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Sanctions Are Holding Burmese People “Economic Hostage”

Interview with Burma’s Ma Thanegi

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Stanley A. Weiss is the Founding Chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington, DC, and a frequent op-ed contributor to The International Herald Tribune. In his most recent article on Feb. 8, he explored the politics of sanctions against Burma and the danger of branding sanction opponents as apologists for the regime. His interview with Ma Thanegi was conducted for that article and is reproduced here on New Mandala.

Five months after Myanmar’s bloody crackdown on anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks, international efforts to foster political change in Burma are again at an impasse. Neither sanctions nor diplomatic engagement have succeeded in persuading the country’s long-ruling military regime to make any significant concessions, including the release of political prisoners such as Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Now, a decade after she made international headlines by publicly opposing Suu Kyi’s call for sanctions, Burmese author and painter Ma Thanegi—Suu Kyi’s former personal assistant—sat down for a rare and wide-ranging interview with Stanley A. Weiss.

The 61-year old Yangon-based author of books on Burmese culture and cuisine speaks candidly about working with Suu Kyi, her years in prison, accusations that she betrayed the democracy movement, recent anti-government protests and the prospects for political dialogue between the junta and the democratic opposition.

Weiss: *How did you get involved in the democracy movement in 1988?*

Ma Thanegi: As a painter, I previously had no interest in politics. Under socialism, we were completely isolated. The Op Art [Optical Art] movement of the 1960s passed by without us even being aware of it. With state propaganda and censorship no one bothered to read the state newspapers, and I envied the press freedom of the West. The only jobs were at government offices and they went to people with connections.

I joined the movement because young people—school children—were at the forefront and I felt ashamed that I, as an adult, was sitting by the road watching them. After all the socialist years I wanted freedom of publication.

Weiss: *You worked as Aung San Suu Kyi’s assistant?*

Ma Thanegi: I helped her as a personal assistant in her home office—answering the phone, taking notes at meetings, traveling with her across the country. Those days were filled with high hopes, fun and optimism. Even when I recall the times of danger, I have no regrets.

Although I was a member of NLD [Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy], I was never directly connected to it; none of us were paid staff. But I am an artist, and office work is not for me. So I told Suu Kyi in 1989 that after the elections I would no longer work for her, but instead would be her eyes and ears in the real world.

Still, I had no idea then that the high hopes we had were the beginnings of unrealistic hopes after the 1990 elections were won, when everyone thought it would be easy to take over power just by demanding it. But even then I was realistic. I knew the NLD would need a lot of political finesse to get power after they won.

Weiss: *But in July 1989 Suu Kyi was put under house arrest and many of her supporters, including you, were sent to prison. You were in Insein prison for three years?*

Ma Thanegi: Living conditions were primitive, but treatment was nothing out of the ordinary—no mental or physical torture. Things were worse in the men's quarters, I am sure. My guards were elderly, poorly educated women. They were friendly, not tough, and liked to talk about their families or movies they had seen.

Weiss: *After your release you went back to work for Suu Kyi, but then parted ways?*

Ma Thanegi: I was released in 1992, and after Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 1995 I helped her with personal matters like going to the tailors and running errands. But in late 1995 the NLD [which had won democratic elections] had been demanding the transfer of power and walked out of the national convention, saying it was a farce and refusing to give the military 25 percent of seats in parliament. I disagreed and felt the constitution could be amended later.

Also in 1995 Suu Kyi called for isolation, although it was not yet a call for sanctions, which came later in 1997. I disagreed and spoke privately many times with her on this. I never believed, not for one second, that putting pressure that falls on the people is an effective or desirable strategy. When I told her that people will suffer, she merely said "It's not true." We argued so much I stopped seeing her. Then, in 1996, I spoke out against isolation in an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine.

Weiss: *And after Western sanctions were imposed on Myanmar, you wrote articles in 1998 that were not only critical of sanctions, but of Suu Kyi personally, saying that her approach had "come at a real price for the rest of us." Any regrets?*

Ma Thanegi: No, I don't regret it, because her voice and her views are all that matters in the NLD or in the world. She *is* the NLD—the one voice of the opposition. When you are trying to make a point and trying to pierce through the fog of happy illusions and flaky hopes—that, voila!, the military government is going to topple within months through western pressure—I needed strong words or my articles would have been a wishy washy thing ignored by all. No, I do not regret it.

Is it not a paradox that the pro-democratic movement should be asking for the people to be held economic hostage like this with sanctions—people they are supposed to help?

Weiss: *But why so much criticism of Suu Kyi and the democracy movement when it's the military regime that's responsible for Burma's isolation and economic despair?*

Ma Thanegi: I was talking about sanctions, addressing that one issue, and it was not the government that asked for sanctions. By 1998 the entire world had been repeatedly condemning this government—nothing new to add by me. As it's a military government, it's a given that they are very controlling and rigid, not knowing anything about the running of the economy, over which they now have a monopoly, thanks in part to sanctions.

Weiss: *How do you respond to critics who say you're a sellout who parrots government propaganda?*

Ma Thanegi: How do I respond? I don't. I know I am not a traitor or a turncoat. I came into the political movement because I wanted to do good for the people. My loyalty lies with the people. Anything that hurts them, I will speak out against. I was raised by a tough mother. Neither the generals nor the screaming hordes are anything compared to her.

In Burmese culture people never criticize each other openly; they do it behind the back and, when confronted, deny it. They are not used to a person being straightforward like me, but I was raised to be so.

I live in a cheaply built flat in a low-scale housing estate near China Town and drive a 22-year-old car with some parts patched with Superglue. If I had wanted money and fame—with my connections to Suu Kyi and my fluency in English and knowledge of French and German—I would be getting a lot of funds and media exposure by working as an exiled Burmese activist.

Weiss: *During one visit to the U.S., didn't some activists confront you, calling you a "spokesperson for the regime?"*

Ma Thanegi: Yes. But none of them addressed the issues; they just called me names or repeated that sanctions will bring down the government. After meeting them, I realized that I was wrong thinking that they

should be informed of the true facts—how sanctions hurt the people—that they didn't know. But they do know. But to be politically correct is what generates their funds and what generates free public relations images for western politicians. There have been many instances when an exiled organization or a publication—if it strays from the strict politically correct view—is warned by donors that funds will stop if they continue like this. This righteous politically correct attitude is costing us jobs and hurting people, who need to eat on a daily basis.

Weiss: *But you acknowledge being a contributor to the Myanmar Times, which has been accused by the Committee to Protect Journalists of "merely presenting government propaganda"?*

Ma Thanegi: I'm a freelance contributor. I never write about politics, only about food, culture, human interest or funny family or school stories. I interviewed then-Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in 2001 to open up the question about the HIV problem here that needs to be addressed. Every publication here comes under censorship, as does the Myanmar Times. It's easy to label, not knowing the full picture here.

Weiss: *What about the recent anti-government protests, led by Buddhist monks?*

Ma Thanegi: Actually, they began not as a protest even, but as a means of calling attention to inflation. Within a day or so, political demands were made. I have no idea if the monks were instigated or thought the demands up on their own, but it turned into a political protest in the eyes of the government, and the crackdown followed. I feel very sad and depressed about it and wish that the situation could have been handled gently.

Weiss: *Since the crackdown, the regime has met with Suu Kyi several times, allowed her to meet with NLD leaders, called for a constitutional referendum this spring and promised elections for 2010, but have barred Suu Kyi from participating. What, in your view, are the prospects for dialogue and reconciliation?*

Ma Thanegi: By now, over the long years, there is so much mistrust for each other I see no way to achieve a dialogue even if they sit facing each other for hours on end. Many opportunities have been lost by both sides in the past. Setting aside, for the moment, the question of fairness, there was so much concentration on unrealistic hopes for the transfer of power at a snap of the fingers—or that the government would topple at any moment—that opportunities to talk of power sharing were lost. If anyone is focusing on a "coming together" of the military and the NLD, it's a pipe dream. People think that just because a government representative, U Aung Kyi, is talking to Suu Kyi that it's about power sharing. But he's only trying to get her "yes" or "no" to the four conditions for dialogue set by Senior General Than Shwe, for example, that if she renounces sanctions, etc., he would talk to her. There are no other issues that U Aung Kyi has to discuss.

In both the government and the opposition we have sycophants who lie to please their superiors. Those superiors need to find out reality by many means, not just from their followers.

Weiss: *Will you vote in the upcoming referendum on the new constitution, which gives a lot of power to the military—25 percent of seats in parliament?*

Ma Thanegi: I would vote "yes" because there is no alternative. It's a step in the right direction. Some exiled activists say that accepting the constitution would give the regime "legitimacy." But this government has been in power for 20 years, the United Nations and other countries accept them, and the activists are talking about legitimacy? If we refuse the military 25 percent of the seats, then it continues to have 100 percent power. As I said, amendments can be made later.

Weiss: *What are your feelings today towards Suu Kyi, who has now spent a total of 12 of the past 18 year under house arrest?*

Ma Thanegi: I wish with all my heart that I had been wrong, that the strategy laid down by Suu Kyi, who we love so much, was the right one. By now, though, my views against sanctions have proven to be correct. But it doesn't matter that I'm vindicated. I am one ordinary person who matters little in the big scheme of things in my country.

People accuse me of criticizing Suu Kyi because I hate her or am jealous. But if I did not love her I would not have served her so well for months on end. She knows best how well I served her. You can be furious with a person you still love. She has high standards, high principles and a strong will. She will remain dear to the hearts of the people, always.

Weiss: *What are your hopes for Burma?*

Ma Thanegi: I hope that the technocrat layer will be strengthened, that administration runs smoothly without so much red tape, that any remaining civil war will end peacefully, that schools teachers will get a good grounding in English, that more school teachers will be employed and paid well, that inflation will be controlled, that we have more infrastructure in the remote areas and that there is a better life and more voice for the ethnic races. And more freedom of publication, that is what I hope for, always.