

Burma: Political prisoner released but thousands remain

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On September 23, one of Burma's longest-serving political prisoners, 78-year-old progressive journalist U Win Tin, was released from Insein Prison after more than 19 years. He was one of six political prisoners included in an amnesty of 9002 prisoners declared by the military junta.

According to the September 23 Mizzima News, the other political prisoners released were Captain Win Htein, Aye Thein, and elected MPs Khin Maung Swe, Daw May Win Myint and Aung Soe Myint.

"I will keep fighting until the emergence of democracy in this country", U Win Tin told reporters after his release. Still wearing his prison uniform, he explained that this was in protest at his release being part of a mass amnesty of non-political prisoners. "I did not accept their terms for the amnesty. I refused to be one of 9,002 ... They should have released me five years ago. They owe me a few years."

Maung Maung Than, secretary of the Australian Coalition for Democracy in Burma and international committee member of the Burma Labour Solidarity Organisation, told Green Left Weekly that while the release of U Win Tin and the other five political prisoners was "a rare sign of hope", thousands of political prisoners remained and 2 million Burmese were conscripted into forced labour.

"I insist on the immediate release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners. This must be the first and foremost requirement toward a breakthrough from the current deadlock", he said.

Burma has been under military rule since 1962, when General Ne Win took power in a military coup. In 1988 his one-party regime was overthrown in a mass student-led democratic uprising. However, the army crushed this uprising and the current junta has been in power since. In 1990 it allowed elections to be held.

However, when these were won by the National League for Democracy, the junta refused to recognise the result and arrested many newly elected MPs; it continues to hold NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest.

"Aung San Suu Kyi is the only leader who unifies all the different democratic and ethnic opposition organisations behind her", Than said. "The NLD is the key political party because it won the elections in 1990 ... It still has organisational structures but these are weak because its members are arrested, its leaders [subjected to] restrictions and monitoring and Aung San Suu Kyi and other top leaders are under house arrest."

Than described the difficulties facing opposition activists in Burma: "For one leaflet you get seven years' jail." Talking to foreigners about politics will also result in jail. Political prisoners' families face harassment and confiscation of property. Than himself experienced this aspect of the regime's brutality with both his father and brother arrested and tortured after he fled Burma in 1988.

While many political prisoners date from the 1988 uprising and the crackdowns that followed, their numbers were boosted by crackdowns against Buddhist monks who spearheaded protests against

cost of living increases and for democracy in September 2007.

“The monks organised the uprising last September. Hundreds of monks and nuns are still in detention. Also, the army continues to detain prominent monks. Last week they raided a monastery and arrested several monks for trying to organise an anniversary of the [2007] uprising. They receive very harsh treatment. Since Burma is a mainly Buddhist country, the way the army is treating the monks is unbelievable for most of the Burmese people.”

Than told GLW that the durability of the regime could be explained by foreign powers putting economic considerations before human rights. The regime’s main backer is China. Until the early 1980s, Than said, China supported the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), which had been engaged in armed struggle since independence in 1948. However, under Deng Xiaoping, China changed its policy and started backing the military regime.

“During ’88, China strongly supported the regime ... Right after the uprising China massively increased its support [supplying] \$2 billion worth of arms in one year. The Burmese army launched an offensive, as a consequence of which the ethnic armed resistance lost many bases.”

The armed resistance consisted of the BCP and a number of ethnic minority liberation movements. The BCP abandoned armed struggle after a split in 1989.

Chinese support for the regime was also significant in the diplomatic arena, particularly the UN, where, Than explained “China has blocked any attempt to criticise the regime” using its Security Council veto. “In return Burma allows Chinese companies to exploit our natural resources”, oil and gas being particularly significant. The most recent deal gives China access to Burma’s massive off-shore gas reserves.

Other countries with major economic links with Burma are Russia, India, Thailand and Japan. “This doesn’t mean European and Western companies are boycotting [Burma]”, Than said. “There are lots of British, French, German and American companies involved in oil, gas and natural resources-related businesses. There are even Australian companies involved.”

Western countries have brought some diplomatic and economic pressure against the Burmese dictatorship. This is the result of struggles by solidarity and civil society groups alongside exiled Burmese activists, responding to Aung San Suu Kyi’s call for a total divestment and tourist boycott. It is also the result of regional strategic competition between China and the West.

Than emphasised that while this pressure was welcomed, it needed to be backed up by more meaningful sanctions and warned against Western designs to use the Burmese struggle for democracy to simply strengthen Western economic interests in relation to China.

“A few months before the [Australian] election, the Howard government imposed financial sanctions on 418 regime figures and their business associates, restricting them from using Australian banks”, he said. However, no sanctions were imposed on Australian companies doing business in Burma.

Furthermore, also untouched was an agreement under which Australia provides training for the Burmese security forces with advisers from the Australian Federal Police stationed in Burma. Officially, this program is to combat terrorism and drug trafficking. However, the Burmese security forces are not only notorious for their use of terror against the population but are the major player in Burma’s booming narcotics trade. Burma is the second largest exporter of narcotics after Afghanistan.

“The new Labor government should take more substantial action”, Than said.

Than told GLW that the regime was seeking to legitimise itself through a process leading to elections for a new parliament in 2010. However, not only will 25% of this parliament be directly appointed by the military, but the election of the remainder will be under the regime's control.

This process was approved in a referendum held in May. However, with no outside observers, widespread intimidation by the army and the vote being taken during the Cyclone Nagis catastrophe, which killed hundreds of thousands of people, this referendum cannot be seen as legitimate, Than said.

The events following Cyclone Nagis demonstrated both sides of the situation in Burma, Than explained. On the one hand, people volunteered to help each other. However, the military would not allow this, preferring to be in control of reconstruction themselves. Furthermore, while the regime is happy to receive foreign investment in resource extraction industries, foreign assistance in disaster relief was not welcome.

The opposition is planning to boycott the 2010 elections, while at the same time calling for UN observers. It insists that the way forward lies in recognising the legitimacy of the 1990 elections and allowing the parliament elected then to convene.

"The struggle of the people is not fading but getting stronger", Than said. "The people want to live in a free, democratic society. The people are willing to continue fighting for as long as it takes."

P.S.

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