

Unified global response vital for Burma

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The Burmese military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is aware of the differences between the situation in Burma now and in 1988 when they killed thousands of peaceful demonstrators to grab power.

Images of the month-long peaceful demonstrations have appeared in mainstream media and have helped raise international awareness on Burma, making it difficult for the regime to use force.

The SPDC, which has never shown any tolerance for opposition, would never rule out the use of force. Reports coming from Rangoon that hospitals have been instructed to be ready for emergency patients are an indication that the SPDC plans to use force.

The SPDC's careful calculation as to whether to use force is based on the junta's estimation of how international players would respond and whether it would receive backing from its long-time supporters.

The regime's survival for the last 19 years is to a certain extent due to divisions among international players with whom the regime can play games individually. However, most international players, if not all, seem to have realised their policies do not work in convincing the stubborn military dictators to change.

The regime's foreign policy since 1988 has proven that it is interested only in finding friends who will defend them from international criticism. Since joining Asean a decade ago, the regime has used its membership effectively for the protection of the grouping under the banner of a "non-interference policy". Asean's policy has dramatically changed in the last couple of years, especially after the failed "Bangkok process", initiated by ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and supported by many countries, including Norway.

Analysts point out that Japan has been the biggest donor of official development aid in Burma despite criticism, and Australia, which provided human-rights training to the regime's top bureaucrats, has come to realise that the junta has just exploited their engagement and that further engagement would not bring about democratisation.

Indian policy towards the regime during Rajiv Gandhi's government in the late 1980s turned 180 degrees once nationalist parties took over, simply due to fears of the regime's absolute obedience to China. Even the current government is being successfully silenced by the regime as it plays the China card.

In search of more backing, the regime has approached governments similar to its own. The SPDC's early phases of friendship with the late Yugoslavian government ended with the downfall of the late president Slobodan Milosevic.

The regime is now developing strong ties with North Korea, one of two countries that Burma cut diplomatic ties with following the failed assassination of South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan by North Korean agents in Burma in 1983 (the country also cut ties with Taiwan). Reports received by the Democratic Voice of Burma show the alleged involvement of North Koreans in the development

of military infrastructure in the new capital of Naypyidaw.

The regime gets most of its important military and political support and backing from China, which is also Burma's largest trade partner. Analysts say, however, that Beijing has been sending signals that the SPDC itself has to do its own work to reduce international criticism and for it not to take Beijing's support for granted. It is important for China to distance itself from the regime, especially now as Beijing prepares for the Olympics next year. However, China continues to defend the regime, at least in public.

The regime is also receiving increased support from Russia, which is allegedly helping it realise its nuclear ambitions by building facilities in Burma, in addition to training Burmese officials in Moscow. The timing of Russia and North Korea's involvement in Burma raises more questions among Burma observers.

The fact that China and Russia are on a common platform when it comes to policy on Burma at the international level is proven by their objection to the UN Security Council's resolution on Burma.

The Burmese opposition movement believes that the EU's stance on Burma is softened by France, which has massive investments in Burma, and Germany which was the second largest donor in the country until 1988. However, the EU has never approved of the regime's wrongdoings. Those in the Burmese opposition generally express satisfaction with overall EU policy.

Consistent strong criticism from the US has not deterred the worsening situation in Burma. Most oppressed Burmese express readiness to welcome US marines on Burmese soil in the event of a regime-change mission. The SPDC pretends not to care about US pressure, but the reality is totally opposite. Some Burmese even suggest that fear of a US invasion was the major reason behind the regime's quick move to new capital.

Divisions among international players for the last 19 years has to some extent allowed the regime in Burma to continue to oppress its own people. Now the same international players have to take their stands on the current crisis. A month-long peaceful demonstration has made it clear that people from all walks of Burmese society - from Buddhist monks to street vendors, from students to peasants - reject the continuation of military rule.

Since the SPDC is a brutal military regime, the decision to kill hundreds or thousands of peaceful demonstrators can be made at any time. Saving the lives of the Burmese people is something that international players can do effectively.

International players need to send the message to the regime early that they will unanimously react to any bloodshed as a result of the demonstrations. As other international players would never approve of another bloody crackdown, the regime can only rely on its usual backers, China and Russia, for any murderous decision. Whether China and Russia will still provide this backing could be the determining factor as to whether the regime uses force.

P.S.

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