

Western hypocrisy and Burma's dictatorship

Tuesday 23 October 2007, by [ILTIS Tony](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2007).

In the wake of mass protests for democracy spearheaded by Buddhist monks, triggered by five-fold increases to fuel and public transport costs, Burma's major cities of Rangoon and Mandalay have become the scene of an intense crackdown by the military, which has ruled the country since 1962.

The cities are effectively under military occupation, with authorities systematically searching for protesters using photographs taken at last week's demonstrations, which had hundreds of thousands of participants. Monasteries are blockaded by the military to stop contact between monks and the general population. Attempts to prevent telecommunications and internet links with the outside world continue.

According to the Chiang Mai-based Burmese exile magazine Irrawaddy, opposition sources estimate that 130-200 people were killed by the military and 3000-6000 people arrested. There have been unconfirmed media reports of thousands of monks being taken away at night and massacred.

Human rights abuses are not new in Burma. Since independence in 1948, counterinsurgency wars against the self-determination struggles of minority nationalities that comprise 35% of the population have involved mass killings of civilians, abductions for forced labour and the use of rape as a military tactic. The rule of General Ne Win began, in 1962, and ended, in 1988, with massacres of students. The suppression of the student-led uprising that toppled Ne Win cost between 3000 and 10,000 lives. The military junta that has ruled since allowed elections to take place in 1990, but ignored the results and clamped down on the National League for Democracy, which won an overwhelming majority. NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest.

Western leaders have been vocal in condemning Burma's ongoing human rights abuses and the current crackdown. They have also condemned China and, to a lesser extent, India for their economic ties to the Burmese regime. China has also been criticised for its military ties with Burma. However, Israel and Singapore are also important suppliers of arms to the Burmese armed forces.

"The United States is determined to keep an international focus on the travesty that is taking place in Burma", Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters on September 27. What Rice is less keen to keep an international focus on is that the US fossil-fuel giant Chevron, on whose board of directors she sat, is part of a consortium with the Burmese government and French corporation Total that operates in Burma's offshore gas fields. The gas from these operations is exported through the Yadana pipeline, which was built with forced labour. Halliburton, which US Vice-President Dick Cheney is a former CEO of, was involved in its construction.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard and foreign minister Alexander Downer have been vocal both in their criticisms of Burma's suppression of the protests and of China for its economic ties to the junta. According to Downer, China's links with Burma are the reason why economic sanctions are not feasible and the justification for limiting Australia's response to token measures, such as refusing accreditation for Burma's choice of ambassador in Canberra, Brigadier-General Thura U Thet Oo Maung.

However, according to Greens Senator Kerry Nettle: "For Alexander Downer to say China isn't

taking action because of their trade relationship with Burma, at the same time as this Liberal Party family are making money out of their relationship with the Burmese military dictatorship, is great hypocrisy.”

The “Liberal Party family” she referred to is the Clough family, owners of the Clough Engineering Group and McRae Investments. Clough Engineering is one of the largest corporate donors to the Liberal Party. It was also a major contributor to “Australians for Honest Politics”, a slush fund associated with health minister Tony Abbott that was used to initiate legal action against Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in 1998, when the Liberal Party wished to eliminate the electoral competition for the far-right vote. Family patriarch Harold Clough and his son Bill have both served on the board of the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs, and have also been major backers of climate change denialist propaganda.

On November 20, 2006, the *Myanmar Times*, a Rangoon-based weekly that publishes in Burmese and English, featured Bill Clough signing a deal with Burma’s energy minister, Brigadier-General Lun Thi, for the exploitation of the 21,000 square kilometre Yetagun East Block gas field. Bill Clough, described as CEO of Twinza Oil, a Clough-family-owned company that appears to have been created specifically for this venture, was quoted as saying: “We are very excited to be the only independent to now be involved in the offshore hydrocarbon sector, it being the most important and dynamic industry in the country ... we have developed a close relationship with the ministry over time and an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges of operating in Myanmar [Burma].”

Interestingly, Clough Engineering Group/McRae Investments are major financial stakeholders in Myanmar Consolidated Media, the company that owns the *Myanmar Times*. According to *Irrawaddy* editor Aung Zaw, the *Myanmar Times*’s editor, Australian Ross Dunkley, has links with Burmese military intelligence. There is a link to its online edition from the Burmese dictatorship’s official website. The recent mass protests and their brutal suppression went unreported in the *Myanmar Times*.

China’s military ties with Burma have also been criticised by the Australian government. However, this has not stopped the Australian Federal Police training Burma’s security forces at the Australian-funded Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation. The October 5 *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that one purpose of this was “counter-terrorist collaboration” and that Downer’s office had told the SMH that it would be ongoing. Previously, the AFP had justified its links with the Burmese military on the grounds of stemming the illegal drugs trade, a justification undermined by the Burmese security forces well-documented involvement in the trade.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #727 10 October 2007.