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Getting beyond image to reality in Burma (Myanmar)

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Written as a companion volume to her *Governance and Civil Society in Myanmar: Education, Health and Environment*, published in 2005, Helen James's *Security and Sustainable Development in Myanmar* asks: Why can't Burma (Myanmar) be treated as a 'normal' Third World country with serious social, economic and human rights problems but also the potential, given international assistance, to gradually evolve into a country that provides its people with enhanced 'human' security, high standards of living and a vibrant civil society as its South-East and East Asian neighbours have done over the past two or three decades?

In light of the perhaps well-intentioned but counter-productive policy of sanctions pursued by the Clinton and Bush administrations, particularly the 2003 'Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act', which banned imports from Burma and caused the lay-off of tens of thousands of Burmese textile workers, this is a question that needs to be answered. Unfortunately, James's arguments for greater humanitarian and economic engagement with Burma are undermined by eye-glazing jargon, political correctness and glaring omissions that compromise the book's value as a study of the contemporary political crisis in this troubled land.

Orwellian doublethink

Its seven chapters are at times difficult reading because of the author's fondness for the kind of language that is popular in air-conditioned seminar rooms, such as 'sustainability' and 'realist and liberal paradigms', and sentences like '...the "we-feeling" at the societal level is already present, nascent, perhaps subdued, but ready to present a more overt community presence both internationally and in the domestic sphere (p 51). She has a penchant for quoting at length a bewildering array of experts whose prose is also less than crystal clear (e.g., 'Deutschian and constructivist formulations', p 49). This gives the book a fuzzy, abstract feel that doesn't so much deny but rather obscures the grim realities of life under military rule in Burma.

The first chapter introduces the key concept of 'holistic security': 'the development and application of public policy which privileges human well-being within the context of state resilience, yet acknowledges "the ongoing centrality that military-related issues play in state and interstate relations" (p 32).¹ At best, this is an oxymoron; at worst, Orwellian doublethink, since Burma's fundamental problem is that the state ensures its own security at the expense of the security and welfare of the people. Chapter two proposes the interesting notion that states might be 'socialised' into respecting human rights: applying pressure simultaneously from 'above' (the international community)



Seeing the light or blinded by it? Ascetic on the Platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon (Photograph by Donald Seekins, March 2006).

and from 'below' through a 'network' of domestic and international civil society groups' (pp 55, 56).

This notion is connected to her discussion of Burma's contemporary civil society in chapter six: based on the traditional notion of self-help, civil society is more deeply rooted and dynamic in the face of top-down state controls than is commonly acknowledged (pp 153, 154). However, the establishment of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a 16 million-member body whose patron is Senior General Than Shwe, and of paramilitary units like the *Swan Arr Shin*, provides the SPDC junta effective tools for keeping civil society and not just the National League for Democracy under tight control. Armed with cash as well as *dah* (swords), the USDA is likely to become Burma's most powerful political-social organisation after a new constitutional order is established, perhaps as early as next year. The USDA was largely responsible for the 30 May 2003 'Black Friday' attack on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters in Depayin in Upper Burma, in which a number of her people were brutally killed.

Drugs? What drugs?

Chapter three is the weakest, an examination of the armed cease-fire groups located in the poppy-growing areas of eastern Shan State, especially the United Wa State Army (UWSA). James describes her own inspection of Wa-controlled areas in 2004, including photographs of herself posing

with UWSA soldiers, and concludes that significant improvements in infrastructure for health and livelihood have occurred now that the USWA is systematically abandoning the cultivation and export of opiates. But she says nothing in the chapter about the UWSA's manufacture and export of amphetamine type stimulants (ATS), especially methamphetamines, known as *yaabaa* in Thailand, which are a cash cow for the UWSA's top commanders and are causing havoc in Burma's eastern neighbour and reaching other South-East Asian countries, as well as Australia, Japan, Europe and the United States. According to the Thailand-based NGO Altsean-Burma, the made-in-Burma *yaabaa* trade in that country alone is worth US\$1.8 billion annually. The Australian Federal Police Commissioner is quoted by Altsean-Burma as saying that amphetamine type stimulants are the 'biggest emerging drug threat in the region' and that 'in Burma now, the production of amphetamines is just huge'.² Although there is very brief mention of amphetamines in chapter four (p 115), James's overall neglect of this issue seriously undermines the credibility of her book.

The book picks up speed in the final three chapters, which deal extensively with Western sanctions. It is true, as James argues, that sanctions, especially those imposed by the United States government on trade and investment, are the product of domestic political dynamics (lobbying by interested groups, especially Burmese

émigrés, and their connection with powerful members of Congress such as Senator Mitch McConnell) rather than an objective study of their probable impact on the target country; that they constitute a zero-sum game that stirs up nationalism and xenophobia inside Burma (or at least within SPDC circles); and that their economic impact is either inconsequential (because of economic support of the SPDC by China, India and ASEAN) or damaging to ordinary people (the consequences of the 2003 sanctions law, mentioned above). James concludes with the credible point that had American and British Burma policies been better planned, Washington and London might still retain a measure of influence inside the country (p 138).

Sanctions bad, junta worse

However, she neglects to mention another, more crucial point: it is not Western sanctions but poor or non-existent economic policymaking by the SPDC junta that is causing deteriorating human security for the majority of Burmese people, who are subjected to patron-client-based corruption; multiple, politically-motivated *kyat*-dollar exchange rates; rampant inflation caused by a printing-press monetary policy and a poor system of distribution of necessities such as rice; state imposition of low prices for crops that depresses the living standards of farmers; forced cultivation of certain crops (especially *Jetrophia*, the plant that yields 'bio-diesel', a current SPDC obsession); reprehensible underinvestment in health and education while

hundreds of millions of dollars are spent acquiring advanced weapon systems from abroad; forced labour and forced relocation; lack of the rule of law in business and other areas of life; and dilapidated infrastructure, especially in Rangoon (Yangon), Burma's industrial centre, including chronic and worsening electricity blackouts. The motivation for the Senior General's decision to move the capital from Rangoon to Naypyidaw in 2005 is to create an ultra-secure environment for himself and his fellow generals at a safe distance from large urban centres, whose populations have become increasingly desperate economically, just as they were in the months leading up to the massive Democracy Summer protests of 1988.

In conclusion, one can agree with James that sanctions are ineffective or even harmful. But Burma isn't a "normal" developing country transitioning from socialism' (p 176). Unlike Vietnam, whose communist regime initiated genuine liberalisation in 1986, the Burmese military elite has not loosened controls over the society or economy or opened up space for the emergence of genuine civil society. The SPDC is a close collaborator, if not ally, of China, which provides it with economic and other forms of support with no concern for political or economic reform. With Beijing's backing, the SPDC can to a large extent ignore the attempts of the international community to 'socialise' a respect for human rights or security. Given the ruthlessly pragmatic geopolitics of China as a rising power, this is a grim situation indeed for Burma's people.³ ■

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Notes

- 1 James's quotation is from D. B. Devitt and A. Archarya. 1996. *Cooperative Security and Developmental Assistance: the Relationship between Security and Development with Reference to Eastern Asia*. East Asia Policy Papers, no. 16. Toronto: Toronto University and York University, Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies: p. 10.
- 2 ALTSEAN-Burma. 2004. *A Failing Grade Burma's Drug Eradication Efforts*. Bangkok: ALTSEAN-Burma (November): pp. 59-72, at <<http://www.altsean.org/drug-report.html>>, accessed 16 June 2007.
- 3 The People's Republic of China has become the principal supporter of other so-called 35pariah regimes: North Korea, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Like Burma, the two African nations are rich in natural resources.