Intervention in Burma: Enough Idle Words

https://www.e-ir.info/2008/03/30/intervention-in-burma-enough-idle-words/

JACOB BAYNHAM, MAR 30 2008

My search for truth in Burma began in a sleepy embassy in Vientiane, Laos, where I sat sweating on a patent leather sofa in a crumpled silk shirt and tie, pulling phony business cards from my wallet and lying through my teeth. It was two months after the monk-led anti-government uprisings of last September, and I had already been rejected a tourist visa twice in Hong Kong and Bangkok. I decided to hit the diplomatic backwaters with a different tack.

So one night in Vientiane I printed a couple dozen business cards, which peddled me as the owner of a Colorado-based jewelry business that has never existed. I designed my own executive stationary and drafted a formal letter of intent. I had the visa in three days; stamped, sealed and shining like a coin from the pages of my passport.

Another popular uprising had been crushed in Burma, and despite international criticism, the democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest while the unflappable military government extended a blood-stained rule into its 46th year. I wanted to find out what could topple this Orwellian regime. After a month of travel, dozens of teashop conversations and my own arrest, I realized change in Burma will not come from within. The nation is ruled by fear. The only realistic hope for change in Burma is in the action, not rhetoric, of the outside world. And the country best suited to take the first stand is America.

"You like George Bush?" the owner of a teashop whispered to me one day in Rangoon. I readied myself for my canned explanation that not all Americans support their government. I needn't have. "I love George Bush," he said. "He thinks something and he does it. He doesn't like Iraq, so he fights Iraq. I hope George Bush will fight a war with my country." I looked down to notice a worn copy of Chicken Soup for the Soul in his hand. He opened it proudly. "I want to write one of these for Burma one day," he said.

The teashop owner's hope in the world was not an anomaly. Across Burma people are following the U.S. elections with interest, straining their ears to candidates' speeches for any sign of a willingness to use the American military to overthrow Burma's decades-long dictatorship.

At the end of my trip, inside her plush office in a brand new, bomb-proof embassy, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires grounded that dream. "I spend most of my time discouraging that talk," Shari Villarosa told me. "I say it's not likely." For now the diplomatic condemnations continue.

But Burma is tired of talk. In the six months since the protests, the UN Special Envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari has visited the country three times. His visits have come to naught. But Burmese hopes in UN action haven't been very high since Gambari's predecessor, Razali Ismail, used his private company to sell the Burmese government high-tech electronic passports, which democracy activists claimed would help the military keep track of them. The complicity continues. The UN's top diplomat in Burma, Charles Petrie, was kicked out of the country last December for a speech the government considered too critical. But up until he left he was living in a swish house on the edge of Inya Lake – a house he rented from Sandar Win, the favored daughter of General Ne Win, Burma's first military dictator, and herself a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the army. Also living on the lake is Burma's Nobel Peace Prize-winning democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. She has spent 12 of the last 18 years there, under house arrest.

The Burmese have heard the talk of the UN and the rest of the world for 46 years, but have seen nothing change. The people's stalemate with their government breeds a dark humor. "In your country, it takes a lot of money to be president," one man told me outside a pagoda. "In my country you just need to have a gun and to be able to shoot straight. Then, after you're president, you get your money."

The realities of Burma are darker still. The majority of the population lives on less than a dollar a day, almost half of the national budget is spent on the military and people are drinking rice juice to survive. Underneath the military's propaganda billboards, beggars young and old ply the streets by day. Prostitutes take their turf by night, all dolled-up and doe-eyed outside the cinemas and under the bypasses, trawling the darkness for a livelihood in a country that has developed its own unique strain of HIV. In Burma, 360 young children die of preventable diseases every day because the government puts only 3 percent of the budget into healthcare. The statistics go on; dense and revealing. But if you're looking to take the pulse of Burma, you only have to sit in a teashop long enough and the truth will find you.

"In Burma, human rights, no," Mr. Nyein told me with all the English he had one afternoon, edging his stool closer to mine though still looking away. "All people like Aung San Suu Kyi," he said. He folded his hands at the wrists under the table. "But talking, danger." And then he left.

That kind of fear is the lifeblood of the military government. It's a fear I felt myself, high in the hills of upper Burma, sitting in a bare concrete room seething with 11 angry plainclothes policemen.

I had heard rumors of a secret military site in the mountains where the Burmese were building a nuclear reactor with the help of some Russian advisers. The story was vague, but prevalent, and I wanted to have a look for myself. I found a guide who agreed to take me there.

We hiked for 15 miles in the dust before we reached the village at the end of the road. The farmers there told us about frequent helicopters coming and going from the other side of the mountain. They said three months ago they were awoken by a large explosion that was never explained. A general had warned the village that no one was to venture to the other side of the mountain, and no one was to ask any questions.

For our own safety and theirs, the village put us under friendly house arrest. No one was comfortable saying much. By the morning our presence was clearly making the village nervous – prison sentences come ad hoc and unexplained in Burma, especially where fraternizing with foreigners is concerned – so we started walking back to town.

The police were waiting for us 15 miles later, outside the teashop where I paid my guide and we were going to part ways. They put us on the backs of two motorbikes and took us to the concrete room on the edge of town, empty but for two desks, a picture of General Than Shwe and a sign on the wall that read "All Respect, All Suspect."

It was the generals' psychological alchemy – resurrecting fear from defiance. My passport was taken, there was much shouting, they found my digital camera, full of a journalist's pictures, and took it to a computer shop to copy its entire contents. I felt clammy, dry-mouthed and ready to vomit. Four hours later, when night had fallen, I was released – loaded onto a waiting pickup and deported from the town. The last I saw of my guide was in the rearview mirror: the police had him by the arm, and were leading him into the darkness.

Back in Rangoon I was being followed and my phone conversations were tapped. Random people sat next to me in restaurants, asking questions. I stopped talking to strangers. I started stepping onto moving buses, not knowing where they were going, but knowing, for the moment at least, that I was not being followed. The paranoia was paralyzing. Like Orwell's Thought Police, they only had to do their job once; my own psychology was taking care of the rest.

Because Burma is the perfect dictator's brew of paranoia, fear and suspicion, change in the country cannot come from the inside alone. The Burmese are looking to the outside world to intervene for their freedom. The ethnic

minorities living in the border regions are calling for a UN peacekeeping force to prevent persistent Burmese military attacks on their villages. In central Burma, people are quick to speculate that it would only take a couple U.S. aircraft carriers parked along Burma's coast to rattle their government into exile.

Decades of U.S. and European sanctions have not sapped the Burmese Generals' will. Neither have strong words from the Oval Office and the UN Security Council. Unfortunately, while the ghost of Iraq haunts U.S. foreign policy into another era of isolationism, there remain governments in the world which have breached their right to sovereignty by oppressing their people. The military junta in Burma is one. Enough idle words have been spoken – the Burmese are desperate for action.

"You can shout freedom all you want," one young man summed it up in a whisper over a teashop table, "But not when they're shooting at you."

Jacob Baynham is a freelance journalist currently focusing his reporting on Burma with the help of a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, in Washington DC.