

US ramps up pressure on Burmese junta over war crimes

John Roberts
30 August 2010

Just days after the announcement of national elections in Burma, the US administration indicated last week that it would back the creation of a UN inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity by the Burmese junta.

The US move has nothing to do with bringing the Burmese generals to justice for their oppressive rule. In the first instance, it is aimed at pressuring the junta to ease restrictions on the opposition during the election campaign. More fundamentally, however, Washington is seeking to undercut Chinese ties with Burma by fashioning a regime more in line with US strategic interests in Asia.

The ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced on August 13 that national and regional elections would be held on November 7. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the last election, held in 1990, but the military overturned the result.

The junta's constitution and electoral laws ensure in advance that the Burmese military will remain firmly in control. Of the 440 seats in the House of Representatives, 110 will be filled by military appointees. In the House of Nationalities, 168 seats will be contested, with 56 filled by soldiers. The president, who must be an army officer, will appoint ministers and nominate supreme court judges. The army chief will install the security ministers.

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has permitted 40 parties to participate in the election, out of the 47 parties that applied. But the NLD is boycotting the election because the election law excludes anyone with a criminal record being a member of a registered party. As a result the NLD would have had to expel Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for most of the past

20 years on trumped-up political charges.

In May, the regime officially dissolved the NLD, in effect for refusing to participate in the poll under the military's terms. Currently at least 429 NLD members are in prison, along with at least 2,100 other political prisoners and an unknown number of ethnic separatists.

The junta has established the Union Solidarity and Development Party led by Prime Minister Thein Sein and 26 ministers and senior officials. Eleven of the other parties are thought to have the regime's support. The remaining parties—no matter how limited their opposition—face considerable hurdles to running in the elections.

Parties must submit a list of candidates in advance and provide a non-refundable deposit of \$US500 per candidate—a huge sum for most Burmese. Candidates must seek official permission a week in advance to hold election rallies. Holding flags and calling out slogans during marches is banned, as is making speeches or publishing material that “tarnish the image” of the military or conducting activities “that can harm security”.

The regime's decision to hold the election at all is the result of protracted pressure by the US and its European allies, which have maintained sanctions on Burma since 1988. The Bush administration intensified the punitive measures, forcing the junta to announce a “road map” for political reform in December 2003. The drawn-out process resulted in a new constitution being approved by plebiscite in 2008 at the height of the humanitarian crisis that followed the devastating Cyclone Nargis.

After completing a policy review in September 2009, the Obama administration adopted a pragmatic carrot-and-

stick approach—maintaining sanctions, but offering the possibility of improved relations if the junta met US demands. In the same month, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell met with senior Burmese officials at the UN and, in November 2009, he became the most senior US official to visit Burma in nearly 15 years.

The Obama administration has made clear that any easing of sanctions is conditional on the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi playing a role. Suu Kyi supports the opening up of Burma for foreign investment, and closer relations with the US and the European powers that have backed her. The junta, however, is deeply concerned that any easing of restrictions could lead to the eruption of political opposition—regardless of any NLD guarantees.

The military leaders took the reins of power in 1988 after crushing mass anti-junta protests, killing an estimated 3,000 people in Rangoon alone. Suu Kyi and the NLD played a crucial role in enabling the generals to stabilise their rule by calling off demonstrations at the height of the crisis in return for a pledge of elections. The NLD won 392 of the 485 seats in the 1990 poll but, having consolidated its hold, the junta annulled the result.

Before the announcement of the electoral laws in March, the US and European powers were cautiously supportive of the planned election. However, with little prospect of any significant political change emerging from the election, the Obama administration has stepped up the pressure on the junta.

Unsubstantiated claims surfaced in the US and international media that the junta had a secret program to build nuclear weapons and was receiving technology from North Korea, in breach of sanctions imposed on Pyongyang after its 2009 nuclear test. A UN report released in May accused North Korea of using several companies and countries, including Burma, to export nuclear and missile technology.

The Burmese regime has flatly denied any nuclear ambitions, stating that impoverished “Myanmar [Burma] is not in a position to produce nuclear weapons”. The junta denounced the allegations as “politically motivated” and designed to prevent dialogue between Burma and the US. The generals are cautiously seeking a rapprochement with the US to avoid over-reliance on China.

There is no doubt that the junta is responsible for brutal repression and gross abuses of democratic rights. However, as in other parts of the globe, Washington cynically exploits the issue of “human rights” on a selective basis to press US interests.

Reporting on US support for a UN inquiry, the *Washington Post* commented: “The Obama administration entered office with a desire to shift course on Burma—both as part of a strategy to improve relations with all nations of South East Asia and as part of a belief that Burma... should not be allowed to become a client state of China... But Burma rebuffed the outreach and announced a series of severe restrictions on campaigning ahead of coming elections.”

China already has close economic and strategic ties with Burma. Beijing is helping to develop significant new gas fields off Burma’s coast, in the Bay of Bengal. The plans include a 2,400-kilometre pipeline and a parallel oil pipeline that will alleviate China’s dependence on shipping crucial energy supplies from the Middle East and Africa through the Malacca Strait. At the same time, Beijing is assisting Burma to build ports and naval facilities that could be used by China as it develops its blue water navy to protect sea routes that are effectively controlled by the US.

The Obama administration’s decision to turn up the heat on the Burmese junta is part of a broader strategy to aggressively undermine Chinese influence throughout the region. Over the past two months, Washington has backed South East Asian countries against China over their contending claims in the South China Sea and provocatively held joint naval exercises with South Korea, despite Beijing’s objections. If the Burmese regime fails to make concessions, the White House will undoubtedly look for an even bigger stick.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact