

Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy in Burma

K. Ratnayake

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The release of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on November 14 has become an occasion for another outpouring of media panegyrics to this “icon of democracy” and speculation about the possibilities for “reform” and “democracy” in the country.

Suu Kyi, however, has already made clear that she has no intention of challenging the Burmese junta. Rather, with the backing particularly of the United States, she is seeking a deal with the country’s generals. Suu Kyi has hinted that she is ready to reverse her previous stance and call for the easing or lifting of US and European sanctions in return for concessions from the generals—all in the name of helping the Burmese people.

None of this political manoeuvring by Suu Kyi has anything to do with concern for the democratic rights or the appalling living conditions of the Burmese masses. Her willingness to negotiate with the junta is bound up with a tactical shift by the Obama administration since September 2009. Washington has adopted a “carrot and sticks” approach to the Burmese generals: the offer of improved diplomatic and economic relations if an accommodation with Suu Kyi is reached, and the threat of tougher US measures, including human rights charges against the junta leaders, if not.

Obama’s policy toward Burma is part of an aggressive drive throughout Asia to undermine the influence of Washington’s rival—China. Obama and his officials have been engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity designed to strengthen existing military alliances, including with Japan and South Korea, forge closer strategic ties with countries like India, and prise close Chinese partners like Burma from Beijing’s sphere of influence.

US calls for “democracy” in Burma are a convenient screen behind which talks with the dictatorial regime are to take place. Obama has demanded Suu Kyi’s release as the precondition for better relations, not because she is a

“champion of democracy”, but because she represents sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie, who are oriented to the West and to the further transformation of the country into a cheap labour platform for transnational corporations.

Suu Kyi is also a useful safety valve for the deep-seated hostility among broad masses of working people to the junta’s oppressive regime. She has in the past exploited opposition movements against the military to press for concessions while at the same time preventing protests from threatening the foundations of capitalist rule. Above all, this was the role that Suu Kyi and her party played in the tumultuous events of August-September 1988.

Student protests against the regime earlier in 1988 began to involve broader layers of the population, fed up with the lack of democratic rights, deteriorating living standards and police repression. The demonstrations dramatically escalated after junta leader General Ne Win stepped down in July and was replaced by Sein Lwin, notorious for his repressive methods. In preparation for a major national demonstration on August 8, there were a series of smaller protests, the formation of neighbourhood and strike committees and a call for a general strike.

The junta responded to the large protests on August 8 by firing into the crowds, killing hundreds, but the general strike proceeded and demonstrations continued. Stoppages in Rangoon, Mandalay and other cities drew in government employees, oil workers, rail workers, dock workers and others, and brought transportation and economic activity to a halt. In Rangoon, whole neighbourhoods were controlled by opposition committees. In the countryside, farmers began to protest in support of their demands.

For more than a month, the junta was paralysed. On August 12, Lwin resigned without explanation and was replaced by Maung Maung, a civilian supporter of the

junta, who appeared conciliatory. He ended martial law and offered a referendum on multi-party rule. Soldiers and police acted more cautiously, which encouraged more people to join the opposition. Hundreds of thousands of people joined new national protests on August 22.

It was not until August 26 that Suu Kyi, along with other bourgeois opposition figures, stepped in—to act as brake on the mass movement, particularly of workers, that had brought the junta to the brink of collapse. Speaking to a crowd estimated at half a million on that day, she urged people to “try to forget what has already taken place”. She called on protesters “not to lose their affection for the army” and to achieve their demands by “peaceful means”.

Suu Kyi’s intervention provided the junta with the critical breathing space that it desperately needed. While rejecting Maung’s proposal for a referendum, Suu Kyi promoted the fatal illusion that the demands of working people would be met through an election. Right up to the military crackdown on September 18, opposition leaders called for people to be “patient”, saying they were sure that Maung would hand power to an interim government and allow free elections.

Instead, General Saw Maung dismissed the government, established the State Law and Restoration Council (SLRC), declared martial law and ordered troops to crush the protests. At least 3,000 people were killed in Rangoon alone and many more in Mandalay and other areas. Thousands were arrested. Others fled the country or to the countryside.

Suu Kyi condemned the repression but urged people to wait for the elections that the regime had promised. While her National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the 1990 poll, the junta, having secured its control over the country, dismissed the result. The generals kept Suu Kyi under house arrest, detained other NLD figures and ignored the sanctions imposed by the US and its European allies.

Suu Kyi and the NLD played a similar role in 2007 when large demonstrations against the junta erupted, sparked initially by the protests of monks. From the outset, Suu Kyi insisted that the movement should not challenge the generals. “There should be no agitation to topple the military regime. It will make people much more wary of a military response and people will become

reluctant to join the movement,” she said.

The conclusion that Suu Kyi has sought to instil from the 1988 political upheavals is that the protests went too far, provoked the army repression and should never be repeated. In fact, the opposite is the case. The opposition movement remained under the domination of figures like Suu Kyi who held it back precisely at the point that the generals were most vulnerable. The working class that had played the central role in bringing the junta to its knees lacked the leadership necessary to challenge the NLD and make a bid for the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies.

The events of 1988 to 1990 are an object lesson in Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrates the organic incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Burma to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. Only the working class, by winning the allegiance of the urban and rural poor, can carry out those tasks as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South East Asia and internationally.

That is the revolutionary perspective for which the International Committee of the Fourth International fights. We urge workers and youth to seriously study our history and program and take up the challenge of building a section of the world Trotskyist movement in Burma.

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