

US upgrades diplomatic relations with Burma

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19 January 2012

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced last Friday that Washington had begun the process of restoring full diplomatic relations with Burma (Myanmar). The US, which never fully ended diplomatic ties, will appoint an ambassador for the first time since 1990.

The US move is part of a broader strategy to undermine Chinese influence throughout the Asian region. The Burmese junta has relied heavily on China since the imposition of US and European sanctions following the army's refusal to accept the outcome of the 1990 election, which was won by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD).

Clinton visited Burma last month to lay the basis for a thawing of relations with the Burmese regime. Her list of demands for the restoration of full diplomatic relations included the release of political prisoners and an end to the longstanding military conflicts with the ethnic minorities in the country's north.

Last week, the Burmese government announced the release of 651 prisoners and the signing of a preliminary ceasefire deal with the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the separatist ethnic groups fighting the Burmese military.

The released prisoners included political activists detained during the mass movement against the regime in 1998, ethnic leaders, journalists, labour rights activists, and monks involved in the 2007 protest movement. An unknown number of political prisoners remain in detention; up to 1,000 according to some human rights groups.

Like the regime's other "reforms," the latest moves are largely cosmetic. The current government headed

by President Thein Sein, a former general, was installed after sham elections in November 2010. Under the anti-democratic 2008 constitution, unelected military representatives control a large bloc of parliamentary seats.

With Washington's backing, NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi has given legitimacy to the regime's efforts to present a democratic façade in order to ease tensions with the West, end sanctions and open the door for foreign investment. This week Suu Kyi registered to run in by-elections in April, with media speculation that she could even join the government as a minister.

Despite efforts in the Western media to paint Suu Kyi as a political saint, there is deep disquiet among opposition activists over her support for the junta's plans. In an interview in the *Australian* on January 6, Win Tin, one of the NLD's founders, branded the "reforms" as "a ploy by the country's dictatorship to seduce foreign governments and neutralise Aung San Suu Kyi."

A non-government organisation worker in Rangoon told the *Asia Times*: "One comment I frequently hear is, 'what was the NLD fighting for if Daw Suu [Aung San Suu Kyi] will run for the by-elections and by that accept the 2008 constitution'?"

In reality, the political role of Suu Kyi and the NLD has not fundamentally altered. The NLD represents sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie that were excluded from political power by the military junta and sought to open the country up to foreign investment.

In the past, Suu Kyi exploited the sanctions as leverage to those ends. Now that the US is moving to restore full relations, she is helping to legitimise the

new arrangements, which have nothing to do with ensuring the democratic rights, and improving the living standards, of ordinary working people.

The NLD performed a similar function in 1988, amid mass protests and widespread strikes that brought the junta to the brink of collapse. Terrified that the mass movement was slipping out of the NLD's control and threatening bourgeois rule, Suu Kyi called off the protests and duped people into believing that their rights could be assured through the 1990 election.

As for the Obama administration, it has embraced the junta's "democratic" window dressing. Obama described the latest prisoner release as a "substantial step forward for democratic reform." Clinton declared "This is a momentous day for the diverse people of Burma. And we will continue to support them and their efforts and to encourage their government to take bold steps."

Clinton spoke to Burma's Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, telling him that the US would "meet action with action." She called the unconditional release of all remaining political prisoners, an end to military violence against ethnic minorities and to Burma's military ties with North Korea.

Washington's chief concern is to weaken Burma's economic and political ties with China. Over the past two decades, Beijing has become Burma's main trading partner, established close military ties and invested heavily in infrastructure. The China National Petroleum Corporation is building oil and gas pipelines from Burma's south coast into China that would allow Beijing's Middle Eastern energy imports to avoid the US-controlled Malacca Straits.

The Burmese junta sent a strong signal to Washington last September when it cancelled a major Chinese-sponsored dam project. The decision indicated that the regime wanted to lessen its economic dependence on China and seek closer US ties and Western investment. Since sanctions were imposed, some 70 percent of investment in Burma has come from China, Hong Kong and Thailand.

China's investment has primarily been in resource and infrastructure projects. Trade has been mostly one way, creating a large trade deficit from imports of cheap Chinese manufactured goods. Burma's exports have mainly been raw materials. Its manufacturing sector has been undeveloped and farmers have been unable to export. Before her visit last month, Clinton played to these issues, warning South East Asian Nations to be wary of nations that invest only to extract resources and not to develop "capacity."

Clinton's trip has been followed by visits by British Foreign Secretary William Hague and French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe. Japanese Trade Minister Yukio Edano is currently leading a delegation of major firms to Burma. As well as establishing stronger political relations, these countries are eyeing economic opportunities, including the exploitation of a new cheap labour force—daily average wages are just \$US2.20.

The US, however, is not just interested in the country's economic potential. The quid pro quo for Washington's easing of sanctions will be the Burmese junta moving away from China's political and military orbit, and accommodating US efforts to secure its continued domination of the region.



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