

The Opinion Pages

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To the Editor:

Thant Myint-U, in "[In Myanmar, Seize the Moment](#)" (Op-Ed, Oct. 5), treats the "new" government of Burma as legitimate when in fact it is a Potemkin village. He ignores the unique structural barrier that precludes effective international engagement: Burma's new Constitution, which sets up the military as a legally autonomous entity, supreme over the government.

Burma's military rulers have managed to pull off what has not been seen in modern history — creating a sovereign state without sovereign powers. Neither political rhetoric nor the periodic release of political prisoners can lead to political reform in the absence of reviving the Constitution.

Even if Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were to become president of Burma, she would lack the legal capacity to enforce any laws against the military, including Security Council mandates on nuclear weapons development, no matter given the military's nuclear ambitions.

Further, the constitutional guarantees of military impunity give a green light to such military rampages as using rape as a weapon of war and seizing children to use as soldiers.

The time is overdue for the global community to follow the rule of law even if Burma does not, and act to end, not embrace, breaches of international law. As a first step, the global community must refuse to recognize the illegal Constitution and resulting elections, as was done with regard to the 1983 apartheid constitution of South Africa.

JANET BENSHOOF

President, Global Justice Center

New York, Oct. 12, 2011

To the Editor:

Following Thant Myint-U's myopic views would be detrimental to the future of Burma. Mr. Thant Myint-U states that President Thein Sein is a true reformer. But the president's actions do not match his words.

Moreover, it is insulting that Mr. Thant Myint-U refers to the Burmese regime's attacks against ethnic minorities as "little wars" and doesn't mention the widespread atrocities the Burmese Army commits every day.

Burmese soldiers killed my parents, my brother and sister, and my uncle after they forced him to watch them rape his wife. If soldiers are able to use forced labor, sexual violence, forced relocation and other abuses as mechanisms of domination, why should President Obama reward President Thein Sein?

President Thein Sein must stop the attacks and persecution of ethnic minorities. It is far too early to place bets on him and his unsubstantiated reform rhetoric.

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Campaign Coordinator
U.S. Campaign for Burma
Washington, Oct. 6, 2011

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Barriers to Bringing Real Change to Myanmar.*

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR **In Myanmar, Seize the Moment**

By THANT MYINT-U
Published: October 4, 2011

MYANMAR, sandwiched between China and India, is at its most important political watershed since the establishment of army rule in 1962. Over the next few weeks, the Obama administration can make a big difference in determining whether historic reforms under way there will lead to Asia's newest democratic transition. President Obama should publicly support the changes taking place, and back up those words with actions to end the country's isolation, before hard-liners who oppose reform are able to push back.

Six months ago it was difficult to be optimistic. Elections had been held but they had been widely condemned as being far from free and fair. And although Myanmar's aging autocrat, Gen. Than Shwe, retired, the constitutional leadership that replaced his junta included many of the same former generals. Few expected more than minor reforms.

But U Thein Sein, the new president and himself a former general, surprised everyone. In his inaugural address to Parliament, he spoke forcefully of combating poverty, fighting corruption, ending the country's multiple armed conflicts, and working for political reconciliation. By June, state pensions for nearly a million people, most of them very poor, were increased by as much as a thousandfold, taxes were reduced, and trade cartels were dismantled. The government redrafted banking and foreign investment rules and began revising its foreign exchange rate policy — all of this in consultation with businessmen and academics. That alone was a huge step, because army rulers had long shunned any civilian advice.

Then, on July 19, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader who was released from house arrest last November, was invited to the annual Martyrs' Day ceremony. The holiday memorializes the 1947 assassination of her father, who is considered the architect of the country's independence. Thousands of her supporters were permitted to hold their first lawful march in years and several independent newspapers came to life. Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi's name, which couldn't be mentioned in print a year ago, began to appear regularly on the front pages.

By August, Parliament began debating sensitive issues, like the release of political prisoners, and passed laws legalizing microfinance for the rural poor and allowing independent trade unions. All Internet restrictions were soon lifted. On Aug. 18, at a meeting with dozens of independent civic groups, the president called for peace talks with the country's ethnic-based rebels and invited exiles to return. The next day, he met for over two hours alone with Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi.

I saw her soon afterward for the first time in over 20 years. She told me that she believed the president was genuine in wanting change and that she hoped we were at the beginning of a new era in Myanmar's politics.

This past week, we've seen previously unimaginable developments. On Friday, following increasing popular agitation, the president halted work on a \$3.6 billion [hydroelectric dam](#) being built by China on the Irrawaddy River to send power to Chinese provinces next door. This was a victory for Myanmar's nascent environmental movement and the area's minority Kachin people. That the president would stop a Chinese-backed project of this magnitude was the clearest sign yet that the country was at a turning point. And many in Myanmar now hope that the government will soon release most or all political prisoners.

But monumental challenges remain — for example, even though the government agreed recently to a cease-fire with the country's largest ethnic-based militia, deadly clashes continue with smaller militias fighting on behalf of minorities in the mountains to the north and east. It is hard to imagine a successful democratic transition while these longstanding and often brutal little wars continue.

Reformist voices are not the only ones in the new system, and a hard-line pushback is far from inconceivable. So the Obama administration needs to do three things, and do them quickly.

First is to unambiguously voice its support for the reforms under way, while at the same time being patient and refraining from demanding too much too fast. The alternative to what is happening is not a perfect revolution; the alternative is going back to square one.

Second, the administration needs to ensure that the reform efforts receive the technical advice and knowledge they desperately require. After decades of isolation, Myanmar suffers from a dearth of skilled people in every field, from banking to environmental regulation to public health. So the United States should lift all restrictions that limit the United Nations and international financial institutions like the World Bank from offering Myanmar their technical expertise. This is not about giving money, but providing the knowledge needed to conceive and carry out reforms in the best possible way.

Third is to move toward ending trade embargoes against Myanmar. As the country opens up, it should neither become dependent on outside aid, nor become an even more corrupt crony-controlled oligarchy. Responsible trade and investment can play key roles in creating jobs, helping to build a new middle class and hastening democratic change.

What we're seeing today is Myanmar's best chance in half a century for a better future. America needs to help end Myanmar's isolation, urgently.

Thant Myint-U, a historian and former United Nations official, is the author of "Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia."

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