

Yet Another Regime Change?

In pursuit of promoting geo-political and extra-territorial goal there is no such thing as a strange bed fellow. So America can do business with military rulers in one part of the globe while talking tough in another region. 'Communist' China does not find any reasonable ground to condemn the ruling junta of Burma (or what is now called Myanmar) but America does. In truth the Bushes are seriously thinking in terms of yet another regime change. While China has immediate business interests, America has a long-term plan to exploit Burma's natural gas.

In August this year some 100,000 protesters, mostly poor workers and peasants, were seen protesting in Mandalay against a 500 percent increase in the cost of fuel as a result of a government decision to abolish its fuel subsidy. But the media in the West presented these protests as demands for "democracy" and regime change in favour of the pro-US National League for Democracy, which won elections in 1990 whose result the Burmese military refused to recognise.

Burma's military junta, true to its nature, responded to these protests by brute force—killing several agitationists, including a freelance Japanese journalist, and arresting hundreds of others. Any voice of dissent is being severely crushed by the military but people are reacting against the economic crisis which is being downplayed in the media.

Anglo-American overloads with the blood of over 2 million Iraqis on their hands are hardly in a position to criticise the Burmese junta for the killings, however, regrettable. American sanctions on the Burmese government are aimed at installing an exclusively pro-American government in that country. The calls by opposition parties, such as Aung Su Kyi's National League for Democracy for sanctions to be strengthened, or for IMF discipline to be imposed, do limit mass enthusiasm in support of the Opposition.

Burma has 30 billion cubic feet of untapped gas in its Arakan province alone, and is known to have further huge deposits of hydro carbon. So America has reasons to talk about another regime change because the Generals are not listening to Bush's sermons. But the hard reality is that the Burmese military is probably not as unpopular as it is made out to be by the pro-American media. The labelling of the rebellious monks as externally inspired eroded their credibility in the socio-political context of Myanmar, in the apolitical sections of society, where foreigners have historically been looked upon with distrust and suspicion. This helped the Generals to mobilise stage-managed but impressive rallies in their support.

True, Burma does have a long communist tradition. But nothing is heard about that legacy—'red flag' and 'white flag'. There was a communist insurgency in Burma between 1948 and 1989 but this gradually lost its momentum and finally collapsed in 1989 when the party masses rebelled against the leadership. Surprisingly the Sangha (i.e. the Buddhist establishment) continues to support the Generals as it has done throughout.

For all their faults the Burmese Generals have so far resisted American ploy to establish American bases on their soil. This may be one 'crime' of which the

Burmese generals are guilty and the reason why they are being targeted for regime change. Because of US sanctions Burma's labour-intensive garments industry has been drastically reduced. The sanctions were originally imposed in 1997 by Bill Clinton and subsequently endorsed by Bush when he took office, and have at least twice since then been strengthened. But sanctions are not really working. So far America has succeeded in driving Burma more comprehensively into alliance with China.

America-sponsored pro-democracy movement is a new phenomenon that affects a number of countries at the moment. But 'democracy' in the West means in effect regime change in favour of American capital. Maybe, renewal of communist movement is the answer to the plight of the Burmese people but that is not happening. The Chinese Communists are helping the Burmese military junta, not the beleaguered Burmese communists and people's movement. □□□