



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 51/2011 dated 1 April 2011

Myanmar Sanctions: Debate Intensifies

By Kyaw San Wai

Synopsis

The swearing-in of the new government amid a rumoured push by Germany to review EU sanctions against Myanmar has sparked a furore. Sanction supporters have refused to cooperate. This partly reflects the nature of Myanmar's political players.

Commentary

ON 30 MARCH 2011, the new 'civilian' government of Myanmar was sworn in at Naypyidaw amid tight security. This comes after Myanmar's first general election in two decades last November which were widely denounced as a sham by opposition movements and Western governments. The junta has been officially disbanded but its members still dominate the political system. Its proxy party has secured over 76% of the seats in the elections. Under Myanmar's 2008 constitution, only 75% of total seats are directly elected while 25% is reserved for military appointees. A number of opposition parties, including a splinter group from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and ethnic parties, participated and won some seats, but are greatly outnumbered in parliament.

One of the key issues dominating Burmese political debate concerns the status of Western sanctions against Myanmar. The debates have been on-going for some time. But sanction opponents have recently become more vociferous in their arguments. They state that certain sanctions should be removed to improve conditions inside and that the new government should be cajoled to cooperate. This has sparked a furore across the board on the impact of sanctions. The pro-sanctions lobby is demanding harsher sanctions and to pressure Myanmar's neighbours and regional countries to strictly enforce the sanctions to topple the junta.

Fundamental Differences

Both sides disagree on the definition of sanctions and are divided over the issues of non-statutory sanctions. The anti-sanctions groups cite a plethora of non-specific sanctions which they say should be lifted to help the people. The pro-sanctions groups, however, maintain that such sanctions do not exist or do not harm the populace. The International Crisis Group recently published a report which labelled the sanctions as a failure in bringing about change and development to Myanmar. This stance is supported by opposition parties in parliament, ASEAN and a number of academics. However, Aung San Suu Kyi -- Myanmar's iconic opposition leader -- a number of exiled Burmese groups and many activists have repeatedly stated that the sanctions should remain in place, as they reportedly were not affecting the general population and no political concession was made by the junta.

Reports have emerged that Germany, supported by Italy, Spain and Austria, is pushing for the European Union to pursue a more proactive engagement towards Myanmar. Many anti-sanction advocates are increasingly vocal in highlighting what they claim as overall failures in the numerous statutory and non-statutory sanctions, which include an investment ban, prevention of financial assistance from global financial institutions, consumer boycotts and a comprehensive import ban by the US.

The non-statutory sanctions regime includes limitations on developmental aid. Despite being one of the poorest Asian countries, Myanmar's ODA per capita is a mere fraction of that given to Cambodia and Laos, which enjoy higher standards of living. Anti-sanctions advocates argue that although the malaise inside the country is mainly due to decades of administrative mismanagement, lifting certain sanctions would definitely help the wider populace, while keeping 'smart' sanctions in place.

Many exiled and opposition groups vehemently oppose the lifting of any sanctions, maintaining that they are working. Lobby groups based in Western countries have reacted fiercely to the anti-sanction statements, even insisting that existing sanctions should be expanded to include members of the new government. They also lambast the anti-sanctions groups as being fronts for business interests, killing possibilities of dialogues between the two camps. The UK, with a strong pro-sanctions lobby, has pushed for existing sanctions to be extended till next year. It is supported by Denmark, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

Internal Politics

It seems that democracy is treated as a panacea for all of Myanmar's woes -- from ethnic grievances, religious persecution, to economic dilapidation and infrastructure breakdown. Democracy may bring about greater opportunities for development and the cessation of human rights abuses, but most activists and groups lack clear goals beyond regime change. Ethnic tensions flared even during U Nu's administration, the only period of electoral democracy. The stance of many opposition groups is solely to oust the ruling regime from power, often resulting in a confrontational approach to politics.

Politics is treated as a zero sum game, where both sides perceive compromise as a sign of weakness. Real debate between political groups is lacking, as many stubbornly adhere to their principles while exchange of views usually degenerates into ad hominem arguments and acrimony. Both the junta and the traditional opposition consider themselves as knowing the best for the people -- an attitude rendering political dialogue almost impossible.

Criticism or disagreement with the official stance is seen by both sides as naïve at best, treasonous at worst. People harbouring differing opinions are quickly denounced as either regime cronies or in the payroll of 'neo-colonialists'. Such lack of depth and dimension in the Burmese political arena means that even if there is agreement on advancing democracy and economic development in Myanmar, many of the country's long-standing issues would persist for a long time.

Prospects

All sides are firmly entrenched in their respective views and are equally intolerant of differing opinions. The sanctions debate is the latest embodiment of the Burmese political crisis and offers a depressing glimpse into the workings of Myanmar's political players. As Myanmar's junta de jure relinquishes power, it remains to be questioned how the people of Myanmar can achieve a better future.

Kyaw San Wai is a Research Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. A Myanmar national, his research interests include ethnic politics and civil society in modern Burmese politics. He has been involved in community welfare projects in Myanmar.