

Time to Embrace the Truth

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The release last month of Burma's longest-serving political prisoner, 79-year-old journalist Win Tin, must have briefly brightened up the restricted life of Aung San Suu Kyi, confined to her home for more than 13 of the past 19 years.

But, while more than 2,000 political prisoners remain behind bars, Win Tin's newly won freedom is unlikely to have given her much hope that her ordeal would also soon be over.

Suu Kyi has described Win Tin as a "man of courage and integrity"—qualities these two champions of democracy share in equal measure.

In the eyes of Burma's military regime, Win Tin was Suu Kyi's "puppet master," although he has rejected any suggestion that he was her mentor or the chief strategist of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

His wholehearted engagement in the pro-democracy struggle, however, earned him 19 years of incarceration in Rangoon's infamous Insein Prison, which ended on September 23 when he was freed along with at least seven other political detainees in an amnesty cynically described by the state media as an act of "loving kindness."

The regime said the amnesty—which also gave freedom to nearly 9,000 convicted criminals—was part of its plan for a "peaceful modern discipline-flourishing democratic nation." Its true purpose, however, was clearly to deflect international criticism at a critical time, as the country marked the first anniversary of the September 2007 uprising and as the spotlight again fell on Burma at a UN General Assembly session.

The UN record on Burma also came under scrutiny, as the UN's "Group of Friends of Burma," which includes the US, the EU, China and Southeast Asian countries, again called on the junta to release all its political prisoners and open talks with the opposition. There was talk of a return to Burma by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, whose missions so far have achieved virtually nothing.

For all his ineffectiveness, Gambari is the victim of a capricious regime, which has treated him like a whipping boy because of its outrage at what it sees as UN bias and international pressure.

Apart from this pressure, the impact of Cyclone Nargis has led many Burmese government officials to realize that change is long overdue.

It's still far from clear, however, whether relief efforts being conducted by the Tripartite Core Group, consisting of representatives of the UN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Burmese junta, are making any significant headway.

The group's so-called experts, handling aid money from international donors, have naively come to believe that a "humanitarian space" has opened up in the country—with some international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), UN agencies and regime apologists claiming that this presents a window of opportunity for the 2010 election.

The regime view of this is contained in the minutes of a briefing Home Affairs Minister Maung Oo received from Than Shwe in July, in which the UN and INGOs were described as “puppets” of the US and the CIA.

Maung Oo accused the relief organizations of providing aid to the victims “just for show,” alleging that they spent humanitarian aid money on themselves and not, through regime channels, on the cyclone victims.

The US, the UN and INGOs were also accused by the minister of pushing Burma to the top of their agendas.

If a “humanitarian space” has been opened up in the Irrawaddy delta it can be closed at any time because the regime retains the sole power to do so, at any time it chooses.

It’s the same power that enables the regime to suppress the truth and imprison those who venture to speak out. Under the brutal totalitarianism of Burma, telling the truth requires great courage and brings fearful consequences.

Win Tin and Suu Kyi are victims of this perverse power. So is the activist Nilar Thein, who was hunted for more than a year, separated from her infant daughter, before being found and jailed, like her husband, for her role in the September 2007 uprising.

The release of Win Tin and a handful of other political prisoners is welcome news, but it isn’t going to change the image of the Burmese regime while Suu Kyi, Nilar Thein and more than 2,000 other pro-democracy activists remain confined.

If Burma’s generals want to show the world that they are sincerely interested in improving the country’s repressive political climate, they should set a timeframe for the release of all these prisoners. They should also make their seven-step political “road map” more inclusive, giving freedom to all political stakeholders to participate in the process and sharing power with opposition forces who were elected in the 1990 election.

No one expects that to happen anytime soon. But there is a general belief that it’s time for the UN and the international community to push the generals to accept the words of Win Tin : *“We have always believed in solving problems through democratic dialogue.”*

P.-S.

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