

Thailand's army leaders not better than Burma's

Friday 23 January 2009, by [THI Awzar](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2008).

Many of Burma's democracy advocates place Thailand's army in a favorable light when compared to their own. But as their familiarity with the abuse of military power at home vastly outweighs their knowledge of that abroad, their appraisals too are imbalanced and detrimental.

The latest cause for contrast has been Burma's May 10 referendum. It comes less than a year after a similar army-sponsored poll in Thailand. Various groups have been critical, among other things, of the delay in the draft Constitution's public release, and now that it is available, its high cost.

"When Thailand held its election, their government distributed the Constitution free of charge to every household and let Thai citizens and the media discuss it freely," U Thein Nyunt, a spokesperson for the National League for Democracy, said in a radio interview.

Thein Nyunt evidently knows nothing about how the draft charter in Thailand was disseminated as part of a Yes vote agenda under strict military control, how the outcome was rigged by the threat of "anything goes" if a No vote succeeded, or how opponents to the draft were denied public space. Yet his willingness to make ill-informed comments about government in Thailand is a regrettably common feature of talk among Burma's political activists.

For instance, many of them happily chorused the remarks of Thailand's "tank liberals" that the 2006 coup was somehow a blow for democracy rather than a blow to it. Even former political prisoners and student leaders, like the celebrated Min Ko Naing, cautiously welcomed the takeover, so long as it would be "good for the people"; whatever that meant.

U Aung Khin, writing in a popular Bangkok-based journal, remarked on how Thailand's military had been able to intervene repeatedly in the country's political affairs without damaging its economy, and apparently only for altruistic reasons, sweeping in like a superhero to fix problems when no one else was left to save the day [article shown above].

Thus the mythology of a good coup forced upon the people of Thailand and transmitted to an unwitting global audience was also replayed for millions in Burma: people who know far better, having been forced to bear the inequities of successive military regimes thanks to the same sort of apologies and excuses of some 45 years ago.

Why is it that persons firmly opposed to militarized politics in their own country appear to condone them in another? Many of their comments apparently stem in part from a desire to demonstrate that "our" junta is so much worse than "your" junta; that Thailand's coup makers are somehow more enlightened than those in Burma, less inclined to cling to power and less likely to behave oppressively, thus making them a good example.

That Burma's dictatorship is vastly worse than any that modern Thailand has produced need not be proven. It is manifest in the wretched affairs of its economy, its decrepit bureaucracy and courts, its broken schools, and in the daily struggle for survival that is the consequence of being born under its

watch.

However, it is incorrect to assume that these differences arise from the respective qualities of the two countries' military leaders. The generals and other big people in Thailand who insist upon keeping their fingers firmly in the power pie are not moral or intellectual superiors to their counterparts to the west. They are not smarter or more trustworthy. Rather, they are constrained by a very different society, one only in part of their own making, which will not tolerate as many excesses for as long.

This was made clear when, in the aftermath of Burma's nationwide uprising last September, Thailand's coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin said he felt that the authorities had handled matters appropriately, that the photographs of violence could not be believed and that it was anyhow an internal matter. He later paid a courtesy visit to the new Burmese capital, Naypyitaw. Not surprisingly, everyone got along just fine.

His predecessor, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, barely hesitated to use violence against thousands protesting his becoming unelected prime minister in 1992. He has never shown any remorse for the deaths, disappearances and injuries that his orders caused, nor has he been called upon to do so, let alone been called to account before a court of law.

But in Thailand, even if a military takeover is supposedly popular — a claim made repeatedly after September 2006 that has since been proven false — the window of opportunity will not remain open for long. Its leaders must calculate and speak accordingly. They must use what time they have to reorganize institutions and people for the best continued advantage over other parts of government and society once they ostensibly retire to their mansions.

By contrast — and this is the important contrast — people in Burma have for nearly half a century never known anything other than military dominance. The army has systematically emptied the country of groups and voices capable of emerging to challenge its supremacy, and makes no pretense of this. There is no window of opportunity; the wall that supported it was long ago demolished.

It is perhaps forgivable then that some of Burma's democrats look longingly at their economically prosperous and at least superficially democratic neighbor and partly attribute the difference between their two countries to good generals versus bad generals. But in so doing they do no favors to themselves or anyone else. Thailand's military and its methods are not qualitatively better than Burma's; it's what's outside holding them back that matters most.

The fight for Burma is a good fight. There is no need for its leaders and spokespeople to make muddle-headed contrasts with others' fights of which they lack understanding, and from which they stand to gain nothing. They can fight their own fight on its merits alone.

P.S.

From Rule of Lords.

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