

Reasons why Thailand can't push Burma too far

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There are at least four reasons why Thailand is not able to push Burma's political development toward democracy and national reconciliation, as well as to free opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

First, the current government led by the Democrat Party has no record of civilian supremacy, not to mention democracy and reconciliation. The Thai government is not comfortable commenting on any military run government since it obtained help from military top brass to form its own coalition. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva knows very well how much he owes the commanders.

People in this country love to call on the military to intervene whenever they have problems with civilian government. The latest military coup d'état happened only three years ago.

The Thai military junta dissolved at the end of 2007. Nobody in this country could say the military has no influence in politics, notably over this current government.

So-called national reconciliation is a political term this government might not be able to spell out. As long as it cannot reconcile the red- and yellow-shirted movements, it's better to have no comment about the even worse national division in Burma.

Disunity in that country is deeper than in Thailand, absolutely. It is not just a matter of political difference, but also a problem of race.

Second, Thai elites - notably those in power - have no clear vision about future opposition and dissident groups. They have no more faith in the opposition's fighting against the Burmese junta.

It seems the Thai elite jump to the conclusion the opposition, and even the rebellious ethnic minorities Thailand uses as a buffer, have a very slim chance of defeating the Tatmadaw [Burmese military].

Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya has talked to ethnic minorities along the Thai border several times over past months since he took the position, to convince them to turn themselves into the junta's fold.

The move is most helpful for the junta but weakens the dissidents.

Very few Thais connect strongly with Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy. Some female members of the ruling Democrat Party and SEA Write-award winning author Jiranan Pitpreecha met Suu Kyi more than a decade ago.

Thammasat University conferred an honorary doctorate degree on her when she turned 60, but such a link is very slim. No strong pressure group could force the Thai government to help her.

Third, the Thai economy relies too much on resources from Burma. The government, every government, would never dare challenge the junta. Making Burma angry might cause trouble in

business.

Thailand could not join any economic sanctions to pressure the junta since they would pose a direct challenge to its own economy. The jewellery industry, for example, suffered from the US's Tom Lantos Block Burmese Jade Act of 2008, since it stifled imports from any country of gems and jewellery containing Burmese raw material.

Rubies and other Burmese gemstones account for about 20 per cent of raw materials for the Thai jewellery industry.

Exports of gems and jewellery to the US dropped sharply in the last quarter of 2008 when the Act was enforced in October. Exports to the US contracted 35.19 per cent between October and December last year, according to Ministry of Commerce data.

Besides gemstones, Thailand is buying via pipeline more than a billion cubic feet of gas a day from Burma's Yadana and Yedagun gas fields, accounting for some 20 per cent of total consumption in this country.

Fourth, Thailand has the burden of proximity as it shares more than 2,200 kilometres of border with Burma.

The borders shelter problems ranging from smuggling and trafficking to political conflict. The junta knows how to use border issues to mount pressure on Bangkok.

Burma's military offensive against the Karen National Union over past weeks caused at least 3,000 people to flee to Thailand, home already to 111,000 displaced persons from Burma.

The operation coincided with the Thai Asean Chairman's statement on Aung San Suu Kyi.

As long as this country fails to overcome these obstacles, it will find it very difficult in lending a hand to save Aung San Suu Kyi.

P.S.

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