

EDITORIAL

Rethinking Burma Policy

Burma is a world trouble spot. But the problem is few take it seriously enough.

Activists and dissidents in and out of Burma have long been struggling to end the military dictatorship. With support mainly from the US and western countries, the struggle continues. But victory seems a distant hope.

The US recently renewed its sanctions on Burma. But many doubt whether this will have any immediate impact on the country. Sanctions may give moral support to detained icon Aung San Suu Kyi and the opposition, but there have been no indications the regime is about to fall. Previous military regimes have turned their backs to the outside world since 1962 and managed to survive. The current regime of corrupt generals is not about to relinquish power.

In fact, the generals prosper by fostering close ties with China, and more recently India. There are even substantial business links with some Asean partners, despite criticism from

officials and lawmakers there.

There is no doubt that Washington's persistent criticism and sanctions are highly appreciated by dissidents and the opposition. But in Rangoon, many diplomats, UN agencies and other observers are more skeptical. They point out that the US policy of isolating Burma is rather counterproductive, because it means that by shutting the door to Burma, Washington cannot talk to the generals. This policy would be fine if the regime was about to collapse soon, but it isn't. More people are becoming critical of sanctions because they hurt ordinary people.

Sanctions cannot be really effective if neighboring countries still engage Burma. Treating Burmese generals as pariahs may draw newspaper headlines and applause from dissidents, but it just makes the regime become more introverted, xenophobic, oppressive and isolationist. You are dealing with a mediaeval dictatorship, not sophisticated politicians.

It is no secret that the US has no

strategy on Burma apart from sanctions. Its earnestness in trying to promote democracy and human rights in Burma is appreciated, but critics say it lacks vision, and its sanctions are ineffective. Therefore, it may be time for all concerned to adopt a more results-oriented policy. A growing number of observers think it is time for a pro-active engagement policy in Burma, but with a timeframe and well-thought out strategy. This would require engaging both the regime and opposition, with inducements for change such as aid and stronger diplomatic links.

We don't want to give the wrong impression. We are not advocating Asean-style "constructive engagement," which has been a total failure. But men in uniform have ruled Burma for 43 long years, and maybe it's time for friends and critics of the regime alike to review their Burma policy. There should be more down-to-earth consideration for the hardships of ordinary Burmese, and not just more lofty ideals of freedom and democracy.

Have the People Spoken?

Nations get the governments they deserve, according to the old adage. So let's take a look around Southeast Asia. Perhaps it's true in Malaysia and Singapore, where the governments of Abdullah Badawi and Lee Hsien Loong respectively seem popular enough. Both have fully democratic political systems, and even though Singapore has hardly strayed from founding father Lee Kuan Yew's charted legacy, the majority of Singaporeans go along with it.

Indonesia has its first directly elected president, Yudhoyono, who appears to have brought a breath of fresh air to the political situation in a country which for three decades was stifled under the heavy hand of former president Suharto. In the Philippines—perhaps the most freewheeling democracy of all, these days—it's always rather difficult to know whether most people are happy with their president or not. The "people power"

ouster of Marcos in 1986 has spawned a street-politics mentality whereby people think they have the right to change governments by extra-constitutional means. So if current President Gloria Arroyo looks unpopular because thousand of Filipinos take to the streets to demand her resignation, it doesn't necessarily mean she is unpopular with the majority.

Cambodia has elections, but Cambodians seem still to look for a strongman, like Prime Minister Hun Sen. Vietnam and Laos follow communist systems, while Burma has a fully-fledged military dictatorship. And little Brunei is a sultanate, though wealthy enough with its oil and gas reserves to keep people happy.

That brings us to Thailand.

There is little doubt Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party were very popular—narrowly missing an outright majority—when first elected to power in February 2001; Thaksin was again

overwhelmingly popular last February, when he and his party gained 370 of parliament's 500 seats. But opinion polls over the past two months show his popularity plunging. Reasons seem to be: first, his lack of credibility in tackling corruption scandals involving the government—particularly the recent purchase of bomb scanners at an inflated price for Bangkok's new airport; failure to bring any hint of peace to restive southern Thailand; Thaksin's new emergency powers; and a slowing economy.

Corruption scandals, like the airport, refuse to die down as they have before. This may have hoped the heavily reshuffled cabinet Thaksin promised in early August would root out dead wood and those tainted with corruption. They were disappointed.

Bangkok newspapers were full of clichés such as "musical chairs" and "old wine in new bottles." Is this what Thais deserve?

Learning with the Irrawaddy 5

To accompany August 2005 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine
Selected article: *Editorial: Have the People Spoken?* page 7

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Editorial in Context

- a) Look at pages 6 and 7. What things are on these pages?
- b) What do all these have in common?
- c) Who writes the editorial, and what is that person's job? What are that person's duties?

Activity 2

Prediction: Title

The title of this editorial is "Have the People Spoken?"
What do you think this editorial will say?

Read the article. Were you right?

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 3

ASEAN's governments

Match the country with what type of government it has.

Brunei	Cambodia	Malaysia	Indonesia	Singapore	Laos	Vietnam	the Philippines
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1. Democratic political system that most people support.
2. Democratic political system that most people support, that has not changed for a long time.
3. A monarchy, where people are rich.
4. A communist state.
5. A new democracy after 30 years of authoritarian rule.
6. A democracy, where people often take to the streets to demand change.
7. A limited democracy, where people elect an authoritarian leader.

Activity 4**Key vocabulary**

- a) Scan the text and underline any words you don't know.
- b) Identify the meanings of these words in your dictionaries.
- c) Here are some words from the text. Use them to fill the gaps in the sentences.

adage	stray	legacy	stifle	freewheeling	mentality	plunge
credibility	tackle	inflated	reshuffle	cabinet	taint	cliche

1. I couldn't study when I became sick, so my marks _____.
2. Although she is a good leader, she has the _____ of her parents' bad behaviour many years ago.
3. He _____ from his studies, because he was more interested in playing football and listening to music.
4. My grandparents left a family _____ of hard work and caring for others.
5. I wish the government would _____ environmental problems.
6. The training was very _____ - we did what we wanted to, without a lot of discipline.
7. "You always want what you cannot get" is a useful _____.
8. This song is a _____ - another love song that says exactly the same thing.
9. There was a staff _____. Everyone changed their jobs.
10. The President is losing his _____, as he lies all the time to the people.
11. I am not allowed to speak in meetings. My boss wants to _____ my opinions.
12. He has an _____ idea of his ability – he thinks he is very clever, but he always says stupid things.
13. Our head teacher has a very conservative _____ - she likes strong discipline and tight control of students.
14. The _____ makes all the decisions in this government – the opposition parties and normal MPs don't have any power.

Activity 5**Idioms and phrasal verbs**

Here are some idioms and phrasal verbs from the article. Locate them in the text, and choose the best synonym or definition for the underlined words.

1. ...*the majority of Singaporeans go along with it*. (paragraph 1)
 - a. agree to follow
 - b. strongly support
 - c. don't like
 - d. debate with

2. ...*Yudhoyono, who appears to have brought a breath of fresh air to the political situation...*
 - a. new idea
 - b. practical help
 - c. more money
 - d. pleasant change

3. ...*which for three decades was stifled under the heavy hand of former President Suharto* (paragraph 2)
 - a. boxing gloves
 - b. authoritarian rule
 - c. military dictatorship
 - d. human rights violations

4. ...*while Burma has a fully-fledged military dictatorship* (paragraph 16)
 - a. complete
 - b. dangerous
 - c. bad
 - d. ineffective

5. *Corruption scandals, like the airport, refuse to die down as they have before.* (paragraph 5)
 - a. be solved
 - b. become public
 - c. go away
 - d. increase

6. ...*the heavily reshuffled cabinet Thaksin promised in early August would root out dead wood and those tainted with corruption...* (paragraph 5)
 - a. reduce the size of cabinet
 - b. punish corrupt people
 - c. put some people in jail
 - d. remove people who are not useful

Activity 6**What's the Editor's Opinion?**

"Thai people deserve the government they have".

Do you think the editor agrees with this statement? Why / why not?

Activity 7**Cliches**

The last paragraph mentions two clichés. A cliché is a phrase that is used so much it has lost its original meaning. Both these clichés refer to the recent reshuffle in the Thai cabinet.

- a) 'Musical chairs' is a game where people walk around some chairs to music. When the music stops, people rush to sit down. The person without a chair is out, and the others walk around the chairs to music again.
- b) 'Old wine in new bottles' is when you pour your wine into a new bottle, so people will think it is new wine.

How do you think these apply to the cabinet reshuffle?

Activities to do After Reading**Activity 8****What do you think?**

The main point of this editorial is

Although the Thai people elected this government, they deserve a better one.

Do you agree with this? Do you think that people in a democratic country are responsible for their government?

Another example: Many people in the US did not vote for George W Bush, and do not support his policies on Iraq. Can you blame these people for US government policy?

Discuss these ideas.

Activity 9**Running Dictation.**

Do a Running Dictation activity with the text.

Activity 10**Cartoon**

Look at the cartoon on page 6. What does it mean? Who is the teacher? Who are the students?