

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Myanmar and Foreign Policy

**M**yanmar, long a recluse by choice, and then an international leper because of its anti-democratic record, is now gaining some degree of international acceptance. It has just won observer status with ASEAN and will probably soon receive membership. It is now present at a meeting of ASEAN and other invited Foreign Ministers discussing Asian security issues. It is now also the site for increasing foreign investment from Japanese and other multi-nationals.

Lest one forget, Myanmar is a country run by a bunch of generals against the wishes of its people. In 1989, at a general election held after years of isolationist military rule, the people voted into power the National League for Democracy headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. The military leaders responded to this declared will of the people by putting Suu Kyi under house arrest and by taking into detention other leaders of her party. The NLD was just not allowed to assume power.

This violation of the basic democratic rights of the people was accompanied by other violations of the people's civil rights, particularly of the many ethnic groups fighting for some degree of autonomy. These actions by the military junta (SLORC) rightly earned the condemnation of the international community; Myanmar was condemned and arraigned before the UN and its human rights mechanisms. A Special Rapporteur has been regularly examining and reporting on human rights violations in the country.

Beset by increasing economic difficulties, SLORC tried to find its way out of its exclusion by making the minimum concessions necessary. Suu Kyi was released from house arrest after six years but with continuing restrictions on movement and association. SLORC also set up a Constitutional Assembly, composed mainly of its own nominees, to draw up a constitution for a return to democracy. The Assembly, however, was required to ensure a constitutional position of dominance for the army.

The ASEAN countries, arguing for a policy of quiet diplomacy and "constructive engagement" and against what they call interference in the internal affairs of a country, have been seemingly satisfied with these measures. Foreign capital, particularly Japanese, also rushed in to exploit the country's natural resources. ASEAN took the political step of allowing Myanmar to participate as an observer at its last meeting; its full membership is probably not far away. It is present at the security conference of Asean and other invited Foreign Ministers that was meeting in Jakarta in late July. The military regime is thus receiving the international recognition that was so long denied it.

Against this background, we are concerned with Sri Lanka's attitude to Myanmar. As far as the state is concerned, it appears totally

oblivious of the nature of the regime. It has in fact accorded Myanmar a goodwill mission headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It invited the Sangharaja of Myanmar on a state visit to this country. It is a truism that a country's foreign policy is dictated by its own interests; in the absence of any other possible material interest that may drive this country to support this anti-democratic regime and the patent lack of a moral basis for its policy, one needs must come to the conclusion that this policy derives from the government's current placation of Buddhist vested interests.

This conclusion gains support from the links that the Buddhist sangha in Sri Lanka is developing with Myanmar. Senior members of the sangha have accepted religious titles conferred on them by the regime in Myanmar; even a monk such as the Venerable Walpola Rahula, a radical and a supporter of the LSSP in his early years, has visited Myanmar to be conferred with such a title. Recently the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress conferred life memberships to respected members of the Buddhist laity; it chose the Ambassador of Myanmar to do the honours on this occasion. Monks and organizations speaking about democratic rights in this country apparently see no dilemma in accepting honours from a regime with patently anti-democratic credentials. To speak of medieval religious links with Myanmar and ignore the present day reality of repressive government is not worthy of Buddhist monks.

The Sri Lankan Parliament is however more enlightened. It recently passed a private members motion deploring the current regime in Myanmar and calling upon it to permit the duly elected government to take power.

Warren Christopher, the US Secretary of State has said that he would raise the matter of Myanmar's politics at the Jakarta Foreign Ministers' meeting and went on to condemn its record of human rights violations, nor ruling out the application of sanctions. He was supported by the European Union and Australia, to the expressed dismay of the ASEAN grouping.

There is no reason at all for democratic Asian countries to ignore these matters and give the US and the West the monopoly of championing human rights.

## The Sinhala Pravada

**W**e also edit a magazine in Sinhala, also called Pravada. This is not a translation of the English magazine though it does occasionally carry a few articles from the English. Addressing a readership of the Sinhala-educated intelligentsia, it is very conscious of Sri Lankan ideological and social issues.

It has recently published a series of articles trying to deconstruct Buddhist attitudes towards such issues as democracy, feminism

and social organization. It has taken as its arena both the doctrine as expounded in the Pali canonical texts as well as the institutionalized practice of the religion in contemporary Sri Lanka. We realized that these articles would be controversial and did expect debate, albeit on an a level of intellectual discourse.

However, subsequent developments have showed us that we underrated the degree of heat inherent in the current climate, exacerbated as it is by the ethnic conflict. These articles have been construed as a base attack on Buddhism and consequently on the Sinhala community; in encouraging such attacks, the editors are playing the game of the Tamils fighting for a separate state and therefore deserve to be called traitors. Once again, the over-determination that the ethnic conflict exerts over all other issues. The insanely irrational nature of Sinhala Buddhist ideology was also clearly on view.

The political overtones of the debate were made all the more prominent by a resolution moved in the Western Provincial Council by the leader of the opposition and approved without a division by the Council. The resolution called for the banning of the journal and the expulsion of its two editors from all their positions. These arguments were supported by the contention that the journal was a forum for attacks on Buddhism; bits and pieces from the articles, taken out of context and with no concern for their overall thrust, were used in the debate. The age-old connections between Buddhism and the Sri Lankan state were emphasized in the course of the debate, with the implication that the articles therefore also constitute an attack on the state.

It must be said that some members of the council spoke in defence of the content of the articles and even of the right to free expression. But even they were too caught up in the hysteria of the debate and did not rise to oppose it.

We bring this to the attention of our readers as an illustration of a mentality that stands against all efforts to modernize our society and to work out a political structure that accords with present realities.

## Power to Control Minds

We have referred in a past issue of Pravada to the abrupt termination by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation authorities of its non-formal education programme. No valid reasons were ever adduced for this step; listeners were left to surmise that the candour with which this programme addressed issues of current interest and the openings it gave listeners to participate and give free expression to their views had offended some government leaders.

A listener filed a fundamental rights case in the Supreme Court alleging that the abrupt closure of the programme had affected his right to free expression. This case was heard last month and the decision has now been announced. In view of its importance, we are publishing in this issue extracts from the judgment.

The Supreme Court has held that the action of the SLBC has been a violation of the rights of the petitioner as a participatory listener. He has been awarded damages and severe strictures have been passed on the SLBC; but the Court has not asked the SLBC to resume the service.

However, the most interesting part of the judgment concerns the opening up of a new area of thought on fundamental rights. The judgment says that the action might have more properly based on the fundamental right of free thought rather than on the right to free expression. This can open up and considerably expand the terrain available for the defence of fundamental rights.

Another aspect of the freedom of opinion and thought is the censorship on security related matters. We have referred to its operation in the case of the attack on the army camp at Mullaitivu. We think it apposite in these circumstances to reproduce as a document an analysis of the current censorship regulations and their implications by Article 19.

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### Insubstantial Interference

"We helped the Congress organisers with money" said Lt. Gen. Hamid, head of the Indonesian army's Socio-political Unit, "but we did not interfere in any substantial way", referring to a government inspired split in the Indonesian Democratic Party and a dissident Congress that removed Megawati, daughter of Sukarno, from its leadership.

This despite the fact that the key-note address at the Congress was given by the armed forces chief himself.