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New pressure can oust Burma's generals

By Amartya Sen

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It is difficult for me to talk about [Burma](#) without a deep sense of nostalgia. My earliest memories are all there; I grew up in Mandalay, between the ages of three and six. But the magically beautiful country I remember from my early years has now been in the grip of a supremely despotic military rule for almost half a century, with collapsing institutions, arbitrary imprisonment, widespread torture, and terrorised minority communities. The situation has remained terrible for so long that there is now a kind of defeatism that makes frustrated well-wishers eager to be thrilled by little mercies. So while [Aung San Suu Kyi's release](#) from unjust confinement is a great moment for celebration, it is also a time to think clearly about what the world can do to help her cause.

What can the world do? Many analysts of Burmese affairs have called for an international commission of enquiry, possibly led by the United Nations. The case for this is strong, especially after the manipulated elections. There are, however, immediate measures that can also be taken to put pressure on the regime.

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First, the existing framework of [sanctions and embargoes has to be reshaped](#). General sanctions that hurt the Burmese people, such as restrictions on garment exports, can be replaced by those that isolate the rulers by targeting their own favourite activities. At the top of the list must clearly be an embargo on arms and armaments of all kinds. There is also a strong case for sanctions on the commodities – from minerals and gems to oil and gas – that yield huge profits to the regime. Travel bans on the personnel running the regime, or those closely associated with it, can be effectively pursued. Financial restrictions on large transactions that come from businesses in which the military rulers are directly or indirectly involved would help too.

Neighbouring countries have a special responsibility. The Chinese government is the regime's most important supporter, providing extensive business connections (not just in oil and gas) and political patronage. Visitors tell me Mandalay is now largely a Chinese-run city, with most of the good premises and new constructions being occupied by Chinese businessmen. But China is not alone: criticisms can be made of the supportive policies of both India and Thailand. These countries should realise a change of course is not only morally important, but also in their long-term interests. The tyrants will, sooner or later, fall. However, the memory of betrayal of the Burmese people will last much longer. The intensity of anti-Americanism that is one of the most potent forces in Latin America today – related to past US support of brutal dictators – points to something that Burma's neighbours should want to avoid.

Yet a global strategy that goes beyond the neighbourhood is also needed. Several western countries have strong business relations with Burma, for example in oil. But as yet neither the European Union, nor the US, nor indeed Switzerland, Australia or Canada, has used the power of financial sanctions against the regime. Western countries are sharp on rhetoric in denouncing Burma's rulers. But given they do not do what is entirely within their power to do, it is harder to persuade China, India and Thailand to do the right thing as well.

Finally, we have to start thinking about how a post-military government should deal with the culprits of the past, both because that will be an important issue in a non-defeatist scenario, and because it is part of the considerations that make the present-day rulers decide what they can reasonably expect if they yield. Here there is something to learn from the intellectual leadership of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, about not threatening bloody revenge but opting for the sagacity of offering safety in exchange for remorse. Even butchers have to find a "way out" if they are not to go on fighting – and tyrannising – to the bitter end.

Towards the end of March 1999, I received a phone call from an old friend: Michael Aris, the husband of Aung San Suu Kyi. I knew then that he was extremely ill with prostate cancer. Michael told me, as he had done many times earlier, that the one focus of his life was to help Ms Suu Kyi, and to work for Burma's freedom. He did not want to die, but he hoped others

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would continue to focus on what can be done. I received a call only a few days later that Michael had died; it was also his birthday. So Michael Aris is no longer with us, but the need for the focus he championed is now particularly strong. In Burma's [recent election](#) we witnessed what Vaclav Havel has described as "a mockery of free expression in which people vote in fear and without hope." But with determination and wisdom, the tyrants can be made to withdraw, and Burma's people may be free once more.

The writer, who received the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, teaches economics and philosophy at Harvard University.

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