

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, January 7, 2012 1:31 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: Burma article

Worth a read.

From: Derek Mitchell [redacted]
Sent: Saturday, January 07, 2012 12:03 AM
To: Kurt Campbell; Campbell, Kurt M; Sullivan, Jacob J; Yun, Joseph Y; Murphy, W Patrick; Patel, Nirav S; Murphy, Erin L
Subject: Burma article

B6

All: This is the most interesting article I have seen in a while analyzing internal dynamics in GOB. Reflects overall lack of clarity we have over what exactly is happening nowadays inside the government. I will be seeing the author (Aung Zaw) in Chiang Mai late next week (and asked for a meeting with 1st Vice President Tin Aung Myint Oo -- will see if I get it). Derek

OPINION / OTHER

January 6, Irrawaddy
 Are there cracks in Thein Sein's cabinet? Aung Zaw

This week's release of just a handful of political prisoners bitterly disappointed many in Burma. Dissidents saw the move as proof that Naypyidaw had not changed—that the so-called "reforms" were all a facade. The public vented its collective anger on social media and in emails to each other.

The main target of their vitriol was of course the president, Thein Sein, and the other high-ranking officials who had—over the past weeks and months—gone out on a limb to promise that political opponents would soon be freed from prison.

But when criticism spread to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for her perceived role as an accomplice, The Lady herself had to react quickly to urge everyone to keep a cool head and to remind the gloomy public that the president alone could not enact reforms single-handedly.

A senior official close to the president confirmed the sentiment by disclosing that the decision to release just over 30 activists was the result of an ongoing power struggle between Thein Sein and the hardliners.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Suu Kyi cautioned against too much faith in the current changes, and said that Burma's long-ruling military still wields enormous power despite the veneer of democracy provided by the elections.

"I am concerned about how much support there is in the military for change," she said. "In the end, that's the most important factor—how far the military are prepared to cooperate with the principles of reform."

Analysts inside the country pointed to the powerful National Defense Security Council (NDSC) and to Snr-Gen Than Shwe, the retired dictator who may continue to exercise influence from behind the scenes.

"As long as Than Shwe is alive, don't expect any genuine change in this country," said an outspoken editor in Rangoon who, on this occasion, requested anonymity.

High-ranking officials have leaked the fact that recent NDSC meetings have been peppered with discord, and that the political prisoners issue is one of its most divisive.

Chairing the meetings is the president, Thein Sein, a former military general, but one who is reputed to be honest and sincere. Even skeptics admit that he is arguably the least corrupt of the top-ranking officers, and the general with the cleanest hands when it comes to the blood of past human rights abuses.

The Council is comprised of 11 senior government leaders, 10 of whom were previously military generals. The team includes the two vice-presidents, the commander-in-chief and deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the ministers of defense, home affairs, foreign affairs and border affairs. The speakers of both Houses are also members of the NDSC, and on occasion Information Minister Kyaw Hsan is invited to sit in as an observer.

Together the NDSC represents the inner circle of government in Burma; its members hold sway over all the highest priority matters, including national security, economy, and the pace of democratic reform.

Aides claim that the president usually makes the final decision on any particular issue, but that he is an attentive listener and prefers to hear competing angles before he commits himself.

However, it also appears that military hardliners still hold the power to overrule any decision. First vice-president, Tin Aung Myint Oo, is renowned as a battle-hardened general, but is also reputedly one of the most corrupt officials, loyal to Than Shwe, and always ready to stamp down on any dovishness at the NDSC and to maintain the status quo.

The hawks in the Council argue that releasing prominent dissidents will endanger national stability. It won't. And Thein Sein, who served in the armed forces since 1968, knows that. Inside sources say that Thein Sein faces mounting challenges to his authority—a suggestion he appeared more than willing to share with Western diplomats.

One story goes that when the president saw the news report published in both The Irrawaddy and the Bangkok Post that suggested that Tin Aung Myint Oo was constantly undermining him and was perhaps positioning himself in the driving seat for a military coup, he simply asked his staff to bring him extra copies of the news article. He then pinned a short note to the clippings and sent them over to the vice-president's office.

But still some observers deny the existence of the hardliners. They want to play ball and so they prefer to believe that the government is just playing the time-tested old game of Good Cop, Bad Cop. They say Naypyidaw has developed this strategy to frighten and cajole the international community, and to justify itself when it needs to stall.

That's why, of course, Thein Sein's allies were so comfortable to disseminate word that they were involved in a daily power struggle with the hardliners, and that the possibility of a coup loomed large unless they were supported 100 percent down the line. Insiders have also disclosed that since the visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Burma, the hardline faction has been neutralized and has faded into the background.

That does not preclude the fact that they could always come back.

But this too is no secret. Remarking on the process of reform in Burma, Suu Kyi recently told AP: "I wouldn't say that there are many dangers, but I wouldn't say that it is unstoppable either. I think there are obstacles, and there are some dangers that we have to look out for."

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