



Closed window to the east

June 18, 2005

Lately, India has taken the lead; it has been vociferous in supporting a principle shared by most men of goodwill on this planet: The ideal of democracy. Long before it was introduced in Greece or in Rome, democracy was known and practiced in the cities of the Indus-Saraswati civilisation.

Today, Indian Communists as well as the officials in the Ministry of External Affairs constantly harangue the media on the need to reintroduce democracy in Nepal. This is fine, though in the case of Nepal, the opponents to democracy are the Maoists who do not hesitate to kidnap thousands of children to recruit them for their killing fields!

But I fail to understand why the MEA (forget the Communists) does not take a similar stand on Myanmar. Is it not another of India's close neighbours where democracy does not exist? Myanmar had known military dictatorship under General Ne Win from 1962 to 1988 and when the General resigned as the Chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party in July 1988, the students of Yangon took to the streets; they wanted democracy. They were shot at.

The daughter of General Aung San, the hero of Burma's independence struggle, stepped in to become the uncontested leader of the freedom movement. Sadly, in September 1988, a junta took over and formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), an acronym signifying no democracy for the people. Hundred of students were massacred and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested in July 1989.

With the muse of the movement neutralised and the generals confident that 'law and order' had been fully restored, SLORC decided to order general election in 1990. To their surprise, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide securing 82 per cent of the seats. The generals refused to validate the results of the elections and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was kept incommunicado in Yangon.

When in 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Chairman of the Nobel Committee stated: "In the good fight for peace and reconciliation, we are dependent on persons who set examples, persons who can symbolise what we are seeking and mobilize the best in us. Aung San Suu Kyi is just such a person. She unites deep commitment and tenacity with a vision in which the end and the means form a single unit. Its most important elements are: Democracy, respect for human rights, reconciliation between groups, non-violence, and personal and collective discipline."

The world has been responding to the appeal and for the past 15 years, several states and individuals have exerted pressure on the junta to restore democracy, validate the 1990 elections and free Ms Aung San Suu Kyi from her house arrest. The United Nations, the European Union, different US administrations, several Nobel laureates (such as the Dalai Lama) and Myanmar's closest neighbours (the ASEAN nations), have tried (and continue to try) to improve the situation; each with its own means or methods.

To give an example, the United States, Canada, and France have recently refused to accept the new diplomats nominated as ambassadors of Myanmar by the ruling military junta. Despite repeated attempts, the State Peace and Development Council (the junta's new name) failed to get three Army officers accepted as Ambassador.

Unfortunately two great nations, China and India, are absent from this concert which pleads for the respect of the basic democratic principles. One can understand that Beijing had never been enamoured of the democratic system

(it was perhaps a coincidence, but Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested one month after the 1989 Tiananmen events). In any case, the regimes in Yangon and Beijing share more than their aversion to democracy.

During the colonial era, the British considered Myanmar "the back door to India". For China, to have political, military and economic foothold in Myanmar is of prime importance to counter India's influence. According to the Jane's Defence Weekly, during a visit of Premier Li Peng in 1998, Myanmar purchased US \$400 million of Chinese helicopters, armoured vehicles, field guns, assault rifles and patrol boats. Yangon had already bought fighter planes from Beijing earlier.

In 2000, Benjamin Gilman, a former chairman of the US House International Relations Committee, noted, "the greatest threat to peace in Asia was not the tensions between India and Pakistan, but China's activity on India's northern border." Gilman added: "China has four armies based in western China that could be employed to support operations from Tibet against India through flanking attacks through Burma."

In 2001, in a China Brief of the Jamestown Foundation, Vijay Nair wrote: "(Beijing) bought its way into favour with the Burmese military Government by facilitating a peace agreement with the Communist Party of Burma, selling them nearly US \$2 billion of arms, providing cheap consumer goods, rebuilding strategic surface communications and upgrading port facilities to enhance maritime activities." In these conditions, one can understand that Beijing wants to keep its cosy relation with Yangon; in return the generals are happy to have Beijing's constant support.

But what about Delhi? Why remain silent? In a recent article, 'India coddles its despotic neighbors', Michael Vatikiotis wrote in the International Herald Tribune: "Isn't it time that the world's largest democracy started behaving like one? Much as India deserves plaudits for ensuring that more than a billion people enjoy the rights and liberty that democracy endows, it could surely do

more to promote these values in its own neighbourhood." The article referred to Myanmar.

Is it not strange that when the ASEAN nations stand united in boycotting Myanmar's chairmanship of the organisation (due for next year) if democratic reforms are not introduced and Ms Aung San Suu Kyi is not freed, Delhi continues to 'engage' the Generals?

Today more than 25 per cent of Myanmar's exports are destined for India, one of the few democracies which does not impose trade sanctions on Yangon. The pretext to remain 'engaged' (a policy framed by the NDA Government) is that the military regime could help in a crackdown on militants who have taken refuge in Myanmar. In 2003, the MEA submitted a proposal to the junta to flush-out ULFA cadre who had shifted their camps from Bhutan to the bordering areas of Myanmar.

The visit of the Myanmarese military leader, General Than Shwe, in October 2004 coincided with a pro-democracy conference on Myanmar organised in Delhi. The UPA Government tried to cancel the conference; it did not want to embarrass General Than Shwe, the military dictator. But why is India so reticent about embarrassing military dictators, whether in the West or in the East?

Mr George Fernandes, the only Indian politician who has always supported the Myanmarese democratic movement and had the courage to speak in favour of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, declared in his opening speech: "Unless India and her neighbours come together to restore democracy in Burma, how can we expect a peaceful environment in Southeast Asia." He also warned that if democracy did not find a place in the country, it could only encourage terrorist groups to recruit new candidates who could act against India's interests from Myanmarese soil.

On June 19, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi will be 60. She would have spent most of the last 17 years behind bars or under house arrest. Can we hope that Mr

Natwar Singh will stand by his own principles, wish her on behalf of the largest democracy in the world, and tell her that India supports the introduction of basic reforms in Myanmar? Can we hope?