

## India, China's silence over Burma protests not so mystifying

Mungpi

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September 1, 2007 - Ironically at a time when the international community, including the United Nations Chief Ban Ki-moon and US president George Bush have publicly condemned the Burmese military junta for its high handedness in dealing with demonstrations and called for the immediate release of the arrested, China and India, the two giant neighbours, have been conspicuous by their silence.

Several key activists and prominent former student leaders, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, have been arrested in a crack down by the junta to quell the spreading demonstrations.

While some critics view India's silence to be part of its 'Look East' economic policy, other analysts said India is making a terrible mistake by keeping quiet because wooing the Burmese generals will not serve India's economic and national interest in the long run.

In 1988, when university student-led protests in Rangoon turned into a nationwide pro-democracy movement, India was the first to voice its concern and supported students and activists even to the extent of allowing some student activists to flee to India to escape the rampant crackdown by the junta.

However, in the early 1990s, with the launch of the "Look East policy' India did a 'U' turn in its policy towards Burma and embarked on the so-called 'constructive engagement' with the generals.

Dr. Sean Turnell, senior lecturer of the Economics Department of Australia's Macquarie University said India's silence over the ongoing protests in Burma is directly related to India's economic policy.

"I can only imagine it must be a part of the 'Look East' commercial policy," said Dr Turnell

However, he added that India's silence does not mean that it has lost hopes regarding Burma's democratic movement. "I think this is really about commercial hopes, and probably a policy of the bureaucracy rather than the politicians."

In contrast to Dr. Turnell's view, BBC's eastern India correspondent Subir Bhaumik said India is making a 'serious mistake' by distancing itself from the Burmese democratic movement.

"[Indo-Burmese relationship] is a one way traffic... the Burmese military junta has not obliged India with a single thing that it wants," Bhaumik said.

India's demand that the Burmese generals flush out Indian insurgents from Burmese soil has not been fulfilled and India's hopes to import gas from off-shore Arakan gas fields has come unstuck with the Burmese generals awarding China the right to buy gas, he added.

"India, for some very illustrious reason is living in its own make believe world and is abandoning its democratic ideals," Bhaumik added.

Bhaumik, who has closely followed Indo-Burma relations, said for the Burmese military junta to take India seriously, India needs to open up options of supporting the Burmese democratic movement.

"Otherwise the Burmese junta will take India for granted," Bhaumik said.

He condemned the Indian embassy in Rangoon for failing to send even a representative to the birthday celebration of Burmese pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on July 19, and said the Indian embassy in Rangoon should do more to support the current spate of protests in Burma.

India, however, in supporting democratic changes in Burma needs to engage the generals and maintain an influence over them, said Brahma Chellaney, Professor of Strategic Studies at New Delhi based Centre for Policy Research.

"India is playing a very active role in telling Burma that it needs to have reconciliation with the democratic forces and therefore making a public statement decreases the leverage," Chellaney told Mizzima in an interview.

Chellaney said India's silence over the ongoing protests in Rangoon and parts of Burma does not mean its support for democratic changes in Burma has decreased.

"Sometimes, 'quiet diplomacy' is more effective than making statements for the sake of doing so... India believes it can play a better role by engaging in quiet diplomacy rather than public condemnation," he added.

Chellaney reiterated that unlike China, India has always been a supporter of democratic forces in Burma and seeks to play a constructive role.

Meanwhile, China, a veto wielding country which has influence on Burma, has also remained silent on the current wave of protests in Rangoon and other parts of Burma.

Analysts said China, which shielded the Burmese military junta along with Russia at the United Nations Security Council earlier this year, is undeterred with the ongoing protests in Burma and does not view it as a threat.

The China based Burma Communist Party (BCP) spokesperson comrade Phoe Than Gyaung said, "China's silence over the current protest is because China does not see any threat."

"But, definitely it is monitoring the situation in Rangoon and Burma," he added.

The current spate of protests that began in August 19 was sparked by a sudden rise in fuel prices – a 100 percent rise in petrol and diesel prices and 500 percent increase in compressed natural gas which is used by buses - impacting the increase in bus fares and other essential commodities.

The increase in bus fares and commodity prices has severely affected the common people, who could no longer afford to travel by bus to their work places.

The sporadic protests, which are the largest in a decade, was cheered by hundreds of onlookers, but failed to attract them to join in to give it a semblance of the 1988 uprising.

The authorities allowed the 88 generation student leaders to begin the protest undisturbed on August 19, but later responded by arresting and detaining several key leaders using its puppet civilian organizations – Union Solidarity and Development Association and Swan Arrshin.

Analysts, however, said the current wave of protests, which is being staged sporadically, has failed to resemble the 1988 uprising, where thousands of students, monks and civilians took to the streets and hundreds of protesters were mercilessly gunned down by the military.

"China does not see the ongoing protests as a threat, but it wants a stable government to deal with... it is concerned about the stability of the regime and does not want conflicts along the Sino-Burmese border," Phoe Than Gyaung added.

A Sino-Burmese border based analyst U Mya Maung, said China is driven by economic considerations and wants a stable neighbour.

"We can see that China is stepping up measures to pressure the ceasefire [ethnic armed] groups because it wants stability along its border and wants to do business in Burma," said Mya Maung.

However, Dr Turnell said, "They [China] would be worried, for they fear instability in Burma above all. They would also be uncomfortable with the emergence of democracy in Burma, lest such an outcome give its own citizens ideas."

"I see China's role as wholly negative, immoral and the biggest single obstacle to the emergence of a good outcome generally in Burma," he added.

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