

# The Neoliberal Onslaught

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If people believe all that is going on in Burma today has very little connection to the wider world but that it is purely a domestic phenomenon the way things have evolved, they cannot be more wrong. Ever since the opening up of the country post-Myitsone and Daw Suu's release, Burmese society has enjoyed ever increasing outside contact, now with the West as well as the East... for better or for worse as they say. And some though not the majority will dispute that sanctions have played a major role in the military junta's change of heart, or more correctly change of tack. Even during the "dark days of military dictatorship" contacts between the West and the Burmese military have not been insubstantial. [1]

In the age of globalisation under the ideological banner of neoliberalism, even if its champions vehemently deny that it is indeed an "ism", this new political and economic era has dawned as a direct result of the Burmese way to "perestroika", many would say machinations, of the ruling military class which remains the elephant in the room. In the domestic arena, it was supported by its broadened social base constituted mainly of the crony class and later converts to the "reform process" among the middle class including among the formal opposition. Internationally and far more effectively however, a new lease of life to our military overlords was granted (after they had been pushed into the embrace of China and then leaned on) by the recent détente with the US and EU that they set out to achieve and succeeded.

One might say the two acts alone of suspending Myitsone Dam Project and releasing the Lady from house arrest were like dropping an international pariah of a government into a magic pool to emerge from it like the Beast turned into Prince Charming. To all intents and purposes "reconciliation", at least the most critical one to the military, between the ruling generals and the West, has been achieved. In that sense, mission accomplished. And it is a mutual/bilateral accomplishment when one considers how the West had been missing out so badly in reaping profits from the world's last large untapped market of cheap labour, natural resources and consumers.

Not that they have not been diligent in paving the way to a neoliberal capitalist socio-economic order one way or the other, either by regime change or by peaceful means, in Burma for years. The American Center, NED, George Soros' Open Society, British Council and many INGOs have all been engaging in infiltration, cultural conditioning and laying the foundations within government as well as civil society. They have all been busy bending the collective ear, funding, training and helping establish many an organization and institution to this end. [2][3][4][5]

The much lauded process of democratisation, in actual practice to acquire a semblance of democracy, is a pre-requisite up to a point. Certain freedoms including the media and peaceful protest as well as free and fair multiparty elections to a national parliament have to be in place as in other member states of ASEAN, notwithstanding our coup prone neighbour Thailand where the military has begun to emulate their Burmese counterparts in their enviable staying power.

The real neoliberal objectives of profits before people and market supremacy before social justice have proved to be an unwritten law around the world in today's postmodern capitalist drive to globalize, read dominate through economic might, even if the old gunboat may still come in handy at crunch time. [6] Free trade and competition after all were globally expounded, upheld and enforced precursors of outright imperialism and colonisation. [7] The concept continues to prevail after four centuries and finds its modern embodiment in the rise of regional blocs of free trade today. [8] The WTO, an overarching global body and successor of GATT, in tandem with the IMF/World Bank, will ensure that every member state falls in line. [9]

This global agenda of the dominant West now suits our military rulers to a tee, if belatedly converted and welcomed to the club. Embracing the whole process however may not be as smooth as they might expect. They will have to jump through a few hoops. And if they think their nationalistic sensibilities will be respected they have another think coming. National sovereignty will be subjected to an economic and political war of attrition until they become empty words. [10]

Are they willing and prepared to be transformed into an emerging comprador bourgeoisie? Because capitalist free competition that inevitably favours the powerful multinationals will drive the budding national bourgeoisie to the ground leaving only those who cooperate and collaborate, or else capitulate. Even the cronies are starting to feel the pinch. Despite their vigorous protestations who in the end won hands down over the foreign investment laws? [11][12]

Is there a fundamental difference between the global elite and the domestic elite in this sense? Wealth creation, yes, but for whom? Trickle down to any significant extent? Chance would be a fine thing.

More importantly driving the farmers up and down the country from their ancestral land and confiscating it in favour of the big players, military/crony, foreign or joint, to engage in mining or export-oriented industrial scale farming of cash crops will almost certainly make the country completely reliant on food imports and food aid. The consequences of such an outcome in the national economy can be dire with soaring indebtedness, both sovereign debt and personal debt. Whether this is the right direction to take for a large agricultural society

like Burma, apparently emulating a small city state like Singapore, must be a very important question to debate. Indeed the political wisdom of such a decision in the land of Saya San has to be downright questionable. [13][14][15]

Industrialisation and capital accumulation will follow the prevailing SEZ model. The urban poor will have to compete with the newly landless farmers seeking a livelihood in the cities (or they can leave not just the countryside but the country itself as so many have already done), leading to a glut in the labour market that favours the so called wealth creators and job providers. Whether this arrangement is beneficial to the majority of ordinary working families in terms of a living wage, job security, holiday and sickness benefits, and not least humane working conditions, is highly debatable. Already industrial disputes have become a day to day reality in these urban industrial estates. [16][17]

What about some enduring peace in the land after sixty six years of civil war? Aside the ceasefire deals only to be broken sooner or later and the so called peace process dragging on interminably while some of the ethnic leaders are being bought off, again with foreign funds and assistance, the civil war rages on in the east against the Kachin and Shan. In the west the Rohingya issue remains largely unresolved. Despite the protestations and aid from both foreign state players and INGOs, the absence of the political will to settle these in an acceptable manner, but instead putting obstacles in the way of finding political solutions and at the same time insisting on a ceasefire, gives the lie to the whole process. [18][19][20]

The reality is that the West and the rest have always been able to accommodate such “local difficulties” and carry on with business as usual. After all they can always dress it up as “constructive engagement”, a stance which their own business lobbies have never shifted from. [21][22] Furthermore “rule of law” can also be as malleable in the hands of the rulers as the interpretation of democracy. [23] It is in the end down to us all the peoples of Burma to hold high the banner of popular struggle and fight on until our cherished dream of a fair and just society for all can come true.

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