

The author of “Burmese Days” would find rich material for a sequel in the current pre-election situation in Burma.

These days one often hears talks of incremental change through the junta’s (kleptocratic) “privatization”, election for election’s sake, and “constitutional military rule.” But they all sound Orwellian to me.

For the past two decades, Burma’s *de facto* government has been suffering from the terminal crisis of legitimization, whether it is measured by Burmese traditional discourses of righteous kings or those of the modern Rousseauian social contract.



The monks’ revolt in 2007 and the common disdain with which the junta is treated in regional and global forums speak volume.

If “the genius of democracy is that it allows social conflicts to find open expression, moderates the intensity of those conflicts, and provides procedures by which to legitimize their public resolution,” as scholars have expounded, then junta leader Snr-GenThan Shwe’s Constitution and the “election laws” are irredeemably stupid and harmful to the common good.

How then could this illegitimate ruling clique of Than Shwe, his thuggish character and feudal pretensions get away with threatening to invoke the “law” to, in effect, abolish the popularly elected political figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, who continues to command both domestic support and international solidarity? Provided, that is, if Suu Kyi chooses, rightly in my view, not to re-register the party as required under the new laws which attack its very foundations?

Ordinary Burmese on the street know the bogus nature of the military’s planned constitutional rule. In fact, these election laws are best understood as the junta’s final battle plan, or

operational manual, in its war against the NLD and other formidable oppositional organizations and leaders such as the Shan NLD and its jailed leaders.

The craziness of the “election laws” is not so much that they are neither law as we know it or about elections (not to mention irredeemably anti-democratic and categorically repressive), as that renowned liberals who should know better, including the secretary-general of the UN and of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are, in effect, treating the junta’s new “electoral” politics *prima facie*.

After their whirlwind visits to the country, these gentlemen came up with memorable sound-bites, including “a moment of hope and change,” “a new beginning,” “a new landscape,” “emerging humanitarian space,” “the growth of civil society,” “state building” and, most recently, “privatization.”

These otherwise well-intentioned men are but fools who allow themselves, wittingly or unwittingly, to be used by the junta as proxy defenders of “Than Shwe Inc.”

” program ( <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/hardtalk/8531397.stm> ), saying: “there is a new beginning [in Burma] after the election,” an utterance which compelled even the program host to accuse him of “insulting the Burmese people.”

The regime’s distinguished proxies remind me of an impassioned conversation in George Orwell’s “Burmese Days,” between the protagonist Mr Flory and Dr Veraswami, the sycophantic Indian doctor suffering from Anglophilia, the strain that made disease carriers believe *Pax Britannica* was the best thing that ever happened to the “Orientals.”

Provoked by his Indian friend’s characterization of his anti-colonialist rants as “seditious,” Flory launches his tirade against the “white man’s burden” defense of the Empire, the thematic mantra among his Eton-schooled, Oxbridge-educated fellow colonial administrators in the then British Burma: “I am not seditious. I don’t want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I’m here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man’s burden humbug.... It’s so boring. Even those bloody fools at the [“whites only”] Club might be better company if we weren’t all of us living a lie the whole time...We Anglo-Indians could be almost bearable if we’d only admit that we’re thieves and go on thieving without any humbug.”

Fast forward 75 years to today's military-ruled Burma. Than Shwe's regime is engaged in a criminal process of establishing a polity which can only be described as "internal colonialism" and an unmistakable kleptocracy. And these regime proxies, wittingly or unwittingly, have entered into a repugnantly "Kissingeresque" swap of cheap access to power for intellectual honesty and personal integrity.

Spin-doctors abound and come in different shapes, skin-colors and backgrounds. Spinning for the junta is a boutique industry comprising not just bureaucrats, but writers and scholars of international reputation—for instance, Thant Myint-U, the dynastic historian of feudal Burma and the grandson of the late U Thant, Burma's former UN Secretary General and the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz.

The *New York Times* wrote in a March 17 article titled "*Change Comes to Myanmar, but only on the Junta's Terms:*" "There is guarded hope among business people and diplomats that Myanmar, or Burma, as many people still call the country, may be gradually moving away from years of paranoid authoritarianism and Soviet-style economic management."

Were George Orwell alive today he would certainly find ample raw material to write a sequel to "*Burmese Days*," perhaps with the title "*Myanmar Days*," using the generals' "election humbug," technocrats' "poverty reduction humbug," self-aggrandizing local elite's "economic nationalism humbug," just to name a few.

As a Burmese who has been pushing for change advocating both sanctions and engagement approaches alternately, I feel these men of impeccable professional and educational backgrounds are pimping us all for their ideology, as well as other undeclared interests.

They appear blinded by the hegemonic discourses that view Asia's rising middle classes of capitalist wage earners, with higher income and better Western training, as "agents of democratization," while the reality tells a different story.

Throughout Asia, the determined and bloody pushes for participatory forms of

government—call them what you will—are coming not from “educated,” urban middle classes, but rather from Thai peasants and urban under-classes, Burmese political prisoners with only domestic schooling (save Aung San Suu Kyi), South East Asia’s faceless migrant laborers, and tradition-bound religious orders such as Buddhist monks and Muslim clerics.

Therefore, these new discourses of “Burma change” are remarkable in that they reek of intellectual dishonesty, elitist paternalism and empirical shoddiness. But they pass as “respectable policy voices” because they resonate with the hegemonic Western capitalist worldview inscribed in the corridors of global and regional powers, even as they choose to ignore all too conveniently the deeply disturbing realities of Burma, and beyond.

Here I offer samples of other Burmas, real not imagined, for these regime advisors, tutors and proxy spokespersons to factor in their next media or official articulations: Burma’s militarized State which shows no signs of retreating from power, politics and the plunder of public assets; ethnic communities making preparations to flee to safety in the face of the looming new round of bloody wars between ceasefire groups and the central military government; the inseparability of Burma’s narcotics industry and the generals’ political economy; the widening hunger and malnutrition and the constant presence of human insecurity; the junta’s crazy pursuit of armaments projects and recent purchase of MiG-29s for about US \$500 million; and last but not least the 2,100 plus dissidents behind bars who risk their lives and those of their families so that change—not the kind the proxy spin-doctors want the public and international community to swallow—will eventually come to Burma.

In an ideological world still in the grip of the neo-liberal hegemony of “State Bad, Market Good”, effective wholesale theft is spun as something preferable to ineffectual state-management.

Historically, large-scale systems of theft, exploitation and daylight robbery have often been justified as “divine right to rule,” “civilizing mission,” “modernization” or “economic development.”

Orwell’s Mr Flory, an imperialist with intellectual honesty, tells Dr Veraswami, the sycophantic Indian doctor with a colonized consciousness: “Of course, I don’t deny that we [British] modernize this country in certain ways. We can’t help doing so...But we’re not civilizing them, we’re only rubbing our dirt onto them. Where’s it going to lead, this uprush of modern progress, as you call it?...Sometimes I think that in two hundred years all this, all this will be done—forests, villages, monasteries, pagodas all vanished... And all the forests shaved

flat—chewed into wood-pulp for the *News of the World* [newspaper], or sawn up into gramophone cases.”

Flory’s creator would be turning in his grave if he knew that China, India and other Asian neighbors, as well as the global extractive and energy industries, have picked up where the *Pax Britannica* of Orwell’s days left off.

With international friends in high places bending over backward in order to spin for them, who can blame Neanderthal “Naypyidaw men” for imagining that their eternal lordship over Burma’s land, life, water and oil is enunciated in their “Constitution”?

Yes, onward with the Orwellian election! Slavery is freedom, indeed.

*Dr Zarni is Visiting Senior Fellow at the Institute of International Security Studies at Chulalongkorn University and Research Fellow on Burma at LSE Global Governance.*