

The rulers of Burma and Sudan face many similar issues in dealing with domestic and international relations.

BANGKOK—Since Gen. Omar al-Bashir's 1989 coup, Sudan has been run as by a military dictatorship, but not quite as long as Burma, which has been under army rule since 1962.

Still, there are many parallels between the two countries: both are multi-ethnic, poly-religious populations oppressed by a violent elite. Both are prey to a vast state security apparatus funded by natural resource revenues, in turn abetted by close links with China and Russia.



Beijing shields both countries from criticism and action at the UN Security Council, and its investment helps undermine the Western sanctions in place against both regimes. Both regimes stand accused of large-scale human rights abuses and violence against their own citizens, and a Harvard Law School report published in May 2009 drew a direct parallel between violence in western Sudan's Darfur region and that in eastern Burma.

Since fighting started in Darfur in 2003, the death of an estimated 250,000 people and the displacement of around 3 million more has become an international cause celebre. Taken by candidate Barack Obama's strong line on Darfur—and perhaps by current Vice President Joe Biden's musings about possible US military action in Sudan—the US-based Darfur lobby expected “something would be done” about Darfur if and when Obama got elected. But now the US-based human rights and Darfur lobby is angry and has criticized the Obama

administration's somewhat tepid reaction to the recent elections in Sudan.

That the Sudanese elections were a sham seems beyond question. The main opposition candidates did not run in the presidential election. The southern opposition—the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) is part of the country's "Government of National Unity" set up as part of a 2005 north-south peace deal. However, it restricted its participation to the south, possibly in anticipation of the 2011 referendum on whether southern Sudan will secede.

Perhaps the SPLM cut a deal with the al-Bashir National Congress Party (NCP), giving Al-Bashir a free run in northern Sudan, in exchange for the NCP accepting the south's preference for secession? Urging calm despite the flawed election, SPLM official Anne Ito told reporters, "We need peace in order to get to the next stage." However, given that a substantial if undefined proportion of Sudan's oil is in the south, it remains to be seen if Khartoum will consent to secession next year. It has the money and the firepower to resist that outcome, while SPLM has allegedly imported arms of its own via Kenya. Over the past year, tribal violence in southern Sudan has increased, with the SPLM accusing the NCP of fomenting trouble by arming groups opposed to the SPLM in the south and funding intra-ethnic factionalism. It all sounds a bit like the Burmese junta backing ethnic splinter militias.

In the north, the NCP seems to have won seats and votes in areas not known for pro-Khartoum views. In eastern Sudan, around the city of Kassala (part of the "north"), the majority of the people are ethnic Beja and Rashaida. However, the NCP won every legislative seat bar one in the region—a result somewhat akin to the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) or similar political vehicle winning a landslide in Karen or Shan regions inside Burma. Beja Congress leader Abdullah Moussa alleged that NCP representatives emptied ballot boxes and pushed his own party observers out of the polling stations during voting and the counting of votes. He said that his party managed to win one seat on a legislative council because the Congress managed to keep an armed guard at the polling station throughout the course of the vote.

The reactions of the various observers and foreign governments to what has just transpired in Africa's largest country might be a foretaste for later in 2010, when Burma holds what exiled dissidents are calling "a military election."

The EU observer mission issued a contradictory statement after the elections, which said that although the polls showed "deficiencies," they "pave the way for democratic progress" in the

future. How this way might be paved is not clear, not least in the EU's own statement, which elsewhere notes not only "intimidation and threats," but says "competition was reduced as opposition candidates, considering they could not participate on an equal footing, withdrew from the race in the North." The statement also referred to "deficiencies in voters lists and weak organisation [which] hindered the voters participation."

Rather than paving the way for "democratic progress," it sounds more like these elections could serve as a trial balloon for similar flawed, rigged polls in the future. The EU mission noted and was impressed by "the commitment shown by the Sudanese (not clear whether this refers to the people or government) to a process of democratic transformation in these complex conditions." But can commitment by people achieve democratic progress in the future, when the odds are arrayed so heavily against them by a well-armed, well-funded state that wants to rig elections to maintain a grip on power behind a veil of democratic legitimacy?

Note also the contrived caveat of "complex conditions," which is meant as a qualification of what can be expected of elections in Sudan. However, conditions are "complex" in almost every country and political context in the world, so why bother peppering an official EU observer statement with an unnecessary non-sequitur? The real reason is that such qualifications can justify "engagement" with oppressive and corrupt regimes, now based on the "principle" that a "democratic" event took place, regardless of what this means for the realities of power inside the country. The thinking seems to be along the lines: "Yes, the country is ruled by a man wanted for war crimes, yes, they ran rigged showcase elections, yes, we are running out of options and leverage over the regime...but its...."complex..and we have to allow for that."

These semantic high-wire acts only amplify Al-Bashir's real interest in staging the election—to offset International Criminal Court indictments and an arrest warrant against him. The elections were originally to be held in 2009, based on a 2005 peace agreement which ended a long-running and brutal war between the north and south. However, the government stalled on publishing electoral laws, and the process was held up over oil-related boundary disputes between north and south, and the difficulties of holding a nationwide census in a country the size of western Europe. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Al-Bashir became more interested in the elections after the ICC first published its charges against him in mid-2008.

Now Al-Bashir has a "democratic mandate," and the tepid international reaction to his win makes the already far-fetched likelihood that he will stand trial in The Hague even less likely. It might be no more than typical al-Bashir posturing, but he boasted in southern Blue Nile state recently that the US now backs him explicitly.

Burma's military elections are likely to serve a similar purpose: help the regime legitimize continued military rule and serve as a buffer against any attempt to establish a Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity, as recommended by UN human rights envoy Tomas Ojea Quintana and backed by Australia, the Czech Republic and the UK. The US is “studying closely” Quintana's recommendations, but has not backed them explicitly.

Getting France and Germany onboard is needed to achieve a common EU position, but whether other European countries have the will to pursue this remains to be seen. In a recent statement to *The Irrawaddy*, Ireland said that it “welcomed the report and the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur,” but added, “We are working with our EU partners to see how these can best be advanced through the Human Rights Council and other UN agencies.”

Since the Sudan election, some whitewash statements have been issued from regional observation teams. Preliminary statements from the African Union, the Arab League and the east African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—a regional bloc of nations instrumental in negotiating Sudan's north-south peace deal—did not report widespread fraud, although they acknowledged irregularities and logistical problems in conducting the vote.

Sudan is a member-state of all three organizations. At the recent Asean summit in Vietnam, leaders apparently “underscored the importance of national reconciliation in [Burma] and the holding of the general election in a free, fair and inclusive manner,” according to the bloc's final statement.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung said the elections should be “free and democratic with the participation of all parties.” The Vietnamese PM had visited Burma mere days before the summit, signing a number of commercial and investment deals. Beyond that, the Asean statement made no mention of how the bloc could work to push for a free and inclusive election in Burma, beyond the blandness of a summit communique.

The Burma-ICC issue aside, some Europeans are being seduced by what junta apologists and naive optimists portray as Burma's “transition.” EU envoy to Burma/Myanmar Piero Fossini penned a recent article in which he noted that the electoral framework “makes a mockery of internationally recognized standards of democracy,” and puts this in the context of a fragile

economy, widespread human and civil rights violations and the continued detention of more than 2,000 political prisoners.

Despite this indictment, Fossini remained optimistic, along the lines that the elections can serve to open some democratic space in Burma. He said, “The upcoming election can be viewed not as a point of arrival, but as a possible 'springboard' for change—along the example of Indonesia—as the first step in a process for gradually handing over power back to a civilian government, to continue the democratic transition.” This reads like an implicit vindication of the junta's “Seven-Step Roadmap” to democracy, which includes the widely-criticised 2008 Constitution, as well as the recently published electoral laws – the framework for Burma's “democratic transition.” Indonesians might also quibble, given that the country made the jump from Suharto's dictatorship to being southeast Asia's best-functioning democracy, in the space of a few years.

The parallels with the EU Observer statement on Sudan are clear and both seem to be grounded in wishful thinking, spun as a form of “realism,” based on “painful choices” about “complex realities.” Fossini's article noted the “painful reflection” taken by the US and EU before both decided upon “re-engagement” with the Burmese junta.

Similarly, “painful choices” was a phrase often used by a variety of Western diplomats, implicitly urging the National League for Democracy (NLD) to take part in the 2010 election.

The NLD has made its choice in the face of a “transition” that deprived it of its leader and hundreds of leading figures, who languish in jail. It now faces disbandment, while Burma will go ahead with elections that will do little to undermine the junta's grip on power. As with Sudan, this is the (not very) “complex reality” behind the country's (non-existent) “democratic transition.”

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