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What Obama Can Do for Burma

U.S. engagement with the junta shouldn't be open-ended.

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By AUNG DIN

The news from Burma, my home country, seems to only go from bad to worse. Last week, Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi was denied yet another appeal and will remain under house arrest. Last month, Burmese-American human-rights activist Kyaw Zaw Lwin, also known as Nyi Nyi Aung, was sentenced to three-years in prison on trumped up fraud and forgery charges.

This past July, President Obama signed into law the Burma Sanctions Renewal Act, which extended strict sanctions on the country's military junta for three more years. But the administration must also be careful that its policy of "pragmatic engagement" with Burma's military rulers—which began with a visit by State Department officials last November—does not legitimize a fundamentally corrupt regime.

Than Shwe, the senior general who heads the junta, has promised to hold nationwide elections this year, the first since Ms. Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy's landslide victory in 1990 elections—which were nullified by the military. But the election will be a sham, the product of a new constitution pushed through last year by force and intimidation that forbids Ms. Suu Kyi from running for or holding office.

Ms. Suu Kyi, her supporters, and many of Burma's long-persecuted ethnic groups, including the Karen, Karenni and Shan, are rightfully refusing to participate in this charade unless the regime amends the constitution to allow for free and fair elections, a legitimate civilian government and equal rights and representation for all ethnic groups.

But first the regime must release its thousands of political prisoners, including hundreds of monks who took part in the 2007 antigovernment protests known as the Saffron Revolution.

Thus far, however, Gen. Than Shwe has been employing his usual mix of violence, brutality and war. He's rounding up and arresting opposition members and increasing his assault on the Karen and other ethnic minorities, displacing more than 75,000 people in Karen State in eastern Burma in 2009 alone.

How can the U.S. and the international community play a meaningful role in bringing true peace and freedom to Burma? The answer lies in placing collective political and economic pressure on the regime to engage in meaningful and time-bound dialogue with Ms. Suu Kyi, her party, and the leaders of Burma's ethnic minorities. Failing that, the U.S. should take the lead in organizing a global arms embargo against the regime, and establish a commission of inquiry to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in Burma by the United Nations.

This will require Mr. Obama's strong leadership and commitment. His Burma policy objectives are sound: the release of all political prisoners, an end to conflict with ethnic minorities, accountability for human-rights violators, and genuine dialogue among all Burma's stakeholders.

But "pragmatic engagement" or "measured engagement," whatever it is called, should not be an open-ended process. There should be benchmarks, such as a clear time frame, expected outcomes and appropriate responses.

Mr. Obama should appoint a U.S. policy coordinator for Burma, legislatively mandated by Congress since 2008, and let him or her play a central role to strengthen existing pressure mechanisms, including increasing financial sanctions on Burma, while continuing engagement with the regime.

Mr. Obama should also urge the European Union to join with the United States, Canada and Australia in imposing targeted financial and banking sanctions against the Burmese generals, their families and their crony business partners. He should also remind the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) that it needs to put serious diplomatic pressure on the regime for a negotiated settlement with the opposition if it is really committed to productive U.S.-Asean relations.

Mr. Obama's presidency is the product of the blood spilled and courage displayed by American freedom fighters and civil-rights activists barely a generation ago. Our hope is that he recognizes their sacrifices by supporting the Burmese people in the months ahead with decisive action. He could start by demanding the release of Ms. Suu Kyi and the American human-rights activist Kyaw Zaw Lwin.

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