

## A beautiful feeling

*In Myanmar, where good things happen to bad people, most things are going the junta's way.*

BY RIGHTS, Than Shwe, Myanmar's dictator, should be a worried man. As an exiled dissident wrote this week, the country he rules is among the world's poorest, has suffered the longest civil war anywhere, and displaces, by the opposition's count, more people per head of population than any other country. He is understandably (if silently) reviled by his own people, and shunned by the West, where it has long been hoped—or even assumed—that the days of any regime as corrupt, inept, brutal and unpopular as the one he heads must be numbered. So it is disconcerting to have to admit it: General Than Shwe is on a roll.

The 77-year-old "senior general" has just returned from India. In the world's largest democracy, he had the chance to pray for about five hours at Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment; he was given Indian promises of help in information technology; and he received as a gift from his hosts a bust of Mahatma Gandhi, an apostle of non-violence. Whoever planned his itinerary must have a highly developed sense of irony. Pro-democracy protesters did little to spoil the party. India feels it has lost out in Myanmar because of its earlier support for democratic reform and Aung San Suu Kyi, the detained opposition leader, and is anxious to make up for lost time. It wants Myanmar's help in thwarting the cross-border activities of insurgents in its north-eastern states, and in curbing smuggling—and the drug-abuse and AIDS that follow.

Most of all, India wants to make sure Myanmar does not tilt irrevocably into the Chinese sphere of influence. Its strategists are paranoid about the sort of access China might win to Burmese seaports. And Indian businesses lament the opportunities to secure energy supplies from Myanmar, lost to their Chinese rivals. They looked on with envy in June, as Wen Jiabao, China's prime minister, was feted in Naypyidaw, Myanmar's remote new capital. India was happy to give the junta the chance, in the general's visit, to remind China that it is not the only game in town.

Completing a triangle of cosy neighbourliness, Thailand's electricity supply depends on Burmese gas, and Myanmar emerged from last month's meeting in Hanoi of the regional club, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), to which both belong, with a reference in the joint communiqué (to "national reconciliation") that could be taken as much as a pat on the back as a rap on the knuckles. Thant Myint-U, a writer on Myanmar, says the regime is relishing the experience of being on good terms with all its neighbours—a first in Burmese history.

America and European countries still impose sanctions of varying severity. But weary of endless bickering with ASEAN about who will sit where at which meetings with whom, the EU and America, like Japan, have swapped the bargepole for the long spoon and some sort of engagement with the junta.

Moreover, the generals have another new friend, of the sort to spook the West. North Korea's foreign minister, Pak Ui Chun, has also been in Naypyidaw. The two countries renewed diplomatic relations only in 2007, 24 years after a murderous North Korean attack on a visiting South Korean delegation in Yangon. Mr Pak's visit now will add to recent worries about Myanmar's inchoate nuclear programme. The two regimes are past masters at dividing and ruling in the outside world. The lesson Myanmar's has drawn from North Korea is that a real or rumoured nuclear capability is a big help in this endeavour. So pally are the two dictatorships that Myanmar seems to have tolerated another outrageous, if less catastrophic, North Korean breach of its sovereignty. Its diplomats in Yangon confiscated all 300 remaining copies of a

locally published Burmese-language biography of Kim Jong II, their dear leader, from the home of its 62-year-old author. Perhaps he had omitted a miracle or a hole-in-one.

The generals will not lack money to pay for North Korean weapons and gadgetry—and to feather their own nests. They can expect a handsome income from the parallel oil and gas pipelines to China now under construction. Already, the sale of gas to Thailand has made some of them rich, without improving the lot of subsistence farmers, the majority of the population. Now they are lining their cronies' pockets by "privatising" state assets.

Happy in your Naypyidaw

That drive is related to the election promised for an unnamed day later this year. Nobody expects it to be free or fair, and the constitution has been doctored to entrench a dominant role for the army. Yet the outside world—including many of the junta's fiercest critics—has by and large decided that the election is better than nothing. That is not just because almost any political change in Myanmar would mark an improvement; it is also because the election will create new, partially representative, institutions, and sometimes the forms of even heavily circumscribed democracy take on a life of their own. That the opposition is split, with Miss Suu Kyi's party announcing a boycott only for one faction to decide to take part after all, may make the junta a bit more confident. But it will not repeat the mistake it made in 1990, when the opposition thrashed it at the polls, and it had to spend two decades rejecting foreign demands that it honour the outcome.

Now, as some generals swap combat fatigues and dress uniforms for longyis and business suits, presenting themselves as civilian politicians, it is hard to expect more than evolutionary change. Another writer on the country recently visited the government in Naypyidaw. He left the crumbling, shoddy former capital, Yangon, for a pristine, deserted highway and a new city built on an epic scale, adorned with monumental statues of the martial heroes of Burmese history. To him, this did not look like the seat of a regime preparing to bow out, so much as that of one that saw itself as the founder of a dynasty, built to last.

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