

Why Burma is Not Iraq

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq has enabled two important realisations. First, that imperial powers act only to preserve their interests, and second, that humanitarian intervention — i.e. humanitarian imperialism — is touted and encouraged by the media and official circles mostly to circumvent the true self-serving intents of aggression. Granted, many Americans are still under the impression that Iraq harboured Al-Qaeda, developed weapons of mass destruction and threatened America's security. But who can blame them? Compare the relentless campaign of fabrication and half-truths prior to the invasion — courtesy of the Bush administration and its willing allies in the media — to the dismal follow-ups on whether such military adventurism actually achieved any of its declared objectives.

Every facet in America's propaganda machine was in ceaseless motion to make a case for war; aside from the obvious pretext, Iraq's horrors under Saddam were repeatedly emphasised. Also showcased were Iraq's exiled elites who "proved" that the US war was in tune with the desperate pleas of the Iraqi "masses". Forget the actual masses thereafter butchered with impunity. Compare again the attention given to Saddam's victims to the subsequent attention given to victims of the US war (estimated to number more than one million), who were not even validated as victims but instead presented as grateful beneficiaries. A few months into the invasion, a leading US neo-conservative claimed to me in an interview that the Iraq democracy experiment was so successful that "Iranians are calling me at my office angrily saying, 'How come you liberated the Iraqis and are yet to liberate us?'"

So why aren't the US and Britain responding to the situation in Burma with the same determination that they exhibited for Iraq, and now Iran? Why haven't media pundits rushed in to make a case for war against the brutal regime of General Than Shwe who has denied his people not only political freedom but also the basic requisites of a dignified life? To maintain their extravagant lifestyles in the midst of crushing poverty, junta generals jacked up fuel prices by 500 per cent in August. This even provoked Burmese monks — legendary symbols of peace and endurance — to demonstrate en masse, demanding greater compassion for the poor. The protests, starting in a rural town 19 August, culminated in massive rallies of hundreds of thousands and lasted for weeks.

The media correctly drew parallels between the most recent Safron Revolution and the 1988 uprising, when students in Rangoon triggered nationwide demonstrations that were suppressed brutally by the army, claiming 3,000 lives. General Than Shwe became the head of the junta in 1992 and continued to rule with an iron fist. However, his subversion of democracy was not a strong enough reason to prevent large multinationals from seeking lucrative contracts in the gas-rich country. He accumulated wealth and his officials continued to roam the globe with few hindrances, while the Burmese people continued to

suffer. This eventually led to the most recent revolt, which was once again crushed without remorse. The number of dead this time remains unknown; estimates range between 200 and 2,000. Thousands have also been arrested and many monks have reportedly been tortured, their monasteries ransacked. From a media angle, no revolution could be as sentimental or appealing. But, of course, it takes more than tens of thousands of monks leading hundreds of thousands of the country's poor in mass rallies to make Burma relevant for long.

Western leaders, aware of the criticism that awaits them, have paid the necessary lip service, but little else. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown decried the use of violence against protesters and demanded European sanctions. President Bush declared that Americans "stand in solidarity with these brave individuals". Israel, on the other hand, denied its military links to the junta, despite much contradictory evidence. It justified its unwillingness to influence the situation on the grounds of nostalgia — Burma was the first South Asian country to recognise Israel. The UN sent its envoy to Burma to meet General Than Shwe and Ibrahim Gambari was left waiting for days before he was allowed to express the concerns of the international community. And that's that.

Burma is as important to China as the Middle East is to the US. China cares more about the political stability of its neighbours than human rights and democracy; the US cares about such a nuisance insofar as its ability to serve its own militaristic and economic interests is affected. China is the world's fourth largest economy, and will soon be the third; it holds \$1.4 trillion in reserve, mostly in US treasury bonds. Its sway over the global financial system is undeniable, and under no circumstance will it allow America a significant role in a country that shares with it a 2,000-kilometre border. The US, on the other hand, pays lip service to democracy in Burma, and its continued "support" of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy is aimed at maintaining a foothold in Burma for a future role, should the relationship between the West and China turn sour.

Humanitarian imperialism has proved more destructive than the injustices it supposedly eradicates. But expect none of that in the case of Burma, because intervention does not serve the interests of the influential parties — not the West's, or China's, or Russia's. We may see a few sentimental meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of the generals, and perhaps a few gestures of goodwill by the latter, at the behest of China and the West. But they will bring no sweeping reforms, nor meaningful democracy or human rights. These can only be achieved by the people of Burma, their monks, civil society activists, and by ordinary people.

If Iraq has been a lesson of any worth it is that the Burmese are much better off without American bombing raids or British napalm in the name of intervention. True reforms and democracy can only come from within, from the closed fists of the determined dispossessed. Indeed, Burma is not Iraq, and Thank God for that.

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