

Editorial

An Opportunity in Burma

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ONE OF THE CHALLENGES for those seeking to promote democracy in tyrannies around the world is the frequent absence of a peaceful opposition to work with. In Iraq, the reception exiles might receive upon return is uncertain, and Saddam Hussein's secret police have quashed any possibility of civil society inside the nation. North Korea's people are beaten into submission and starvation. In Iran, to complete the tour of President Bush's "axis of evil," there is a vibrant opposition, but America's checkered history in that country means that any support must be offered with delicate sensitivity.

All of which makes Burma all the more remarkable as an exception to the rule. It's a lush and potentially wealthy nation with a population of close to 50 million, but its despotic regime (which calls the country Myanmar) would fit comfortably on Mr. Bush's axis. The ruling generals enrich themselves, protect drug lords and have imprisoned more than 1,000 people who peacefully expressed a desire for freedom. And yet, amazingly, a pro-democracy party survives. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy enjoys legitimacy rare in a dictatorship because it overwhelmingly won an election in 1990; the junta, having wildly mistaken its own popularity, annulled the results. Aung San Suu Kyi, though under house arrest for most of the past dozen years, continues to enjoy enormous respect and popularity, judging by reports of crowds that turn out to see her when she travels the provinces -- even though her party is not permitted to publish any kind of newspaper and the state-controlled press never reports on her travels.

You would think this rare circumstance would be seized upon by the Bush administration as an opportunity. Some officials do in fact seek to support the democrats. But others are inexplicably tempted to consort with the dictators. There was lately a misguided move to increase cooperation on drug control that was derailed with difficulty, thanks in part to pressure from pro-democracy Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), incoming chairman of the Appropriations Committee's foreign operations subcommittee. More recently, America's highest-ranking diplomat in Burma gave a cheery interview to the junta's stooge newspaper. What could she have been thinking?

Under pressure from U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and others, the junta released Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel peace laureate, from house arrest on May 6 and promised to initiate a dialogue with her party. But no dialogue is taking place; in fact, things seem to be moving in the wrong direction. A crowd of 20,000 people who gathered to hear their democracy leader in a provincial city recently was threatened with

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fire hoses; she climbed aboard a fire engine to block such abuse, then persuaded the crowd to peacefully disperse. President Bush should make clear that dialogue must begin; a number of levers, including a possible import ban, remain at his disposal. He'll rarely have a more unqualified chance to show U.S. support for nonviolent democrats.

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