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## No Excuse for Inaction on Burma

By Fred Hiatt

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On the 10th anniversary of South Africa's peaceful transition from apartheid to majority rule, outsiders may want to congratulate themselves. After all, didn't we all stand with Nelson Mandela, imposing economic sanctions until the white-minority regime gave in?

▼ **ADVERTISING** Well, yes, some countries did, eventually. But the rosy history forgets how controversial sanctions were -- how many people argued for "engagement" and against sanctions, which they said would only harm the oppressed black majority.

Self-congratulation is particularly misplaced when so many nations are slinking away from a moral challenge not all that different from the one presented by South Africa before 1994. No two situations are identical, but Burma, a Southeast Asian nation of 50 million people, presents some striking similarities:

- Egregious violations of human rights. The military generals who rule Burma, led by Gen. Than Shwe, maintain such an iron grip that possessing an "unlicensed" fax machine or quietly criticizing the nation's school system can land someone in jail for years. "Murder, rape, forced labor, child soldiers," was the recent summary by Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) of the regime's official policy. Amnesty International has identified some 1,300 political prisoners, many of whom have been tortured.

- A viable political alternative with moral authority. In South Africa, there was little doubt that Mandela and the African National Congress enjoyed the support of most people. In Burma, there is *no* doubt that Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy enjoy majority support: When the regime, in a momentary spasm of self-deluded confidence, allowed elections, the democrats won more than four out of five parliamentary seats.

- Support for sanctions from the people who know best. The ANC understood that

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international trade and investment barriers would hurt some of its supporters in the short run; that was a price, it believed, that had to be paid to win freedom. The NLD has been similarly clear.

- Experts ready to blame the democrats. South Africa's regime tried to promote fears of Mandela and his colleagues as radicals, Communists or revenge-seekers. In the case of Suu Kyi, a Buddhist committed to nonviolence, such vilification would sound preposterous. Instead, critics turn her principles against her: Georgetown University scholar David I. Steinberg recently suggested that she is "rigid and uncompromising." U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy to the country "emphasized the need for all the parties . . . to turn over a new page."

Given that Suu Kyi has been held virtually incommunicado since May 30, when government goons attacked her and her supporters, killing scores and injuring many more, it's hard to know how she could "turn a page" even if she were so inclined. Many of her top advisers remain in prison, and no supporters or journalists are allowed to speak with her.

That leaves the field clear for those who argue against sanctions. And sanctions are a blunt instrument; one can certainly be opposed to them without being an apologist for the regime. Steinberg and others argue that they only entrench the regime by impoverishing the people.

But it's also true that sanctions haven't really been tried. The United States imposed an import ban last summer, after the May 30 attacks, but the Europeans haven't followed suit, and the Bush administration hardly has pressed them to do so. Meanwhile, the administration is cozying up to the autocratic prime minister of Thailand, Burma's neighbor, who is busy shoring up Burma's regime even as he erodes human rights in his own country.

"Myanmar is not South Africa," writes another pro-engagement scholar, Robert H. Taylor. "Its politics are more complex than a battle of democracy versus authoritarianism."

By that standard, South Africa wasn't South Africa either; its politics were complex, too. And that complexity was often cited as an excuse for inaction.

"When we called for international action, we were often scorned, disregarded or disappointed," Archbishop Desmond Tutu recently recalled. But, he said, dismantling apartheid required international pressure, as will promoting democracy in Burma: "Sadly, tyrants choose not to understand the language of diplomacy or constructive engagement, but rather respond only to the action of intense pressure and sanctions."

Than Shwe and his generals are rumored to be planning Suu Kyi's release in a couple of weeks. Diplomats will be eager to claim credit and declare a problem solved. But undoing one of their many outrages is just a small step. Whether it becomes the first step toward democratic reform will depend in large part on whether the generals feel pressure from overseas, or whether they think they can keep blaming their prisoner for her "intransigence."

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