

## Burma: In a Month, in a Year...?

Konstanty Gebert

“I’ve had very productive talks with all sides,” said the special envoy of the UN to Burma, Malaysian diplomat Razali Ismail, as he departed from Yangon. “I expect further progress on the road to national reconciliation.” He announced that he will return in two or three months, and that “something important could happen in the course of the year.”

This newspeak might sound merely grotesque, but it should be frightening. It is with this kind of language that the international community talks about Burma: renamed Myanmar by its military rulers 12 years ago, when on August 8, 1990, the junta decided not to recognize the electoral victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Ms. San Suu Kyi - and drowned democracy in blood. From then on the world has been asking them nicely that they ease up a bit, and move towards reconciliation. Ms. Suu Kyi, on the other hand, is being asked to be “constructive.” It is not clear what this means, because the talks are being conducted in secrecy. But it is clear what rule by those generals means for Burma. “This is not our policy. We would not dream of it. We would try to establish the facts, if indeed there are any to be established”: with these words the head of the Foreign Ministry, Wing Aung categorically rejected in early August the accusations that the army was raping women. But human rights organizations have at their disposal hundreds of reports. I myself have talked with some of the victims in refugee camps in Thailand.

The minister was afraid that these and other accusations would be brought up at the recently completed ASEAN summit in Brunei. But nothing happened: his government was praised there for its dialogue with the opposition and for its reforms. And in fact, once Razali had negotiated the freeing of Suu Kyi from house arrest in May, changes did start taking place in Burma. Some political prisoners were freed, although there are still three hundred people behind bars. And there is unexpected political activity going on: in the last week Yangon, was visited by - besides Razali - the head of the Japanese Foreign Ministry; his Thai counterpart is also expected, as well as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir.

But is difficult to judge, from a distance and second-hand, to what extent this heralds a breakthrough. For me, analogies with the end of the 1980s in Poland are undeniable. I know from a conversation I had with Ms. Suu Kyi three years ago that she foresaw just such a scenario: an internationally negotiated compromise, a slow transition to democracy, a guarantee of safety for people of the regime. On the horizon: a Happy Ending. In Poland the last years of the regime were bloodless, yet people still felt Big Brother breathing down their necks. Here the junta is murdering with impunity, without even any foreign siblings to give a hand. Perhaps the compromise being negotiated now by Ms. Suu Kyi will only open the door to completely new forces - ones not bound by her promises of nonviolence, and desiring revenge? We Poles did not manage to enter into the same kind of “Solidarity” a second time. By the same token, it will most probably be impossible to enter another League (NLD) of a similar kind. If I were a Burmese general, I would not sleep soundly.

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