

The military dictatorship was already eighteen years old when I first went to Burma in 1980.

It is now almost a half-century since this naturally and historically rich country was first dragged down into generalized poverty. We know about the banality of evil. This is all about the evil of determined and unapologetic mediocrity.

In fact, what struck me most in 1980 was that the ruling Generals were of a mind-numbing mediocrity. They had no plans for their country. They weren't ideologues. They weren't even egomaniacs. Their corruption was the greed and brutality of small-time organized criminals. Their reward for holding power was to camp out in decaying, moldy British colonial villas. Their great leader's preferred privilege was solitary golf in a provincial Stalinesque suburb of Rangoon. The accepted view was that he and his close friends had a few million offshore, small change by classic Central American standards.

As for their army, it had effective control over only the Irrawaddy Valley – the territory of the Burmans. In the North West and above all in the vast Eastern states, power was held by the traditional Shan clans and the drug traffickers. The army received a percentage of the opium/heroin money from the traffickers and locked themselves in their garrisons at night for safety.

None of this has changed. The country seems never to have recovered from those few seconds in 1947, six months before independence, when a man burst into a meeting of the country's leaders, including Aung San, and gunned them down. With the elimination of that remarkable team, forged through the lengthy independence struggle, Burma seemed to go into a tailspin. U Nu, the best of the surviving democrats, took over, well-intentioned but not up to the situation. And Ne Win, the senior general – the model for the mediocrity which was to follow – gradually gathered up power until by 1962 he held it all.

Since then, generation after generation of leaders in Eastern countries, Western countries, all of ASEAN have tried to deal with the real indifference of the Burmese generals when it comes to any form of reasonable government.

Asian leaders are naturally leery of Western interference in the region, particularly when it has an ethical ring to it. This brings back memories of European empires promoting progress, the Vietnam War and the 1997 Asian economic meltdown. As for Burma's neighbours, the Thais are old rivals and so have reveled in that country's self-destruction, all the while profiting from bargain basement opium and teak. Beijing, ever in search of a soft buffer zone around its borders, has been indulgent, even supportive.

As for the West, our diplomats, aid agencies and businessmen have taken a roller-coaster approach over the years, from pessimism to optimism to pessimism. In the optimistic periods they convince themselves that some investment from

abroad plus some tourism will ease the poverty, open the army to the real world and thus normalize the Generals through engagement.

This last month's worth of peaceful demonstrations and violent reprisals comes on the back of several years of ASEAN engagement, investment and tourism. Yet the lead cause of the uprising has been poverty. Regimes such as the Burmese do not engage in economic growth in order to spread the wealth. If there is more wealth, the Generals, the army and their good friends take it. Look at their brand new capital, an enormous, ornate, isolated garrison. Who paid for it? Western and Asian investments and tourism.

So now again the West has lost hope. And the Thais are disturbed to discover that the drugs from Burma settle down in Bangkok and do local damage. The Japanese are confused because their careful engagement has back-fired. India, eager to be treated as a model Asian-style democracy, finds itself criticized internationally for propping up one of the world's worst dictatorships. As for the Chinese, they are in search of a better international reputation. They want an atmosphere of progress, generosity and intelligence to surround their Olympics. Not dead monks.

Cynics say that China, India and Thailand have supported the regime because of trade and raw materials. But given the size of their own economies, this Burmese part is peanuts. All three need to admit to themselves that they are playing old-style border politics, in which they support the weakest possible regime inside Burma in order to ensure there are no border threats.

At least there is now a possibility that these most indulgent of neighbours might take their distance from the Generals. But even if these countries were to fall away, the old Burmese military truth would reassert itself. If forced to stand alone and so to lose their small profits from recent investments, the Generals won't care. They won't bend. They can't change. They're too stupid. Too isolated. Too intentionally isolated from reality.

So long as they are willing and able to send out their soldiers to open fire on unarmed citizens they can theoretically hold on to power.

Of course, Burma's real friends in the outside world are right to call for a blockage of any bank accounts they can, and right to oppose investments and tourism. Aung San Suu Kyi, the one pole of stability, has always said that you cannot soften these Generals. She has the ethical clarity and calm ability to remain focused on the reality of the country. But she would be the first to say that, while essential, her personal sacrifice will not be enough, nor will the demonstrations. Every decade or two good people come out into the streets – families, monks, students – and they call for change. And the generals send the army out to shoot them down, arrest them, break them.

There are two missing elements in all of this. First, the international community, rightfully focused on negotiated exits to international crises, needs to recognize that this is an unreformable regime. ASEAN in particular needs to accept that this isn't about East versus West or Dictatorship versus Democracy. The truth is far simpler: Burma's Generals are the very personification of the rogue state. That means a very different international approach is required.

The second missing element lies within the 400,000 strong army. In all one-party states, the key to opposition lies within that party. We saw this in the Soviet Union. And the health of the Chinese Communist party is closely linked to a fairly public and lively debate within its ranks.

No military force as big and as dominant as the Burmese can be monolithic. The officers and men may be ignorant of any international reality, and be beneficiaries of the Generals' pathetic system, but there must be among them some currents of thought. Some of them must have other, more interesting ambitions; a more honest sense of Buddhism; admiration for the courage of the monks; for Aung San Suu Kyi; a desire not to be an international pariah, not to be a regional joke.

This is the toughest and most dangerous of scenarios. Power at its lowest common denominator leaves little space for better people to find the room to maneuver for change. And power in Burma has been all about the lowest common denominator for 45 years. And yet intelligent officers, with a desire for ethical action and Buddhist decency, must exist.

The point is this. Almost every element for reasonable change is present in Burmese society. The only missing elements are international honesty and the minds behind the guns. There must be officers who don't want to fire on monks and other unarmed citizens. People who want to help Burma – whether Burmese or not – need to concentrate their attention on this officer corps. How is not clear. But they need to find those elements – probably younger officers – who dream of a better country with that broader sense of society which lies quite naturally within the Buddhist and Burmese tradition.

- John Ralston Saul