

**Interview with John Sidel, Sir Patrick Gillam Chair in International and Comparative Politics  
Government Department, LSE  
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00:00

**Justin Gest:**

The torrid cyclone that ripped through the south east Asian lowlands has created a Humanitarian crisis in Burma. In doing so, it's also revealed an ongoing political crisis as the regime there has restricted aid from the outside world to help its victimised citizenry.

Hi, I'm Justin Gest and welcome to the government department Hotseat. With us today is Prof John Sidel who will offer some background and insight into the ongoing political situation in Burma.

Thanks for being here, Professor Sidel. What background can you offer about the political events that preceded this environmental disaster and that informed the government's response since then?

00:38

**John Sidel**

The Burmese government is essentially a military regime that has in different forms been in power since 1962. In the late 1980s, in particular in 1988, there was a series of protests and a very harsh crackdown when students and other people in the then capital Rangoon mobilised against the regime. Following that in 1990, there was an election in which an opposition party, the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, essentially won 80 percent of the parliamentary seats but the results of the election were essentially denied. And since that time the regime has been entrenched and highly repressive of an organised opposition that is kept at bay through violence. So that's the essential backdrop.

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**JG:**

So how has that history contextualised the international community's hesitation to more aggressively intervene in this situation to help?

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**JS:**

Well, there's a complicated, longer history that might help to explain the isolationism of the Burmese isolation, it's not your standard garden variety military dictatorship. Most military dictatorships with which we might be familiar are right-wing dictatorships, but the history of this one is vaguely socialist. One which was formed in the early 1960s and evolved over time in part to isolate the regime from the cold war, from perceive enemies, of US imperialism, of the former colonial power the UK and its allies in and around Burma, and thus there's a sort of history of cold-war intervention in Burma dating back to the late 1940s, early 1950s, which has made this particular regime a peculiar one, which has no close ties to any of the major Western powers, save, curiously enough, Japan. One thing which is often forgotten is that Japan has been a major donor to Burma and has been a major donor in Burma from the 1980s onwards.

03:02

**JG:**

As the cyclone hit within a matter of weeks of the Chinese earthquake disaster, how has this sequence of events affected the Chinese image from a human rights perspective globally?

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**JS:**

Well, the initial attention to Burma in the press and the attention focussed on the possibility of China's intervention, China's application of pressure, has then be overshadowed by events in China but also overshadowed by various kinds of various kinds of efforts by the neighbouring states of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, and the Burmese regime's own public pronouncements to in some ways wipe the story from the front pages and the from the TV news, so that the continuing suffering of the people in Burma and the actions of the regime to evict forcibly tens if not hundreds of thousands of people form sites of refuge in monasteries and schools and so forth. All that has now been removed from public view for the most part.

04:09

**JG:**

Well, Burmese authorities have since released about fifteen activists from the opposition party that you mentioned earlier. Is this going to continue as long as the international eye remains fixed on the government's actions?

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**JS:**

The Burmese military regime seems relatively impervious, very impervious compared to many other countries, with regard to foreign pressures. In so far as its economy runs on a very low gear and there's not a heavy dependence on foreign investment, foreign assistance and other involvement from countries that are critical and are closely scrutinising human rights problems in Burma. So I would be very pessimistic as to the possibilities for further evolution in the direction of political liberalisation. They've just passed by referendum a bogus constitution that really constitutes a major obstacle towards any kind of democratisation or meaningful political change in Burma.

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**JG:**

So in light of these very difficult circumstances, what do you suggest the international community do?

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**JS:**

Well, there have been sanctions in place, especially on the part of the United States, but in so far as these sanctions have huge loopholes, in so far as these sanctions do not fully involve the neighbouring countries, not just China, but now India and neighbouring Thailand are countries which are all in various ways now aiding and abetting the military regime in Burma. And in so far as pressure is not applied on those countries to withdraw their support, it's hard to see that such sanctions will really prove meaningful. What's difficult in this case, is that in contrast to say a military regime in an industrialised or industrialising country, one that remains on a veneer of democracy or pseudo-democracy and so forth. This is a much more isolated, much more rural country with a much smaller urban middle class, urban working-class, a business class and the cracks within the regime which itself controls the economy, in tandem with some foreign investment, means it's hard to find cracks within the regime that would allow for a kind of opening. If we look at various transitions to democracy in different parts of the world, you find that there are institutional fissures within the regime that are then useful for some kind of opening, for civilian politics, parliamentary politics and so forth. You have a military regime with the military as an institution ruling, in a Junta that seems pretty solid.

Any kind of rumours or hopes with regard to factionalism within the military seems to have proven if not false then a rather faint basis for hope.

07:16

**JG:**

So what support exactly have the countries you've mentioned given to the Burmese regime?

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**JS:**

Well certainly through military assistance, economic assistance, trade and diplomatic support, in all those ways.

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**JG:**

And they're not willing to stop that?

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**JS:**

No. I mean certainly for China and India there are major strategic concerns at stake, for China having a kind of window on the Indian Ocean is very important and India is keen to counter China's moves since the late 1980s to strengthen its ties to Burma and develop intelligence and military facilities through links to the Burmese regime. In the case of Thailand, it's perhaps much more a matter of economics, with major investments in logging and minerals and so forth in Burma, so there are different considerations here that won't go away. If in Thailand, for example, democratic politics were such that popular sentiment about the regime would make a difference, that would be another story, but that's not the kind of issue that animate ordinary Thai voters, so it's on the backburner as far as Thai politics is concerned.

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**JG:**

A very dark and bleak and Kafka-esque illustration of the Burmese regime.

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**JS:**

Yes, sadly, there's little reason to be very hopeful. Again, if you look throughout South East Asia, this is part of the poor, mainland part of South East Asia that has experimented with socialism and thus it's in a very different category from the thriving, industrialised countries that have been full-blown capitalist economies for decades at a time. The isolationism of Burma and one might also say Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, quicker to join the world economy, they still have a way to go, not just in terms of economic development, but in terms of a kind of political context in which one could really hope for a meaningful challenge to strongly entrenched authoritarian regimes.

09:42

**JS:**

Alright, Professor John Sidel, you are off the HotSeat, I wish you could be the bearer of better news, but for what it's worth we appreciate having you here. For more from Professor Sidel, be sure to check out his most recent books, the newest of which is called *The Islamist Threat in South East Asia*, you can find that on amazon.com and select bookshops and of course also an earlier book called *Riots, Pilgrims and Jihad* which can also be found at select bookshops and on amazon.com.

Thanks for being with us; we will see you in the next academic year on the HotSeat.