

politics) include waging war against ethnic rebels (directed more at the ethnic populace than rebels); using aid provided for the “war on drugs” to build personal power-bases either in the government, the armed forces and other coercive agencies of the state; distorting the goals of development projects and crop replacement programs so that they are transformed into patronage “fiefdoms”; using the “war on drugs” as a pretext to repress the people, suppress their rights, consolidate authoritarian control, strengthen the coercive and surveillance arms of the state, and so on — with no appreciable effects on drug production and outflow.[7] The upstream war on drugs often became, as one DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) agent puts it, a war between “our crooks” and other crooks.[8]

Burma: The “War on Drugs” Gone Wrong

The best example of the distortion of the upstream “war on drug” — a war gone wrong — and its unintended consequences, is illustrated by the “war on drugs” in Burma. In the mid-1970’s, the U.S. government under President Carter embarked on a policy of cooperating with Ne Win’s socialist-military regime to wage a “war against drugs” in Burma’s “Golden Triangle”, i.e., in the Shan State. The U.S. supplied the regime with US\$18 million annually. Additionally, the UNFDAC (United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control) also provided the regime with about US\$19.5 million (allocated in three phases, from 1976-1988).[9] However, despite the inflow of monetary and other assistance to the socialist-military regime, the production of opium in Burma increased from 360 tons to 800 tons (production more than doubled).[10] In an assessment of U.S. cooperation with the Ne Win military-socialist regime (which collapsed in 1988, as a result of a country-wide “people’s power” uprising), the American General Accounting Office was compelled to conclude that the anti-narcotics program in Burma was not effective, adding that corruption pervading the government and the military (and the ruling BSPP/Burmese Socialist Program Party) facilitated illicit trafficking, making effective action against narcotics difficult to sustain.[11]

What is particularly ironic about the “war on drugs” in Burma is that after 1988, those who the regime had fought against — with the help of U.S.

and other anti-narcotics aid and assistance — and who the regime had blamed for the opium-heroin problem, were transformed into “democratic” armies, their commanders became “leaders of the national races”.[12] Their “business” partners and patrons — major players in the trans-border opium-heroin and contraband trade — became “entrepreneurs” on the cutting edge of economic development, via the Burmese path to capitalism. What transpired, in a nutshell, was that after the collapse of the military-socialist regime, brought about by 1988 people’s power uprising, the military staged a bloody “come-back” coup, with the help of neighboring governments — in particular, Singapore, China and Thailand. the new regime — State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) — declared that it was embarked upon a development-oriented free market path. It “opened” the hitherto closed “socialist” economy to investors from neighboring countries, i.e., China and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) states, in particular. At the same time, Chinese and Thai leaders persuaded former communist forces (previously supported by China), and later, Shan and other ethnic-based resistance forces, to sign cease-fire agreements with the illegitimate regime. This was a timely move for the regime: the Burman majority had become disaffected with the military and had found a new champion in Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who embodied the aspiration of Burman majority in particular (and the whole country generally) for civilian, democratic rule (and better governance).

The new, post-1988 alignment of power in Burma, and “partnership” between Burman and non-Burman armed elites (and their respective cronies, sons, daughters, and close relatives),[13] has resulted in — in the words of Richard Gelbard, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for international narcotics and law-enforcement affairs — “the corruption and criminalization of the state and the entrenchment of the drug trade in Burma’s political and economic life”.[14] Burma continues to provide the bulk of the world’s opium supply and is the source of over 60 percent of the heroin seized on streets in the United States. The French Observatoire Geopolitique de la Drogue estimated that drug revenue from 2,800 tons of opium (producing 200 tons heroin) would yield an illegal income between US\$2 to 8 billion (compared to official for-