South China Morning Post
scmp.com

# Helping hand on the road to reform

## Discreet movement pits US-backed push for democracy through non-violence against Myanmar's brutal junta

By Greg Torode

South China Morning Post – 28 October 2007

In the week before the Christmas of 1983, then-US president Ronald Reagan announced from the White House what he described as a "noble vision" and a "message of hope" at the height of the cold war - the launch of the National Endowment for Democracy.

The endowment - publicly funded but officially a private, non-governmental body - would openly support the international spread of democracy and human rights. In publicly backing peaceful activism, selected media and human rights work, it would take over some of the roles once handled in the shadows by the CIA.

"We must work hard for democracy and freedom, and that means putting our resources - organisations, sweat and dollars - behind a long-term programme," Reagan said.

A quarter of century on, Reagan and the cold war have gone, but the vision he outlined is alive and well. The strictly non-partisan endowment continues the work, year in and year out. In recent years it has been linked to some dramatic international political developments, helping local activists overturn rigged elections to topple hardline regimes, including in the Ukraine - stage for the so-called "orange revolution" - and Georgia, with its "rose revolution".

Now there is talk of a "saffron revolution" unfolding in Myanmar, after monks joined a long-suppressed opposition in the most serious protests since the military's bloody crackdown in 1988.

Endowment officials are at pains to state they are not directly involved on the ground with events in Myanmar, yet they acknowledge the body has funded training and support for exiled opposition groups, mostly in neighbouring Thailand. That work - which continues - has included educating monks in the art of non-violent protest.

Officials couch the work in terms of "empowering" and "strengthening"; of building "democratic space". The direction and instigation of protest comes from the movements themselves, they stress.

Flush with funding from the US Congress amounting to tens of millions of dollars, the endowment has long been active in the region in support of human-rights and civil-society initiatives in China, Pakistan, Vietnam and North Korea. In Hong Kong, the endowment last year issued grants to the Civic Exchange (US$86,000) and the Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor (US$175,000).

Myanmaris a "special case", says Brian Joseph, the endowment's director for South and Southeast Asia. He talks of the country's relatively large opposition, the remnants of a civil society and of a repressive military regime far removed from its subjects and whose control and legitimacy is deeply questionable.

Highly organised communist states such as China or Vietnam would be a vastly different proposition, he says.

"It is the most open 'closed' society in the region {hellip} our involvement there is very different than elsewhere," he says.

Some officials are privately more blunt: "In Myanmar, the good versus evil line is clear. This is a murderous regime that has delivered nothing for its people {hellip} it is standing in the way of legitimate government and we have to act accordingly," said one.

The endowment spent US$3.9 million - funds administered by the US State Department on behalf of the US Congress - on dozens of initiatives in Myanmar last year, reaching out to women's groups, artists and trades unions and funding a mushrooming exile media. It has been a decade-long effort, one which paid dividends as images smuggled out of the country of the latest crackdown drew international outrage. Money flows could expand next year as the administration of President George W. Bush further squeezes Myanmar's generals and "regime change" moves up the political agenda.

The endowment's work is part of a broader international effort that involves government-funded groups from Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway. Insiders estimate total annual international spending of about US$10 million on Myanmar alone.

The most sensitive work involves training activists and monks in both the principles and tactics of non-violent defiance - whether it is protest, passive resistance or the need to defend a group against infiltration. The roots of the philosophy lie in the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, ideas developed by Boston-based political philosopher Gene Sharp.

His writings on the power of non-violent resistance have surfaced in all the recent "colour" uprisings.

At its heart, it is about analysing the strengths and weaknesses of both your own movement and that of the enemy regime, and then striking to best advantage. It is also practical, instructing groups on how to make the best of specific situations and protect themselves for future agitation.

It has a decidedly modern twist, too. Funding has been earmarked to help activists fully exploit mobile phone and computer technology, allowing them to beat firewall censorship and exploit SMS networks to rally their comrades. The results have been on visible display in recent months as the junta faces a flurry of online exposure and criticism.

The endowment - which has no offices outside Washington - draws volunteer trainers from a wide cadre of peaceful revolutionaries in Serbia, Georgia, South Africa and India.

Their work is necessarily discreet; rather that run formal camps in northern Thailand, they work in hotel rooms, homes and restaurants.

The activists themselves say the international funding is important but that they are determined to keep control.

"This is our movement and we don't want to be hostage to anyone {hellip} but we have to fully learn how to best use the resources at our disposal," said one activist who recently received training.

"It is going to be a long struggle {hellip} there are too many of us and we all have different ambitions. Creating a co-ordinated campaign is going to be our biggest struggle," the senior activist said.

"We know it is not enough to just shout slogans, we have to be more clever than that {hellip} but collectivising our efforts is not going to be easy.

"First, we have to lift our consciousness and we have to win hearts and minds {hellip} people are too used to being silent."

In Boston, non-violence theorist Mr Sharp is a long way from Myanmar and questions whether his lessons have been heard in Yangon or Washington.

He says he believes that translated versions of his essay >From Dictatorship to Democracy are still being circulated among Myanmese exiles but he is uncertain about the future.

"I'm not deeply familiar with [Myanmar]," the 79-year-old says from his office at the Albert Einstein Institution he founded. "But from what I can see the recent activity has been very naive. It is OK if you want to march down the street but you have to know that you can expect repression.

"There are a great many other tactics that could be used as part of a co-ordinated campaign {hellip} but in this case I don't identify any strategic planning and there is no evidence of how they are going to develop the struggle.

"You have to remember that this is more complicated than a military or guerilla struggle."

The manual was written in 1993 at the request of the late Myanmese activist Tin Maung Win and published in Myanmese and English.

Subtitled "Framework for Liberation", it outlines both the principles and the tactics of peaceful resistance. It includes an appendix listing 198 methods of non-violent action, covering everything from teach-ins and graffiti campaigns to strikes.

With financial help from the Open Society Institution of tycoon George Soros, it was translated into four of Myanmar's ethnic languages. The manual now circulates in 27 languages worldwide - including Putonghua, Tibetan and Vietnamese.

Despite ongoing use of his work, Mr Sharp says he has not worked with the endowment for years, and last received a grant in 1999. He also denies links to other US government agencies, suggesting that the bloody quagmire in Iraq showed how little resonance his life's work has had in Washington's political salons.

At one point, Mr Sharp's essay offers a chilling warning should events escalate and activists consider a more bloody route to power.

"Whatever the merits of the violent option, however, one point is clear. By placing confidence in violent means, one has to choose the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority," he writes.

"The dictators are equipped to apply violence overwhelmingly. However long or briefly these

democrats can continue, eventually the harsh military realities usually become inescapable. The military dictators almost always have superiority in military hardware, ammunition and transportation, and the size of military forces. Despite bravery, the democrats are [almost always] no match."

(c) 2007 South China Morning Post Publishers Limited, Hong Kong. All rights reserved.