

MUSINGS

BY MARJORIE KELLY



Is Pizza Hut Burma's Keeper?

U.S. companies doing business in Myanmar are protest targets

IT WASN'T PIZZA THE ONE HUNDRED ANGRY STUDENTS HAD ON their minds as they marched down University Avenue in mid-February, swarming indignantly into the Pizza Hut in the Dinkytown area of Minneapolis. No, it wasn't pizza they had come for, but it was Pepsi: Pepsi politics, that is. They were there to protest human rights abuses by the brutal military regime in Burma, and to demand that Pizza Hut's parent, Pepsi Cola International, withdraw from that country.

Fellow managers might sympathize: How bizarre to have a horde of protesters invade your normally peaceful establishment—and accuse you of complying with dictators half a world away. “It wasn't any fun,” said a manager, who declined to give his name. “We tried to have them arrested.” (A reasonable response, though it didn't succeed.)

Amid the pepperoni and the placards, one can discern the ethical question at issue: Is Pizza Hut Burma's keeper? On the face of it, it's preposterous—a noble idea taken to an absurd extreme. But beneath the surface, at the level where those of us who love democracy are obliged to aid those struggling toward it, at this level the Burma issue makes enormous sense. It promises to be the next South Africa.

Why Burma? For thirty-three years, under various guises—now the Orwellian-named SLORC (State Law and Order Council)—unelected generals have ruled with a bloody hand. According to the United Nations, commonplace abuses include “torture, summary and arbitrary executions, forced labor, abuse of women, politically motivated arrests,” and more.

In a chilling echo of Tiananmen Square, the regime crushed a pro-democracy uprising in 1988, killing thousands. When democratic elections in 1990 gave 82 percent of the vote to the National League for Democracy, SLORC refused to allow them to take up their seats.

“In terms of activism, this is the most popular issue on campus right now,” said Drew Hempel, a St. Paul activist. He mentions stickers he's sighted: *Boycott Pepsi, the Choice of a New Genocide*.

There have been an estimated 75 protests on campuses nationwide. In April, Harvard University decided not to award Pepsi a \$1 million contract, because of its Burma presence. And at Stanford University, 2,000 students petitioned to block a new Taco Bell, because of ownership by Pepsi.

The villainous activity of which Pepsi is guilty? Having a bottling plant in Burma. Pepsi announced in April it was selling its 40

percent stake in that bottler—but activists remain dissatisfied. Their demands for a total pullout took up a quarter of Pepsi's annual meeting recently, despite the fact that Burma sales total two-tenths of 1 percent of total Pepsi sales, or \$8 million out of \$3.6 billion last year.

The handwriting is on the wall: If you or your suppliers are in Burma, pull out now. You'll be joining companies like Amoco, Columbia Sportswear, Eddie Bauer, Levi Strauss, Liz Claiborne, and Macy's.

COMPANIES CRITICIZED FOR MAINTAINING TIES TO BURMA will find themselves stung by state and local restrictive purchasing laws, which prohibit municipal purchases from Burma-related companies. This type ordinance was enacted in three cities last year, is pending in three more.

The aim: to create economic pressure that forces the Burma regime to the bargaining table. Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi—the leader of the pro-democracy movement—calls often for

BOYCOTT PEPSI

THE CHOICE OF A NEW GENOCIDE

talks. But the generals decline, saying openly that dialogue is unnecessary because of growing foreign investment.

Even the conservative *Wall Street Journal* has criticized investment in Burma, noting in a February 10, 1995, editorial that petroleum developments by Unocal and Texaco only line the pockets of Burma's “ruling thugs.” Business likes to talk about “constructive engagement”—the idea that commerce strengthens civil societies—but “constructive engagement is looking less constructive all the time,” the *Journal* said.

Add to that the voice of the Rev. Desmond Tutu, who has said that it was economic sanctions—not constructive engagement—that changed South Africa. “This is the language that must be spoken with tyrants,” Tutu said. “It is the only language they understand.”

Is Pizza Hut Burma's keeper? Not exactly. Does business have an obligation to avoid complicity with tyrants? Absolutely. ☒