

# Political Time Bomb Burma

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Despite an increasingly bloody crackdown, the peaceful sea of chanting monks in maroon robes continues to fill the streets of Burma's major cities. The number of injured monks is rising, and it has been reported that large numbers of monks and protesters have been dragged away in trucks to unknown locations. The once confident and repressive military regime has been shaken by a wave of peaceful demonstrations led by thousands of monks. The protests were sparked earlier this summer by the regime's decision to sharply increase fuel prices by over 50 per cent, making everyday life for the impoverished Burmese impossible. The stakes for the military regime are rising as every day the number of people willing to risk their lives and join the protests is growing. The key question is how the regime will respond to the growing challenge to its authority: will it repeat a 1988-like crackdown, or will it solve the present deadlock with the least bloodshed possible? The repressive record of the Burmese army, and the junta's warnings to senior monks that strong 'action' will be taken (despite growing media attention worldwide), makes the first option look increasingly likely.

## A reminder of 1988

The large numbers of protesters and the prospects of a bloody crackdown by the military regime make for a chilling reminder of the summer of 1988. The crisis started with a similar act of economic folly when high value currency notes were devalued, wiping out the savings of millions of Burmese, without compensation. On the 8th of August of that year, protests by thousands of people calling for democracy culminated in a bloodbath by the Junta. Over three thousand people were killed, and in the following months the army consolidated its power base. An unknown number of people were executed, put in labor camps or simply disappeared. Two years later, in May 1990, the first elections since the military takeover in 1962 took place. The reportedly free and fair elections led to a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy led by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The junta has up to now ignored the electoral results, and instead perse-

cuted, killed and put under house arrest candidates, members and followers of the party.

## Sons of Buddha

Burmese monks are highly revered in Burmese society. Considered to be 'Sons of Buddha', they represent the strongest institution in Burma after the military. Burma's young and active Sangha Buddhist community of about 300,000 has had an uneasy relationship with the ruling generals. During the 1988 democracy marches, the independent monks union emerged to support the students. The regime responded by issuing decrees to keep the monks in line, and banning all independent Buddhist organizations. Until a week ago, when underground monk unions called for a mass uprising, the monks observed a religious boycott of the regime. Over the last two decades they have refused alms from the military regime or simply overturned their bowls instead of collecting food and donations.

Under the repressive military rule, civil society has had little space in which to develop. Because of the high levels of repression, most activists, in the past, have retreated into passivity, hoping that somehow change will come without the need to take risks. From 1962, the military regime slowly co-opted or eliminated the backbone of civil society: there are no legal human rights groups in Burma, the media is extremely restricted, and strict censorship is instituted. Access to communication technology is very limited. In 2001, there were only 5.5 telephone lines per 1,000 people, with the cost of cellular phones being prohibitively high. The military regime has been as well extremely reluctant to provide e-mail and Internet access. Anyone caught possessing a computer fax/modem or fax machine without permission can be sentenced to seven to fifteen years in prison. In the midst of the present chaos, the small 'window of information' is closing, and mobile phones and Internet access has become even more restricted.

The regime has been very concerned about the emergence of independent politically minded groups which could develop an action program.

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Intelligence gathering capabilities have been expanded in order to prevent domestic upheavals. An extensive network of agents and informers has developed to monitor campuses, monasteries and even military posts. The main goal is to isolate and demoralize activists, and also punish those who continue to associate with them. The repressive control of the regime, however, has been challenged by the monks. Despite the highly restricted access to communication technology and the oppressive climate, the monks managed to coordinate and organize the largest protests that Burma has seen in the past 20 years. Both the pro-democracy protests in 1988 and the current street protests are a reminder to the ruling party that they will not be able to repress their people for ever and that their power is contested. One problem, however, is that no concrete demands have been voiced by monks or others, other than the restoration of democracy and human rights. No leaders have yet emerged, as happened during the tumultuous events of 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi's party members and the heroes of the 1988 uprising are mostly still in jail.

### The end of the Tatmadaw?

The Burmese army – the Tatmadaw – has a long history of repression. Since the declaration of independence in 1948, different ethnic groups have demanded independence or more autonomy – often through violent insurgencies. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC – the present name of the military regime), as its predecessor, rules with an authoritarian fist in pursuit of two main objectives: maintenance of national solidarity and the Union, and perpetuation of national sovereignty. When the highly mobile counterinsurgency army for instance confronted pro-democracy protesters in 1988, it came to see them in the same light as the insurgent enemies it fought over the last 40 years – as a threat to national unity.

Historically the Tatmadaw has remained remarkably unified by Asian standards. While over the last half-century the officer corps in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines has been periodically torn apart by factionalism, the Burmese military leadership has not yet faced serious challenges from within its ranks. A split in the military leadership could prove to provide the necessary turning point. Pressure from influential allies in the region could provoke this, but it depends on how the situation will evolve. The coherence of the officer corps could break down rapidly, if the end of the regime seems imminent.

The regime under General Than Shwe, who has essentially been running the country since 1988, appears even more hermit like than ever. Cloistered away from the turmoil in their new jungle capital, they have not given an indication of



*Protesters in front of the Myanmar embassy in Paris, with a portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi (September 2007) (© Hugo)*

willingness to move towards reconciliation. They have certainly started to fight back with beating protesters and using tear gas. It has been reported that troops dressed as monks acting as agent provocateurs have been dispatched. With growing media attention, however, the shooting of peacefully marching Buddhist monks could mean the end for the junta. The public outrage that would ensue might pressure their few remaining allies to distance themselves. In fact, many observers believe that Burma has so far been cautious because of pressure from its most important trading ally: China. A bloody act of repression by one of its regional allies would overshadow China's long-awaited Olympic showcase next year. Furthermore, the shooting of a Japanese journalist on September 28th has provoked a rise of diplomatic pressure, and it is hoped that this incident will provoke harsher reactions from the international community.

Peaceful resolution of the situation might prove to be hoping for too much. Burma has shown in the past that it cares very little about public opinion. The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi was transferred from house arrest to the notorious Insein jail – known as the 'darkest hell-hole in Burma' – shows that the junta feels increasingly cornered and might take decisions with disastrous consequences. Considering past actions of the junta, a 1988-like crackdown does not seem impossible. A much more likely scenario, however, will be that the military manages to scare people off the streets by using its present 'low-level' violence tactic of beatings, tear gas and the 'random' shooting. The numbers of protesters risk to be dropping, and the junta might be able to win the battle this way. No matter what the upcoming responses of the generals will be, the peacefully marching monks have made a deep impression on the foreign press and global civil society. The crucial point is for the international community to condemn Burma's actions and to give support to the Burmese people – in case the big crackdown starts, or the present 'low-level' violence continues.

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