

Burma : The struggle continues

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While the mainstream media concentrate on the pronouncements of foreign governments and the role of the U.N. in stopping the bloodshed perpetrated by the Burmese junta, the real struggle is on the streets and in the cities around Burma. The idea that the Chinese government, responsible for the Tiananmen Square Massacre, or the Thai military junta will somehow restrain the Burmese military is laughable. The West has a long history of supporting military juntas in South-east Asia and never lifted a finger to stop massacres in Indonesia or the Philippines. It is most ironic that in fact, the present demonstrations that we are seeing in Burma, arise from a realisation by Burmese pro-democracy activists that they cannot rely on Western powers or anyone else to bring about a change and they have to act themselves.

Until the military started its latest round of bloody crackdowns, the mainstream media were claiming that the wide spread use of the internet meant that the watching eyes of the world would prevent a massacre, "unlike in 1988". In fact we could see pictures of the 1988 crackdown and we were all aware of what was going on. The great uprising which started on 8th August 1988, was initiated by student protests over economic issues. Soon it developed into demands for democracy. On the morning of the 8th a general strike started in the docks and spread to government offices. All sections of society, including priests, marched to demand the end to military rule and despite the bloody brutality of the regime, the movement showed signs of winning. Ne Win, the old military dictator was forced to resign and the junta changed its name and promised elections. However, instead of pushing forward with the struggle, which would have toppled the military completely, the movement was deflated. Aung San Suu Kyi told demonstrators to disperse. The reasoning was that they should trust the army and not push them "too far". The energies of the democracy movement were channelled into electoral politics. After Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (N.L.D.) won 392 seats out of a total 485 in 1990, the junta refused to accept the result. Suu Kyi and N.L.D. politicians were arrested, but the movement had already been weakened. Some student activists joined the armed struggle in the countryside, but they soon became demoralised.

For years after the defeat of the 1988 movement, demoralised activists had hoped that the United States would put pressure on the Burmese junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi and negotiate a road map to democracy. Despite the understandable pessimism of many Burmese exiles, lessons have been learnt by many activists. Earlier this year a loose network of activists decided to start open protests in the form of "prayer marches" at temples. This was followed by the large demonstrations of monks after fuel price rises of 500%. Thousands of ordinary people gained confidence and joined the monks' protests. Hundreds of politicised young men have become monks in recent years, partly due to the fact that the junta closed down or restricted entry to colleges and universities. The temples were safer places for people to gather and talk, much like the Mosques in Iran during the revolution or the Catholic Church in Communist Poland before the uprising there.

The pro-democracy movement today has more experience than in 1988. Twenty years ago they were prepared to allow Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy to lead the movement. Today there are debates about the way forward. While everyone agrees that Suu Kyi and all political prisoners should be freed immediately, the radicals are wary of leaving the leadership of the movement in the hands of the N.L.D.

Freedom and democracy can only be achieved by also dealing with the ethnic conflict. The non-Burmans, who make up more than half the population, have never been happy with a unified state and many groups have been in a state of constant armed struggle against the central government since independence. It is encouraging to see that the Karen National Union has come out very clearly on the side of the pro-democracy movement and has urged Burmese soldiers to turn their guns on their officers. It is to be hoped that the democracy movement responds to this act of solidarity by taking up a position allowing ethnic groups self-determination. In the past Burmese independence leaders such as Aung San (Sui Kyi's father) or U Nu were not that enthusiastic about allowing different ethnic groups to have autonomy. The 1947 Panglong conference to discuss the future of Burma was boycotted by the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Arakan and Wa. Sui Kyi herself has been unclear on this issue and is not fully trusted by non-Burmans.

While many of the activists trace their roots back to 8-8-88, thousands of young people on the protests are too young to have taken part back then. This means that a whole new generation of people have become radicalised. There are signs that they are prepared to resist the army with great courage and sacrifices. One woman, interviewed by Reuters, summed up the present situation by saying "it is good but it is dangerous". Democracy can only be achieved by overthrowing the junta. There is no room for compromise and the junta can never be trusted. We can only hope that the democracy movement inside Burma will strive to topple the regime, like in Manila in 1986, Bangkok in 1992 and Jakarta in 1998. This will involve fighting back and also winning over ordinary soldiers to the side of the people. It will involve strikes by the growing working class, both in the cities of Burma and also among the millions of Burmese migrant workers, especially in the factories on the Thai side of the border, such as in towns like Mae Sot. It may be a long process, but we can all act to show the necessary solidarity.

P.S.

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