

Burma's long struggle for democracy

Wednesday 3 October 2007, by [ILTIS Tony](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2007).

What began on August 15 as protests against escalating fuel and transport prices and deteriorating economic conditions has developed into a mass uprising in Burma. From September 17, mobilisations by Buddhist monks and nuns emboldened thousands of Burmese to take to the streets in the largest protests since the pro-democracy uprising in 1988 that was brutally crushed, with over 3000 people killed, by the military regime that has ruled Burma since 1962.

The military was initially reluctant to attack the Buddhist clergy-led mobilisations, not wishing to undermine the regime's claims to be the protector of the national religion. However, by September 26, with more than 100,000 people mobilising in Rangoon for several days running (300,000 on September 26 according to www.mizzima.com, website of the Delhi-based exile-Burmese Mizzima News Agency) the military began baton-charging, tear-gassing and firing on the protests. Pro-government militias have also been used against the protests.

The military also raided monasteries, arresting large numbers of monks. The official death toll stands at 13, although both internal and Western sources suggest it is probably significantly higher. A Japanese photojournalist, Kenji Nagai, was shot dead on September 27, and there are reports that other foreigners may have been killed. Since the crackdown started, protests have continued but numbering in tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands. The Buddhist clergy has been less visible, with monks and nuns either in detention or blockaded inside their monasteries by the military.

That the August 15 announcement of the lifting of fuel subsidies prompted such large numbers to confront a military regime notorious for its brutality towards dissent is an indication of the dire economic circumstances faced by ordinary Burmese. Over 90% of the population live on less than \$1 a day and malnutrition is rife. The end of fuel subsidies meant that many people could no longer afford public transport to get to work. "Its either die of starvation or go out on the street and get shot by the government", Htay, a Burmese refugee living in Australia, told Green Left Weekly.

While centuries of British colonial exploitation meant that Burma was already impoverished when it won independence in 1948, the situation was worsened by civil war, the irrational economic policies of the isolationist Ne Win regime (1962-1988) and the wholesale plunder of the country by the junta that has ruled since 1988. Burma's independence was won by the struggles of the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League against the Japanese and British. However, the assassination of its leader Aung San by conservatives on the eve of independence, the split of the movement between communists and anti-communists, and self-determination struggles by the more than 100 ethnic minorities who comprise 35% of the country's population meant that the "democratic" period of Burma's post-independence history was marked by civil war and instability.

Things got worse after General Ne Win's 1962 military coup. Not only did the bulk of the country's resources continue to go on the military's efforts to crush the ethnic and communist insurgencies, but Ne Win's policy of isolating Burma from the rest of the world increased economic stagnation. Furthermore, the dictator's predilection for numerology meant bizarre meddling in the currency that had the effect of making people's life savings worthless. It was this that catalysed the protests that grew into the 1988 uprising, in which students were prominent.

While the military responded to the uprising by massacring protesters, they also dumped Ne Win and allowed elections to be held in 1990. These elections were won by the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of independence leader Aung San. However, the junta that had taken power in 1988 (called the State Law and Order Restoration Council before adopting the less accurate name of State Peace and Development Council in 1997) refused to recognise the election's results and has since held Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (she was briefly released in the mid-90s and 2002-03).

Thousands of students and activists involved in the 1988 uprising went into exile. Others fled to the border bases of the ethnic insurgencies and took up armed struggle. Some, after serving long periods in prison, remained active in the underground democracy movement and have played a role in the current protests.

The post-1988 junta differed from the Ne Win regime in actively seeking foreign investment. The generals have become extremely wealthy through selling the country's natural resources. While the Western media has made much of China's economic involvement in Burma, companies from the West, and its allies such as Thailand, have been major beneficiaries of the plunder of Burma. This is despite Western sanctions imposed due to public concern about human rights abuses.

Thai logging companies, having literally exhausted the teak forests of their own country, were quick to move into Burma. Furthermore, Western fossil fuel companies such as the French Total Oil and US Unocal and Chevron-Texaco have been involved in natural gas projects. US Vice-President Dick Cheney's Halliburton has been involved in the Yadana gas pipeline project. Both industries make extensive use of slave labour. Burma's main export remains heroin.

The current protests and crackdown has created more hypocritical condemnations and "targeted" sanctions (targeted so as not to harm Western corporations). Australian Prime Minister John Howard and foreign minister Alexander Downer have made global headlines with their colourful condemnations of the Burmese junta — described by Howard as "loathsome" — while at the same time the Burmese security forces receive training in "criminal intelligence" from the Australian Federal Police at the Australian-run Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation. This is ostensibly to fight the illegal drugs trade. However, the Burmese military are major participants in this trade.

The Canberra Times reported on September 28 that John Kaye, president of the Australian Coalition for Democracy in Burma, said: "One thing we can do immediately is to withdraw the Australian Federal Police who are currently training police in Burma." "We can downgrade the military delegation in Australia [at the embassy] from Burma", he told the paper.

A September 26 statement by the Asian Centre for Human Rights argued that it is "the hypocrisy in Asia-Pacific which endured the military regime in Myanmar [Burma]. Foreign Minister of Australia, Alexander Downer already made it clear that Australia will not impose economic sanctions on Burma.

"The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has done little to address the present situation. ASEAN Secretary General Ong Keng Yong merely stated that ASEAN hoped that 'the situation remains peaceful'. The ASEAN failed to issue a public statement condemning the Burmese junta for using force on the peaceful protesters, including the monks."

On September 25, Greens Senator Bob Brown, calling for the suspension of military training and trade with the Burmese regime, noted: "Alexander Downer's fear that the military will subject the pro-democracy protest leaders to 'very harsh treatment' is in absurd contrast with the Howard

government's twin policies of training the Burmese military and keeping open unrestricted trade. Mr Downer is all description of the Burmese events and no action."

Alex Bainbridge, a Sydney-based anti-war activist and Senate candidate for the Socialist Alliance, argued that "The Australian government should immediately withdraw its ambassador in protest and halt all cooperation with military regime in Burma ... the Australian government should halt the training provided by the Australian Federal Police for the repressive Burmese police force." [See article page 7.]

While the Howard government rails against the Burmese junta's repressiveness this does not mean that its victims are recognised as fleeing persecution. Seven refugees from the Muslim Rohingya community, Burma's most oppressed minority, have been held by Australia in Nauru since September 2006.

While Burma's worst human rights abuses — mass killings, rape, abduction for slave labour and destruction of villages — are those committed as part of the counter-insurgency wars, extreme repression has also been aimed at preventing any dissent in government-controlled areas. Burma holds more than 1300 political prisoners and torture is routine. The level of surveillance is extreme. Htay told GLW that "every evening the government goes around people's houses checking that there are no visitors". Burmese house-guests must be reported, foreign house guests are banned.

Any dissent is met with extreme measures. Htay came to Australia because her entire university was shut down after minor student protests. It is in the context of this extreme repression that the role of the Buddhist clergy was significant: "The government was less likely to shoot them, so the people followed", Htay explained.

As GLW goes to press it is unclear whether the protests will be drowned in blood as happened in 1988. There have been reports of mutinies in the army, with some troops refusing to fire on protesters and even fighting between pro- and anti-protest soldiers. There have also been reports of a falling out between junta head Senior General Than Shwe and his second-in-command, Vice-Senior General Maung Aye. According to Newsdeskspecial.co.uk, the latter is opposed to the crackdown and has sent troops to guard Aung San Suu Kyi with whom he will be holding talks. However, these reports come in an environment where the regime has cut-off internet and telecommunications links and rumour is easily confused with fact.

Whatever happens, the aspirations of the Burmese people will continue. "I hope one day the Burmese people will see freedom. They deserve it. They have been suffering for a long time", Htay said.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #726 3 October 2007.