

Myanmar and the loss of legitimacy

Friday 5 October 2007, by [STEINBERG David](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2007).

The tragic recent events in Myanmar, whose true magnitude remains unknown, are one more indication to the international community of the illegitimacy of the military junta. This position, however, is far more complex when internally viewed. To the Western world, popular elections and the delivery of goods, services and security are those elements that comprise legitimacy. Thus, to the external world Myanmar has miserably failed.

Although there is a dispute about what the May 1990 elections were for, there is no question that the National League for Democracy (NLD) swept the field with about 80% of the seats and 59% of the votes, but were denied recognition. Even though the macro-economic position of the country since 1988 has vastly improved, from foreign exchange holdings of perhaps US\$30 million then to some \$770 million last year and increases are likely due to newly explored offshore gas reserves, the living standards of ordinary citizens has declined, and at last half are either below or at the poverty line.

The standards of education and health are abysmal and Myanmar has the lowest per capita income in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. So by all Western measurements, the military regime has no legitimacy. Even the name of the country is a surrogate indicator of legitimacy: the United States and some international news outlets such as England's BBC still choose to use "Burma" while the United Nations and much of the rest of the world use "Myanmar".

Yet internal measurements of legitimacy are more complicated. Although Western measurements may be accepted by some of the urbanized elite and those exposed to the outside world, many in Myanmar may believe the traditional view of the sorry state of their lives: that this is due to the Buddhist concept of reincarnation where deficiencies in past lives have affected, even caused, their present problems.

Although there are traditional Buddhist views of the proper attributes of kingship or administration, which the present regime has lacked, belief in the personal responsibility for one's sorry state may still carry weight. So the failure to deliver goods and services may be somewhat mitigated by a traditional view of the cycle of life.

The essential element of legitimacy in Myanmar has been Buddhism. As someone once wrote, "To be Burman is to be Buddhist," and virtually all of the Myanmar population (some two-thirds of the national population) are Buddhist. Buddhism looms large in the political equation. Buddhism is a matter of profound belief and an administrative necessity for virtually all higher levels of government, for under the military (but not the previous civilian government) one must be Buddhist and Burman to rule. There are virtually no Christians or Muslims in the higher ranks of the military or civil service.

The military leaders, as well as U Nu (first prime minister of independent Burma and prime minister overthrown by Ne Win in 1962) and his entourage and opposition, have been devout Buddhists, but they have also used Buddhism as a political tool as well as an individual credo. U Nu built a pagoda to establish legitimacy for the state and for his administration. U Nu won the 1960 elections by promising to make Buddhism the state religion. Ne Win and every military leader have built

pagodas, and hundreds have been repaired in Pagan and other areas, much to the horror of archeologists and art historians because of inappropriate methodologies.

Practically every day in the *New Light of Myanmar*, the official publication (and previously known as the Working People's Daily), there are stories and pictures of the military paying obeisance to the monks, making offerings, or performing some other appropriate act. There has been a calculated policy of associating the military leadership and rule with Buddhism.

In addition, the Buddhist hierarchy is administratively controlled by the military. What is taught in Buddhist institutions, the number of Buddhist sects, and other administrative aspects are under military control. All monks are registered with the government. What is not subject to their immediate command are individual monasteries and the younger monks. The past two weeks have seen these younger monks in the streets.

We do not know how many have been killed, and the military in its usual manner will doctor statistics, either to report fewer deaths and detainees or in another case to inflate school enrollment. But this "saffron revolution", as some have called it, changes the equation. There was a revolt of monks in Mandalay in 1992 that was quickly squelched by the military. But today's is different, not only because it was broadcast to the world, but perhaps more importantly because the BBC and CNN images that we saw were evident through the ubiquitous Burmese urban phenomenon of satellite dishes reporting those networks.

The military profoundly believe in its role in society, however badly they may have carried out their responsibilities. They think of themselves as the only force holding the country together, having in effect destroyed any other significant institution in the country. Yet now, because of this crackdown on the Sangha (Buddhist monkhood), they may have lost the modicum of support they once had among the population. Their role may be as strong as before, but their rule may be less secure.

It would be remarkable if these actions by the junta do not cause disquiet among members of the military itself. Many may be profoundly disturbed by the actions of their colleagues. This may be an important factor in military discontent because the suppression since 1988 has resulted in political, economic and social malaise, and this particularly egregious suppression may feed festering internal military concerns about their own leadership.

We know that there have been policy and personality differences among the top commanders, with rivalries among their children for economic spoils, but the recent protests may bring on the military's worst fears - division among the ranks, which the military, aware of the propensity in Myanmar society for personalization of power and factionalism, has abhorred. It may not be the monks that directly effect change in Myanmar, but they may have contributed to its strengthening. The legacy of this revolt will not be stilled by the enforced quiet that pervades the cities.

The frustration of the monks is not only a result of the apparent disrespect for Buddhism by the top of the military hierarchy, but also because these younger monks are also affected by the general social miasma, as many customarily move in and out of the Sangha. The military controls all effective avenues of social mobility - it determines who goes to university and what positions are available in the private sector beyond petty trading in the bazaars.

It controls the quasi-political organizations, the media, and influence strongly the non-governmental organizations. The military is the primary source of social mobility, and all this must frustrate the young, who see no future outside of a military-controlled society. They have little to lose. This feeds discontent. Although the present military seems powerful, and has more than doubled in size since 1988 and is far better equipped, its hold on society and on its own members will become more

tenuous as this frustration mounts and finds expression in some other incident, not necessarily mandated from the top of the hierarchy, but more likely from the lower echelons where unthinking attempts are made to please their superiors at any cost.

One cannot predict when this might happen, but the likelihood exists, and this could help trigger discontent within some of the military, who feel the reputation of the tatmadaw (armed forces) itself has been besmirched, and must be restored to the historical glory that the military has rewritten to justify its claim to power.

P.S.

* From Asia Times. Reproduced on Burmanet.

* David I Steinberg (yonsan1 gmail.com) is distinguished professor, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and is on sabbatical during the autumn semester 2007 as senior visiting research scholar at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.