

CALM BEFORE THE STORM?

Perspectives on the Continuing Crisis in Burma/Myanmar

TIM PACHIRAT, *Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs:*

The now iconic images of rain-soaked processions of rust-red robes, surrounded and protected by the clasped hands of thousands of ordinary Burmese people signified astounding and breathtaking acts of political courage. Burma's first massive, multi-city protests in over 20 years took on an uncompromising anti-SPDC character, drawing on decades of economic and political oppression that included the massacre of thousands during the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1988, as well as the annulment of the National League for Democracy's (NLD) resounding victory in the 1990 elections, and the subsequent, decades-long confinement of NLD's leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

By the week's end, however, the images of defiance and hope that gave rise to the evocative phrase Saffron Revolution, were being replaced by stories of brutality and despair: cell phone videos posted on YouTube showed truckloads of military and paramilitary groups dismounting and shooting unarmed protestors and a Japanese journalist at close range and beating prisoners with batons and rifle butts while they were loaded in scores onto trucks. Monasteries were raided and monks were detained, beaten and humiliated. The triumphant shouts of "Do-aye!" – "It is our task!" – and the throngs of hand-holding people were now displaced by the dull pop of gunfire, the eerie sight of hundreds of flip flops now lying discarded on bloodstained streets, and enormous regime-installed signs declaring "Tatmadaw and the people, cooperate and crush all those harming the union!" Estimates of the dead range wildly from the regime's figure of 13 to an uncorroborated report from a defecting military colonel of thousands of bodies of executed monks being dumped into mass graves in Burma's jungles.

In the face of all this, Myanmar's foreign minister, U Nyan Win stood before the UN General Assembly and blamed the recent unrest in Burma on a handful of agitators supported by neo-colonial external influences, praised the restraint of Myanmar's military, and – in a sentence notable at once for its banality, its Orwellian doublespeak and its ironic self-indictment – declared before the world that, normalcy – *normalcy* – has now been restored to Myanmar.

I find this declaration of restored normalcy to be extraordinarily sad, not so much because of its weak attempt at propaganda, but rather because of the unintended truth that it conveys for a Burma ruled for over four decades by a repressive military regime: the shooting of peaceful protestors and monks; the night-time raids on monasteries; the division and persecution of the population; in short, the continued rule by fear in a context of economic desperation does indeed constitute normalcy in Burma. It is this very normalcy that is Burma's continuing crisis.

DR. KHIN ZAW WIN, *a long-time prisoner of conscience in Burma and Visiting Fellow at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, described his experience as witness to the Saffron Revolution:*

On August 15, without any warning, there was an announcement that the government raised the price of fuel from double to five times: suddenly bus fares – all transportation – went up and it hit people very hard. Student activists staged two marches and were picked up, arrested, and are still in detention. Monks in Pakokku also staged protest marches. A commotion ensued and the monks were roughed up and beaten and held in the monastery.

When news of the mistreatment of monks got out to the rest of the country, the monk's alliance made three demands: that the government should apologize; should release prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi; and should hold meaningful talks with the opposition. If these demands were not met, the monks threatened the regime with excommunication. September 17 was given as the deadline and, as usual, the regime did not respond. The next day excommunication ceremonies were held and monks started protest marches.

This went on for a number of days before the repression began. Just as the world was struck by magnitude of the monk's participation, so the brutality of the crackdown was unheard of. Indescribably, a number of monks who had not been in the protests were now being beaten and shot.

But this was not the end of the story. Because of what happened there have been sudden, unexpected openings. An offer of talks has appeared. Out of the chaos and bloodshed, an opportunity has arisen for democrats and their supporters to help liberalize Burma. It will be hard to make the government change its mind, but we can try our best to have democratic input change the outcome.

SANJAY REDDY, *Assistant Professor of Economics at Barnard College and the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, spoke about the relationship between India and Burma:*

In recent public discussions, India and China have been identified as countries which are implicit or explicit supporters of the Burmese regime, or which could be major interveners who could potentially affect the future of the regime. The Indian point of view is that India is supporting, or at least tolerating, the regime to maintain Indian influence where it might otherwise be lost entirely due to increases in Chinese economic and political influence.

It has been explicitly stated by India's Minister of External Affairs that there are a number of military governments in the neighborhood, that India takes the question of the character of the regime to be an internal matter, and that it tries to develop cooperative relations with all neighbors; this view is inconsistent, however, with many of India's historical practices (for instance, opposing the apartheid regime in South Africa or supporting the expulsion of Pakistani military governments from the Commonwealth) and it is, in fact, becoming increasingly difficult to identify a coherent Indian foreign policy doctrine with respect to democracy and human rights.

India's support for the Burmese regime has come out of a commitment to "pragmatism" in elite circles and in particular the foreign policy and defense establishment. It's not something that enjoys obvious and general public support. If it were to become clear that there was general public disapproval of the government's stance and it were to become a more salient issue in domestic politics, I think one could expect that opinion to have an impact on Indian foreign policy. There has been a general ascendancy of the doctrine of realpolitik in India, but the government is also susceptible to internal pressure. There remains strong the perception on the part of the public that India ought to have an ethical dimension to its foreign policy which reflects its own ostensible commitment to human rights and democracy.

DR. ASHIN NAYAKA, *founding director of the Buddhist Missionary Society, New York and visiting scholar at the Department of History, Columbia University, spoke about the role of Buddhist monks in politics:*

There is a history of conflict between Burma's two dominant poles: religion and military tyranny. The Saffron Revolution is not a power struggle but is a struggle between righteousness and the un-righteous. The Saffron Revolution arose from the Buddhist concept of nonviolence and a moral code of truth, self-sacrifice and self-mortification. We [monks] came into the streets chanting a clear message: bring about a compassionate regime and a more harmonious society. We came out for a happy ending but the military government's response was tragic, painful, a crime against humanity. Buddhism is the face of the nation, the soul of the nation. Killing Buddhist monks, torturing them, is destroying the Burmese way of life.

This bloody crackdown against a democratic movement led by thousands of monks is a crisis of international value; if it is not addressed by the international community, the situation is likely to continue.

The Saffron Revolution came out of a religious obligation to speak out against what is happening in our country and the struggle is totally justifiable from the Buddhist point of view. The future of Burma will be determined by our courage and determination for peaceful struggle, but we need international support to reach this goal. We must change the direction of Burma, and we don't want to carry this painful legacy into the future. Our common future should be one of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

For more information on the situation in Burma and what you can do to help, please visit www.regimechangeinburma.org