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# Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma

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In September 2007, for the first time in more than 10 years, large peaceful demonstrations took place in the biggest cities in Burma. To those long acquainted with the ruling junta's brutal repression of its challengers, the demonstrations came as a surprise. Many activist monks themselves were surprised by the momentum the protests gathered and by the wholehearted support of the Burmese people. One monk noted, "We were initially going to protest for only a few days. We knew that people would support us, but we did not think that they would support us openly. . . . We did not think that all of entire downtown Rangoon would be filled with the protesters."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the military junta initially did not think monks would be able to sustain the protests for any length of time. A government official recalled:

"Because we had arrested so many protestors, we believed the monks would be afraid of the actions the government would be taking against them. We thought this would be enough to scare them. We thought that after they had expressed their unhappiness, they would disperse. To our surprise, the protests lasted for several days."<sup>2</sup>

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In August 2007, the government arrested leaders of the famous 88 Generation student group,<sup>3</sup> suspecting that they had organized the demonstrations to protest the junta's decision to raise fuel prices. For years, the 88 Generation has been Burma's most organized opposition group, and its leaders are among some of the most popular pro-democracy advocates in the country. After the government arrested the leaders of 88 Generation, no one expected other groups to hold large demonstrations. So when the monks staged such large protests the following month—and were suppressed so brutally—it allowed the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and other advocates to press more effectively for political reform within Burma.

How did the monks manage to mobilize such large peaceful protests and sustain them? Why did these demonstrations have such significant impact on the political processes of the country? The junta claimed that the protests were the result of malicious activities organized by opposition groups that did not want to see a smooth transition to democratic governance in Burma. Some hypothesized that the protests grew out of international actors' encouragement of the monks to "do something for the country."<sup>4</sup> Others suggested that the monks had spontaneously participated in the protests because of their unhappiness with Burma's economic and political situation.<sup>5</sup> Although rejecting the government's explanation, this paper will show that most of the arguments forwarded by journalists and analysts were incomplete; economic and political grievances did play a role in the emergence of the protests, but these issues alone do not adequately explain the motivations of Burma's pro-democracy reform movement.

This article argues that in order to accurately explain the demonstrations in Burma, one must understand the role of the monks in Burmese society and politics, the nature of the monk community, the repertoires and forms of protest adopted by the monks, and the prevailing state of the political opportunity within the country. In addition, this article will demonstrate that unlike the view advanced by the media, the junta's crackdown on the recent protests were not the most brutal actions it has undertaken. (Dissident monks were tortured from the 1970s to 1990s.) However, the government's repression of the recent protests received unprecedented attention from the international community mainly because of the Internet and the Burmese activists' use of new media. This article also argues that it was due to the international pressure engendered by the dissemination of images and information about the government's brutal suppression of the demonstrations that the junta came to realize it could not remain in power without talking to opposition groups, especially the National League for Democracy and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

## THE STATE OF THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN BURMA

Upon its independence from Britain's colonial rule in 1948, Burma adopted a British-style parliamentary system. Although it was by no means a perfect liberal democracy, citizens enjoyed a measure of political freedom. In March 1962, the military took control of the country and instituted a repressive system under the name of the Burmese Way to Socialism. Since then, many citizens of the country have staged pro-democracy anti-government protests.<sup>6</sup> The government managed to suppress all protests until the student-led Four-Eights Democratic Movement in August 1988, when students and other opposition groups mobilized against the military-backed regime and its mismanagement of the economy. Although the government sought to put down the protests quickly with a show of force, the social movement organizations not only managed to sustain their campaign for several weeks, they also succeeded in extending it across the country. This movement eventually drew the support of prominent figures, including Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's national hero.

In August 1988, the socialist government ceased functioning and eventually ceded power to the military. The military, in turn, formed a so-called interim government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which, in 1997, was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

As soon as the SLORC took control of the country, it promised to hold a multi-party election followed by the transfer of power to the winner. On May 27, 1990, the government .....  
 upheld the first half of its promise, and to the surprise of both the Burmese and the international community, the election was free and fair. When the results were counted, however, the junta refused to cede power to the wining political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). In fact, when it became obvious that the NLD would emerge as the winner, a senior officer .....  
 hinted that military rule would continue until a new constitution was drafted. In return, the NLD and other pro-democracy groups called for the swift handover of power. The NLD also offered to present a constitution drafted upon the model of the country's original legal framework. The international community, especially the United States and the European

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Union countries, also pressured the junta to honor the results of the election. Instead, Burma's government successfully resisted this domestic and international pressure and announced that *it* would institutionalize disciplined democracy within the country. Indeed, the junta held a National Convention in 1992, and its actions indicated that the leaders did not intend to surrender power in the near future. The junta artfully manipulated the convention, creating a constitution that secured a strategic role in Burmese politics for the military for many years to come, or, to paraphrase a veteran Burmese politician, *eternally*.<sup>7</sup> In 1996, the government suspended the National Convention after it was boycotted by the NLD. However, it resumed in 2003 after the government adopted a seven-point roadmap to so-called disciplined democracy.<sup>8</sup>

On September 3, 2007, Burma's ruling junta concluded the fourteen-year-long National Convention. Although the junta formed a committee to draft the new constitution on October 18, 2007, it resisted international pressure and refused to announce when that constitution would be presented to the people.

Pro-democracy groups knew that the movement would have to persevere until the advent of a genuine democratic transition within the country. Therefore, while leading political activists established political parties in 1988 and 1989 in order to undertake political activities legally, many students and Buddhist monks maintained their political organizations and informal networks in spite of the government's order to disband them. Students and political activists also fled to the border areas in order to undertake pro-democracy activities from either insurgent-controlled areas or neighboring countries. As such, opposition parties functioned like social movement organizations, and students and Buddhist monks continued to

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..... stage anti-government activities whenever opportunities arose. For their part, exiled pro-democracy leaders sought to bring the political situation in Burma to the attention of the international community.

Although the movement has been ongoing, most pro-democracy groups have weakened over time, mostly due to political infighting.<sup>9</sup> Since their failure to organize the Four-Nights Movement

..... in September 1999, most organizations have not been able to do much in the country. Their achievements lay in their ability to get Western govern-

ments to impose various sanctions, which have had some impact, but the entrenched government has remained more organized and stronger than the civil society and the opposition groups.

Realizing this, some exiled activists have reportedly tried to negotiate their return so they can engage in political activities within the institutional framework set by the government. More than 20 activists I interviewed admitted that even though they are determined to remain a part of the movement, they did not think a divided pro-democracy movement would be able to bring down the well-entrenched government. Speaking in 2006 and 2007, none of them expected large protests in the country anytime soon.

### THE PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATIONS OF SEPTEMBER 2007

In August 2007, the junta drastically raised fuel prices, a move that upset Rangoon residents, who felt there was little that could be done about it. On the day the government suspended the fuel subsidy, I took a taxi back to my hotel from downtown Rangoon. When I remarked to the taxi driver that the fare he charged was much higher than the usual rate, he fell speechless before breaking down. After wiping his eyes, he said to me, "Brother, I know the fare I asked for is higher than what I used to charge, but the government raised fuel prices. People are not taking taxis now, and I have yet to make enough money to pay for the car rental, let alone to make enough to cover the expenses of my family."<sup>10</sup> I asked him if he thought there would be any demonstrations to protest the new fuel prices, and he said it was very likely.<sup>11</sup> But when asked if he would participate in any of those protests, he replied in the negative.<sup>12</sup>

My conversations with another 50 people from Rangoon revealed similar sentiments; while a large majority thought that fuel price increases might cause protests in the country, only four out of 50 respondents indicated they would be willing to participate in them. Even a political activist trying to mobilize people to join the demonstrations told me that while there may be a few sporadic protests, it would be very difficult to organize a large, coherent grassroots movement.

In fact, within a few days of the government's gas price increases, members of the 88 Generation organized several peaceful demonstrations to pressure the government to provide economic relief. In response, the junta allegedly used members of a government-organized, non-governmental organization, known as Swan Arshin, to disperse the crowds.<sup>13</sup> While doing so, members of the Swan Arshin group beat up protestors.<sup>14</sup>

At that time, most Burmese were merely spectators. One activist I interviewed remained skeptical of the movement's ability to sustain itself:

"As far as I know, the main intention of all the protesting groups was to pressure the government into undertaking genuine reforms and to truly work for the long-term prosperity of the country. We just wanted the government to listen to us. We did not plan to bring the government down, because we did not think it was feasible. Also, we did not think we would be able to mobilize large protests that could be sustained until the government could be toppled."<sup>15</sup>

The 50 young people from Rangoon with whom I spoke believed the government would quickly crack down on the protest movement, yet only one indicated a wish to join the movement.

However, a series of events occurring in September 2007 changed the public perception of the protests. On September 5, a group of monks from Pakokku staged a peaceful demonstration to protest the rise in fuel prices.<sup>16</sup> The local authorities allegedly used members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and Swan Arshin to disrupt the protests. According to witnesses, many people were beaten by supporters of the government, and three monks were arrested. The following day, when local officials went to one of the monasteries to apologize for the arrests, monks burned the officials' cars.<sup>17</sup> The monks also held the officials hostage until the authorities agreed to release the detained monks.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, an underground union of monks, known as the Alliance of All Burma Buddhist Monks, emerged. The Alliance distributed leaflets, which encouraged people to ask the government to apologize for its mistreatment of monks in Pakokku.<sup>19</sup> The Alliance warned the government that if it did not issue a formal apology by September 17, the monks would hold "*patam nikkujjana kamma*," that is, they would boycott the receipt of alms from family members of the armed forces.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Burma's moral leaders wanted nothing to do with the members of armed forces would shame the entire military institution. When the military junta chose to ignore the September 17 deadline, several hundred monks staged peaceful protests. Although there was no central organization coordinating all the groups, the Alliance regularly issued guidelines. All the statements the Alliance issued were disseminated throughout the country via the Burmese language programming of the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and the Democratic Voice of Burma.

The government blamed the protests on opposition groups and Western countries, describing the latter as neo-colonialists who sought to establish puppet governments in developing countries. Some opposition

groups admitted privately that they had played a role in planning the protests. But my interviews with several activists and my own observations suggest that the demonstrations had virtually nothing to do with the opposition groups or with Western countries.

Within Burma, opposition groups have been trying to wrest control from the junta ever since the latter seized power, and exiled reformers' assistance has extended only as far as supporting the work of lay activists inside the country.<sup>21</sup> Interviews with exiled activists revealed that neither the Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks nor any other religious associations had received financial assistance from exile leaders recently. One exiled activist confirmed:

"I was involved in the organization of the Four-Nines Movement [September 9, 1999]. We sent people back into the country. We sent money to the groups that we thought could do it. Nothing came out of it. All our attempts to mobilize large social movements inside the country were futile. The original pro-democracy groups did not play any role in the recent demonstrations. Burmese protested out of their anger with the state of the country. Monks did it because they believed they should do so for the people and the country. Some activists tried to take credit for this because they wanted to tell the funding agencies that they had done something. All the credit for the recent protests should go only to the people who participated in them."<sup>22</sup>

There was also no evidence indicating that the Alliance, or other monks, had interacted with any foreign embassies or governments. In other words, the September 2007 protests were organized by monks of their own free will.

Many believe that if the government had publicly explained its reasons for raising the price of fuel, many people, monks included, would have accepted the decision; the government, they felt, had only itself to blame for the protests. For example, after learning more about the cost to the government of subsidizing fuel, 50 young people, many of whom had joined the protests, raised the question: why did the government choose not to explain its reason for the price hike to the general public? They agreed that given the rising gas prices in the world, it would be difficult for the government to keep subsidizing the gas. However, they were unhappy with the government's hiking of fuel prices without prior notice.

Likewise, local officials committed grave errors in the incident in Pakokku. If the junta had apologized to the monks and took the necessary actions against the officials responsible for the violence and arrests, the crisis could have been resolved peacefully. Instead, the government's mismanagement of the crisis provided opposition groups with the agenda and opportunities that they had been incapable of establishing for themselves.

To the surprise of much of the Burmese population, the government did not crack down on the monks in the first few days of the demonstrations. As a result, the number of participants grew from a few hundred to an estimated 100,000 in less than a week. The public wholeheartedly expressed

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their support for the monks, who were often accompanied by lay supporters attempting to protect them. In turn, the monks called for both participants and spectators to remain peaceful. Initially, the monks did not plan to stage protests for more than a few days, but after witnessing the support from the public, many young monks decided to continue with the protests until the government complied with their demands.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually, this faction of monks persuaded the rest of the Alliance to continue to stage peaceful protests and to invite lay Burmese to participate.<sup>24</sup> Although there was no way of knowing the exact number of the participants, the major downtown areas of Rangoon were filled with protestors and spectators. Though peaceful and orderly, the protests in other parts of the country were not as extensive as those in Rangoon. In Mandalay, three large monasteries demonstrated separately. With the exception of Pakokku, where the monks and laymen came together from the beginning, these monks did not allow lay activists to join them.

The activists' ultimate goal was to pressure the government into working toward national reconciliation and genuine political reforms, yet they lacked a unified voice. Protestors from Pakokku had made more political demands than their counterparts from Rangoon and other parts of the country. In Rangoon—which received more attention due to its role as the former capital and the number of embassies located there—the Alliance and other groups called for democratic reforms more openly only after laymen joined the protests. As the number of protestors increased and the momentum of protests accelerated, many Burmese began to believe that political changes were within reach.

But on September 25, 2007, the junta finally decided to crack down. First, it imposed a curfew on the cities where the biggest demonstrations had taken place. Immediately after that, a large number of soldiers deployed to those cities. The soldiers initially ordered protestors to disperse, but when the people did not obey their orders, soldiers used tear gas and fired upon them. In some instances, soldiers fired warning shots before

they started shooting at protestors, but in many areas soldiers allegedly shot at protestors without warning. Soldiers also beat monks and other protestors with bamboo sticks. Not surprisingly, the government's and the protestors' estimates of the number of the protestors killed varied widely. On one hand, the government informed the UN human rights envoy that 15 people were shot dead in Rangoon, whereas opposition groups claimed that more than 100 people had been killed by soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

No protestors were killed outside of Rangoon, partly because of the cooperation between senior monks and military officers. In Mandalay, for instance, military officers requested that senior monks keep the younger monks under their supervision in the monasteries. The officers also said that if the monks came out, the soldiers would be obliged to suppress them by any means, even if that meant shooting them. When the senior monks realized these threats were serious, they convinced the junior monks to remain in the monasteries. Although protestors did not immediately desist, their numbers decreased significantly and quickly, and by the end of September, most Burmese realized that the peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks—now confined to the monasteries or, in some cases, in the custody of security forces—had been subdued.

#### WHY MONKS? WHY NOT OTHERS?

While the protests were taking place, one of the questions academics, students, and journalists frequently asked was: Why was the movement led by monks, rather than other societal actors or opposition groups? Some found it quite ironic that monks, who did not have to worry about food prices, were protesting the economic problems in the country. However, those who know the role of Buddhist monks in Burmese society would find the monk-led protests neither ironic nor unique.

Buddhist monks have had a legacy of playing a major role in Burma's politics since pre-colonial days. They have always been considered influential community leaders. The political behavior of Buddhist monks has been fundamentally shaped by the socio-political character of the *dajaka*, or lay disciples, with whom they are associated.<sup>26</sup> That a monk might support the current military regime does not mean that he does not understand the intensity of the nation's discontent. A monk is likely to be an opponent of the state if most of his lay disciples are individuals with strong anti-state sentiments or citizens who are politically and economically worse off under the existing political system. Similarly, if a monk has senior government officials and supporters of the government as his lay disciples, he is more likely to act like a supporter of the state. The monk who has major

*dajaka* both in the state and non-state sectors tries to appease both sides by participating in state-sponsored religious ceremonies and by expressing his support for democracy through private interaction with *dajakas* from the non-state sector.<sup>27</sup>

The military government has long understood the usefulness of monks. Therefore, while imprisoning anti-state monks, the junta tried to become the *dajaka* of as many monks as possible by making large donations. The junta's strengthening *saya-dajaka* relations proved to be very effective. The position of anti-state monks was seriously weakened when the junta and their *sayadaw* (Burmese honorific term for the head monk of a monastery) successfully persuaded some former activist monks to join the state controlled Sangha Council and to participate in state-sponsored religious activities.<sup>28</sup> According to a senior monk from Mandalay, by the end of 1996, most leaders of the regional *sangha* (the Buddhist community) community eventually cultivated some military officers as their *dajaka*. This does not, however, mean that most monks became supporters of the state. It is worth noting that the government does not have sufficient resources to reach out to the entire *sangha* in the country. The majority of monks remain outside the state's influence and, according to some estimates, a large majority of them have maintained a negative attitude toward the government.<sup>29</sup> Monks whose primary *dajaka* are anti-state activists and the poor continue to portray themselves as opponents of the state. All 30 anti-state monks interviewed by a retired researcher, for instance, have *dajaka* who displayed anti-government sentiments.<sup>30</sup>

The participants of the recent peaceful demonstrations proved to have ordinary citizens as their patrons. As community leaders, most of the monks understood the magnitude of the political, social, and economic problems their lay disciples faced. A prominent monk noted:

"We basically live on the support of our lay disciples. In our country, monks had to get involved in politics when the government was not fixing the problems of the people. Whenever there were problems, our people expect us to do something about it. The current military government has been doing a terrible job of fixing the country's problems. The problem lies in the fact that these generals are more interested in enriching themselves than in fixing the country's problems. We therefore want to do something to make them realize that they could not remain in power without doing anything for the people and the country. We just waited for the right time, and when the time came, we all came together and staged peaceful demonstrations."<sup>31</sup>

Fifteen other monks I interviewed also made similar remarks. They all noted that they could not perform their religious activities properly when their lay disciples were having problems. One of them confirmed:

“Because of their economic difficulties, many of our lay disciples could not support us as much as they used to. Many monks could not even get enough alms food from the patrons. In the past, we had to walk around only one or two kilometers to get enough food for the day. Now, many of had to walk around three to four kilometers almost every morning to receive enough food. We understand these problems stemmed from the government’s mismanagement of the country. We could not simply sit idly and waited for the change to come naturally. We had to involve ourselves in politics if the country needed us. We are not interested in power politics; we are only interested in making the responsible officials realize that they should either try to fix the problems prevalent in the country or step down.”<sup>32</sup>

Monks were by no means the only group that could organize protests. There have been opposition groups both inside and outside the country trying to organize protests since late 1988. As noted above, most exile groups could not organize major protests in the country because of their internal problems and their failure to work with one another.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the junta has systematically arrested opposition leaders or kept them under surveillance, an action that has confined opposition groups to small, sporadic protests since 1996. Although universities had traditionally been fertile grounds for student activists, the relocation of universities to far-flung outlying areas inhibited students’ ability to launch major political activities.<sup>34</sup>

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The government kept major monasteries under surveillance as well. However, it is more difficult for the junta to control monks than the students. A typical Burmese monastery houses more than 300 monks, and the monastic structure functions like that of an informal civil society organization. There are leaders at the various levels in the hierarchy of Burmese monasteries. In addition, monks from various parts of the country entered large, urban monasteries to complete their religious studies. Therefore, monks at a monastery in a city often have friends studying in other big monasteries in other cities. Ten monks

I interviewed noted that they each had more than 20 friends studying at different monasteries in more than eight cities. Therefore, it is easier for monks to mobilize their fellow monks. They can always start with their friends within their own monasteries and then tap into the broader network they have in various parts of the country. While the protests were going on, monks from Rangoon talked to their contacts in other cities about the state of the protests and discussed how each group should proceed.<sup>35</sup>

#### REPERTOIRES, POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND MOMENTUM

Citizens of Burma knew that the ruling military government was prepared to do everything it could to keep itself in power. A survey of 220 respondents, conducted between late 2006 and early 2007, revealed that most people were reluctant to join open protests against the government because they believed soldiers and riot police would shoot at them. One interviewee noted:

“In the last days of the socialist period, General Ne Win [the military dictator who led the 1962 coup] said, ‘When the military shoots, it shoots to hit its target.’ The military we have now is still the same institution Ne Win created. They don’t think about what should or should not be done. They would just follow their superior’s orders. We know that Than Shwe [the current leader of the military] would not give up power easily. He would order his soldiers to shoot at anybody who challenged the government openly. We cannot engage in any protests unless we are prepared to die.”<sup>36</sup>

The monks were aware that the government would react with brute force. The Alliance of All Burma Buddhist Monks therefore tried to dissuade the junta from taking actions against them by using nonviolence as an organizing principle of their protests. The Alliance also called upon monks from other parts of the country to stage only peaceful demonstrations. In the first few days of the protests, the procession of monks did not take the form of regular anti-government protests. They did not shout any anti-government or political slogans. They just recited prayers in unison. In Burma, monks often come out in procession and recite prayers during the Buddhist period of Lent.

Even during the socialist period, monks were allowed to walk in processions and recite prayers almost anywhere they went without having to obtain permission from the local authorities. However, the ultimatum issued by the Alliance has given a new meaning to such processions, especially in the eyes of the people, and it was difficult for security forces to fire upon

monks who were simply reciting prayers. A midlevel military officer was quoted saying just that.<sup>37</sup> He also said that he prayed he was not ordered to quell the procession by force.<sup>38</sup> Another well-placed source remarked that the government did not initially use any draconian methods to suppress the monks' demonstrations, for the protestors were not only peaceful but were reciting Buddhist prayers.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the peaceful form of protest proved to be quite effective. When blocked in one place in downtown Rangoon, some Buddhist monks kneeled down and paid homage to soldiers in the ways their lay disciples paid homage to them. In Burmese society, people believe that it is sinful to be paid homage by people who are older or superior to them. Thus, these tributes frightened the soldiers, who then let the monks pass. It is also worth noting that in some areas, government soldiers started shooting at protestors only after lay protestors started throwing stones at them.<sup>40</sup> To be clear, I am not suggesting that the government would refrain from brutal actions as long as monk protestors remained peaceful.

Peaceful repertoire alone was not the only factor enabling the monks to launch the protests. As Sidney Tarrow and others have pointed out, the mistakes made by the government sometimes incited the public outcry, thereby allowing social-movement entrepreneurs to mobilize protests.<sup>41</sup> A few of the young monks I interviewed noted that they had been waiting for an opportunity to mobilize the protests, despite any previous lack of involvement. One monk said, "Most monks were already unhappy with the ongoing situation in the country, so when the event like the Pakokku incident happened, it gave activist monks an opportunity to provoke ordinary monks into joining them."<sup>42</sup> Seven other monks also confirmed that they decided to join the protests only after they heard about the mistreatment of the monks by local officials in Pakokku.<sup>43</sup>

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Another factor that allowed the Alliance and other groups to leverage the momentum of the protests was the absence of a well-organized and competent intelligence agency in the country. Before former intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt was dismissed and his intelligence agency disbanded, the junta could almost always uncover opposition groups that were planning to organize protests.<sup>44</sup> In 1997, for instance, the junta became aware of monks' plans to protest a regional recommender's improper renovation of a famous Buddha statue in Mandalay. Before the monks could

launch the protest, a rumor emerged that a Buddhist woman had been raped by a Muslim businessman. The government diverted their attention from the regional commander to the Muslim businessman, eventually causing an anti-Muslim riot.<sup>45</sup>

Some Burma observers noted that intelligence agents have often instigated anti-Muslim riots in order to prevent angry monks from engaging in anti-government activities.<sup>46</sup> Fifteen exiled activists I interviewed confirmed that government intelligence uncovered their protest plans before implementation. But the junta's intelligence capacity has been degraded over the last decade or so. In 2005, for example, the government never identified those responsible for several deadly explosions in Rangoon. During the

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protests in 2007, one Burmese analyst observed that if General Khin Nyunt and his intelligence agents had been around, they would have stopped the protests before they broke out. "The previous intelligence agents," he said, "would have done something to divert the public attention from the ongoing government-related issue to some other problems that the government did not have much to do with. Meanwhile they would arrest leading monk protestors before anyone could do anything. In fact, the entire country knew about the recent protests before they started. However, the government could not stop it as it used to be able to."<sup>47</sup> Thus, the absence of an effective intelligence agency allowed activists to mobilize and sustain the protests quite freely.

The junta's desire to improve its image in the eyes of the international community also enabled the monks to sustain the demonstrations. If the junta had arrested many leading monks before the September 17 deadline, it is likely the protests would not have gained such momentum. The military seems to have thought that the monks would stop demonstrating when they became tired. Therefore, the junta reasoned that it should just allow the peaceful demonstrations to peter out on their own rather than injure its international reputation. Some well-placed figures pointed out that all of the local authorities were instructed not to take action as long as protestors did not destroy government buildings, especially military headquarters and police stations.<sup>48</sup> These same sources also noted that the generals had underestimated the monks' commitment to the cause.<sup>49</sup>

Although many monks appeared to have thought twice before they

joined the protests, once they had joined it, they assumed that there was no turning back. One monk activist explained:

“Even if we quietly stopped joining the protests, the past experiences of many activists told us that we could still get arrested. If we were unlucky, we could still be tortured and sent to notorious prisons. . . . If we participated for only one or two days, the government might not detain us. But, after a few days, we knew they would punish us. After we’d protested for several days we knew that we were already in trouble, so instead of stopping we decided to continue demonstrating as long as we could.”<sup>50</sup>

With no immediate action from the government, many people—including nine monks and 25 laymen I interviewed—concluded that the cost of participating in the protests were not as high as previously assumed; once they felt the cost to be reasonable, they joined in the protests.

#### **YOUNG PROTESTORS, THE INTERNET, AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE BURMESE DEMOCRACY ISSUE**

On the day Burmese security forces started shooting at and beating protestors, I spoke via online messaging programs with some of my Burmese students, who described what they saw while walking with protestors. The students had observed events in the street and then ducked into the nearest Internet café to relay a graphic account of what they had seen. I also received similar reports of protests in Mandalay and other parts of upper Burma. Many of my students and friends also e-mailed pictures of the demonstrations and of soldiers beating up protestors. Even though I was in Hong Kong while all this was going on, the Internet allowed me to remain informed of developments in my native land.

Needless to say, my students, friends, and I were not the only people who chatted about the protests via the Internet. Hundreds of young Burmese tried to share their first-hand knowledge about the protests with their friends abroad. Some shared what they saw or heard about the protests with millions of people around the world through blogs. Most of these young bloggers grew up after the Four-Nines movement and did not experience first-hand the brutal stance the government could take against its challengers. They told their friends inside and outside the country how exciting it was to be a part of the movement. After they personally witnessed soldiers shooting at and beating up monks and other protestors, these young people became shocked by and upset at the government, and

they began systematically disseminating information about the military government's repression of the peaceful protestors to the rest of the world. This new generation provided vital information to the international media and people across the globe came to realize the gravity of the situation.

The government's repression of the peaceful September 2007 demonstrations was not as brutal as its repression of the Four-Eights democracy movement or the actions it took against protestors in 1988. Monks and other protestors had been beaten up and shot dead for challenging the governments during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. Although no one knows for sure the exact number of people who died in the Four-Eights Democratic Movement, most believe that it was at least several hundred people. Because of the heightened media coverage of the September 2007 protests, many foreigners mistakenly thought the government's response was the most brutal action Burma's ruling junta had taken against its own citizens. As a result, the international media inaccurately suggested that entire major cities in Burma had become killing fields. In fact, the brutal repression of the protests took place only in a few areas of Rangoon.

Regardless, the Internet activities undertaken by young Burmese proved to be very effective in disseminating pictures and information to the international community. Even staunch allies of the junta, such as the government of China, felt compelled to advise Burmese military leaders to work with the UN. For the first time in its history, ASEAN harshly criticized the junta. The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, as chairman of ASEAN, issued a statement condemning the Burmese junta for killing monk protestors.<sup>51</sup> Some diplomats noted that the availability of the pictures of the government's brutal repression of monks made it very difficult for ASEAN governments to remain quiet.<sup>52</sup> Burmese military leaders also appeared to have understood that their handling of the September protests had damaged their reputations. One official said that senior leadership within the junta "initially seemed to think that they would not receive the harsh criticism from the international community if they tolerated the protests while repeatedly calling for the protestors to disperse before they began shooting at them. They had discounted the impact the Internet. That's why they shut down the Internet for a few days, but it was too little too late. It was, in part because of the harsh criticism it received from the international community, especially from the countries typically friendly to them, that the junta decided to change its policies."<sup>53</sup>

The junta made it very clear that the NLD and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, would not be a part of its plan to institute so-called disciplined democracy in the country.<sup>54</sup> In less than two weeks after the protests were

suppressed, the government announced that its leader, Than Shwe, would meet Aung San Suu Kyi if the latter stopped confronting the government and stopped calling for the international community to impose economic sanctions on Burma.<sup>55</sup> The junta even appointed a cabinet minister to deal with Aung San Suu Kyi directly. ....

Since then, some meetings between Suu Kyi and representatives of the junta have taken place. In addition, Suu Kyi has also been allowed to see her party members. The junta also allowed a UN human rights envoy to investigate the human rights situation in the country for the first time in three years.

*The junta made it very clear that the NLD and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, would not be a part of its plan to institute so-called disciplined democracy in the country.*

Although it is still too early to know for certain the impact of these current developments, it is clear that mounting international pressure, resulting from the availability of pictures and information of the repression of the protests, made the government change its course of action.

**CONCLUSION**

The peaceful protests of September 2007 in Burma were not instigated by any opposition groups or foreign governments. Rather, several monks and Burmese lay-people were frustrated with the political and economic situations of the country. When opportunities arose, activist monks successfully mobilized the people to protest. As noted above, the dissemination of information and pictures about the protests via the Internet attracted unprecedented attention for the Burmese political issue from the international community. Furthermore, these protests allowed many young people to personally witness the brutality of an authoritarian government, thereby helping them realize the sacrifice the public had to make while fighting for political changes in the country.

Regardless of the aforesaid developments, no one knows when Burma will have a new constitution and a new government. Although the junta agreed to talk to the opposition, it refused to revise the 104 principles. The junta also revealed that it would continue to implement its Seven-Point roadmap. Although a representative of the junta and Aung San Suu Kyi have met a few times, true democratic changes are still far from realized. The government has made it very clear that it would work with the opposition groups so long as its rules are followed. Although Aung San Suu Kyi

has announced her willingness to work with the government, it is unclear whether she would be willing to work within the government's framework. The government media has recently reported that the junta wanted a win-win situation. At the same time, state-run media outlets continued to denounce opposition groups for inciting protests in the country. Although the meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi and the government have been ongoing, the political future of the country remains uncertain.

A Buddhist monk once noted that when all political actors involved in Burmese politics stopped making self-righteous comments, set aside their personal egos, and start focusing on the welfare of the citizens, most of the country's political problems will be resolved quickly. Burma is still waiting for that moment, and that no one knows when it will come. ■

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Burmese monk, October 12, 2007. All interviews are held in confidentiality by the author.
- 2 Interview with a government official, October 14, 2007.
- 3 The 88 Generation is led by former student leaders of the Four-Eights Democratic Movement that took place in August 1988. This nationwide pro-democracy uprising was known as the Four Eights Democratic Movement, for it broke out on the eighth day of the eighth month of 1988. At the climax of the uprising, the government lost control of the whole country. Numerous government properties were destroyed and a number of people were beheaded by rioters on the charges of spying for the government. Hundreds of demonstrators were shot to death by government security forces.
- 4 Personal communication, October 28, 2007.
- 5 "Burmese monks' protests escalate," *BBC News*, September 19, 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7002732.stm>> (accessed October 30, 2007); and "Backed by Cheering Crowds Defiant Monks Protest Burma's Junta," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2007, A16, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/18/AR2007091802082.html>> (accessed October 30, 2007).
- 6 *Rangoon tha-ka-tho-kyauung-tha-tha-ma-ga-sein-ya-tu-tha-bin* (The Diamond Jubilee of the Rangoon University Student Union), 2006, 14.
- 7 Interview with a Burmese politician, July 12, 2005.
- 8 The seven-point road map "included reconvening the National Convention (NC), drafting a new constitution according to the principles adopted at the NC, holding a national referendum for the new constitution, holding free and fair elections according to the new constitution, convening the Hluttaw (parliament), and the formation of a new democratic government." See Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Myanmar in 2003: Frustration and Despair?" *Asian Survey* 44 (1) (January/February 2004): 87-92.
- 9 For details, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Burma*, forthcoming.
- 10 Personal communication, August 14, 2007.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Asian Human Rights Commission, Press Release, August 22, 2007, "Burma: Dramatic price rises, protests and arrests oblige international response," <<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2007/08/22/asian-human-rights-commission-burma-dramatic-price-rises-protests-and-arrests-oblige-international-response/>> (accessed November 10, 2007).

- 14 "USDA and Swan Arshin Urged to Join Demonstrators," *Mizzima News*, August 25, 2007, <[http://www.bnionline.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2310&Itemid=6](http://www.bnionline.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2310&Itemid=6)> (accessed December 8, 2007).
- 15 Interview with a Burmese activist, September 9, 2007.
- 16 See "Q & A: Protests in Burma," *BBC News*, October 2, 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7010202.stm>> (accessed October 20, 2007).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See Yeni, "Burmese monks demand government apology," *The Irrawaddy*, September 10, 2007, <<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2007/09/10/irrawaddy-burmese-monks-demand-government-apology-yeni/>> (accessed November 11, 2007).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 For the safety of their comrades in the country, my informants neither revealed the groups they have assisted nor the kind of assistance they have rendered.
- 22 Interview with a Burmese activist, September 29, 2007.
- 23 See "Thousands Protest in Burma," *Radio Free Asia*, September 19, 2007, <[http://www.rfa.org/english/news/social/2007/09/19/burma\\_fuelprotest/](http://www.rfa.org/english/news/social/2007/09/19/burma_fuelprotest/)> (accessed November 8, 2007).
- 24 Interview, October 28, 2007.
- 25 See Thomas Fuller, "At Least 15 Die in Crackdown, Myanmar Tells Envoy," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/17/world/asia/17myanmar.html>> (accessed November 18, 2007).
- 26 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "The Politics of States-Society Relations in Burma," *South East Asia Research* 12 (2) (2007), 213-254.
- 27 For instance, the first prime minister of independent Burma, U Nu, was very religious and pursued policies designed to uplift the status of Buddhism in Burmese society. Given that U Nu was a devout Buddhist and that his major opponents were anti-religious communists, one might assume that the entire *sangha* community supported U Nu and his government. In the 1950s, however, many monks in both upper and lower Burma were known to support and provide refuge to leftist political groups. It should not be coincidence that most of the *dajaka* of these monks were unhappy with the performance of the U Nu government and were supporters of or were members of opposition parties.
- 28 Interviews, January 2001 through March 2001.
- 29 Interview, May 15, 2003; Interviews, June 19, 2006.
- 30 Interviews, June 19, 2006.
- 31 Interview with a Burmese monk, May 1, 2005.
- 32 Interview with a Burmese monk, October 19, 2007.
- 33 For details, see Kyaw, *The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Burma*.
- 34 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Associational Life in Myanmar: Past and Present," in N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, eds., *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 166.
- 35 Interviews, October 2007 through November 2007.
- 36 Interview with a Burmese citizen, June 24, 2007.
- 37 Personal Communication, October 12, 2007.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Personal Communication, October 14, 2007.
- 40 Some protestors claimed those people who threw stones at soldiers were planted by the government.
- 41 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Social Movement: Social Movement and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36.
- 42 Interview with a Burmese monk, November 1, 2007.
- 43 Interview with Burmese monks, November 8, 2007.
- 44 General Khin Nyunt was fired because of his involvement in the internal power struggle between army and intelligence officers. For details, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Burma in 2004: Why Military Rule Continues," in Chin Kin Wa and Dalit Singh, eds., *Southeast Asian Affairs*

- 2005 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 231-256.
- 45 Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Plural Society Revisited: The Misapprehension of Burmese Muslims by Burmese Buddhists," unpublished manuscript.
- 46 Personal Communications, October 9-October 12, 2007.
- 47 Personal Communication, October 11, 2007.
- 48 Interviews, October 12, 2007.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Interview with a Burmese monk, October 29, 2007.
- 51 See "Massacre of the monks in Burma," *Herald Sun*, September 10, 2007, <<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,22515138-661,00.html>> (accessed November 8, 2007).
- 52 Interview, November 11, 2007.
- 53 Interview with a Burmese official, October 30, 2007.
- 54 See "Democratic Voice of Burma: Burmese democracy party views exclusion from National Convention," *BurmaNet News*, February 3, 2005, <<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2005/02/03/democratic-voice-of-burma-burmese-democracy-party-views-exclusion-from-national-convention/>> (accessed October 30, 2007).
- 55 See Sebastian Berger, "Aung San Suu Kyi: leader offered meeting," *Telegraph*, May 10, 2007, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/10/05/wburma105.xml>> (accessed October 30, 2007).