

Protests against the Burmese military junta

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Despite a security clampdown within Burma (Myanmar), a number of anti-government protests took place both inside the country and internationally during September and October to mark the anniversary of the savage army crackdown on the popular uprising against the military junta in 1988.

On October 2, a group calling itself the Vigorous Burmese Students Warriors occupied the Burmese embassy in the Thai capital of Bangkok. There was a tense standoff after the group, armed with AK-47 assault rifles, hand grenades and grenade launchers, held dozens of hostages including diplomats and foreigners inside the embassy building. The siege ended when the Thai government agreed to take those involved to the Thai-Burma border and release them. This “soft” approach has provoked sharp tensions between the two countries.

During early September, extra military and police personnel, including riot-controlling units, were deployed throughout the Burmese capital Rangoon (Yangon) to guard official buildings, temples and other key places, particularly the US Embassy and the Sule Pagoda, the focal points for the 1988 protests.

Even the teashops and restaurants where people gather after work were asked to close. Officials toured the city to register all overnight guests using a decades-old regulation, normally enforced only in emergencies. There were also reports of an unofficial curfew in provincial towns and parts of Rangoon. The junta cancelled the scheduled visit of UN special envoy Alvaro de Soto and even banned military personnel visiting Rangoon without specific instructions.

Dissident groups had called for anti-government demonstrations on September 9 but only a few small-scale protests occurred. The military began to round up suspected oppositionists weeks in advance. As many as 500 people, mainly high-school age students, were arrested and their whereabouts is not known. In the past, those arrested for anti-government activities have received a seven-year jail sentence with hard labour.

Two British activists, James Mawdsley (26) and Rachel

Goldwyn (28), who work with exiled opposition groups were among those detained. Mawdsley, who has been arrested for similar activities before, entered Burma through the Thai border and distributed anti-government literature in the northern border town of Tachilek. He was sentenced to 17 years in jail. Goldwyn, who was detained in Rangoon, was given seven years with hard labour.

Last year 18 foreign activists were arrested for distributing leaflets in the capital, sentenced to five-year jail terms and subsequently deported. Goldwyn was released on Monday after signing a statement that she would not get involved in political activities in Burma in the future.

The tough security measures reveal the nervousness of the regime in the face of continuing opposition and resentment to its rule, economic crisis and international isolation. Anti-government protests organised by Burmese exiles took place in Thailand, Australia, Japan and Malaysia on September 9. The demands of the various opposition groups are limited to the release all political prisoners, dialogue between the military government and opposition leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, and the convening of parliament.

September marked the high tide of the 1988 protest movement that had begun in late 1987 against the autocratic rule of the military and deteriorating living standards. At the end of July and the beginning of August, hundreds of thousands of students, workers and peasants took to the streets in all over the country. They seized police stations, burned down government building, beheaded police personnel, broke into rice stores, ransacked the houses of the ruling military elite, and paralyzed the transport service and the docks.

Ne Win, head of the military regime brought to power in a coup in 1962, had already been forced to resign from the chairmanship of the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) in an abruptly called party congress. But the regime was forced to make another change to try to placate the protestors—Ne Win's successor Sein Lwin was replaced by Muang Muang, one of the junta's civilian

members.

These moves by the military only fueled further demonstrations. In early September the army began to crush the uprising. At least 3,000 people were killed in Rangoon alone. In Mandalay, another 500 demonstrators were shot down. About 7,000, mostly students, fled to Thailand.

The key political role in enabling the army to unleash its repression was played by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi. While critical of the repressive policies of the military dictatorship, Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders were deeply fearful of the extent and militancy of the protest movement that threatened to make demands they were also incapable of meeting. Suu Kyi appealed to the demonstrators to accept as bona fide the military's promise to hold national elections and to permit a transition to a civilian government.

National elections were eventually held in May 1990 and produced a landslide victory for the NLD, which won 82 percent of the vote, reflecting the widespread hostility to the junta. But having been given nearly two years to stabilise the economy and strengthen its grip on power, the military commanders made clear that they had no intention of handing over to the NLD and refused to convene the national assembly. Suu Kyi was under house arrest until 1995 and remains under close surveillance.

When it seized power in 1962, the dictatorship largely closed off Burma and took over the country's banks and businesses. Despite a limited opening up to foreign investment in the 1990s, the military still retain control over major sections of the economy. In the 1996-97 budget, for instance, defence was allocated 39.7 percent of the government's total operating expenditure. Critics accuse the military of having "laundered" money that does not appear in official budget figures and receiving revenue from drug running operations.

A large proportion of the defence spending goes towards "internal" surveillance. The largest computer facility in the country is to be found in the Defence Ministry's compound in Rangoon. It is able to intercept telephone and fax messages as well as email and radio communications. According to Robert Karniol, Asia-Pacific editor of *Jane's Defense Weekly*, the military intelligence has the capability "to monitor even satellite phones... by using Inmarsat and similar direct satellite-telecommunication systems".

Collectively the military is the largest financial institution in Burma and has a series of partnerships with

foreign investors through the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited. This body, which was established in 1990 to oversee joint ventures, controls 40 percent of all investments.

In comparison, only 5 percent of the 1996-97 budget was spent on education and less than 5 percent on health. Even in Rangoon, many residents are without electricity or running water. The per capita income was just \$US790 in 1998, one of the lowest in the world. Rising prices, low pay and the lack of basic facilities and social services have all contributed to the continuing widespread hostility to the regime.

But the perspective of Suu Kyi and the NLD is to seek the support of the major powers and financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank by offering to open up the Burmese economy to foreign investors, while at the same time putting pressure on the military junta for a deal.

The NLD leaders remain hostile to any independent mobilisation of workers, students and others to bring down the regime. Suu Kyi's attitude was summed up in an interview with *Asia Week* correspondent Roger Metton in Rangoon in May. Asked why the NLD did not mark the anniversary of its congress held last year to declare its intention of unilaterally convening parliament, she replied: "People always want drama, I think especially journalists. They want something dramatic all the time to write about."

Following last year's congress, a significant number of senior NLD leaders and parliamentarians elected in the 1990 elections were rounded up and thrown in jail. Neither Suu Kyi nor the NLD organised any opposition, even though it severely undermined the party itself.



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