



Burma: A History of Repression and Resistance by Emily Hallgren

Burma, a country with a long history of both repression and resistance, attracted international attention again this past fall with its revived movement for democracy. From British occupation to the military junta that is still in power, Burma has long been controlled by oppressive forces. However, this is only half the story. Coupled within the history of oppression is one of resistance. Resistance to oppressive rule has a long tradition in Burma, and though it has at times turned violent, the people's democracy movement has relied mainly on practical and principled nonviolence to achieve its goals. The story of nonviolent resistance in Burma is one of resilience, courage, and, notably, success.

Nonviolent Tradition

Resistance to British rule, especially by Buddhist monks, is a well known part of Burma's colonial history. Monks who took action against the British did so both violently and nonviolently. Historians note that monks who engaged in violence voluntarily "defrocked".¹ Two monks who advocated nonviolent resistance to British rule were U Wisara and U Ottama; they are among the Burmese independence heroes. U Wisara publicly criticized British rule and employed the nonviolent tactic of a hunger strike against the British; it lasted 166 days until he finally died in prison in 1929. U Ottama condemned British occupation in public speeches.¹ Students and other activists in more recent times rely on the foundation of nonviolent resistance established by Buddhist monks many years earlier.

1988 Movement

The mass people's movement that emerged in 1988 calling for democracy and an end to rule by the military junta is not only important to understand the current social movement; it is an essential case study of nonviolent social change. Analysis of the 1988 student-led movement for democracy usually determines that it was ultimately unsuccessful, for it failed to bring an end to the military junta, referred to as the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Researchers often point to the regime's reorganization and reclamation of control, while the movement demobilized and failed to form into a unified structure, as the primary factors that led to the ultimate failure of the movement. However, the tightening of control and repression that followed the re-seizure of power in 1990 was the result of an often unacknowledged fact about the people's movement of 1988: that is, it worked. The success of the movement was undone when the BSPP reclaimed control, annulled the democratic election results, and increased violent repression. Nonetheless, the movement itself was a success.

The people's power movement achieved two major goals: 1) it removed the leader of the military junta and his successor from power (Ne Win and Sein Lwin), and 2) it forced multi-party democratic general elections.² The movement removed the leader of the military regime, and his appointed successor, although it did not remove the regime entirely. The nonviolent tactic predominantly used to achieve this was mass protest and persuasion. Becoming a powerful and recognizable force in March 1988, the protests forced Ne Win to

step down from his position as chairman of the BSPP and president of Burma in July 1988. The most notable protest took place on June 21, 1988, when a broad-based coalition of protesters including students, Buddhist monks, factory workers and the disaffected and unemployed of Rangoon marched together to protest against the regime and demand democracy. As with previous protests, the marchers in Rangoon met with violent repression by the Lon Htein, the riot police. Witnesses estimated that eighty to one hundred protesters were killed. However, the BPSS could no longer ignore the broad based anti-regime campaign. On July 23, 1988, Ne Win not only announced his resignation as BPSS party chairman and president, but unexpectedly called for a national referendum to gauge support for a multi-party governmental system. Although the Congress rejected the proposal for a national referendum, and appointed General Sein Lwin, the detested commander of the Lon Htein, as Ne Win's successor, this decision only fueled larger, more intensified people's protests.

The second goal achieved by the democracy movement of 1988 was the holding of multi-party general elections. The intensified protests culminated in a general strike on August 8, 1988. The general strike was devastating to the ruling party, and it seemed as if the regime was in its last days. On September 18th, however, Ne Win and others staged a "sui generis coup," formed the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, later renamed the State Peace and Development Council), and claimed it was pursuing the goal of preparing Burma for general elections. The multi-party democratic election did take place on May 27, 1990. Notably, voting in the election was widely considered free and fair.² Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy won the election, receiving 59.9 percent of the votes and 80.8 percent of the parliamentary seats. Though the SLORC refused to accept the results, and the movement was not in a position to resist its decision, the fact is that the people's movement succeeded in forcing multi-party elections.

As documented by sociologist and peace scholar Kurt Schock, the main nonviolent tactics used in the 1988 democracy movement were protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and creative nonviolent intervention. These took the form of massive public demonstrations, a successful general strike, hunger strikes, "burn-ins" of BSPP cards, formation of local committees, and an attempted parallel government.²

Current Situation

The recent resurgence of protests began on August 18, 2007 when the people of Burma, who earn an equivalent of \$170 U.S. annually, woke up to a five hundred percent rise in diesel oil prices.³ The spike in the oil price was intended to cover a budget deficit that resulted from a wage hike for civil servants. It is widely believed that the building of a new capital city in Pynmana, now called Naypyidaw, contributed to the budget deficit as well. The decision to move the capital city from its current location in Rangoon, the commercial center of the country, is considered bizarre by many Burmese citizens and analysts. Nyein Chan, a Burmese refugee who resides in Fort Wayne, IN, insists that the relocation of the capital is part of a military strategy; the new location is isolated and located in the center of the country.⁴

During last fall's campaign, protests were held in all major cities. The message of the demonstrations was three-fold: 1) lower the price of oil and other commodities, 2) release political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and 3) engage in dialogue with the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Although the new wave of protests was sparked by economic injustice, the protests undoubtedly also included an anti-regime, pro-democracy theme.

Nonviolent action once again met with violent reaction by the military, ordered by the so-called State Peace and Development Council. The tactics employed were more of the same: attacks with automatic rifles, batons, tear gas, mass arrests, and an imposed curfew. Repressive tactics intensified over the course of September 26th and 27th. These two days saw the deaths of at least two hundred protesters, injuries to several hundred, and the arrest of over three thousand. Many of the leaders of the 1988 generation were also arrested.

It was at this moment that the Buddhist monks stepped in as leaders of the revived democracy movement. They obviously garner respect for the cause, however the monks may mean even more for the movement. As walking symbols of struggle, nonviolence, and strength, they seem to embody the soul of the people's movement for democracy. Their link with the tradition of nonviolent resistance is even evident in the language they use. The Burmese phrase meaning "to strike", thabeik hmauk, literally means "to turn the alms bowl upside down."⁵ Turning the begging bowl upside down and refusing alms is possibly the greatest insult to practicing Buddhists, for by accepting alms, the monks permit the person be a good Buddhist through their acts of generosity. This nonviolent tactic has been employed against the military in both the 1988 movement and the current one. However, their status as religious leaders has not shielded them from violent retaliation. The military has been indiscriminate in its use of violence against monks and all peaceful protesters. Monks have also been arrested during raids on monasteries.

The regime also imposed one new repression tactic. Realizing international attention had once again focused on Burma, drawn by images of peaceful protesters, including Buddhist monks attacked in the streets, the military regime attempted to suppress the media and shut down the Internet in the country.⁶ Although flow of news could not be stopped, aided by cell phones and news stations in neighboring countries, international media coverage of the movement nonetheless suddenly dropped off in mid-October.

One central truth derived from this story is that violence by the Burmese people will never bring an end to this regime. Research on the 1988 movement consistently finds that the junta was never seriously threatened by protesters who engaged in violence or by armed guerrilla groups. It was instead nonviolent action that crippled the regime. Although those of us who champion nonviolence are quick to rejoice in this knowledge, we should remember the bravery of those who have been killed, and those who risked their lives by opposing this regime nonviolently. We can assume that many more will lose their lives before democracy and freedom from the control of the military regime are finally achieved in Burma. This loss of life could be minimized if any number of nonviolent intervention strategies are adopted to advance the people's movement in Burma.

One obvious solution is the continued use of nonviolent tactics by the people's democracy movement to force political change. It will be extremely difficult to sustain momentum in a prolonged nonviolent campaign, considering that violent repression by the military all but devastated the movement in late 2007. However, the Burmese people have shown their resiliency in the fight for a democratic country.

Another strategy, discussed this past fall during the time of the democracy protests, is to put further international pressure on China, Russia and India to withdraw their support for the regime. Although both China and India have remained close allies with Burma, the two countries have begun to support U.N. efforts for national reconciliation in Burma. Both countries are members of the U.N.'s Group of Friends, a coalition of 14 countries who have agreed to use their influence to help Burma "emerge from its isolation."⁷ The Irrawaddy, a well known journal reporting on Burma, however, claims that negotiations are "going

nowhere", because the military junta refuses to engage in any real dialogue with opposition leaders or with neighboring countries about political change or national reconciliation.⁸

Also discussed in fall of 2007 was passage of a U.N. Security Council resolution. In January 2007 the U.N. Security Council attempted to pass a resolution calling for respect for human rights and to begin the process of democratic transition in Burma. The resolution, however, was vetoed by China and Russia. In October 2007, the Security Council released a statement regarding Burma, condemning the use of violence against nonviolent protesters and calling for dialogue between opposition groups. Unfortunately, this agreement does not have binding power.⁹ Ultimately, a meaningful Security Council resolution regarding the political situation in Burma is unlikely while China and Russia continue to support the Burmese military government.

A promising strategy of nonviolent resistance would be to convince the military troops to engage in noncooperation against the ruling junta. The military government cannot continue to repress the people's democracy movement without the support of the 400,000 member military. During the 1988 movement, students were able to organize some members of the military and convince them to join in protests against the junta.¹⁰ In the current movement this approach could again prove to be effective. In fact, it could eventually collapse the base of power, and its use of violent repression, that ultimately keeps the military government in power.

Pressure from within and without should ultimately lead to the collapse of the military junta. The Burmese people and the international community should continue to engage in practical and principled nonviolent tactics in an effort to end the rule of the oppressive government. Though it is difficult to say just when political change and reconciliation will take place, it is clear that the people will not stop in their struggle for a free Burma.

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