

Rangoon public increasingly impatient with regime

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Tension is rising in Rangoon, as the regime continues to ignore more than 2 million victims of cyclone Nargis, which has killed over 77,000 persons since it hit southern Burma on May 2nd. The regime has increased the number of police patrols in Rangoon, and shortened the opening hours of Burma's main Buddhist monument, the Shwedagon Pagoda, starting point for many of the pro-democracy demonstrations in September 2007.

'Before the cyclone, and in the first few days afterwards, people would criticise the regime out of the side of their mouth, or through a joke. And they would go quiet if soldiers walked past' says Pi Mo, a local student who has thrown all her energy into collecting food and second hand clothes for cyclone victims. 'But over the last couple of weeks, people have begun to express themselves open. Rather than cringe when soldiers address them, they snarl back. People are very angry that the government is doing nothing to help the cyclone victims, and is more interested in stealing as much of the foreign aid as possible.'

The regime recently abandoned its attempts to confiscate aid from private citizens who were trying to aid their compatriots in the cyclone affected areas, and is now allowing more or less free movement in and out of the delta for Burmese citizens. But its callous and totalitarian attempt to monopolise aid, and its subsequent climb-down in the face of public protest, has seriously damaged its image of invincibility. People no longer just hate the regime. They start to see that it is incompetent, and that it can be forced to make concessions.

The regime's incompetence and apparent lack of interest in disaster response contrasts with their obsession to obtain a Stalinist-style massive 'yes' vote in the May 10th referendum on a new Constitution that would give the regime 25% of seats in the parliament. "If you want to read about the cyclone disaster you have to look on the inside pages of the newspapers," complains Pi Mo. "You have to read past columns and columns of propaganda for the referendum first. But surely for this nation the cyclone should be the number one priority".

People are not just speaking their minds more freely. Rangoon has hundreds of internet cafes, and an hour's air-conditioned high-speed access costs about 0.40 USD - the same as a cup of tea in a street cafe. With few other forms of public entertainment, the young generation is packed into the internet cafes, and as you walk past the long lines of terminals, it is easy to see that many people are corresponding with contacts abroad, and writing very critically. As if they were no longer worried who is looking

over their shoulder.

The regime has even failed in its attempt to force internet cafe owners to help them spy on internet users. One newspaper reported on 19 May that less than 20% of internet cafe owners are complying with the strict conditions of their license: among other things they should record the name and ID card number of all internet users, collect a screen shot of each terminal every five minutes, and forward this information to the police every two weeks. Most owners know that their customers would resent the invasion of their privacy. Keeping a full register of users would also prevent internet cafe owners from pocketing most of their income, and declaring only a very small amount for tax purposes...

With residents of Rangoon increasingly open about their frustrations, the regime may have to either increase repression, or make concessions towards public opinion, particularly concerning its insensitive handling of the cyclone Nargis disaster. It would not take much to bring people onto the streets again. 'People are much more angry than last September,' says Pi Mo. 'But, because the regime was so violent towards the monks and other demonstrators, everyone is waiting for someone else to start the protest, before they join in.'

Unfortunately, there are virtually no organised opposition groups in Rangoon which could provide a 'spark' or some mobilising slogans to speed up the current radicalisation in public opinion, or to encourage people to move towards street demonstrations. The Burmese opposition is extremely weak and inexperienced, with many of the leaders of the 1988-1990 protests now in exile. The opposition also suffers from extreme factionalism, personalisation of politics and corruption - bad habits which have cursed Burmese politics for many years, and from which the inexperienced opposition could hardly be immune... But the 30-40 year old generation of political exiles, who were catapulted into public activities during the 1988 democratic spring, and hardened by the 1989 coup and subsequent military repression, are trying hard to link up with internal opposition groups, including through the development of alternative networks for disaster relief, and the widest possible distribution of independent testimony about the true scale of the cyclone damage in the south, and the scale of regime lies about how 'everything is under control'.