

# Burma's long struggle for democracy

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This month is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Burma's "8888 uprising", which began on August 8, 1988, when tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Rangoon, the capital, to protest against decades of military rule and economic mismanagement. The protest included all sectors of Burmese society — university and high school students, public and private sector workers, Buddhist monks, ethnic minorities and even sections of the military. Similar demonstrations broke out in regional cities and towns. The ruling military junta under General Ne Win, which had instituted one-party rule through the misnamed Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) after a military coup in 1962, had never before faced such large-scale and open opposition.

The city ground to a halt as marchers called for an end to military rule and the restoration of democracy and human rights. Speaking platforms were set up at prominent locations and speeches and chants rang across Rangoon for hours. The defiance reflected the frustrations created by 26 years of military rule and the confidence of a new generation of student and democratic activists. Martial law had been declared on August 6, but this was defied on that day by a 10,000-strong march through Rangoon. Thousands of leaflets produced by student activists calling for a general strike on August 8 circulated widely in Rangoon and to provincial cities.

## Uprising begins

Burma analyst and historian Bertil Lintner captured the events of the day in his book *Outrage: Burma's struggle for democracy*: "At 8 minutes past 8 on 8.8.88, the dockworkers in Rangoon port had walked out. That was the auspicious moment and as soon as the word spread that the strike was on, the people began marching towards the city centre."

According to one foreign eyewitness: "At every intersection, marchers from other townships appeared and we joined hands and continued down Sule Pagoda Road to the City Hall. It was unbelievable; the entire population of Rangoon seemed to be out in the streets ... A festive mood prevailed all day — and the army remained in the background at the intersections, protected by rings of protesters. Spontaneously, some demonstrators struck-up the national anthem, the army song and chanted: 'The pyithu tatmadaw (people's army) is our army'! The soldiers were addressed as akoygi, or elder brother; there was a widespread belief that the soldiers would join the uprising and help overthrow the government ..."

The government response was ruthless. Shortly after 11.30pm, army trucks and armoured cars surrounded groups of demonstrators and began to shoot, beat and detain protesters

indiscriminately. In the following days, as protesters continued to defy the crackdown by the army and police militia, an estimated 3000 people were killed and thousands more detained.

Divisions within the military junta and BSPP deepened as it became clear that the demonstrations and confrontations were not going to cease. On August 12, Sein Lwin, who had replaced Ne Win as head of the BSPP on July 26 and was appointed president on July 27, resigned. Martial law was lifted on August 24, following massive demonstrations across the country the previous day. The BSPP began to disintegrate.

### **SLORC seizes control**

As the BSPP crumbled, sections of the military (who had significant economic interests in state-owned and private enterprises, as well as black market and drug-running activities) seized control. On September 18, General Saw Maung announced that the military had assumed control of the country through the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Shortly after, Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin U and Aung Gyi launched the National League for Democracy (NLD) and stepped up campaigning for free elections.

The SLORC intensified arrests of democracy activists while filling all key government posts with trusted military or ex-military figures. By the end of September an estimated 10,000 students and democracy activists had fled to the border regions of Burma; along with the mass detentions and intimidation by the military, this weakened the momentum of the pro-democracy movement.

Under pressure from Western powers and growing support for the NLD and the ethnic minority and student army groups along the Thai and Chinese borders, SLORC announced on May 31, 1989, that it would hold general elections. The main opposition party, the NLD, continued to gain popular support, although repression was unrelenting. Numerous NLD and pro-democracy leaders were arrested and charged with bogus crimes, receiving sentences ranging from one to 20 years.

Despite the repression and reports of state-sanctioned forced labour and rape, multinational corporations such as Chevron, BHP, Total and Unocal urged the lifting of sanctions against Burma. SLORC's decision in late 1988 to end the state monopoly on foreign trade made access to Burma's vast natural resources (especially rubies, timber, natural gas and oil) and cheap labour highly appealing.

### **NLD election victory**

The result of the May 27, 1990, poll was an overwhelming rejection of SLORC. The party it backed received only 2% of the vote, while the NLD received 60%. SLORC refused to accept the result and retained power, forcing NLD candidates into exile or placing them under arrest, including NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In December 1990, the NLD established a government in exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma.

Under General Than Shwe, SLORC maintained tight control over political dissent and reached cease-fire agreements with several rebel and ethnic armies active in the border regions. A weakened student movement, resulting from detention of student leaders and frictions within different national student groups, also enabled SLORC to consolidate through the 1990s.

Increased trade with China, Singapore, Thailand and India partially stabilised the economy. Through these links, the regime was able to circumvent some of the international sanctions that had been in

place since late 1988. In 1997 the regime changed its name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Increasing economic mismanagement, cronyism and corruption from 2000 to the present have produced simmering tensions within the regime and encouraged government opponents to speak out.

In August 2007, on advice from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the SPDC announced the removal of state subsidies for petrol and diesel, resulting in a 100% increase in price. In response, prominent dissidents such as Min Ko Naing and Su Su Nway led protests in Rangoon. The leaders and student activists were arrested (and detained and tortured in the infamous Insein Prison) or forced underground. But a new wave of protests led by Buddhist monks quickly spread across Burma.

On September 24, the largest demonstrations for 20 years took place, with estimates of up to 100,000 protesting in Rangoon, monks playing a prominent role. The regime attacked and detained protesters in Rangoon and other cities. Regional monasteries were raided and anyone suspected of supporting the monks was questioned or detained. The scale and spontaneity of the protests caught the regime off guard, and it was unable to suppress the movement until late October. On February 7, the SPDC announced general elections in 2010 (as well as a referendum on the constitution, which took place on May 10).

## **Cyclone**

The ineptitude and callousness of the SPDC were revealed in full when Cyclone Nargis struck the heavily populated Irrawaddy delta on May 3. An estimated 100,000 people perished as a direct result or in the aftermath. Some 1 million people were displaced by the worst natural disaster in Burma's history. Rather than allow an influx of international aid, the regime blocked emergency relief for almost two weeks.

When aid and international emergency workers were finally allowed in, it was under strict control. A report in the May 9 British Guardian quoted a UN official as calling the restrictions "unprecedented". The International Herald Tribune on May 10 described foreign aid being relabelled with names of generals to make it appear that the aid was from the SPDC. Recent reports have suggested that money for reconstruction has been siphoned off by regime cronies, while land of poor farmers has been taken by the state or private speculators.

Despite announcements over 2007-08 by the EU and US of tougher sanctions, these appear to be of limited impact. The biggest income earner for the regime remains oil and gas, and this sector has expanded considerably in recent years. According to the SPDC's figures, foreign investment in this sector tripled over 2007 to US\$474.3 million, 90% of all foreign investment for that year.

On July 24, the US Congress voted to extend sanctions on imports from Burma. However, it also voted, on July 15, to allow the oil giant Chevron, which has a 28% stake in the huge Yadana offshore gas field, to continue to maintain its investment without fear of penalty or punitive actions. Human rights organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about the use of forced labour on the Yadana pipeline and harassment by the military of people living near it.

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