

As protests continue, Buddhist clergy grows increasingly bold

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With unrest in Burma entering its fifth week, the country's Buddhist monks are making the disturbances the most serious since the bloody 1988 crackdown on a democracy uprising that resulted in thousands of deaths and kept the population cowed for a generation.

At this point, according to analysts, the country's widely despised State Peace and Development Council led by Senior General Than Shwe is obviously hoping that the protests stop. Nonetheless, marches by the widely revered monks are growing as politicians from other countries maneuver behind the scenes and everyone watches to see who will blink first. The monks want an apology for an earlier incident in which soldiers beat monks in Mandalay, reportedly killing one monk, during a similar protest. Most analysts say an apology is unlikely to come soon, but other concessions may be possible such as opening a dialogue with opposition members.

There have also been reports that monks have begun to withhold blessings from soldiers and their families and they are said to be refusing to accept alms from the military, a particularly harsh religious action.

In affirming the boycott of religious services, the monk's have begun organizing a nationwide boycott against the military, the first such action since 1990. The Asian Human Right Commission in Hong Kong released a translation of a recording earlier this week of a monk affirming the boycott during a protest in Rangoon:

"Reverend clergy, may you listen to my words. The violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings [military leaders] - the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury - have killed a monk at Pakokku, and also arrested reverend clergymen by trussing them up with rope. They beat and tortured, verbally abused and threatened them. The clergy who are replete with the Four Attributes [worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts and salutation] must boycott the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless soldier kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. The clergy also must refuse donations (of four types) and preaching. This is to inform, advise and propose."

"The military is just wishing the protests disappear, fizzle out," said Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese political analyst. "We'll see how tenacious the monks are in protesting against the Burmese military and how patient the military will be. But if the situation goes on without social or political reforms, then this will come up again and again and again."

It appears that the junta miscalculated badly after initial protests over a five-fold increase in fuel prices, which left many of the country's impoverished citizens unable to even afford carfare to get to work. When they took to the streets to protest, the Burmese authorities, while keeping the military out of sight, sent squads of goons to beat demonstrators and drag their leaders off to jail.

As many as 200 people, many of them leaders of the 1988 protests, were arrested and others remain in hiding. Among those arrested at the time were Min Ko Naing, regarded by many as second only to

Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma's pro-democracy movement. The wife and four-month-old daughter of Ko Jimmy, another 1988 activist who has been hospitalized, are now in hiding.

"The military is taking a wait-and-see approach at the moment. It's very hard for the military to crack down. For instance, the military beat the monks and arrested them, and the monks became very angry. They are worried that if they crack down on this violence it could trigger something worse," said Win Min, a Burmese analyst based in Thailand. "It seems like the monks will keep protesting. Before, they didn't ask people to join because they were worried that people would be arrested instead of monks. But now they are asking people to join the protests to sustain the movement. If the military does not crack down, more and more people will join. But if they find the leaders in the night and they disappear, people will not want to join. If they crack down on monks, people might be more angry and then join. That is why they are waiting."

It still seems unlikely that the country's long-suppressed 47 million people could rise up to a degree that would actually bring down the government, which is arguably more universally reviled and held in contempt than any other in the world. Both India and China, openly coveting Burma's abundant natural resources including natural gas and tropical hardwoods, have supplied the junta with state-of-the-art military equipment to keep their people in line.

According to Burma scholar Bertil Lintner, writing in Global Asia Magazine, the Chinese have provided Burma with at least US\$1.4 billion in hardware including fighter, ground attack and transport aircraft, tanks and armored personnel carriers, naval vessels, towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, surface-to-air missiles and trucks and military equipment.

Likewise, India has strategic ties to the junta. With most western countries and United Nations condemning the junta, New Delhi has continued to say only that it prefers not to interfere in others' "domestic matters." India's foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee, faced a tough time while answering journalists' questions in Bangkok recently.

Despite the intimidation, Irrawaddy Magazine, a Thailand-based magazine of Burmese affairs which has maintained a running city-by-city tally of protests since they burst into the open on August 19, reported Friday that hundreds of Buddhist monks marched to Mei Lamu Pagoda in Rangoon. As many as 1,300 massed at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most important religious site, while about 100 more massed in Pegu, about 80 kilometers north of Rangoon, while chanting Buddhist scriptures.

That followed demonstrations and protests in other cities. The military used tear gas and fired warning shots to break up a rally of about 1,000 monks in the oil town of Sittwe, according to Agence France Press. In Rangoon and other cities, thousands of supporters now have come into the open, following the monks and offering them water and protecting the monks with a human chain.

"The people believe the monks are sacrificing on their behalf and feel the need to protect the monks," Aung Naing Oo said. "If the military has an ounce of a brain they would avoid violence at all costs, because if a Buddhist monk gets killed then this will bring out the pent-up anger and force people on the streets."

So far the main public gripes have remained economic. The monks have refrained from calling for the military's ouster, focusing instead on an apology for the heavy-handed crackdown and a demand for a cut in commodity prices, as well as the release of political prisoners from the 1988 generation who were arrested for protesting after fuel prices spiked.

Hundreds of Buddhist monks in the town of Pakokku, some 600 km north of Rangoon, took

government officials hostage on September 8, however, after authorities came to the monastery to attempt to apologize for firing shots over the heads of protesting monks on August 29. The monks burned their cars as a crowd of about 1,000 persons gathered.

The junta has accused the National League for Democracy, the political party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, "western elements," and foreign radio services of instigating the trouble.

"Foreign radio stations airing exaggerated news, trying to instigate public, launching propaganda campaigns" reported the junta's mouthpiece, New Light of Myanmar in characteristic broken English. Telephone connections of activists and journalists have been disrupted in an attempt to prevent the flow of information to the outside world, and Internet connections have been interrupted, although the country's resourceful citizens have often found ways to connect.

Earlier this week, the monks also began to refuse alms from the 400,000-strong military, a real blow in the overwhelmingly Buddhist country, where people make merit by contributing to the monks. Some of the marching monks carried inverted alms bowls, a symbol of the alms boycott. The junta maintains a healthy respect for the religious figures. The monks, who played an integral role in the 1988 uprising, provide the only other country-wide organizing capability apart from the junta's formidable security apparatus.

"I doubt it will unseat the military, but what may happen is that once a group of military officers crack down on monks, then an internal split can happen in the military," said Aung Naing Oo. "There are a number of possible scenarios, but one thing is sure: Any changes will not happen without the military." Said Win Min: "This is like the beginning of the 1988 movement. That started with economic reasons, and now gas prices have increased two to five times. Other commodities have increased 10 to 50 percent, so people are very angry. This time it is not just 1988 generation students, but also monks." It's still very early too say if this will overthrow the military regime. It's gradually gaining momentum, stopping and starting. If there is no crackdown and students join, the professionals may think it's safe to join. They are to some extent already. Yesterday in front of City Hall in Rangoon, civil servants clapped their hands at the windows to cheer on the monks. They are just scared to come out at the moment."

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