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BURMA

FORTY SIX YEARS OF SOLITUDE

Neither cyclone Nargis nor the saffron revolution managed to topple the oppressive Burmese military regime. The generals, who have ruled the country for almost five decades, are still firmly entrenched in power. **Will Burma ever escape from its history?** OLGA YOLDI writes.

Karl Marx once said that history tends to repeat itself, first as a tragedy and then as farce. If this is the case, Burma must be still stuck in the tragedy phase. Cyclone Nargis devastated the country leaving more than 77,000 people dead and many suffering from hunger and disease. The generals, who were slow to come to the rescue of the victims, seemed prepared to see thousands of people die rather than allow foreign aid workers in the country. According to observers they feared social unrest.

Only last September monks and civilians took to the streets to protest against the rise of fuel prices. This time the protesters seemed determined to sweep away the unpopular military regime. The moral authority of the monks, combined with the flow of information to the outside world facilitated by the Internet rekindled a renewed sense of hope. But the peaceful protests resulted in a violent crackdown and nothing changed.

Today the Burmese regime, led by General Than Shwe, is arguably stronger than ever. The army is one of the most effective in the region, with 450,000 soldiers, and the junta appears to be able to weather any storms, whether

political or environmental and any condemnation from the international community. The survival of Burma's military regime remains one of the enigmas of Southeast Asian politics. "The key to this puzzle is understanding that Rangoon is no 'ordinary' military dictatorship," writes journalist Bertil Lintner in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. "It cannot be compared with Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan or other countries in the region, which also have had spells of military rule."

When the army took power in 1962 under the leadership of General Ne Win, it not only took control of the government, but also assumed economic power. Unfortunately it soon proved to be completely incompetent in managing the economy. All private property was confiscated and turned into military run state corporations, wealthy merchants (mostly Indian and Chinese) left the country, and so did many of Burma's educated elite.

The junta turned Burma, previously a rich country with abundant natural resources and one of the highest living standards plus a well-educated population, into one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. In fact Burma, like Cambodia and Laos, is now one of only three

countries in Southeast Asia categorised as having “low human development”.

The “Burmese Way to Socialism,” the junta’s official ideology, has been described by writer John Lanchester as “a mixture of isolationism, nationalism, self-proclaimed Buddhism and outright fantasy”.

Ne Win ruled the country until 1988 under a policy of stubborn isolationism. A former postal clerk and coal dealer who had been trained by the Japanese army, Ne Win was obsessed with astrology and numerology and acted always on the

timetable that could lead within months to a multi-party democracy.

Then in 1990, the military junta allowed free elections, in which Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD won a landslide victory, with 392 of 485 seats, and Ne Win’s party won only 10 seats.

What followed next? Nothing much. They arrested most of the winners, kept everyone locked up, and left things as they were.

And that has been the state of affairs ever since.

“Nationalist passions were also aroused by the way the British had privileged ethnic minorities (Karen, Chin, Mon, Karenni, Shan, Wa) who were prospering through their associations with the British, often at the expense of the Burmese.”

In 1930 a few students were given military training by the Japanese. They would become the future political leaders of post-colonial Burma. Among these was Aung Sang (the father of Aung San Suu Kyi). He played a major role in leading Burma to independence but was assassinated.

The British left Burma with a mixed legacy. An extensive transport infrastructure, a civil service, but they also left a nation divided politically, ethnically and religiously. Thant Myint-U makes the connection between Burma’s current problems and its colonial past. “The great British experiment in regime change created a Burma that was entirely different from anything before,” he writes. “A break with the ideas and institutions that had underpinned society in the Irrawaddy valley since before medieval times ... a Burma adrift, suddenly pushed into the modern world without an anchor to the past.”

The political vacuum left by the British was exacerbated by ethnic tensions, which the new and struggling democratic government, under the leadership of U Nu, was unable to pacify. In 1949, the Karen turned against the government and started what would become the longest civil war in history.

The Karen elite had expressed the idea of a Karen nation long before the British left Burma. At independence in 1948 the agreement was that a Karen state would be established. But at the time of drafting the constitution there were serious disagreements over its boundaries, as the Karen, which constitute seven per cent of the population, were scattered across much of lower Burma. It was this failure to resolve the ethnic nationalities’ demands that would eventually fuel Burma’s descent into chaos.

Sixty years later the Karen National-

ist Union (KNU) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) are still locked in a titanic war against the Burmese government. They established guerrilla units in temporary jungle camps on the Thai-Burma border where they launch attacks. In retaliation state forces pursue brutal counter insurgency attacks. However it is the civilian population that has borne the brunt of this conflict, with some 156,000 people pushed into refugee camps on the border with Thailand and half a million Karen internally displaced.

According to human rights reports, more than 232 Karen villages have been destroyed, relocated *en masse*, or abandoned due to the conflict. Forced labour, summary executions, sexual violence, expropriation of land and property and the forced relocation of civilians deemed sympathetic to the KNU, are common.

Ne Win was obsessed with astrology and numerology and acted always on the advice of astrologers.

Sher Mu Ler We, a young Karen refugee living in Sydney, was caught up in the conflict. “I spent my childhood fleeing the army and hiding in the jungle. My family lost everything.” Tamlaw Gaw, another refugee was caught by the soldiers and became a porter. He managed to escape. Both endured the unthinkable, they were vulnerable to the constant risks of hunger, death, and deportation.

During the 1980s, government forces gained the upper hand in the civil war as civilians fled to Thailand. But in 1994 with the fall of its headquarters the KNU was in serious trouble. The crisis was intensified by the loss of most of the remaining Karen/ liberated zones during a major offensive in 1990. Lately the ‘four cuts strategy’ aimed at denying the KNU food, money, information and recruits, has added to the

pressure, as well as the assassination of their new leader Pado Manh Sha.

As a result, the possibilities of winning the war are very slim, but the KNU won’t give up. “The KNU is a greatly weakened force and no longer poses a threat to the government,” writes researcher Ashley South. “Although in danger of becoming marginalised it still wields power. To many, it is the oldest and only legitimate Karen ethno-nationalist group and retains strong credibility in opposition circles,” she adds.

According to South, one of the reasons the conflict has been perpetuated is because it has become institutionalised and is now associated with deep-rooted political economies. “They [the KNU] often rely on the taxation of black market goods, on natural resource extraction (logging and mining) and other unregulated practices (including the drug trade) to enrich themselves and their retinues”.

The military has managed to negotiate cease-fire agreements with the Karen – and also with other ethnic groups (Mon, Kachin and Shan) which to a lesser degree have also been fighting the government. However these agreements have often been broken. The KNU, which claims to be fighting for democracy, has made it clear that it won’t give up until there is political change.

But nothing will change as long as the military remains united and loyal to the junta. At the moment there are no indications of any serious cracks within the ranks. Today there is no organised opposition prepared to take power. The NLD has been decimated. Aung San Suu Kyi is on and off under house arrest and the entire leadership is either in prison, dead, has been cowed into submission or fled the country. “The monks who took the initiative in the street marches can only mobilise people and take the moral high ground; as monks, they cannot be political leaders,” Lintner writes. “Unlike in 1988 when a number of political leaders emerged, the current movement is leaderless and rudderless,” he wrote. Even civil society is weak after decades of political repression and widespread poverty.



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advice of astrologers. But he was ruthless against anyone who dared to dissent.

The brutality of his regime was evident during the 1988 uprising. By then he had become the most feared and most powerful man in the country. “I want the entire nation, the people, to know that if in future there are mob disturbances, if the army shoots, it hits –there is no firing in the air to scare,” he announced. The army acted on his words and opened fire on crowds of protesters. At least 3,000 people were gunned down.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who had returned from exile, temporarily stepped into the public light and immediately became the leading figure in the democratic movement. Then the army initiated a further crack down, abolishing the constitution and announcing a new ruling body called the State Law and Order Restoration Council, (SLORC). The military changed this name in 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The SLORC arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of her party the National League for Democracy (NLD). In response to people’s increasing dissatisfaction with the government, Ne Win announced a referendum on democratic reform and a

Burma has never been a peaceful country. Thant Myint-U, author of *The River of Lost Footsteps*, notes how violent Burma’s history has always been. Despotism ruled the country for a long time, competing with each other for power and suppressing its people. Britain decided to bring Burma into the modern world by conquering it and turning it into a province of India in 1886.

Under the British rule the economy thrived. Burma became the largest exporter of rice in the world. The colonial regime allowed missionaries to establish schools and hospitals, particularly in the hills where many ethnic minorities lived. The British extracted teak, petroleum and gems. To move these goods they established a network of roads and introduced civil service and a legal code. But most Burmese resented colonial domination and students started to demonstrate against colonial rule.

“Students played a role in developing a new political consciousness, combined with a commitment to Buddhism, with a desire for independence and a progressive form of government,” writes Christina Fink in her book *Living Silence, Burma under Military Rule*. According to Fink,



Even if an elected government could be seated tomorrow, it would find itself with an economy in shambles and bereft of the institutions needed to deliver stable democracy.

China, India, Russia and the Ukraine continue to sell large numbers of weapons to the junta. Western sanctions have had a limited effect because China and India have invested in Burma, allowing the generals to trade Burma's natural resources and strategic position to survive without the West.

Burma is very rich in natural resources: dense forests, untouched rivers, vast untapped mineral resources (zinc, copper, nickel, lead, coal and precious stones), gas, oil and hydropower. It is also the largest producer of opium.

India and China are now competing avidly for these resources. But China looms large politically, economically and strategically. Trade between the two countries has doubled. According to the *Burma Western News*, up until the end of 2006 China had initiated 825 projects and labour contracts worth \$1.4 billion and had turned the border area near Ruili into a special economic zone.

However, despite profits from energy exports, the country's economy development is constrained by lack of access to energy and investment capital. According to former US diplomat Priscilla Clapp, Burma's reliance on imported fuel, the shortages, the trade deficit, the huge cost of maintaining its state-owned enterprises leave the Burmese in a constant state of instability and uncertainty. "The bulk of the economy is informal, rife with black market activity and subject to temporary disruptions in the supply of critical commodities, such as petrol, electricity and cooking oil". "While the majority of the population ekes out a subsistence existence off the land, the urban population suffers both materially and psychologically from its vulnerability to haphazard economic management," she writes.

According to an Earthrights International report, Chinese corporations are involved in hydropower, oil, gas, and mining projects in Burma. These vary from small dams to planned dual oil and gas pipelines across Burma to China's Yunnan province. Many major development projects take place in ethnic minority areas along Burma's borders. The report said

that because of the political repression no environmental, social, human-rights impact assessments were made on these projects. "As a result, these often result in environmental devastation, internal displacement, and loss of land and livelihood for those communities that depend on land and natural resources for their survival. Increased militarisation around project areas also often results in the use of forced labour, forced portering and forced relocation and other abuses." The report concludes that: "Burma exemplifies the corrupt misuse of resources and environmental devastation of the resource curse."

Could this be avoided if the West adopted a policy of ethical trade with Burma? Aung Sang Suu Kyi says any influx of foreign money helps legitimize -and enrich- the generals. However some Burmese intellectuals have publicly objected to this. "Economic hardship is being prescribed to bring about democracy," Khin Zaw Win, a Burmese academic wrote. "For 26 years Burma experienced impoverishment in the name of socialism, it now appears there is to be impoverishment in the name of democracy ... The country is being subjected to more punitive measures by the world's economic powers."

Thant Myint-U argues that the western world has a fairly simple line on Burma. "The military government is bad, Aung San Suu Kyi good, and the international community needs to apply pressure on Rangoon and pressure means no aid, trade sanctions and more isolation," he writes.

"The assumption is that Burma's military government couldn't survive further isolation, when precisely the opposite is true: Much more than any other part of Burmese society, the army will weather another forty years of isolation just fine." According to Thant, it is the isolation that has kept Burma in poverty, "isolation that fuels a negative, almost xenophobic nationalism; isolation that makes the Burmese army see everything as a zero-sum game and any change

as filled with peril; isolation that has made any conclusion to the war so elusive, hardening differences; and isolation that has weakened institutions -the ones on which any transition to democracy would depend- to the point of collapse. Without isolation, the status quo will be impossible to sustain."

Both Thant Myint-U and Khin Zaw Win argue for a policy of engagement with Burma. One of ethical trade and tourism, coupled with a gradual process of economic reform, a rebuilding of institutions, "and a low opening up of space for civil society". Given all these things, "perhaps the conditions for political change would emerge over the next decade or two". Thant writes that if Thailand and Indonesia had been under US and European sanctions the past twenty years, they would not be democracies today. "Would China be better off and isolated since the demonstrations of 1989?"

There is no sign that sanctions will be lifted in the near future. Dialogue with the junta hasn't worked as the junta talks to nobody but itself. The West fears that if the junta loses its grip on power a struggle could then ensue between the Burmese and ethnic minorities, who fear that they will continue to be marginalised in a democratic Burma, governed by ethnic Burmese. There is fear that the toppling of the junta won't be the end of the story but just the beginning of a messy and violent affair.

While the international community may encourage political transition, few countries believe in the effectiveness of an intervention, particularly without the agreement of countries in the region, and neither India nor China is interested in changing the status quo. "Since Iraq nobody expects an intervention to go smoothly anymore, now we expect it to go horribly wrong," George Packer wrote in *The New Yorker*. "But if the fear of Baghdad and Falluja is what keeps us from saving huge numbers of Burmese from their own government's callousness, that will be one more tragic consequence

of the Iraq war."

Lintner believes that the only hope is a younger generation of army officers, who see the need to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement. According to him change won't occur just by demonstrations led by monks.

But even if an elected government could be seated tomorrow, it would find itself with an economy in shambles and bereft of the institutions needed to deliver stable democracy.

Much will need to be done to build the foundations for a transition, particularly in the economy. Monetary and fiscal reforms are urgently needed as well as the restructuring of the banking system, to enable and support both local and foreign investment and regularise public revenue.

The new constitution might need to be amended as it currently enshrines the junta's hold on power and excludes the main opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from holding office. The constitution would lay the basis for creating a new legal system and the rule of law, which must be reestablished to tackle endemic corruption and, most importantly, it would need to accommodate the demands of ethnic minorities. Khin Zaw Win believes that democratic consolidation is possible even under military-imposed authoritarian constitutions. "In Chile the constitution was circumvented and put to work for a democratic purpose through an institutionalised party system," Khin Zaw Win said and he believes that Burma could follow the same gradual process. "Chile illustrates a case of slow and negotiated transition from authoritarian governments that have not suffered military or political defeat."

Cultural and civil-society institutions should be promoted, as well as reform of the education and health systems, which are in shambles. The military will need to be retrained and reoriented.

Sooner or later some form of leadership change is likely to happen, as General Than Shwe is already 75 years old and out of touch with reality. He has been described by economist Sean Turnell as "one man rule pretending to be a junta".

However, the possibilities of real transition are remote. The junta believes they are the only ones that can hold the country together, so it is likely they will resist the devolution of power.

Even in the case of an agreed transition it might insist on receiving a constitutional guarantee of power sharing in an elected government. It may even insist on leading the country in some form for a substantial period of time. This might be acceptable as an interim measure. "As the world around them moves forward in pace with globalisation, sooner or later it will inevitably become impossible for future Burmese leadership to continue insulating their society from the rapid pace of economic and political modernisation in Asia," Clapp writes.

According to experts both China and India should be speaking to the junta about the importance of restructuring the economy and the need to start making changes towards a pluralistic democracy. India, the largest democracy, is reluctant to promote democracy in Burma. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could also play an important role in helping the junta into a transition. "It would give Burma the confidence and support to develop economically and politically, perhaps ASEAN should commit to integrate Burma more firmly into ASEAN economic infrastructures" Clapp writes.

The international community should not anticipate a smooth transition. Democratisation could turn out to be a confusing, often chaotic and overwhelming process of change.

Perhaps the international community could identify the most appropriate forms of assistance and intervention to help Burma develop the means for sustainable and stable democracy. Elections by themselves will not guarantee democracy unless the structural deficiencies are addressed first. Burma won't be able to do it by itself. A long-term vision for international engagement will be crucial. This may mean adequate internal support and assistance. A concerted effort is needed to help Burma help itself and finally escape from its own history. ■