



MYANMAR'S PERPETUAL JUNTA

Solving the Riddle of the Tatmadaw's Long Reign

THE IMMINENT FALL of Myanmar's brutal and kleptocratic military dictatorship has been proclaimed on numerous occasions over the past twenty years. The mass protests of 1988, which saw the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi as the figurehead of the pro-reform forces, came just two years after the success of 'people power' in ousting the Marcos regime in the Philippines, and seemed at first destined for similar success; but within twelve months the movement had succumbed to splits and repression. Suu Kyi's arrest in July 1989 came on the eve of the Hungarian border opening, prelude to the velvet revolutions of the ex-Soviet bloc; but 'third wave' democracy swept by, leaving Myanmar untouched. In 1996–98 when, after sustained lobbying by human-rights groups, the EU and US imposed formal economic sanctions on General Than Shwe's regime, the move was hailed as another turning point: it was hoped that sustained international pressure might succeed where popular mobilization had failed, with South Africa considered a template for forcing reform in Myanmar. But by then, the junta was reaping massive profits from teak, jade and ruby deals with its neighbours, and shrugged the sanctions off. Well-funded attempts by George Soros, the National Endowment for Democracy and others to build an opposition movement among Burmese exiles produced scant internal effects. The dictatorship survived one well-documented human-rights report after another, as well as denunciations by world leaders, Nobel laureates and Hollywood celebrities.¹

In September 2007 the exhilaration of the 'march of the monks' and the mass protests once again seemed to herald the beginning of the end. Now it was the power of the new media that was hailed, as bloggers,

students and relatives of the Burmese diaspora flooded the internet with cellphone images and optimistic predictions, amplified by the foreign press corps. Within a week, however, the government crackdown had dispersed the protests, while cellphone democracy fell prey to network jamming. Eight months later, on 2 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis swept through the Irrawaddy Delta killing as many as 200,000 people, most of whom were very poor farmers, fishermen and labourers living in thatch or bamboo huts that provided no protection. Once again there were activist and media pronouncements that the junta would never survive the blow. With two supply-laden US warships patrolling its coast and 24/7 international media coverage of the desperate plight of the cyclone victims, there were high hopes that Myanmar's military could no longer refuse entry to Western relief workers, whose presence was now judged essential if the regime were ever to change. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon travelled to Myanmar on May 22 and won visas for dozens of foreign relief experts in exchange for millions of dollars of emergency aid.² The catastrophe did permit some of the international NGOs to scale up their operations, although government checkpoints continued to act as chokepoints for aid, and the junta continued undaunted.

For the international media and many of Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters in the West, the reason for the Burmese regime's staying power is quite simple: repression. Thus the September 2007 crackdown on the 'march of the monks' was portrayed as turning Myanmar's major cities into 'vast killing fields'.³ In fact, most of the brutality was centred on Rangoon and

¹ I use the terms Burma/Burmese and Myanmar interchangeably for the country/population. The former, which probably dates back to the last dynasty before colonial rule, derives from the majority ethnic group, the Burmans; the latter, a literary form, first appears in 12th-century inscriptions. In 1989 the toponym's romanization was changed to Myanmar by the ruling junta, with corresponding revisions for cities and ethnic groups (a move comparable to China's introduction of the *pinyin* system). Usage of pre-1989 names became a litmus test for certain exile and advocacy groups in the 1990s. Today the new names are widely used inside the country and some minority leaders prefer Myanmar, as less associated with the Burmans (now renamed 'Bamars'). Currently, the US, UK, Canada and Australia insist on 'Burma', while much of Europe, Russia, Japan and all the country's near neighbours—India, Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos—use Myanmar.

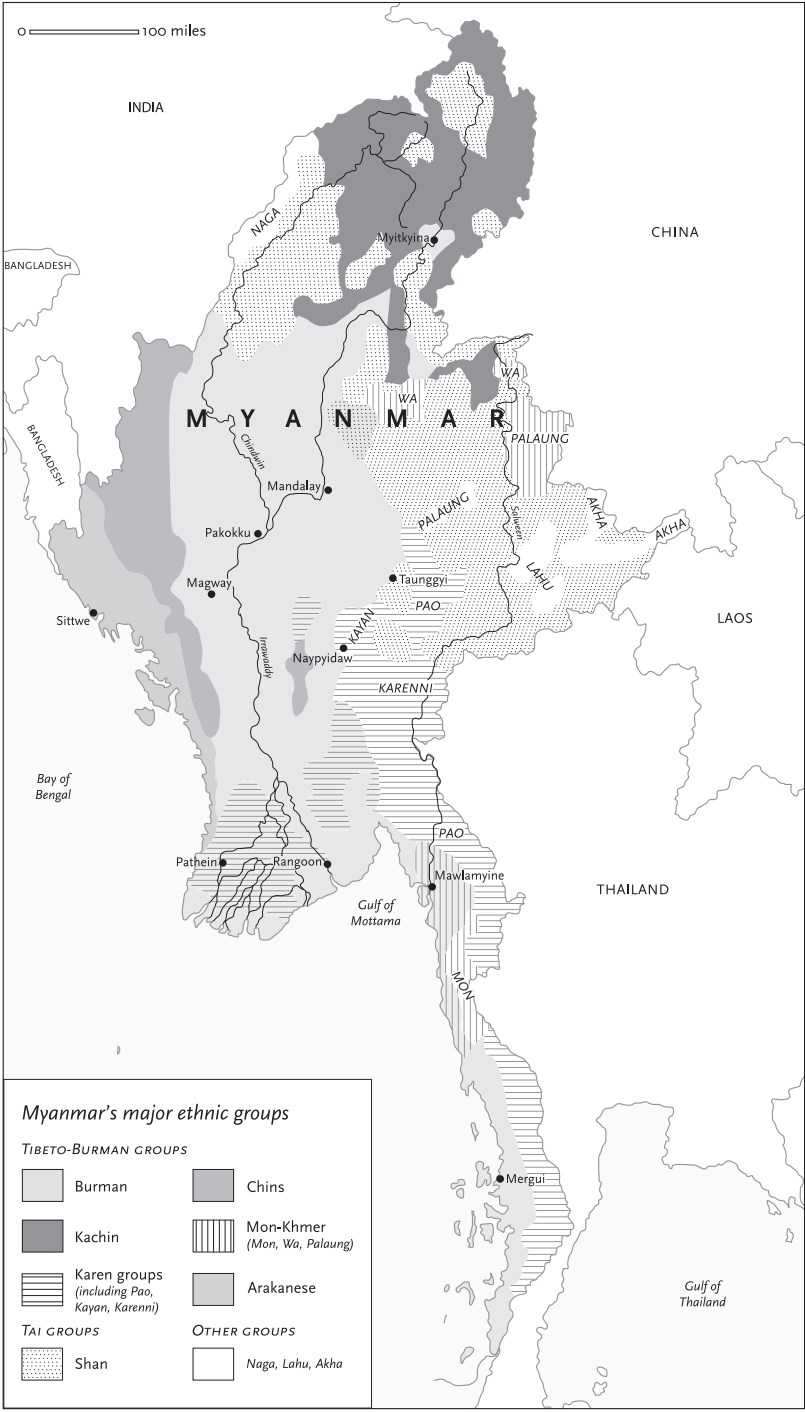
² The regime has some grounds for suspicion. See Andrew Selth, 'Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 30, no. 3, December 2008.

³ See Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2008.

the death toll was around 30 or 40, as compared to media estimates of hundreds, or even thousands. That is not to suggest that the repression was insignificant: some of the leading activists were sentenced to 65 years in prison, although it is hoped they will not serve that long; and the government's *Swan Arr Shin* militia—the name means ‘masters of strength’—are well-trained thugs, who operate with impunity alongside uniformed riot-control army and police units. But repression alone cannot explain the regime's persistence. Far more murderous dictatorships—Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines—have been overthrown, as well as far better-policed ones, in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, the GDR. The Myanmar government has little to compare with the coercive apparatuses of these, yet it has outlived them all. A more satisfactory explanation of its resilience may be gained by examining the origins of the regime, in the anti-colonial movement against British rule and Japan's war-time occupation of Southeast Asia, and its relation to Burma's multi-ethnic, mainly Buddhist society. This in turn requires an examination of the pre-colonial social structures on which British rule was definitively imposed in 1886, and of the peculiarities of British Burma's treatment within the Empire. For it was during the colonial period that the foundations were laid for the centralized yet highly differentiated spatial logic of power, in equal parts repressive and divisive, that continues to define the Burmese polity today.

Palace and pagoda

Any analysis of Myanmar's political history must reckon with the overwhelming facts of its physical geography. The country covers over a quarter of a million square miles—around the size of Texas and significantly larger than, say, Afghanistan. It is riven by three north–south mountain ranges: one on each flank, and a third running up the centre; each presenting formidable obstacles to east–west travel, trade and interaction. Three major rivers also run north–south: the Salween in the east, the Irrawaddy in the centre, and the Chindwin in the northwest; for centuries these provided the only reliable means of transport. In pre-colonial times, ecology—hence, mode of agriculture—was the most significant determinant of social organization in this densely forested region. The principal distinction was between hill peoples and valley civilizations; the former—among them Kachins and Karens in the north and east, Arakanese and Chins in the west—practised *taung-ya* agriculture, involving crop-rotation and slash-and-burn, still in use today. Population was



sparser in the hills, spirituality more animist, languages more diverse.⁴ In the more densely settled valleys and on the eastern plateau, Mons, Burmans and Shan practised irrigated paddy cultivation and developed more complex social and political systems, building cities notable for their luxurious palaces and temples in this land of villages.

Various kingdoms co-existed at different times in the region during the pre-colonial period, among them that of the Mons of southeastern Burma, entry point for Indian Buddhism from the 3rd century BC, the Arakanese on the Gulf of Bengal and the Burmans of the central Irrawaddy. From their capital Ava, near Mandalay, Burman kings established the first 'empire' over the multitude of different linguistic and cultural groups in the territory between the 11th and 13th centuries.⁵ The basis of Burman rule lay in control over foreign trade and appropriation of rice surpluses from the central Irrawaddy valley; the war booty—slaves—was used to build irrigation works, temples and palaces. Political power was highly personalistic, defined by relationships of obligation to rulers and overlords rather than jurisdictional control over territory; indeed remote villages and towns were often subject to claims for labour and taxes from multiple suzerains. Burman kings were also the chief patrons of the Buddhist orders and monasteries, supporting monastic schools and constructing pagodas to improve their karma. Favoured *hpongyis*, or monks, were often key advisors at court.⁶ In addition to the state–*sangha* nexus, the local *myothugyis*, or hereditary village leaders, played a vital social and administrative role in raising revenues, recruiting troops and supplying labour.

⁴ Edmund Leach, "The Frontiers of "Burma", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 3, 1960, pp. 49–68.

⁵ Over the last ten years, sophisticated debates have emerged over many aspects of second millennium history on the Pagan, Pegu, Taungoo and Thaton dynasties. Original sources have been re-examined and reinterpreted, raising fundamental questions about the accepted narratives of Burmese history. See, for example, Michael Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend that was Lower Burma*, Honolulu 2005.

⁶ Relations between king and *sangha* were complex and often fraught. In times of scarcity, the *sangha* and the monarch competed for control over wealth and labour. Economic hardship sent larger numbers of indigents into monasteries, which reduced the royal tax base and labour force. Corruption in the monkhood provided pretexts for kings to purge the *sangha*. On tensions between state and *sangha*, see Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma*, Honolulu, 1985; Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580–1760*, Princeton, NJ 1984.

By the late 18th century, Burman kings had once again staked claims for submission, tribute and slaves throughout much of what constitutes Myanmar today, and proceeded to plunder Arakan (1784), Assam (1817) and Manipur (1819). In doing so, they now threatened to encroach upon East India Company operations in the region. The British responded with shows of force, confidently expecting the kind of accommodation they had achieved with Malay sultans, Indian princes and African tribal leaders. Instead they were met with proud rebuffs from King Bagyidaw (r. 1819–37). With London's backing, the East India Company then turned to outright coercion. In the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824–26, British forces seized Assam, Manipur, Arakan and what is today Tenasserim in the southeast, on the Andaman coast. Thirty years later, the Company annexed the province of Pegu, or Lower Burma, in the war of 1852–53.

Colonial palimpsest

Had the clash occurred at a time when the Burman monarchy presided over a less expansive realm, the British might have mapped South and Southeast Asia quite differently. As it was, they drew boundaries around territory that hosted one of the world's widest diversities of indigenous populations, in one of the most fractured geographical settings. If the Burmans made up some 60–70 per cent of the population (the modern estimate), the remaining third comprised dozens of distinct ethnolinguistic groups.⁷ Again, a different fate might have awaited the Burmans had they shared the luxury of distance from British India enjoyed by Siam. But where the Siamese kings could turn their domain into a compliant buffer between French and British interests in Southeast Asia, the Burmans had no such option.⁸ Although King Mindon (r. 1852–78) and, to a lesser degree, his son Thibaw (r. 1878–85) sought to counter imperial aggression by modernizing and re-arming the kingdom, London made clear that it would no longer tolerate their defiance. In 1885, a tax dispute was trumped up into a *casus belli*, and the vast superiority of industrial Britain's arms dictated the outcome. With a force of only 9,000 troops, Gen. Henry North Dalrymple Prendergast, a veteran of the campaign that had put down the 1857 Indian Mutiny, succeeded in routing the royal Burmese army in less than a month. By a bureaucratic

⁷ Statistics on ethnic makeup in Burma are inadequate and widely contested: the last systematic national census to include the minority regions was conducted in 1931.

⁸ Thant Myint-U makes this case in his *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge 2001.

fiat that was to have far-reaching consequences, Burma was incorporated into the Raj from 1 January 1886, to be administered as a sub-province of British India, rather than as a separate colony.

What was supposed to be a swift, low-cost 'decapitation' leading to the installation of a more pliant regime soon turned ugly, however. Although young King Thibaw had been sent into exile, a widespread anti-British insurgency now erupted, led by former army officers, princes and village chiefs. By February 1887 more than 40,000 British and Indian troops were fighting a brutal pacification campaign against cells of resistance fighters in nearly every district of Upper and Lower Burma. By one estimate, in many of the plains villages practically every household had some male member fighting with the rebels.⁹ The British response was predictably brutal. Indian Army units had orders to shoot anyone suspected of possessing arms; they burned or forcibly relocated villages, and conducted public floggings and mass executions of alleged rebels.¹⁰

As part of the pacification process, a more 'rational' system of administration was imposed on central and lower Burma through the 1887 Village Act.¹¹ At a stroke the British abolished the centuries-old practices of social regulation. The village *myothugyis* were abruptly dismissed and *hpongyis* sidelined under the new dispensation. Geographically determined administrative districts would henceforth be policed, taxed and ruled by a new layer of administrative personnel, mostly brought over

⁹ John Cady, *History of Modern Burma*, Ithaca 1958, p. 133. Thant Myint-U notes that more troops were deployed here than in 'either the Crimean War or in the occupation of Egypt just a few years before': *River of Lost Footsteps*, New York 2006, p. 28.

¹⁰ One regimental history defended these tactics: 'In practically all engagements with the enemy we had to fight an invisible foe. The *dacoits* waylaid our troops as they came up the river in boats or by road marches, poured forth a heavy fire upon the advancing forces as they got within range. Not only was it difficult to locate the enemy in their hidden lairs, but our men laboured under the vast disadvantage of having to force their way through the close undergrowth of an unknown forest, whilst the enemy knew all the ins and outs of their tangled labyrinths and were able to keep concealed . . . Our only means of punishment was to burn these villages.' Sir Reginald Hennell, *Famous Indian Regiment*, New Delhi 1927 (reprint 1985), p. 134.

¹¹ See the account by the first Chief Commissioner of Burma: Charles Crosthwaite, *Pacification of Burma*, London 1912 (1968). See also Daw Mya Sein, *Sir Charles Crosthwaite and the Administration of British Burma*, Rangoon 1938, and the brilliant (if romantic) critique of Crosthwaite's system by scholar-bureaucrat J. S. Furnivall in *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, Cambridge 1948.

from Madras, Bengal and other parts of India. The result, naturally, was increased support for the insurgency, while the radical demotion of the *sangha* ensured that monks were among the most vocal early critics of the colonial regime, able to call upon deep reserves of moral authority.¹² In the end, famine helped to weaken the Burmese resistance, although small bands of fighters would vex the British Indian Army for another decade. But the more lasting effect of the butchery and repression was to eliminate the possibility of installing the normal mechanisms of semi-indirect imperial rule through pliable local elites, such as the princely satraps who served the British so well in India. Instead, a brutal and intrusive form of direct rule was imposed on a complex social order about which the conquerors were particularly ill-informed.

Or so it was in lower and central Burma. For purposes of bureaucratic simplification and fiscal cheese-paring, the British partitioned the country into two zones. 'Ministerial Burma' or 'Burma Proper', encompassing the maritime regions, the centre and the Irrawaddy Delta, was governed directly by employees of the British state.¹³ The second zone juridically designated by the new rulers comprised the 'Frontier' or 'Excluded' areas: the hilly regions running up to the borders of the country. This territory was populated by a wide range of smallish ethnic groups, including Shans, Karenni, Chins and Kachins. Here, the British relied entirely on traditional rulers, such as Shan *sawbwas* and Kachin *duwas*; but unlike in the princely states of India, few British officials were ever posted in the Frontier Areas. There were concrete economic reasons for this categorization: the difficulty of the terrain meant that the costs of providing infrastructure—roads, bridges, tunnels, rails—in areas of sizeable settlements would be colossal; while the low population density of the mountain peoples would also have made direct rule hard. Yet no other Asian colony suffered such a radical bifurcation in its population's fate. Vietnam, Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia all had 'indirectly ruled zones', and the Indonesian archipelago had many more ethnic groups than Burma; but the 'mountain zones' among these were strategically unimportant and thinly populated, mainly by 'tribals'. The peculiarity

¹² In the next generation, charismatic monks such as U Ottama and U Wisara led revivalist movements in the rural areas, aiming to rescue Buddhism from British oppression. They were imprisoned by the British and are remembered as martyrs (in 1924 and 1930, respectively) of the national cause.

¹³ Most of the population of this zone was Burman, and predominantly Buddhist; the rest consisted of Karens, Indians, Chinese, Mons and others.

of Burma lay in the sheer size of the special zones, and their strategic locations—next to India, China, Thailand, Laos—along the longest land frontier in Southeast Asia.

Skewed modernization

For the next fifty years, ‘Burma Proper’ was developed as an administrative adjunct to British India. Many hundreds of thousands of Indian immigrants, as well as Christianized Karens and Anglo-Burmans—but, importantly, very few Burmans—were employed to construct, at break-neck pace, roads, bridges, banks, railways, telegraph and later telephone lines; and to staff schools, colleges, police and militia units.¹⁴ British trading houses dominated the most lucrative sectors of the economy, including the export of rice, teak, gemstones and oil; internal trade and small-scale processing of agricultural produce were largely in the hands of Chinese and Indians. The British oversaw extensive engineering works to drain and clear the swampy Irrawaddy Delta for rice production—comparable to the endeavours of the French in transforming the Mekong, or the Dutch in the alluvial plains of Java—relocating over 300,000 farmers from Upper Burma in the process. The largely subsistence economy of the pre-colonial era was now engulfed by the demands of agricultural commodity production with rice as a chief export, mainly to India. Competition drove up prices for land, food and imported consumer goods, while the interest rates for credit at the start of planting season proved ruinous for many village farmers. When they lost their land to (usually South Indian) money-lenders, impoverished Burmese farmers competed with Indian labour for manual work in the delta and Rangoon regions. Market pressures resulted in growing landlessness, indebtedness and desperation; early 20th-century Rangoon had the highest crime rates in the Empire. The response of the colonial authorities was to expand army and police forces, and impose stiff penalties not only on the accused but also on their families.

In the field of education, the British sidelined the monastic schools, which had set regional standards in the pre-colonial era, in favour of Anglo-vernacular and missionary schools; these tended to attract a higher proportion of non-Burman groups, such as the Christianized

¹⁴ Kingsley Davis estimated that a total of 2.5 million Indians migrated to Burma during the colonial period: *The Population of India and Pakistan*, New York 1968, p. 101.

Karen.¹⁵ One compensation for the inclusion of Burma in British India, however, was the development of higher education: Rangoon College was founded in 1878 as an affiliate of Calcutta University, and became a full-fledged university in 1920. By the 1930s the campus had become a hotbed of anti-colonialist agitation; it was here that a new layer of Burmese leaders would be formed, among them such figures as U Nu, Aung San, Kyaw Nyein (later deputy prime minister) and Thein Pe, later leader of the Communist Party of Burma.¹⁶ They took over the stodgy Rangoon University Student Union, formerly a social club for the sons of government officers, and transformed it into a militant campaigning body. The nationwide Dobama Asiayone, or 'Our Burma Association', formed in 1930, was distinctly to the left of the Indian National Congress (and on occasion, stridently anti-Indian). Aiming to promote unionization and worker-peasant solidarity, it was in the forefront of the strikes and demonstrations of the time. Many Dobama members bestowed upon themselves the honorific *thakin*, meaning 'master', in repudiation of colonial deference and to show themselves rulers in their own country. At the same time, London began restructuring its colonial administration, under pressure from the Congress Party in India, creating openings for an older, more conservative cohort of Burmese politicians and lawyers, some of them trained in London. In 1935 elections were held for a native Burmese legislature, to serve under the British Governor-General. Ba Maw became its first prime minister.

In sum: the period of British colonial rule was, by comparison to India, Ceylon or Malaya, relatively short—a little over fifty years. But its impact on Burmese society was far more destructive. It decisively weakened traditional elites, through the repression of the Burman resistance, overthrow of the *myothugyi* system and marginalization of the monks; and instituted a structural division of the population on ethnic grounds in relation to the central power, whose instruments of repression—police and military—were predominantly staffed by Indians or Christian minorities. Modernization, too, depended on the importation of a large sub-clientele of allogeneic money-lenders and petty bureaucrats, often a target for the nationalist movement. Economic development

¹⁵ J. S. Furnivall pointed out that before the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885–86, Burma had far more children at school than any other country in 'the tropical Far East': *Colonial Policy and Practice*, p. 211.

¹⁶ Ne Win, who would run the country from 1962 until 1988, also attended Rangoon University but flunked out in 1931. After failing to break into the charcoal market, he found a job as a postal clerk.

skewed towards cheap commodity exports devastated the subsistence village economy. Such was the British legacy in Burma on the eve of the Japanese invasion.

Japanese occupation

With the outbreak of World War Two, Burmese anti-colonialists, like many Indian nationalists, looked to London's enemies as potential allies and liberators. In 1939 the Freedom Bloc, an alliance of the Dobama Asiayone, monks, students and older nationalists, issued a call for an uprising. The British responded with mass arrests and brutal repression. In 1940, the 25-year-old *thakin* Aung San, a wanted man, escaped on a Norwegian freighter to Amoy. Having co-founded the Communist Party of Burma a year earlier, he planned to make contact with the Chinese Communist Party. Instead, it was the Japanese Kempeitai (secret police) who discovered him. He was flown to Japan, where he worked with intelligence forces to draw up his 'Blueprint for a Free Burma'. Aung San secretly re-entered Rangoon on a Japanese freighter to recruit 29 other young anti-colonialist leaders. The 'Thirty Comrades' were then taken to Hainan, given six months' military training—command, combat, espionage, guerrilla warfare, political tactics—and formed into the Burma Independence Army. In early 1942, as British rule collapsed in ignominy before the Japanese advance through Hong Kong, Malaya, Thailand and Singapore, Aung San's BIA accompanied the Japanese 15th Army on its lightning conquest of Burma. British officials fled west in disarray, harried by their former subjects. With them went over 500,000 Indian refugees, mostly travelling on foot. The BIA proceeded to recruit a (mainly Burman) guerrilla force some 20,000 strong.¹⁷

Over the next three years Burma suffered a scale of destruction even greater than that of the Philippines as bitter inter-imperialist warfare raged back and forth across the country, with supply chains on both sides repeatedly stretched to breaking point. The retreating British had destroyed crops, bridges, roads, schools, markets, rice mills and hospitals. The Japanese established an 'independent' Burmese government in 1943, reinstalling the ever-helpful Ba Maw as prime minister. Aung San, as minister of war, was in charge of the Burma

¹⁷ Official Burmese sources estimate a figure of 50,000: see, for example, Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, The Hague 1961, p. 55, and *Tatmadaw History, 1824–1945*, Rangoon 1994, vol. 1, chapter 5 [in Burmese].

National Army. He and other young activists also retained the leadership of the semi-clandestine anti-colonialist networks, chief among them Aung San's People's Revolutionary Party and the Communist Party of Burma, whose leader Than Tun, Aung San's brother-in-law, served as minister for agriculture, although most CPB cadres were underground. Meanwhile in the mountainous 'Excluded Areas' US and British special forces, regrouped by the Allies in 1943 under the South East Asia Command, now worked to arm Kachin, Shan, Chin and other indigenous levies against Japan and its Burman allies.¹⁸ In March 1945, with the end of the war in sight, Aung San's PRP and the CPB turned on the Japanese, and joined with SEAC forces to defeat the now-retreating Imperial army. They constituted the principal power in the devastated country when the British forces returned.

Post-war order

On the eve of independence, the *thakins* were confronted with a country in ruins. Three years of Allied bombing raids, followed by the earth-scorching of the departing Japanese army, left Rangoon in rubble, Mandalay flattened and most provincial towns in shambles. The harvest had been destroyed and famine loomed. Displaced guerrillas, uprooted villagers and urban refugees struggled to survive, as did the armed ethnic-minority levies raised by the Allies. In contrast to rubber-rich, strategically located Malaya, the British had little incentive to bear the costs of Burma's reconstruction; nor, thanks to their own conquests, was there a collaborationist landed oligarchy that could be resuscitated—as in the Philippines, by a decisive MacArthur—after the war. Nevertheless, the British were determined, as in India and Pakistan, to leave their imprint on the post-colonial Burmese state and armed forces while rewarding the groups that had served them most closely, as a basis for future influence. Just as they had governed Burma on the cheap, so they now aimed for a cut-price post-colonial solution: a commanding role for British-trained Karen officers in the Burmese Army; continuing UK military presence; a federalist constitution, guaranteeing representation for the Karens and other minorities; and the exclusion of the CPB.

The political and ideological assets of the young *thakins* included a world outlook substantially framed by Second International socialism; the

¹⁸ Andrew Selth, 'Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942–1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, xx, 1986, pp. 483–507.

impress of Japanese military training and discipline; an unwavering faith in 'progress' and modernity; and—as the Cold War began—a militantly neutralist foreign policy. In January 1947 Aung San and Attlee signed an initial independence agreement, largely on Attlee's terms, although Aung San declared that Burma would reject membership of the British Commonwealth, and thus not recognize George VI as formal head of state (the only former colony to do so until 1968, when tiny Aden followed suit). Independence was scheduled for the following January, six months later than India and Pakistan. On 19 July 1947, while negotiations were still under way, Aung San and five colleagues from the interim Cabinet were assassinated, apparently at the behest of their political rival, U Saw. It was thus U Nu, one of the older pre-war *thakins*, who became the first Burmese Prime Minister, while General Smith Dun, a British-trained Karen Christian, was appointed Army Chief of Staff.

The immediate upshot was the outbreak of fighting as the CPB, excluded from power by the Attlee agreement, repudiated the British deal and called for a national uprising, the expropriation of foreign assets and expulsion of (overwhelmingly Indian and Chinese) landlords and business proprietors. Nu called on the army to put down Communist-led risings in Pyay, Thayetmyo and Pinyinmana. Within a few months of independence, however, the Burmese armed forces had split—the second fateful outcome of the British settlement. Karen domination of the top brass and their coziness with the British Services Mission was intolerable to the surviving *thakin* leadership, not least Ne Win, who arranged for the discharge of the Karen officer corps. The result was a mass defection of battle-hardened Karens to an insurgency that would last into the 21st century, leaving the Burma Army with fewer than 2,000 men. The young state now faced an increasing array of armed rebels in the border regions, including CIA-backed remnants of the defeated Kuomintang.

To meet these threats, the armed forces were rapidly expanded. Under the command of General Ne Win and his comrades from the wartime Fourth Burma Rifles, the *tatmadaw* ('armed forces') was remodelled as a British-style professional military, with an integrated vertical command structure and effective logistical support. In the process it was also set on a course in which no ethnic-minority officer would again achieve a significant leadership role. By the late 1950s, the competence of the army stood in marked contrast to the growing paralysis of the civil service and

the factionalism both within and between ruling and opposition parties, which at times descended into violence.

The first decade of independence saw a number of achievements: towns were rebuilt after the war-time devastation and the country's infrastructure improved. Rangoon was one of the most modern cities in Southeast Asia. As Prime Minister, Nu—a caustic anti-colonial social critic, novelist and playwright, who saw himself as Burma's answer to George Bernard Shaw—propounded a neutralist foreign policy, a highly optimistic economic plan devised by US consultants enamoured with the New Deal, and a populist Buddhism which he managed to embody in his own person.¹⁹ His vision never extended far beyond the Buddhist Burman heartlands, however. The contrast between Nu and Sukarno, his contemporary in post-Independence Indonesia, is instructive. Sukarno spent the 1950s assiduously travelling the archipelago to forge a common national identity while the multi-ethnic uprising against the Dutch was still fresh in living memory. In Myanmar, anti-colonial Burman forces had been pitted against SEAC-backed minority guerrillas for much of the war; they had fought alongside Kachin, Chin and other frontier levies against the Japanese only for a few months after March 1945. Upon the British reoccupation of Rangoon in May of that year, what little common cause connected the different peoples in Burma quickly receded. The problem of bridging historically exacerbated ethnic and religious differences was never a priority for the Nu government in the 1950s. Minority politicians, who had been promised federalist concessions in return for their support of a unitary constitution, chafed at their political marginalization and demanded greater autonomy. Students, too, held frequent anti-government protests.

Ne Win's long reign

As in many other settings both in the region—Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand—and beyond, the Burmese military judged itself, as Defender of the Nation, more disciplined, responsible, patriotic and thus better equipped to govern than the squabbling civilian politicians, their former comrades-in-arms in the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s.

¹⁹ Nu (1907–95) was famous for having translated Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, into Burmese. He also authored a stridently anti-capitalist and anti-colonial novel in Burmese with the Hobbesian title, *Man, the Wolf of Man*. See his eccentric memoir, *Saturday's Son*, New Haven 1975.

Ne Win's *tatmadaw* first took over, briefly, in 1958; but his caretaker military government held elections in 1960, and allowed the victorious Nu to return to office. Nu's bid in 1961 to fulfil a campaign promise to declare Buddhism the state religion prompted the Army's second intervention. The military leadership strongly opposed the move, concerned that it would alienate the already fractious non-Buddhist minorities. Predictably, a group of ethnic-minority leaders met in early 1962 to discuss a programme for a federalist constitution. The Burman-dominated War Office viewed this as a threat to the unity of the nation. Ne Win seized power again in 1962. The coup, applauded by the Kennedy Administration, was met with determined student protests. Their dissent was silenced when Ne Win's men blew up the Rangoon University Students' Union building on July 7, leaving dozens dead.

Ne Win's martial law nevertheless had a substantial degree of continuity with Aung San's and U Nu's vision of a strong, unified Burma as a self-sufficient, developmentalist state, free from foreign tutelage and interference. This was codified in Ne Win's 'Burmese Road to Socialism', a strange blend of Buddhism, nationalism and command economics. His isolationist foreign policy was close kin to Nu's militant neutralism and Aung San's refusal to bend the knee to George VI. All three were convinced that the country could prosper better on its own than as the client of some untrustworthy great power. Nor was this illogical in the context of the Cold War, when its Southeast Asian neighbours were being overrun by deadly proxy wars—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia—or suffering under US-backed dictators: Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines. Domestically, the *tatmadaw*—still carrying the flag of Aung San's nationalist revolution—remained an admired institution for the majority of Burman-Burmese. While military corruption was not uncommon, the scale was relatively limited, not least because isolationism left the generals without access to Cold War largesse. Within the military, Ne Win handpicked *ta-bye*—'followers'—for promotion, and never allowed any rivals to emerge. But although his power was largely unchallenged, the ascetic Ne Win never indulged in the kleptocratic plunder characteristic of Suharto or Marcos.

Corruption was more widespread within the official (i.e. military-backed) Burma Socialist Programme Party, many of whose senior officials were former army officers. The BSPP government instituted a thorough-going nationalization of private business, eventually taking over the major

export–import operations for rice, timber, oil and other commodities, as well as most wholesalers and stores; when incompetent state planning failed, it released pressure by manipulating the black market. As a result of government economic policies, some 300,000 Indians and 100,000 Chinese, mainly traders and middlemen, left the country between 1963–67. A committed secularist, Ne Win repealed Nu’s State Religion Protection Act and set about registering *hpongyis* and nationalizing monastic schools. Protests brought forth heavy repression. In 1974, students and disaffected monks seized the coffin of U Thant, former UN Secretary-General, in a demonstration against the dictatorship; many were killed in the subsequent crackdown. Army dissent was eradicated with equal zeal. In 1976 an officers’ plot to assassinate Ne Win saw a large-scale purge that included the then Chief of Armed Forces, Tin Oo, who was charged with treason and sentenced to seven years’ hard labour. (Later a co-founder of the National League for Democracy, Tin Oo has spent nearly as much time under arrest as Aung San Suu Kyi.)

Yet however strong its hold on the centre of the country, government authority was almost nonexistent in most of Burma’s borderlands during the half-century following independence. Here the *tatmadaw* was engaged in fighting well-equipped forces, some backed by foreign states or funders—US, Chinese or Thai—or financed through natural-resource extraction and taxes levied on cross-border black-market trade. In addition the *maoisant* CPB, sometimes allied with national-minority armies, continued to hold large areas of ‘liberated territory’ along the Thai and Chinese borders and to field thousands of soldiers in its defence. The Kachin Independence Organization and the Karen National Union (at one point a CPB ally) had similar sized forces, fighting for secession from, or autonomy within, the unitary Burmese state. Perhaps a quarter of the country was under the control of armed opponents of the central government. Millions of villagers in these areas were prey to roving bands of militias, drug lords and black marketeers, who commandeered their goods and labour; warring parties on all sides were responsible for rape, torture, extrajudicial killings and destruction of homes. The government’s counter-insurgency strategy, known as *Pya Ley Pya* or ‘Four Cuts’, was carried out on a shoestring, with poorly equipped *tatmadaw* soldiers posted far from Rangoon. Their efforts—brutal enough—produced little more than dry-season tactical gains.²⁰

²⁰ Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948*, Singapore 2009, and Andrew Selth, *Burma’s Armed Forces*, Norwalk, CT 2002.

It has been estimated that around 10,000 people—farmers, traders, *hpongyis*, pastors, teachers, government soldiers, and armed rebels—died every year across the four decades of Burma’s civil wars.²¹ The numbers are relatively low in comparison to lives lost in Indonesia, Cambodia or Vietnam, of course, or even to those killed by the Indian state in Assam, Nagaland and Kashmir. What differentiated the bloodshed in Burma’s isolated borderlands was the proportional scale of the rebel-held area, combined with the coarsening and brutalizing effects on the national ethos under perpetual army rule. If the military and jurisdictional division of the country had first been imposed by British colonialism, its continuation after independence represented both a political and a moral failure on the part of the Burman-dominated state.

Trauma of 1988

By the late 1980s, the country’s economic failure was also becoming apparent. While its neighbours—Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and, eventually, China—were attracting large-scale capital inflows through their pools of cheap skilled labour, after 25 years of *tatmadaw* rule Burma’s autarkic economy was teetering on the brink of collapse. On 5 September 1987, in a spectacularly ill-advised move, the BSPP declared all kyat notes in circulation to be worthless and replaced them with a new series of notes, denominated in multiples of nine (fortune tellers had apparently advised Ne Win that nine would be propitious for his fate, or *yeh-ti-ya-che*). The few savers who kept their money in government-owned banks were entitled to transfer their deposits into new kyat notes. But the majority, who had believed their money would be safer under the floorboards, discovered that their life savings had been rendered worthless overnight. All but a handful of *lu-gyi*—‘big shots’—lost everything they had.

What followed was the greatest political upheaval of Burma’s post-colonial history. Demonstrations erupted sporadically, followed by bloody crackdowns, in a cycle that built to a climax in the summer of 1988. In Rangoon and Mandalay, student-led protests paralysed the city. By late July, monks had taken over control of Mandalay’s streets, wielding sticks as well as moral authority. A visitor described ‘monk commandos careening around town. Jeeps, trucks, private cars all are

²¹ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2nd edn., London 1999, p. 101.

filled with monks travelling about town looking important, and usually with a couple of monks hanging on the side or sitting on the roof blowing their whistles furiously so that everyone will get out of their way.²² Many smaller cities and towns witnessed unprecedented protests. Dramatically, Ne Win, aged 78, stepped down in late July, while warning in his resignation speech that in future, 'if the army shoots, it hits—there is no firing in the air to scare.' Despite the threat, a massive mobilization on 8 August—8-8-88 was said to be auspicious—brought perhaps a million people onto the streets in popular demonstrations, including many state employees. The interim government ordered an end to the marches. Starting late at night on August 8, troops opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. Further protests and a general strike ensued. In a number of cases, demonstrators fought back and worsted the security forces. Army spokesmen would later claim that civilian protesters had killed more than 100 people, including 30 soldiers.²³ The final death toll has been estimated at between 3,000 and 10,000.

SLORC's new course

On September 18, army leaders took power directly and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC, chaired by Senior General Saw Maung. Under the SLORC the patterns that had long characterized Myanmar's social order would be turned inside out. The closed economy was now opened to foreign extraction of the country's natural resources (and soon subject to 40 per cent annual inflation). The frontier regions were given degrees of autonomous rule. The professional Army was bloated to more than twice its size and turned to rent-seeking. The relative egalitarianism of the Buddhist-nationalist 'planning system' was abandoned by second-generation *tatmadaw* rulers in favour of an untrammelled *enrichissez-vous*. Military rule was embellished with a façade of ad hoc constitutionalism, later framed as a set of linear steps down the 'Road Map to a Discipline-Flourishing Democracy'. Maoist guerrillas and British-trained Karen generals were replaced, as opposition icons, by the frail and photogenic Aung San Suu Kyi.

SLORC went ahead with the May 1990 elections for a constituent assembly, as promised by Ne Win, although it was toothless and the generals

²² Ward Keeler, 'Fighting for Democracy on a Heap of Jewels', Working Paper no. 102, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1997, p. 14.

²³ *Bangkok Post*, 4 February 1989.

severely restricted campaign activities. The splintering of anti-regime ranks after the turbulent 1988 uprising was reflected in the 93 parties that had candidates on the ballot paper; but predominant among them was the National League for Democracy, established in September 1988 with Aung San Suu Kyi as its leading figure. Born in June 1945, the daughter of the martyred Father of the Nation had accompanied her mother Khin Kyi to Delhi in 1960, when the latter was appointed ambassador to India; after reading PPE at Oxford, Aung San Suu Kyi had spent most of her life abroad. She had returned to Burma in March 1988 to nurse her ailing mother, and quickly found herself at the forefront of the swelling opposition movement. Early on in the campaign she adopted a somewhat moderate line toward the military, but in late 1988 and the first half of 1989 she gradually stepped up her criticism, telling Western journalists, 'My father didn't build up the Burmese Army in order to suppress the people.'²⁴ On 20 July 1989 she was placed under house arrest for a term that lasted, in the first instance, until 1995. Nevertheless, in May 1990 the NLD went on to win almost 60 per cent of the popular vote, and 392 out of 492 seats; the military-backed National Unity Party won 21 per cent of the vote and only 10 seats—results that suggest a remarkably clean election, in the circumstances. The generals proceeded to disqualify, imprison or chase into exile the victorious candidates of the NLD and other parties that had allied with it. A National Convention was held in 1993, largely consisting of handpicked delegates (although the NLD participated until 1995), and charged with drafting guidelines for a future constitution.

At the same time, terrified of losing control of the streets again, the *tatmadaw* set about a massive expansion of its own ranks. The modernization of what had become the region's most undermanned and poorly equipped army occurred at a frantic pace, deemed necessary by the junta, which had been caught unprepared by the events of 1988. By 1995 the army had expanded from 180,000 to around 350,000.²⁵ Throughout the 1990s, nearly half the state budget was devoted to the security sector, boosted by soft loans from China, India and Thailand. Army growth created new problems for military leaders: widespread indiscipline, unprecedented corruption and looming factionalism. Logistics for this sprawling behemoth became unmanageable, and eventually the Quartermaster General gave up trying to provision soldiers,

²⁴ *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 June 1989.

²⁵ Andrew Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces Since 1988*, Canberra 2006.

instead requiring garrisoned units to provide for themselves from the local economy. The organizational culture of the *tatmadaw*, long centred on combat, was now focused on rent-seeking. Recruitment standards were lowered, since able young men preferred higher paying factory jobs in Thailand or Malaysia. Senior generals had always manipulated promotions, but with tens of thousands of new positions opening up in the expansion phase, the scale of personalistic politicking mushroomed and the factional implications grew byzantine.

Military Intelligence was also expanded, the number of MI detachments doubling from around 12 in 1988 to 23 in 1992. In the process, it was transformed from a combat-focused organization into a 'regime-defending "secret police"', buttressed by large numbers of paid or co-opted informants'.²⁶ MI's outlook was famously summed up in 1991 by its then chief, Major General Khin Nyunt, when he warned, 'Martial law means no law at all.' For the most part, however, the effectiveness of the generals' system of social control depended not on outright coercion but on the widespread fear that one could be arrested for almost anything at all, with devastating consequences. Self-imposed limitations on public behaviour became a small price to pay for staying off the regime's radar screen.

Frontier ceasefires

The ending of four decades of counter-insurgency warfare in the frontier regions was primarily the result of the junta's economic turn. Within two months of crushing the 1988 uprising, SLORC had done a deal with Thailand's generals to grant Thai timber companies access to the vast virgin forests of southeastern Myanmar. Bangkok abandoned its long-standing support for armed rebels in the area, a strategy designed in the 1950s to create a buffer between Cold War Thailand and leftist-run Burma and China. Thai leaders also advised their new business partners to build roads and develop the rebel-held border regions as, under the direction of US advisors, Thailand had done in the early 1980s to fight its own Communist insurgency.²⁷ The opportunity to do so presented itself

²⁶ Lt. Col. James McAndrew, 'From Combat to Karaoke: Burmese Military Intelligence, 1948–2006', MS Thesis, National Defense Intelligence College, 2007, p. 77; McAndrew served as US military attaché in Rangoon in the early 2000s.

²⁷ Tom Kramer, 'Thai Foreign Policy Towards Burma, 1987–1993', MA Thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1994, esp. p. 68; and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *A Plastic Nation: The Curse of Thainess in Thai-Burmese Relations*, Lanham, MD 2005.

early in 1989, when rank-and-file Wa and Kokang troops in northeastern Myanmar rebelled against the (Burman) leadership of the CPB there. Khin Nyunt offered Wa and Kokang leaders separate ceasefire agreements, granting them extensive local autonomy over economic, social and local political affairs and the right to hold on to their weapons. Combined with the retraction of Soviet and Chinese assistance to left-wing groups, the deal effectively finished off the 41-year-old CPB rebellion.

Under pressure from Thailand and China, also now involved in resource-extraction deals, another 25 groups subsequently negotiated ceasefire arrangements or surrenders with SLORC or its successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), constituted in 1997. Rangoon refused any negotiations with armed coalitions, such as the National Democratic Front, formed in 1976 by the major non-Communist armies; but it continued to deal with individual groups. Since each agreement carried different terms—none of which were made public, although some details have been leaked—a bewildering array of political arrangements has emerged in these areas, extending to the near total autonomy of the United Wa State Army in parts of Shan State. In most of these former war zones, ex-rebel groups were permitted to retain their arms, police their own territory and use their soldiers as private-security forces to protect business operations; however, the right to carry arms was set to expire once the ‘Road Map to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy’ process was complete—a potential time-bomb. By the mid-1990s, the frontier-zone wars had largely come to an end and villagers could begin fashioning post-war lives in territory redesignated as special autonomy areas, or coming under central or mixed administration. However, the ceasefire agreements offered no lasting solutions to the social, political and economic grievances that had long fuelled Myanmar’s insurgencies.

As the combat stopped, the Burmese military hastened to cash in on teak, gold and gems deals, and gain control over lucrative trade routes to China and Thailand. Foreign investment was channelled into joint ventures with military holding companies, which creamed off large sums for their own purposes. While these deals brought in millions for the generals, they created few jobs for Burmese workers: Chinese firms involved in the rubber plantations or teak harvesting brought their own labourers with them. In addition to the resources of its forests, vast reserves of natural gas were discovered in the 1990s in Burmese waters in the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Mottama and, more recently, in the Bay

of Bengal. It took nearly ten years for the windfall profits to materialize: in 1999–2000, natural gas accounted for less than 1 per cent of all export earnings, but it was over 40 per cent by 2006–07. By late 2007, hundreds of millions of dollars had rolled in, and 25 offshore blocks were under exploration in joint ventures between Myanmar's government and oil companies from Australia, Britain, France, Canada, China, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Russia, South Korea and Thailand.²⁸

Situated in this energy-hungry region, these reserves give the SPDC the ultimate trump card, and the regime has shrewdly played foreign energy-seekers off against each other. Competition has been fiercest between India and China, particularly over the output of the 'Shwe' gas field off the Rakhine coast. In its joint venture exploration there with Daewoo, the regime has found some 3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, with an estimated total market value over \$80 billion. From that field alone, the Myanmar government will earn an estimated \$800 million per year from 2010–2030. China, with its own trump card of a UN Security Council veto, appears to have won those sweepstakes, and is about to build a 2,380 km pipeline from Myanmar's west coast to Yunnan province. India signed a \$150 million natural gas exploration deal with the SPDC in the middle of the September 2007 protests.²⁹

New rich

With these funds, the *tatmadaw* has undertaken a massive remaking of state and society, comparable perhaps to that of the British after 1886. The principal focus has been the brand-new up-country capital, Nay Pyi Taw. Built on a vast scale, complete with eight-lane highways, the city grid consists of four sections, divided by function: commerce, housing, army and bureaucracy. Privileges are determined by rank, so that—for example—all deputy ministers get the same kind of house in the same neighbourhood. But even Rangoon, until quite recently a quaintly

²⁸ Through clever accounting, the gas revenues have been converted into kyat at the official rate, meaning that 6 kyat for each of the 2.5 billion dollars earned this year will enter the national treasury. Unofficially, the kyat trades at about 1,200 per dollar. Sean Turnell, 'Burma Isn't Broke', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 August 2009.

²⁹ China may build a second pipeline to transport Gulf oil from tankers docking at a new deepwater port on Myanmar's Rakhine coast, thus avoiding the flashpoint of the Strait of Malacca. See Ashild Kolas, 'Burma in the Balance: The Geopolitics of Gas', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2007. Figures may overstate future revenues, given the current volatility in energy prices.

decrepit, 1950s-era urban relic, now looks like a fast-mouldering replica of Kuala Lumpur, with a rash of high-rise condominiums and office buildings, highways and traffic jams. Ten new townships have been built on the city's outskirts, as well as Bangkok-style luxury suburbs, shopping malls and high-end grocery stores. Hundreds of pagodas have been erected across the country, and there are plans to link up with the Asian Highways project. The Ministry of Information boasts of constructing 26,127 bridges, 17 airports, 6,801 schools and 188 television retransmission stations since 1988.³⁰

With this has come the emergence of an ostentatious new elite: a few score families at the top of the regime have created a Hollywoodesque lifestyle, almost as lavish as that of the celebrities—Jennifer Aniston, Woody Harrelson, Sylvester Stallone and others—calling for its overthrow. Senior military officers have come to expect royal treatment, while their wives, sons, daughters, in-laws and cousins have seized business opportunities brought by Myanmar's 'opening'—buying up undervalued land, gem businesses and hotels; exploiting monopolistic access to assets and extortionary joint-venture requirements for foreign investors. Profiting from its connections to the dictatorship, this class has come to inhabit a luxury-laden parallel universe, far removed from the problems of Myanmar's people. Its symbol was the extravagant wedding of Senior General Than Shwe's daughter in 2008 to an army officer. The bride, laden with diamonds, received an estimated \$50 million worth of gifts, while guests were treated to a lavish banquet and champagne reception.

If the citizens have not appeared grateful for these developments, it is not just because many were forcibly relocated to make way for them, or obliged to provide labour on the burgeoning building sites. For all its resources, Myanmar's GDP per capita in 2006 was less than half that of Bangladesh or Laos. Only a tiny percentage of Burmese have benefited from the country's new-found wealth, and the level of inequality has soared over the past twenty years. Central Myanmar's thousands of formerly self-sustaining rice-growing villages and rural townships have suffered especially. From its inception, the SLORC/SPDC regulated rice prices—forcing farmers to sell at artificially low prices, putting cheap rice in urban markets and army canteens but plunging farmers into penury.

³⁰ See *Chronicle of National Development*, Myanmar Ministry of Information, 2007.

In 2003, the government officially deregulated the rice trade, but many local military commanders have enforced restrictions on the movement of rice to markets so that they can continue buying farmers' surpluses at rock-bottom prices, sometimes even below what they cost to grow. Cultivators have lost their land to moneylenders who, in the absence of viable formal financial institutions, have lent money out at rates of interest from 10–15 per cent a month for farmers with land, but 10–20 per cent a *day* for high-risk, asset-less borrowers. As a result, numerous families have become day labourers on what used to be their own land. Even in the relatively more rice-rich, pre-cyclone Irrawaddy Delta, recent studies point to widespread tenancy, debt and food insecurity.³¹

Desperate for alternative sources of income, many have sent their children off to work in factories in urban areas or agro-industrial plantations. Millions of Burmese have moved to other countries for work as domestics, sex workers or factory hands. As of late 2008 there were 3–4 million Burmese migrant workers—up to 8 per cent of the population—in Thailand alone. In 2005 a UN Development Programme report, carried out in consultation with the government, found that 90 per cent of the population lived on less than 65 cents per day. The average household spends three-quarters of its budget on food.³² According to UN figures, a third of children under five suffer from malnutrition, in a region where average child malnutrition rates are less than 15 percent. It estimated that close to 700,000 people each year suffer from malaria and 130,000 from tuberculosis. Child mortality figures are double the regional average: 109 per 1,000 children die before the age of five.³³

The social fabric of central Myanmar, relatively intact up to 1988, has come under immense strain in the course of the SLORC's liberalization programme. Today, half of Burma's children do not complete primary education, mainly because registration fees—which go to supplement teachers' abysmally low salaries—far exceed the incomes of most families. This, in a country where parents will do almost anything to provide

³¹ Nancy Hudson-Rodd and Myo Nyunt, 'Control of Land and Life in Burma', *Land Tenure Center Brief*, no. 3, April 2001.

³² UNDP/Myanmar and Ministry of National Planning (Myanmar), 'Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar: Vulnerability-Related Information', 8 March 2006.

³³ 'Statement of the UN Country Team in Myanmar on the Occasion of UN Day', Rangoon, 24 October 2007; Department for International Development (UK), 'Country Assistance Plan, Burma', London, October 2004, p. 3.

their children with an education. Middle-class families in the Irrawaddy valley scrape together funds to send their young people out of the country for work or school, as there is no future for them in the gutted education system or miserable civil service. Some villages have no young people between the ages of 16 and 30 left in them. A family's hopes can be wiped out by the costs of one funeral, flood, poor harvest or even a mild illness.

In the Buddhist areas, monasteries have long provided the major social safety net, offering shelter to the homeless and education to children whose families cannot afford government-school fees.³⁴ But the monks in turn depend on local communities for rice, curry and other provisions through daily alms-giving and other ceremonial donations. With the deepening impoverishment of recent years, many of Myanmar's rural and urban poor have been lucky to get one meatless meal a day and have been ashamed that they could no longer provide alms to their *hpongyis* or hold *shin-pyu* ceremonies for their young sons to become *koyin*, or novice monks. The *sangha* has been acutely aware of the growing crisis: monasteries across the country have been overrun with orphans, invalids and the desperately poor needing shelter, care and food. But monks have sometimes had to refuse those trying to take robes or shelter with them—there simply has not been enough food to go around.

March of the monks

On 15 August 2007, probably as an ad hoc solution to cash-flow problems, the regime announced an immediate slash in fuel subsidies, resulting in price rises of up to 500 per cent for petrol, diesel and compressed natural gas. The effects were traumatic for the already shaky economy. Especially hard hit were the very poorest people living on the fringes of urban areas, such as day labourers from Rangoon's satellite towns—South Dagon, Hlaing Thar Yar or North Okkalapa. They live far from possible downtown work sites, where they might earn 1,000 kyats per day (about 83 US cents). The overnight hike in city bus fares from 100 to 500 kyats cut severely into their incomes, most of which was already being spent on food and transport. Businesses, students and others were hurt, too. With little reliable electricity outside the generals' new capital,

³⁴ Churches provide similar services in regions with large Christian populations, such as Chin State, Kachin State, and Karen villages in the Irrawaddy Delta. Some of the most effective relief programmes after Nargis were undertaken by monks and Christian pastors who had previously established a humanitarian interfaith network.

diesel generators are essential for any business to survive or for a family to provide light after 6 pm for their children to study by.

On August 19, dozens of activists organized a peaceful, silent march through Rangoon to protest the new economic hardships. Among the marchers were high-school and university students, members of the NLD and well-known leaders of the '88 Generation', former political prisoners who had been jailed for their participation in the pro-democracy uprising of 1988; most had been released in late 2004, but had not hitherto developed any visible strategy for mobilization. Also in the Rangoon demonstrations were a handful of other activists who had been protesting against the worsening economic plight of ordinary Burmese for the past year.³⁵ Smaller demonstrations continued for the next few days, until a menacing new militia, the *Swan Arr Shin*, behaving not unlike Suharto's *Pemuda Pancasila* thugs, arrived on the scene.³⁶ Over a hundred protestors were arrested, including 13 of the 88 Generation network. Undaunted, other protestors, including members of Myanmar's usually conservative but occasionally politicized *sangha*, managed sporadic but typically quite small demonstrations in many different parts of the country. Few imagined the monks would pick up where the August protestors left off.

No one knows how many monks there are at any given time in Myanmar, since the monasteries are decentralized and Buddhists can enter or leave the monkhood freely, at any time; but a reasonable estimate might be around half a million.³⁷ It had appeared to some observers that SLORC/SPDC reforms—sponsoring monasteries, promoting particularly other-worldly, 'apolitical' monks—had largely succeeded in co-opting the

³⁵ One such protest in February 2007 ended with the small crowd craftily chanting, 'Long live the Senior General!'

³⁶ Little known in Rangoon before 2007, this militia had made appearances in rural areas since at least 2005. There have also been reports in ethnic-minority regions of forced conscription into the pro-government 'Pyi-Thu Sit-Tat' (People's Militia).

³⁷ All Buddhist boys are expected to spend a few months in a monastery as *koyin*. At 19 they can be ordained as *hpongyis*, but this need not involve renouncing the secular life forever. Many men return to the monkhood for short periods to study, find respite or prepare themselves for major life changes such as marriage or migration. Predictably, statistics on religion are unreliable in Myanmar. Burman leaders probably inflate the proportion of Buddhists; on the other hand, while Burmans and Western NGOs generally assume that Kachin, Chin and Karen minorities are Christian, the majority of Karens are actually Buddhists. See Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The Karen Revolution*, Washington, DC 2008.

sangha, already divided into nine competing sects.³⁸ But this was to underestimate the effects of the social and economic crisis on the monasteries themselves. On 5 September 2007, just as the fuel protests appeared to be losing momentum, several hundred *hpongyis* from a large monastery in Pakokku joined lay residents in a local demonstration. Pakokku is a rural market town in the Magway province, known for its large, highly respected teaching monasteries, and now also for the accelerating poverty that characterizes most towns in central Myanmar. What transpired is not completely clear, but it appears that the police or soldiers fired live ammunition and rubber bullets over the heads of demonstrators. When they did not disperse, security forces, including thugs from a local *Swan Arr Shin* group, reportedly assaulted several monks, and there is an unconfirmed report of the death of one *hpongyi*. The next day, when a delegation of township officials visited the Maha Visutarama monastery, angry monks held them hostage, demanding an official apology for the beatings. On September 9, a statement was circulated on the internet by the ‘All Burma Buddhist Monks’ Alliance’—a previously unknown group, probably consisting of youngish monks, more radicalized than most—suggesting a deadline of September 17 for the regime to apologize and calling for a reduction in commodity and fuel prices.

With no apology forthcoming, *hpongyis* in Rangoon, Mandalay, Sittwe and a handful of other towns turned over their alms bowls (known in Pali, the religious language of Burmese Buddhism, as *patta-nikkujjanakamma*) to symbolize their refusal to accept donations from military personnel and their families, thus denying them the ability to acquire ‘merit’ or *kutho*.³⁹ In Chauk (like Pakokku, in Magway division) and Kyaukpadaung (Mandalay division), monks started their processions on September 17, and the Rangoon *sangha* followed suit the next day. For several days, steadily increasing numbers of *hpongyis* from all over Rangoon division marched in an orderly fashion, chanting the *metta sutta* prayers of loving kindness. The timing of the protests was significant: September 18 was the date of the coup that brought the generals back into direct political power in 1988. The marches came at the tail

³⁸ Juliane Schober, ‘Buddhist Visions of Moral Authority and Modernity in Burma,’ in Monique Skidmore, ed., *Burma at the Turn of the 21st Century*, Honolulu 2005, pp. 113–32. See also Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*, Athens, OH 2007.

³⁹ In his classic *History of Modern Burma*, John Cady writes that throughout the country’s history, the alms boycott was used by monks in ‘an evil community needing to be disciplined effectively’ (p. 51).

end of a severe rainy season, extraordinarily so in Rangoon. Instead of meditating in the comfort and shelter of their monasteries, long processions of monks marched through the streets of Rangoon amid torrential downpours, clad only in their maroon robes and flip-flops. At times they had to wade through the waist-deep floods of a city abandoned by its government, with scant upkeep of its sewers. They did so in the name of the suffering of the people of Myanmar. Within a few days, the monks were joined by tens of thousands of citizens, who formed protective human chains along the edges of the processions. Some of them expanded the original marchers' demands—restored fuel subsidies and an apology for Pakokku—to include democratic reform and 'regime change'. Footage of the protests, shot by cellphones and ubiquitous digital cameras, was soon circulating on the internet and being aired by foreign newsrooms.

Crackdown

It took the generals nearly a week to respond to the growing protests. Having shifted their families, bureaucrats and cronies to the comforts of Nay Pyi Taw in 2005, the regime had grown badly out of touch with events in the country's major conurbation. The Burmese military has long discouraged the reporting of bad news up the chain of command; as the rural economy has deteriorated, the leadership has received less and less accurate information from regional garrisons or civil servants with first-hand knowledge of the worsening situation on the ground. The dismantling of the MI apparatus in 2004, following a power struggle between Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt, has exacerbated their ignorance.⁴⁰ As a result, the generals missed obvious opportunities in August and September 2007 to ameliorate the situation. They could have apologized to the Pakokku monks and offered them prodigious alms, or locked down the Rangoon monasteries early in the protests. By the time the regime grasped the scale of the unrest, the mass demonstrations had gathered a momentum of their own.

On September 24, Brigadier General Thura Myint Maung, Minister of Religious Affairs, proclaimed the protests to be the work of 'internal

⁴⁰ Khin Nyunt and his family were arrested, and upwards of 600 officers were jailed. In October 2007, many angry Rangoon residents told me that none of this would have happened if he had been in power. He would have understood how serious the situation was and apologized. For background, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Myanmar in 2004: Another Year of Uncertainty', *Asian Survey*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2005, pp. 174–9.

and external destructive elements', junta code for enemies of the state. Promising action 'according to the law', he pressured the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee—comprised of senior *hpongyis* who rotate through membership—to order all monks to stay out of secular affairs. The next evening, the regime deployed 33 loudspeaker trucks to sweep Rangoon neighbourhoods, broadcasting announcements of a new nighttime curfew and resurrecting its ban on public meetings of more than five. Meanwhile, crack troops from the police and army took up their positions. On September 26, riot police and combat troops fired shots—some live ammunition, though mostly rubberized bullets—at unarmed protestors, and beat them in several locations. Acting on orders that undoubtedly came from Than Shwe, security forces raided Rangoon monasteries on the night of September 26–27, and in some cases unleashed wanton brutality on sleeping *hpongyis*. That night, hundreds of monks were arrested, while thousands more escaped to rural towns and villages all over the country. On September 27, troops again roughed up and shot at protestors in a number of locations. Some victims were innocent bystanders who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Other protestors were singled out for assassination, probably identified as leaders or 'destructive elements' of one sort or another.

At least thirty people died in the crackdown, including a Japanese photojournalist. Over the next few weeks, security forces carried out terrorizing post-curfew raids on more than fifty monasteries and hundreds of homes. Using the video footage and photos emailed out of the country and posted on blogs and news sites, the regime targeted those suspected of leading or participating in protests. In the tradition of their British colonial predecessors, security personnel rounded up family members of suspects and held them hostage until the targets could be flushed out of hiding. At least three thousand in Rangoon were arrested and charged with terrorism. They were detained and interrogated in six hastily assembled holding camps around the city. A dozen or more people, including eight monks, died in custody.⁴¹ Within two weeks, Myanmar's ambassador to the UN could confidently announce a full return to 'normalcy'.

⁴¹ This account of the protests and crackdown is based on research in Myanmar from November–December 2007, January–March 2008, and October 2008. I also draw on: Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar', UN Human Rights Council, 5 December 2007; and Human Rights Watch, 'Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma', December 2007.

By May 2008, when Cyclone Nargis and the subsequent storm surge of about 3.5 metres swept across the Irrawaddy Delta, killing 200,000 people, it was clear that the regime had not only weathered the storm of the previous September, but would also manage the opprobrium heading its way in the aftermath of the cyclone. Although Ban Ki-moon's discussions with junta leaders resulted in visas for dozens of foreign relief experts, the generals balked at more concessions and insisted that they would take care of the needy. (On 30 May, the *New Light of Myanmar* chastized victims for being overly reliant on foreign aid: 'Myanmar people can easily get fish for dishes by just fishing in the fields and ditches. In the early monsoon, large edible frogs are abundant.') However, once the emergency phase of the disaster was over, international donors proved less willing to take on the long-term commitments required for rehabilitation and recovery. By late 2008 they had paid out only half the funds requested in the UN appeal. Aid to farmers remained particularly neglected.

Sources of power

Inside and outside the country, the euphoria of the moment in September 2007, when marching monks were joined by ever-greater crowds of hopeful citizens, masked the improbability of meaningful political change. Myanmar's military-based regime was not crumbling. In some respects its position has even been reinforced over the past two decades. The sources of its power can be traced to its historical origins. The colonial state that preceded it had decapitated the indigenous social order, and instituted a policy of ethnic divide and rule—'martial' frontier races against the centre—that was extreme even by imperial standards. The British order collapsed, levelled by war, without having established the typical raft of post-colonial relays. The result, as the Japanese withdrew, was an institutional vacuum and an ethnic powder-keg. In these conditions, the Burmese army soon emerged as the most—indeed, the only—credible upholder of national unity and patriotic identity, while its promise of a swift route to modernity gave it further popular appeal.

Ne Win's regime was routinely authoritarian, secretive and suspicious of outsiders, not without historical reason; but—though conflicts raged unceasingly in the frontier regions—it shed relatively little Burman blood. In putting an end to the ethnic fighting SLORC and its successor,

the SPDC, have neutralized the regime's most determined enemies, qualitatively strengthening their national position. In this respect it is worth noting where the monks did not march in September 2007. The geography of protest mapped almost isomorphically onto the 120-year-old administrative partition separating Ministerial Burma from the Excluded Areas.⁴² The September protests played out mainly in the central heartlands, which have seen popular mobilizations around political and economic demands every decade since the early twentieth century. By contrast, the grievances of local populations along the borders with India, China and Thailand historically tended to be mobilized behind proto-national claims for autonomy from Rangoon.

For over a century the contrast between the modernity of the mostly Burman centre and the neglect and 'backwardness' of the hill regions had been a political given. However, that landscape changed when the frontier wars were ended, flawed though the ceasefire agreements were. Since the late 1980s, the national topography of development and wealth generation has undergone a virtual reversal, putting parts of the border regions in the forefront for what few economic opportunities exist in this very poor country. The big winners have been a handful of ceasefire leaders, regional military commanders, Chinese and Thai timber and mining companies, and drug lords; but many villagers have seized the chance to try to claw their way out of decades of insecurity. Poverty in some of these regions is rife, and by most measures far more endemic than it is in Myanmar's heartlands.⁴³ The key to explaining their relative silence in September 2007, however, is that, for ordinary farmers, traders, artisans and white-collar workers in these regions, oppression and exploitation come not just from the central regime but from a range of other sources—former rebel commanders, traditional leaders, religious authorities, foreign investors, businessmen, human traffickers, drug lords—who may provide the only available sources of income for populations poorly served by the formal economy.

After nearly half a century in power, Myanmar's *tatmadaw* retains the political initiative. After long deliberations, the National Convention

⁴² There were a few exceptions in ethnic-nationality areas, such as Myitkyina, Kachin State.

⁴³ In 2005 the UNDP/CSO survey found that the proportion of people living below the poverty line was 52 per cent in Eastern Shan State, and 70 per cent in Chin State.

established in 1993 finally concluded its work in August 2007. It was announced that the (still unpublished) Constitution would be put to a referendum in May 2008, followed by general elections in 2010. The referendum duly went ahead, despite the disaster of Cyclone Nargis, and the government press reported that the Constitution had been approved by a majority of 92 per cent, on a 98 per cent turnout. The much-redrafted Constitution, now 194 pages long, allocates a quarter of the seats in both national and provincial-level legislatures to the military, who will vote there under army discipline. The Commander-in-Chief retains the right to declare emergency rule as he sees fit, and to appoint cabinet ministers without legislative approval.⁴⁴ As yet, no election law has been promulgated to define the rules of campaigning in the 2010 election, but it is generally assumed that the NLD will be barred from participation.

The regime has further buttressed its position through the creation of a proto-party body, the Union Solidarity Development Association, founded in 1993 to 'organize the people to have belief in the nation's policies and take part with might and main in implementing them.'⁴⁵ The USDA now claims over 25 million members, including government employees (some of whom do not realize they have become members), businessmen, teachers and students. Their membership earns them access to welfare services, business licences and educational openings. In some districts the USDA branch holds greater sway than the local administration, but in most there is an extensive overlap of personnel between the USDA, local officials and business interests. The USDA has begun to expand into explicitly political areas, including the harassment of opposition leaders or foreign-aid projects and, most recently, the creation of the *Swan Arr Shin* militia. It can be confident of success in the 2010 legislative elections.

In the short term, 2010 may be the cause of further conflicts in the border regions. In April 2009, as the end of the 'Road Map' process hove into view, the junta demanded that the minority forces disarm and place their troops under central command, as a new Border Guard Force. Some of the smaller ceasefire groups acquiesced, but at least four major forces have thus far rebuffed it and regrouped as the Myanmar

⁴⁴ See the analysis of the new constitution in International Crisis Group, 'Myanmar: Towards the Elections', *Asia Report*, no. 174, 20 August 2009.

⁴⁵ *New Light of Myanmar*, 23 May 2006; on its founding see *New Light of Myanmar*, 16 September 1993.

Peace and Democracy Front.⁴⁶ With the deadline looming, Burmese artillery units moved into positions around the autonomy zones of the recalcitrant groups, including the Wa and Kachins. On 8 August 2009 the *tatmadaw* took advantage of an internal power struggle within the Kokang ceasefire group to move in and overthrow its leader. Thousands of villagers fled in fear across the border to China. However, the other three members of the Peace and Democracy Front offered little support to the Kokangs during the crisis beyond a joint press statement.⁴⁷

Oppositions?

In the central regions, there is widespread popular anger and contempt for the dictatorship, and many Burmese take pride in 'everyday forms of resistance'—delighting at video CDs of military gaffes, for instance. But the negative strength of the regime still holds. The junta can draw on decades of mistrust to sustain divisions between a Burman-dominated National League for Democracy and the militant minority groupings, as well as fostering differences among the latter. It has survived, not because it faces no criticism, but because its multiple opponents—NLD, *sangha*, minority groups, exile organizations—have found it impossible to unite. Thus no countervailing power is capable of challenging its domination at national level. When partial challenges emerge, the generals are adept at managing them—as with the 1996 student protests in Rangoon or the monks in 2007—through a combination of bribery and repression. In doing so they can draw on a range of pacification measures that dates back to Crosthwaite.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The four are the United Wa State Army, 15,000–20,000 troops; the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), 5,000–6,000 troops; the Mongla-based National Democratic Alliance Army–Eastern Shan State (NDAA–ESS), under 2,000 troops; and the Kokang ceasefire group, 1,000–1,500 troops. See Tom Kramer, 'Burma's Cease-fires at Risk', Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, September 2009.

⁴⁷ The United Wa State Army did send troops to Kokang in early August, but Wa leaders insist they were there to mediate between the Burmese Army and the Kokang, and that they left without a shot fired on August 28, when they concluded their mediation had failed. A small number of Wa soldiers stayed behind to protect a bridge of strategic value to the Wa, but they did not fight on the behalf of the Kokang. Kramer, 'Burma's Cease-fires at Risk'.

⁴⁸ The SLORC regularly invoked the Village Act (1907) and Towns Act (1907), laws which allow local leaders to demand compulsory labour from residents. Martin Smith makes the point about conflict 'management' in *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, Washington, DC 2007.

Western governments and Burmese exile groups alike insist that power should be transferred to the NLD, the only entity they consider legitimate. Unfortunately the NLD no longer resembles a political party of any sort. More than a decade ago, after scores of its MPs had been jailed or forced into exile, Aung San Suu Kyi and her elderly lieutenants imposed a ruthless centralism on the small number of elected MPs still active and expelled those who disagreed, ending all pretence of intra-party democracy. With Suu Kyi under house arrest for most of the last two decades and her ‘Uncles’—as the octogenarians on the Central Executive Committee are called—lacking either imagination or much of a following, the NLD is no longer a mobilizing force. They were as out of touch as the generals when the August 2007 fuel-price hikes decimated the economy: an NLD spokesperson actually denounced the protests led by the 88 Generation. Soon thereafter, the ‘Youth Wing’ left the party. Suu Kyi retains the admiration of most Burmese, including minorities. But many among the latter are reticent when it comes to the question of her and the NLD’s fitness for rule. They have not forgotten that the Uncles are themselves ex-officers who led Four Cuts counter-insurgency campaigns in the borderlands, while the NLD has never given serious consideration to federalist demands.

The *sangha* could, and still can, call upon deep reserves of moral authority in their criticisms of the regime, yet cannot be anything more than a body of dissenters from, or accessories to, the ruling power. Individual monks have occasionally been resistance leaders, but in the past hundred years none have ever presented a serious threat to the governing elite. As September 2007 indicated, a section of the *sangha* is still ready to give voice to the social desperation it has seen developing over the last fifteen or twenty years. But whatever moral leverage they may have had in their boycotts of alms from *lu-gyi*, their courage was not enough to shake the *tatmadaw*, let alone overthrow it.

The best-organized opposition forces in Myanmar are also the most divided. Numerous former insurgent groups—17 at least—negotiated separate ceasefire agreements which generally allowed them to retain both a military and a civilian wing.⁴⁹ They are quite adept at mobilizing around particularistic grievances and can be a costly nuisance to

⁴⁹ Any attempt to give a specific number of groups is somewhat misleading, given that the regime on several occasions managed to break off small factions, sometimes performing lavish ceasefire ceremonies with only a few dozen soldiers.

the regime—often out of all proportion to their actual troop strength—through disrupting lucrative trade routes and natural-resource concessions. But without real alliances in the Burman centre, they cannot threaten the regime. The position of the ethnic-minority leaders is in any case becoming increasingly difficult. A generation ago they led their followers into ceasefires with promises of peace and development, but existence in the borderlands remains precarious, in the face of growing food insecurity, disease and exploitation by Thai and Chinese logging and mining firms. Many former rebel leaders now face rivals—either internal to the group or critics from the diaspora—who charge them with collaboration or ‘being too close to’ the SPDC. The demand that they now disarm and regroup as a Border Force under central command greatly increases these pressures. On the other hand, in all these regions there are large numbers of people who define themselves as ethnically distinct from the group for which the post-ceasefire autonomy zone or state is named. This provides the SPDC with a range of possible allies to court in a divide-and-rule strategy, while the internal power struggles of the ceasefire groups can create pretexts for the *tatmadaw* to move into new territory. Again, if the minorities opt to resist disarmament they may face the same fate as Kokang.

A fourth front of opposition is constituted by Burmese exiles, along with the transnational advocacy networks that have embraced and trained them. The courageous youth of the 1988 uprising who fled the country have managed to make ‘Free Burma!’ as common a clarion call as ‘Free Tibet!’ in enlightened Western circles, and they have established highly professional media agencies such as *Mizzima* and *Irrawaddy*. But their discourse, largely framed in terms of ‘regime change’, is often reduced to easily digestible, ahistorical narratives for Western audiences eager to sign online petitions or join media-friendly campaigns. The tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions of dollars spent on pro-democracy campaigns outside Burma may have provided gifted young exiles with helpful technical training and higher education, but they have yet to produce organizations capable of fostering significant political change inside the country. To the extent that their tactics have relied on Western governments’ economic sanctions, they have had a detrimental effect—damaging opportunities for small farmers, artisans and traders, while strengthening the hand of the most xenophobic generals, who carried on lining their pockets with commodity-export deals. In many cases, the SPDC has managed to turn embargoes, travel restrictions and Security

Council resolutions to its own advantage. Overseas advocates continue to press for better, 'smarter' measures that will finally deliver a crushing blow. But inside Myanmar, US and UK sanctions policies are viewed as having definitively failed to bring about democratic reform.

Nevertheless, the Senior General may not sleep easy in his bed. No leader of post-colonial Burma has ever left his post without losing face, as well as his family's assets, status and even freedom. After U Nu was kicked out of office in 1962, he spent four years in jail. In the 1970s, he tried haplessly to mount an armed offensive against Ne Win's BSPP. A frail old man by the time of the 1988 uprising, he nonetheless declared himself Prime Minister again, though few paid him much attention. He died in 1995. After Ne Win's resignation in July 1988, the former dictator lived out his days in seclusion watching videos, while his influence waned over the new generation of generals in SLORC. He died alone in utter irrelevance in 2002. His children and grandchildren, long accustomed to their privileged lives as the first family, eventually found themselves in jail, charged with hatching a bizarre coup plan involving 'black magic, soothsayers and three little dolls representing the country's three top generals'.⁵⁰ Senior General Saw Maung, Ne Win's successor, was booted from SLORC in 1992 and lived under a kind of house arrest until his death in 1997. Khin Nyunt, probably Than Shwe's only real rival in the last 20 years, was arrested along with his wife, two sons, daughter, son-in-law and fortune teller in 2004. He was charged with corruption, but his real crime was that he had become known as a 'soft-liner' and was thought to be willing to compromise on Suu Kyi. Moreover, his MI files contained dirt on everyone in the military, including Than Shwe and the vice chairman of the SPDC, General Maung Aye. The Senior General is well aware of this history, and neither he nor his insatiable family will go down without a fight.

Than Shwe has presided over a fire-sale of the country's resources: large sections of its forests have been clear-cut, its rivers dredged for gold, and jade mined for export. Even the Irrawaddy, the symbolic lifeblood of the nation, is on the verge of being dammed near its source in Kachin State, as Chinese companies seek to generate electricity for nearby Yunnan. This has accompanied an unprecedented impoverishment of central

⁵⁰ In December 2008, Ne Win's daughter, Sanda Win, was released after six years under house arrest. Her husband and three sons remain in jail. For the charges, see *New York Times*, 27 September 2002.

and southern Myanmar, the historic heartland as Burmans define it. In September 2007 the Western media was keen to conclude that the monks' messages about suffering were a call for 'human rights' and 'democracy', constituting another colourful revolution on the march. The marchers undoubtedly carried multiple agendas into the streets, but their central demands were economic, focused on fuel prices and common suffering—a call for compassion. The protests reflected the sense that Myanmar's once proud heartland teeters on the brink of economic and social catastrophe.

A real challenge to the regime would have to overcome the deep divisions fostered by the British, the continuation of which under the *thakins* and their military successors constitutes Myanmar's great failure. It would need to rally both the minorities and the deeply impoverished centre, as well as sectors of the armed forces, behind an economic programme that would heal the country's gaping inequalities, and in support of a constitutional settlement at once federal and democratic. If this is deemed too much to ask, Anglo-American critics—the British in particular—should look in the mirror. The repertoire of ethnic division and state repression upon which the *tatmadaw* draw is the reflected legacy of their own rule.