

**Burma's Warrior Kings and
By Bertil Lintner**

the Generation of 8.8.88

Next year will mark the 20th anniversary of what is arguably the most massive pro-democracy uprising in modern Asian history.

¹ Speech by Khin Nyunt, broadcast on Radio Rangoon, September 24, 1988, FBIS FE/0265 B/1; speech by Saw Maung, broadcast on Radio Rangoon, September 26, FBIS FE/0266 B/1.

IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1988, millions of people across Burma took to the streets to vent pent-up frustrations with a military-dominated regime that had turned the county into an economic, political and social wreck. General strike committees were formed not only in major cities, but also in the remotest parts of rural Burma, in more than 200 of the country's 314 townships. It was an entire population, rural as well as urban, in unison demanding an end to the one-party rule of General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), which had held the country in its suffocating grip for more than two decades. It was not a centrally organized uprising, but a spontaneous — and simultaneous — outburst of anger. It was a stunning outpouring of sentiment, as rice farmers from the countryside in bullock carts joined office workers, students, civil servants and virtually everyone else, save the military, to demand change.

Most governments would have collapsed under such intense pressure, but, on September 18, 1988, the Burmese military stepped in to shore up a regime overwhelmed by popular protest. Thousands of people were gunned down in the streets of Rangoon and elsewhere as the brutally named State Law and Order Restoration Council took charge. Activists fled to Burma's border areas to link up with the country's many ethnic rebel armies, which had been fighting the central government for decades.

An effective armed struggle never materialized, but after suppressing the uprising, the junta that was formed after the military's intervention actually permitted the formation of political parties and promised to hold "free and fair elections" that would, in the words of the country's powerful intelligence chief, Brigadier-General Khin Nyunt, "hand over power to the party that wins." Junta chief General Saw Maung said on September 23, 1988 that "the fact that we have formed a government with very few people is evidence that we have absolutely no desire to hold on to state power for a prolonged period." The government that the junta had appointed on September 20 consisted of only nine ministers.¹

Those pledges — all of which were later broken — were perhaps meant as a cynical gesture to appease the international community, which almost unanimously condemned the bloodbath in Burma. The United States, Japan and the European countries suspended their aid programs and were preparing to impose sanctions on Burma unless the generals agreed to implement meaningful democratic reforms. But most of Burma's immediate neighbors, and especially China, adopted a more conciliatory approach — what the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) calls "constructive engagement."

The result of this divided response by the world to the barbarities of the regime has continued to the present day. The fact that the military remains in power almost twenty years after the events of 1988 reflects the failure of both ASEAN's softer approach and economic and political pressures from the West. Sanctions and isolation by western democracies have weakened the economy but not significantly undermined the junta's hold on power. Meanwhile, its neighbors — China, India and ASEAN — continue to trade and invest in the country, allowing the generals to use Burma's ample natural resources and strategic geographical position to survive. The fractured exile opposition keeps the issue alive on the Internet and on op-ed pages but these groups have almost no impact on Burma itself, a fact that well-meaning funding agencies more or less ignore while they keep the tap running.

But the stasis in international relations and exile politics does not mean that nothing is happening inside the country. There are voices of opposition, leaders from the 1988 movement who chose to remain in the country, and their activities are quietly allowing some light to shine in one of the world's most repressive systems.

A STATE-WITHIN-A-STATE

Going back to the aftermath of the Rangoon spring of 1988, assembly elections were held in May 1990 and they resulted in a landslide victory for the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD), which captured 392 of 485

seats even though its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, at the time was under house arrest.

The assembly was never convened, and Saw Maungs's statement about a "small government" was soon forgotten; the present Burmese cabinet consists of 33 ministers, of whom only three are not military men. Not only has the Burmese regime survived but the military now is more firmly entrenched in power than at any time since it overthrew the country's last democratically elected government in a coup d'état on March 2, 1962. The population has been cowed into submission, and the once mighty NLD has been reduced to a gathering of mostly elderly people in Rangoon as Aung Saan Suu Kyi remains under house arrest and its younger members either languish in prison or live in exile abroad.

The main reason for the Burmese military's uncompromising stand is simple: over many years in power the generals have committed what the rest of the world, and domestic opinion, would consider serious crimes against humanity, including mass murder, theft of property and public funds, rape and collusion with drug traffickers. They have too much to hide, and nothing to gain, from allowing more openness and transparency. A Rangoon-based Western diplomat once put it to me quite bluntly: "They fear that if they don't hang together, they'll hang separately."

The fear of retribution is so strong that when, after the 1990 election Kyi Maung, then acting head of the NLD, said in an interview with the now defunct Hong Kong magazine *Asiaweek* that, "Here in Burma we do not need any Nuremberg-style tribunal," he promptly was arrested. The very mention of Nuremberg scared the generals.

Equally important, the Burmese military has created a parallel state-within-a-state, a society where army personnel, their families and dependants enjoy a position far more privileged than their counterparts ever had in, for instance, Thailand and Indonesia. In both those countries, some degree of pluralism was always accepted even during their darkest years of military dictatorship.

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In Burma, there are special schools and hospitals for the military and their dependents. They live in secluded, subsidized housing and shop for goods which are not available in ordinary stores. An army pass assures the holder of a seat on a train or an airplane, and a policeman would never dare to report him or her for violating traffic rules.

WARRIOR KINGS REBORN

In November 2005, the junta even moved the capital to a secluded location near Pyinmana, almost 400 kilometers north of Rangoon. An entirely new city named Naypyidaw was built in what until then was jungle — and ordinary citizens do not have the right to settle there without special permission. And, typically, only foreign defense attaches, not civilian diplomats,



Aung San Suu Kyi delivering an address from the gate of her home in 1996, where she remains under house arrest

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were invited to attend the Armed Forces Day celebrations, when they were held there for the first time on March 27, 2006.

This year's celebrations were somewhat more open, with foreign media invited to watch columns of soldiers march past newly erected, larger than life statues of the three most prominent warrior kings in Burmese history: Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya. Armed Forces Day is meant to commemorate the day in 1945 when Burmese nationalists took up arms against the Japanese, whose occupation they had previously supported. The warrior kings, however, hark back to a distant past that seems less murky than Burma's modern history.

Anawratha founded the First Burmese Empire in 1044 AD and established a new capital at the temple city of Pagan on the banks of the Irawaddy River, southwest of today's Mandalay, and eventually expanded his empire down to the Andaman Sea.

Bayinnaung was Burma's most celebrated warrior king. He reigned from his palaces on the central plains of Pegu between 1551 and 1581 and conquered territories north of Pagan, parts of the Shan plateau in the east, and pushed as far east as Chiang Mai in northern Thailand and Vientiane in Laos. He was the most prominent ruler of the Second Burmese Empire.

Alaungpaya reigned in the 18th century and was the first king of the Konbaung Dynasty, the third and last of the Burmese Empires. Alaungpaya also fought the Mon, and his successor, Hsinbyushin, sacked the Thai capital of Ayutthaya in 1767, a deed for which the Thais have never forgiven the Burmese. But the Konbaung kings were defeated by the British in the Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-1826, and 1885, and the country became a British colony. In 1885, Thibaw, the last king of Burma, was led away by the British in front of a mourning and wailing crowd gathered to say farewell to the last monarch of an independent Burmese state. He was sent, with his once-powerful wife, Supayalat, and their children into exile in Ratanagiri in India, where he died in 1916.

That these dead kings are a living force was clear from present junta leader General Than Shwe's Armed Forces Day speech in Naypyidaw last year when he outlined his vision for the country. "Our *Tatmadaw* [armed forces] should be a worthy heir to the traditions of the capable *tatmadaws* established by noble kings Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya," he said.² Democratic reforms are clearly not on the minds of the Burmese generals. They see themselves as successors to the pre-colonial warrior kings, a fact reflected in the name of the new capital. Naypyidaw means "capital" or "place of a king" in old-fashioned usage. It is populated almost exclusively by soldiers and government officials.

Democracy is seen as a threat to the existing order because it would deprive the ruling elite — which is synonymous with the military — of its unique privileges. There are more than four hundred thousand men in Burma's armed forces, and if family members are included the population of this privileged "second state" would be approximately two million out of a total population of 48 million. This ruling elite is prepared to suppress any movement for democracy, as it did with such brutal finality in 1988. And as long as it is able to sell gas, timber and minerals to its neighbors, the sanctions imposed by the West will have little effect. Since 1988, China has also supplied Burma with more than US\$1.4 billion worth of military hardware, including fighter, ground attack and transport aircraft, tanks and armored personnel carriers, naval vessels, a variety of towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, surface-to-air missiles, trucks and infantry equipment.

China has also given Burma crucial diplomatic support in the United Nations. For instance, on January 12 of this year, China, along with Russia, thwarted the adoption of a draft resolution in the Security Council that would have called on Burma to release all political prisoners, open a real dialogue with the opposition and end its military attacks and human rights abuses against ethnic minorities.

Sponsored by the United States and the United Kingdom, the text received nine votes

in favor, the necessary number for a majority. Those in favor were Belgium, France, Ghana, Italy, Panama, Peru, Slovakia, the UK and the US. But permanent members China and Russia used their vetoes, and South Africa also voted against the resolution. There were three abstentions: Indonesia, Qatar and the Republic of the Congo. Speaking before the vote, Chinese Ambassador Wang Guangya said the problems in Burma were an internal matter and the government and other groups should be allowed to continue their efforts towards "reconciliation."

But there are few signs of any such "reconciliation." Sooner or later change may come to Burma, but not because of pressures from the West, or ASEAN's "constructive engagement." Nor are the many exile opposition groups, based mainly in Thailand but also in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere, likely to be playing any significant role other than keeping the issue alive internationally.

For most of the Thailand-based groups, survival — not political change in Burma — has become the overriding priority. They also advocate "dialogue" and "national reconciliation" — popular buzzwords with the international donor agencies that fund the groups, but of little or no relevance inside Burma, where the military talks to no one but itself.

Attempts to forge workable alliances to coordinate the struggle have failed, mainly because individual groups have to compete for donor money. And the money has kept coming — from the National Endowment for Democracy and George Soros' Open Society Institute in the US, the Norwegian government, Danish and Swedish aid organizations, church groups all over the world and private donors.

THE 88 GENERATION

Not surprisingly, rifts have emerged between the exiles and those activists who are still in the country. While the exiles in Thailand are active publishing a flurry of magazines and journals, and holding endless meetings and workshops on subjects such as "democracy and the media," "women in development" and "capacity build-

ing," they have become a world unto themselves where they preach to the converted. And despite occasional raids by the Thai police, they can, by and large, work freely without fear of being arrested or deported.

Inside the country, however, there is an entirely different reality. "We recognize that opponents of the regime living in exile are doing a good job and are part of the struggle for democracy. But we have made the decision to stay here and lead the struggle from the front... call us the generation of 1988. We are the front line in the struggle for democracy," a Burmese man in his thirties told a foreign reporter in September 2005.³

The young student activists of 1988 are now in their late thirties or early forties and they meet regularly in teashops in Rangoon to discuss politics. Most of them have spent years in jail, "plucked from their families, from their studies," to quote the foreign reporter. "At last free, they still live in a kind of captivity — watched by the regime's agents, unable to find jobs in any official capacity, locked out of the universities and colleges which once offered them the promise of relatively rewarding academic careers."

The most prominent among the "88 Generation" is Min Ko Naing, the student leader who was arrested in March 1989 — and released only in November 2005, after nearly 16 years in solitary confinement. In 1988 he was a 26-year old zoology student addressing crowds of tens of thousands in Rangoon. When he was released he was 42, and his years in prison had left their marks on his face and body. In 2005, he looked old and haggard — but his fighting spirit had not been quelled. "The people of Burma must have the courage to say 'no' to injustice and 'yes' to the truth," he said at a meeting of the newly formed "88-Generation Students' Group" in Rangoon in August 2006. "They must also work to correct their own wrongdoing that hurts society."

Many countries in Asia have certain "generations" that fought for democracy, and sacrificed much of their lives for it. In South Korea, the term "386 generation" was coined in the 1990s to describe those who attended university and

fought for democracy in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. Today many of them are university lecturers, lawyers, newspaper columnists, even ministers in the government. They are a new liberal elite, which is admired by the public at large because of their past sacrifices.

In Thailand, people speak of the “1970s generation,” men and women who took to the streets in October 1973 and forced the military government, led by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn,

azines are privately owned, although publishing licenses are more easily obtained by those with strong connections to the government.

Still, Burma today has nearly 400 newspapers, journals and magazines, and the number is growing steadily — in November 2005 the government issued 15 new publishing licenses. These publications may operate under some of the most restrictive laws and regulations in the world, but they are nevertheless becoming bolder and more

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into exile. Three years later, Thanom and some of his associates returned to Thailand — which caused a new wave of student-led protests. These, however, were crushed by the military, and thousands of students, teachers and labor activists took to the jungle where they joined the insurgent Communist Party of Thailand. But they were hardly communists, and, before long, fell out with the diehard CPT leadership. Following a general amnesty in 1980, almost all of them returned to Bangkok and other cities, where many became prominent political and literary figures. To have been with the CPT in the jungle in the 1970s bears no stigma; on the contrary, they are respected because they endured hardships and continued to fight for what they believed in.

Burma now has its “88 generation,” and it is coming of age. They are not only meeting in teashops, many have become journalists and writers. Burma's has five daily newspapers which are published by the government, but — contrary to what is generally assumed in the outside world — the majority of the country's journals and mag-

azines are privately owned. In fact, the media in Burma have become one of the few dynamic sectors in a society that remains mostly stagnant.

Local journalists and editors often state that their main motivation for getting into the profession is “public service” and a desire to do something for the country. Many are interested in politics and development, and find that journalism — despite all the constraints placed upon them — is one of the few professions that allows them to play a role in current events in a constructive fashion. Many took part in the 1988 uprising and remain faithful to their democratic ideals.

THE FUTURE

If any political or social force is going to play a role in Burma's future and carry the country's unfinished renaissance forward, it is not the increasingly geriatric NLD, but men and women of this new 88 generation. The government has also realized their political potential — and reacted in its own inimitable way. On September 27, 2006 it was learned that Min Ko Naing had

been arrested along two other former political prisoners, Ko Ko Gyi and Ko Htay Kywe. Each had spent 15 years in the Burmese military's notorious prisons, but they had not given up hope for a better future for Burma.

Their arrest turned out to be counterproductive, because the 88 generation is a generation, not a political party. On October 2, their comrades who had not been jailed started an unprecedented, nationwide signature campaign. People put their names under demands for freedom for Burma's political prisoners and they could also in a few words express their grievances and desires. When the campaign ended on October 23, 535,580 signatures had been collected all over the country. The results were sent to UN headquarters in New York.

At the same time, the 88 generation urged citizens across the country to participate in a "Multiple Religious Prayer" to be held in Buddhist and Hindu temples, Christian churches and mosques. People flocked to the holy sites, dressed in white, the symbol of Burma's many martyrs. The government was no doubt taken aback by this massive, but entirely peaceful, expression of dissent. A few more people were arrested, but then there were no more repressive measures. The generals were busy building their new royal capital.

The 88 generation is now a force to be reckoned with, although it has no proper leadership or organization. In fact, they still see the detained NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi as their leader: "She is the one person that can bring about reconciliation and lead us into a new, democratic future," one of the activists told the foreign reporter who interviewed them in September 2005.

But as long as the military remains united, even the 88 generation will not be able to change Burma. Many observers argue that a new order must come from a change of mind within the armed forces. Given the resistance that could be expected to any challenge to the status quo from the mainstream military, the outcome could be very violent, and perhaps even result in civil war.

Collapse of the regime could also lead to anarchy and chaos, as there are no power centers other than the military. Burma has not had a truly civilian government since 1962, and lacks people with administrative skills and experience. Given its ethnic diversity — there are several dozens different nationalities speaking different languages and many have been fighting secessionist wars for decades — there is also the fear that Burma could fall apart as Yugoslavia did after the death of Marshal Tito.

The future looks grim for Burma, and there are no easy solutions to its multitude of problems. A younger generation of army officers, who see the need to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement and representative of the ethnic minorities, is probably the only hope.

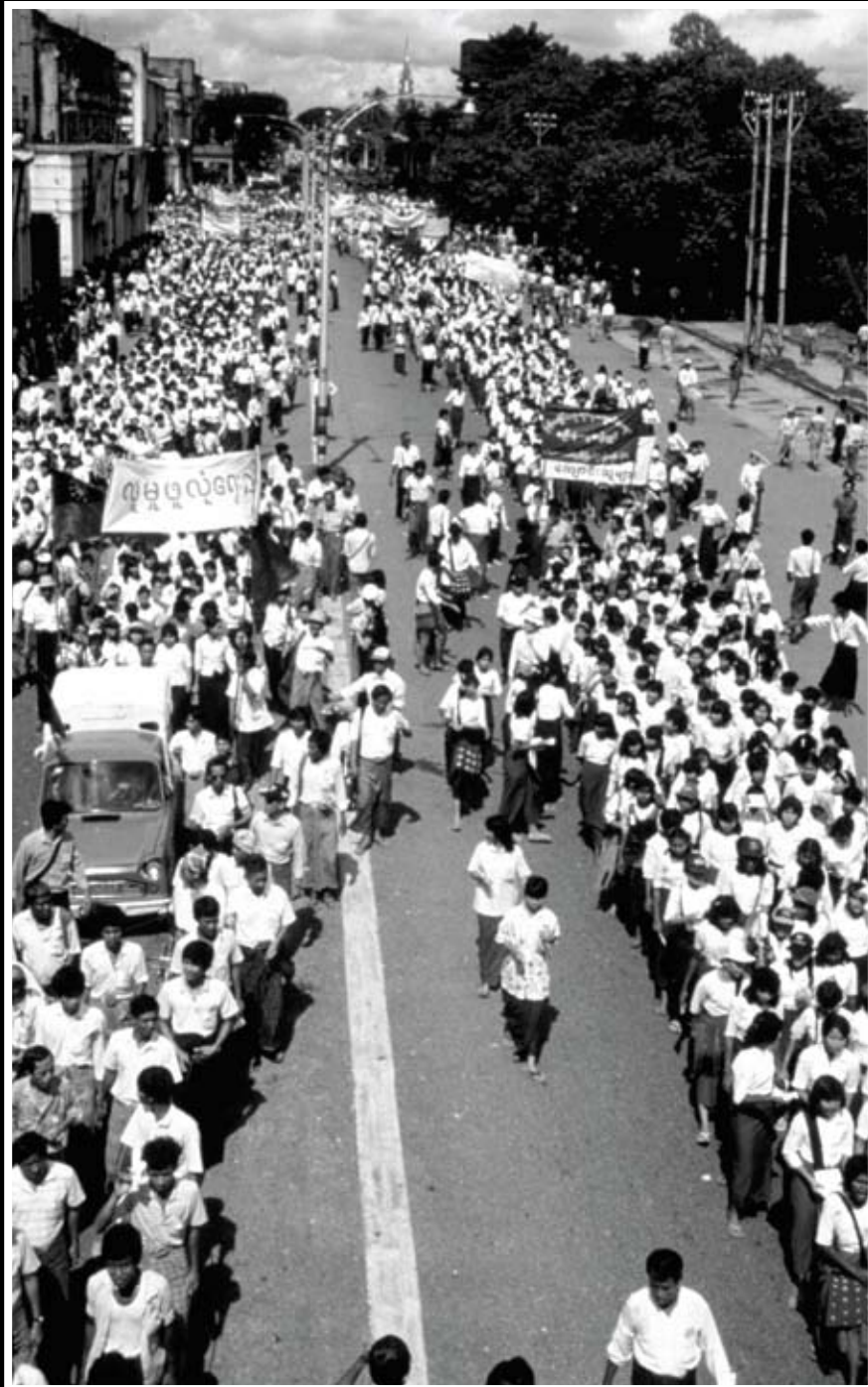
The present strongman, General Than Shwe, is seen by many as the most inflexible of all the generals. He is 74 years old, but not about to retire. However, his health is failing and he may not be in power much longer. For now, we are unaware of any "young Turks" lurking in the wings, and despite several purges — most recently the October 2004 sacking and jailing of intelligence chief Khin Nyunt — there are no signs of serious cracks within the ranks.

The Burmese quagmire is, therefore, likely to continue for the foreseeable future, with some countries trying to engage the warrior kings in Naypyidaw and others condemning them. In the meantime, the generals make their own decisions, regardless of what the outside world says or thinks.

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Protesters march through the streets of Rangoon (now Yangon), September 8, 1988 — one month after the initial demonstration