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Title	Plight of Myanmar's people : challenges for the international community
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Citation	Roberts, C. B. (2007). Plight of Myanmar's people : challenges for the international community. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 102). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2007
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/4274
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Plight of Myanmar's People: Challenges for the International Community

Christopher B. Roberts

4 October 2007

Recent protests in Myanmar headed by Buddhist monks have captured the attention of the world. The military leaders are unlikely to relinquish their power in the absence of a unified international response. Such a response will necessitate Myanmar's strategic partners coming together behind a total trade and arms embargo.

ON THE auspicious day of 8.8.88, tens of thousands of students in Myanmar led nationwide protests against an oppressive dictatorship that had needlessly driven their resource-rich country to the brink of bankruptcy. Despite decades of repressed frustration, the final spark to trigger the protests occurred when many Burmese lost their savings following an unfounded decision to demonetise the banknotes. Nearly two decades later, the Myanmar government, alternatively known as the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC), was similarly erratic and arbitrary in an August announcement to increase subsidised fuel prices from US\$1.18 to US\$1.96 per gallon. The price of fuel had been as little as 14 cents just two years earlier. As far as the people were concerned – and reminiscent of the protests in 1988 – the hike in fuel prices was simply the final straw. Nonetheless, a key difference on this occasion is that the deeply revered Buddhist monks (*Sangha*) spearheaded the protests. In representing the needs of the people, they have made three modest requests: to ease the living conditions of Myanmar people, to release all political prisoners, and to undertake meaningful dialogue for national reconciliation.

The Junta's Response to the Protests

While the size and immediacy of the protests may have caught the regime off-guard, the 26 September military crackdown appears to have been relatively well planned, pervasive, and insidious. Rather than simply being surprised, as suggested in some media reports, the junta likely needed several days of preparation while it waited for reinforcements to arrive in Yangon and Mandalay. On the morning of the crackdown, the government declared Yangon a 'restricted area' and then sought to block the internet and phone lines. It also searched vehicles and people for cameras and recording devices throughout the many checkpoints encircling the city.

Despite the peaceful nature of the protests, the SPDC security forces soon resorted to violence including the killing of monks and protestors along with the death of a Japanese photojournalist. Vivid images of the dead and dying escaped to world's media and international leaders responded with revulsion. Most of the military have very little education or professional training, and those based in the borderlands are accustomed to frequently carrying out human rights violations against ethnic minority groups. Further, military commanders have previously provided their troops with doses of methamphetamine to increase their level of aggressiveness and according to one source, similar tactics were reportedly adopted during the crackdown in Yangon. In the absence of a drug-induced rage, it is difficult to imagine how such violent acts against the peaceful *Sangha* could have been committed in such a deeply religious society.

Aside from the many acts of unchecked brutality displayed in the media, on the whole the response of the security forces appears to have proceeded according to plan. Thus, the ominous work of the security forces continued during the dead of night with reported raids of six monasteries and the arrest of hundreds of monks. The next day, the effectiveness of the operation was evident when only a few dozen monks were seen participating in protests compared to tens of thousands on previous days. The raids of monasteries and arrests of media and protests continued each night and by the following Tuesday (2 October) there were reports suggesting that up to 4,000 monks had been detained while a further 1,000 were missing; a report by the BBC even suggested that the missing monks had been murdered. In spite of such draconian measures, the overwhelming mass of security forces, and the absence of the *Sangha's* leadership, the people of Myanmar maintained their public protests against the government through to the weekend. Their continued resolve to stand against such an oppressive and powerful force is not only indicative of a sense of rage towards the violence committed against the *Sangha*. It also represents a deeply-grounded feeling that the people of Myanmar can no longer remain in the shadows of humanity

Myanmar's Strategic Allies: Keeping the Regime Alive?

In 2008, it will be 50 years since the military first ruled Myanmar, only eleven years after the country acquired independence from the British. Throughout the following half century of international isolation, the junta managed to survive through totalitarian rule, the squandering of natural resources and (more recently) vital economic and military alliances. Myanmar's three principal export partners are Thailand (44.9%), India (11.5%) and China (6.9%). Largely because of their recent purchases of commodities, such as natural gas, the junta has been able to claim economic growth rates as high as 12.2% during the past few years. Nonetheless, the government's actions demonstrate that it is primarily interested in applying these sources of income towards the continued development of its security and civil service sectors. Consequently, both the health and education sectors have continued to collapse and, with a GDP per capita of less than US\$100, various ethnic minority groups such as the Wa, Shan and Kokang are among the poorest people in the world.

Meanwhile, in recent decades several countries have been responsible for ensuring the continued survival of Myanmar's military. Since 1988, China has provided more than US\$1 billion in weapons and ammunition at concessionary prices. Russia has supplied a squadron of advanced MIG-29 fighters and, in May 2007, finalised an agreement to supply Myanmar with a nuclear reactor. India similarly snubbed a US arms embargo with a January 2007 promise of weapons and military equipment while countries such as China have also assisted in the construction of local factories designed to manufacture items such as 'small-calibre weapons and ordnance' and anti-personnel landmines. Given recent events, while there may exist some humanitarian grounds to justify economic engagement and political dialogue, it is argued that there no longer exist any morally acceptable grounds to justify the supply of military equipment, assistance and/or aid to the SPDC.

The Way Forward?

Thousands of Myanmarese have demonstrated that they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the betterment of their country. However, in the absence of adequate support from the international community, these sacrifices may not be enough. There are two options available to the international community to possibly force the SPDC to relinquish its power in the future. The first option would be for all of Myanmar's key trading partners (e.g. Thailand and India) to threaten or (should that fail) implement, a total trade embargo against the regime. Recent events have demonstrated a lack of intention on the part of the junta to carry through with promises to enter into constructive and meaningful dialogue with its opponents – whether domestic or foreign.

The second option, which could be carried out in conjunction with the first, would involve ASEAN and the international community applying 'real' pressure on China to implement an arms embargo. Should China fail to act, then it may be necessary for organisations such as the European Union to follow through with their threat of boycotting the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Meanwhile, an end to a total

arms and trade embargo would be conditional upon an agreement by the SPDC to a 'face-saving' package along the lines of an accelerated and binding version of their 'roadmap to democracy'. Such a package would necessarily involve a commitment to elections within twelve months, agreement to a UN presence to oversee the elections, and a massive aid package to facilitate political change and prevent any humanitarian crisis. Admittedly, the probability of getting all of the allies of the SPDC to act in the interests of the Myanmar people remains low. Nevertheless, anything short of a determined and completely unified international position will likely fail to pressure the SPDC generals to relinquish their power

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