



## Burma in 1988: There Came a Whirlwind

Burma Watcher

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# BURMA IN 1988

## *There Came a Whirlwind*

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The past year has been Burma's most turbulent and violent since 1962, the year General Ne Win seized power in a military coup and initiated one of the world's most isolated and economically disastrous regimes. In 1988, after 26 years of rule, Ne Win resigned his overt political posts but retained power behind the scenes, while the Burmese people endured political turbulence, economic disintegration, and brutal repression during a heady period of political hope for a better way of life.

The article on Burma in 1987 by John B. Haseman was entitled "Change in the Air?" In 1988 there came a whirlwind of violence as the Burmese people struggled toward an end to the discredited "Burmese way to socialism" and a transition to a more moderate form of democratic government. Normal political and economic developments were overshadowed by the series of violent periods that dominated the year.

### *The Politics of Anger*

No one could have foreseen that the traumatic events of the year would start in a brawl between a small group of students and townspeople over the type of music played in a bar and cafe. But that is precisely what happened. A populace still stung by the demonetization of 80% of its currency in September 1987 was less tolerant of its government and more brazen in its response to petty repression. In March, an off-campus conflict that could have been settled by reasonable discussion escalated instead to major violence by the utter stupidity of the government's reaction. The death of a student at the hands of a ministerial bodyguard led to major

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"Burma Watcher" is the pseudonym of a diplomat who is intimately familiar with developments in Burma. He is a specialist in political/military affairs in Southeast Asia, and has published a number of articles dealing with the region. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official position of any government.

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student demonstrations at Rangoon's university campuses. Except for small disturbances following the demonetization, these were the first major antigovernment demonstrations since student protests at the burial arrangements for former U.N. Secretary-General U Thant in 1974.

The use of special riot police called Lon Htein, whose callous brutality stunned the general population, changed the conflict into a major protest by the ordinary people of Rangoon. Unofficial estimates of student deaths from beatings, bayonet stabbings, and suffocation were in the hundreds, but the government blandly announced a total of two student deaths. Government coverup attempts inflamed public opinion while thousands of students were arrested and carted off to prisons. Months later the government admitted the worst atrocity, the suffocation deaths of 41 students among over a hundred people crammed into a single police paddy wagon.

The demonstrations led to the closing of all universities in Burma until June, a move the government hoped would calm student fervor. However, people did not forget the violence of March. Rumors swirled through Rangoon about beatings and deaths at the hands of the Lon Htein, and about alleged rapes of women students imprisoned at Rangoon's notorious Insein Prison. There were demands for a full government accounting of the dead and missing.

Political activity was renewed and the second period of violence occurred in late June. It started as a peaceful march of students down a major road from Rangoon University. The same Lon Htein riot police attempted to break up the march by driving a truck into the front ranks of the demonstrators, killing or injuring several junior high school students. The enraged crowd turned on the police and beat eight of them to death on the spot. The Lon Htein fired into the crowds of demonstrators at several points, dispersing them and incurring even more hatred in the process. All schools in Burma, from elementary level through universities, were closed indefinitely and remain closed at this writing.

In the aftermath of the riots and under great pressure from an aroused populace, Chairman U Ne Win called extraordinary meetings of the ruling Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) and the Pyitthu Hluttaw (national assembly) in late July. It was widely believed the sessions would result in some political concessions, including the expulsion from the BSPP of General Secretary Sein Lwin. Instead U Ne Win and President San Yu resigned their party and state posts, and in the ensuing power vacuum the BSPP appointed Sein Lwin, the most hated man in the country, as both the BSPP chairman and president of Burma. Incredibly, the man held responsible in the people's eyes for the brutality of March and June, as well as for the deaths of students in 1962 and 1974, became the

country's chief of state and party leader. Popular outrage was immediate and widespread. Demonstrations began in Rangoon and quickly spread to most other major cities in Burma. Initially led by students, the ranks of demonstrators quickly filled with people from all walks of life; by early August hundreds of thousands were marching through Rangoon and other cities demanding the resignation of Sein Lwin and an accounting of students missing after the March and June incidents. The demonstrators also carried signs calling for democracy and the removal of the one-party system run by the BSPP. Martial law was declared on August 3, and combat troops were brought directly from front line duty against Karen insurgents to patrol the streets of Rangoon.

### *The Politics of Violence*

Throughout the turmoil of March and June the Burmese armed forces (Tatmadaw) had retained a popular image. Although present on the streets, military forces had been held in reserve and were not deployed against the demonstrators. Popular mythology reported instances of soldiers restraining the brutal Lon Htein in their clubbing of students, and the feeling was that the Tatmadaw supported the students in their confrontation with the police. Years of effective propaganda have portrayed the Tatmadaw as children of the nation, born of the people and defenders of the country. The standard image shows loyal sacrifice as soldiers leave their family and loved ones and depart for a life of hardship and danger on the front lines. Songs, movies, and books have been written furthering this image, and the effort had been a huge success. The people of Burma had been conditioned to think of their army as a force of strength, deployed on the country's frontiers to combat a wide array of insurgent movements that threatened the nation's security. Certainly the 80% of Burmese living in "metropolitan Burma," the historic center of Burman society along the great Irrawaddy, Chindwin, and Sittang rivers, had little chance to see the Tatmadaw in action.

Even as late as August 8th, five days after the declaration of martial law and the banning of gatherings and demonstrations, thousands of people marched through Rangoon. Student marchers were seen paying homage to the squads of soldiers deployed on every street corner, and the expanding demonstrations remained peaceful, without interference from the military. But sometime that day—the 8th—a decision was made at the highest level of government to use force against the marchers. After warning demonstrators in front of City Hall to disperse or be shot, the army opened fire. Dozens were shot and the violence was on. Uglier and uglier incidents multiplied throughout Rangoon. Troops, fully deployed all over

the city, fired on unarmed demonstrators at will, chased fleeing civilians and shot them, and fired indiscriminately into houses and at innocent people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. In one of the worst incidents, soldiers followed a group of protesting nurses into the compound of Rangoon General Hospital, which had become a central gathering place for demonstrators, and opened fire, killing or wounding doctors, nurses, and bystanders. The soldiers returned later and again fired into the hospital. The government-controlled radio and television news lost all credibility by repeatedly broadcasting denials of this incident despite hundreds of eyewitnesses and verification by foreign diplomats.

The brutal repression lasted through August 12th. Though final figures will never be known, reliable diplomatic observers estimate that over a thousand people were killed and more than two thousand were wounded. On August 13th, Sein Lwin resigned and was replaced by Dr. Maung Maung, a civilian and close intimate of U Ne Win's inner circle. He was probably the most credible candidate available from the ruling echelon of the BSPP, and one of his first steps was to withdraw the army from the streets of Rangoon. For awhile at least, the killing stopped.

### *The Politics of Hope*

With considerable justification, the Burmese people thought they had won a significant victory. Dr. Maung Maung announced that the planned referendum on whether or not to adopt a multiparty system would go forward. But the people were no longer listening. In the streets in increasing numbers, they insisted that a referendum had already taken place and that the millions of voices already had declared their decision. Well-organized demonstrations, with growing numbers of participants, took place daily, including in front of the United States embassy. Perhaps because of U.S. official and congressional denunciation of the regime's resort to lethal force against unarmed demonstrators, the people of Rangoon adopted the embassy as a gathering place and a destination for most demonstrations, the largest of which took place on August 23 and 24 with an estimated one million people participating.

Significantly, every other city and town of any size in Burma also supported huge demonstrations. Mandalay, the great center of Burmese culture, regularly turned out hundreds of thousands into the streets. Many towns swelled over their normal populations as rural farmers came to town to demonstrate for democracy. It was no longer a case of isolated and sophisticated Rangoon speaking out. What sounded was the voice of an entire nation.

To the aroused populace, the government response was seemingly to foment fears of a breakdown of law and order. Rumors flew like wildfire, with some justifiable verification, that the government was instigating robbery and unrest with squads of undesirables. The rumors were fed when simultaneous major riots occurred in many of the country's largest prisons. After fires and rioters damaged the prisons, tens of thousands of common criminals were released into this tinderbox of suspicion and violence. Suspected criminals suffered instant vigilante justice, including beheading. Severed heads and headless bodies appeared at suburban markets and downtown street corners. Anarchy loomed, and Rangoon turned into an armed vigilante camp. Every city block or neighborhood organized its own security committee, and bamboo fences eight feet high spread across every city block to keep out nonresidents and control access.

As a result, most government services came to a halt. Heeding opposition calls for a general strike, Burma's millions of civil servants stayed home. The economy, already in shambles, ground to a halt. Fuel became scarce as refineries closed. Domestic air service was halted, and by the end of August foreign airlines stopped regular service to Rangoon. Trains, intercity buses, and ferries also stopped running. The cost of local transportation soared with the cost of fuel, and food transport slowed to a trickle. Exports of rice and teak wood came to a halt and foreign exchange reserves plunged. Mobs sacked government factories and warehouses, and they occupied police stations and confiscated weapons found there.

In this atmosphere of fear and insecurity, most foreign embassies in Rangoon evacuated their dependents and some staff members as a precautionary measure. A dramatic evacuation flight of these dependents on September 11 signaled a major change in the external view of events in Burma. An ever more isolated government accused foreign news media of undue influence in Burmese internal affairs, a damning admission that a radio broadcast or news article outside of Burma carried more weight with the Burmese people than anything the government could churn out.

### *The Politics of Opposition*

Political opposition has been prohibited in Burma for more than 26 years. Because of this, demonstrators were slow to organize and produce effective leaders. Three personalities gradually assumed importance as leaders of the opposition movement. Retired Brigadier General Aung Gyi was well known for writing a series of critical letters to BSPP Chairman U Ne Win between April and July. His letters recounted the history of the BSPP takeover of the country in 1962, criticized the government's handling of economic disintegration, and detailed human rights abuses by riot police

during the March demonstrations. Aung Gyi, imprisoned in the past for his disagreement with Ne Win's policy of nationalization of industries and property, was arrested by Sein Lwin and imprisoned for several weeks before being released by Dr. Maung Maung. Retired Major General Tin Oo retained considerable influence within the armed forces. He was forced from service and jailed in 1976, allegedly for failure to take action against coup plotting by junior officers. The third and most unlikely leader to emerge was Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Burma's revered independence leader, General Aung San. Married to a British scholar and a long-time resident of England, she was fortuitously in Burma to attend to her seriously ill mother when the demonstrations broke out.

These three figures consolidated personal support at outdoor rallies attended by hundreds of thousands of followers, and they joined forces to form the major opposition political party. Former Prime Minister U Nu, ousted by Ne Win in his 1962 coup, formed a second major opposition party. Apparently out of touch with the realities of present-day Burma, U Nu at one point declared himself the legitimate prime minister and announced formation of a government without consulting many of those he "appointed" to office. U Nu retains much affection and respect in Burma, but the degree of his political influence cannot be readily discerned.

### *The Politics of Violent Repression*

Much political activity and the heady feeling of freedom in the air vanished on September 18, when Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Saw Maung announced that the armed forces had taken over the government. The pseudo-coup placed the military, which has always been the real arm of power in Burma, in an unfamiliar, out-front political posture. The immediate effect of Saw Maung's seizure of political leadership was a renewed period of brutal military repression. Soldiers gunned down hundreds of unarmed demonstrators in the streets of Rangoon, including an ambush of unarmed civilians directly in front of the American embassy, a move probably designed to remove the air of sanctuary the environs had enjoyed.

The renewed violence, which persisted for several days, finally gained the attention of the outside world. Many foreign missions in Rangoon delivered formal protests to the military junta deploring and condemning the violence directed at unarmed demonstrators, and calling for reconciliation between the military and the political opposition. Burma's three major aid donors—Japan, West Germany, and the United States—suspended their assistance programs until genuine political reform is instituted.

The military leadership, taking its direction from Ne Win, quickly consolidated its position and ended the demonstrations. Thousands of dead and wounded jammed Rangoon hospitals and private clinics, and it was readily apparent that armed might had prevailed. Within days, the people's crude roadblocks and security fences had been dismantled and martial law succeeded in halting demonstrations. It took more than two weeks, however, to return civil servants to their ministries, and the damage imposed by mobs and two months of general strike took their toll on the government infrastructure as well as on many state-owned factories and other enterprises.

### *The Aftermath*

A key part of General Saw Maung's proclamation upon seizing overt power was a pledge to respect the people's wishes for free elections once law and order had been restored to Burma. Laws for registration of political parties were quickly drawn up and more than 100 political parties had registered by early November. It remains to be seen how many of these parties plan to contest the elections. The date for elections has not been set, although a period in early 1989 has been commonly rumored. The Saw Maung government has not granted several key demands by the opposition in the area of election management, however. The election commission was appointed by the government without opposition representation. Curfews and restrictions on public gatherings prevent much public campaigning from taking place. However, General Saw Maung did direct the divestiture of all publicly owned assets from the BSPP, and all military and government personnel have been prohibited from membership in any political party.

Ironically, the Tatmadaw, which started the year as a respected component of Burmese society, reached year's end as a popularly hated organization. Its use as an indiscriminate dispenser of violent repression resulted in a forfeiture of the respect and affection it enjoyed both locally and abroad. The armed forces remains a highly disciplined organization, apparently totally loyal to Ne Win and the narrow interests his inner clique represents. Held in thrall for years by access to special privilege and sanctioned corruption, the Tatmadaw remains the most powerful sector of society in Burma and will, for the foreseeable future, retain an overwhelmingly powerful position within the country.