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Author(s): David Steinberg
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Burma/Myanmar and the Saffron Revolution

David Steinberg

The tsunami of globalization that has swept around the world is an often-melded mixture of goods, services, technologies, ideas, and aspirations. Its socio-cultural and political effects, however, are often less predictable than its technological and economic impacts. These potential impacts have often been mixed when dealing with popular dissent, and the case of Burma/Myanmar is no exception.[1] The 2007 Buddhist monks' demonstrations in Myanmar have been called the Saffron Revolution, analogously named with the Orange, Rose, and Green Revolutions elsewhere, although the color of the monk's robes had changed from yellow to rust a generation ago.

Contemporary dissent in Burma/Myanmar must first be contextualized within the country's legacy of orthodoxy amongst government and opposition alike. The dissent expressed in the Saffron Revolution is a product of economic degradation, the frustrations of youth and young monks, and the impact of global media on the movement. Recent events illustrate the importance of the previously unrealized effects of international attention—increased in today's globalized world—on internal dissent and orthodoxy.

David Steinberg is the director of the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University.

Dissent and Orthodoxy in Myanmar. Burma/Myanmar has been under military rule since 1962. The 1988 junta that currently rules the country, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is arguably the most insular of the world's ruling groups. Its senior officials have only traveled abroad on state functions, for medical treatment, or on China and ASEAN-related trips on which they are isolated from outside influences. They are internally shielded in a Potemkin-like atmosphere in which unpleasant facts are erased or altered, diverse opinions are withheld, and disquieting questions are never asked. Their education has been controlled, manipulated, and parochial. The government continues to build infrastructure, which it claims with a degree of accuracy the outside world does not appreciate, but which the government considers visible evidence of its efficacy.

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In this society, orthodoxy—conforming to prevailing doctrines and practices—is mandatory. Vigorous elements of hierarchy are transmitted through the language and social customs, and reinforced by a dominant military command system. Power is personalized, resulting in weak institutions. The government controls all imported books and journals, and the media, when not under direct government aegis, is rigorously censored. Under current (March 2008) junta edicts, one may not criticize the new, proposed constitution, even though it is subject to a public referendum in May 2008.

Orthodoxy among the opposition is evident as well. Some members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the opposition force, were expelled from the group because they questioned party decisions. In one dissident rebellion, some were executed as government "spies." Even among expatriate Burmese living in democratic societies, to veer from the established line and question the wisdom of leading opposition figures is considered anathema. Criticism of Nobel Laureate opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi or her opinions is virtually heretical. In this environment, even among the opposition, analysis thus gives way to conformity. There is less dialogue in Washington on Burma/Myanmar issues than on other foreign policy questions: in part because of this orthodoxy, in part because it is less an internationally critical issue, and in part because there is no effective political constituency taking an alternative view on what has been called a "rogue," "pariah," or "thuggish" regime.

Popular historical dissent is still vibrant in political rhetoric and in memorial celebrations, was first focused on the anti-colonial struggle led by monks and students. It is distinct from pre-colonial attempts by various pre-

tenders to capture the throne. Two famous monks died in British jails, and violent political and religious demonstrations against the British and Indians were sometimes led by monks. Students protested against the British because of stringent University of Rangoon regulations, and youth led the nationalist movement in the 1930s. The model is still significant today, not only because of historical precedents, but also because of the intense frustration of youth—young monks and students—who see little hope for their futures in a military-dominated system of limited social mobility except through the military and military-approved channels.

Dissent against the military as part of the administration—as opposed to the military itself—has been evident since the coup of 1962. Sporadic student-led demonstrations resulted in many deaths during the socialist period of 1962-1988. The failed peoples' revolution of 1988 was sparked by a student incident, but quickly engulfed the population as a whole. The 1962 military bombing of the Rangoon University Student Union, the fabled heart of the nationalist movement, as a result of student protests is evidence of the perceived importance of students as purveyors of dissent.

Dissent has been stifled in Burma/Myanmar through fear caused by ubiquitous surveillance, arrests, and long and arbitrary prison sentences. Inappropriate and "subversive" web sites are controlled; Internet access is limited. Yet the waxing tide of dissent in the fall of 2007 that caught the world's attention is a watershed moment from which there is likely no return to stabilized control. This is evident from the nature and knowledge of the transformational Saffron Revolution.

The Saffron Revolution: The Social Context. On 15 August 2007, the government made an announcement—massive increases in gas and oil prices—that the poor were unable to reconcile. As a result, there were extensive increases in bus fares for the poor, who had been shunted to the outskirts of many cities and who could not afford the new rates. Had the junta been aware of international events, it would have known that such increases have led to massive demonstrations in many countries. Myanmar was no exception. The interpenetration of globalization with the religion of a predominantly Buddhist state was amply demonstrated by the social grievances that set off the Saffron Revolution, though its causes were far more profound and intricate.

The people of Myanmar are mired in an economic crisis which is compounded by persistent inflation and which is occurring despite the regime's increasing foreign exchange holdings. About half the population is at or below the poverty line; drop-out rates in primary school may reach 50 percent; some thirty percent of children are malnourished; malaria and tuberculosis are rampant; HIV/AIDS are prevalent; per capita state expenditures on healthcare are minimal; and food insecurity is common. According to the UN, Myanmar is one of the world's least developed countries.[2]

Burma/Myanmar is profoundly Buddhist; some 85 percent of the population espouses the faith. This national Buddhism is central to the identity of most Burmans and a number of minority groups as well. One of the tenets of a Buddhist society is that the government must provide the conditions under which the people can practice their religion and thus improve their karmas. This includes

the concern of the *Sangha*, or Buddhist monkhood, for the well-being of the people. The Buddhist administrative hierarchy, religious educational institutes and universities, and the numbers and types of Buddhist sects are rigidly controlled by the military. However, younger monks in many monasteries have considerable latitude in their actions. Although the Burmese consider symbolic entry into the *Sangha* for a certain amount of time to be a rite of passage for every young Buddhist boy, entry and exit from the *Sangha* is extremely easy and socially acceptable. Whatever the shortcomings of an individual monk, the *Sangha* is treated with great respect, far in excess of clergy in Western nations. The village monastery is the center of communal and religious life. Monastic education is still important in that society, and because of it, by the early nineteenth century Burma was considered the most literate society between Suez and Japan. After years of failed attempts to do so, the military finally was able to register the monks and control the *Sangha* in 1980.

With the unannounced and overnight rise in bus fares—since rescinded because of the riots—monks in central Burma demonstrated in support of the poor. The demonstrators were motivated by the decline in the people's living standards, which have invariably led to reductions in laypersons' food donations to Buddhist monasteries. There are documented cases of children being brought to the monks to be fed, since their own families were unable to provide nourishment. Monks were also roughed up by the local military, which then refused to apologize, infuriating the *Sangha*.

The monks began to demonstrate in Yangon and were joined by students and young people and students who formed a protective cordon on both sides of the long lines of robed monks, indicative of the extreme reverence shown to the *Sangha*. Prior to the demonstrations becoming overtly political in tone, the military showed unprecedented tolerance, even allowing some monks to march past Aung San Suu Kyi's house, in which she was secluded under house arrest. The religious protests, however, expanded into cries for democracy and eventually became blatantly political in favor of the opposition party of Aung San Suu Kyi. Because of the perceived intensity of socio-economic and political futility, politicization of any demonstrations in Myanmar is feared by the authorities, who normally take immediate steps to prevent them and close schools and universities at any overt sign of discontent. The fact that they initially allowed the monks to demonstrate reflects the sensitivity to Buddhism in Burmese society.

Eventually, however, military repression set in. Demonstrations were forcibly stopped with considerable violence; monasteries were raided at night, away from camera lenses; and midnight arrests of onlookers who seemed to have supported or encouraged the demonstrators caused fear to spread through the local population. Thousands were arrested and most were later freed, but the number of deaths remains unknown. The government claimed about a dozen died; the UN suggested several dozen; and one foreign embassy estimated about one hundred deaths. The repressed calm returned to Yangon, but fear permeated the atmosphere.

In the Public Eye: Globalization and the Junta. The Saffron Revolution might then seem to be relatively insignificant in terms of its duration and

magnitude, certainly in comparison to the massive, nation-wide peoples' revolution of 1988 that had failed. Domestically and internationally, however, its effects were profound. "To be Burmese is to be Buddhist," goes the adage: the incidents of military beating and the humiliation of Buddhist monks in their robes have major consequences both for the military itself and for the population as a whole.[3] This significance is increased because those images from the streets of Rangoon were available to the Burmese for the first time as a result of globalization. Satellite dishes are now plentiful in urban areas.[4]

The external world responded with outrage as films of the demonstrations and their brutal repression were shown on BBC, CNN International, and local stations all over the world. Already vilified for its human rights repression against dissenters both in and out of the formal opposition political structure, including its house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, and its military actions against minority rebellions, the Burmese government blamed the international community for causing its country's violence.

These demonstrations, the military responded, were promoted by the evil forces of globalization: the imperialists, their minions, and expatriate dissidents had incited the people and purposefully employed "bogus" monks. Although the world responded with indignation, and the United States introduced yet another round of likely ineffective sanctions outlined by President Bush in his September 2007 address to the UN General Assembly, the international community's reaction was programmatically weak.

The junta itself may have been shocked that the scenes of horror that inflamed the rest of the world were also available to Burmese citizens through their satellite dishes. This was unique in Burmese history: for the first time, the Burmese could see for themselves the effects of military brutality. Their concerns were no longer based on hearsay, rumor, and innuendo. Many individuals also had cell phone and video cameras, which captured the beatings in gory detail.

The junta had long insisted that it was immune to the dire effects of globalization. True, it needed to export gas, rice, and teak, and wanted assistance from China and India, but the influences from these countries could be controlled and were peripheral to continuing military political power. As much as Burma's actions might embarrass ASEAN, member states could do little to influence the Burmese government. As many of their leaders have said in justification of non-interference, Burma was isolated for a generation under the previous regime, and thus could be so again and still survive. It has a surplus of rice and major natural resources, only some of which has been tapped.

But if foreign concerns would be ineffective under "regime change," globalization and new technology have surpassed the military's internal capacity for manipulation of public knowledge and opinion. In spite of attempted repression, dissent can no longer be kept in the penumbra, The most significant results of the Saffron Revolution are likely to be its internal repercussions, both among the overwhelmingly Buddhist population and, perhaps more importantly for political change, within the Buddhist military.

To gain political legitimacy, the military command uses pictures and stories in its newspaper, *Metta*, to demonstrate its

acts of obeisance to the monks; donating to a monastery; or otherwise performing some good Buddhist act. Every day monks' sermons are broadcast on state television. Buddhist slogans proliferate, and the military has claimed it acts with Buddhist *Metta*, or loving kindness, and thus must be obeyed. All this junta effort—a mixture of both sincere belief and propaganda—was destroyed in a few days of violence against the monks. Political legitimacy for the military through the Buddhist channel has been lost.

The state has not contributed to the well-being of its people, and it has violated the most cardinal of its social norms through its actions. The future is unclear. Will elements of the military turn on some of their leaders? Will the retirement of aging leaders bring change and reform under younger military officers? Will the legal but weakened opposition play any role in the near political future? Will the populace, frustrated and angry over the sacrilege and despairing of the future, take the situation into its own hands even though they remember the terror of 1988? What is the future for youth, who has no social mobility except through channels controlled by the military?

The Way Forward. For several years, the military has promised a "roadmap" to a multi-party "discipline-flourishing democracy." The roadmap lacked international credibility, however, because it did not include a timetable. The junta claimed that there would be a new constitution, but consideration by a military-controlled group has technically been ongoing since 1992, and a referendum on that constitution—followed by new elections for a new government—is still needed. Under the proposed constitution, the military would assert its primacy, control the appointment of the head of state, have the active-duty officers comprise 25 percent of the national and local legislatures, possess the ability to declare a state of emergency or impose martial law, and keep all military affairs, appointments, and budgets under military control.

The surprise announcement in February 2008 that a referendum would be held on the constitution in May 2008, followed by new elections in 2010, may have been prompted by the tumult over the Saffron Revolution. In other words, the timing of the referendum, as well as the referendum itself, may be the lifeline to save the military's drowning leadership, as these planned events provide a safety net for the present and future military authorities. Perpetual military control through civilianized rule is also planned, for amending the constitution would require three-quarters-plus-one approval. Although the military would command all branches of government, even the legislature, some say that a constitution of almost any sort is better than the alternative—continuing rule by decree, meaning martial law. Whatever public opinion may be, the mass mobilization and explicitly military-controlled Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), composed of roughly one-third of the total population, will work with other state-controlled mass organizations to ensure passage of the constitutional referendum.

In effect, however, the timing of the referendum will undercut some foreign criticism. ASEAN, China, and India will admit that there has been some progress and ask the regime to continue to reform, while the United States will deny progress. Japan will likely continue to assist through

debt relief and humanitarian aid.

Whatever the degree of government control over the elections, dissent against the military is unlikely to be tolerated. The Saffron Revolution was ignited by the junta's lack of understanding of globalized experience as it imprudently eliminated energy subsidies. At the same time, the military vilified the demonstrations as part of a globally—read "Western"—sponsored conspiracy. Yet the visceral, direct, and explosive reaction in Burma to suppression was partly a result of the new satellite television technology brought to Myanmar by globalization itself. Myanmar has entered a new era, one more dangerous for the military, but one that its oppressive government and corresponding dissent movement have brought forth themselves. Internal and external dissent will grow and attempted suppression will follow, but the junta and any future government are unlikely to withstand the effects of globalization that have already found roots in Burmese society. Although national change seems most probable through the military's internal transformation, some egregious and outrageous miscalculation by a lower official trying to please the high command could spark a new peoples' revolution—saffron or multicolored.

The very concept of globalization has, ironically, produced its own orthodoxy. The "Washington Consensus" that has inextricably linked market economies and democracy was one such example in which there was little dissent in multinational and national institutional settings and among the power elite. Indeed, the United States foreign policy position that democracy was the only form of governance that was acceptable is in itself a form of orthodoxy that is inherently inimical to the democratic norms of diversity of views and pluralism of power.

As much as the United States, the EU, ASEAN, and other states may deplore the tragedy of Burma/Myanmar—and it is a tragedy—their ability to affect badly needed reforms is extremely limited, short of a military adventurism that is as unthinkable as it is unwise. Sanctions and demands for change, both regime and otherwise, have been shown to be ineffective. More of the same, no matter how morally satisfying to those who advocate such actions, will accomplish little except to increase nationalism and the identification of internal democratic elements with foreign powers, thus undercutting their effectiveness and internal legitimacy in periods of developing nationalistic fervor. The Saffron Revolution, more than anything foreigners can do, is more likely to affect change in that society because of the abhorrence of the repression among the people of Burma/Myanmar and many members of the military themselves.

Myanmar has entered a new era, one more dangerous for the military but one which its oppressive government and corresponding dissent movement have brought on themselves.

NOTES

1 In 1989, the military changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar, an old, written form. The Burmese opposition never accepted that change, made by a government it claims is illegitimate, and still use Burma, as does the United States. This the military regards as insulting. The UN and most other states use Myanmar. The use of either has become a surrogate indicator of political persuasions. Here, both are used, together and singularly, without political intent–Myanmar since the coup of 1988, and Burma for the earlier period.

2 Burma was declared a least developed nation by the UN in December 1987. Various UNICEF reports delineate the state of poverty. According to the UNDP (2007/8) Burma/Myanmar received only $2.90 per capita economic assistance in 2005, compared to $49.90 to Laos and $38.20 to Cambodia.

3 Significantly, the junta and virtually all of the colonel and higher ranks of the tatmadaw military are "Burman" Buddhists. Significant glass ceilings exist for both Christians and Muslims, and for the minorities as well. This was not true under the civilian administration. "Burman" refers to the majority ethnic group (two-thirds of the population); the military now call them "Bamas."

4 There are said to be some 60,000 registered dishes and perhaps another 30,000 unregistered. From this writer's high hotel room on one of Yangon's main streets, he stopped counting after he saw eighty satellite television dishes on other buildings.