

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Rangoon

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Burmese Days

Dear Mr. Martin:

I was sitting in a downtown tea-house listening to a dental student describe the March student riots that had taken place a few blocks away. Many of his classmates from Rangoon University were caught and beaten, some were killed. But, he said with a grin, he had hitched up his longyi (a sarong worn by men) and outrun the police. A man sat down at a nearby table and smiled vacantly in our direction. The man was the brother of a high government official, but it was OK to talk because he was a drunkard. Filling in a pause in our conversation, I asked the student whether he planned to work in a hospital. He exploded with unexpected vehemence, "No, I'll never join the government. I hate him so much." "He" was, of course, Ne Win, Chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party and Burma's leader for 26 years.

A year ago, a similar conversation between a student and a foreigner under the public gaze of a tea-house would have been impossible. But in the aftermath of the March 13 to 18 student unrest--the worst riots in post-war Burma with some 100 protesters killed by police and almost 5,000 arrested--there are increasing stirrings in normally quiescent Rangoon. One week before the re-opening of Rangoon's universities, people are watching the students, waiting for something to happen.

"There's a great air of expectation that there will be riots after the universities open," says a European diplomat. An informed Burmese predicts: "This is the decisive year." Although student protests, and perhaps other changes, are likely in the months ahead, Rangoon has been waiting for any sign of a fresh breeze for over two decades.

At Rangoon International Airport, unrest seems unlikely in this quaint, slow-moving capital of over 3 million people. Crowds on the veranda of the air terminal wave pink and white handkerchiefs, welcoming relatives laden with boom boxes from Japan, duty-free liquor and cigarettes from Thailand, and even a windshield for a Toyota. Old cars and buses coming from the airport used to putter along the left side of the road, British-style. But to bring good luck, the government switched traffic the right side on a suitably auspicious day over a decade ago. In downtown Rangoon, passers-by leisurely

The writer, who wishes to remain anonymous, visited Rangoon for one week in late May.

stop to pick up a fresh, green cigar from the Indian peddlers. On the mainstreet by the waterfront, grease-covered mechanics tinker with ancient crank-started trucks that have been sputtering for over 40 years. The city itself continues to lose its long battle against entropy and decay--the wide boulevards are pocked with holes where the flagstones have sunken through and the great box-like buildings from the British era slowly peel and fade to grey. Only the pagodas, covered in dazzling gold leaf, are maintained.

This view of Rangoon on the eve of the opening of the universities on May 30 focuses on the March student unrest, its causes and consequences. Whether or not the riots will trigger a cycle of student protest and government response, they will be remembered in the years ahead. This impressionistic report ignores the central government's continuing wars with ethnic separatists on Burma's borders, which have been going on from before the British era and, despite recently reported government victories, are likely to continue. Except for the greatly weakened Burma Communist Party, and to a lesser extent the Karen National Union, the insurgencies do not challenge the legitimacy of the government's control over lowland Burma; the students do.

First, a note of caution. Rangoon is a vast rumor mill. Soon after I arrived from Bangkok, at least two well-informed Burmese government officials asked me whether it was true that the Thai Army had installed the Crown Prince in a coup, killing Princess Sirinthorn. Like the outburst by the dental student, most conversations eventually center around Him--the Chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party who came to power in a military coup in 1962; Bogyoke (General) Ne Win who single-handedly saved the country in 1948-49 when 60% of government's troops had joined communist or ethnic rebels; the "one upstairs" who at age 77 has grown remote, reigning as a Burmese king by taking on a string of wives and building a pagoda to make merit for his next life. Rumors revolve around him too. The ageing Chairman would soon be returning from his annual vacation in West Germany where he reportedly receives rejuvenating injections of lamb serum. Bogyoke Ne Win would be in Geneva to consider buying more slow-flying PC-7 Turbo-Trainers with gold and rubies. The one upstairs would order yet another currency demonetization, suddenly making high-denomination bills worthless and irredeemable, which for the unfortunate would wipe out a life's savings overnight.

The March 13 to 18 student rebellion started, as one European diplomat puts it, "over a storm in a tea cup." The riots--a spontaneous outburst waiting for the right spark--are the fourth major student protests under Ne Win. Riots followed the 1962 coup, the death of UN Secretary-General U Thant in 1974, and last September's one-day protest was easily suppressed.

On March 12, a dispute broke out between two students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) and the owner of

a nearby tea-house (actually a gambling den and house of ill-repute.) The son of the owner of the tea-house was arrested for stabbing one of the students but released on bail on the same day.

The next day, 300 to 400 RIT students converged on the shop, fought with locals, and burned it down. During the melee, riot police shot and killed Maung Phone Maw, RIT's top student, and another student.

Some Burmese say that the unrest probably would have been confined to the small RIT student body if the authorities had not made a tactical error two days later on the 15th. Government TV and radio accused the students (probably falsely) of also burning down a government-run store. (Some Burmese say locals, not students, were seen setting fire to the store, presumably to cover up fiscal year-end losses.) Enraged by the government's condemnation of their comrades, students at nearby Rangoon University began their own speeches and rallies. Government deception also fueled student anger. The authorities had announced that Maung Phone Maw's body would be cremated at Kyandaw Cemetery near the universities, but then on the 16th snuck the body to another crematorium across town.

Wednesday the 16th also marked larger demonstrations that now centered around Rangoon University, the most important university with 15,000 of the capital's 50,000 students. The rallies were exciting and dangerous. "It was fun," said one young woman who chided "the boys from the medical school for being too scared" to be militant. Yet, the next moment, she described how a coed tried to attack riot police with a crude spear^{and} was clubbed to death. Scores of students were beaten in baton charges by riot police. Army troops fired on students, but not heavily.

From a command post hastily set up in the Burma Broadcasting Corporation, Sein Lwin, Secretary of the Council of State, coordinated police and Army units. The third-ranking member of government, Sein Lwin's reputation as a hard-liner dates from his days as commander of the 4th Burma Rifle Company when he gave the order to open fire on rioting students in 1974. (In a speech on February 11 marking the 41st anniversary of Burma's independence, Sein Lwin urged officials to "avoid extreme practice of democracy, which results in lawlessness.") At the command post, according to one source, "it was a police show." Significantly, General Saw Maung, Chief of Staff of the Army, was not present.

According to several reliable sources, the Lonhtein (riot police who one diplomat calls "riffraff from the Army") had orders to use considerable force. A knowledgeable individual claims that Sein Lwin broadcast over the police radio: "This is Lion speaking (his code name). Don't compromise. Don't negotiate. Don't shoot. Beat them till they are dead." Western diplomats, whose embassies host an impressive array of radio antennae, don't confirm this rumor. Yet, one reliable Burmese source, while not sure of the exact wording of the order, says that the signal for harsh treatment came from the highest levels.

The 17th was a relatively quiet day. The government's announcement of the formation of an independent commission to investigate the riots was viewed by students as a sign of weakness. During the unrest at Rangoon university, nearby residents brought the students bananas, food, and water.

On the 18th, about 300 students marched from Rangoon University toward the Sule Pagoda, located in the center of Rangoon next to City Hall. According to Western diplomats, some of whom wandered through the crowd, the protests began in a festive mood with people milling aimlessly about. But soon students chased away military intelligence agents taking pictures as well as regular police sent as reinforcements. By this time, over 10,000 people had joined the students, mostly street vendors of Indian descent. Shouting anti-government slogans, students burned government vehicles and set fire to a state-run department store. One diplomat emphatically states that students did not loot or destroy private property and even prevented street urchins from snatching government goods from the flames. Eventually, however, Army units sealed off the area and the Lonhtein moved in.

The Lonhtein charged the crowds, wielding wooden batons, chasing down and beating rioters who were later packed into overcrowded police vans where a number died from their injuries. An employee at the U.S. Embassy says that he saw fleeing students ask to enter the Embassy, which faces Sule Pagoda. It is not clear whether the students were seeking shelter or some other kind of assistance. (Earlier, students had delivered a letter denouncing the Rangoon government.) According to the employee, the students were denied entry.

The student riots were clearly spontaneous. Although underground student groups had circulated anti-government leaflets well before the March riots, the protests lacked planning. In only one case did I hear of a molotov cocktail being used. On the 16th or 17th, the son of a retired Army major, acting alone, fire-bombed the house of a high government official and died in the attempt.

Reports on the number of deaths and arrests vary widely. Western diplomats say that as many as 100 protesters were killed during the unrest with 5,000 jailed, half of them students. (About 2,000 protesters were released within three days but almost 200 are still being held without charges.) Some Burmese sources put the figure for deaths at 200 or higher. It is certain that the remains of 43 or 44 students were cremated in one day. Several Burmese sources and Western diplomats report that some families received phone calls informing them that their children were dead and warning them not to mourn in public.

One informed Burmese, citing civilian doctors who were brought in to perform autopsies, says that as many as 200 students and other protesters may have died. Another Burmese source claims that a report delivered to police/headquarters two weeks after the riots counted 283 deaths. Whatever the exact figure, some believe that mass graves were dug in

Rangoon's sprawling Army camps, pointing out that Rangoon's main crematorium was watched closely by residents. If the graves exist, they may eventually be discovered, for the Burmese have a saying, "the bone talks."

Perhaps more than in most countries, students as a collective, are respected and may even have a legitimate voice in politics. The Burma Independence Army, enshrined in official myth as liberating Burma from British rule during World War II, sprang from nationalistic student organizations. U Aung San, the father of independent Burma, whose likeness is depicted on all bank notes, was, of course, a student leader in the 1930's.

"The people are all on the side of the students," says a non-Western diplomat. Some of the students arrested include the sons and daughters of mid-level government and Army officers. "The arrests go right across the social board," says a European diplomat. "It's a shattering indictment of 26 years of the Burmese way of socialism." More condemning, is that the students in the streets, born after 1962, grew up without being polluted by what State Council Secretary Sein Lwin calls "the ill-effects of capitalist Parliament Democracy system."

But what especially shocked and angered Burmese, was the Lonhtein's treatment of women. One European diplomat notes, "The beating of young women is abhorrent to Burmese notions of propriety." Women students, some of whom were particularly militant, were chased, clubbed, dragged by the hair, and sometimes molested.

While the public is outraged by the Lonhtein's behavior, one Western diplomat claims that the Army itself came away with "very clean hands." Indeed, some Burmese say that certain Army units surrounding the riots permitted students to escape from the Lonhtein and in one case even protected a coed from a beating. But, these Burmese also point out that the Army was involved in the shooting on the 16th and played a crucial back-up role on the 17th and 18th.

The student's defiance and public anger over their treatment seems to have emboldened Rangoon, if only slightly. People now quietly voice dissent that would have been unheard of five years ago. Grumbling, gossip, and jokes about the government are at an unprecedented level. Apolitical Indian businessmen poke fun at the government; so do government officials. I spent one evening over a huge Chinese meal and a few bottles of Mandalay beer hearing story after story about the government, the Chairman, and the stupidity of the Army. What most surprised me, however, was the response of one taxi driver, a retired sergeant from upcountry who makes 70 Kyats a day (officially \$1=6 Kyats, unofficially \$1=40 Kyats) driving a beat-up pickup truck. With the reputation of Rangoon's military intelligence in mind, I didn't expect him to say much to a stranger. Instead, he said, "The government is a cheat. Everyone is angry at the government, but they cannot complain."

The release of the independent commission's report on May 13 has done little to dampen public resentment. The report, which says that 2 students were killed by police gunfire, 625 arrested, and 28 riot police wounded, skims over the violence after March 13. Apparently, it is a lengthy document, but most Burmese, and most if not all foreign diplomats, have only seen the excerpt printed in the state-run papers. No one takes the report seriously.

Despite the widespread arrests, students say they will participate in future protests. "I don't think the students were too intimidated," adds a Western diplomat. The main student group appears to be the newly-formed, underground Burma Students' Association, which according to some students has only a few hundred members. During the March protests, a two-page letter printed by the Burma Students' Association was delivered to the American and British Embassies. It called for the government release all those arrested, allow proper funerals for the dead, and provide details on the number of casualties. The students do not appear to have any real program other than opposition to the government and demands for economic and political democracy.

Presently, students at Rangoon University are planning to hold a Thabeik Thut (a Buddhist service for victims of violent death) as soon as the universities open on May 30. (Originally scheduled to open at the end of the summer holidays on May 9, universities will presumably open on the first day of Buddhist lent.) A few days before the re-opening of the schools, people are debating whether the government will permit the ceremony to take place. Some say no, others say that the government wouldn't dare interfere so directly with the monks.

The ceremony, if it occurs, could be an important initial step toward aligning the Pongyis with the students. Until now, monks have not been involved in the protests. By awarding religious titles, the government maintains the allegiance of the ecclesiastical elders. And in 1980, the government cautiously registered all monks, something that gave the British a lot of headaches. For as the British learned, if the Pongyis take to the streets, there's trouble.

Behind the protests are inflation and a steadily deteriorating economy that has taken another downturn in recent years. Burma's controlled economy gives socialism a bad name. Says one Western diplomat, "The economy has been on the rocks for twenty years and breaking up for three." Last year, the world's number one rice exporter after World War II, applied for and received Least Developed Country (LDC) status. Designed to garner more UN assistance, the move has instead spawned a new joke industry. One of the better stories relates how the chairman of the beggars' convention informed his comrades that theirs was a respectable profession now that the nation had been awarded LDC status. Burma's per capita income in 1985 was estimated at \$179. Of course, Burma isn't as poor as the statistics indicate since the most dynamic sector of the economy--the black market--is off the books.

In cash-starved Burma, being a seaman is a prized profession. After working for a few years on a foreign line, a sailor can purchase a pickup truck, bring it in duty free, and sell it for 200,000 Kyats. Rangoon's streets are filled with pickup trucks. One sign that the government is stretched to reward even its highest officials is that all of the sons of the number three man in government, Sein Lwin, have at one time been sailors.

For a while, it appeared that there might be movement toward economic liberalization. Last August, Ne Win said change was necessary and inevitable. It was his first admission that mistakes have been made. And on September 2nd last year, free trade in rice and certain other crops was permitted.

But, three days later, the government suddenly demonetized--declared invalid without compensation--25, 35, and 75 Kyat notes. No official warning or rationale was provided. It is believed that the intent was to punish wealthy black marketeers, the target of a previous demonetization in 1985. But, according to one Western diplomat, "It hurt the poor who had their life savings in a roll of 25 Kyat notes under the bed." About 1,000 students rioted and were quickly subdued without much force. Authorities gave each student 100 Kyats, sent them home, and declared an early university holiday that lasted for almost two months.

Inflation, especially sharp in the past few years, has hit those on fixed incomes such as government employees. One resident showed me a meticulously-recorded log book of prices for almost every staple since 1962. Prices have increased dramatically in recent years, particularly for rice.

In light of these economic hardships, why weren't more people out on the streets in March and why weren't they out there sooner? A European diplomat provides three reasons that seem to best fit the details that others furnish. "Fear is the main one," he says. All government officials must report any meeting with a foreigner, stating the nature and content of the conversation. Phone calls from hotels, says another diplomat, are monitored, if not tape recorded. For an example of the efficiency of informers, one Burmese tells how 400 students from a technical school were meeting secretly on the 17th to decide whether to join the protests. They were all arrested within one hour.

The diplomat adds, "You don't have starving crowds throwing stones because people don't starve in Burma." Upcountry, peasants aren't squeezed with excessive efficiency by the government; in Rangoon, there are very few beggars by Asian standards.

He concludes: "Burmese-style Buddhism is especially apathetic." A government official wryly notes, "Maybe like the Westerners say, we are more concerned with other-worldly affairs."

Yet, the British didn't find the average Burman especially apathetic nor the Pongyis other-worldly when both monk and layman led the rebellions that regularly challenged the British Raj. I asked a prominent Burmese intellectual why Burmese

had rebelled under the British but not Ne Win. His reply: "When the British ruled, they acted like Englishmen. Ne Win acts like a Burman." It appears that by being swift to punish but also swift to forgive, the regime instills the fear that keeps people in line but not the lasting hate that brings down governments. Former communist leaders, rival politicians and generals, even the children of certain active guerrilla leaders can live in relative comfort in Rangoon provided they remain quiet under watchful eyes.

Unlike in the Philippines and South Korea, Burma lacks a charismatic opposition leader who is willing to step forward and draw the crowds. The letter of protest issued by the Burma Student's Association highlights this. The letter is signed with the pseudonym Bo Aung Kyaw, a student leader killed 50 years ago protesting British rule.

If the students take to the streets as expected in the months ahead, people will also be watching the Army to see if it shows any signs of hesitancy in bearing down on the students. Out of Burma's 170,000 strong Army, eight Light Infantry Divisions form an elite force that is reportedly very loyal to Ne Win.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the Lonhtein (an abbreviation for Security Preservation Force). Formed in 1978 by the subsequently-jailed head of intelligence, the riot police are viewed as a counterweight to the Army. Many say that the Lonhtein recruits from those in Army and civilian life who have criminal records. Numbering 4-5,000 thousand based in Rangoon and possibly Mandalay, the Lonhtein are believed to remain personally loyal to the former Home Minister who once directed them, Sein Lwin.

As mentioned earlier, some Army units surrounding the riots let students escape and in one case stopped the Lonhtein from molesting a woman. A Western diplomat plays up the split, saying that Army officers were "unhappy" with the Lonhtein. Yet, Burmese tend to caution against making too much of the apparent rift between the Army and the riot police.

Within the Army itself, there may be grumbling, but it is quickly squashed. In 1976, an assassination plot by majors and colonels was nipped in the bud. Last year, some 200 young officers from around the country were arrested for talking about the economy. But overall, Bogyoke Ne Win is still revered and is viewed as the ultimate source for the scanty privileges that officers receive.

Thus, Rangoon is waiting and watching the students. No other sector of society now has the strength, legitimacy, and foolhardiness to act. Looking back, a prominent intellectual notes that Burma's older, pre-1962 politicians had thought General Ne Win would make a safe leader of the temporary "caretaker government" because "he seemed only interested in playing with the girls." The intellectual smiles wearily from a quarter-century of bitter experience, "Now all we can do is make jokes about the Army."