

THE ENDURANCE OF MILITARY RULE IN BURMA: NOT WHY, BUT WHY NOT?

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Over the last 20 years, the end of military rule in Burma has been demanded, anticipated, predicted, and scripted by its myriad critics at home and abroad. In the early years of the latest iteration of junta rule, the fall of dictatorships and authoritarian rule was widely considered inevitable in a global environment characterized by the disappearance of great-power support for autocracy, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the Warsaw Pact, the expansion of human rights regimes, and an explosion in the movement of people, ideas, information, and technology across borders. However, two decades of arms embargoes, 17 years of U.S. sanctions of one sort or another, and 14 years of formal European Union (EU) sanctions, as well as global advocacy campaigns that get Burma on the UN Security Council agenda, spawn viral videos, enlist star power from Jennifer Aniston to Nelson Mandela and Madeleine Albright, and deliver thousands of dirty underpants to Burmese embassies abroad, have not budged the *tatmadaw* (Burmese, for “armed forces”). Army leaders remain solidly in control of national political authority in the largest country of mainland Southeast Asia.

Originally called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the junta took direct political control on September 18, 1988, after a year of anti-government protests, the collapse of the one-party, socialist state, and a series of brutal police and military crackdowns. Army leaders grafted the military command structure onto the skeleton of the corroded state, promised market reforms in the stagnant planned

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economy, neutralized political opposition, constructed (at times, with forced labor) a more modern physical infrastructure, survived at least a half dozen purges of powerful members of the officers corps, and cracked down on several sizable popular protests. Renamed the “State Peace and Development Council” (SPDC) in 1997, the ruling junta also stage-managed a 15-year production of a constitution aimed at maintaining military influence in politics under its version of a “modern, developed, discipline–flourishing democracy.”

Against widespread predictions of its imminent fall and despite failing to achieve domestic or international legitimacy, the military government has prevailed. In this essay, I suggest we take that endurance seriously and interrogate the assumptions and inferences that led us to expect otherwise. Why would we assume that the Burmese military would capitulate in the face of external pressures? Why would anyone expect that withholding U.S. investments in Burma would concern the generals enough that they would risk the political and financial interests of their families and their military institution? And why do we think the elite-level political deadlock can be broken via some kind of Lafayette solution—something as simple as sending a UN envoy, a member of the U.S. Congress, or some Southeast Asian general who has seen the (democratic) light to advise the generals on how to run their country? How exactly would a “democratic opposition” (or probably more realistically, “democratic oppositions”) bring down this regime?

THE NARRATIVE, BRIEFLY

In this paper, I make a specific argument about ahistorical reasoning that has underestimated the capacity of *tatmadaw* leaders to withstand domestic and external pressures for wholesale democratic regime change. I criticize some of the central tenets of the dominant narrative embraced and reproduced by transnational activist networks focused on human rights and democracy promotion in Burma. Lisa Brooten characterizes this narrative as “a storybook tale of good vs. evil.”¹

This view pits Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), against the SLORC/SPDC and the generals’ cronies. Suu Kyi, the NLD, and a handful of other “democratic

activists” constitute “the opposition” (singular) against tyranny, although there is growing recognition that some leaders (but not others) of the ethnic nationalities also represent a force for good. In the last few years, exile politicians, media, and transnational activists have added another category to the story—the so-called “third force,” variously characterized as a group (singular) of non-NLD “democrats,” “regime apologists”² or naïve “pseudo-political Brahmins,” duped by the SPDC into believing they could take moderate positions for “national reconciliation.”³ In the highly simplified, often inaccurate global activist discourse about Burmese politics, “Burma” represents a story of unparalleled and unqualified loss, repression, and victimization. Not all advocacy groups or claims are so one-dimensional; particularly among exiles, there is a far greater variation in interpretations. For this essay, I employ this brief caricature, which surely does not do justice to the many strategic thinkers who support reform. My point is a narrow one: to challenge one specific set of assumptions that, in fact, are viewed as truth claims and at times, litmus tests. The caricature is based on campaigns produced for global public consumption, such as the U.S. Campaign for Burma’s 2008 viral video spots, which adhere to this basic story and perpetuate the intransigent, unrealistic, and unhelpful binaries of this morality play.⁴

Three brief notes on terminology: First, I will use the rather clumsy terms, “Burma problem” and “Burma” (in quotation marks) to refer to the basic narrative as characterized above. Second, because actors on all sides of the Burma debate assert they are promoters of “democracy”⁵ and “pro-democracy,” various cognates will be set off in this article with quotation marks to remind the reader of the highly valent, often slippery usage of the terms. As Roland Stromberg argues, “democracy” became the “hurrah word” of the early post-Cold War years. It remains a “cure-all” for troubled peoples and lands. In public debate, Stromberg writes, “Politicians typically mouth the word *democracy* when (as is often the case) they can think of nothing else,” thus condemning the category at times to near “nonsense.”⁶ Third, regarding the name of the country, I use the terms “Burma/Burmese” and “Myanmar” interchangeably for the country and population. I intend neither to make a political statement nor to mean any disrespect by my use of these terms.

THE PERSISTENCE OF “PENULTIMACY”

Among the strident claims of both the pro- and anti-military parties to the Burma debate is that the SPDC is on the verge of transformation. For the junta, the country is finally one election short of a successful transition to a “modern, developed, discipline-flourishing democracy.” The junta views this transition as the culmination of at least 60 (and arguably, several hundred) years of history. Exile politicians and “pro-democracy” campaign groups depict the regime as maniacally cunning, but—in seeming contradiction—also promote the idea that it is just one or two pushes short of a collapse.⁷ Penultimacy, or on-the-brinkness, appears so obvious and natural to activists and much of the media that this condition is considered more of an unproblematic “fact,” than an interpretation of data that may or may not be reliable. Policy prescriptions flow equally as naturally from the “fact” of imminent change. If the on-the-brink military is said to be “in a vise,” with domestic and global pressure closing in,⁸ it must be pushed just a little further or more cleverly into a corner, from which it will have no option other than to surrender. In the global discourse, the only acceptable outcome seems to be capitulation or “regime change” of one sort or another—implementing the 1990 elections and handing over the government to the NLD (and the unelected⁹ Suu Kyi), shelving the 2008 constitution, or releasing Suu Kyi and all political prisoners, or more likely, all three.

Transnational advocacy campaigns that assert penultimacy most commonly draw on the following “facts” about the imminence of regime change toward liberal “democracy”:

- *There is an **economic crisis** or a near-crisis that can be forestalled only so long;*
- *The ruling authorities are the object of such deep and **universal revulsion** by their population that their illegitimate rule cannot last;*
- *The military (as rulers or as an institution) is on the threshold of a **succession crisis**, riddled with factions and rank-and-file desperation, and the leaders hang on to control by only a thread;*
- *Military rule as a form of governance is an **anachronism**, a relic of a bygone (Cold War) era;*
- *The generals suffer from **xenophobia**, a pathological condition that will ultimately bring about their demise in the era of globalization; and*

- The “**international community**” should and/or can bring about elite-level political change in Myanmar.

These “facts” are rarely spelled out as specific or discrete claims (as above), but often appear so intertwined in the discourse as to be unimpeachable. But they are actually interpretations of data such as observations and reports of behavior, events, and other phenomena that involve the SPDC, those labeled “cronies” or “close to the authorities,” and the many different individuals and groups that have been identified (by themselves or others) as “opposition,” “civil society,” etc. Many of these interpretations are based on questionable sources. Yet these interpretations masquerading as “facts” are asserted in support of non-negotiable prescriptive claims, with little or no recognition of the numerous assumptions and inferences that are either theoretically unsound or have, time and again, proven empirically unsustainable.

***Economic crisis.** Burma is (has been) in the throes of a massive economic crisis that has undermined or will eventually undermine the capacity of the military to govern.*

Yes and no.

Yes, there is no question that Burma’s economy is under duress, particularly as experienced by those outside the elite. National aggregate figures confirm the chronic distress experienced by the vast majority of the population in terms of health, education, and welfare. In 2006 a UN Development Program survey, carried out in consultation with the government, found that 90 percent of the population lived on less than 65 cents per day, while the average household spent three-quarters of its budget on food. One third of children under five suffered from malnutrition in a region where average child malnutrition rates are less than 15 percent.¹⁰ It estimated that close to 700,000 people each year suffer from malaria and 130,000 from tuberculosis. Child mortality figures are double the regional average: 109 per 1,000 children die before the age of five.¹¹ While government expenditures in the social sector have increased somewhat over the last few years, any potential benefits have been erased by 35–40 percent annual inflation rates. The empirical evidence shows that the economic outlook for Myanmar—and especially for those outside the small elite circle—is bleak.

Will these conditions spark political change? Some cite historical precedent. In postcolonial Burmese history, one economic crisis is associated

with the collapse of an authoritarian regime. The 1987 demonetization of the *kyat* bankrupted all but a handful of senior military and Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) leaders. Widespread and probably unprecedented anger, driven by their overnight impoverishment, drove tens of thousands of citizens to participate in anti-BSPP protests over the next year. By July 1988, the BSPP had collapsed, eventually replaced by the new military junta two months later. The suddenness of the bankruptcy no doubt shocked all, but it was not the economic crisis alone that led to political and social mobilization. Instead, the police and later, the armed forces brutally mishandled crowds, killing dozens of young students and producing the degree of outrage that sent so many into the streets. Moreover, the BSPP, much as the Soviet and eastern European communist parties of the same era, had gradually rotted from within after 26 years of mismanagement, corruption, nepotism, and isolation.

Are Burmese citizens now on the verge of 1987-like desperation? In the 20 or so times I have traveled to Burma over the last two decades, I have met businesspeople, farmers, traders, monks, pastors, students, parents, nongovernmental organization (NGO) personnel, and others who consistently tell me—year after year—that “the economy is so bad, it cannot get any worse.” And somehow, it does. Their observations are supported by the relatively reliable data collected by international organizations and government agencies. However, as grim as the economic outlook is for most families, there are important differences between the widespread impoverishment in 1987 and the economic and political conditions today. As opposed to the overnight destitution caused by the 1987 demonetization, the current economic decline has come at a gradual pace. Although many families are just one flood, funeral, or accident away from personal disaster, migration has emerged over the last 15 years as a new coping mechanism for more and more families nationwide.¹² In the BSPP era, passports were very difficult to obtain and both legal and illegal migration for work abroad was difficult, dangerous, infrequent, and usually temporary, if at all. Now, at least 4–6 percent of the population has migrated or seasonally migrates (legally or illegally) for jobs that allow them to remit income to struggling families at home.¹³ Improved transit options, as well as a loosening of restrictions on travel, have also produced massive movements of mostly the poor in search of work.

The decline in quality of life for most Burmese appears likely to continue. Reports by the international financial institutions note little willingness on the part of the junta to address ongoing structural weaknesses in the banking, insurance, agriculture, industry, trade, and other sectors.¹⁴ However, the SPDC is hardly the shell that the BSPP was in the mid-1980s. Instead, it has managed (but not resolved) the tension and conflict that has resulted from the accelerating impoverishment of the population by allowing migration and channeling resources, concessions, and privileges to strategic domestic and foreign allies. There is no empirical evidence to suggest it cannot continue to do so, at least for the next 10 to 15 years.

Universal revulsion. *The SPDC is so widely detested by its population that it can stay in power only by violent repression. Its illegitimacy will bring down the regime.*

Yes and no.

Citizens' experiences of the SPDC are varied and shifting, depending on local resource endowments, investment opportunities, cultural variations, officials' personalities, and the historical legacies of conflict. However, it is probably safe to say that most Burmese people do not like, understand, or identify strongly with their government on most political issues. Because the *tatmadaw* views its citizens as potential enemies, capable of undermining fragile order, national unity, and its version of economic development, coercion, violence, and arbitrary personal power, rather than law and bureaucracy, are constitutive of state-society relations.¹⁵ Mark Duffield writes that the junta deliberately creates "uncertainty of where the arbitrary power of the leadership lies and when it will appear."¹⁶ This unpredictability means that every time Myanmar citizens leave their homes (and also in them), they chance becoming the object of punitive, extractive, capricious, and indifferent punitive action (or inaction, in the case of Cyclone Nargis in 2008) by political authorities. It is not surprising that the government is so widely reviled or so carefully avoided by most Burmese in their day-to-day lives.

Popular distrust of the government may be at record levels, for at least two reasons. First, this government is more intrusive than any predecessor. The SLORC/SPDC has deployed record numbers of troops, bureaucrats, monks, teachers, members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), and police throughout the entire country. Evidence of state intrusion includes the massive recruiting by the military to expand its 1988 establishment of 180,000 to 350,000 in the 1990s; land confiscation

either by the army or well-connected Burmese businesspeople and foreign investors; the initiation of large, flashy infrastructure construction projects such as hydroelectric dams, gas pipelines, microwave stations, and universities that sometimes rely on involuntary local labor and taxation, and/or involve the forced relocation of villages or neighborhoods; and increased kinds and amounts of business “license” fees and levies on all civilians, most of which are payable to military, USDA, police, and line ministry offices.¹⁷ For ordinary citizens, all these state-building activities have raised the likelihood of falling prey to a predatory state.

Second, there is now widespread access to information about domestic and international political affairs, despite government censorship. Whereas before 1988, locals might have gathered once daily to listen to a BBC radio Burmese-language broadcast on the village shortwave radio, they now gather to watch 24-hour television coverage on Norway’s Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) (assuming they have access to electricity).¹⁸ The massive expansion of human rights documentation after 1988 provide daily reports of state abuses to these broadcasters.¹⁹ City dwellers have access to dozens of newspapers, journals, and magazines, none of which explicitly criticize the SPDC, but many of which highlight its failures. For example, one magazine ran an article about the rising costs of generators in a historical perspective, pointing to the abject failure of the government to sustain even 1950s-levels of electricity. Most urban areas are dotted with packed internet cafés, complete with savvy attendants who connect to exile news agencies via the proxy-server-of-the-day. All this media provides evidence of government wrongdoing that surpass that directly experienced by an individual or a community.

Anger and revulsion, however, are not sufficient conditions to bring about regime change. For many of those who live inside Burma, the internet, BBC, VOA, and DVB reporting validates what they experience, and reassures them that someone is watching “big brother.” However, over the last few years (especially since the crackdown on the 2007 protests), hopes for a revulsion-driven revolution from the streets have waned. Most citizens live their day-to-day lives by creatively adapting to the political environment, however arbitrarily and often non-sensically it unfolds. Kyaw Yin Hlaing’s surveys of businesspeople, students, and others have found little willingness to join political activities, given the risks of prison sentences and to their families.²⁰

Succession crisis. *The senior generals, who are in their 70s, face military factionalism that eventually will erupt in an intra-elite struggle for control, whether it comes before or after their retirement or displacement.*

Yes, succession is at hand in the top military ranks, and yes, there are factions, but no, there is no convincing evidence that factionalism will split the *tatmadaw* in any politically significant way.

It is certainly the case that there are frustrated officers in the *tatmadaw*. The top cadre of army leaders today has endured longer than any other, with the exception of general Ne Win himself. At least a decade has gone by, in which slightly less senior officers have been denied the promotions, greater status, and expanded income opportunities they expected because the elder officers did not retire. Thousands of officers were “aged out” a few years ago, when military leaders enforced maximum age limits for officer ranks. Than Shwe has presided over several major purges, including that of military intelligence—the branch many considered likely to produce the next generation of army leaders. The expansion of the armed forces from 180,000 to over 350,000 20 years ago led to a parallel expansion of the officer corps and to rapid promotions for some officers, but they have slowed down as of late and there are fewer perquisites available as they ascend the ranks. A plethora of new military higher education campuses now has the capacity to produce 3,000 new officers each year, with the potential to cause further bloat in the officer corps and greater competition for promotions and status.²¹ In the implementation of the 2008 constitution, what exactly happens to powerful military positions (such as regional commanders) and to the promotions of officers designated to serve in the many legislatures is, as yet, unknown. It is possible that both senior general Than Shwe and the successor three- and four-star generals have cause for concern, as would leaders of any organization undergoing change. But so far, they have managed dissent and edginess in the ranks quite effectively. In fact, the last major purge in 2004 not only brought down the military intelligence apparatus without any known resistance (unthinkable in most countries), but also created a windfall of economic opportunities for the junta, when the jailing of some 300 military intelligence officers allowed for the seizure of their assets.

Some diplomats and academics argue that this next generation of army leaders will hastily distance itself from the Than Shwe group and has the potential to be more liberal- and reform-minded. As some army defectors

have suggested, there probably is a contingent of the *tatmadaw* that has not been fully convinced by junta propaganda that is ashamed of military behavior over the last two decades, that is embarrassed by the international denunciations, and that identifies with the suffering population. However, as reasonable and patriotic as those officers or soldiers may appear, they are unlikely to take a stand and risk their careers to promote either western-style civil, legal, and political rights or the political agendas of Aung San Suu Kyi and “democrats” in exile. Simply *the appearance* of promoting “reconciliation” of any kind over the last 20 years has not only ended careers, but resulted in jail time. The precedent is clear: so-called “softliners” who sought western interaction and engagement were kicked out en masse in 1997 and 2004. Proud majors and lieutenant colonels, no matter how open-minded they might be, are unlikely to appreciate the difference between denunciations of government leaders and derision toward their nation. Although Aung San Suu Kyi has not criticized the *tatmadaw* directly, as her supporters argue, all of her backers have. After 20 years, most soldiers and officers will not split these kinds of hairs. The continued construction of the “Burma problem” as the tale of good versus evil gives them little incentive or traction to do so.

Nonetheless, small, self-defined networks and factions exist in the *tatmadaw*, as they have since the military was first constituted in 1948. They organize around military academy and officers’ training schools’ classes, cronies, sectoral interests, staff or intelligence officers, operational field commanders, regional commanders, cabinet ministers, or adherents to particular ideas or policies (such as market reform), etc. However, factions have never resulted in a split that destabilized the *tatmadaw*. Those who have lost factional struggles have been sent out of country as attachés, retired or jailed.²² History is on the SPDC’s side: the *tatmadaw* has a 60-year record of staying unified, unlike the armed forces in nearby Thailand, the Philippines, or Indonesia. Other than a near catastrophic split in 1948–49, divergence along political or other factional lines has not threatened the unity of the military.

Anachronism, a relic of a bygone era. Military regimes belong in the dustbin of history with the other relics of the Cold War. Western-style, majoritarian, liberal democracy is inevitable. Modern militaries go back to their barracks; elected civilians control the military; and “right” trumps “might” in any modern society.

No.

The inevitability-of-democracy thesis has proven theoretically unsound, given that generalizations of this sort dehistoricize and depoliticize

particular processes that are contingent, ongoing, and still (forever) in flux. Empirically, “democracy” has proven neither inevitable nor durable in the post-Cold War world, where the last 20 years have seen a wide range of nominally “democratic” nations (e.g., Bosnia and Pakistan) devolve into civil wars and military-dominated facades of electoralism. Unfolding just east of Burma is an ongoing case of illiberal, unsustainable “democratization” process gone very wrong. Considered by many political scientists to have been locked up in its barracks and marginalized from politics at least 10 or 15 years ago, the Thai military has shown repeatedly since 2006 that it continues to be a ruthless, unaccountable, and largely invulnerable player in national politics. It remains an empirical question as to whether the continued presence of armed forces, one of the most political arms of any government, in national affairs is the rule, or the exception, or anachronism. The SPDC’s highly anachronistic, Maoist propaganda does not render the regime vulnerable to anything more than puzzlement or mockery in the contemporary era.

Yet, teleological claims of democratic inevitability are rarely questioned in the global debate on Burmese political reform. “Regime change” may have lost its luster inside the Beltway since president George W. Bush declared the mission “accomplished” in Iraq in 2003, but even the most outspoken critics of the neoconservative, “tsunami-of-democracy” rationale for that invasion set their critical lenses aside when it comes to Burma. It is as if Fukuyama’s 1989 “end of history” remains gospel, at least vis-à-vis Burma.

Xenophobes. *The generals’ sense of siege, of threat from all things foreign, is at best, unreasonable and pathological, at worst, racist.*

No, not unreasonable.

The *tatmadaw*’s “intense nationalism,” as Andrew Selth calls it, is often equated with xenophobia, or an irrational fear of, or contempt for that which is foreign. The junta incessantly decries foreign interference, claiming, for example, in one press conference that “Some Western Powers Have Been Aiding And Abetting Terrorism Committed By Certain Organizations Operating Under The Guise Of Democracy And Human Rights By Giving Them Assistance In Both Cash And Kind.”²³ Foreign (read: western) saboteurs and their collaborators, also known as “treasonous minions” or “axe handles,”²⁴ are blamed for any and all political dissent, the 1988 crisis, the 2007 protests, the many political and ethnic insurgencies since 1948, and

the continuation of the civil wars in eastern Myanmar. In school textbooks, local and national museums, and government media, there are frequent, if not daily, reminders of the divisive consequences of British colonialization as well as ongoing “neo-imperialism” targeting Burma.

The military junta reserves its most racist propaganda to declare Aung San Suu Kyi guilty of not only embracing neo-colonial overtures and the adulation of the Nobel committee and the western world, but also committing a kind of race betrayal. SLORC/SPDC has repeatedly attacked her producing two “impure” sons by mixing her “pure” Myanmar blood with that of her late British husband. As Kyi May Kaung suggests, the terminology smacks of “vulgar” bigotry, particularly when reported in English.²⁵ Dating back at least to World War II, public behavior and speeches by Burmese military and civilian political leaders have been laced with references to blood myths to mobilize support for nationalist agendas and against foreign interference. However, it must be noted that Burmese/Myanmar language speakers, whether in the regime or opposition, are somewhat hamstrung by linguistic categories. There is only one concept (“lu-myo”) that covers “race” and “ethnic group.” In Burmese, there is no other category, denuded of unproblematized hierarchies of civilizations, bloodlines, or races.

Linguistics aside, what about the regime’s heightened concerns about foreign interference? Should they be dismissed as pathologically delusional? Or, as Selth recently suggested, do the paranoid really have things to worry about? In fact, they do, and their concerns are real and current. Selth points out that three foreign invasions “have occurred within living memory.” Additionally, at least five foreign governments (the U.S., PRC, Thailand, India, and the UK) have financed, trained, collaborated with, or otherwise supported anti-state groups since independence in 1948. In the 1988 uprising, the BBC shortwave radio broadcasts were critical mobilizing assets for protest organizers. VOA, RFA, and Norway’s Democratic Voice of Burma (radio and television) all continue to transmit Burmese-language programming, with most of it carrying messages from powerful nations that call for the end of the regime.

Close to home, Thailand allows at least two of the remaining armed rebel groups to operate with impunity inside the Thai border. High-profile “humanitarian” aid groups regularly cross illegally into Burma from Thailand; some travel with mercenaries or armed anti-state soldiers to deliver cash, medicine, and other assistance to internally displaced

persons in territory where the *tatmadaw* has launched offensives against armed anti-state groups. Additionally, Thailand hosts the militaries of the United States, Japan, Singapore, and Indonesia every year for “Cobra Gold,” the largest U.S. war games held in Asia. When Cyclone Nargis hit the Irrawaddy delta in 2008, the USS Essex carrier group was dispatched there for Cobra Gold. U.S. offers to deliver aid via the Essex, in all likelihood, represented a potential U.S. invasion to Burmese military leaders, who must be aware that U.S. presidents have annually declared the SLORC/SPDC to constitute “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”²⁶

In fact, the regime has grounds for many of its charges of past U.S. interference in domestic politics. Among them:

- *The New Yorker* credited the American Center in Yangon with fomenting the 2007 Saffron Revolution;²⁷
- Anti-SLORC/SPDC activists and armed or “insurgent” groups have received support by U.S. military retirees, particularly those with special forces backgrounds;²⁸
- The CIA
 - financed and propped up the Kuomintang in Shan State during the 1950s, against Burma’s appeals to the United Nations for the occupation to be ended;
 - encouraged opium growth in Shan State and facilitated heroin trafficking; and
 - supported former prime minister U Nu’s ill-fated, armed uprising in 1970–71.²⁹

In short, the regime has reason to distrust foreign influence, even if its sloganeering is clumsy, obsolete, and offensive. The most extreme anti-western generals (those who sound xenophobic) have undoubtedly miscalculated in their strategies regarding foreign support, investment, and recriminations, but thus far, there is little evidence that this kind of poor judgment has brought military political dominance to the brink of its demise.

International Community. *The “international community” exists, and it should or will promote democracy in Burma, and accelerate the demise of the military junta. Populist pressure on nation-states and on international institutions is necessary for an “international community” solution.*

Perhaps the most prevalent underlying assumptions of “pro-democracy” forces is that something called “the international community” exists, that the generals do not understand its power, and that it holds the key to regime change or political reform in Burma. After the 1990s, which saw the promulgation of legal sanctions, successful tourism, and aid boycotts against Myanmar, most of the strategic campaigning in the name of “democracy” has focused on pressuring international institutions or regime “friends” either to condemn and isolate the SLORC/SPDC or to induce leaders to hand over power to the NLD. These strategies have viewed international institutions and individual nation-states as potentially willing and able to promote reform in line with western, liberal versions of “democracy.” However, the experience of the last 20 years demonstrates that no singularity of purpose or interest exists among the many nation-states that interact with Myanmar, which has allowed the SLORC/SPDC to exploit differences in principle and interest among neighbors and global powers to its own ends. Moreover, even if the regime’s closest trading partner allies, including China, Thailand (especially its military leaders), Singapore, and India, were willing to promote a reformist agenda in formal or informal interactions with military leaders, there is no evidence that any of them have any significant cards to play. No one knows exactly how policy is made in Burma, but given the purges of the more internationalist (including both pro-China and pro-West) officers in 1997 and 2004, it is unlikely that the generals proceed according to advice or threats from foreign experts or officials.

Among international institutions and UN offices, bodies and agencies are the most frequent targets of activist campaigns. The UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council have passed some three dozen resolutions condemning the junta for human rights abuses. But those resolutions have had no consequences for the SPDC, other than reputational.³⁰ In January 2007, the United States drafted a UN Security Council resolution calling on the SPDC to release Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and initiate a democratic transition. As expected, China and Russia vetoed it. “Pro-democracy” campaigns have been more successful at limiting the mandates of and funding for UN agencies operating inside Burma, to a degree that is unmatched anywhere else in the world except—perhaps—North Korea. Activists have also tried to shame the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a consultative body with no enforcement capacity

and limited resources, into taking responsibility for bringing about regime change. ASEAN has had little influence on macropolitics in Myanmar, except perhaps in the weeks just after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, when the association helped broker arrangements to allow international assistance to enter the country. Pressure groups as well as Aung San Suu Kyi have also charged other international organizations, such as NGOs that carry out emergency medical care, humanitarian relief, or development assistance inside Burma for propping up the government.

If nation-states and international organizations are the concrete manifestations of “the international community,” the latter is unlikely to do more than issue inchoate proclamations that may include reporting obligations, but stop short of committing to enforcement. Ruth Wedgwood writes that the concept of “‘international community’ is a dangerous reference point for the naïve.” The 42-month Serb bombardment of Sarajevo, which resulted in 200,000 civilian deaths, was met by the “international community” with nothing more than formal denunciations and some food aid. Wedgwood argues that the concept’s connotation of sociability and commitment invites unwise reliance by those who must ultimately fend for themselves. Its diffusion of responsibility excuses countries that have no intention of lending a hand. The concept amounts to a moral hazard, inspiring imprudent behavior by leaders who expect that someone else will pull their fat out of the fire.

Treaties and international law have no teeth unless states back up their words and proclamations with actions to enforce them.³¹ No such development has been forthcoming in regard to Burma in the last 22 years, although it is possible that the SPDC’s flirtation with nuclear fissile materials may eventually lead to more coercive foreign pressure. In the meantime, until we have evidence, we should not assume that the SPDC feels an overwhelming sense of “fear” about the threat of additional anti-junta saber-rattling.

Questioning assumptions about the “international community” and its putative role in a political solution means that we should treat long presumed foregone conclusions as empirical questions. Why should we assume the top agenda item for senior military leaders is courting international acceptance, negotiating with Aung San Suu Kyi, or even recognizing the relevance of “the opposition” that is lionized by campaign groups and western governments? How about the occasionally positive steps taken

by the military, for example, cooperation with the International Labor Organization or the Three Diseases Fund? They are typically held up as evidence of capitulation to the morally-driven global campaigns, without any consideration of alternative explanations. Is it not possible that some influential member of the regime grasped the (personal or public) advantages of cooperation and chose to take the risk of advocating a U-turn in policy? (I do not know the answer, but it remains an empirical question, not an unsupported inference.)

If the “international community...does not exist in any recognizable form,” as Arjun Appadurai wrote in 2002, perhaps he is correct in equating it with a moral idea of “common humanity,” “empathy at a distance,” solidarity with the suffering, and non-engagement with “evil” dictators. For the last 22 years, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of campaign groups around the world have coalesced around one particular set of moral principles that prioritize civil, legal, and political rights. These campaigns have succeeded in documenting abuses of these rights (more or less accurately), naming the abusers when possible, and keeping “Burma”—at least in terms of the deadlock between Suu Kyi and the regime—on the agendas of celebrities, international institutions, and foreign parliaments.

Given Burma’s isolation from 1962–1988 and its relative irrelevance in economic and strategic circles in the West, it was against great odds that advocacy networks would succeed in promoting Aung San Suu Kyi for the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, sustain continuous funding and followings for global awareness, define the “Burma problem” so decisively if narrowly, and “brand” Burma’s future with the face of Suu Kyi. In terms of media coverage, dollars spent on promoting “democracy” or numbers of anti-SLORC/SPDC parliamentary or multilateral declarations, one could argue convincingly for the existence of an Appadurai-like moral “international community” dedicated to political reform (of one sort or another) in Burma. Its success may be evident in the way its simple slogan, “Free Burma,” now rivals “Free Tibet,” as the clarion call of both liberal and conservative supporters of human rights, at least in the West. The Tibetan Freedom Concerts of 1996–2001 are upstaged now by the likes of U2, which distributes pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi’s face on popsicle sticks for concert-goers to dance with. A more plausible measure, however imperfect, of the prominence of Burma campaigns is the number of Google hits for anti-junta petitions in cyberspace. The following table shows the

results of googling the word, “petition,” and the name of one of the many countries in which gross human rights violations or other humanitarian concerns have been documented.³² While the “Google” measure cannot tell us how many of those hits duplicate each other, it can give a rough and relative appraisal of the extent of English-language references to advocacy petitions to be signed in the cause of whatever major issues are highlighted on Burma.

Table 1: Number of Google Hits When Entering the Word “Petition” and a Country Name

“Petition” + [country name]	No. Results Google
Burma	8,930,000
Tibet	5,500,000
China	3,850,000
Kosovo	3,540,000
India	3,300,000
Israel	2,630,000
Iraq	2,140,000
Iran	1,800,000
Afghanistan	1,700,000
Palestine	1,150,000
Cuba	1,130,000
Philippines	1,280,000
Haiti	1,110,000
Chechnya	884,000
Thailand	814,000
Rwanda	561,000
Sri Lanka	513,000
Sudan	493,000
N. Ireland	477,000
Burundi	466,000
Kyrgyzstan	464,000
Congo	462,000
North Korea	449,000
Zimbabwe	427,000

This moral community of student activists, the many diasporas from Burma, celebrities, Nobel laureates, professional advocates, and western politicians has the capacity to name, blame, and shame the generals. However, lacking any enforcers, this moral version of the “international community” cannot end the junta. Indeed, campaign groups offer residents inside Burma little more than information (not always reliable) and solidarity (boycotts of Pepsi and Triumph bras, for example). They also cast unmistakable and often inaccurate aspersions on those activists trying to carry out reform from inside the country. Moreover, some of the major organizations that comprise this moral community are ones in which the means, advocacy, media coverage, public education, celebrity fundraising, and grant-writing—are very much in danger of having become the end, some 22 years after the 1988 crackdown. As in other protracted exile situations, activities get mistaken for achievements.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND PENULTIMACY, TOWARD ALTERNATIVE THEORIES OF CHANGE

Although it is always possible that unforeseen events could dramatically recast the distribution of power inside Burma, the current military leadership is probably not one push short of capitulation to “pro-democracy” demands. The SPDC appears to have learned to manage the conflicts resulting from myriad pressures inside the country and from abroad.³³ In this context, how would a “democratic opposition” (or more appropriately, “democratic oppositions”) bring about liberal political reform that advances the rights, protections, and interests of ordinary citizens and limits the arbitrary power of government? Short of an improbable capitulation to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, I suggest five possibilities:

1. a foreign military intervention to carry out “democratic” regime change (very remote likelihood);
2. a popular revolution to unseat military leaders (thus far, tragically unsuccessful);
3. a split in military leadership that results in the ascent of a set of young (or perhaps older), charismatic, and broad-minded Turks (unlikely);

4. a “pacted transition” in which moderate leaders of social forces cooperate with less hard-line military officers to make enough changes to satisfy some of the political demands of anti-government forces while limiting civilian incursions on military power (difficult to identify potential leaders or groups on both sides, at least for now, at the national or macropolitical level); or
5. a series of initiatives carried out inside Burma to gradually expand the space, legal and political protections, and opportunities for the poor, uneducated, unhealthy, malnourished, and disenfranchised citizenry.

The first four possibilities, unlikely as they are in light of the historical record, hold out the promise of prompt remedies to Burma’s “democratic deficit,” assuming that the activist narrative is correct in identifying the military and its leaders as the “root cause” of Burma’s many difficulties.

The fifth takes a longer view, one that rarely is embraced outside of Burma but that is more commonly heard inside. Many non-NLD activists inside the country are promoting and indeed, achieving meaningful political, cultural, and economic reform that, as Duffield argues, successfully “push back the boundaries of arbitrary power and uncontrolled force that have long been the root cause of Burma’s and now Myanmar’s chronic emergency.”³⁴ They have founded thousands of local NGOs or community-based organizations (CBOs), sought out contacts with regime officials, and tried to educate them on global and humanitarian issues, and carried out transparent and, in many instances, effective humanitarian and development assistance, usually on miniscule funding. In 2008, I interviewed more than 50 representatives of Burmese NGOs and CBOs. “Democracy” and civil rights clearly mattered to them, as did access to education, medicine for AIDS and tuberculosis, and credit for poor farmers. I found that all but two of the three dozen organizations they represented self-consciously embraced rights-based methods in their work in community development, education, health, and livelihoods. There are varying degrees of interaction, cooperation, and competition among these activists, and they represent a plurality of views. They constitute nothing like a unified “opposition,” but do view themselves as promoting empowerment, advocacy, and democracy. Some, who self-consciously identify themselves as “democrats,” (but notably not members of the NLD) are also positioning themselves to take part in the 2010 elections.

For them, there is no singular “Burma problem,” no singular “root cause” of suffering, and no illusions about a magic bullet of “regime change.” Some of those I interviewed have been denounced repeatedly by exile politicians and media as well as other campaign groups. Much of the reporting on “inside activists” suggests they seek to become the new, legitimate “opposition” (singular) and intend to usurp the “democratic” banner from the NLD. According to U.S.-based writer, Min Zin, for example, inside activists are “third force” wannabes who threaten to “confuse the moral clarity of people’s struggle against dictatorship.”³⁵ In general, the “pro-democracy” advocacy position is one that views “civil society” as minimally effective at promoting the kind of reform they demand. “That kind of work will never change anything,” one prominent U.S.-based activist told me recently. Stories carried by exile media have suggested that pro-junta diplomats overstate the capacity, popularity, and sincerity of these individuals. Other critics go as far as to suggest these “inside” activists are puppets or agents of the regime. When criticized, “inside” reformists find themselves in a bind. They have no credible platform from which to respond, given state control of the media. Additionally, entering into this debate puts them at risk of greater surveillance by the military. The result is that “inside” activists who are not in the NLD or otherwise christened “authentic” by external activist campaigns end up the object of attack by both the “opposition” and its nemesis, the junta.

The fifth view is probably more realistic, given the absence of compelling evidence that the SPDC and the government that succeeds it under the 2008 constitution are on the precipice of transformation. Although many residents of Burma would prefer to see a speedy transition and also doubt that the 2010 elections hold out much hope, they have little choice but to accept a theory that change inside is gradual. It is hard to underestimate the fluidity and complexity of the mosaics of power in Burma today. They vary from one region to another and sometimes, from one month to another. To the degree ordinary citizens can, most are always reassessing the boundaries of the possible, the dangerous, and the probable to derive a sense of the de facto rules of the political game. Everything depends on calculating correctly so that they can accommodate the explicit and implicit mandates of the local, sub-national, and national authorities while still taking care of their own needs and those of their families. Where possible, most try to stay off the radar screen of the state. Their strategies for survival and for giving life meaning evolve gradually as the rules change.

NOTES

1. Lisa Brooten, "Human Rights Discourse and the Development of Democracy in a Multi-ethnic State," *Asian Journal of Communication* 14 (2) (September 2004): 174–191, 183.

2. Thakin Chan Tun, described as a "veteran politician," in Wai Moe, "The 'Third Force' in Burmese Politics," *The Irrawaddy*, April 30, 2008.

3. Arthur Sim, "The Consequences of Elitism," *The Irrawaddy*, March 30, 2009.

4. This version of "Burma" has been commodified as well, not just among NGOs and advocacy groups but even by the Chrysler Corporation, available from <http://www.autoblog.com/2009/12/04/video-chrysler-ad-gets-political-advocates-for-release-of-myanmar/#continued>.

5. The cognates of "campaign," "advocacy," and "activism" are also slippery concepts, but I use these terms to refer to groups that self-identify as promoters of solidarity with the population living under military rule inside Burma. Websites of groups such as the U.S. Campaign for Burma, the Burma Project, and Free Burma routinely use these terms. I also apologize for the less-than-systematic usage of terms like "junta," "government," "state," and "regime."

6. Roland M. Stromberg, *Democracy: A Short, Analytical History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 4–5.

7. Elsewhere, I have argued against overestimation of state authority throughout the country. My view is that one of the necessary conditions for the endurance of this iteration of military rule has been, in part, a result of the particular history of the Burmese military itself, but also, in part, the result of the fragmentation of social forces along the lines of personal or ideological factions that have fractured "opposition" organizations, and the ethnic majority Burmans' lack of understanding of and tolerance for the aspirations of organized ethnic nationalities. No doubt, some of these divisions are supported by the machinations of the SPDC, but it is also important to understand that non-state and anti-SPDC groups have often taken each other or themselves out of the game.

8. Simon Montlake, "Burma's Junta in a Vise," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 2009.

9. Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest at the time of the 1990 election and was not elected to any seat in parliament.

10. UNDP Myanmar and the Government of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar: Vulnerability-Related Information* (Yangon: UNDP Myanmar and the Government of the Union of Myanmar, March 2006).

11. Statement of the UN Country Team in Myanmar on the Occasion of UN Day, Yangon, October 24, 2007.

12. In NGO-language, migration may be considered a "coping method," but it is often fraught with risk, hardship, and misfortune.

13. There is no systematic demographic data on migration.

14. International Monetary Fund Myanmar, *Staff Report for the 2007 Article IV Consultation*, SM/07/347 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, November 2007), 5.

15. The disdain and the ready deployment of coercion are not new or unique to SLORC/SPDC. In 1958, the Burmese army's Directorate of Education and Psychological Warfare wrote that the Burmese people were ruled by "the grip of their instincts alone, which generally are not of too high standards..." For more information, see Myanmar Ministry of Defence, "Some Reflections on Our Constitution" (research paper, Myanmar Armed Forces Defence Services Historical Museum and Research Institute, Yangon, 1958).

16. Mark Duffield, "On the Edge of 'No Man's Land': Chronic Emergency in Myanmar" (working paper, Centre for Governance and International Affairs, University of Bristol, 2008), 8, available from <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/politics/workingpapers/01-08mdpaper.pdf>.

17. According to one ethnic minority opposition group, these taxes include "porter fees, gate fees, military fund contributions, sports fees, road and bridges fees, fire sentry fees, labor contribution fees, and levies on farms, farm water, and crops." For more information, see Karenni Development Research Group, *Damned by Burma's Generals: The Karenni Experience with Hydropower Development From Lawpita to the Salween* (Karenni Development Research Group, March 2006), 41.

18. In an inexplicable development, satellite TV subscribers have not had to pay subscription fees over the last two years. Very high fees for access to international television programming exist on paper, but have not been collected or enforced in recent years. Thus, the anti-government station, DVB, has a devoted following.

19. Brooten provides a critical history of this development. See Brooten, "Human Rights Discourse," 174–191 and Sandra Dudley, *'External' Aspects of Self-Determination Movements in Burma*, QEH Working Paper Series – QEHWPS94, Working Paper 94 (working paper, The Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, 2003), available from <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/pdf/qehwp/qehwps94.pdf>.

20. Yin Hlaing Kyaw, "The Politics of State-Society Relations in Myanmar," *South East Asia Research* (London: IP Publishing, August 2007).

21. Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

22. For a detailed analysis of the factional struggle that Khin Nyunt lost, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Power and Factional Struggles in Post-independence Burmese Governments," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39 (1) (February 2008): 149–177. Aung Zaw, editor of *The Irrawaddy*, regularly reports on factional struggles. For more information, see Aung Zaw, "The Emperor Looks to the Future," *The Irrawaddy Magazine* (June 2010): 22–23.

23. This is the title of a press conference given by then-lieutenant-general, Khin Nyunt, on June 27, 1997. Available from <http://www.myanmargeneva.org/pressrelease/p1997.htm>.

24. This much-used metaphor likens a member of the nation who serves as a tool for its handler to use to destroy that nation to a piece of wood that serves as the handle of an axe that chops down the tree.

25. See the criticism of the regime's racism in Kyi May Kaung, "Burma's Struggle: Aung San Suu Kyi's Role," August 8, 2006, available from http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/rangoon_3805.jsp.

26. For the latest U.S. presidential extension of sanctions, see http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=1997_register&docid=fr22my97-169.pdf.

27. George Packer, "Drowning: Can the Burmese Save Themselves?" *The New Yorker*, August 25, 2008.

28. Many sources confirm this, including most recently, Robert Kaplan, "Lifting the Bamboo Curtain," *The Atlantic*, September 2008.

29. Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin, CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

30. Campaigners also have successfully lobbied for statements of solidarity from other multilateral organizations, such as the European Union and the G8.

31. In recent years, advocacy groups have focused on using international law to pursue justice rather than political reform. See for example, Tyler Giannini and et al. *Crimes in Burma* (Cambridge: The International Human Rights Clinic, Harvard University Law School, 2009); available from <http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/hrp/documents/Crimes-in-Burma.pdf>.

32. Carried out on July 24, 2010 from Seattle, Washington.

33. Whether the senior generals fully understand the nature of the economic, diplomatic, and domestic problems they face is an open question. As long as their strategy is conflict *management*, not *resolution*, it probably does not matter whether they do or not.

34. Duffield, "On the Edge," 13.

35. Min Zin considers the "third force" to exist and potentially to become "an ill-conceived attempt to undermine the role of committed activists from the NLD, the Shan National League for Democracy, the 88 Generation Students and the monks." See Min Zin, "Burma's Road to 3G Democracy," *The Irrawaddy*, July 14, 2010.