Buddhism and Burmese Politics

In Their Own Words—
Looking at Burma's Political Culture

From Inside and Out
THE ISSUES....

BUDDHISM AND BURMESE POLITICS:
Burma is a country immersed in beliefs, rites, and rituals long-identified with the Buddhist faith. Saffron-robed monks and towering pagodas are part of both the urban and rural landscape. To many outside observers at least, Burma and its people are cloaked in a Buddhist mantle that seems to be at the core of understanding this society. But how deeply do the tenets and practices of this faith actually affect Burmese culture? And what, if any, has been the religion's influence on Burmese political systems? We examine how Buddhism might help explain aspects of Burmese political thinking; the tendency to "orientalize" Burma's politics; and the ways in which Buddhist teachings are applied to the political arena.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS – LOOKING AT BURMA'S POLITICAL CULTURE:
For more than a decade, promoting political dialogue between Burma's military regime and pro-democracy forces has been the centerpiece of international efforts with regard to Burma. Numerous United Nations resolutions have been passed, sanctions have been enacted and special envoys have been dispatched with the hope that the political stalemate might be broken and substantive talks take place. But how much is really understood about the way Burmese view politics? Is there anything unique or innately "Burmese" to their ideas of power and governance? What influences the thinking of the military, the opposition, and the average Burmese?

FROM INSIDE AND OUT:
Perhaps the defining factor in the mentality of modern Burmese society is the military rule under which people have lived since General Ne Win took power in 1962. The role of the military intrudes into every aspect of Burmese society—family interaction, basic social values, community life. At the same time, Burma is finding itself increasingly the subject of international attention and attempts by external forces to influence social and political behavior. Two authors examine the impact of these forces on the country and its people.
THE ORIENTALIZATION OF BURMESE POLITICS?
A Research Agenda
by: Chao-Tzang Yawngwe

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES:
A Buddhist Perspective on Burmese Politics
by: Min Zin

IN THEIR OWN WORDS –
Looking at Burma's Political Culture

LIFE UNDER MILITARY RULE:
The Pressures to Conform
by: Christina Fink

EXTERNAL IMPACTS ON BURMESE THINKING
by: Derek Brooke-Wavell
PREFACE • This book deals with Burmese ideas about Buddhist mental culture (*samatha*, meditation and *vipassana*, contemplation) in the 1988 political crisis. It does so at three levels, including the general level of Burmese political terminology, and at the more specific levels of personal practice by Burma’s leading politicians and their association with and patronage of particular traditions.

The attention paid to mental culture on both sides of the political divide is in part due to the importance of meditation and contemplation in Burmese political culture since the colonial period. However, in part, this is also a response to the isolation experienced. On the one hand, members of the NLD [National League for Democracy] have experienced severe repression by the regime and were isolated from society by imprisonment and house arrest. Senior members of the NLD and senior monks have appealed to the regime’s leaders to rehabilitate themselves through the practice of *vipassana*. On the other hand, the military experienced isolation and fear of mainstream society. To them, these practices represent the last possible instrument for the transformation of the military hierarchy. Contemporary patronage by the military of these traditions is certainly based on its awareness of the powers of these traditions in the creation and dissolution of boundaries and in the legitimization of the state. It is not clear, however, to what extent the practice and patronage of these techniques is the result of its desire to change.
Let me propose one approach to understanding the Burmese political arena that I have found useful, namely in terms of the distinction between two different models for political action: the political model that works on 'authority' and the political model that works on 'influence.' 'Authority' (ana) is centralized, whereas 'influence' (awza) is distributed.

Burmese military leaders operate on the basis of authority, and since they have no interest in transforming their subjects into active citizens, power and agency are not redistributed across a wide range of institutions outside the army. In this system, influence is only tolerated when it flows through channels of authority. Thus, the situation is created where a breakdown in authority becomes a traumatic event that requires the regeneration of influence for which both monks and elections are deemed crucial even by the military.

Since an authoritarian system does not rely on anyone outside the structure of authority itself, this means that it is unable and unwilling to dispense rights and privileges outside its own hierarchy-only obligations can be distributed. Democracy is thus reduced to a form of catharsis, a brief moment of relief through a promise that, like Ne Win's promise, is never realized.

In an influence model, however, since it is based on the idea of dispersal rather than centralization of power, individual citizens must continuously be appealed to for support. This then must function on the basis of more than just duties or obligations on the part of its citizens. A system of distributed power simply cannot work without also distributing certain rights and benefits. Once an environment of distributed power exists, authoritarian behavior is turned into the least efficient and most counter-productive way to conduct politics. Forced labor would not work in this system.

In my view, such contrast helps explain differences between the regime and the democracy movement. To reduce this difference, as the army would have it, to a simple opposition between indigenous local patriotism, and foreign values that lead to selling the country out to foreigners, is to oversimplify the local debates that are currently ongoing.

**Influence Versus Authority**

Let me first cover everyday use of the term. Ana is associated with the naked power of the State irrespective of ethics, as involved in 'instruments of government' (owners of ana) who 'possess ana' either because they 'seize ana,' as 'dictators (lord of ana) do, who set up 'dictatorships (views by masters of ana), or because ana is 'delegated' by someone higher, by supernatural sanction or even by elections. Such deferred authority includes the authorized law courts ('owning ana') and executioners ('sons of ana').

Ana 'comes into force' or is 'established,' and is 'stringently enforced.' To contravene it is to be 'disobedient'. It is viewed as a kind of machinery limited to a sphere ('wheel of ana) and a limited period of time ('ana period').

Ana is closely associated with office and rank, and ana in Burmese history has been significantly sustained by Brahmanic and mundane rituals (magic), including loki-panna.

There is, however, an ethical form of ana that is built upon good Buddhist practice and rightful rule. This is linked to the concept of the 'wheel of authority' that arises only as the result of correct mental states and intentionality of the king. Furthermore, [General] Aung San referred to democracy as 'the people's desire, the ana of the people, indicating that the ultimate form of authority is one based on the peoples' appreciation of what is being done for them, namely 'influence.'

**Awza (Influence)**

Sometimes instructors refer to The Three Awza, including: (1) 'food awza, the power that generates the material form of creatures'; (2) 'earth awza, the power that makes trees appear'; and (3) 'human awza, the power that makes for accomplishment.'

The primary meaning is 'nutrition'. It is often used to convey the idea of 'strength-giving' or 'nutritive essence,' as in 'rich soil;' but it also 'has flavor' and is associated with 'nourishment' as opposed to inorganic substance which is 'without awza'.

Secondarily it means 'influence' that 'can make someone feel' so that it 'permeates a domain'. In this sense it has a fluidity not unlike the English 'influence'.

**Ana (Authority)**

Ana, in Pali, means 'order,' 'command,' 'power' and 'authority'. It is the most commonly used concept to characterize the military regimes since 1962.

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When used in conjunction with authority, as in *awza-ana*, it means an authority that is both regarded positively and is influential. Such would be opposed to, for example, 'ana of arms'.

_Awza_, as distinct from _ana_, 'permeates'. On the other hand, it is inalienable, so that _awza_ cannot simply be delegated or inherited, whereas _ana_ can. Yet its effect is felt to be much more positive and goes much deeper than _ana_. It is important to point out that while _ana_ can be and usually is exercised negatively, _awza_ is never a negative quality or even a neutral term—it is always a positive quality associated with the positive characteristics of a person. _Awza_ is strongly associated with self-purification and elimination of mental defilements through high morality, mental culture, and in particular with loving-kindness and compassion as inherent in *byama-so* and *brahma-vihara_. It is associated with voluntary co-operation, as opposed to forced co-operation elicited by _ana_.

_Buddhism._

_Awza comes prior to ana_

_Ana_ and _awza_, just like 'authority' and 'influence,' blend into one another. One who is greatly influential is often given authority, and one who is in a position of authority is also able to influence. Nevertheless, there is a world of difference between these concepts. To be influential may make one authoritative, but there is a world of difference between being influential and authoritarian. In Burmese history all Burmese kings invariably had _ana_, but exceptionally few were described as having _awza_. The exception were those, such as Kanaung Crown Prince under Mindon, who were broadly educated, internationally minded, of good intention, and who were interpreted as having a good all around _awza_. In short, they were popular or, in modern terms, electorally eligible. The idea of _ana_ is that it is limited by boundaries and frameworks—a domain and some kind of life span such as a period of government; _awza_, however, is so fluid that it transcends and trickles through all boundaries of time and place.

In Buddhism, the techniques of _awza_ are sketched as primary in the ability to maintain order on a voluntary basis, and _ana_ is presented as an extension of this. For example, the idea is emphasized that the future loss of Buddhist teachings should not be an excuse to adopt an _ana_ approach. The Buddha's field of authority is supposed to be the greatest of any, since through authority of the Wheel of the _Dhamma_ it pervades the one hundred thousand crores of cosmic systems, surviving generations of kings and outshining their limited fields of authority over time. This power is rooted in supreme understanding of the Doctrine of Dependent Origination which the Buddha discovered through his meditation, and which though simple in only containing twelve causes, resulted in his thorough understanding of the 3,700,000 crores of _Mahavajira Vipassana Nana_. This field of authority can be delegated, for subsequently creatures had the ability to take up his words on his authority in the form of the _purittas_, so that the _suttas_, when recited under the right conditions, become efficacious. In General Aung San's view, this superior authority of the Buddha, based on full understanding of all causes, provides the idiom in which terms the rightful demise of British colonialism can be understood.

_Military Ana_

_and NLD Electoral Awza_

General Aung San stands today for both _ana_ and _awza_. Aung San was a courageous student who founded the Communist Party, heckled the British authorities, turned on Japan and finally negotiated national independence as a civilian, without relying on his army rank, for he was also founder of the Burmese army. Though Aung San is invariably depicted in uniform, the legacy of Aung San is in fact not so much of _ana_, someone who founded the army, but a person with _awza_, who enjoyed the goodwill of the people, and had influence among them. He resisted the accumulation of wealth for himself and lived with an ideal that inspired the Burmese people. Burma's national independence was attained by Aung San and U Nu as civilians, not soldiers.

The army had not achieved national independence. It was the combination of a particular moment and the personal qualities of two leading and popular personalities of Burma's struggle for national independence that were productive of sufficient _awza_ to rally the population along with them. To stay in power, the army had to draw on Aung San's _awza_. When Aung San's daughter stood up in
his name, the army demonstrated that it could only manage \textit{ana}. However, it was ineffective at managing \textit{awza} outside its own immediate realm without resorting to instruments of authority. It seemed change was imminent when it permitted elections, but as the years passed, it then proceeded to arrest and imprison more and more elected members of parliament.

As long as the army reverts to such instruments of \textit{ana}, it will eventually prove unable to contain such crises of legitimacy. Stable political systems must permit \textit{awza} to be the mainstay, and \textit{ana} to be only an adjunct to this. The above distinction between \textit{ana} and \textit{awza} is particularly useful for interpreting the current crisis. It is possible in this way to distinguish between three kinds of politics-\textit{awza} electoral politics of constructive influence, \textit{ana} politics of force and illegitimate government, and \textit{awza-ana} politics of good and benevolent government with the support of the people.

...[The] Burmese State is conceptualized as having originated with the introduction of Buddhism, and this gives Buddhist concepts enormous force in Burmese politics. Both \textit{awza} and \textit{ana} are based in the Buddhist teachings. Pagoda politics has historically been important in the national independence struggle and continues to be so today, even with the military now rebuilding pagodas in an attempt to augment their \textit{awza} in an \textit{ana} manner.

The transition from the U Nu electoral to the Ne Win dictatorial phase may be read in terms of the vernacular as a transition from the politics of influence (\textit{awza}), in which people warm to the leaders because of their personal and other qualities and their ability to converse, influence and persuade the public, to the politics of authority (\textit{ana}), in which displays of impersonal and omnipresent strength are required to make people obey out of fear of retribution...

...Aung San Suu Kyi has \textit{awza}. This contributes to her authoritative role in Burmese politics. She invokes higher ideas, while the regime's \textit{ana} is supported by weapons, military intelligence and \textit{lakipanna}. Post-1962, military regimes have been \textit{ana}-style dictatorships with good reason to greatly dislike personalities with \textit{awza}, who are to them like a 'loose cannon'. Ne Win never permitted any officer who was liked by the people to climb the ranks, for such a person might eventually usurp his authority. The result was that the worst personalities, those most loyal to Ne Win himself, rose to the top with no benefit to the people. [0]nly the promise of democracy and the periodic gesture of elections, could keep \textit{ana} in place.

Aung San Suu Kyi's politics is entirely focused on \textit{awza}, for she has no \textit{ana} as such (except for the elections which many argue did confer \textit{ana} on her). This uncontrollable force of \textit{awza} is the regime's bugbear. This is why the regime must interpret her influence not in terms of 'local' Burmese concept, namely \textit{awza}, but as a foreign concept, namely 'influence'. The generals attribute to her foreign influence, and in doing so they hope to avoid the implication that she has positive influence in this Burmese sense, namely that her personal charisma functions most definitely in terms of traditional ideas of \textit{awza}.

The elections are about the electorate conferring \textit{ana} upon those who have \textit{awza}. Realizing this, the current cultural and religious revival that the regime is orchestrating is an attempt to manufacture \textit{awza} under a future electoral polity in which they hope to secure a dominant position. This is a significant change from the previous Ne Win polity. However, they cannot compete with Aung San Suu Kyi, whose \textit{awza} is not artificially manufactured and whose politics actually touches the minds of the people and
deeply influences their opinions; the military does not have this capability. It can only pretend to express 'the peoples' desires'...

The regime knows that in an electoral environment it needs to supplement its aña with awza. It has tried its utmost to rule out all forms of influence outside its own center. There is some evidence that this even extends to changing the Burmese vocabulary itself. For example, the latest official government dictionary, published in 1993, interprets awza in an aña sort of way. It does not so much translate it as 'influence,' but rather as a synonym for aña. Any subtle distinctions between aña and awza disappear when no distinction is made between 'making one's awza felt,' and 'having one's awza permeate'. These are all in fact translated in the dictionary as 'asserting one's authority'. In sum, awza is invariably equated with 'authority' and with the exercise of naked 'power'. This contrasts with earlier dictionaries such as Judson's and Hok Sein's, who preserve the designation 'influence' for this term. Such collapse between the spheres of authority and influence would explain why the NLD is seen as a threat.

ANA AND 'FOREIGNIZING'
...To sustain its preposterous views of self-sufficiency the regime has to 'foreignize' those Burmese people not directly linked to the army. The aña approach 'foreignizes' genuine Burmese citizens, and 'indigenizes' those in authority. In contrast to the large-scale support the regime proudly proclaims it receives from foreign sources in the state-controlled press, every penny the NLD receives is scrutinized by military intelligence and publicized as evidence of support by foreign powers for subversive elements in Burmese society. The regime's tendency to publicize Aung San Suu Kyi's every move for propaganda purposes, and its tendency to publicize its own benevolence towards her, meant that Aung San Suu Kyi steadfastly refused to accept any support from the regime. This already began when she refused offers of electricity and food. Indeed, she has sold her furniture and possessions in order to finance her own upkeep.

The regime could not handle this independence. In a society permeated by authority with cetana [good intentions] and with the upper hand in the patron-client relationship, not to accept benevolence from the generals is considered a serious snub. The only propaganda they could achieve was to show how she relied on foreign elements. They investigated her every possible connection with foreigners. They confiscated packages sent by her [late] husband and photographed its contents which they published under the heading 'The Lady's privileged foreign connection' in the national press. The pack-
ages contained lipstick and a Jane Fonda exercise tape. They also sought to turn her two sons into foreign subjects by canceling their Burmese passports in September 1989, though they had by local traditions become Burmese men since they had carried out the shinbyá novitiation ceremony in Burma. They highlighted every connection Aung San Suu Kyi has with foreign countries in terms of embassy visits and foreign journalists, to show her as propped up by 'alien' regimes and their agents (journalists) devoted to 'alien cultures.'

CONCLUSION

Ana is an indispensable component in government, but awza is more so. To analyze Burmese politics entirely in terms of ana is extremely one-sided. For a government to be effective, it must be respected and be able to harness full support from the population. In taking an ana army-centered approach: [one] enters into Burmese politics, as does the army, without raising the broader, less tangible, more fluid, local, cultural and Buddhist angles that belong in the awza domain. [One] cannot satisfactorily explain the 1960 AFPFL victories or the 1990 NLD victories except as an expression of authoritarian sentiment by rival local armies.

...Focusing on the cultural and religious models of Burmese politics would, I suggest, explain a lot of hitherto unexplained features. First, it would explain why the regime could not have anticipated its failure in the 1990 elections. The regime itself has been fooled by the apparently submissive cultural behavior that the Burmese exhibit when they talk to an ana (cf. awza) government. Their sentiments of disagreement do exist, but they remain submerged until the opportunity presents itself to 'show their feelings,' whether it be an auspicious time or day, or at the ballot box. These more submerged concepts of politics require a very different approach; not permitted a life outside, the Burmese are primarily coming to terms with their political preferences through 'mental politics' in which 'mental culture' is as the only one permitted and understood on both sides of the political divide, for it is productive of both awza and ana.

Second, Aung San Suu Kyi adopted the higher awza Buddhist vocabulary to express her opposition to the regime pitched in a battle with ana politics.

Based on the power of the powerless, it is largely invisible, does not have a single center, crosses boundaries and is therefore much more difficult to describe. This kind of 'disorganized' awza politics is...fixed on high profile instruments of authority as it is.

Third, as I have explained, the breakdown of ana demands regeneration through awza. This would explain why the regime itself, since the 1988 uprisings, has not only organized elections, but has taken up culture and Buddhism as a platform in order to compensate for its facelessness and its lack of charisma. Ne Win's awza worked through Aung San, but Aung San has now been "re-assassinated." As there is no privileged entry point into awza politics, except as what the people of Burma grant the person, the military is now trying to compensate for its facelessness by using culture and Buddhism to gain awza style influence with the electorate in a clumsy "ana" sort of way.

...Broadly speaking, then, the Burmese themselves, in terms of their outward behavior, and the way they are spun into a web of patron-client relationships, are in no doubt that the generals in power are indeed a form of government, namely an ana government, with ultimate power over their lives. However, they are highly ambivalent and suspicious about this power in a way that does not secure or promise their voluntary co-operation. This is what produces the tragic irony of a government trumpeting its own unique 'good intentions' [cetana] while building pagodas by recruiting 'voluntary laborers' or 'masters of cetana' [cetana shin].

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Many scholars view Burmese politics as "unique," as different from politics elsewhere, to be understood only in terms of Burmese-Buddhist beliefs and symbols. A critical examination of this "uniqueness" is undertaken here, albeit with some trepidation. While this article is by no means a scholarly thesis, nor can it be considered authoritative, it is written in the hope of provoking further discussion.

Introduction: Burmese-Buddhist Political Language

Burmese kings and rulers were viewed as being in possession of high karma, having abundant Pon, Awza, and Ana—the "qualities" that bestow greatness and legitimacy. Awza is defined as authority and influence derived from the possession of Pon, which is "an aura of sacred power or sacredness" and Ana, or power.
he precedent set by Burmese kings to employ Buddhists rituals and beliefs as a means of legitimation pertains to the current political situation; the use of Buddhist rites, pomp, and ceremonies is one way that the military regime advances its claim to legitimacy and consolidates its hold on power. The state-controlled television is filled with images of the ruling generals presiding over Buddhist ceremonies. Generals Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt figure prominently in significant religious ceremonies and in the restoration of sacred edifices. Notably, the former often presides over the annual Paungdaw-Oo rites where images of Buddha are brought in on a royal barge from Inle Lake to Yawnghwe in Shan State. The latter recently presided over the repair and hoisting of the hti (or crown) of the famed and revered Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon. (Curiously, all those who took part in this venture, including Khin Nyunt, wore Shan costume). Moreover, each of the important generals has his own personal guardian and protector. These guardian-monks are showered by the generals with luxury sedans, air-conditioners, television sets, video players, refrigerators, and so forth, in lavish televised ceremonies. People joke that Burma is the only country in the world that has color televisions showing only two colors: green (military) and yellow (monks).

Those who see politics in Burma as distinctive-ly Buddhist may claim that the regime’s longevi-
ty-from 1988 to the present-results from its use of Buddhist symbols. It could be argued that the regime has swayed the general populace, which is largely Buddhist, to its side and therefore is in tune with mainstream political culture.

The Objective Fact of Power

It is difficult to analyze a repressive authoritarian regime, where politics are opaque and the political arena is tightly closed. Little can be observed, much less analyzed by outsiders; those living in the country are also limited in this regard because no real politics or political debate are allowed. People living under repressive regimes are not only forcibly "de-politicized," but also disoriented and traumatized by repression, and gripped by fear.

It is common for repressive regimes to cloak themselves in a patriotic mantle, to conjure up images of the glorious past, and to justify their behavior in terms of hoary traditions and culture. A recent example is the Burmese regime’s insistence that forced labor is part of the Buddhist merit-making tradition, on the grounds that building roads, irrigation dams, bridges, and so on, benefits the nation as a whole, including those forced to do the work.

It is tempting therefore, for outside observers to infer from what little is visible and heard, that the regime, no matter how repressive, is accepted by those ruled and even considered legitimate, because the regime and its behavior are perceived as reflecting the "authenticity" of tradition, culture, history.

Understanding the "Submerged Culture" of Politics

Outside observers analyzing a repressive long-lived, regime often fail to take adequately into account the "submerged" voice of the subordinated elements of society. Behavior of the locals is explained in terms of the political ideology propagated by the regime, which has a vested interest in portraying society as either politically immature and incapable of managing itself, or as "different" and "unique" and thereby legitimizing its repressive practices. This often leads outside observers to explain and describe politics in ways that are highly elitist, condescending, and orientalist-seeing the "other" as quaintly different and creating a special category out of something that actually may not be different or unique at all.

A case in point is the studied inattention of outside analysts to the culture of politics among the Burmese masses (the Burman as well as the non-Burman Buddhist population, especially the Shans.) Here one finds a strong distrust of kings and rulers. This is expressed in the saying or belief that mins (rulers) comprise one of the five Great Evils of mankind; they are to be avoided or kept at a distance. There is significant skepticism, even cynicism, concerning the pronouncements and intentions of governments and leaders.
BUDDHISM AND BURMESE POLITICS

When General Ne Win unveiled his Burmese-Buddhist Socialist doctrine, few people took it very seriously as a philosophy, let alone as anything authentic to Burmese culture. While hailed by outsiders, most Burmese saw it as a shallow, incohesive mix of Burmese metaphysics and leftist jargon, concocted by the military’s in-house “philosophers.”

This trend has manifested itself in the elections of 1960 and 1990 in which people posed a serious challenge to the military’s claim to legitimacy. In the 1960 elections, both former prime minister U Nu and General Ne Win invoked Buddhist values and beliefs. U Nu, however, ran on a Buddhist platform that was also anti-military and anti-dictatorship and won. The party backed by General Ne Win lost, despite the fact that Ne Win’s caretaker government had often employed Buddhist language and symbols and extolled the Buddhist way of life.

Clearly, the 1990 elections again reflected the anti-military sentiments of the people: part of the reason for the resounding victory of the National League for Democracy was the willingness of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other party leaders to stand up to the military. Both the elections of 1960 and 1990 posed a serious challenge to the military’s claim that Burmese politics are “unique,” that they cannot be understood or appreciated except in reference to the symbols, values and beliefs of the Burmese-Buddhist world-view that confer legitimacy.

It is quite likely, however, that if there is another relatively free and fair election in Burma—which is improbable—the people will once again overwhelmingly reject any pro-military party or leaders, despite the regime’s hold on Burmese-Buddhist political culture.

There is also a tendency for analysts to gloss over the effects of repression. Repression silences and compels people to withdraw into a private world, to reject involvement in the dangerous public realm, or in other words, to be depoliticized. This depoliticization is further promoted by economic hardship because energies are diverted to making ends meet under very trying conditions. Political passivity that results from severe repression might be misinterpreted as characteristic of Burmese-Buddhist society, thus implying that the behavior of the regime is in tune with local political culture.
Politics is about power: who will hold and exercise power and to what degree such power will be exercised. In any political struggle, victory goes to the one who is able to mobilize or win over the various centers or pockets of power within a society, or to those who are able to control or destroy these centers, so that only one exists.

The building blocks of power are sets of social, cultural and ethnic values, beliefs, and symbols, that serve to bind strangers together, giving them a collective "body" and sociopolitical cohesion, that can be used to win power or to legitimize the possession of power.

It is unfair to accuse outside observers and political analysts of having a pro-military, pro-authoritarian bias, or to label them as outright orientalists. Scholars who attempt to analyze politics in Burma cannot avoid describing or explaining Burmese politics without reference to Buddhism. After all, the people being studied are Buddhists, and Buddhist metaphors, images, and terminology, are widely employed in the political arena and therefore, heavily influence political thought.

However, it might be useful for observers of the political scene in Burma to take into account that throughout the country’s history—except for a very short time, from 1948 to 1958—the people have had no say in the matter of who governs and have had extremely limited access to the exchange of political ideas. It is therefore misleading to argue that Burma’s politics is pre-determined by, and enclosed within, a Burmese-Buddhist world-view. It is also untenable to assume that owing to the political salience of Buddhism, the Burmese are not conscious of, or do not care for, basic issues that drive or underlie politics elsewhere, such as good governance, the accountability of rulers and officials, justice, equity, the rights of citizens, and so on. In the current repressive environment, it is premature to make any hard assumptions about the influence of Buddhism on the psyche of the people, in particular on the question of who governs or leads, and the legitimacy of its rulers.

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"On account of offering the new htidaw to the Shwedagon Pagoda, may the building of a stable, peaceful, modern and developed union be undertaken successfully without internal and external disturbances and dangers."

"THERAVADA TEACHING REACHED MYANMAR A LONG TIME AGO.
IT REPLACED THE Asura WAY OF THINKING;
AND ENCOURAGED THE Sakkci WAY OF THINKING. Asura IS A COMPETITIVE WAY OF THINKING, PROMOTING THE DESTRUCTION OR CRUSHING OF CONTESTANTS OR RIVALS TO GAIN VICTORY. Sakka IS A COOPERATIVE WAY OF THINKING, PROMOTING THE HANOPADANA METHOD OF NEGOTIATING WITH THE COMPETITORS, THAT IS, ADOPTING THE PRINCIPLE OF GIVE-AND-TAKE TO WIN THEM OVER."
A couple of years ago I saw a book entitled *Living with Mindfulness* on the shelf of a book stall in Mae Sot, a town along the Thailand-Burma border. At first, the title merely suggested that the book was of a popular genre in Burma in which the author shares his or her experience of contemplation and insight. But at second glance, when my eye caught the name of the author on the book's cover, I was amazed. The reason for my surprise was that the writer was a well-known colonel in the Burmese army who served as a high-ranking officer within the military's Public Relations and Psychological Warfare Department. As a famous composer, writer and film director, he also had become a propagandist for the regime. In the second half of the 1990s, however, his life changed in a striking and very public manner. This colonel met a highly educated and venerable Buddhist monk, who gave him a life-altering teaching. As a result, he began to refuse propaganda assignments. He offered excuses, saying that he was in no mood for the task or lacked the inspiration to perform these duties. His refusals, not surprisingly, greatly upset his superiors. The colonel instead wrote articles discussing his meditation experiences and the insight gained from them. He also admitted the mistakes in his life, such as excessive arrogance, conceit, jealousy, malice, envy and intolerance. In his writing, he not only repented for his past misdeeds, but also expressed the pity he felt for his superiors and fellow colleagues who remained stuck in what he described as an immoral and meaningless lifestyle. Consequently, his writings and the journal he edited were suspended at least twice. Eventually, he was sacked.

The dramatic event drew not only the attention of the colonel's intimates and acquaintances but also that of the broader public. While some marveled at the personal transformation that had taken place in the colonel's life, others connected with the democratic opposition focused on the political implications: the regime had lost an effective tool and the colonel had now become "our man," or at least had been neutralized. Many people welcomed his change as a conversion: evil finally must be giving way to good. But was this change of heart simply about the dichotomy between good and evil?

Reflecting on the event and the concepts of evil and conversion in the light of our native cultural ideas and the teachings of Buddhism, one might consider a different interpretation Aung San Suu Kyi was once asked if she believed in the concept of evil. She responded "I always quote something that Karl Popper said when he was asked, 'Do you believe in evil?' He said,'No... but I believe in stupidity.' And I think this is very near to the Buddhist position. I don't think there is a word for 'evil' as such, in Buddhism, is there?"

Aung San Suu Kyi is right, indeed. In Buddhism, we do have the terms—*kusala kamma* and *akusala kamma*—that are sometimes translated as "good action" and "evil action", though this translation may be misleading. Things that are *kusala* (such as calmness of body and mind) may not always be considered good, while some things may be *akusala* (such as melancholy, sloth and distraction) and yet not generally considered to be "evil", as we know both of these words in English.

Keeping the Pali scriptures in mind, *kusala kamma* can be rendered generally as "intelligent, skillful, contented, beneficial, good," action or "that which removes affliction." *Akusala kamma* is defined in the opposite way, as "unintelligent," "unskillful" action and so on. In brief, Buddhists prefer to say *kusala kamma* as "wholesome action" and *akusala kamma" unwholesome action". So rather than speaking in terms of a conversion from evil to good, it is more meaningful in the Buddhist context to speak of a gradual movement away from ignorance towards wisdom throughout one's process of rebirth, *samsara*. If a person is on the right track, proceeding from ignorance (the domain of *sankhata dhamma*) to wisdom (the domain of *asankhata dhamma*), the ultimate goal of liberation can be achieved.

In the social sphere, liberation is achieved through a process of humanization, a term that has special significance in the Buddhist context. Within Buddhist understanding, human existence is considered more conducive to enlightenment than a divine existence. A human life may have innumerable merits to attain and is, therefore, regarded as particularly precious. But even after being born as a human being, it is possible to be dehumanized both by one's own actions and those of others.

For Buddhists, dehumanizing others does the greatest damage to one's own status as a human
being. Thus the current situation in Burma, in which both oppressors and oppressed become victims of dehumanizing behavior, is particularly inimical to the attainment of true liberation in the Buddhist sense.

Here we can use the analogy of the Burmese nat (spirit) worshiping tradition to understand this point. Within the nat worshiping belief system, many lower nats intimidate vulnerable people so that they can enjoy special favors from those people. Those who are extorted are so afraid of the nats that they cannot resist their oppressive demands. They will make offerings to the nat, in order that retribution and punishment will not fall upon them. At the same time, the nats fear losing the privileges they have acquired by compelling people to kowtow to them.

The point we could infer from this analogy is that those who make others insecure feel insecure too; those who dehumanize, devalue, and humiliate others also take these feelings onto themselves. The dignity and humanity of both parties are lost. The main concern has not to do with the good-evil/oppressed-oppressor dichotomy, but the dehumanization of both parties and restoration of the humanity of all involved. This concern, however, is frequently overlooked.

It is particularly interesting to ponder why a country like Burma, where people have adopted Buddhism for centuries, is failing to follow the path of this historical vocation: the restoration of humanity for all people. During the colonial period, many ideologies imported from the West and Japan, such as Socialism, Communism, Capitalism and Fascism, took hold among the younger generation. The impact of these ideologies on popular thought goes farther than one would have expected. The idea that, in order to bring peace and prosperity for good and innocent people, it is justifiable to wipe out those who are evil or corrupt, has been employed by landlords, capitalists, foreigners, and Burmans over decades. And the people have suffered because of it. Throughout the years, the crude polarization between the oppressed and oppressor, the exploited and the exploiter, became more dominant. An "us-versus-them" attitude emerged.

With this in mind, and after more than 50 years of civil war, perhaps we require a shift in our thinking. We should re-evaluate the Burmese saying Ma Kaung Thu Pal, Kaung Thu Kal (quash the evil and save the good) if we want to realize the goal of the movement; to allow all people to enjoy human values, dignity and rights. The idea of "cosmic companionship" that Martin Luther King once put forward should also be fundamentally re-examined. The universe does not take sides, but it does operate under the laws of cause and effect. Rather than emphasizing polarization and partisanship, we should instead give weight to shared ground and genuine reconciliation.

Unfortunately, as the events of the past dozen years have clearly demonstrated, the ultimate goal of the Burmese military regime is to perpetuate its power at the expense of reconciliation and peace. The attitude reflected in its maxim - "destroy all internal and external enemies," posted on the red billboards displayed at strategic points in the country, is at the forefront of its thinking regarding the opposition. Even while announcing to the outside world that it is seriously undertaking a process of guided reform or "disciplined" democracy, the regime proclaims the right to resort to brute force in the event of popular opposition to its plan.
A popular puppet play of Burmese nats (spirits.)

However, this public approach does not mean that the regime is a united and monolithic entity in terms of political cohesiveness. When one takes into account the structural dynamics of the regime and its component forces, one will notice that there are different opinions, mutual suspicions and personal rivalries within the ruling body. If the opposition is strategically minded and sophisticated, this intra-military fluidity of power and opinion could serve as a basis for creating political will among the different segments of the military.

The opposition, however, thus far seems to lack the ability to convince elements within the military that it is possible to enter into a mutually beneficial dialogue to end the current deadlock, thereby preventing one side or the other from being totally annihilated. To do this they should identify members of the junta who are most likely to recognize that the current, unsustainable situation can only be defused through cooperation with the opposition.

For the opposition, the danger of over-reliance on mass uprisings and international support to dislodge the military from power is that it may create further polarization and demonization rather than bring the two sides closer together. While the opposition has pursued the goal of national reconciliation, it has also at times fallen into a zero-sum struggle due to the extreme pressure it has faced from the regime.

This is not meant to minimize the importance of demonstrations or international pressure in this globalized world. Experience has proven that the cumulative effect of pressure applied both from within and outside has been crucial for every country in moving away from an authoritarian form of government.

In order to apply such pressure effectively, the movement must also give weight to the importance of creating political will among its opponent. There could be opportunities for the movement to proceed with such a strategy. The opposition should not fall into the crudely polarized, "black versus white" mentality. Instead, it should take proactive and inventive steps that would diminish the military’s fear of relinquishing control. Perhaps through a sincere practice of Buddha’s teaching Vivadam Khemato, which means “all disputes and conflicts are settled by conference and discussion,” the fate of all those who have lost their humanity—both the oppressed and the oppressors—will be brighter. This could provide a win-win alternative to the stalemate in which Burma now finds itself, and could prevent what might otherwise become a bloody revolution with needless loss of life on both sides.

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Looking at Burma's Political Culture

With headlines declaring a political stalemate and international efforts for promoting dialogue stalled, many of those outside Burma are grappling for an understanding of what makes the Burmese political mind tick. On the following pages, Burmese from varied walks of life share their views on the mental culture surrounding Burmese political thinking. What do they see as the cultural and social influences that have an impact on the way people think of politics? How much of a role do religion and traditional values play? And what does it all mean for the future of Burma?

Q: What aspects of Burmese culture have had an impact on Burmese political thinking?

A: There are probably three major influences on Burmese political thought: number one is religion, which as you know, is predominantly Buddhism; number two is feudalism and feudal values; and the third, which has emerged historically, is young people as a force for political change.

Q: How much of an impact do you feel Buddhism has had on Burmese political thinking?

A: Fundamentally, Buddhism teaches contentment and tolerance. There is a large degree of tolerance because people will always regard what is happening as a product of past deeds. For instance, if you are poor or destitute now, it is not necessarily due to someone slighting you or society failing you. It's due more to bad karma from your past life. In Burma people will, to a large degree, simply tolerate their hardships. Politically speaking, it may be difficult to move people to action. But religion is not the sole factor. It is entwined with other factors, perhaps the most important of which is feudalism.
Q: Could you elaborate on that point?

A: I think Burma is still fundamentally a feudal society, where feudal values continue to prevail. While democratic values and processes had been introduced before and after independence in 1948, they were nipped in the bud by General Ne Win with his coup in 1962. But we should remember that even in U Nu's time, he was accused of acting like a King-Emperor by his own minister of information. But then, the feudalism of U Nu was much milder.

In feudal society, you have the feudal lord, those officials serving the feudal lord, and the common people, who are the subjects. What was really problematic about Burmese feudalism was that it had no rule for, or guarantee of, succession. You know, throughout Burmese history, it was not always the eldest son who succeeded his father. Once a king or a feudal lord died, all of his sons were equally eligible to succeed him. So if someone seized power, he would often kill off the remaining relatives, except his own brothers and sisters from the same mother. This method of succession and other feudal practices led to two things that have had an impact on political life: one is individualism, and the other is tendency toward factionalism.

Q: In what way does this tendency towards factionalism relate to feudalism?

A: Feudal values have carried over in this sense: essentially, you owe allegiance only to your feudal lord and when you see that the feudal lord's power weakening, the princes begin to start plotting to take over. There is no acknowledging that someone else may be better or more deserving than you. If you look at Burmese history, there were really only five or six kings who were really strong, who were builders of dynasties and who could keep the country together. Once one of these strong kings died, his kingdom would split into principalities again.

I think this mentality has now carried on into modern political life, though in a different form. In Ne Win, you have a very strong leader—one who simply removes whomever he suspects of being disobedient or disloyal, or of becoming popular enough to become a potential rival. Anyone Ne Win saw as a threat would be removed from his position, not necessarily because he had done anything wrong, but simply because Ne Win suspected that he might have done or might do something. This attitude has roots in feudal thinking.

Secondly, the feudal kings exercised life and death authority over you. We have a saying in Burmese culture, kyu-bin-koke-ngok-ma-kyan-zëya, it's about a type of reed that grows in the swamps. The saying is that if you need to remove reeds, ensure that you do not leave behind any stumps, as the stumps could grow into reeds again. This means that once you get rid of somebody, you must get rid of the whole family and their associates. This thinking is carried on even now; for instance, with the present government you have to submit your personal history when you apply for a job, fellowship or a passport. When doing so, you must list all of your relatives and your spouse's relatives, for three generations back. Essentially, those in power don't look at you as an individual. They want to trace your family background to see if there are any people disloyal to them. If any of your ancestors have been anti-government, you will most likely not get what you applied for. To me, this mentality has been carried over from feudal life. In the old days they would kill you, or kill all of your clan. Now they may not kill you, but they won't let you enjoy your rights.

A very vivid and recent political example of this was the removal of Brigadier General Tin Oo, popularly known as the number "1 1/2," and regarded at the time as the second-most powerful person in the country. When he became too powerful, he was removed on some minor charges. Not only was he jailed, but hundreds of officials, both in the military and civilian ranks lost their jobs because of their friendship and association with Brigadier Tin Oo. (Incidentally, "Tin Oo" is a common name in Burma and Brigadier Tin Oo should not be confused with General Tin Oo, a leader of the opposition NLD.)
In feudal society, Burmese people generally feared the king, the feudal lord, and still do. For example, there is a Burmese prayer that people say every morning or night. When we pray, we always ask, "Because of my good deeds, my prayers, may I be spared the five kinds of enemies." Enemy number one is water—praying that we are protected from floods. Number two is fire—that your house and property be safeguarded from fire. Number three is the king. Number four is a thief. And number five is those who hate you. You always say that: "May I be spared from the five enemies." The king is very prominently placed among them.

Another aspect of modern day feudal thinking, is the role of astrology and mysticism. The belief in astrology is still very strong. Many events (for example, the issuing of 90 kyat currency notes) could not be explained except through astrological needs.

Q: The third factor you mentioned was youth as a force for change.

A: My feeling is that whenever we have undergone a significant, revolutionary type of change, it has been in the hands of the youth. A predominant change in modern political life started in about 1911 or 1912 with the founding of the Young Men's Buddhist Association. In the context of religion young people soon moved into political struggles.

Three student strikes in 1920, 1936 and 1938 changed the whole political fabric of Burma. An element of idealism and sacrifice was introduced and the political movement was elevated to another level. When Bogyoke Aung San left the country, he was only in his twenties. When he died he was just 32. When he was accepted as a national leader, he was only 26 or 27. The so-called "30 comrades" were all very young, in their twenties or early thirties. Whenever there has been a significant movement that has led to change, it's always been the youth at the forefront. The political elite that ran the country after independence was made up of former student or youth leaders.

Q: Are there certain traits or traditions that help formulate the political thinking of the military?

A: You can't look at the military in isolation. You need to look within the framework that I have mentioned. General Ne Win regarded himself as one of the incarnations of the King-Emperor. To a degree, it may be true: he was literally feared, like a king. And of course, he acted like one. He had no hesitation in removing people, no matter how close they were to him, much the same as the kings before him.

Q: How do you see the future of the Burmese military?

A: First, let me say that I am an admirer who has great affection for the Burmese Army. It was founded by Bogyoke Aung San with many of my contemporaries who were idealistic patriots, serving as his foot soldiers and pledging to give their lives for independence.

Recent years have given me great sadness to watch the deterioration that the country is undergoing. As it was said, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The military has been in absolute power for nearly 40 years and the country is in ruins, with all political and administrative institutions destroyed, and yet nobody is accountable. It saddens me to think of the current state of affairs—the development of warlordism, rampant corruption in the whole society; and the absence of hope, not only for the present, but also for the future, because of the huge brain drain and the closing of institutions of higher learning for years. It pains me even to think about it and I only hope a way can be found to re-establish institutions that are accountable to the people.
A: Historically, Burmese people believed that when a group was in power, we must listen to them. For example, when I was a young child, in 1946-7, and Aung San and politicians began their strike against the British government, many elders were saying, "No, you should not do that. They are the government. You must listen to them." It is a very conservative way of thinking and this type of thinking remains in Burma today.

Also, we are often driven by self-interest. People want to promote themselves, or promote a particular group and they tend to do so at the expense of others. That's why when General Aung San and his group were able to achieve unity among themselves, they became the strongest group in Burma. Aung San was able to unite his group and as a result, he gained respect among the masses.

Q: In your view, what things affect Burmese political thinking?

A: You have to go back to 1958 when the military took power. For one and a half years, people were saying that the interim government greatly improved the Burmese way of life. They solved many problems that our politicians could not solve, that a democratic government could not.

So in that way, some people were saying that the military government was good, better perhaps than a civilian government. After some years, however, people began to admit that yes, they had been good for a time, but a change was needed.

Q: What does this tendency to operate out of self-interest mean in terms of reconciliation?

A: I think that most of the people who are talking about reconciliation are not really talking about changing a mentality. They merely want to do something organizationally. Perhaps once we have some kind of organizational unity, then a change in our mentality will follow. It may take centuries, however, to achieve that kind of unity.

Also, when people claim that they want to have unity, only some are really sincere. Others are saying it because they think that is what they're supposed to say. They think, "If I say this, I may get more support," from both internal and external sources. It's not truly about reconciliation. Just saying that you work for reconciliation doesn't necessarily mean that you do.

Q: What impact do you think military rule has had on the way Burmese think about politics?

A: We cannot say that there is a particular Burmese way of thinking. We have been influenced by Western powers and Western philosophies. We have also been influenced by other Asians, by Indians and Bangladeshis. For example, I come from the Western part of Burma, from Arakan State. Arakan is far from central Burma and is separated by mountains. Geographically, Thailand and India have been more accessible and historically, we have been influenced by these cultures.

In Calcutta, academics were very highly educated and very politically minded. Many came to Burma and held discussions and lectures. Many of their books and lectures influenced the Burmese people.
Q: Do you feel that there are different "types" of democracy that may fit better with different cultures?

A: There are many academics who argue that there is a difference between Western and Asian democracy, but in my mind, it is basically the same. Of course, when democracy is applied in Eastern countries, Western countries, Africa, in America and so on, there are some differences according to the historical experiences in each country. But, basically it is the same. When the regime in Burma, the SLORC or the SPDC, wants to minimize the necessity for a democratic system in Burma, it creates differences, saying that Eastern democracy and Western democracy are very different. They say that we are Buddhists and so on, but they are just using that as an excuse.

Q: What is your opinion of the view that the Burmese may not be ready for democracy?

A: Partly, it is true. For example, when we were under the British, we were saying that we wanted freedom and that after independence we would have a democratic system. But the politicians did not have very clear plan to present to the people. When they were fighting the British they wanted freedom, not dictatorship. They believed democracy would naturally follow. So in that sense, perhaps, they were not ready.

We can ask now, "Are the people ready?" People desire freedom, and freedom is very much related to democracy, but we are uncertain of what kind of democracy we want. In 1990, I wrote articles about this very fact. I spoke to young student activists who said to me, "We want democracy again." I asked, "What kind of democracy do we want? Do you know?" But they couldn't answer.

Q: If people are trying to gain insight into of what might move the military and the opposition toward reconciliation, is there anything in particular that needs to be understood?

A: If we think of the general population of Burma and the entire military, reconciliation is possible. The majority of the soldiers want to have some assurance of their safety. For example, during the 1988 uprising, I talked with many soldiers and commanders who said, "We are ready. We want to try to have some kind of solution in Rangoon. We soldiers are ready to support that." If we had been able to establish some type of interim government in Burma at that time, the majority of soldiers were ready to support it. And they proved it in the 1990 election by voting for the NLD. They want some kind of peace in Burma.

Q: What about ten years later?

A: I think that people still want change. They cannot withstand the kind of difficulty they are living under much longer. That's what happened in 1988. The 1988 movement was not organized by any one person. People were fed up with the situation. I was watching the people who came to participate in the demonstration in 1988. They were poor people. And now, it is difficult to understand how severely people are suffering.

Q: Do you believe that the only way change will happen is through another mass uprising?

A: It is not the only way. Within the SPDC there might be some people thinking that there should be change. These people may be ready to start negotiations, but they won't expose themselves. If they do, they will be in danger.

So how does one bring together these people and the members of the opposition, is the question. They might not share common goals on everything, but perhaps common goals in a few areas could be identified. We would need to be very careful however, about how to expose this to the public and the timing must be perfect.
Q: Do you think there are aspects of Burmese culture that have been applied to politics?

A: Yes, and I have to say that there are aspects of Burmese culture that should not be applied. For example, Burmese are quite laid-back. We often say anadeh ["I feel bad"] and yabadeh ["That's okay"]. These words mean neither "yes" nor "no." This mentality doesn't get you anywhere. We can't continue to be vague and say yabadeh or anadeh because for us, politics is survival and we need to be really precise. We need to say "yes" or "no" or "it's possible." That, I think, is an aspect of the Burmese mentality that needs to be separated from our political thinking.

Politics has changed very much from what it was 30 years ago. It's not just dreams and ideas built on dreams. Politics need to be looked at in a very practical way. We need to act "lean and mean" to survive.

Q: Has this been a problem in Burmese politics historically?

A: Without being spoken, it's always been there. If you are the head of a government you can afford to be a diplomat about everything. But I think if you are trying to change a system, then you've got to be really specific and efficient in the things you do.

And for this, the Burmese mentality of yabadeh and anadeh doesn't work. We have to take that attitude out of the way we do things. Even in the democratic movement, we have to say "yes" or "no." A lot of people may not agree with me. They don't see it as being very polite. They want us to be more polite.

Q: What about the military? Is anadeh, yabadeh incorporated into their way of thinking?

A: Yes, but the difference is that they are brought up in the military way. So when they are told to do something, they have to carry it out regardless of the situation. That is their advantage over the democracy movement.

Q: If those outside Burma are trying to understand the culture of the SPDC or the democracy movement what do they need to look at?

A: It's difficult to talk about the military. With respect to the democracy movement, I would say that it's very hard to define because there is a wide range of people involved. There are the "elders," who have gone through a lot and have a hard time trying to interpret what is taking place in the world today, like globalization or privatization. Because they have had to suffer through the armed struggle and such, it's very hard for them to change. But they are trying to adapt.

Then there are the people who were part of the democracy movement in the '60s who had the broad experience of the parliamentary system, the pre-democratic system, and before that the British system. And there are people who came out in '88 and didn't know much about what happened earlier when it came to politics. They are trying to understand the elders, and the elders are trying to understand them. There are also the students from the 1996 movement, who were born under the military system and are trying to relate to these two, three different layers of people who came before them.

According to different ages, there are different experiences, making it hard to define the democracy movement as one whole "culture." Even among people my age, who are in their forties and fifties, we might come from different
IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Q: And what do people need to know about the military’s view of politics and its role?

A: The military is very proud of itself. Members of the military think that once someone dons a green uniform he is really superior to everybody.

I think there are two ways of thinking within the military itself—those who just want to be ordinary soldiers, and those who want to be the masters. The latter are those who think that they should be the masters just because they have the green uniform.

We used to look up to the military because they were the ones who gained independence. They were heroes. But when it came to the SLORC period and SPDC period, it all deteriorated. So the mentality of the population has changed.

Q: Do you think there is something relative to Burmese culture that lends itself to the idea of needing leaders or heroes?

A: I would say that we have always looked for heroes. Let's say in '88—looking back, we noticed that when we were on the streets, we had actually stopped the machinery. But whenever there was a crisis, we called for either Aung San Suu Kyi or Min Ko Naing or U Nu, U Tint Zaw, U Aung Gyi, someone willing to come and solve the problem.

For example, I was in the civil service. We should have known what we needed to do. Maybe—and it's a big maybe—if we had done what we now realize we could have done, it might have changed the balance of power at that time.

That's why people have been looking to Daw Suu as a national hero. They see her, not the party. People seem to think they need a "hero." That's why they have not been as actively involved as they might be.

Q: Is there a difference in the political thinking among the various ethnic groups?

A: I would say at some levels. With those who know politics, and have experience in or have studied politics, I don’t think there is much of a difference. But there has been a problem when it comes to the culture around recruitment for the armies. There has been a mentality that armies had to be raised to fight the Burmans, or the Karens, or the Shans. Military recruits can be heard saying, "The Burmans are coming." Whereas it should be, "The military is coming." Right? Building up the military power base often created this divisive way of thinking.

This is something that I think is changing. The Karens, the Mons, the Karennis, the Shans, are seeing more Burmans in their ranks, in their territories and seeing that they also suffer the same fate. So the people have come to realize it's the Burmese military that is creating all these problems. It's not the Burmans against the Karens, or the Karens against the Burmans. I think this has gradually been given up for discussion. It is gradual, but good.

At the UN General Assembly in 1992, there were delegations from various ethnic groups there representing the movement. Everybody
And later, a constitution was drafted by the various groups, which became the NCUB [National Coalition of the Union of Burma] constitution. This may be used at some point; it may not be used. But the exercise of having a discussion, having argued it out in a legal way, made everybody work together.

So I think when we talk about equality and reconciliation, these things are being practiced. Perhaps in a very small sense, but the concept is there now, on the ground. This did not happen before and this is something that we are quite pleased about. A lot of changes are taking place.

That is why the regime has been trying to split up the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the ethnic reconciliation processes. ”Come and have cease-fires individually,” they say, because they don’t want these ethnic organizations to be working with the ABSDF or the NCUB or other groups like that. They want people to believe that it is the military that must come in to save the people from this divisiveness, to solve all these issues, when it is the military that is creating them. It's actually the people who are working on it. The military sees the people working together and, they're trying to stop it from happening.

Q: Some say that, in large part, what drives Burmese political forces is self-interest. Do you agree?

A: It is not that simple. If the Kachin had not looked out for themselves earlier on, who would have spoken for them? And if the Karens didn't, who would have spoken out for them? They had to go out and help their situation somehow. But now that there is the NCUB, they have joined together as a group. Before that, this kind of avenue didn't exist. They had to go out and do it for themselves.

It used to be that in the past, the Burmans might go out and not speak up for the Karens or the Karennis. But now, let's say you have a Burman or a Mon [lobbying] at the United Nations, he is also giving statements sent by the Karen or Karenni. When someone is at the International Labour Organization (ILO), it's on everyone's behalf. There is information coming in from the Karen, Karenni, Mon, the Chins, from Arakan. There is more equal representation whenever there's an opportunity

Q: Do you feel that there's anything unique to the way Burmese think of politics?

A: Most of the Burmese people in the period following independence would think about politics as "party politics," and if you asked a layman to define politics, he would probably describe it as a vying for power.

Politicians will do anything to get to a position of power, whether they conduct good governance or not is subject to question. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons the military came into power after 1958 was because the political parties were fighting amongst each other to such a degree that they couldn't involve themselves in governance. The military was not involved in the politics of re-election so they completely devoted themselves to governance. And relatively speaking, their "caretaker gov-

INTERVIEW WITH U SOE THINN

U Soe Thinn is head of the Burmese Service of Radio Free Asia (RFA). He was a member of the Burmese Foreign Service from 1969-1988 and was last posted at the Burmese Embassy in Ottawa, Canada. After seeking political asylum in 1988, U Soe Thinn relocated to Washington DC. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of RFA.

Q: Do you feel that there's anything unique to the way Burmese think of politics?
You also need to realize that a lot of young people only know a one party system—they don't know anything about politics under a multiparty system. So to them, governance is by decree. The people have not really been exposed to what's happening in the world in terms of politics. The 1988 uprising had little to do with democracy. To most people, democracy just meant something different from military rule. The people wanted more opportunity, more freedom. It was more a desire for a better life, than for democracy as a political system.

People today are more politically astute than they were 10 or 15 years ago, however. They have more of an idea of democracy now, even though they may not understand the actual rules of a democratic system.

Q: And what about the mentality of the military?

A: The military leaders have a different thinking. It has always been embedded in them that they are the saviors of the country. And they have always used that as a pretext: they love the country more than the rest of the people, because they gave their lives to save the country.

One thing that you must understand about the military is that they're very dogmatic in their thinking. They feel that no one can question what they say or tell them anything they don't already know. There are several anecdotes that illustrate this attitude. For instance, one very high ranking military officer was reading a book on economics that he didn't understand. So he said, "Oh the guy who wrote this book doesn't know economics. He's talking rubbish." That's the sort of attitude. If they don't understand it, then it's wrong.

A military officer very close to me once said, "You know that General Ne Win says that the military needs good people, not intelligent people." Good people meaning, people who are loyal, not smart people. Military officers have told me that when they took over the government in 1962 and nationalized all of the government operations in 1963, even though none of the military officers were trained to be managers, they were expected to manage technical organizations. Take for example, the banks. Military officers were asked to serve as general managers of banks, even though they knew nothing about banking. So I ask some of these officers, "How do you expect to run this organization efficiently if you don't know anything?" They said, "Well, the most important thing is that we be loyal. We're in a revolution-like mode." Fine. But they have been in that revolutionary mode now for 37 years!

One thing that you must understand about the military is that they've been trained to go to war. In such situations you don't have time for questions from subordinates. Because if you have questions, if you have arguments, then you've lost the battle. That's the way the military operates.

Q: To what degree does the particular personality of Ne Win play into the attitudes of the military?

A: To a great degree. All of these generals know that they are where they are because of Ne Win. He still has a great deal of influence. I've talked to some senior people and they've indicated that because they've worked with Ne Win all of their lives, they know how he thinks. They know what he wants even before he says it. They all call him "Pe Gyi," or father, because they feel obligated to him. Ne Win is a very shrewd politician.

Q: You refer to Ne Win as a shrewd politician. Would you describe any of the other military leaders that way?
They've always left it to the big commander, Ne Win, to truly think. And they just follow. When he goes, what will happen? The window of opportunity will be when he dies. What will they do? That is the main question.

Khin Nyunt is more of a politician, however, because of being an intelligence person, he knows how to manipulate. Most people in the intelligence community would refute this, but they like to manipulate. Their world is information, just like a politician's. Khin Nyunt has that trait, but he doesn't have the backing. So he has to manipulate, he has to strategize, in order to get the backing. Whereas Maung Aye, as far as I know, has always been a follower. He does what he's told, that's why he's got the backing of the military. Whether he's an astute politician remains to be seen.

Q: What's your reaction when people say that Khin Nyunt is the moderate, and if there is going to be any change, he is the person who's going to initiate it?

A: That...is possible. And if it happens, it will be a marriage of convenience. As I've said earlier, Khin Nyunt doesn't have the backing of anyone, but he's a smart man. If he's a really smart man, he's going to figure out some way to get the backing of the people. The people are still behind Aung San Suu Kyi. If he teams up with Aung San Suu Kyi, he knows that he's going to get the backing of the people. But he's got to pick the right time to do it.

A friend of Maung Aye's said to me that he always thought Maung Aye was actually a liberal. Maybe he is, but maybe he's also a smart enough fellow to project an image of a hard-liner. He may be doing this to sustain his position.

Both sides within the military know that they have to get the support of the people and the only way they are going to get that is if they align with Aung San Suu Kyi. And whoever does that will have the people saying, "This guy is the real savior."

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Q: What about the technocrats, the civil servants, people in the foreign service... How do they think of politics?

A: They're all bureaucrats—even the ministers in the cabinet now are bureaucrats. They don't have any room to formulate major policy, they just do what they are told. It's always been like that. They, like the military, follow orders. For example, I was once at a Burmese embassy function abroad when the then Burmese deputy prime minister and minister for finance were talking with the Burmese ambassador. The ambassador was complaining to them that he had very little money to operate the embassy. So the deputy prime minister and minister for finance said, "Let us submit this to the superiors." They were the deputy prime minister and the minister of finance and they couldn't even make such a decision!

When you ask whether these bureaucrats think about politics, maybe they do, but it's more personal politics than politics in a broader sense. It's more about "Will I be able to stay foreign minister? Whose side should I be on? Should I stay on the fence?" People don't want to stick their necks out. There's a Burmese saying: "If you don't move, it doesn't get complicated. And if it doesn't get complicated, you don't get fired." So that's the attitude.

The real politics of the people of Burma is to sustain. Politics has nothing to do with governance, and has everything to do with power. You're fighting for your survival.

Q: Do you believe that international condemnation has an impact on the regime?

A: Only if it is comprehensive. Rhetoric is not going to help. I've asked very close friends who are in the military, "What would move the regime toward dialogue?" The simple answer: they're
not going to talk. They don't have any reason to compromise or come to terms with anybody unless, or until, they're in a corner. And they're not there yet.

It would hurt if ASEAN says, "You're suspended unless...." Or the ILO—it's going to hurt them if action is taken. If the United Nations says, "You're put on hold until you do X" that type of action may move the regime. But with ASEAN, for example, no action will take place unless they have a consensus. The UN won't happen unless all the veto powers agree to it. Action has to be very comprehensive. Then, they will talk.

ANONYMOUS

The person interviewed here currently resides in Burma and has asked not to be identified.

Q: Do you feel that there is anything unique in the way that Burmese think of politics?

A: Well, I'll speak from my own experience. I was born during the colonial period and I grew up under the Japanese occupation. We then went through some years of independence, which were equally turbulent, because while we achieved independence in 1948, the insurrection by the ethnic minorities broke out in 1949. So the country has never been peaceful or stable. Such experiences influence the way people think and feel about politics.

You know that in Burma, political theory was studied only at the university level, not the secondary level. I went to college in 1954, and graduated in 1957. In those days, there were only three colleges and universities in all of Burma. The year I graduated, there were only 700 graduates total, from all the institutions combined. So back then, there was limited awareness of political thought. Today, we cannot even come together to discuss politics.

Q: Do you think that there's a difference in the way various ethnic groups think of politics?

A: I suppose. No one can really escape that. The economic situation is very bad and economics and politics are bedfellows. And as members of a minority, we feel that even more. When you suffer much, you would like to speak out, but you are afraid. It's a very repressive government. There is no freedom. We can think, but we cannot speak out.

Q: What role has Christianity played with regard to people's political thinking?

A: Historically, even before they became Christians, many of the minorities were persecuted and were very much afraid of the Burmese kings. After Christianity was introduced, they were accused of accepting the white man's religion and were isolated because of it. But when the mission schools were established, before they were nationalized, many of the Burman Buddhists attended these schools. They began to appreciate the value of learning in mission schools. So faith and education became very closely related, because through education, one was lifted up and could find a place in the society. It is when you become educated, that you can have a broader understanding of things, that you can stand up for yourself and others. For those who were educated, for those who made their way into the world, they learned to speak up and be politically active. But under this oppressive government, not even a majority group like the Burmans, can speak out. To speak out makes you an enemy of the State.

Q: What do you feel is the attitude of the average person in Burma regarding politics?
A: It would be negative. Very negative. I would say generally, very few people would have a positive view towards politics. But you know, politics, if it is good, can improve the economic situation. But right now, people can't afford to think in those terms. The farmers don't even talk about the oppression and hardships they are experiencing because they live in fear. They might be overheard and arrested, put in jail. Most people have a very negative attitude towards the government, but within Burma proper, we cannot speak out.

Q: Do you think that there's a difference between those living in urban areas, who perhaps have greater access to education, and those in rural areas, with regard to how they think about politics?

A: We all feel the same. In some rural areas, I will go attend a meeting or a training session and the secretary will say, "No political talk." But eventually, we will all talk. Not in a formal or official manner, but privately. That's how much we all fear the government. Because they have spies everywhere and people feel that "Big Brother" is always watching.

Q: Do you feel that there is a divide along religious lines—between Christians and Buddhists?

A: No, because Christians live cheek-by-jaw with Buddhists. We are not divided along religious lines. The government has used Buddhism to manipulate situations, but not even the Buddhists themselves like this. Friends of mine who are Buddhists, who are well educated and who hold important positions in the government—even they don't favor this manipulation. They know that the regime is not sincere. The people know that because they are suffering, aren't they? People see through the military's behavior.

Q: In some countries, Christian churches are active politically in the sense of a peace and justice movement. Is there an opportunity for churches inside Burma to play a role in this regard?

A: No. Because the government would come down on any group that would come together for a political purpose. You know that the church is not in the "good book" of the government. Right now, we have no freedom to even build churches, so we build Christian "centers." Actually, there are only a few churches remaining because in the "black" and "grey" areas [areas of insurgency] so many of the churches have been displaced, or burnt down. In one ethnic state, in one association, there were over one hundred twenty churches two years ago, now only forty remain. There is supposed to be religious freedom but in reality that freedom is growing smaller and smaller.

It is not possible to come together for a political purpose. Privately we'll do that, but not in an organized way. We dare not do that. We can come together for cooperation, for fellowship, for mutual spiritual encouragement. We may not talk politics, but we feel the burden of politics.

Q: Some people have said that within Burmese culture the concept of a leader or a hero is very important. Do you agree?

A: I think that's true. I think that's true of anyone who is living in an oppressed situation. Most people in Burma support Aung San Suu Kyi. But I don't think they would have the courage to get actively involved. I think secretly everyone supports her because she has the courage to stand up against the government.

Q: If people are trying to promote dialogue and move Burma toward peace, are there aspects of the way the various sides think that must be understood?

A: That's a difficult question. Speaking off the cuff, when you want to have reconciliation, there has to be mutual trust. And I don't think that there is, in this situation.

Q: Are there ways to achieve that?
A: Right at this moment, I am pessimistic, because I don't think that there can be any mutual trust between the parties. If the government can talk with the opposition group [the National League for Democracy], that will be a step, but you know very well that there has not been a real talk at this point.

Maybe an outsider can see more clearly than we within the country. We're so much a part of it, I think that sometimes we can not really see clearly. But of course, we have the advantage of living through it all.

Q: What must one understand about the military's thinking?

A: We can understand the military only to a certain extent. Now they are afraid, so they are holding on to power. Look what's happening in Indonesia, right? And at one time Indonesia was their model. So I think they are afraid. And the more afraid you are, the more intense you will be in your repression.

I really don't have any direct dealing with military higher-ups, but we hear about what they are doing. You know the papers and the mass media are full of what they are doing—the good things. But we don't hear the truth. The soldiers do not criticize their superiors. Sometimes I ask the younger officers, "Why are you in the army?" And you know very well why they're in the army—because there is power, there is the opportunity of filling your pockets, by hook or by crook.

Q: If you asked people to explain what democracy means to them, how do you think they would describe it?

A: Well, it would mean orderliness, it would mean speaking up, it would mean exchange of ideas. But I think they would still have this sense of hesitancy to speak out. Because within our culture you don't really speak out openly, like Westerners do, for example.

Q: Do you think this cultural tendency not to speak out holds people back from being politically active?

A: I cannot say for sure, but look at what happened in 1988—people could stand it no longer so they erupted. And then they were put down ruthlessly. Once bitten twice shy, so people are afraid to do it again. But who knows? If the situation becomes unbearable it could happen again. Something can spark it off, like the universities—the students are the ones who have the courage to say or do something. The common people, the working people—they are afraid of having their rice pot broken.

Q: Do you think there's something particular to Burmese culture that accounts for the student activism?

A: I don't really think so. I think it has to do with education. People become enlightened even if it contradicts their culture or traditions. In 1988 when students went out to protest, they paid homage to their teachers before going out. They did their homage—bowing down, prostrating themselves before their teachers and asking for forgiveness. Then they went out to protest.

Q: In your mind, what accounts for the decades of military rule in Burma?

A: It's very simple. They hold the guns. And the people don't. You know that no one is allowed to possess a gun. All the guns were surrendered in 1988. For example, my brother is a hunter and he owned a rifle that he was forced to surrender in 1988. Since then, he has paid the license fee every year—can you believe that?—because he still has hopes of going hunting. Now, however, you fear that if you are found with a gun, you may be dragged off to jail and never heard from again.
Q: Do you think there is something unique to Burmese culture that has an impact on how people think of politics?

A: There seems to be this mentality within Burmese culture that if one person is gaining more prominence or becoming a rising star, the others try to pull him or her down, saying, "No, no, he can't do that. He has to be at the same level as me!" Some people say that we Burmese in particular have a problem with this mentality. But this type of thinking is everywhere, in every community and society. One sees political in-fighting, conflicts, jealousy, that sort of thing, everywhere.

But Burma is unique in one way. Burma has been isolated for over thirty years and people have been psychologically paralyzed. People are living without even realizing that their thinking is being damaged by the military government.

If you look at the backgrounds of the top military leaders, they all have served in the psychological warfare department. Recently, General Than Shwe gave a speech on Armed Forces Day, where he stressed that "psychological warfare is very important." In public he said that! Can you imagine? A modern state leader talking about psychological warfare, about attacking the enemy, using the media as a tool? This is the kind of closed society in which we live. It isn't surprising that Burma's problems may be more complicated than those of other countries that enjoy a more open, transparent governments. They have the space to voice their concerns and their dissent. In Burma it is not the case.

Q: What about the military? Do you feel you can understand their thinking?

A: One of my friends used to say that it's hard to understand the Burmese military, but at the same time, he could see why they do the things they do. That's because they are not a foreign body. They are part of us, but a lot of people don't want to accept that fact. A lot of opposition groups want to treat them like an evil coming from outside, but they're not.

You can see the actions of the military, the way they confront the opposition, the way they treat the Burmese people, the way they manipulate the students and the media. As a journalist I see a lot of Burmese who are doing similar things here in Thailand and elsewhere. Even though they oppose the government, they often behave the same way, instituting the same kind of practices within their own organizations. So that's why I don't see the military as something to abolish. That's why I feel that we have to be very critical in looking at each other and looking at ourselves too. Ask why the military does something, instead of just reacting to everything.

Based on my experience—because that's all that I really understand—I think that the democracy movement needs to be more critical. We need more critical thinkers, more open-minded Burmese who want to promote democracy in Burma. It is not too late for a revolution within a revolution. We talk about a revolution, but we are not revolutionary enough, not critical enough. We really need to examine ourselves. The problem is not only with the military government, but also among our people.

But still, I am quite optimistic. I think we can break through; we can change. But to begin, we need to change ourselves, our attitudes. I don't mean to criticize anyone, but to be criti-
cal. Let's not have a one-sided view, but look at the other side and analyze the whole situation.

Q: Is it possible for people who are living in Burma under a military regime to be "revolutionary" in their thinking?

A: In some sense they might have more of a chance, because they are living with "Big Brother" every day. I think a lot of Burmese there are stronger, more committed than those on the outside.

We are sometimes spoiled here. Here we have the chance to explore, to change ourselves, change our attitudes. In 12 years of living in exile, we have had so many opportunities to change. The sad thing is that we don't take advantage of these opportunities. Some Burmese, including myself, miss opportunities to become more constructive, more productive for our movement.

We haven't yet practiced democracy, within ourselves. We just keep saying, "We want revolution, we want democracy." But democracy begins inside. The regime says, "We are on the road to democracy." No one believes that because democracy doesn't come in a box all wrapped up where you say, "Okay here it is." It's not like that! It comes from inside. If you don't become a democrat yourself, how can you try to change a system of government?

Let me give you an example. It's what I call "media culture." A lot of people don't understand media culture. Free speech and freedom of the press are part of a democracy, and part of the process that we have to practice now. Now. Not ten years from now, not when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has restored democracy or when the NLD comes into power. Some people have said, "Don't write this. Don't report that. You will have a chance when we have democracy." We are strongly committed to the democracy movement, but people didn't understand why we would publish articles that might be critical. I say, "Do it now." If you don't do it now it will be too late.

At first I was quite sad and worried about my country, about my people, because of these attitudes. But it has gotten better. Now these people say, "Okay, the media is part of the movement and the media should serve as a watchdog."

Look at Thailand. This is how Thailand advanced to democracy within a short time. I was here in 1988 when the Thai military was still strongly in control. I saw how General Chavalit and those in his government were trying to pull Thailand back to square one. But Thai democrats and the media were strong. They wouldn't give up. That's why Thailand is where it is now. That's the example we must tell each other. We cannot just keep putting out the party line. We cannot keep repeating nonsensical slogans about the junta.

Q: How much influence do you think Buddhism has on Burmese society?

A: I have a very short answer. Buddhism has helped people cope under this repressive government. It helps people cope with daily hardships that include more than issues like skyrocketing prices. They also include those situations when Military Intelligence comes to knock on your door, the threats and intimidation. My mother survived, and my brother survived, Burmese people survived, because of Buddhism. We try to cope with all this through Buddhist teachings.

Q: What do you think accounts for decades of military rule?

A: I think Ne Win is the reason Burma has suffered. In 1962 Ne Win came to power. In 1988, we got some junior Ne Wins. Now we've got Khin Nyunt. I'm afraid in the next thirty years we'll have more junior, junior, Khin Nyunts. And that's what we have to prevent. We have to find a way to educate people not to have another dictator.

But even within the government they know that they have no real "man-power," they have no human resources. They realize it and that's why they are very insecure. Burma couldn't come out of its shell until 1995 or 1996, not
even to participate in international conferences and seminars. This was not only because of the international boycott, but because of their own fear. They were very fearful of being in touch with the world because they had isolated themselves. When Burma did come out of its shell and try to enter forums, such as ASEAN, it was like a medieval creature, a dinosaur. The rulers have a very bad self-image.

Q: Some people think that Western influence has been more harmful than beneficial when it comes to Burma, that Westerners don't really understand the intricacies of what's happening there and that condemnation of the military has further entrenched the regime in its thinking. Do you agree?

A: I don't know whether Western influences have been counterproductive or harmful, but the West may naively believe that putting sanctions on Burma or making a strong statement about the junta will create change. This is not the case in Burma. That's why I said that Burma is quite unique. The mindset is very different. Even for the Burmese it's sometimes hard to understand. Because of the censorship and media control, those inside the country don't really understand the nature of the government that has ruled Burma for over 30 years. So that's a problem.

Some people are critical of ASEAN, for their lack of involvement. For example, when Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 1995, ASEAN's leaders didn't make enough gestures to support her, or the results of the 1990 elections. They don't try to assess the situation in Burma, even though they are close neighbors. They don't urge the government to change. That is sad.

The pressure applied thus far has not shaken the government in Rangoon. The US sanctions were not enough pressure to make the government change. The sad thing is also, apart from Burma, people now are generally very skeptical of sanctions. They are seen as dated weapons for change. So in that way, we have to be critical and ask why aren't sanctions bringing about change in Burma? Perhaps it's not enough pressure, perhaps we have to find another way to move the junta to change. Or, is there enough space to share power between the NLD and the junta? Should we give them more space? The West and ASEAN nations have to ponder and assess the situation carefully if they really have a sincere intention of seeing change in Burma.

INTERVIEW WITH SAW KAPI

Saw Kapi was a student activist in 1988 before fleeing to Thailand. He holds a Masters Degree in Economics from Williams College and currently works with the University of San Francisco. Saw Kapi also is one of the founders and Secretary of the Policy Affairs Division of the Karen National League.

Q: Do you think there's a different mental culture among ethnic Burmans and other ethnic groups when it comes to politics?

A: Yes, and I'm not saying this in a negative way. The majority of Burman people are engaged, active and responsive when it comes to politics. They seem to be more responsive to the effects of their rulers. Most ethnic people—the majority of whom are rural people— feel if they can live in peace, and not feel that there is a government or a ruler over them, that is best. That is what they really think of politics on a daily basis. Living peacefully, trying not to disturb anyone. That is the political culture of most—I'm not saying all—rural people.

By adopting that culture, the Karen people living in rural areas are less active in political life.
Q: Are you saying that, given the choice, the ethnic groups would prefer less governmental control in their lives?

A: In a way, yes. But not only with regard to a central government. For example, if there is no need to have someone to oversee a village, that is considered to be best. Not only do people prefer "less government"—they would prefer that there be no government at all. Historically, the need for a village headman, or a hierarchical political structure, has not been that important. We had leaders chosen by the villagers for different and specific occasions, but nothing like a formal government or a monarch. And that is one of the reasons that the Karens did not develop a structure of ruling chiefs. We would have someone to represent us when there was a need in dealing with other villages, but for ourselves, the idea of a village chief or headman was not prominent.

In pre-British times, the Karens did not develop kingdoms. We did not have kings. There are some anthropologists who argue that kings are mentioned in Karen oral history, but there is no historical evidence of it.

During British times the Karens developed a certain level of political consciousness and they tried to organize themselves, but they didn't push for the emergence of a single leader. In the mid-eighteen hundreds the KNA (Karen National Association) was formed and then later, the Karen National Organization (KNO) and the Karen Central Organization (KCO), the Karen Youth Organization (KYO) and the KNU (Karen National Union). Even though we developed a political consciousness and the need to have organizations to respond to British rule and the political environment around us, the Karen did not seem to want one individual to take the lead. They had a more collective approach. It was a historical trend and even in contemporary times, I think the Karen prefer it that way.

I mentioned the KNA, which was formed in 1891, and was the earliest Karen political organization. The Karen felt that when the British came to Burma, the Karen had to have an organization to represent them in the broader political context, which was British Burma. So leaders emerged. Again, this happened more out of necessity than something particular to Karen culture.

Q: Do you feel that there are aspects of Karen culture that have had an impact on the thinking of Karen political leaders?

A: There have been two driving forces behind Karen political thinking and Karen political activism. One is simply a response to the central government. That in itself has been a driving force in modern times. The second is the influence of Christianity, and the influence of some of the twentieth century political leaders.

Many of the Karen leaders are Christians, though let me acknowledge that we also have non-Christian leaders. One aspect of Christianity is a focus on the concepts of truth and justice. That part of Christianity played a political role for us. It moved people to resist or to stand up for truth and justice. For example, whether we want to accept it or not, the teaching "we shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" has had an impact on the KNU [Karen National Union] leadership today. This either consciously or unconsciously plays a very important role in the way these leaders think, the way that I personally think, and the way young Karen political activists think of politics. Also, many Karen political activists and leaders became familiar with Martin Luther King's writings. The works of Mahatma Gandhi have had an influence as well, even though he was not Christian, but a Hindu political leader.

Q: How has Burma's isolation over the last few decades influenced the way people think politically?

A: The current military regime has actively discouraged political involvement by the people. It's as if politics is the domain of only a few people, of the military and the elite. They don't see the people as having a part in the political
process. The military has been able to get away with this, in part, because people have been isolated from the outside world.

There is also an attempt by the regime to "foreignize" issues related to politics. For example, in the case of human rights, the regime tries to say that this concept is not Burmese, that it is very foreign. Whatever you do in politics that is against the regime, they try to attribute to foreigners. They point back to the colonial period and they say, "This is due to foreign influence." And some Burmese accept this. When the Burmese military regime tells them these things, a lot of them don't know that it is wrong. This is because of the decades of isolation.

Q: What influence do you feel has living under military rule had on the way people think of politics?

A: It's had a great deal of influence and I realized that only when I came out of the country. I did not realize that while still living in Burma. Growing up, I believed much of what the media inside the country purported. When you are told something day after day, you tend to take it as being fact. Because accurate information was not available to us, I really thought the military regime was working for us and that they really were trying to protect us. It becomes very blurred. They put seeds of doubt in our minds, that these foreigners, or in their own words, "neocolonialists," will come and they will invade us or try to colonize. So people even tend to have that doubt, that suspicion, of foreigners all the time.

Even the picture the regime painted of the ethnic movement—the Burmese media always mentioned that the ethnic movements lacked defined political goals. As an ethnic Karen, I was sympathetic to the Karen people; I did not actually believe the regime when it said, "These are a bunch of robbers and thieves who destroy everything in their path." But on the other hand, I found myself thinking that maybe it was true, maybe the ethnic groups did not have real political goals. Until I left my hometown and came to the border in 1988, I did not really understand that the ethnic movement was historically significant in Burmese history. I learned then that the ethnic movements were significant during the early independence era—1948, '49, and later—in the early fifties. But when General Ne Win came into power the ethnic struggle was reduced to "armed robberies." That is what we were told and that's what the media reported.

Q: Do you think that people inside the country today still believe what the military is telling them?

A: Probably not. By now, I think that my friends inside Burma who are the same age as I am realize that something is wrong. Something is amiss with what the regime is saying. I think that people now have a little more access to international media than before. There are some people who can afford to have a satellite dish and they can watch some foreign programs. There is radio. But the main reason that people don't believe the regime's claims is that the regime itself is very self-contradictory. They try to say that this or that is foreign and therefore bad, but people now may find that difficult to believe. If you look at many of Burma's generals—and many people who have good connections with the regime—they are rich. And they are in and out of the country all of the time. They go to Singapore and other counties in the region, to the West. Many people question why they are doing this. On the one hand, the regime is saying, "Fear foreign influence, fear foreign power." But on the other hand, many people on the inside know that the generals and a lot of their supporters are very fond of dollars, of hard currency and of what the outside world has to offer. Based on daily life experience, people no longer believe the regime.
Life Under Military Rule: The Pressures

Family vs. Morality

Under military rule in Burma, it seems that doing what is right is often directly opposed to doing what is necessary to survive. Carrying out orders with which one does not agree and engaging in corruption have become prevalent in a society where there are few jobs outside the military and the civil service. To be honest can mean not being able to take care of one’s family. Thus, stealing government goods and taking bribes have become routine activities, while challenging or refusing orders is rarely attempted.

During the period of General Ne Win’s rule, from 1962-1988, all industries, schools, hospitals, and newspapers were nationalized, making government jobs virtually the only alternative to farming. Although civil servants earned low wages, they had access to government-subsidized goods and a guarantee of lifetime employment as long as they continued to demonstrate loyalty to the regime. Since the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power in September 1988, private businesses have been allowed, but relatively few people have moved into the private sector because of high inflation, a weak economy, and difficulties competing with those who have connections to high-ranking military officers. Thus, many Burmese still consider obtaining a job in the military or the civil service as their safest option. The salary hikes for government employees in April 2000 are an added inducement, although with an inflation rate of 40%, the value of the pay raises is being quickly eroded.
to Conform

Christina Fink

One of the ubiquitous Tatmadaw signsboards, central Mandalay.
While the regime most likely kept salaries low throughout the 1990s because it lacked sufficient cash and saw military disbursements as a far greater priority, the junta reaped other benefits. People were so busy hustling to survive that they did not have time for politics. Equally important, because so many soldiers and civil servants engaged in corruption, they were also implicated in the evil that the system produced. Under military rule, the whole notion of legality has been turned upside down. Many normal activities under other forms of government, such as free speech and the unrestricted purchase of fax machines and modems, are treated as illegal. Other activities, like stealing gasoline from government warehouses to sell on the streets or demanding cash for proper nursing care in hospitals, are openly tolerated.

With corruption having become so pervasive, those who insist on acting in an upright fashion are sometimes criticized by friends and relatives as foolish. For instance, in some schools, bribing teachers to raise high school matriculation scores has become normal. Parents who refuse to pay off teachers could be endangering their children's chances of obtaining a higher education.

Parents continue to encourage their children to pursue careers in the military or the civil service so that they will have a guaranteed job and access to subsidized food. Although most of these parents have suffered economically under military rule and are tired of living in fear, they push their children to become a part of the system because they perceive military dominance as continuing indefinitely.

As the military's influence has seeped into virtually every aspect of people's lives, resistance becomes difficult to imagine. Those who do resist and are caught, as so many inevitably are, find that their punishment extends far beyond their jail term. "Crimes" such as helping to organize a student protest or distributing opposition literature can result in jail sentences of up to twenty years. Once political prisoners are released, they cannot obtain a job in the civil service, they are kept under surveillance, and they are in constant danger of re-arrest whenever there is political activity in their neighborhood. Even finding a marriage partner becomes complicated, as parents worry that former political activists will bring nothing but trouble to their families.

To protect their children from such a bleak future, many parents try to insulate them from political realities and urge them to conform with military rule. Families might dislike censorship, demands for forced labor and forced donations, and the authorities' often rough treatment of civilians, but these problems are accepted as routine. While parents might reminisce about the past when their salaries went further and their lives were freer, they do not link their complaints to a political program of action.

Only a few politically-committed parents try to raise their children to understand what is wrong with military rule. But even these parents find that at one point or another, their children are attracted to the military and other state-controlled organizations.

Than Dai, for instance, was raised to hate the military regime. His father, who had been imprisoned for involvement in a student protest in the 1960s, refused to allow his children to attend any state-sponsored celebrations or to participate in any government-organized labor projects. Many of the visitors at Than Dai's house were former political prisoners who discussed banned books and criticized the government. But when one of Than Dai's brothers finished high school, the boy told his father that he wanted to enter the military academy like his friends. This was not only because of the material benefits which officers generally acquire, but also because in school he had been taught that military men were heroes. According to the textbooks, the Tatmadaw (armed forces) had brought about Burma's independence and valiantly fought against communist and ethnic traitors bent on destroying the union. Even though Than Dai's brother had been raised in a dissident family, he was strongly influenced by his schooling and peer pressure.

Burmese families place tremendous value on education, but most parents have done little to make up for the regime's silence on much of the country's recent history. In some cases this is because they do not feel qualified to teach their children about politics and history. In other cases, it is because they are worried that such knowledge will lead their children to participate in dangerous political activities. As a result, very few children are informed by their parents about the positive aspects of democratic life in the 1950s or about the protests against military rule that have occurred over the years. Some parents even discourage their children from reading, for fear this will arouse an interest in politics.

With a long-stagnant economy and no social security system, many older children must help pay for their younger siblings' educations and provide financial support for their aging parents. If the children are in and out of jail and unable to get jobs
because of their political activities, how can they provide for their families? Many parents believe that it is better if their children ignore politics and focus instead on earning a living and enjoying their time with family and friends.

Children do eventually learn about the abusive nature of the regime through their own personal experiences. In rural areas, where the military's presence is more pervasive, such knowledge comes early. In the cities, children grow up more insulated. Still, high school and university students often find out about the regime's history of repression through underground literature surreptitiously distributed in schools, teashops, and public bathrooms. In this way they also discover other heroes; namely, students and monks who led resistance protests against military rule.

Once their eyes have been opened, many students feel driven by a desire to do something to bring about a political change. But the demands of the family and the democracy movement pull them in opposite directions. Some choose to refrain from political activities so they can take care of their families, while others decide that they must work for their country despite their families' objections. Many activists find wrestling with these tensions extremely painful.

**Shifting Attitudes**

Between 1962 and early 1988, rare were the parents who supported their children's anti-government activities. But when pro-democracy demonstrations broke out all over the country in August 1988 and the government seemingly collapsed, ideas about activists changed. More and more of the parents who had raised their sons and daughters to go along with the system came out on the streets with their children.

A number of families, however, found themselves divided, with some members taking part in the demonstrations and others gunning the participants down. Older siblings, who had gone into the military and regularly sent money home to their families, became pariahs. Younger siblings, who had looked up to their older brothers with admiration, now viewed them with repugnance.

For instance, Zaw Lwin, a university student in 1988, had a cousin who was a military officer. He himself intended to enter the military until the 1988 demonstrations broke out. Zaw Lwin joined student activists on the streets, while his aunt told her son that if he shot any students, he should not come back home. Zaw Lwin said that his cousin was so upset by his aunt's words that he cried. He had a university education and knew what was right and wrong, but he was thinking of his family's survival. He was already married and could not afford to do anything that might cost him his job.

Later that year, Zaw Lwin ran into this cousin at a large event at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. He was shocked to see his cousin in plain clothes, wearing a National League for Democracy (NLD)
pin and pretending to be an NLD sympathizer. When he returned home, Zaw Lwin informed his family about the incident, increasing his relatives' disdain for the once-respected cousin.

But after the military refused to transfer power after the 1990 election, parents' attitudes toward their children changed again. The Tatmadaw's honor had been tarnished by the killing of unarmed civilians, but parents again began thinking that only military officers would have a guaranteed good life. Sons were once more encouraged to join the army.

Students who continued to be involved in politics were often denounced by their relatives, who feared that they too would come under suspicion. The regime often punishes whole families for the actions of one member. For instance, the authorities might transfer a parent in the civil service to a remote post, harass or close down family members' businesses, or even arrest other family members. In a few cases, parents have felt compelled to take the drastic step of disowning their politically-active children in a newspaper announcement to protect the family from government persecution.

The fact that parents try to stop their children from engaging in political activities assists the regime in maintaining its control. Even though the parents themselves may be against military rule, they still shout out pro-regime slogans at government rallies in order to keep their jobs and obtain promotions. The regime is surely aware that it has little genuine support, but to a certain extent, it doesn't matter as long as people are acting in a way which perpetuates military rule. Trying their best to survive in extremely difficult circumstances but to demonstrate how military rule becomes self-sustaining even when most citizens are opposed to it. The collective effect of almost every family trying to protect itself is that challenges to military rule are generally not promoted or valorized, except in rare situations like 1988, when it looks like real change is imminent.

Living in Silence

Community life has also been warped by military rule. Although it may not be true, it is commonly believed that in urban areas there is one informer for every ten houses. Thus, people do not trust each other and cannot converse freely, even in their own neighborhoods. As one writer put it, "We have no mouths, only ears." So many people in Burma talk of living in silence and speaking in whispers.

Some Burmese activists have argued that the military is habituating people into silently obeying as part of a strategy of disempowerment. As one labor organizer with experience in rural areas put it, "When a man in an army uniform stands in front of your house and says you have to pay this amount of money, the house-owner has no thought of complaining or asking, 'For what?' He just gives it." Similarly, businessmen in Rangoon and Mandalay have no choice but to buy tickets for military-sponsored functions or make donations to military-sponsored charities, because if they do not, they will find their business activities hindered in all kinds of ways.

If independent organizations were allowed, people could band together to protest unreasonable demands. But they are not, so people feel isolated and weak. Even Buddhist abbots can do nothing for their followers. Villagers tell the monks their troubles in order to be comforted, not because they think the monks can intercede on their behalf.

Raymond Tint Way, a Burmese psychiatrist who now lives abroad, put it in psychological terms. "People have regressed under military rule. They have become more dependent. They have had to endure so much hardship that they have become 'immunized' to it. They can handle and cope with it. There are positive and negative consequences: they survive, but they don't overthrow the regime. They see no point in resisting."

Social Disintegration

From 1962 until 1988, the Ne Win regime did almost nothing to upgrade the country's transportation and communication infrastructure. Since the SLORC took power in 1988, the military regime has launched infrastructure development projects throughout the country. In the cities, such work is done with motorized equipment and paid laborers, but in the rural areas, many of the railroad extension projects, roads, dams, and irrigation works have been constructed with forced labor. New battalion bases have also been built, requiring a steady supply of forced labor for
maintenance and the transport of supplies. Although travel has become easier in many areas, the burden on communities has been heavy. Having to do regular stints of forced labor makes it difficult for family members to get their own work done. Those who have enough money can pay a bribe instead, but few can continue to pay indefinitely.

Intra-community tensions in rural areas are also exacerbated by the regime's demands. The village headman has to determine who will go for the work projects and how much each household will pay when fees are exacted. With several hundred thousand Burmese called for forced labor on any given day, distributing these burdens fairly is no easy task, and conflicts are inevitable.

Because villagers feel that resisting the soldiers' demands is dangerous and futile, they have focused on finding ways to meet the demands and still survive. Able-bodied villagers have migrated abroad to earn money which is sent home to pay off the authorities. In numerous villages and towns within striking distance of the Thai and Indian borders, only old people and small children remain. Yet, by continuing to send money home, villagers enable the system of extortion to continue.

Social life has also been affected by the regime's decree that all overnight guests, including visiting family members, must be reported to the ward office. Failure to do so can result in a fine or even detention. In the Thai-Burma border area, when soldiers want porters for their operations, they take the registered guests, many of whom are traders staying with friends. Because they are far from home, it is difficult for such guests to escape arrest, let alone get word back to their families of their fate. As one person who was taken in this way, but later managed to bribe his way out, explained, 'If the soldiers say, 'Let's go,' they have to go along. If they don't come back, you'll just have to assume that they are dead.'

In the border areas in particular, where ethnic armies have continued to fight against the Tatmadaw troops, community life has been profoundly disrupted. The Tatmadaw has overseen large-scale forced relocation operations, involving over 300,000 people in the Shan State and tens of thousands in Karen and Karenni States in the past four years. Villagers trying to return to their old village sites have been shot on sight. Many others have lost their limbs or their lives to landmines laid by the warring armies, often when being forced to walk in front of Tatmadaw troops as human mine sweepers.

Besides the physical dismemberment of individuals and communities that has resulted from the civil war, the military has left a legacy of increased racial hatred. Many ethnic villagers living in remote areas have had virtually no contact with Burmese people except Tatmadaw soldiers. As a result, some do not distinguish between soldiers and civilians but see all Burmese people as the enemy. In Shan State, the Tatmadaw has been allowing Chinese and Burmese settlers to move into depopulated areas, altering the racial balance and presumably diluting the political power of the ethnic minorities in the future.

The Tatmadaw is our Mother
As authoritarian rule has continued, the military has increasingly come to see itself as above the rest of society. Many army officers apparently believe that because of the sacrifices they are making on behalf of the country, they have earned a place of esteem equivalent to the traditional five categories deserving respect; namely, the Buddha, Buddhist doctrine, monks, parents, and teachers. And by pointing their guns, they can get whatever they want.

The transformation of Burmese society into the military as order-givers and the people as obeyers is reflected in the distortion of an old military slogan. In the 1940s, General Aung San and the military leaders of the day promoted the slogan, "The people are our mother, the people are our father." Under military rule, this has been changed to "The Tatmadaw is our mother, the Tatmadaw is our father."

Because the army has insisted that it is safeguarding Burmese society and traditions, some Burmese feel confused about what is good or bad in their culture. They are repelled by the regime, yet the regime is always stressing the importance of maintaining Burmese culture. They believe in the goodness of Burmese traditions, such as hospitality, tolerance, and a respect for elders, and yet the entire culture seems to have been tainted by the abuse of authority and the futility of acting honestly. Eradicating the mistrust, corruption, and bitterness that haunt Burmese society today will be one of Burma's greatest challenges in the years ahead.

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In the sharp debate that has raged over Burma since 1988, the political opposition, ethnic rebels and foreign interested parties have put their major effort into convincing Western press and electorates, who know very little about the situation in Burma, of the turpitude of the Burmese government. They paint a black picture of a regime that brutally crushed a country-wide democracy movement, then overturned an election result that did not suit it, imprisoned many of the leaders of the winning party, and committed innumerable human rights abuses against democrats, minority peoples and a long-suffering public. The government has defended its record equally strongly; but the net result has been two very different black-and-white views, with neither side feeling secure enough to see any good in its opponent, or to temper condemnation of wrongs with understanding for the weakness to which all human beings are prone.

Goals have certainly been achieved in this war of words—for instance, the opposition has kept Burma in the world headlines and its government under intense Western pressure while the government won entry into Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and continues to participate within that grouping. However, so long as the present regime remains in firm control of Burma, it seems that political progress there can only come about if government and opposition will open a dialogue; and it appears that is not going to happen while the government feels acutely menaced by its political opponents.

What the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) can see of its critics at present looks very much like a lynch mob. No initiative that it makes appears to be praised by the advocates of democracy—even when the SPDC is following their advice. The government has many times complained of a lack of fairness, and perhaps on this it has a point. Without such fairness, how is it to find the confidence to concede greater power to its opponents?

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has herself spoken of a need to establish a relationship of trust with the SPDC, and spokesmen of the National Coalition Government of Burma (NCGUB), made up of Burmese MPs in exile, sometimes acknowledge the necessity of creating an environment conducive to a political dialogue. However, the fairness and understanding that the Burmese government may need, to build up confidence and mutual trust, will require a measured and objective assessment of the events of recent years, at the same time, no doubt, as the political debate rages on overhead.

Some thought has gone into examining the Burmese basis behind opposition thinking, and to a lesser extent, behind government thinking too. Where the government is standing on nationalist ground, it has made its points very clearly. The gov-
Government portrays the democracy movement of 1988 as an externally-inspired conspiracy to destabilize and overthrow a nationalist Burmese government; and since then it has felt that the United States and other countries have attempted to bully and displace the present government, with the aim of gaining control of Burma. So its stance has been hostile to ideas emanating from the West.

That, briefly, has been the government's stated reason for its actions in taking power and keeping tight control ever since.

However, there have also been many unacknowledged instances where government actions have not been directed against the West but made in imitation of it, or at its behest, or in response to criticisms from it, and these actions too have sometimes been identified by the government's critics as human rights abuses. The purpose of this paper is to offer some points to ponder, concentrating particularly on instances where the West has impinged on the Burmese mind, and thus may have added to the complexity of the situation. To what degree, I leave others to decide.

COPYING OLD PRACTICES

The Burmese Army (Tatmadaw) is not very old, and there are those alive who remember its origins in the early 1940s. Since 1988, Burmese government commentaries have time and again referred to the lessons of Burma's history: the struggle for independence from Britain, and the struggle against the Communists. In fact, the same forces have been portrayed as still at work. Perhaps because of this backward-looking posture, there was a delay in coming to terms with new working conditions, new definitions of human rights, that had been accepted in the world outside. So what the British did in the days
before and after the war, and the Japanese administration during it, remained something of a standard for behavior, while the world outside had moved on.

One example of this has been a series of demonetizations of Burmese currency, particularly the banning of all big banknotes in late 1987, with the payment of very incomplete compensation. Even with hindsight, the reasons for such a drastic measure are difficult to see—but whatever the motive, this move, which was seen both within and outside Burma at the time as shocking and arbitrary, had an equally drastic British prototype many years before, in the demonetization of Japanese occupation currency used in Burma, shortly after the close of hostilities in 1945. In both cases, ordinary men and women suddenly found their cash savings to be worthless. And in both cases, the respective authorities felt that Burmese people who retained large amounts of the old currency were probably criminals or profiteers who did not deserve compensation.

Then again, the pre-war British administration was not above using unpaid labor from villages where there was an urgent need, for building roads in villagers' own areas, although the British preferred to pay for it. The Japanese occupation army—which originally helped set up the Burma Independence army—went a lot further, and was notorious for its use of local sweat gangs, working in the harshest of conditions. These examples, in addition to the Burmese tradition of local self-help that the government normally cites, may have combined in the minds of SLORC leaders to make pressed local labor appear more acceptable as a short cut to nationwide construction in the absence of modern machinery or foreign aid.

The Burmese government now says that forced labor is illegal, but so far at least there have not been reports from Burmese villagers of a new policy by which their labor can be withheld without penalty, or recompensed at a realistic rate.

Looking more widely, even though Burma turned against the Japanese and against fascism in the last months of the war, the memory of wartime Japanese rule in Burma must still have served as an unconscious template from 1988 on when the Burmese armed forces found themselves holding down the lid on a whole civilian population on the point of boiling over. SLORC chief General Saw Maung himself referred to how much the Burmese army had learned from the Japanese, though his point was to urge the Burmese armed forces not to "act like fascists upon the people", but to prefer "the good methods of the English".

**FOREIGN ADVICE**

Further accusations of government human rights violations are related to the army's series of Four Cuts campaigns against ethnic armies, for the most part in border areas. These campaigns have led to mass relocations, during which many villagers took off for the Thai border as refugees. Extensive shootings of non-combatant villagers have also been documented. Again, the Four Cuts methods were borrowed from the British, who had used them during the Communist emergency in Malaya in the early 1950s, and from the Americans who used similar programs in Vietnam, which they called the Strategic Hamlets campaign. The British/American technique was to force guerrillas into the open by compelling all villagers to live in fortified enclosures; large open areas were then declared as fire zones, and any villagers discovered there were liable to be regarded as guerrillas and shot. During the Vietnam war, the United States regularly announced huge body counts of "dead Viet Cong", but the Western press suspected that many of the bodies involved belonged to non-combatant Vietnamese villagers who had strayed into free-fire zones.

So the Burmese strategy is derived from what had not long ago been fairly orthodox Western thinking. Whether other equally effective methods exist to combat guerrillas while causing less suffering to civilians is a question to explore.

The government has of course now brought to an end many of the long-standing wars against ethnic armies, by signing a series of ceasefires; and this process stands to its credit.

Many other accusations against the government concern its handling of the economy—particularly regarding inflation and corruption. Critics should perhaps be more ready to acknowledge that the Burmese government was urged into something like the present market-led system by leading Western institutions—and that this was what opened the door to inflation on a large scale. In 1988-89 the socialist economy was scrapped—under which gov-
ernment servants, while paid little, had been able to draw rations of very cheap staples such as rice and petrol from special government shops. It was the sudden lack of such cheap daily necessities, coupled with galloping inflation, that brought the families of civil servants and school teachers into financial straits, and forced breadwinners to find second and third incomes, including backhanders where these were available.

RESPONSES TO CRITICISMS
If the Burmese government had reasons of national pride for not admitting that foreign ideas had played a part in its policies, there were still stronger reasons for not acknowledging that it has been responding positively to criticism from abroad. However, the ministerial reshuffle of 1997 involved the sacking of Generals Kyaw Ba and Tun Gyi—and even if General Ne Win played a part in their removal, as was rumored, it can hardly have been irrelevant that these two men had been generally painted in the Western press as the most corrupt of all government ministers.

Another recent corrective that has been made in the wake of long foreign criticism is the government's move from April 1, 2000 to bump up the salaries of government servants, including school teachers by as much as five or six times. This in turn has been criticized, for giving inflation a new fillip—but the fight against corruption, so often urged by other countries, seems to have provided one strong motive for introducing it.

NARROWING OPTIONS
Sustained pressure from outside on the Burmese government, including withdrawal of aid and investment, must also have had adverse effects on the Burmese public. For instance the current shortage of medicines must be partly attributable to the lack of outside help.

And finally the constant and hostile media spotlight from abroad must have been a contributory factor to the long closure of universities, because in the absence of such publicity the government might have been able to keep quiet about any minor student disaffection that arose, and thus avoid the risk of it escalating into major confrontation.

WESTERN INFLUENCES ON THE OPPOSITION
The Burmese political opposition, with its call for democracy, has been backed all along by the West.

Being powerless in Burma itself because of tight military control, the opposition has also needed to score many of its triumphs in a non-Burmese arena—by mobilizing international opinion and sanctions against the Rangoon regime.

Foreign influences on the thinking of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are obvious enough. She lived many years of her life abroad. But at root her thinking is very Burmese—as Dr Gustaaf Houtman has examined at length in his book Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics.

What is a good deal less visible to the outside world is the extent to which the NLD's message to the Burmese public, as well as the government, has been distorted by a foreign filter through which it has had to pass.

Because the NLD has no way of talking directly to the Burmese public, it has had to make use of for-
eign media to the limited extent that it was able. Within Burma it has no access to newspapers or broadcasting, because these are controlled by the government; censorship prevents it speaking through leaflets, magazines or books, and martial law regulations prevent large public meetings.

Despite these difficulties it has been quite successful in getting its message through to the Burmese public, via foreign radio stations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), The Voice of America (VOA), The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and Radio Free Asia (RFA).

However, the Burmese language foreign radio stations are themselves tied to the currents of Western press opinion, and rely largely on Western sources—including news agencies from Rangoon, whose material is angled toward Western newspaper outlets. So to get through to Burmese listeners, the NLD within Burma, as well as Burmese activists abroad, have first needed to make news in the Western press, to activate the radio stations. Now, Burma is not a newsworthy part of the world, and before 1988 it was hardly ever reported in world newspapers. The one kind of story for which a world appetite now exists is any serious abuse of human rights, by a government on the black list. And the foreign public is also interested in stories about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whom journalists would like to identify with the charismatic and defiant French heroine Joan of Arc.

One effect of this situation is that anything moderate the Burmese opposition has to say is unlikely to make the news, and so the Burmese public and army will never hear of it. By contrast the most dramatic depictions of the scene tend to make the biggest news.

Catering to the foreign press demand, Burmese groups outside Burma and their supporters have worked hard to document shootings, rapes, forced labor and portering, particularly in border areas. In the Burmese heartland, the NLD can only make world news by attracting the wrath of the government upon itself. In this it has bravely persisted, but the process is akin to poking a lion with a stick at intervals to make it roar, which does not have a calming effect on the situation.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as an international celebrity in her own right, has also been able to give interviews to Western journalists, and to send out speeches for use on such occasions as International Women's Day. In order to retain credibility as spokesman for the oppressed people of Burma she must always include a forceful denunciation of the government over one or other issue. However, she watches her words carefully, and her overall position even in such statements has frequently been far-sighted and statesmanlike. Nevertheless, journalists often provoke her towards something more defiant, and the milder and more philosophical parts of her speeches tend not to be quoted in reports.

To sum up, the Burmese opposition has had to depend on Western media to get its message across in Burma. This has often meant that only the most extreme parts of the message have been getting through. At the same time the process has heightened Burmese government suspicions that the opposition is deeply tied up with foreigners who wish to gain control of Burma.

CONCLUSION

External influences have impinged on both the Burmese government and opposition more than either would like to admit. The very nebulosity of these influences must have added to the difficulty experienced by each side in fathoming each other's nature and motives. But my present purpose is neither to exonerate the Burmese government nor to spread the blame more widely. It is to suggest that each side has much to gain from an approach in which combativeness is visibly balanced by tolerance and a will to find points in common in order to pave the way to a solution. The government is unlikely to enter into a relationship with the opposition unless it feels it is getting a fair hearing there. It is helpful to find good points as well as bad about the government, and bad points as well as good about the opposition. It is also helpful when writers and journalists who know Burma can present the situation in a wider context than just the perception of one side.

Derek Brooke-Wavell speaks neither for the Britain-Burma Society, of which he is secretary, nor the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for which he previously wrote. His views are his own.
NEW YORK, NY — A panel discussion entitled “Building Civil Society in Asia: Challenges and Prospects for Resolving Ethnic Conflict” featured Sidney Jones of Human Rights Watch, David Thakerbaw of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, and Thomas McKenna from the University of Alabama. Asia Society and Open Society Institute sponsored the October 24th event, which focused on Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines.

Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, a Landmine Monitor researcher and the Southeast Asia coordinator of Nonviolence International, gave a briefing on the state of landmine pollution in Burma, landmine use by armed groups in Burma and on its borders, and their impact on prospects for peace in Burma. The UN Church Center hosted the July 6 event, sponsored by the Burma UN Service office, Quaker UN Office, and Open Society Institute. (Moser-Puangsuwan also gave a briefing at the Washington Roundtable on June 26.)

The New York Roundtable holds periodic meetings of organizations and individuals interested in Burma. For more information contact the Burma UN Service Office by phone: (212) 338-0048 or fax: (212) 338-0049.

WASHINGTON, DC — Upon return from his mission to Burma and the region, Ambassador Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the United Nations Special Envoy to Myanmar, spoke at an October 20th breakfast briefing, hosted by The Asia Foundation and the Asia Studies Program of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

US Chargé d’Affairs in Rangoon, Priscilla Clapp, was the featured speaker at the August 9 Washington Roundtable. Ms. Clapp briefed the audience on the latest developments inside the country.


MADISON, WI — Dr. Christina Fink, an anthropologist and author of the upcoming book Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule, spoke at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on July 25 about the militarization of Burma and the current health problems that face the Burmese people.

For more information about the University of Wisconsin’s Southeast Asia programs, contact mgrow@smtp.fammed.wisc.edu.

LOS ANGELES, CA — The Burma Forum of Los Angeles meets on the first Wednesday of every month to discuss various ongoing campaigns. For more information contact: Heidi Quante by phone: (323) 653-4571 or email: bfla@freeburma.org.

SEATTLE, WA — The Burma Interest Group is a non-partisan forum attended by representatives of NGOs, business, academia, and other interested parties that meets monthly to discuss Burma-related topics. For more information contact Larry Dohrs by phone: (206) 784-5742 or fax: (206) 784-8150.

PORTLAND, OR — For more information about the Burma Action Committee contact Jensine Larsen by phone: (503) 239-7726 or email: jensine@hev.anet.com.

NEW ENGLAND — The New England Burma Roundtable is an informal group of individuals and organizations working to promote human rights and democracy in Burma. Meetings are held the second Monday of every month. For information contact Simon Billenness of Trillium Asset Management by phone: (617) 423-6655 Ext. 225, fax: (617) 482-6179, or email: sbillenness@trilliuminвест.com.

PHILADELPHIA, PA — The Philadelphia Roundtable hosts a monthly activity. For more information contact Dan Orzech by phone: (610) 650-7755 or email: orzech@well.com.

CANADA — The July Burma Roundtable in Toronto focused on the campaign to encourage Suzuki and Wal-Mart to stop their business activities in Burma.

The Toronto Burma Roundtable meets monthly to discuss issues relating to Burma and plan educational and political events. For more information contact Elizabeth Shepherd by phone: (416) 465-3458 or email: mandalay@sprint.ca.

LONDON — Britain-Burma Society hosted Martin Smith, Burma scholar and author of Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity, at a June 27th presentation, entitled “Border Minorities Revisited.” Mr. Smith examined the continued fighting in border areas of Burma despite several cease-fire agreements.

The Britain-Burma Society meets seven times per year, focusing on cultural and historical issues and academic exchange. For more information contact Derek Brooke-Wavell by phone: 44-118-947-6874, fax: 44-118-954-6201, or e-mail: d.wavell@ntlworld.com.

NETHERLANDS — The Netherlands Burma Roundtable is held once every two months with the goal of updating organizations and individuals on current events and activities surrounding Burma. For more information contact The Burma Centre Netherlands by phone: 31-20-671-69-52 or by fax: 31-20-671-35-13.
UNOCAL FORCED LABOR CASE DISMISSED

In his September 1st ruling, Federal District Judge Ronald Lew determined that Unocal is not liable for its indirect employment of forced labor in the construction of a pipeline in Burma, reported the Washington Post. The claim, which was made by 15 Burmese villagers, sought to penalize the California-based oil company for human rights abuses abroad. Despite finding that "the evidence does suggest that Unocal knew that forced labor was being utilized and that the Joint Ventures [Unocal, Total SA and the Burmese government] benefited from the practice," Lew dismissed the case, maintaining that his court lacked the jurisdiction to rule. In his decision, Lew referred to documents authored by Unocal consultants that observed "egregious human rights violations" in southern Burma, including the rampant use of forced labor and forcible relocations in the pipeline area. Unocal lawyers maintain the company's innocence—not merely their ignorance—insisting that no forced labor was employed. The plaintiffs will appeal.

U.S. LABOR CALLS FOR ZERO IMPORTS FROM BURMA

In response to the most recent crackdown on the National League for Democracy and democratic activity by the Burmese regime, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) appealed to President Clinton to establish a "zero" quota on all textile and apparel products imported from Burma. In a September 18th letter to Clinton, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney pointed to the Burmese government's repressive grip on the labor force as the source of the low, non-competitive prices of textile imports, and subsequently, the 272% increase from 1995 to 1999 in the importation of apparel products manufactured in Burma. Data also indicates highly unbalanced trade relations between the U.S. and Burma as an outcome of dramatically increased U.S. imports of Burmese goods accompanied by decreased exports.

CHINA AND BURMA COLLABORATE IN CONSTRUCTION DEALS

A Chinese construction outfit finalized a deal with SPDC Public Works in late July to provide steel trusses and project supervision for the building of a long-span bridge on the Irrawaddy River, as reported by the Myanmar Times. The China National Construction and Agricultural Machinery Import Export Corporation has teamed up before with Public Works, having erected three other bridges in Burma. According to a September 19th Xinhua News article, the Export-Import Bank of China (known as Eximbank) has cemented a deal with Burma's government-run electric power company to build a massive power station. The 120 million US dollar loan allows for the Yunnan Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Company (YMEC) to supply equipment for the construction of the Panlang Hydroelectric Station, which, when completed, will have a generating capacity of 280,000 kilowatts and will supply one-third of the electricity supplied to Burma. The project is China's largest export of hydroelectric equipment to Southeast Asian countries, as well as Yunnan's largest foreign trade deal.

SWITZERLAND, LIECHTENSTEIN SANCTION JUNTA

On October 2nd, the Swiss government announced its plans to impose sanctions on Burma, with Liechtenstein following suit on October 12th. The Swiss decision, which was created in accordance with the European Union resolution against the Burmese junta, will freeze bank accounts belonging to Burmese government personnel, ban the export of arms to Burma, banish all members of the military attached to Burma's diplomatic missions in Switzerland and suspend all non-humanitarian aid. Liechtenstein has adopted similar measures including the freezing of junta assets and a plan to stop supplying equipment to the Burmese military.

UN OFFICIALS VISIT BURMA

Special Envoy to the UN Secretary-General Razali Ismail, who returned to Burma on the 9th through the 12th of October to undertake his second mission, met with General Than Shwe, Major General Khin Nyunt, Foreign Minister Win Aung, and other government and military figures, as well as Aung San Suu Kyi and members of the National League for Democracy. While the objective of the mission was to initiate dialogue in an effort towards national reconciliation, Razali also discussed the possibility of increased UN humanitarian aid, particularly to solve the country's growing health problems, in his conferences with both the government and Suu Kyi.

ILO TO SANCTION MILITARY REGIME

In an action unprecedented in International Labour Organization (ILO) history, the organization agreed to sanction Burma's junta for its failure to adhere to ILO regulations on the use of forced labor. During a November 17th meeting in Geneva, the ILO Governing Body found the military regime's attempts at reform to be "too little, too late." Only four nations, Malaysia, Russia, China and India, voiced opposition to the governing body's decision to implement sanctions, as spelled out in an earlier ILO resolution, beginning November 30th. The regime meanwhile stated that it "totally and categorically rejects the governing body resolution...[and] will cease to cooperate with the [ILO] in relation to the ILO Convention 29 [on forced and compulsory labor]." The ILO is the oldest of the UN organizations and is composed of government, employer and worker representatives from the 174 member nations.

SUU KYI, NLD TRAVEL EFFORTS MET BY JUNTA AGGRESSION

The face-off between the junta and NLD forces continues as the SPDC persists in its restriction of the freedom of movement and association of Aung San Suu Kyi, U Aung Shwe and other NLD members. The confrontation, which began on August 24th when the military police prevented Suu Kyi and fourteen NLD leaders from leaving Rangoon, resulted in a nine-day standoff. Military police ended the stalemate when they forcibly removed Suu Kyi and others, confined them to their homes and denied them telephone access and diplomatic contact. The conflict resumed on September 21st when Suu Kyi and other NLD members attempted to purchase train tickets to Mandalay. Military police halted them from the train station, removing U Tin Oo to Ye Mon prison and confining Suu Kyi to her home. More than 100 party supporters were detained in Insein prison. Suu Kyi and NLD executive committee members remain under house arrest in Rangoon.
NCUB STATEMENT ON RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT OF THE ELECTED POLITICAL PARTY

This statement was issued by the National Coalition of the Union of Burma (NCUB), an organization representing various ethnic nationalities, on August 26, 2000.

... We call on the international community to support the political rights of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and to fully acknowledge the abuse of those rights by the military regime, confirmed again today. The recent cooperation of some countries with the regime only lends legitimacy to their acts of abuse and further supports the repression of political and civil rights in the country. We call on all countries to refuse to work hand-in-hand with this dictatorship and to reconsider support and investment at this time.

The refusal to allow the elected political party of Burma to travel even 32 kms outside of Rangoon demonstrates yet again the utter repression of political and civil rights in the country. Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was supposedly released five years ago from the house-arrest imposed after the landslide victory of the NLD in 1990, she and her party face continual harassment and restriction of their right to carry out their political duties. NLD members are forced to resign on a daily basis, several hundred are detained, their families are harassed. The SPDC (the State Peace and Development Council) rule by fear and force. Forced labor and forced relocation are the chosen means to so-called development of the country. The rights of opposition parties are severely limited, the rights of the people are continually abused. But the fear the regime generates also reverberates through their ranks, and their action in forbidding the movement of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi illustrates their fear that the support of the people lies with her party. Consequently, they must do everything in their power to keep her away from her people. We urge the international community to strongly condemn such actions and to call for the right of the people to representative political parties.

U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES REGISTER SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

Leading up to the 2000 presidential elections, both the Republican and Democratic parties weighed in with their positions vis-à-vis Burma. Amidst the detailing of the party’s foreign policy, the Republican National Convention platform description noted, “The Republican party is committed to democracy in Burma, and to Aung San Suu Kyi and to working with our allies in Europe and Asia to maintain a firm and resolute opposition to the military junta in Rangoon.” GOP presidential and vice presidential candidates Governor George W. Bush and former defense secretary Richard Cheney elaborated on their party's platform, stating, “Advocacy of human freedom … is a fundamental commitment of our country…. [We] view free trade as an important ally in what Ronald Reagan called ‘a forward strategy for freedom.’”

On September 2nd, U.S. Vice President and Democrat presidential candidate Al Gore registered his outrage at the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi during the stand-off, declaring, “Denying [her] this right is an offense to free people everywhere.” Gore commented further, “Each day that the Burmese authorities restrain Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s isolation from the international community deepens,” calling for the immediate end of the suspension of her “basic human rights.” This followed an August 25th statement by the Clinton Administration that condemned the Burmese military for its treatment of the National League for Democracy and its leadership.

US CONGRESS PASSES RESOLUTION ON BURMA

In July, the Senate passed a resolution in recognition of the 10th anniversary of the 1990 elections deploring the junta’s human rights abuses and reaffirming congressional support for Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy and the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament. Declaring Burma’s “urgent need to improve the democratic and human rights of the people,” the resolution went on to list the human rights violations committed by the SPDC. The resolution concluded that the U.S. Government should support the accession of NLD to power, sustain the placing of political pressure on the SPDC to end human rights violations and not only to continue to level economic and political sanctions against Burma, but to pursue multilateral support for the sanctions. The resolution, which was introduced by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) and Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), passed the Senate on July 19. A House version passed on September 21st.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

All letters must include the writer’s name and address and are subject to editing.

8/17/2000

We received the latest issue [Spring/Summer 2000] of your always most informative Burma Debate. For us in Chicago the in-depth coverage of the new ILO resolution will prove most interesting. Last year we used information about the initial resolution in an ad and a leaflet regarding ABN/AMRO’s involvement in Burma.

On thumbing through the Debate to the last pages, I was surprised to find that you had not included ABN/AMRO under other international companies who recently withdrew from Burma. As one of the top four or five multinational banks active in East and Southeast Asia, ABN/AMRO is as important as the four mentioned US firms [Baker Hughes, Carlson Holdings, King Koil and Best Western] put together. Besides, as far as we know, it is the only bank to have exited any country as a result of a human rights campaign.

Sincerely yours,
Donald Erickson
Synapses Project Burma

Burma Debate
Spring/Summer 2000

CORRECTIONS

Please note that there was a typographical error in the name of the Director-General of the International Labour Organization (p. 4). It should have read Juan Somavia.

The volume number for this issue as it appeared on the cover was incorrect. Spring/Summer 2000 is Vol. VII, Nos. 1&2
"Democracy! Human rights!... What hypocrisy [sic]! What irony!" by U Myo Chit

Excerpts from the article that appeared in the September 6, 2000 issue of The New Light of Myanmar

At this moment while Suu Kyi, enthroned as Democracy Princess and glorified by [sic] a Nobel Laureate, is practising self-mortification on the windy, rainy Dalla shore opposite to Yangon, a brilliant scientist by the name of Wen Ho Lee of Taiwan is pining away for freedom being dumped unceremoniously in a dungeon somewhere in America, for a framed-up charge [sic] without permitting [sic] bail.

Lee, now 60, hailed from Taiwan; trained in nuclear physics, left his native country many years ago, he left his homeland for America, the Great Democratic country, full of trust and hope. After thorough meticulous security check with complete investigation of his background developments and associations, he was employed in a highly secretive scientific assignment at Los Alamos, where he had rendered loyal service to his adopted country. Then, in the wake of news about security lapses in his place of employment and glaring cases of negligence [sic] of security in the State Department ruled over by Suu Kyi's great mentor Madeleine Albright, Lee was rudely pulled away from his office by FBI agents who clapped him suddenly in solitary confinement. He has been there for eight solid months with not a single Human Watch Organization [sic] nor a statesman or politician from any country, taking the slightest notice about him nor [sic] raising the slightest voice of protest for the inhuman treatment meted out to poor Lee of Taiwan. There he still remains unnoticed, uncared for, miserably bemoaning his blind faith in the great democratic country which vociferously preaches democracy without practising what it teaches.

In contrast to the fate of poor Lee, as soon as the news of Suu Kyi blared forth from the symphoniously [sic] orchestrated broadcasting stations of the C.I.A., myriads of democracy frogs brought up and fed by the neo-colonialist the world over [sic], croaked and shrieked in unison with these lie factories in protest to Myanmar government's restriction to Suu Kyi and her followers journeying to an outlying area for sinister purposes. Unlike the case of Lee, there was no arrest, no solitary confinement; they are in the wide open field, beside the highway, in view of the public. They pitched up their own tent, going back to Dalla and bringing back bamboo and plastic sheets. Yangon City Development Committee, with great foresight, provides them with a mobile lavatory for their convenience. There are plenty of food shops, with fruits, drinks, beverages galore. As a matter of fact, I believe that Suu Kyi is immensely enjoying the great publicity she has received and basking in the glow of warm lime light spotted gratis [sic] on her.

During the last few days, a dumb nitwit from VOA tried to make derogatory remarks about Myanmar Government's claim that the Myanmar country is completely peaceful, that it is utterly safe for everyone to travel everywhere they like, night or day, in the cities, in the country along the high-ways and bridge being constructed, repaired throughout the country and yet when his Democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made her way out of Yangon, she was stopped just on the other side of the river, and prevented from proceeding any further. The Government's action, he derided, was to keep her out of harm's way, to assure security for her. How equivocal, how ambiguous was the government claim, he gloated. "On the one hand," he screeched, "Myanmar government claims perfect security and peacefulness throughout the country; on the other hand, they maintain that they have to restrict her movements for security reasons—how equivocal, how ambiguous!" While listening to such howls of sarcasm against the far-sighted action of the tolerant government, a few lines from a poem of the late famous Sayagyi Thakhin Kodaw Hmine flashed past my mind. Thakhin Hmine warned "Min-do-nyam Amyin-ta-mite- Ta-htwar-hmya-ye Hnint Nyn-bo-than-lyin Mite-yar-kyya-bar-leint" (With you harebrained mind, if you try to involve in [an] argument with me, you will only prove to be an utter fool yourself).

How can this harebrained nitwit screeching from VOA howling post, fathom the deep foresight of our leaders who have taken the required precautionary measures for the safety of Suu Kyi and in the long run, the security of the whole country??
INTERVIEW WITH U TIN OO, VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY.

Excerpts from an interview conducted and broadcast by Radio Free Asia (RFA) on September 14, 2000. Transcribed and translated by RFA, it appears here with their permission.

RFA: Could you recount the details of how you and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and party members were brought back from Dallah?
UTO: I was in the car with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, she was sleeping in the rear seat and I was sleeping in the front seat. At about 11:45 pm we heard a commotion outside, people shouting at one another. It was between the young people who were looking after us and the SPDC security forces. They carried us to the street and put me in a car and locked the doors. I kept on asking about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and they said that she was in another car. After waiting for about an hour, we were driven to the jetty and across the river. I told them that when General Aung San was the supreme commander of the armed forces I was one of his commanders and that it was my responsibility to protect the daughter of General Aung San. That it was my responsibility to accompany Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to ensure that she gets home safely. They said that they understood, but didn’t do anything. We were taken across the river by a military Z-craft and when we arrived on the Rangoon side of the river they took Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a separate car and took us to our respective houses.

RFA: Was she dragged out of the car by the security forces?
UTO: Yes. But I did not know at that time because it was dark. It was during the commotion. I could hear her shouting, "What are you doing? Don’t do this, don’t treat me in this rude manner". Later she was carried away. When I realized what was happening, I tried to go after her but then I was carried away by the security forces. They carried us to the street and put me in a car and locked the doors. I kept on asking about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and they said that she was in another car. After waiting for about an hour, we were driven to the jetty and across the river. I told them that when General Aung San was the supreme commander of the armed forces I was one of his commanders and that it was my responsibility to protect the daughter of General Aung San. That it was my responsibility to accompany Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to ensure that she gets home safely. They said that they understood, but didn’t do anything. We were taken across the river by a military Z-craft and when we arrived on the Rangoon side of the river they took Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a separate car and took us to our respective houses.

RFA: We have heard that the NLD headquarters was raided and papers and documents were taken away by the military authorities. In light of statements issued by the SPDC and comments given in the foreign press, is it possible that the SPDC will accuse the NLD of conspiring to commit terrorist activities against the government?
UTO: ... Initially we calculated that this time it seems that the military government was going to go all the way in looking for whatever reasons [it could find] to declare the NLD illegal. They were writing in their newspapers and their leaders were saying that all internal and external agents who are trying to destroy the country and all ‘axe handles’ (lackeys) will be completely annihilated. So we calculated that this time they were going to close down the NLD. But, as I heard during the time we were under house arrest, the leaders of the international community are now quite strongly supporting our democratic forces. This includes calling for the government to permit Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to move about and organize freely, and to start negotiations. We have heard that the international community is increasing its pressure. For example, at the Millennium Summit, President Clinton in his speech, which lasted only five minutes, devoted about one minute to talking about how force was used on us (by the SPDC). Also, the British Prime Minister mentioned us in his speech, as did the UN Secretary-General. Additionally, countries such as South Korea and Australia have made comments. Just today I heard that the UN Secretary General Mr. Kofi Annan met with Foreign Minister U Win Aung and urged him to start negotiations with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and let her move about freely. So maybe they changed their minds. I really cannot say.
Burma Debate is a publication of The Burma Project of the Open Society Institute.

Mary Pack, Editor

THE OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE (OSI) was established in December of 1993 to promote the development of open societies around the world. Toward this goal, the institute engages in a number of regional and country-specific projects relating to education, media, legal reform and human rights. In addition, OSI undertakes advocacy projects aimed at encouraging debate and disseminating information on a range of issues which are insufficiently explored in the public realm. OSI funds projects that promote the exploration of novel approaches to domestic and international problems.

The Burma Project initiates, supports and administers a wide range of programs and activities. Priority is given to programs that promote the well-being and progress of all the people of Burma regardless of race, ethnic background, age or gender.

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