

A NEW BURMA DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

By Roland Watson
August 3, 2013

The failure of the pro-democracy movement

I'll begin with an obituary. The Burma pro-democracy movement is dead.

Of course, some people might disagree. Instead, they might say that it is “over.” The Burma democracy movement isn't dead, it's just over, because it succeeded. Burma is now free and democratic.

I know how ridiculous this sounds, but many people actually do hold this view. The SPDC and Than Shwe are GONE, and the “progress” in the country is irreversible. The “reform” will take some years to complete, of course, but democracy is now established, there is a President and a Parliament, and things will only get better.

Such people are either fools; or part of the regime, such as Shwe Mann, Suu Kyi and Tayza; or corrupt cronies of the regime, including EBO's Harn Yawngkhwe, the KNU's General Mutu Sae Poe, General Johnny, and General Secretary Kwe Htoo, the SSA-South's General Yawd Serk, and of course all of the corporate pirates now invading the country. In the third group I would also include the international regime cheerleaders, including Ashley South, who is now reaping the reward for his complicity through his association with the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative; Derek Tonkin, of Network Myanmar; and Georgetown's illustrious David Steinberg. Congratulations, gentlemen, you must be dancing in the streets. You won! Burma is not free, and it won't be for a long, long time to come. You got what you wanted!!!

The movement has failed, and the first and foremost proof of this is that the dictators are still in power. Some of them, such as SPDC supremo Than Shwe, may have moved to the shadows, and others, including President Thein Sein and the members of the USDP, have taken off their uniforms, but, they are still absolutely in charge. And, with the 2008 Constitution as the “Supreme Law” of Burma, and which Than Shwe will never allow to be significantly altered, there is no way that they can be removed.

Secondly, repression in the country continues, without fail. This includes the ongoing Burma Army offensives against various ethnic nationality groups; related repression of ethnic nationality people, including the regime's backing of a campaign of genocide targeting the Rohingya; widespread land thefts, to assist the corporate pirates; and the continuing arrests and detention of individuals who protest these abuses, as well as the fact that any of the political prisoners who have been released can instantly be re-imprisoned if they ever really speak out.

And thirdly, there has not been one iota of justice for the regime's literally millions of victims, of both past and on-going abuses, and which justice Suu Kyi herself has declared shall never be permitted.

So, notwithstanding all of the supposed progress, nothing fundamental has changed.

Now, some people might say that the movement hasn't failed, merely - for the moment - that it is dormant. There are still thousands of courageous men and women dedicated to freedom and democracy, who have not given up in any way. And, this is true, and I applaud them. Even though I am not from Burma, I think of myself as being part of this group as well.

But, we have to face facts. The principal components of the movement have ended their resistance, including: Suu Kyi and the NLD; the ethnic armies that had continued to fight; and the student activists. Suu Kyi has joined the regime. The ethnic leaders betrayed their peoples and signed one-sided ceasefires, which only benefit them personally and the regime. And, the students, notably 88 Generation, while they haven't openly joined the dictators, have adopted a wait and see attitude.

So, the "dormant" argument doesn't hold water. The people who are still dedicated to freedom are going to have to regroup and start an entirely new movement. This might be like the White Mask movement in neighboring Thailand, as a prelude to organizing a new popular uprising; or the creation of renewed ethnic resistance as through the UNFC; or something else entirely. Only time will tell. But, whatever happens, the resistance will continue, and someday a new movement will be created, and it will prevail, and Burma will be free. The people deserve, and will settle for, nothing less.

History of the movement

In talking about the democracy movement, I should probably be clear about what I mean.

The movement began in the 1940s, with General Aung San's efforts to expel the British. Then, in 1949, the ethnic resistance formally started, when the Karen people launched their own revolution in response to General Ne Win, comrade of Aung San but also future dictator of Burma, threatening to exterminate them with his pocket army in Insein Township.

Next, student activism began in the 1950s, but interestingly, this was encouraged by the British, who had already left, as a means for the people to learn more about democracy. All such aspirations though came crashing down on March 2, 1962, when Ne Win launched his coup.

The students then began to shift their focus from democracy education to democracy activism, but not immediately, since they were preoccupied with their exams at the time, something Ne Win no doubt took into account. After completing their exams, the students went home, and then returned to campus in May, at which time the movement really started. However, in response to

the developing resistance, Ne Win's troops gunned down protesting students from Rangoon University on July 7, 1962, and then blew up their Student Union building the following day. The age of repression had formally begun.

In the intervening decades, there have been many other significant events, which can be included in the movement to free the country. These include:

A major student protest in 1974 following U Thant's funeral, which year Ne Win also imposed a new constitution.

Additional student protests in subsequent years.

The formation of the ethnic resistance National Democratic Front in 1975, in response to the fact that after he seized power, Ne Win started wars with the major ethnic nationality groups.

The murder by the regime of protesting students at Rangoon Institute of Technology, in March 1988.

Massive demonstrations that developed in response to this, culminating in the protests of that August, now exactly 25 years past, which Ne Win suppressed mercilessly on August 8th, in a massacre.

The formation of the ABSDF, by students who moved to the border areas to join forces with the ethnic armies.

And finally, continuing resistance by those students who remained in Burma's major cities.

You will note that I have not included in this list:

Any reference to Aung San Suu Kyi or the NLD as a whole, since following the 1990 election they never took any significant action to actually instigate democratic change.

Any later reference to the ethnic forces, since they became factionalized and unable to act in unison; and with many signing ceasefires; and with those that did not only engaging in defensive actions.

Any reference to the Buddhist monk uprising in 2007, since it did not have freedom and democracy as its goal.

So, and once again, and in conclusion, this is an outline history of the movement, which is now terminated. It failed. I am certainly not saying, though, that everything that has been done, and all of the sacrifices that have been made, have been in vain. They haven't. I am just pointing out

that we need to accept, and act on, the basic fact that Burma is not yet free, and that it no longer has any semblance of a functioning much less effective democracy movement.

Why the failure?

There obviously needs to be a new movement, but so the same mistakes aren't repeated again, perhaps it is best to conduct an autopsy of one that failed. Why did so much effort and sacrifice fail to achieve its goal?

The obvious answer is that the dictators, meaning Ne Win and then Than Shwe, were brilliant. How else could single individuals hold back an entire nation?

Ne Win implemented a multi-pronged strategy to hold onto power, and which Than Shwe then duplicated. First, he consolidated his base, the post-World War II Burma Independence Army. His principle actions here were to achieve dominance over his rival, communist Bo Zeya, and to purge the military of non-Burman commanders, notably Karen General, Smith Dun. Following this, he began to inculcate a sense of Burman superiority, and corresponding racism against non-Burmans. This was accomplished with the aforementioned wars, to which Ne Win appended the strategy of Divide and Conquer, leading to the ceasefires of the early 1990s - notably the KIA in 1994, and also the split of the KNU through the betrayal of the breakaway pro-regime DKBA, and the loss of the organization's Manerplaw headquarters.

Secondly, Ne Win isolated and impoverished the people of the country through his socialist program, thereby initiating an era of want that effectively reduced their ability to rise up.

Thirdly, he successfully maneuvered against students activists, through the different crackdowns and also via arrests, torture and imprisonment.

Fourthly, although this development occurred largely behind the scenes, he reached some sort of accord with the leaders of the Buddhist Sangha, such that there was never any religious support for the democracy movement.

Fifthly, he maneuvered successfully relative to - and secured military assistance from - the international community, principally the United States, by promoting his regime as a bulwark against both Chinese and broader regional communism.

And lastly, and just prior to, and no doubt in anticipation of - the 8888 massacre, he left the stage. He shielded himself from blame, and disappeared into the background.

Now, turning to Than Shwe, he perpetuated - if not increased - the racism and aggression against the ethnic nationalities; continued, through stealing the proceeds of the country's natural resource sales, the impoverishment of the people; continued to successfully contain student activists as well as Suu Kyi and the NLD, through arrests and imprisonment, although they bear some of the

blame for the success of this strategy since in general their actions were symbolic, and never designed to trigger great pressure much less a revolution for change; continued to control the Buddhist leadership, which opposed the younger monks' Saffron uprising; continued to minimize support for democracy from the international community, including by maintaining a secret relationship with the U.S., through the guise of narcotics interdiction, which drug smuggling, ironically, the regime oversees; and lastly, and once again imitating Ne Win, disappeared from the stage, leaving behind a political charade that Suu Kyi and the United States were only too happy to embrace.

Leadership failure

As this last point suggests, the democracy movement failed not only because of the brilliance of the dictators, but also due to the inept and self-serving actions of the movement's leadership, and supposed international allies.

Only Suu Kyi herself knows what has happened in her heart, how someone who was able to speak so strongly in 1989 transformed into a political animal who now - and exclusively - lusts after power. Whatever motivated her, though, be it the massacre at Depayin, her growing age, or her own racism, this transformation amounts to one of the most significant falls from grace of a pro-democracy leader in the history of humanity's struggle for freedom from tyranny and fear. This is her historical legacy.

The students in the cities, on the other hand, were imprisoned, so they bear no blame for the movement's failure; and the students who joined with the ethnic forces continued to fight, so likewise they are blameless as well. Certain ethnic nationality leaders, though, either became corrupted, or made serious if not fatal mistakes, and are to be castigated just as much as Suu Kyi.

Next, the role of Barack Obama and the U.S. cannot be underestimated. The acceptance of the legitimacy of Burma's dictatorship took two steps: Suu Kyi's surrender, and Obama's policy reversal. Of course, the reversal was only for public show, since behind the scenes America's backing of the dictatorship never really wavered, although the announcement of such a public stance was enough to open the floodgates to commercial development, and hence the financial strengthening of the regime that is now underway, exactly as it was intended to do.

Lastly, Burma's media share a large part of the blame. While the internal media were either censored or openly pro-regime, external media outlets presumably had freedom of speech. However, they too allowed themselves to be censored, notably by their common funder, the National Endowment for Democracy, which punishes any grantee that expresses sympathy for anything other than the weakest pacifist actions. (This is additional evidence of Washington's pro-regime complicity.) Hence, Burma has never had a true revolutionary media, capable of unifying the Burmans and the ethnic nationalities around the need to create a country-wide revolutionary movement.

The rise of a new movement

With all of this as background, those people of Burma, and their international supporters, who still hunger for freedom, can see that through the failure of the movement, and even with the supposed reform, nothing has really changed. The country is still under the thumb of a racist dictatorship. Their leaders are still weak, and corrupt. Where formerly the wealth of their nation was being stolen piecemeal, now it is occurring wholesale. What are they to do?

I'm not sure when or how it will happen, but the only option is to rise up. The people should of course oppose all of the corporate pirate pillage, including the theft of their land, and in the strongest possible ways. But, even this won't be enough. They need to rise up, unify around the cause of freedom - not land thefts - and take to the streets. It is possible. If the publics in literally one country after another can do it, and successfully, the people of Burma can, too.

Barriers to a new movement

Once again, though, it's not going to be easy. In addition to all of the normal hurdles that exist for a democracy movement, there are a number of other barriers specific to Burma.

The first of these is Suu Kyi. Her betrayal of the people and their aspiration to be free is so severe that she is nothing less than a traitor. The problem is, with her legacy, her anointing as a saint by the international community, but much more importantly the fact that she is Aung San's daughter, it takes a huge psychological leap for an ordinary person to oppose her. Nonetheless, this is what is required. The people must turn against her. It might help to recognize that Aung San himself would disown her for what she has done. Indeed, if she wasn't family, his penalty would be even more severe. Aung San, who was no racist, would further recognize that the Burman dictatorship - through its record of decades of murderous repression - is even worse - much worse - than the British.

A basic way to evaluate leaders is to look at their actions, and then consider whose interests are being served. What has Suu Kyi actually done (or failed to do), and who is benefitting in the "New" Burma? The answer is: she personally is the one who is being rewarded, as well as the generals who for decades have destroyed the country, their Burman and now ethnic nationality cronies, and the international corporate pirates. This is who she is working for: not the people.

I can add that a related issue here, counterintuitively, is the respect that is commonly granted to the elderly in East Asia. In Burma's case, and also China and Thailand, a very positive social influence is having the unintended consequence of working to the disadvantage of the people. Because of this value, people in East Asia find it very difficult to criticize, much less oppose, older generations. This hidden value is a significant factor in the inability, even the unwillingness, of the people of Burma to rise up.

Even more, it now extends to all of the different ethnic nationalities, individually. Not only are the Burmans being misled through Suu Kyi, but the Karen through General Mutu, the Shan through Yawd Serk, etc. Burma needs ethnic nationality resistance movements not only against the dictatorship, but against their own leaders as well.

In conclusion, other barriers to a new democratic movement include the revelation that large numbers of Buddhist monks, amazingly, are also openly racist; that the U.S. and the rest of the international community have cast pretense aside and - as with China - are now openly cheering for the dictators; and, finally, that there is one other hidden factor as well.

To repeat the above point, the publics in many countries have achieved their freedom; why not Burma? If you look at a number of these successful resistance movements, though, another factor becomes clear, which is not present in Burma. This is in fact probably the most important factor of all.

The people need someone to unify against. All of their frustration and anger needs to be directed against one target, so that it can build and coalesce and ultimately explode through a massive taking to the streets. In Libya, the target was Gaddafi; in Tunisia, Abidine Ben Ali; in Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic; in Syria, Assad; in Egypt, Mubarak and then Morsi; and now, finally, in Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra.

All of these countries had - or, for Thailand, have - a hated dictator. But, the dictators of Burma, and also China, have successfully eluded this threat. Both Ne Win and Than Shwe were devout Buddhists. How could they be all bad? And, as 1988 developed, Ne Win excused himself from the scene. Now, Than Shwe has done the same thing, and who did he install in his place - Thein Sein: mild-mannered, soft-spoken, balding Thein Sein. How can you be angry with him? He's not even part of the Sit-tut anymore. The Army is rogue, outside of his power.

This fantastic deception has not only convinced many opportunistic people, starting with Suu Kyi, that now is the time to give up and jump on board the money train, more deeply it deprives the public, who will never be invited on the train, of the focal point that they need to instigate a rebellion. Again, Burma's dictator - Than Shwe - is a genius.

The flip side, though, is that the rise of the new corrupt class, Burma's princelings, is sure to seed resentment, particularly as ordinary people continue to have their land stolen. The anger will still be there. The question is, what will set it off?

Triggers for new unrest

While, as Tunisia demonstrated, anything can trigger a rebellion, for Burma, the only obvious upcoming events are the national census, that supposedly will be conducted next year, and the election that is also supposedly scheduled for the year after that.

For the first, there is a significant factor here that few people recognize. Many Burmans, certainly the racists, believe that they are the majority. It is not uncommon to hear the claim that Burmans constitute 70% of the country's population and everyone else 30%. This is no doubt incorrect. Indeed, some people believe that non-Burmans, including mixed ethnicities, may now be the majority. "Pure" Burmans may even be less than 40%.

Now, if this is true, it is certain to constitute a flash point. The dictatorship will unquestionably conduct the census in a way that is designed to minimize non-Burman registrations, but the blunt methods that were used in the past, such as registering all Buddhists as Burmans, will not be possible. Observation of the census will be too professional for them to get away with this.

This means that there are two potential trigger points arising out of the census. First, if the regime attempts to disenfranchise the ethnic nationalities, either by denying them registration, or by undercounting their numbers, there will be a popular reaction to this, and which the corrupt ethnic leadership will not be able to control. Secondly, if a fair count is held and which shows the end of Burman dominance, the racists will not let this stand. In the "interests of national unity," the generals will step in and seize direct control, under the terms of "their" Constitution, and Burma will be an incontestable military dictatorship once again.

Secondly, assuming the hurdle of the census can somehow be overcome, there is the issue of the election. Personally, I believe Than Shwe will authorize amending the provision of the Constitution that is necessary to allow his now ally, Suu Kyi, to become President. He understands that giving her the corner office, so-to-speak, will be a strong deterrent against popular unrest. So, barring a new uprising between now and 2015, the stage will then be set. Reactionary and autocratic Suu Kyi will replace Thein Sein as the public face of the military regime. (I wouldn't be surprised if she finds a way for her friends from China to resume the Myitsone dam.) And, the people - to win their rights and stop the pillage - will be forced to oppose her.

It's good that these events, the census and the election, are getting closer every day.