

# China's Discomfiture

Another bloodbath in Myanmar would be bad for business for China and also expose its inaction as it hosts the Olympic Games, comments *David Harrison*



Protesting monks being teargassed

The images are unforgettable: Myanmar soldiers shooting at barefooted, saffron-robed monks and other peaceful protesters on the street of Myanmar's capital Yangon. Thanks to internet technology the world has seen the true, brutal face of the military regime that has ruled that beautiful but benighted country for 45 years.

From New Zealand to New Delhi, Vladivostok to Venezuela and Britain to Bahrain millions of shocked people witnessed the mauling of the monks. But now, weeks later, with at least a dozen — and possibly many more — protesters killed and hundreds more in jail, the streets of Myanmar's cities are silent once more. Meanwhile, the junta's spies continue to hunt down anybody connected with the protests, pursuing them even over the

border into Thailand.

The demonstrations showed that the desire for freedom burns brightly in Myanmar. But the crackdown has confirmed that not all mass protests lead to overnight democracy. What has worked in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world in recent years has brought not even a flicker of democracy to the Union of Myanmar, as the regime renamed Burma in 1989. The country's dictator, the Senior General Than Shwe, and his ruling body of 12 generals, refuse to budge.

State television continues to pump out propaganda, blaming western governments and media for the homegrown protests sparked initially by huge rises in fuel prices. Pictures of staged pro-

government demonstrations are beamed into the homes of Myanmar's 50 mn impoverished people. Life, on the surface at least, appears to be getting back to what, in the Orwellian world that is Myanmar, passes for normal.

We have been here before. The junta, which seized power in 1962, massacred hundreds of protesters in 1988. In 1990 when Aung San Suu Kyi's Democracy Party won an election the generals simply ignored the result and carried on in power, protected by an army that receives 40% of the country's budget, compared with the less than 1% allocated to education and health. Suu Kyi, 62, who was shown briefly and movingly at her gate during the protests, has been under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years. The regime claims that it has its own 'road map to democracy', but there are no signs that even the first steps have been taken on that road.

What more can the Myanmar people do about this inhuman regime that attacks and tortures its own people and keeps them in terrified poverty while the generals lead a life of luxury and omnipotence?

The Myanmar people are understandably afraid, but they are also angry. The assaults on the monks, a revered group in a deeply Buddhist country where such actions are believed to have spiritual consequences, have left a simmering rage. Many of the soldiers, and perhaps even the superstitious and self-proclaimed 'pious' generals, are uneasy about the beating of the Buddha.

The world's anger has given hope to the protesters. Unlike the 1988 demonstrations, when hundreds of protesters were massacred, news of the 2007 uprising flashed around the world almost instantaneously.

But Myanmar desperately needs action as well as moral support from the outside. The European Union and the United States have announced tougher sanctions and Japan has cut its aid package. ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), of which Myanmar is a member, is also planning to lean on the junta.

But while sanctions will affect the ordinary Myanmar people, the generals' privileged lives will be untouched. Britain and France want Myanmar to be 'rewarded' for moves towards democracy, though the French oil company Total has been offering questionable 'rewards' for years in the



Aung San Suu Kyi with Ibrahim Gambari of the UN

form of contracts that have swollen Total's profits and helped to fill the generals' coffers and prop up their totalitarian rule.

India, which has strong economic ties with Myanmar, should certainly put much more pressure on the junta. Yet there is one country, more than any other, that holds the key to dismantling Myanmar's tyranny: China.

Beijing has vast oil, gas and other business interests in Myanmar and sells huge quantities of arms to Myanmar, giving it huge influence over the regime.

But China was slow to condemn the suppression of the protest and, even when it did, demanded that the UN water down an original demand for a transition to democracy.

Beijing, which denies basic political freedoms to its own citizens, is unlikely

to call for instant democracy in Myanmar. Sensitive to external pressure for change in Tibet, and aware of China's own suppression of spiritual groups such as Falun Gong, its leaders argue that other countries should not 'interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs'.

But as its economy booms, China is increasingly aware of its image in the world. The regime that is still embarrassed by its ruthless suppression of the Tiananmen Square protesters in 1989 will want to distance itself from a government that kills peaceful protesters in 2007.

Next year China hosts the Olympic Games, and the world will be watching. Another bloodbath in Myanmar would be bad for business and also expose China's inaction more starkly than ever. It is time for the dragon to breathe fire on the generals.

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