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THE ROLE OF SYUDENTS IN THE 8888 PEOPLE'S UPRISING IN BURMA



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Twenty three years ago today, on 8 August 1988, hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets of Burma demanding an end to the suffocating military rule which had isolated and bankrupted the country since 1962. Their united cries for a transition to democracy shook the core of the country, bringing Burma to a crippling halt. Hope radiated throughout the country. Teashop owners replaced their store signs with signs of protest, dock workers left behind jobs to join the swelling crowds, and even some soldiers were reported to have been so moved by the demonstrations to lay down their arms and join the protestors. There was so much promise.

Background

The decision of over hundreds of thousands of Burmese to take to the streets on 8 August 1988 did not happen overnight, but grew out of a growing sense of political discontent and frustration with the regime's mismanagement of the country's financial policies that led to deepening poverty.

In 1962 General Ne Win, Burma's ruthless dictator for over twenty years, assumed power through a bloody coup. When students protested, Ne Win responded by abolishing student unions and dynamiting the student union building at Rangoon University, resulting in the death of over 100 university students. All unions were immediately outlawed, heavily restricting the basic civil rights of millions of people. This was the beginning of a consolidation of power by a military regime which would systematically wipe out all opposition groups, starting with student unions, using Ne Win's spreading network of informers and military intelligence officers.

U Ne Win's disastrous decision to demonetize three-fourths of the country's bank notes forced universities and high schools to close down, as students were unable to pay for their examinations. Students acted as a gauge of popular discontent, predicting that the Burmese people would be ready for political demonstrations on a large scale. "We realized that something would happen, a movement or a demonstration would come soon¹," recalls Min Ko Naing, one of the key founders of the movement.

The growing frustration translated into action. Students in the Rangoon Institute of Technology protested inside the campus. Riot police responded with excessive force, resulting in the death of three students. As news of the fatalities spread across campuses, students began to join together in solidarity. Within three days, 4,000-5,000 students filled the streets of Rangoon, demanding an end to the government's mistreatment of students and the need for a student union. The response by state authorities amounted to a wholesale massacre; those who tried to escape being beaten by riot police were either forcibly drowned in Inya Lake, near Rangoon University, or

¹ Megan Clymer – Journal of Burma Studies

were raped. Countless others were arrested and forced into police “lock-up” trucks to be brought to Insein prison; an additional 41 died of suffocation while in the trucks.

The blood had to be washed from the streets the next day, but the stains of injustice remained in the nation’s memory, triggering a number of demonstrations in the following months and setting the stage for the largest nation-wide uprising calling for democracy in Burma: the 8888 uprisings.

With power seemingly slipping farther from the Burmese government’s grasp, student leaders were busy trying to fill the void with a democratic government by organizing other sectors of society for a general nation-wide strike, set for the auspicious day, 8 August 1988.

8888 uprisings

The people of Burma were frustrated by the failures and strict limitations of the military regime, hope grinded out of them by poverty and injustice. They were buoyed by the words of Min Ko Naing, who gave a “call to arms” statement through BBC.

We, the people of Burma, have had to live without human dignity for twenty-six years under oppressive rule...Only "people power" can bring down the repressive rulers...If we want to enjoy the same rights as people in other countries, we have to be disciplined, united, and brave enough to stand up to dictators. Let's express our suffering and demands. Nothing is going to stop us from achieving peace and justice in our country².

Inspiration and confidence in the future of a democratic Burma was contagious: during the first days of protest, hundreds of thousands of people across Burma took to the streets. The people were determined to find a solution to the day-to-day problems of grinding poverty, social injustices, and heavy-handed oppression. Students were quickly joined by all sectors of society: government workers, hospital staff, Buddhist monks, teachers, soldiers, all joined the movement, equalized in their purpose for political change.

It didn’t take long for the protest to turn bloody. That night, armed soldiers opened fire at City Hall. The following night, as peaceful demonstrators made their way to Shwedagon pagoda, Burma’s most sacred landmark, they were confronted with an impenetrable wall of soldiers. The military had been ordered to not shoot upwards, meaning they were to fire directly at the demonstrators. As the crowds panicked and dispersed, the death toll began to mount. Military troops violently crushed demonstrations; over the next 5 days, over 3,000 people were killed.

Even in the face of this immeasurable cruelty, the demonstrators bravely marched on, sometimes soaked in the blood of their comrades. People continued to pour into the streets, showing their support by offering rice to the protestors or by tending to the wounds of those injured.

² Megan Clymer, Journal of Burma Studies

On 26 August, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, previously almost unknown to the Burmese public, addressed a large crowd in front of Shwedagon pagoda, declaring the urgent need for democracy. It seemed that finally, victory would be possible.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. On 18 September 1988, a little over a month after 8888, the military government consolidated its power and established itself as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in a bloody coup that left hundreds dead³. As soon as the SLORC assumed power, a curfew was established, groupings of over 5 people were prohibited, and the secret police began arresting anyone they believed to be in opposition to the government.

Was it worth it?

Over twenty years have passed, and not much has changed.

The draconian and repressive laws remain in place. The military's power is firmly cemented, albeit under the guise of a "civilian" administration. The key leaders of the democracy movement are either in prison, facing long sentences in remote prisons, or in exile. Close to 2,000 political prisoners remain behind bars for their perceived opposition to the regime. Of those 2,000, 37 are 88 generation student group members. Millions of Burmese live in abject poverty despite the abundance of natural resources. State institutions are still under the tight control of the military. War and violence continue to afflict all individuals with increasing brutality.

So, was it worth it?

It is not surprising then, that the 8888 uprisings have roundly been viewed as a failure. The protestor's original demand for the restoration of a democratic government is far from being fulfilled, making it increasingly hard to rationalize the death of over 3,000 peaceful protestors. Worse, mass anti-government protests occurring after 8888 suffered the same fate: violent crackdown by authorities resulting in the needless loss of lives.

It would be unfair, however, to define the success of the 8888 uprisings solely by whether or not a limited set of demands was met. It would be unfair to those who marched with the dream of a democratic Burma, and it does no justice to the democracy movement in the long-term.

Dismissing the 8888 uprisings as a failure ignores the enormous contribution these protestors had in laying the unseen foundation for a new era of social activism and in shaping key leaders who continue to play a critical role in the long road to freedom. Min Ko Naing, whose name translates into Conqueror of Kings, was relatively unknown before the 8888 uprisings, yet his integral role in organizing the movement transformed him into one of the most prominent student leaders of the effort to bring democratic reform to Burma.

After spending 16 years in solitary confinement for his leading involvement in the 8888 uprisings, Min Ko Naing continued to promote human rights as a cornerstone for national reconciliation. In January 2007, Min Ko Naing and other leading members, such as Ko Ko Gyi, Ko

³Students who were involved claim the number was much higher.

Min Zeya, Ko Htay Kywe and Ko Pyone Cho who already spent nearly two decades in prison, of the 88 Generation Students traveled across Burma to encourage ordinary citizens to express their grievances to the authorities in letters. In explaining the purpose of this, referred to as the Open Heart Letter Campaign, the group said, “You have the right to demand your rights. Not until the world hears your cries, will you be free from your sufferings. It is the right time to assert the truth.” Even though members of the 88 Generation Students were quickly arrested, with 22 members, including Min Ko Naing, now serving at least 65 year sentences, their action sparked the Saffron Revolution: the largest anti-government demonstration since the 88 uprisings.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi played no role in politics previous to the uprisings. She, however, like countless others, was so moved by the 8888 uprisings that she decided to dedicate her life to the struggle. She went on to co-found the National League for Democracy, earning the trust of the majority of ethnic nationality groups. Although recently released, she was kept under house arrest for many years in an attempt to sideline her from politics. Just like Min Ko Naing, despite being out of the public eye for many years, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a much-loved leader across Burma who draws huge crowds whenever she speaks.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Ko Naing are just two examples of leaders who have been indelibly shaped by 8888, paving the way for a younger generation of activists who continue to build on the progress made by their predecessors. History has shown that democratic progress can only be made through the concerted effort of committed, dedicated, and passionate individuals who are able to lift the hopes of those affected. 8888 uprisings helped produce leaders who sought alternative ways to express their political opposition to the military regime.

Before 1988, the words “democracy” and “human rights” were rarely heard and even less understood. It was not until student leaders began reaching out to ordinary individuals that ordinary Burmese began to understand how the daily problems they faced were part of a larger system of injustice deeply rooted in the governing regime. In the lead up to the protests, those in Burma looked at the glaring poverty that engulfed them and the strict limitations on their freedoms and thought, this is not just. For the first time, a sense of injustice empowered those affected by the regime’s suffocating policies, instilling them with the confidence they needed to undo countless wrongs. In the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, citizens organized amongst themselves, producing independent organizations, newspapers, and magazines across the country⁴.

A movement was born.

Even though the military regime continues to erect new barriers in an attempt to stifle activists, the democracy movement continues to reach all corners of Burma. Ensuring the rights of all those in Burma in the twenty-first century demands more innovative tactics and approaches than were required during the period of overt military rule. The democracy movement, in changing its approach, has not strayed from its original mission to ensure political equality. This is

⁴ Megan Clymer, p45

largely due to the guiding presence of the 8888 leaders, who showed ordinary Burmese that freedom and democracy requires their active political engagement.

Crucial Role of students

In Burma, student activism has historically been a crucial force for social change, with students often serving as the conscience of nations, reminding people in times of turmoil of the founding ideals of the country and inspiring others to continue their fight for democracy and human rights. Students were at the forefront of the first struggle for independence against British colonialists, so it comes as no surprise that students were critical in orchestrating what would later become known as the second struggle for independence, the 8888 uprisings.

The Burmese military regime understands the power and significance of student movements, sometimes better than the students themselves. The collective spirit of those who were frustrated with the snail-like pace of progress joined together and found its voice in student leaders. When these leaders shared their cry for justice and dream for a democratic Burma, the spirits of the crowd soared higher still. The ability of students to organize and command respect from the people is one of the military regime's greatest fear.

Nothing is more revealing of this fear than the fact that student activists are often jailed and murdered, college campuses are closed down in times of crises or moved to remote locations, the formation of student unions are outlawed, and there are strict guidelines on what can and cannot be taught in the schools.

There are **269** students behind bars in Burma today, **52** of those are serving sentences of over 15 years, and **29** students are serving sentences of over 65 years. One of these is Bo Min Yu Ko, a 21 year old student recently imprisoned with a **104** year sentence for organizing a student union at his university. He is just one of many young students who will have spent the majority of their youth behind bars, highlighting the continued failure of the military regime to allow a safe space for dissent.

Role of 88 generation leaders in Burma's transition to democracy

The leaders of the 88 generation have a particularly important role to play in the future of Burma. Not only are they widely admired but they have repeatedly shown their ability to unite ordinary people from all walks of life under a common cause: equality; self-determination; and democratization. This struggle for a unified Burma has been ongoing since independence and cannot be achieved unless there is an inclusive dialogue between the ruling "civilian" regime, the National League for Democracy, and representatives of all ethnic nationality groups to discuss the future of a unified Burma. Until these issues are resolved, Burma will not transition into a peaceful, democratic, and developing country.

A crucial first step in the road to democracy is official recognition of all Burma's 1,995 political prisoners, and their unconditional release. This is an essential part of trust-building between the military rulers, democratic forces, and wider society. In July, Hnin May Aung (aka)

Noble Aye, a student activist imprisoned twice since 1998, had her family visits banned and is being held incommunicado in a punishment cell for writing a letter demanding state authorities to retract statements denying the existence of political prisoners.

This continued denial of the very existence of political prisoners is a critical barrier to national reconciliation, as political prisoners represent the struggle for democracy, human rights, and equality. While activists remain in prison for voicing their beliefs, ordinary people will have no trust in the ruling authorities.

Currently, at least **37** members of the 88 generation group are in prison, over half of them former political prisoners who have already spent many years in jail for their pro-democracy activities as student activists. **23** of these are serving sentences of over 65 years, with the majority still under trial. Leading members of the group have been transferred to remote prisons in the far north, south, east, and west of the country.

Prioritizing the **unconditional and immediate** release of 88 generation leaders would demonstrate genuine commitment on the part of the “civilian” regime to fostering an atmosphere of trust with civil society and democratic forces. Burma cannot be considered a democracy unless political prisoners, including members of 88 generation, are guaranteed the right to participate in the transition to democracy. This includes their right to stand as members of Parliament or political candidates, form political parties or civil society groups, or join political parties if they choose to do so.

The exclusion of political leaders from positions of power must not continue. National figures such as Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Ko Min Zeya, Ko Htay Kywe, and Ko Pyone Cho, have the power to unite ordinary people behind a democratic process. Similarly, members of the 88 group across the country can encourage their communities to nurture and foster the nascent democratic structure in Burma.

As long as these leaders remain behind bars, there can be no democracy in Burma.