

Burma :From the Land of the Golden Pagoda to a Land of tyranny

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ABSTRACT

After British colonialism which lasted from 1885 to 1948 Burma appeared to be a land full of promise with the pioneering vision and leadership of General Aung San a nationalist and young statesman who would have led Burma to renewed freedom and prosperity. Unfortunately Gen.Aung San's tragic assassination in 1948 the year of Burma's independence by a rival faction led to a period of indifferent democratic rule until 1962 when the military dictatorship overthrew a weak civilian government in a coup and assumed power.Ever since then the military dictatorship or *junta* has relentlessly governed Burma under its new name Myanmar with an iron grip of espionage, coercion, punishment and propaganda. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which the junta grossly violates the tenets of Buddhism which is the predominant religious faith of the Burmese people and the ways in which the Buddhist monks in collaboration with the student community have been agitating for democracy ever since 1988 .The paper also examines the Burmese peoples' struggle for democracy, a cause championed by General Aung San's charismatic daughter and Nobel Laureate Aung Saan Suu Kyi and way in which the lives of Buddhist monks in Burma is severely impacted by the military dictatorship.

In the recent histories of repressive nations in Asia the most long standing and relentless example is that of Tibet, brutalized and subsumed under Chinese hegemony for the past sixty three years ever since the Chinese occupation of 1950. We then have the example of Burma where the military dictatorship has ruled over the country for over five decades since 1962. The irony with Burma is that where as Tibet became a territory occupied by a foreign power the Junta as the military dictatorship is called in Burma is constituted of the Burmese military. It is ironic that a powerful clique of the military should rule over their own people as if they were a colonial force whose only agenda is to suppress the individual and collective rights and liberties of the Burmese people. What is more ironic is that the global voice of the community of nations particularly in South and Southeast Asia and India in particular should have remained silent to the crises of Tibet and Burma despite the close geographical, religious, cultural and historical ties between India and Tibet as well as India and Burma.

Unlike India the colonial period in Burma lasted only from 1885 to 1948. David Steinberg writes, “ The British occupation of Burma largely used troops from the subcontinent to suppress discontent. Administrative convenience (if not acumen) led the British until 1937 to govern Burma as a province of India in spite of profound cultural differences.” (28) It was only in 1937 that Burma was freed from Indian dispensation. Due to the encouragement given to Indians by the British many of them settled in Burma and worked in the lower levels of administration as clerks, peons and staff of professional medical and educational institutions. This was resented by the Burmese.

The traditional monarchy came to an end in 1885 with the exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supalayath to the coastal town of Ratnagiri in a reversal of fortunes just as the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar was exiled to Rangoon after the 1857 First War of Independence. However the association of the monarchy and the monastic order had been so

strong that the rebellions against the British were sanctioned and given legitimacy by the monks. The Sangha acted as the mentors and conscience keepers of the monarch. Steinberg points out that the most important of these rebellions was the Saya San rebellion of the 1930s. San was at sometime in his life a monk and he was captured, tried and executed. Saya San is considered a nationalist hero.

World War II caused exodus of a large number of Indians many of whom died en-route. According to Steinberg the role of Japan in Burma and the defeat of the Allies in Burma and other parts of Asia , “hastened the end of colonialism and boosted the development of nationalism.”(36) It also brought into prominence young leaders like the dynamic Aung San, U Nu and Ne Win. However although Japanese collaboration brought independence to Burma the Japanese military treated “the Burmese with cultural disdain and a brutality that is largely forgotten.”(37)

Aung San the most outstanding of nationalists in Burma was , “ a vigorous, magnetic, young nationalist leader whose forceful personality was critical both to negotiations with the British and to encouraging the minorities to keep within what became the Union of Burma.”(42) Unfortunately Aung San was assassinated by a rival faction on July 1947. Subsequently a civilian govt ruled from 1948 to 1962. This period was marked by poor law and order, corruption, weak institutions and factionalism. The weakness of the civilian govt empowered the military .In 1962 the military overthrew the civilian govt through a coup whose ostensible purpose of the takeover of the govt was the preservation of the Union of Burma but who having tasted power for a brief interregnum between 1960-62 wanted absolute control over the country. Military dictatorship lasted without any marked political development from 1962 to 1988.

1988 marks a significant turn in the movement for democracy. It was in 1988 that General Aung San's daughter Suu Kyi happened to be visiting Burma to nurse her ailing mother. After her father's death when she was two years old she had mainly lived abroad in India where her mother Daw Khin Kyi was appointed ambassador in 1961 by the U Nu government. She then attended Oxford University where she met and married Michael Aris a scholar on Bhutan and Tibet. When the unrest began in 1988 she did not immediately begin but then she decided to give a speech outside Shwedagon pagoda on 26 August the day student organizers called for a nationwide strike. Christina Fink writes, "Her eloquence and poise captivated the audience as she urged the people not to turn on the army but to seek democracy in a peaceful and democratic way." (60) Despite Suu Kyi becoming a symbol of national protest as the daughter of an illustrious leader the movement lacked organization. As the strikes continued, "food shortages worsened, public services stopped and people grew tired, giving the military an opportunity to take control." (Fink 62) The State law and order Restoration Council (SLORC) announced elections and Suu Kyi's party the National League for Democracy (NLD) was the first party to register for the elections. Although there were several parties some of them small student groups it was the NLD that "was most successful in bringing diverse people together under a common platform." (65) Nearly 300 million people joined the party and large crowds attended Suu Kyi's rallies. Suu Kyi echoed the feelings of the people because she spoke of democratic ideology as well as of "Buddhist precepts of loving kindness, tolerance and self-control." (65) On 19 July 1989 Suu Kyi decided to march with thousands of students to the tomb of her father to honour Martyr's Day the day of her father General Aung San's assassination in 1947. The military regime responded by filling the streets with troops and Suu Kyi called off her march. There was a rumour that edgy with her growing magnetism and her unequivocal criticism of the

junta, the regime was going to arrest her. The rumour was vindicated when the military surrounded her house and put her under house arrest. Numerous NLD members throughout Burma were arrested and Suu Kyi was disqualified. Draconian laws were imposed. Meetings of more than five people were prohibited. Media was monitored. Despite these restrictive measures the NLD continued to campaign throughout the country. The elections were fair despite the restrictions imposed during campaigning and 72.5 per cent people cast their vote. In what was a landslide victory the NLD won 392 of the 485 seats in the parliament. The votes of the military –dominated districts contributed significantly to this landslide win which meant that a number of votes came from army personnel. The victory was a reflection of the people's desire for democracy.

Yet it was not at all going to be a smooth transition to power for Suu Kyi's NLD. The junta procrastinated while monks and students began to agitate to show their support to the National League for democracy. However these protests were suppressed with an iron hand and military rule continued. There is hardly a greater travesty of human rights and democratic ideology in Southeast Asia than the continuity of status-quo in Burma if we discount the Chinese occupation of Tibet. It is one of the worst case ironies of southeast Asia that a political party which wins an election with a thumping majority should be left in the lurch while self appointed rulers should continue with impunity to rule a country for forty nine years without a major neighbour like India batting an eyelid. During all the years of her house-arrest Suu Kyi has become an iconic figure winning a Nobel Prize for peace as early as her struggle in 1991. The 1.3 million dollars given in the prize was used by her for establishing a health and education trust.

The period following the May 1990 elections and Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in 1995 was marked by an affirmation of the military dictatorship's power. The NLD had failed to form a legitimate government despite their landslide victory because of the

repressive measures adopted by the junta. Suu Kyi was released in 1995. The news of her release spread and crowds of people started appearing at her gate of her residence at Inya Lake. She addressed the crowds and then began addressing them everyday until she decided that she would address them only on weekend meetings. There was a great deal of curiosity among the people and journalists about her life under house arrest. Christina Fink writes, “She had run out of money and refused donations of food from the military authorities.....On a few occasions her husband and sons had been permitted to visit but most of her time was spent alone, reading, listening to the radio and meditating.”(86)

The fact that Suu Kyi as the charismatic daughter of a martyr, an iconic leader and visionary like Gen. Aung San has faced years of house arrest without resorting to violent agitation has built up an iconic status for her as a leader. Suu Kyi’s priorities are, “representative govt, civilian control of the military, better education(including scholarships)improved access to health and some form of federal structure for the minorities.(Steinberg89)

Despite preventing the NLD from coming to power the Junta has engaged in sustained propaganda over the years. According to Christina Fink, “ The regime has downplayed the shooting of unarmed civilians in 1988 and instead emphasized the violent actions of some of the demonstrators asserting that it was acting only to restore order in a chaotic situation.”(143)

Likewise the military emphasizes its role in holding the country together despite ethnic insurgencies. The military also claims that it has improved the infrastructure by building roads and bridges. It remains a major source of employment particularly for rural young men who have no other job prospects. Christina Fink writes, “Successive military regimes in Burma have managed to hang on to power by using a combination of repression, intimidation, financial incentives and propaganda.”(250)

Those who oppose the regime face imprisonment, torture or death. Capitalizing on the resentment over the British policy of encouraging the ethnic

minorities the regime has built up on the idea of a centralized state. If there is no provocation on the part of the NLD the regime is silent but the slightest protest is suppressed with an iron hand. The regime relies on China's support and there has been inadequate international pressure against it.

There are several documentations of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of Burma and the purpose of this paper is to explore how the military dictatorship grossly violates the tenets of Buddhist Dhamma in Burma and how the Burmese people and the monastic order in particular cope with the daily and persistent challenges to their freedom and liberty. The paper also highlights how Buddhism underlies and impacts the struggle for democracy in Burma. As a reference to the ways in which the military dictatorship or Tatmadaw as it is now known violate the principles of Buddhism and the stoicism with which the people bear such violation of their liberties is the iconic figure of Aung San Suu Kyi the leader of the struggle for a multi-party democracy in Burma since 1988 and the daughter of the General Aung San the most dynamic nationalist leader of colonial Burma who was assassinated in 1947 by a member of the rival faction. Suu Kyi or "The Lady" as she is ambiguously referred to by the military since any mention of her name invokes the illustrious name of her father thereby stirring collective memories of the injustice done to him is herself a practising Buddhist and as leader of the National league for democracy and the chief figure in opposition to the tyrannies of military rule she leads her people by example. Suu Kyi has never advocated the use of violent means in the struggle for democracy and has emphasized the need for discipline in uniting to fight the menace of the Tatmadaw.

According to David Steinberg Buddhism is the single most "central of primordial values that define a Burman" and some of the minorities as well. He writes:

Built into an indigenous animist base that is still vital and alive, Buddhism permeates the government and people's lives and values. Buddhism in the classical period defined political legitimacy and every king tried to regulate the *sangha* (monkhood), purify practices, reform various sects and scriptures, and build pagodas.....The classical prestige of the *sangha* continues into the contemporary period.(23)

The monks were not only the religious and moral beacons of traditional Burmese society. They were also responsible for inculcating literacy in the populace. All schools in the precolonial period were in Buddhist monasteries wherein Buddhist scriptures were an important part of the curriculum. During colonial rule the British introduced secular education which undermined the role and significance of traditional Buddhist learning. Yet although deprived of its traditional role, "Buddhism became the surrogate indicator of Burmese nationalism"(24) and monks became martyrs to the nationalist movement. In post colonial times as well the Tatmadaw wants to make a public spectacle of their veneration for and adherence to the monastic order.

Aung San Suu Kyi has in her book *Freedom from Fear* spelt out the Buddhist concepts of what constitutes the ideal Buddhist ruler and in reinforcing the traditional tenets that are binding upon the monarch she has vindicated the abject failure of the contemporary military junta as the leaders of a predominantly Buddhist nation. The Burmese monarch was not authorized to rule merely by the privilege that the Divine Rights of monarchy bestowed on him. He was fit to rule only if he embodied the Ten Duties of kings namely liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, austerity, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-opposition to the will of the people. Explained in detail with the use of the traditional Pali words the first duty of liberality or *dana* assumes that the king or government should provide adequately for the people. The reality of the junta is that they take by force and clever

impositions from the people and bribes are the order of the regime for any favour granted to the citizenry. Morality or *Sila* is the second duty of the ruler under which are the five precepts of refraining from stealing, lying, intoxicants, sexual misconduct and killing hold sway. The Military violates all of these precepts to some degree or another. They steal from the people, their propaganda is all lies and they kill those who defiantly challenge their dictates. The third duty is that of self-sacrifice or *paricagga* which assumes that a good ruler must make sacrifices for the sake of the well-being of his people. The Junta far from making any sacrifice tramples upon the basic rights and liberties of the people and exploits them to suit its own ends. The fourth duty is integrity or *ajjava* which implies in the words of Suu Kyi, “incorruptibility in the discharge of public duties as well as honesty and sincerity in personal relations.” (17. The fact is that the junta survives on falsehood and malicious propaganda much like the Chinese do in Tibet. The fifth duty is kindness or *madavva* by which virtue the ruler remains ever compassionate to the trials and tribulations faced by his people. The Junta rules by the force of dictatorship causing distress and crises in the lives of the people and pays scant attention to their woes. The sixth duty is that of austerity or *tapa* which enjoins upon the ruler a simple lifestyle, not given to the pursuit of comfort or pleasure but the privileges the junta enjoys at the cost of the people is at cross purpose with austerity. The seventh, eighth and ninth duties are non-anger or *akkodha*, non-violence or *avihamsa* and forbearance or *khanti* all of which are inter-related. Forbearance leads to tolerance or non-anger which in turn leads to non-violence. To quote Suu Kyi :

Violence is totally contrary to the teachings of Buddhism. The good ruler vanquishes ill will with loving kindness, wickedness with virtue, parsimony with liberality, and falsehood with truth. The Emperor Ashoka who ruled his realm in accordance with the principles of non-violence and compassion is always held up as an ideal Buddhist

king. A government should not attempt to enjoin submission through harshness and immoral force but should aim at *dhamma-vijaya*, a conquest by righteousness.(172)

On this score the military regime fares worst of all because it has been guilty down the decades of intolerance, anger and violence at any speech or action that aims to challenge its dictates or threatens its continuity as a dictatorship.

The tenth duty non-opposition to the will of the people or *avirodha* is in Suu Kyi's words, "a Buddhist endorsement of democracy..."(173) The irony is that the very basis and *raison d'être* of the military dictatorship is opposition to the will of the people and the denial of fundamental rights and liberties to them.

The ten duties enshrined in Buddhism as the fundamental ethics of governance are antithesis to the tyrannical rule of the Tatmadaw and they form a justification and a foundation for the struggle for democracy . The Junta justifies all its policies and practice as the rule of law and order completely overlooking the fact that a law that suppresses the free will of the people and imposes an unreasonable way of life upon them is not the rule of law but the rule of tyranny. According to Aung san Suu Kyi:

Law as an instrument of state oppression is a familiar feature of totalitarianism. Without a popularly elected legislature and an independent judiciary to ensure due process, the authorities can enforce as 'law' arbitrary decrees that are in flagrant negations of all acceptable norms of justice.....The Buddhist concept of law is based on *dhamm vijaya*, righteousness or virtue, not on the power to impose harsh and inflexible rules on a defenceless people. The true measure of the justice of a system is the amount of protection it guarantees to the weakest.(177)

For the people of Burma democracy is not so much a political agenda as a way of life that guarantees their freedom to earn a decent living without any interference or oppression. Suu Kyi writes, “When asked why they feel so strong a need for democracy, the least political will answer: ‘ We just want to be able to go about our business freely and peacefully,not doing anybody any harm ,just earning a decent living without anxiety and fear.’(173)

As Suu Kyi writes, “The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community.It is part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his own nature.”(179)

Burmese monks have played a significant role ever since 1988 in the struggle for democracy by collaborating with university students in opposing the military .The irony is that the Tatmadaw well aware of the role of the monks as mentors of society seek to appease them in all sorts of ways. According to Christina Fink , “The ruling generals are constantly demonstrating their own piety through lavish donations to monks and monasteries in a bid to shore up their moral authority.”(213) Yet the irony is that the military also suspects the monks of the collaboration with agitating students who pose a threat to the continuity of their power and authority for which purpose they exercise surveillance over the monks.This is akin to the Chinese exercising control over the monastic order in Tibet so as to stem any deification of His Holiness the Dalai lama and even using propaganda particularly during the Cultural Revolution to coercively ensure respect for Chairman Mao and loyalty to the Chinese state.

To understand the support and help extended by monks to the students agitation in 1988 and after it is important to see the background of monastic involvement in the worldly realm of politics.Acc.to Christina Fink, “In the early 1900s monks played a leading role in

organizing protests against the colonial government particularly because they felt their religion had been insulted.”(213) .In 1988 when the movement against dictatorship gathered the momentum to become a nation-wide protest monks sheltered the agitating students in monasteries.This was a grave risk to have taken; risk to the protesting students and to themselves and it shows the courage of their conviction that they should have taken such a risk. In Mandalay one of the principal cities monks were asked by the people , “to come out and administer their areas until peace was restored.”(Fink214) As a result the monks were able to restore order to a large extent. The monks feel the injustices of heavy taxation and forced labour as well as coercive donations made by the people to the monasteries because of the intimidation of the military. Such donations they feel should be voluntary and not forced.

The monks are conscious of the fact that involvement in politics is not their calling but would rather support those who are protesting against the injustices of the regime than remaining tacit witnesses. Among the people who are largely Buddhist there is also the stoic acceptance of a situation that they feel is beyond their control so that neither do they exert any active agency on their part to protest against injustice or strive for a better order nor do they support the monks active on behalf of the agitation against dictatorship. On the other hand there is an ambivalence of attitude prevailing among the monks: the senior monks who have the responsibility of administering the monasteries are more acquiescent of the Junta while the younger monks like the student community support the struggle for democracy.The junta uses the clever strategy of rewarding monks who support them by material gifts or by religious titles.These monks are used as spies to report on the political activities taking place within the monastery. By such surveillance the regime attempts to stem subversive movements and intimidate those indulging in them. In 2007 due to an economic crisis thousands of monks demonstrated peacefully against the regime along with students and youth.The junta cracked down violently when their numbers grew to about 50,000 and about

31 monks were reportedly killed although 100 actually died. So recent is this blatant violation of a basic human right-the right to protest peacefully- that it has come to be known as the saffron revolution though it was quiet and powerless in nature. The tragedy of the military regime in Burma is that while it pays lip service to the monastic order and to Buddhism by restoring and building pagodas it does not refrain from exercising unbridled violence on the most sacred segment of Burmese society, its Buddhist monks.

As in Tibet the junta have adopted the dual policy of restoring temples and pagodas like the Shwedagon of erstwhile Rangoon (now Yangon) at the cost of donations from the people while also being responsible for their desecration. The SLORC has also warned the members of the National League for Democracy headed by Aung San Suu Kyi from being ordained as monks. On the other hand the monks were told to distance themselves from the NLD. This was done because the Junta has always suspected the monks for having a soft corner for the NLD as being a political party that champions the cause of democracy.

The Nobel prize acceptance speech given by Aung San Suu Kyi's son Alexander Aris on his mother's behalf sums up and underlines the Buddhist spirit of the peaceful struggle for democracy in Burma. Quoting his mother he says, "the quintessential revolution is that of the spirit." (Fear 236) Emphasizing the Buddhist underpinnings of her struggle he quotes, "Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood." (Fear 238)

(Works Cited will be attached with the final version of the paper to be submitted with due revisions for publication.)