

# The Saffron Revolution

## Burma's Buddhists on the boil

Levels of repression and fear in Burma have reached new heights after the killings and arrests during September demonstrations that swept the nation. **Graham Bailey** provides a political, economic, labour and religious context for these democracy protests.

In September this year people watched with anxious fascination on television all over the world growing tensions in Burma. Thousands of Buddhist monks in burgundy (not saffron as often reported) coloured robes took to the streets of Rangoon [Yangon], Myitkina, Mandalay, Pakhokku in mass demonstrations with smaller towns following suit. The monks supported by thousands of ordinary citizens (150 000 in Rangoon and 100 000 in Mandalay) joined hands in peaceful demonstrations to vent their anger at the Military Regime that has brutally and illegally ruled Burma since 1962. The Military Junta renamed it Myanmar but for the people it remains Burma.

The people of Rangoon rallied at Burma's holiest religious sites, such as at the 2 500 year old Shwedagon Pagoda on Singuttara hill which was a holy shrine long before the Pagoda was built. It is said to be the burial place of three Buddhas and to enshrine eight sacred hairs of the Buddhas. It is a magnificent structure standing 98 metres high, with a bell shaped 'stupa' (a topknot that 'God' uses to pull the dead up to heaven) covered in 60 tons of gold and gold leaf. Similarly people rallied at the Sule Pagoda, about 2 000 years old and 48 metres high, built to house one hair of the Buddha.

There is massive significance in people rallying around religious

sites. What is being 'transmitted' is the Burmese peoples' strongest prayer for help and understanding in their time of greatest need.

A 'stupa' is a symbol of an enlightened mind, and the path to realisation. It represents the Buddha's body, speech, and mind, the path to enlightenment, symbolising the protection of life, the practice of generosity, and pure morality. By congregating at the Shwedagon and Sule Pagodas, the Burmese were asking for protection against an unenlightened, brutal, immoral and heavily armed enemy. An enemy who has destroyed the socio-economic welfare of the people, as well as their safety and way of life. Being a religious, peaceful and unarmed people, for Burmese this is their only recourse to defence.

In this way the Burmese people unequivocally told the military rulers that they want them to go, that they want democracy.

What is behind the current explosion of mass civil action? Events leading up to the August and September demonstrations and the historical situation will give some insight.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Burma was a British colony. They negotiated independence after the war. General Aung San, Aung San Suu Kyi's father, led negotiations but he was assassinated before he could

form a government. He is now a national hero.

Burma had an elected government until 1962 when it was overthrown by General Ne Win. In 1988 economic mismanagement caused an uprising and Ne Win resigned. 'The 88-Generation Group', led this uprising and have since been imprisoned for many years having suffered torture and abuse. Many of the elected MPs, 107 of them, were also 'arrested' and imprisoned. Some died in jail whilst many fled and formed a government in exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).

General Than Shwe took power in another coup and the 1988 uprising was put down ruthlessly by the military. About 3 000 people were killed. The military held elections in 1990 whilst Suu Kyi was under house arrest to prevent her standing. Her party the National League for Democracy (NLD) however won 82% of the parliamentary seats. The military refused to hand over power and have misruled ever since.

### TRADE UNIONS FORBIDDEN

On 15 August the authorities raised the price of fuel massively. Petrol and diesel doubled in price and compressed gas used in public transport was increased by 500%. This hit ordinary people hard. In Burma 95% of the population lives



on less than US\$1 a day. An average week for a textile worker is about 60 hours. Monthly wages including overtime pay vary between US\$14 and US\$36. But the upper bracket would require about 157 hours overtime per month.

Work conditions are primitive by Western standards. Factory owners are often authoritarian and safety considerations are non-existent. Job security is tenuous and workers are frequently abused physically and by working in such conditions mentally also.

Trade unions are banned in Burma and activists from the underground Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) are targets of the regime's repressive apparatus. Some union leaders have spent years in jail, being sentenced on trumped up charges. In 2003 new arrests and sentences were meted out and Daw (Mrs) Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the democratic movement and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was again house arrested, after an assassination attempt by the regime. Nonetheless, the unions called for pressure on the regime to continue.

Trade unions have been under sustained attack. All unions that existed before the military seized power and crushed the uprising in 1988, have been banned. The FTUB set up in 1991, has been forced underground. The ILO has invited successive Burmese governments to bring the country's legislation into line with Convention No 87 on freedom of association and the protection of the right to organise, which Burma ratified in 1955. In 1999, 2001 and 2003, the committee on the application of standards of the international labour conference devoted special paragraphs of its reports denouncing the continuing failure by the authorities to heed its demands.

On 4 August, 2002, U (Mr) Saw Mya Than, a member of the FTUB was shot dead by soldiers of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In November 2003, nine Burmese democracy activists were sentenced to death on charges fabricated by military intelligence. Charges were brought against three of them on the grounds of contacting the international labour organisation (ILO). It is probable their sentences resulted from their trade union activities. Also FTUB facilities were attacked by the military on May Day 2002.

Two members of the FTUB's Central Executive Committee (CEC) have been in jail since 1997. U Myo Aung Thant and U Kyin Kyaw were arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment and 17 years respectively. Trade union leader Than Naing is still in prison after being sentenced to life imprisonment in 1989 for playing a leading role in forming strike committees during the 1988 democracy uprising.

The Burmese military systematically makes use of forced labour on a massive scale, a practice condemned by the ILO.

A Committee of the International Labour Conference in 2003 on the application of standards devoted a paragraph to Burma in relation to Convention No 87 (1948) on Freedom of Association and the protection of the right to organise. The paragraph reads, "... the committee had discussed this serious case on many occasions in the last ten years and its latest conclusions had been included in a special paragraph because of the continued failure of the government to apply the convention. Notwithstanding, the committee was once again obliged to note the lack of real progress towards the establishment of a legislative framework for the creation of free

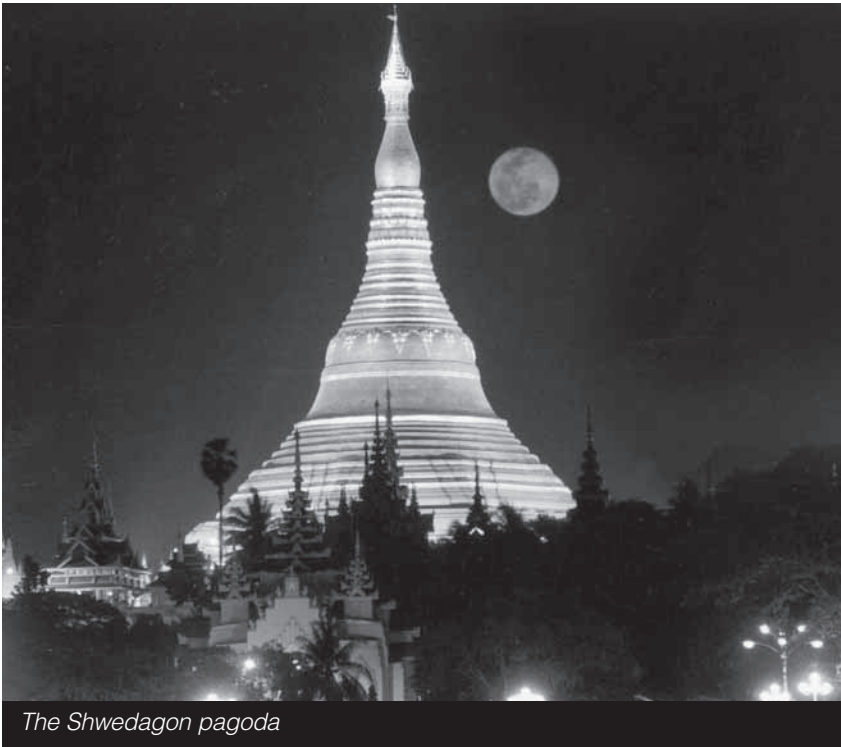


and independent organisations. The committee profoundly deplored the persistence of serious discrepancies between national legislation and the provisions of the convention which had been ratified almost 50 years ago."

Concerned about the lack of progress towards implementing this convention, the committee insisted that the government urgently adopt measures for guaranteeing in law and in practice the rights of workers and employers to affiliate to organisations of their choosing. It emphasised that respect for civil liberties was crucial for the exercise of freedom of association and urged the government to take measures so that workers and employers could exercise these rights without fear.

Furthermore, it urged the Burmese government to provide the committee of experts, with all relevant draft and existing legislation, and to provide a detailed report on measures taken to ensure improved compliance with the convention.

In view of the gravity of the situation in Burma, the ILO workers' group is demanding several things. Firstly, that the Burmese government takes urgent steps to secure the



*The Shwedagon pagoda*

unconditional release of the nine activists unjustly sentenced to death and failing that, that their death sentence be lifted and they are given a fair trial.

Secondly, the ILO is demanding that the government release unjustly imprisoned union leaders, including the FTUB's U Myo Aung Thant and U Khin Kyaw, and Than Naing. It is also demanding that the government undertakes an independent investigation into the murder of FTUB leader U Saw Mya Thant and that those linked to his assassination be brought to court.

The ILO is asking its constituents to exert as much pressure as possible on the regime to secure the freedom of association. It has called on the international trade union movement to redouble efforts to show solidarity with the FTUB and workers in Burma. It is also asking employers, including multinationals, to take part in the measures advocated by the ILO and the union movement to isolate the Burmese junta.

### INSULTING THE MONKS

In recent times public transport, rice, cooking oil, and pulses have rocketed in price. Diesel, which people use to power generators for electricity as Burma does not have a reliable electricity supply, has become out of reach for citizens.

On 19 August about 400 democracy activists of the '88-generation group' (who led demonstrations in 1988) protested in Rangoon. This was the largest demonstration in Burma for years. It was violently broken up and arrests made.

Demonstrations in other towns such as Sittwe and Mandalay, followed. In Pakhokku a number of Buddhist monks decided to join the demonstrations. Monks traditionally beg the public for food and money (alms) so they can eat. They are not allowed to earn money or grow their own food. This is a tradition that goes back thousands of years and is a social compact between the monks and their communities. Monks have always played a moral and political role in Burma. Recently, they have become intensely aware of how ordinary people are suffering as they receive less and less food and alms daily. They could also see how wealthy the generals and their 'friends' had become.

Burma is 85% Buddhist and its monks are revered. In Pakhokku soldiers stopped monks from marching by firing warning shots, and assaulting some monks by tying them to trees, disrobing them (a grave insult) and beating them, which was unheard of. The Sangha Kosahl Apathwe (Sangha), the



national body of monks, was outraged as were ordinary people.

The Sangha demanded an apology from the military, set a deadline and called a 'Pattam Nikkujanna Kamma' - a boycott on the military until they apologised. They refused to receive food or alms from the military or perform religious rights for the military until their terms were met. This is a serious step in a religious country like Burma and indicates the gravity of the dispute between the monks and the military.

It is clear the repression and unrest will continue but so will the fight for democracy. LB

*Graham Bailey visited Burma, and held talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and her cabinet. He is a member of The Free Burma Campaign (SA) and is the NCGUB coordinator for African Affairs.*