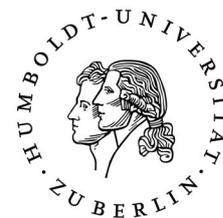


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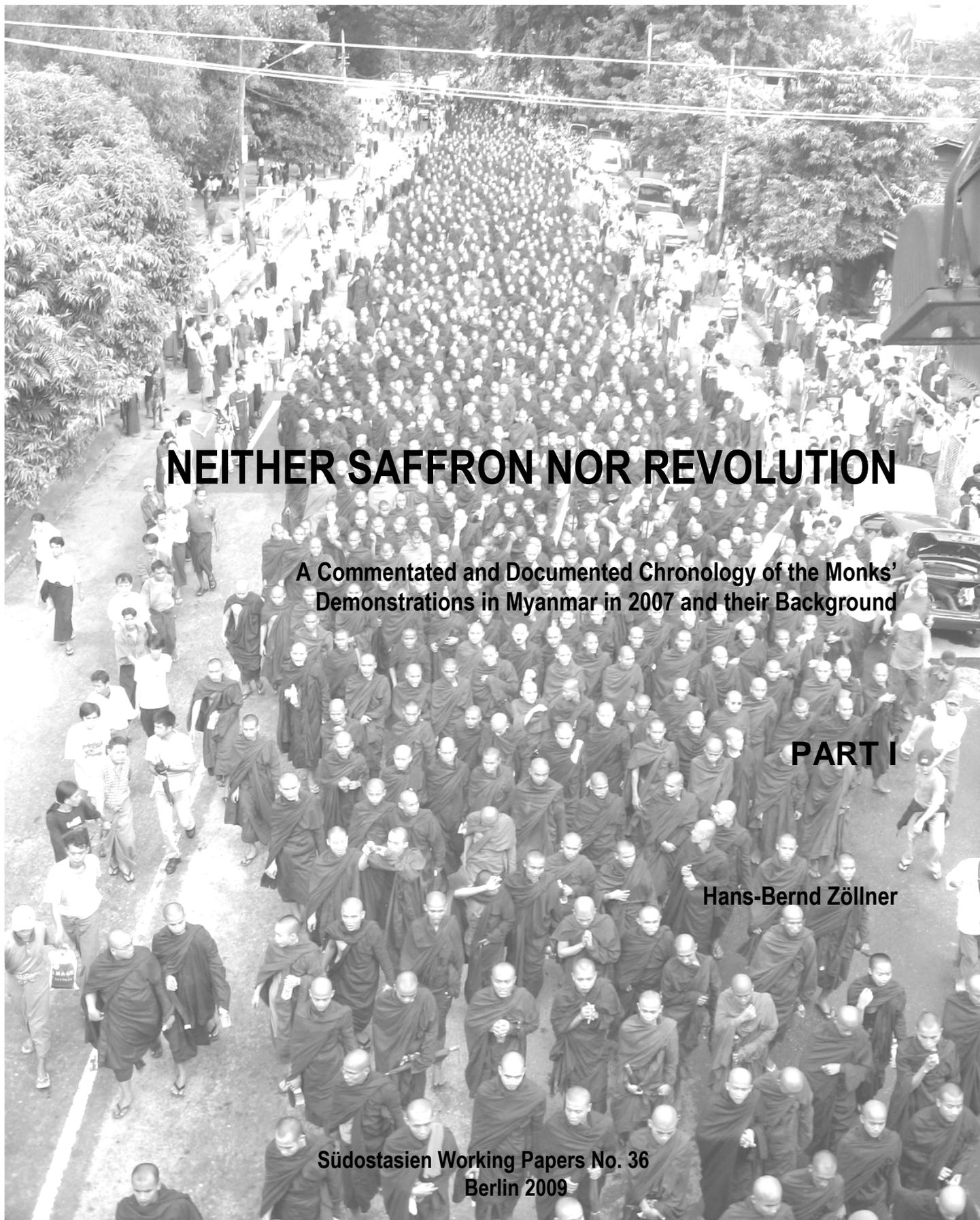
NEITHER SAFFRON NOR REVOLUTION

A Commentated and Documented Chronology of the Monks' Demonstrations in Myanmar in 2007 and their Background

PART I

Hans-Bernd Zöllner

Südostasien Working Papers No. 36
Berlin 2009



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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
FOREWORD	7
1 INTRODUCTION	9
2 GLIMPSES INTO HISTORY: ECONOMICS, PROTESTS AND STUDENTS	12
2.0 From 1824 to 1988 – In Fast Motion	12
2.1 From 1988 to 2007	16
3 FROM AUGUST 15 TO SEPTEMBER 5	25
3.0 Narration of Events	25
3.1 The Media	28
3.2 Summary and Open Questions	29
4 PAKOKKU	35
4.0 Preliminary Remarks	35
4.1 Undisputed facts	35
4.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports	36
4.3 Summary and Disputed News	38

4.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies	39
4.5 Open Questions	43
4.6 Conclusions	44
5 THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA	45
5.1 Reflections on the Sources Taken from the Media	45
5.2 The Media	48
5.3 Conclusions	58
6 THE MONKS' DEMONSTRATIONS – SEPTEMBER 18 TO SEPTEMBER 25	59
6.0 Preliminary Remarks	59
6.1 Undisputed Information	59
6.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports	63
6.3 Summary and Disputed Information	69
6.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies	70
6.5 Open Questions	78
6.6 Conclusions	80
7 MONKS, SOCIETY AND THE TURNOVER OF THE ALMS BOWL	81
7.1 The two Sides of the Alms Bowl	81
7.2 From Early Times to the End of the Burmese Kingdom 1885	83
7.3 The Colonial Period	84
7.4 After Independence	87
7.5 Conclusion	91

8 CRACKDOWN AND SUPPRESSION	92
8.0 Preliminary Remarks	92
8.1 Undisputed Information	93
8.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports	95
8.3 Summary and Disputed Information	98
8.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies	99
8.5 Open Questions	101
8.6 Conclusion: Two Pyrrhic Victories	102
9 EPILOGUE	103
9.1 The Aftermath	103
9.2 Instead of a Conclusion	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY	118

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The Friedrich-Ebert Foundation supported this publication by a grant for the proof reading.

FOREWORD

The idea to write this chronology was conceived on Friday, October 12, 2007 around 8 p.m. at one of Yangon's many Thai restaurants. This Thai restaurant had for some time been the regular meeting place of the authors of this book and some of his Burmese friends. He had visited Myanmar twice a year for some years and since the beginning of 2005 with the main task of advancing the Myanmar Literature Project focusing on a famous Book Club named *Nagani*, Red Dragon.¹ He had arrived one day before this particular meeting for another routine visit of 14 days which had been planned long before the protests.

The main theme of this particular meeting was not the Book Club but what had happened some weeks before. Information, impressions and assessments collected in Yangon and in Germany were exchanged and rather spontaneously the idea was conceived to put both perspectives together and write an account of the events by way of a commented chronology. The idea of this book was born. It was that September 18, 2008, one year after the monks' demonstrations started on the 19th anniversary of the 1988 coup would be the fitting date for the presentation of the material result of the idea i.e. the publication date of such a book.

However, the idea could not be implemented as intended. The main reason was that the "insiders" for obvious reasons did not want to be named as co-authors of the publication. Second, it was not easy to find a publisher for the book. These difficulties resulted in a compromise. A short account in German was published before the first anniversary of the beginning of the demonstrations that contained neither footnotes nor documents.² The "full version" was then accepted by Prof. Vincent Houben of Berlin's Humboldt University to be published in the series of Working Papers by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies. It is hoped that it helps to carry forward the long tradition of Burma studies

The account published here does not and cannot claim to present the "true story" of what happened in August and September 2007 in Myanmar. The time span between the events and the writing about them is too short for an account putting the events into a proper historical perspective. Moreover, the emotional reactions to the events which are a little bit elaborated at the beginning of chapter 8 are on the one hand very appropriate given the dramatic nature of what happened. At the same time, they point to the limits an unbiased evaluation of the episode under review here.

The main aim of this account, therefore, is to present some material which allows the reader with some interest in Myanmar to make up his own mind and to preserve some information, impressions and assessments which otherwise might get lost. Hopefully, the reader will share the opinion that the meaning of the monks' demonstrations can only be understood if one considers them as part of a global and extremely complex net of interdependencies which defies simple judgements and that the people of Myanmar need not just sympathy but a thorough investigation into the causes of their problems as well which may be related to some of our own troubles.

Regarding the controversial question of nomenclature of the country and its geographical parts, this study tries to follow the "middle path". Since the name "Myanmar", introduced by the State Law and Order Restoration Council in 1989 for international use was accepted by the United Nations and most

¹ For details see <http://www.phil.uni-passau.de/die-fakultaet/lehrstuehle-professuren/suedostasien/suedostasien/forschung/myanmar-literature-project.html>

² Hans-Bernd Zöllner (2008) *Weder Safran noch Revolution. Eine kommentierte Chronologie der Demonstrationen von Mönchen in Myanmar/Birma im September 2007*. Hamburg, Abera.

states except the United States of America, this name – as well as Yangon for the country’s biggest city - will be used here for all events after 1989. Referring to the time before the declaration, the names “Burma”, Rangoon” etc. will be used thus not following the present policy in Myanmar to change all these denominations retroactively.

Before introducing this project in some more detail, the text of the Metta Sutta shall be reproduced that was chanted by the monks on many occasions – not only on the critical days accounted and analysed here. It can only be hoped that the message of this Sutta will materialise one day for all those who took part in the events described and analysed here and for all people outside Myanmar who are concerned about what happened and happens in this beautiful country.

This Sutta’s translation by Acharya Buddharakkhita, a monk from Sri Lanka, preserves the poetic tone of the Sutta.³

Metta Sutta

The Hymn of Universal Love

Who seeks to promote his welfare,
Having glimpsed the state of perfect peace,
Should be able, honest and upright,
Gentle in speech, meek and not proud.

Contented, he ought to be easy to support,
Not over-busy, and simple in living.
Tranquil his senses, let him be prudent,
And not brazen, nor fawning on families.

Also, he must refrain from any action
That gives the wise reason to reprove him.
(Then let him cultivate the thought:)
May all be well and secure,
May all beings be happy!

Whatever living creatures there be,
Without exception, weak or strong,
Long, huge or middle-sized,
Or short, minute or bulky,

Whether visible or invisible,
And those living far or near,
The born and those seeking birth,
May all beings be happy!

Let none deceive or decry
His fellow anywhere;
Let none wish others harm
In resentment or in hate.

Just as with her own life
A mother shields from hurt
Her own son, her only child,
Let all-embracing thoughts
For all beings be yours.

Cultivate an all-embracing mind of love
For all throughout the universe,
In all its height, depth and breadth –
Love that is untroubled
And beyond hatred or enmity.

As you stand, walk, sit or lie,
So long as you are awake,
Pursue this awareness with your might:
It is deemed the Divine State here.

Holding no more to wrong beliefs,
With virtue and vision of the ultimate,
And having overcome all sensual desire,
Never in a womb is one born again.

³ Source: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.08.budd.html> (September 20, 2008)



1 INTRODUCTION

In September 2007, pictures like this showing Burmese monks marching through Yangon, the biggest city and former capital of Myanmar, attracted the attention of a worldwide audience watching news on TV. The general public as well as the people commenting on the news were caught by surprise by the demonstrations. They were not and could not be informed about the background of the happenings in this secretive and strange country.

The above picture was posted on the Internet on September 24, six days after demonstrations of monks had started in Myanmar countrywide. On the same day, the London newspaper “The Times” introduced the term “Saffron Revolution”.⁴ The article entitled “Nuns join Saffron revolution” informed about the “dramatic escalation” of the demonstrations led by the Buddhist clergy and stated later: “Foreign human rights activists supporting the Burmese democracy movement have begun tentatively referring to the prospect of a ‘Saffron Revolution’, after the ‘colour revolution’ of the former Soviet republics. Saffron is the traditional colour of monastic robes in South-East Asia although in Myanmar monks wear a much darker, ox-blood colour.”⁵ The label affixed to the happenings was quickly adopted. An attempt to “google” the term in June 2008 resulted in 55.100 entries.

⁴ As the following quotation in the text shows, the term “Saffron Revolution” had already a short history before appearing in “The Times”. Maybe, it might have been used in a publication before September 24. The naming of the monks’ robe as “saffron” already occurs in articles on the first demonstrations published September 19 in the States and Britain.

The phrase was first used on September 24 in some newspaper reports.

⁵ For the full text of the article that contains some other interesting observations, see Document 1.1.

The picture shown on top of this introduction clearly shows that the author of the article was correct. Most monks in Myanmar are dressed in maroon coloured robes, just some wear robes of the same colour of their spiritual brothers in neighbouring Thailand and some wear saffron coloured scarves with their maroon robes.⁶

Some simple conclusions can be drawn from the contrast between the picture of the monks and the term attached to their actions.

First, all 'facts' must be checked. Second, the description of what happened and happens in Myanmar may be heavily influenced by the perception of the observer. The same applies to the interpretation of the events. Here, the international media play a significant role. What happened in Myanmar in 2007 was not just a local event but a global one as well; it was "glocal"⁷

The title of this paper indicates that it may be misleading to call the monks' demonstrations a "revolution". One aim of the deliberations presented here is to search for more suitable terms than the word that, according to a writer of "The Times", was coined after the model of the Open Society Institute's and its founder George Soros' attempt to further the democratic development of the post-Soviet states in Europe and Asia.⁸

To reach this aim of looking for an appropriate concept of what happened in Myanmar in 2007, the events of August and September are put forward in detail in chronological order. This chronology forms the backbone of this study. Four stages are established. Chapter 2 provides some glimpses of Burmese history since the beginning of the colonial time to provide historical backdrop for the events. The focus is on the time between 1988 and 2007. Next comes a report of the protests of civilians against the price hike for fuel after August 15 (chapter 3) followed by a detailed account of the monks' demonstrations in Pakokku on September 5 and the events that followed are detailed (Chapter 4). These events have special significance because they are directly connected to the large demonstrations in Yangon and other parts of the country beginning September 18 and continuing for one week (chapter 6). The chronology is completed by a short overview of the aftermath of the crackdown (chapter 8).

Since the main purpose of this paper is to present some information that may be lost later and does not aim at telling the "true story", the narrative of events is complemented by some historical reflections and the discussion of open questions that need to be clarified.

The narrative of events concentrates on the basic facts of the demonstrations as well as the media coverage. Since the account of proceedings is mainly based on Internet sources that may not be accessible any more after some time, the documentation published in vol. 2 of this paper contains some of the material used.

The chronology is complimented by some material providing insight into different contexts of the events as a means for a deeper understanding of what happened. Three contexts of the demonstrations will be outlined after the narration of events that focus on the monks' involvement.

⁶ F.K.Lehman (U Chit Hlaing), a veteran Burma scholar who grew up in Burma, witnessed some changes in the colour of Burmese monks: „Actually, when I was growing up and even when I started going back in the 1950s and '60s there were many more yellow~orange robes than maroon. There seems to be a lot of 'fashion' at work here. Lay persons choose what they buy and donate, and from, say, the late '70s more and more bought the maroon colours, so that is what one sees now. I know about the old paintings and so on having maroon coloured robes, and so it has to be old in Burma, but again, one has to keep it in mind that fashion inescapably comes into play because it has to have been many centuries since monks (in India) got and/or even dyed (in mud, from scrap cloth) their own robes.”

⁷ See Beck 2005.

⁸ See Wikipedia's article "Color Revolution" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_revolution). The phrases were used to mark popular movements in the post-communist states of Eastern Europe – the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine being the most well known - and Central Asia. The propagation of these labels caused reaction against Soros' Open Society Institute that was accused of instigating unrest against autocratic regimes. – For a critical assessment of comparing the development in the former Soviet states with Myanmar see Schaffar 2007.

The events in Pakokku raise some questions on the media coverage of the events and the sources of the chronology (chapter 5). The account of the demonstrations between September 18 and 25 is supplemented by information on the role of the monks in Burmese society, which can be symbolised by the alms bowl (chapter 7). Finally, a short summary closes the paper (chapter 9).

2 GLIMPSES INTO HISTORY: ECONOMICS, PROTESTS AND STUDENTS

On Wednesday, August 15, 2007 the government of Myanmar increased prices for petrol by 100% and for compressed natural gas (CNG) by 500%. These price hikes prompted the civilians' demonstrations some days later, which then acquired a new quality with the involvement of monks in Pakokku on September 5 and 6 and thereafter.

The raising of the fuel prices came out of the blue and was anticipated neither inside nor outside Myanmar. However, the rise did not occur in a vacuum but in a historically and socially structured context. The same applies to the reactions to the price hike. Both the action of the government and the reaction of the people who protested against the action can be compared to the incidents of 1988.

It was a government economic measure that triggered the protests of the ex-students and later of the monks. This chapter will present some material on economic issues in Burmese history, on economically motivated protests and the role of students in such conflicts. The events of 2007 are put into such a historical context. Furthermore, some features of Burmese protest culture will come into focus.

The following paragraphs will give short overviews on the historical context of the three headwords of this chapter (2.1). Section 2.2 will present a more detailed account about the development of Burmese society between 1988 and 2007. Here, economic issues, the emergence of forces that protest against the government and the role of students in these protests are interwoven. In addition, some information on the role of non-student dissidents in Myanmar during this period and the international community's view of the development is presented.

The account focuses on the role of the students because a group calling themselves the "88 Generation Students" initiated the protests and it was the students who acted as vanguard of the public protest in 1988. Furthermore, the events of this crucial year were ever-present in the interpretation of what happened in September 2007, both inside and outside the country and on all sides of the parties involved in the conflict.

2.0 From 1824 to 1988 – In Fast Motion

There are various ways to divide Burmese history into periods. One popular choice is to start with the date at which Burma became independent from Britain in 1948, then subsuming the time until 1962 under the constitution of 1947 as the "democratic era" that was ended by the military coup of 1962. From then on until today, "military dictatorship" prevails. This scheme and similar ones stress the discontinuity in Burmese history and neglect its continuing and recurring features (Zöllner 2000: 39-57). This account rests on the assumption that in Myanmar – as in many other formerly colonised countries – the process of decolonisation is not yet finished. Consequently, the beginning of the colonial period is taken as starting point of the history that constitutes the historical horizon to which the events under investigation here belong.

This option results in the need to summarize the antecedents of the protests starting after the price hike of August 15, 2007 by way of fast motion. The following chapters will provide some more elaborate information on certain topics only touched upon here.

2.1.1 Economics

The Honourable East India Company that fought and won the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824 – 1826) was a British joint stock company defending its economic interests in Asia against the Burmese kingdom of Ava. The declaration of war on March 5, 1824 proclaimed in Calcutta, the headquarters of the Company, may be regarded as the beginning of “modern” Burmese history. From now on, the Burmese rulers and the Burmese people were confronted with – Western – modernity in a totally different way than before.

Before 1824, this modernity – military, economic, political, cultural - was incorporated into the Burmese Empire under the guidance of the paramount king. After British troops entered the land up to that point exclusively belonging to the king, modernity became an autonomous entity in face of the king, his court and the people supervised from the centre of power.⁹ In other words, the co-existence of “two Burmas”¹⁰ began that still continues until today. In economic terms, after the “Friendship Treaty” of 1826 that ended the first war, two economic systems co-existed in Burma, one “modern” directed by the laws of the market, the other “pre-modern” controlled by the king as the holder of the absolute monopoly over all important resources of his realm.

Ironically, the recent measure cutting the subsidies on fuel prices that prompted the protests were in line with a market orientated economy ordered by a government exercising absolute power like the kings of old Burma.

The two economic systems partly co-existed – particularly under the reform minded king Mindon (Schendel 2002) - and partly collided. The collisions caused the second and the third Anglo Burmese Wars and finally the takeover of the whole of Burmese territory in late 1885 by the British crown, which had replaced the Honourable Company as the governing body of India after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

After the Second War of 1852 that cut off the Burmese kingdom from access to the sea and brought the Irrawaddy delta under British control, large-scale agro-business based on the cultivation of rice was introduced in the delta region causing two waves of migration satisfying the demand for workers on the rice fields. Burmese people from upper – and until 1885 royal – Burma migrated southwards. On the other hand, Indian workers, moneylenders and government officials came in. Some stayed only for the harvest season, many settled down.

These changes contributed to the development of a society that J.S. Furnivall has described as a “plural society” characteristic for all European “tropical dependencies”. “It is in the strictest sense a medley, for [the people] mix but do not combine.” (Furnivall 1948: 304) People of different religious and ethnic background live separately and meet just on the market place. And “in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines.” (Furnivall 1948: 304)

In Burma, it was British and other Western merchants and to a certain extent Indian as well as Chinese entrepreneurs, who dominated the economy of the country (Furnivall 1957). As a consequence, the rising Burmese nationalism after 1920 opposed the economic system implemented by the British parallel to but with different tactics than Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement. As in many other South-east Asian countries, the situation came to a head after the global economic crisis of 1929 that contributed to a number of critical and even violent events. In May 1930, Burman-Indian riots broke out, followed by the foundation of a “We-Burman” society (*Dobama Asiayone*) that propagated “Burmanisation” of business and should develop into the movement that dominated Burma’s independence struggle (Khin Yi 1988). Finally, at the end of the year, a peasant rebellion broke out.

⁹ For details of the royal system see Lieberman 1984 and Than Myint-U 2001.

¹⁰ Callahan 2003 coined this phrase referring to the two armies on Burmese soil after World War II representing two different concepts of the country’s future.

At the end of the 1930's, the mainstream *Dobama* – as other parties – advocated an anti-capitalist economy and borrowed socialist and communist ideas whose public messages were peppered with Buddhist terminology (MLP 3 and 7). After independence was won after World War II, these ideas were implemented. Under the premiership of Nu, the *Pyidawtha*- (Happy Land) Program tried to transform Burma into a welfare state (Zöllner 2006). The attempt failed and the way was paved for an alternative economy under control of the military (Callahan 2005).

The “Burmese Way of Socialism” under the leadership of Ne Win nationalised the few private companies still left in Burma and established a socialist and self-sufficient economy that cut Burma off from the global markets. This attempt failed as well despite several amendments and international support from UN agencies and countries such as Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany. One result was the emergence of a big black market that supplied goods of all kind for all people who could pay the high prices (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2000). Two “demonetisations” in November 1985 and September 1987 that invalidated bank notes without compensation tried to hit the Chinese traders allegedly masterminding the black market but effected in an increased frustration of the populace. This frustration was a main factor contributing to the outbreak of the mass demonstrations in 1988.

To sum up: Since the beginning of the colonial period in Burma, two different kinds of economic systems existed contributing to a series of economic crises. All Burmese governments until 1988 failed to establish an economic system that served the needs of the population and was regarded as “just” by the majority. Economics has thus played a paramount role in Burma’s history.

Since the economy is linked to other fields or systems of society, it must be considered how Burmese economy is related to other issues. The following paragraphs will provide some first answers. In later chapters that focus on the monks’ activities, some more information on the connection between the laity and the monks will be given.

2.1.2 Protests

The protest of Burmans against the economic system implemented by the British administration started in the early 1920s as a refusal to pay taxes. This fundamental protest that caused the administration to implement laws to making such boycott a punishable offence was preceded and accompanied by other forms of protests.

The first civil protests after the suppression of the revolts that followed the abolishment of the Burmese monarchy in 1885 occurred in the field of religion at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the liberal notion of the British, religion belonged predominantly to the private, not to the public sphere. Inducement of the protests was the habit of the British and other Westerners for hygienic reasons not to take off their shoes after entering a pagoda. The nationalists started a massive campaign that aroused much emotion on all sides. The dignity of Buddhism was at stake, the Burmans argued. The campaign succeeded and the British establishment did not visit Shwedagon and other pagodas any more.¹¹

Unnoticed maybe by most participants in the conflict, the dispute over the “shoe question” had a very political connotation. The question whether or not the foreign ministers visiting the Burmese king had to take off their shoes or not before entering the royal audience hall had strained the British-Burmese relation to a great extent. Behind a question of protocol lay the claim of both parties to determine the rules that guided the relationship. The failure to reach a compromise made the “shoe question” a win-or-lose affair.

¹¹ Somerset-Maugham who visited Burma in 1923 gives a vivid account of the atmosphere in his travelogue *The Gentleman in the Parlour*.

The atmosphere of uncompromising antagonism characterises the the next field of protests, education being closely related to religion. The student strike of 1920 that will be considered in the next paragraph proved that relationship as well as the tax boycott already mentioned. It was accompanied by the refusal to participate in the elections organised by the government in order to involve a greater participation of the Burmese people in the government of the province. Since the suffrage was tied to the payment of taxes, the economic and political spheres were very much interconnected.

Protests in Burma, therefore, have a special quality of being holistic even if the cause is just a rather confined one. If one part of the whole is affected, everything is affected, too. This feature appeared in the communal riots of 1930 and the peasant rebellion. Here, it was highlighted by the fact that Saya San who led the rebellion was crowned as a king before starting the fight against the British. Not only were the bad economic conditions of the peasant to be improved, but they demanded that the whole system implemented by the British must be substituted. The same logic applied to the parliamentary elections under the new constitution of 1935 that separated Burma from India. Even the first premier under the constitution, Ba Maw, promised to wreck the constitution from within the parliament. Other parties, among them the party set up by the *Dobama* vowed not to accept any office when elected – and thus no money. Accepting money under the system implemented by the British was regarded as an act of betrayal to the national cause. Burma was divided into the “Our-Burma” (*Do-Bama*) and the “Their-Burma” (*Thudo-Bama*) (Nemeto 2000).

Then, in 1938, the We-Burma-Association attempted to organise a general strike involving workers, peasants and students and thus pave the way for a complete revolution of the existing economic, political and cultural system (MLP 11).

Another feature connected with the comprehensive nature of protest was the tendency to use violent means as shown by the Saya San-rebellion, by the anti-Indian and anti-Chinese riots in 1930, 1931 and 1938 and the high degree of violent crimes that were deplored by the authorities. The Burmese Independence Army and its successors led by Aung San and Ne Win transferred the violence into a legitimate means to achieve independence.

Shortly after independence, civil war started both between rivalling Burman fractions and along ethnic lines. Protest of various kinds continued during the parliamentary period and were suppressed after the military had taken over power for a short period in 1958 and then in 1962. The insurgency continued and ceased only after the suppression of the 1988 uprising.

To sum up: There is a long tradition of protests in Burma against the respective government. The protests question the government’s legitimacy in a categorical manner. The uncompromising nature of this tradition is accompanied by the trend prevalent on all sides of a conflict to use violent means of various types to achieve the high goals striven for by the respective party. A culture of political compromise exists neither in conflicts between Burman parties nor for the solution of inter-ethnic problems.

2.1.3 Students

Myanmar is unique in many ways. One of her special features is related to the country’s National Day celebrated between mid-November and mid-December according to the lunar calendar. It commemorates the first student strike of 1920 against the establishment of a university in Rangoon. The strike did not hinder the formation but was seen as a symbolic act of resistance against the British and their Burmese allies. One year after the strike, the first day of the strike was declared National Day and celebrated from then on countrywide. The university from then on until today became the place of confrontation between students and the government of the day. The National Day carries a continuing potential of protest with it that induced the authorities to close the universities for long periods of time and – after the students’ led demonstrations of 1988 – to build new universities at the outskirts of the

cities, in an attempt to implement a system of distant learning and reserve the traditional campuses for post graduate studies.

The high protest potential of the students is underlined by the fact that both Aung San and Nu, the designated and the factual first premiers of independent Burma became prominent during a student strike in 1936 and after that used their prominence by joining the *Dobama Asiayone* in 1938.

Students, therefore, may be regarded as the country's societal group from which a future leader of the country will arise, a group that represents the people as a whole. And, as the prominent role of the 88 Students demonstrates, this expectation still prevails even if the government has successfully cleared the breeding grounds for a coming politicised student generation.¹²

2.1 From 1988 to 2007

As mentioned in the introduction, the events of 2007 triggered immediate memories of 1988. This section outlines some general developments concerning the uprising of that year, the takeover of the military on September 18 (2.2.1), the politics of the military *junta* after the coup (2.2.2) and the fate of some prominent dissidents other than the ex-students who participated in the protest against the government's measures in 2007 (2.2.3). Finally, a short assessment of the country's situation before the price hike which triggered the demonstrations is given together with an assessment of the situation before the events in Pakokku. (2.2.4).

2.2.1 1988 – Attempting a Revolution out of a Vacuum

A balanced and well-documented history of what happened in 1988 has not yet been written.¹³ However, like in 2007 a skeleton of facts can be assembled

The economy of the country was in shambles after 26 years of the “Burmese Way of Socialism” under the reign of Ne Win at the helm of the country's single political party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). People's discontent was high after two ‘demonetizations’¹⁴ in previous years and the country's entry into the “club” of the world's Least Developed Countries. In March, a tea shop brawl developed into clashes between the police and students. One student died, later more casualties occurred. Students took the demonstrations into the town. Schools and Universities were closed. In May, a second round of demonstrations started. On July 23, in an extraordinary session of the BSPP, Ne Win stepped down from his post as party chairman and recommended a plebiscite on the introduction of a multi-party-system. The party congress accepted the resignation but rejected the proposal. A vacuum occurred which had to be filled.

General Sein Lwin, a hardliner in the eyes of the public, was elected BSPP chairman and President of the Union. Demonstrations continued, and leaflets called for a general strike on August 8 (8-8-88). Martial law was declared in Rangoon, but the demonstrations continued. On August 8 and later demonstrators were shot at and killed by soldiers. Sein Lwin resigned on August 12; Maung Maung, lawyer and chronicler of the Ne Win era, succeeded him on August 19. Demonstrations continued; martial law was lifted on August 24. On August 26, Aung San Suu Kyi addressed several hundred

¹² For more information about the students' movement in Burma / Myanmar and some related issues see MLP 4, 4.1 and 11.

¹³ Hans-Bernd Zöllner (forthcoming 2009), „Behind the smoke of ‚myth‘ and ‚counter-myth‘: Contours of what Happened in Burma in 1988”. Paper, presented at the occasion of the symposium “‘Breaking the Bonds.’ Unravelling the Myths of South-east Asian Historiography” in compliment to Prof. Barend Jan Terwiel, Hamburg, November 24-26, 2006.

¹⁴ On September 6, 1987, all banknotes over 15 Kyat were declared illegal. No compensation was given. (Steinberg 2001: 4-5). Similar actions had been performed in 1985 and two times in 1964 already.

thousand people at Shwedagon Pagoda. Two days later, a student union was formed.¹⁵ Student leader Paw Oo Tun, a zoology student known under his pseudonym Min Ko Naing (“One who conquers kings”) was elected acting chairman and Ko Ko Gyi his deputy. On September 5, an ultimatum demanded the government to give way to an interim government or face an ongoing strike. The ultimatum was ignored. Former Prime Minister U Nu proclaimed a parallel government. On September 10, another BSPP emergency congress proposed general elections under a multi-party system; the parliament voted accordingly the next day. The government started preparing an election that later were held in May 1990 supervised by the military *junta*. On September 12, opposition leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, supported the demand for an interim government as an alternative to the proposal of the old regime. Demonstrations, unrest and violence continued. On September 18, 4 p.m. the leader of the military, General Saw Maung, announced that the *Tatmadaw* – the Burmese name for the armed forces - had assumed power. Street battles continued. People were gunned down. Many students fled to the borders and prepared themselves for a battle against the military *junta*, some together with rebels from various ethnic groups that had been fighting the central government in Rangoon for years. Other students went abroad. Some of them established media that covered and commented upon the events in Burma.

2.2.2 Policies of SLORC¹⁶ and SPDC¹⁷

The policies of the *junta* can be characterised by a dual and somewhat contradictory approach. On one hand, reform was announced and implemented. On the other hand, the military insisted on its leading role in administering political change. The greatest example of the double approach was the holding of the multi-party elections in May 1990 in continuation of the plans commenced under Maung Maung’s short tenure and the subsequent disregard of the election result which had voted overwhelmingly the National League of Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership.¹⁸ For the purpose of this study, the military government’s policies in the fields of economics, constitutional progress and security deserve special attention.

a) One main reform project was the renunciation of socialist economy and the adoption of a “market oriented policy”. Private enterprises were encouraged and foreign investment was invited. These measures resulted in a nominal growth of the yearly Gross National Product of more than 10%.¹⁹ These and other figures, however, conceal the fundamental weakness of Myanmar’s economy, which suffers – *inter alia* – from an insufficient fiscal policy and “capricious” policy-making.²⁰ The main problem of money politics was, according to business analysts in Myanmar, the non-convertibility of the kyat and the co-existence of a plurality of exchange rates, which led to losses on the side of the merchants. These losses were passed on to the consumers with the result of high inflation.²¹ With regard to the erratic character of the government’s interferences in the economy, an expert in early 2006 listed the following examples:

- In October 2005, the SPDC suddenly announced an eight-fold increase in the retail price of gasoline.

¹⁵ The name of the organisation was “All Burma Federation of Student Unions” (ABFSU). Other students’ unions were established as well at that time.

¹⁶ State Law and Order Restoration Council; name of the ruling junta from 1988-1997.

¹⁷ State Peace and Development Council: name of the ruling junta after 1997.

¹⁸ See http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs4/1990_multi-party_elections.pdf for details of the results and short biographies of the elected MPs.

¹⁹ Turnell 2006.

²⁰ Turnell 2006: 7-8.

²¹ Personal communication to the author, October 2007.

- In 2004, in order to stem rising domestic prices, the SPDC announces a ban on rice exports. Just a year earlier the SPDC had brought in measures designed to substantially liberalise the avenues through which rice producers could export.
- Various announcements throughout 2005 that exporters/importers in Burma were to henceforth use the Euro rather than the \$US in their transactions.
- The (numerous) changes to tax and duty levies on commodities.
- Reflexive cycles of relaxation/restriction on border trade.
- Sudden arrests and purges of regime insiders when, occasionally, they called attention to the regime's follies and incompetence. Legal procedure scarcely matters in Burma, but 'economic crime' is the usual charge
- The sudden announcement in 2005 that Burma's administrative capital would relocate from Rangoon to Pyinmana. Not strictly an economic decision, but there is little to suggest that the economic dislocation costs of the move were seriously entertained.²²

The increase in prices on August 15 was thus one unforeseen economic act in a series of many similar acts both in pre- and the post-1988 times. Most notably, fuel prices had been increased once before.

b) In the field of constitutional reform, the main project of the *junta* was the arrangement of a "National Convention" given the task to draft a new constitution. The convention started in January 1993, was adjourned in 1996 and reconvened in 2004 without the participation of the NLD, which did not accept the rules and regulation prescribed by the government. In the end of August 2003, a roadmap consisting of seven steps leading to democracy was proclaimed, the convention having been the first one. Since then, five sessions have taken place in a camp constructed for the purpose. The final meeting of the last session was scheduled for September 3, 2007.

c) A third salient feature of the military government's policies was the suppression of any kind of opposition that was supposed to challenge the rule of the military. From 1998 on, many students and other dissidents were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms for offences against laws mostly promulgated a long time ago to meet the dangers of armed insurrection after independence. The most prominent leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi were put under house arrest for most of the time and were thus unable to actively participate in public affairs.²³

On the other hand, the junta took measures to secure the cooperation of civilians both on the national and the local level. In 1993 the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) was founded as a Non Government Organisation. The organisation has branches all over the country and claimed to have over 20 million members in 2007. The organisation supposedly will be transformed into a political party that will contest the elections held as step five of the roadmap announced in 2003.

On the local level paramilitary groups called *Swan-Ar-Shin* ("holders of power") were established to look after the upkeep of law and order. These groups allegedly harass and intimidate opponents of the junta at the local level and are labelled "thugs" by their opponents.²⁴

²² Turnell 2006: 7-8.

²³ The last time Aung San Suu Kyi was released from arrest was between May 2002 and May 2003 as a result of the activities of UN special envoy Razali Ismael. This period ended with the "Depayin incident" or "Depayin massacre" on May 30, 2003 (see Zöllner 2003). The agreement which led to Aung San Suu Kyi's release apparently was a result of Gen. Khin Nyunt's efforts to find a political solution to the confrontation between the two sides. Later, Khin Nyunt was dismissed in October 2004, sentenced to 44 years in prison but allowed to stay at his residence under a different kind of house arrest than Suu Kyi.

²⁴ According to many reports, the attack on Suu Kyi's convoy on May 30, 2003, was carried out by members of the group.

2.2.3 The Students

a) Thousands of students fled Burma after SLORC'S takeover. Most of them settled down in Thailand, many went to India and some to other bordering countries. Others were repatriated in Western countries. Together with nationals from their respective host country, these students formed the core of Burma-related solidarity groups and set up various projects to promote change in their home country. The establishment of media was one of these ventures.

b) Other students like Min Ko Naing remained in Myanmar, were arrested, tried, sentenced and put into jail. Min Ko Naing²⁵ in 1989 received a sentence of 20 years under a section of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act. The sentence was reduced to ten years under an amnesty in January 1993 but he was only released in November 2004 after 15 year in jail. After his release, he was often interviewed by foreign media and expressed his conviction to carry on standing by the side of the people.²⁶

In October 2005, he got the Civil Courage Prize awarded by an American foundation²⁷ promoting the virtue of "steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk"²⁸ together with the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya who was killed one year later and an Indonesian human rights activist who received the prize posthumously. Min Ko Naing did not attend the award ceremony which took place in New York. Another ex-student, Bo Kyi, the founder of the Assisting Association of Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPPB), accepted the award on his behalf. In his acceptance speech he mentioned that he and another student escaped arrest on March 23, 1989, whereas Min Ko Naing was arrested.²⁹

In February 2006, Min Ko Naing was reported to be the leader of the "88-Generation Students" for the first time.³⁰ The group supported a statement of the NLD issued on February 12³¹ that called for the convening of the 1990 elected parliament. According to Bertil Lindner,³² the ex-students' network was established in August 2006. Together with Min Ko Naing, four other students are named as core members of the group.³³ They were all arrested on September 28, 2006 before a celebration on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the founding of the NLD took place. According to the government, they were taken away for questioning by the authorities. They were accused of having contacts with "foreign terrorists".³⁴ In support of Min Ko Naing, a campaign was launched one week before his 44th birthday on October 11. People were urged to wear white shirts and sign petitions for the release of political prisoners. According to the organisers, more than half a million of signatures were collected. In connection with these activities, a multi-religious prayer campaign was launched. Participants were urged to wear white clothing and hold candlelight vigils in Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim places of worship. Some 100 to 150 people observed the call on the Shwedagon Pagoda.³⁵ The prayer meeting at the Pagoda was continued as a weekly event performed every Tuesday. In the end of Janu-

²⁵ See Clymer 2003.

²⁶ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/03/13/democratic-voice-of-burma-student-leader-min-ko-naing-on-burma%e2%80%99s-human-rights-day/> [February 3, 2008].

²⁷ He was awarded other prizes before: The John Humphrey Freedom Award in 1999 and the "Homo Homini Award" by the Czech "People in Need Foundation" in 2000.

²⁸ <http://www.civildcourageprize.org/> [February 16, 2008]. The Train foundation allegedly is closely related to US neo-conservative circles.

²⁹ <http://www.civildcourageprize.org/kyi-remarks.htm> [February 16, 2008].

³⁰ *Irrawaddy* February 14, 2006. The DVB renders the name of the group „8888 Generation“ (DVB, February 15, 2006) linking it to the big demonstrations on August 8, 1988 which are still commemorated until today. It can be assumed that the name for the group was conceived outside Myanmar and later used within as well.

³¹ Burma's Union Day remembering the Panglog Agreement concluded between Aung San and ethnic leaders in 1947.

³² See Document 2.1.

³³ Ko Ko Gyi, former vice-chairman of the ABFSU, Min Zeya, Pyone Cho and Htay Kywe.

³⁴ AP November 2, 2006 „Myanmar junta alleges detained activists are linked to terrorists, but defers charges“.

³⁵ AFP November 2, 2006 „Myanmar threatens crackdown on democracy activists“.

ary, it was reported that 30 participants were doused with water by “pro-military groups and special police.”³⁶

On January 11, 2007, all five detainees were released.³⁷ Already before the release, the “Open Heart Campaign” was launched on Myanmar’s Independence Day, January 4.³⁸ The campaign was planned to last one month. It involved sending out letters and envelopes to the people of Burma - a letter from the 88 Generation Students to *junta* leader Than Shwe, and a message to the people, encouraging them to write their own letters expressing their feelings and troubles and returning them to the activist group in the envelopes to be sent on to the *junta*. The campaign, which called on the people to open up their hearts and inform the military junta about their grievances,³⁹ was well received.⁴⁰

Additionally, Ming Ko Naing and his 88 Generation Students group conducted the “White Sunday” campaign from 11th March 2007 to 20th May 2007 to express support to family members of political prisoners. They visited the families of political prisoners in Yangon (Rangoon) every Sunday during this period.



Leaders Pray at the pagoda



Ko Htay Kwe, Ko Ko Gyi and Min Ko Naing, continue to lead a prayer campaign.

In an interview with *Irrawaddy* in April 2007, Min Ko Naing explained the aim of the campaign.⁴¹ “The aim of the campaign is to encourage the people to exercise freedom of expression, which is their basic right. ... We have received a huge amount of letters from across the country and can draw the whole picture of the Burmese people’s desires. We have categorized the letters according to social, health and economic issues, and we are preparing a research report. After that, we will announce the results to the world.”

2.2.4 Other Protests – Two Case Studies

2.2.4.1 Su Su Nwe

Ma Su Su Nwe born in 1971 and orphaned as a child is the first Burmese national to have successfully sued local government officials under a 1999 law that prohibits forced labour. The law was issued by Minister of Home Affairs, Col. Tin Hlaing, on 14 May 1999. Su Su Nwe filed a complaint after she, along with other villagers, were forced into working on a road construction project by the local Village Tract Peace and Development Council (PDC).

³⁶ DVB January 24, 2007: “Tuesday prayer campaigners doused with water”.

³⁷ DVB, January 12, 2007 “Burma needs change, not words: Min Ko Naing”

³⁸ DVB, January 30, 2007 “Open Heart campaign goes Burma-wide”.

³⁹ See Document 2.2.

⁴⁰ AFP, January 29, 2007 „Thousands write protest letters to Myanmar junta leader”.

⁴¹ See Document 2.3.

Su Su Nway is from Htan Manaing village, Kawhmu Township (located 50 miles from Yangon). The case, filed by her, was then pursued by NLD lawyers. On 3 September 2004, one PDC member was sentenced to 16 months in prison, whilst three others were sentenced to eight months in jail each. Subsequently, the new town chairman charged her with harassment and defamation, and she was sentenced to an 18-month term at Insein Prison. In February 2006, with the aid of legal counsels, Su Su Nwe attempted to appeal to the Supreme Council but her case was rejected, after having appealed to district courts that also rejected her case. She was released on 6 June 2006, as a result of international pressure.

Su Su Nwe has a heart condition. She is a member of the NLD and received a human rights award from the party in 2005. She was awarded the John Humphrey Freedom Award in 2006.⁴²

On August 28, 2007, together with 20 other people she participated in a protest against the price hike. After that she collapsed and was admitted to the Muslim Free Hospital near Sule Pagoda.⁴³ From there she was reported to go “into hiding” until she was arrested on November 13 after another public protest. Two days later human rights special rapporteur Sergio Pinheiro of the United Nations visited her in Insein Prison.⁴⁴



Prominent labour activist Su Su Nwe (centre) takes part in a protest in Yangon in this September 29, 2007 file photo. The 34-year old labour activist, who had been on the run since the monks-led protests were crushed on September, was arrested while putting up anti-regime leaflets near a Yangon hotel this morning [November 13, 2007], activist sources said.

REUTERS / Aung Hla Tun/Files

(MYANMAR)

2.2.4.2 Htin Kyaw

The dissatisfaction of a wide populace with the living conditions was by no means expressed only by the ex-students' group as the case of Ko Htin Kyaw shows whose protests were called a “landmark” by foreign media.⁴⁵ Together with some other people, Htin Kyaw staged a protest on February 22, 2007 at Theingyi Market in downtown Yangon.⁴⁶ Placards were carried with slogans such as “Down with consumer prices” and “24-hour electricity is our cause”.⁴⁷ A statement addressed to Senior Gener-

⁴² Information is taken from the Wikipedia article on Su Su Nway.

⁴³ DVB August 28 “Su Su Nway hospitalised after demonstration”.

⁴⁴ AP November 15, 2007 “Pinheiro meets prominent Burmese political prisoners”.

⁴⁵ DVB June 6, 2007 “Analysis - Political activists gain ground in Rangoon”.

⁴⁶ Theingyi Market is the second oldest in Yangon and located between Anawratha and Maha Bandoola Street close to the Sule Pagoda. Unlike Bogyoke Market, which is visited mainly by wealthy people (including tourists) it is a place providing goods for the basic needs of all people.

⁴⁷ AP February 23, 2007 “Myanmar’s state-run media warns of crackdown after demonstrations for reform”.

al Than Shwe was distributed. It asserted that the conditions of the people are “totally in the hand of the SPDC and “recommended ... the Senior General, with all due respect, to correct” what was wrong economically and socially.⁴⁸

Three demonstrators and three Burmese journalists covering the 30 minutes event were arrested. The journalists were released after some hours of interrogation as was one demonstrator. The alleged leaders of the group named “Myanmar Development (or Progress) Committee”, Htin Kyaw and Myint Swe, remained in detention.



Htin Kyaw (centre) on February 22 (Photo: Reuters)

The next day, one member of the 88-Generation Students criticised the action by the police contrasting it with a pro-*junta* demonstration in front of the US and British embassies some days before and concluding that the ruling *junta* was not interested in democracy. *The New Light of Myanmar* on the same day reported the incident linking Htin Kyaw to the NLD⁴⁹ and accusing the group of trying “to win popularity among the people and seek self-interest, [causing] public annoyance and panic [and] harming the desire of the people to lead a peaceful life”.⁵⁰

Htin Kyaw was released on February 27. He was warned not to hold similar protests in the future. Despite the warnings, he said “people will continue to protest unless their complaints are dealt with by the government.”⁵¹ He was again taken into custody on March 5, then released the next day. He was detained for a third time after he held a press conference on March 8 urging the *junta* to solve the country's social and economic problems, but released the same day. On March 22, he was arrested again. This time, he carried a begging bowl and demanded religious freedom. According to some of his friends, his wish to enter a monastery in North Okkalapa had been turned down by the abbot due to government pressure.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Irrawaddy*, February 24, 2007 “Anti-government protests in downtown Rangoon”.

⁴⁹ Different sources give the information that formerly he was a NLD-member, but no details could be found about the reasons to leave the party.

⁵⁰ See Document 2.4.

⁵¹ *Irrawaddy*, March 7, 2007 “More Rangoon protesters arrested”.

⁵² AP March 22, 2007 “Persistent protester detained for 4th time in month in Myanmar”. – On the same day, there were reports on hindering the '88 Generation Students' “White Sunday Campaign”.

On April 22,⁵³ Htin Kyaw together with seven members of his group were arrested again at another market after displaying placards – two of them allegedly showing Than Shwe – and shouting slogans. According to reports, he was beaten up “by a mob”.⁵⁴ According to another report, some of the 40 protesters were beaten by members of the special police unit number 200.⁵⁵ On July 30, Htin Kyaw was released together with four NLD members who had been detained without trial because of prayer meeting for Aung San Suu Kyi’s release.⁵⁶ A fortnight later, the price increase let him protest again and he was detained another time on August 25.⁵⁷

2.2.4.3 Summary

There were other protesters like Su Su Nwe and Htin Kyaw during the months before August 2007. Furthermore, there were a lot of issues that gave reason for action and a variety of means to express them. There were activities on labour issues, prayer meetings, poets and writers reading out, lectures on human rights, rice donating to the poor etc. There were arrests and releases and more arrests sometimes resembling a cat-and-mouse-game with high risks for the mice. But there was no visible unity or the existence of a dissident network – besides a multifaceted display of discontent, a close monitoring by the Myanmar police as well as the civic organisations aligned with the government and the reports and analyses published by the international media. Thus, in a way, it was the reporting about the individual protests in Myanmar that made them appear part of a common struggle.

2.2.5 The International Community

For the world, Myanmar over the years since 1988 has been mainly a source of constant worries, frustration and a business-as-usual attitude. The worries were mainly articulated by human right activists of different kind from UN agencies working inside the country to Amnesty International. Countries, federations of countries like ASEAN and the EU as well as the United Nations as a whole were frustrated because all attempts to bring forward political change proved to be ineffective. Neither the diplomatic endeavours of the UN envoys nor the boycott policy of the United States and the European Union nor ASEAN’s approach of “constructive engagement” had accomplished anything that could be exhibited proudly. After all, the closest neighbours continued to conduct business with Myanmar and benefit from the country’s natural resources – mainly huge offshore gas fields – not caring for their geo-political standing. Some of the initiatives vis-à-vis Myanmar neutralised each other as the rivalry between ASEAN and the Western countries and the competition between China and India. Finally, Myanmar was widely considered a trouble spot but one of less importance than Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Sudan and North Korea.

2.2.6 Myanmar in mid-2007: Moving in different directions

Viewed from different angles, Myanmar in mid-2007 supplied material for a variety of assessments. From the government’s point of view, the country was close to achieving a first fundamental step towards the goal of a “modern disciplined democracy” a state of affairs that had never been attained since Independence. Almost all of the rebellious ethnic groups had been pacified and even took part in the National Convention. The new constitution was on its way and was supported by many mass meetings all over the country. Bridges, schools and other infrastructure and facilities had been built. The

⁵³ Interestingly, Htin Kyaw staged his protests very often on the 22nd day of a month.

⁵⁴ *Irrawaddy* April 23, 2007 “Burma's junta vows to crack down on human rights activists”.

⁵⁵ DVB April 23, 2007 “Rangoon protestors bashed, detained by police”.

⁵⁶ DVB July 30, 2007 “Burmese authorities release five more activists”.

⁵⁷ See below 3.1.3.

economy was improving, at least in figures. The country had been accepted as a part of ASEAN and enjoyed good relations with Thailand, the leading country of the Southeast Asian association as well as with the big neighbouring countries China and India. Finally, the government had learned to make use of the strategies and tactics of public relations and could draw capital from the US's and Great Britain's enmity by pointing at these countries' blunders in Iraq. On the other hand, there was still the memory of what had happened in 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi was a worldwide acknowledged symbol of fundamental resistance against the government's endeavours to move the country forward. And there were the students who continuously instigated unrest. Finally, it can be said that the government was not much worried about the monks.

For the NLD party, which had won the election of 1990, its leader Aung San Suu Kyi and their supporters inside the country, there was almost no space to move. The opposition leader from time to time received the visit of UN envoys but it was never in the position to influence the country's politics in an active way.

The students who had taken part in the uprising of 1988 still adhered to an unfinished legacy. They had been the voice of the people, had supported Aung San Suu Kyi and personified a "real" independent and flourishing country. Their predecessors had launched the first student strike of 1920, still remembered as a public holiday on National Day. Their mission was one that required above all courage and the spirit of sacrifice (Zöllner 2008a). At the same time, some lessons from 1988 had been learned. It was of no use to confront the military government directly, but only in a civil way. There was still hope because any evidence showed that the people cherished their engagement and supported their call for change.

The ex-students were by no means the only individuals and loosely structured group trying to find new ways to express the discontent of the public. Ko Htin Kyaw's story illustrates that the "88-Generation" was and is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg which manages to attract attention because it can be seen – by the outside world. "Under water", that is inside Myanmar, it can be supposed, there live and act many people who show their dissatisfaction. One of their many problems may be that it is only the foreign media through which their activities are connected.

For the outside supporters of the "Burmese Democracy Movement", both native Burmese and not, there was a big chasm between the given reality and the desire for change. This deep gulf contributed to painting a black-and-white picture of a rotten to the core Myanmar ruled by a brutal and power greedy military and the good brave Burma represented by Aung San Suu Kyi and the students. This picture of "the beauty and the beast" inevitably shaped the opinion of general public opinion and thus the perception of what should be reported about Myanmar on the days after the protests of mid-August.

In mid-August 2007, Myanmar was moving ahead, but in different directions. The government had a long-term plan for the future. Many citizens, however, did not trust this scheme, simply because of the miserable conditions of their economic situation, the legal uncertainty and the lack of freedom of speech. The ex-students tried to channel the grievances into political change by educating people to express themselves. This can be regarded as another long-term project initiated not from the top but from the base of society. Both schemes collided on the issue of the sudden increase of fuel prices.

3 FROM AUGUST 15 TO SEPTEMBER 5

This chapter describes the events leading up to the events in Pakokku on September 5 that were a catalyst for the big demonstrations starting on September 18. First, there is a chronology of events (3.1) followed by a review of the reports about what happened (3.2). Finally, there is a summary and a commented list of open questions (3.3).

3.0 Narration of Events

3.1.1 The Price Hike

On Wednesday, August 15, the government increased prices for petrol by 100% and for compressed natural gas (CNG) by 500%. Both price hikes occurred without prior announcement and without any explanation given. Prices for fuel were (and still are to a certain extent) heavily subsidised by the government and graded. Besides, petrol is allocated.⁵⁸ In addition to the state-regulate prices, there are market prices as well.

The increase hit most heavily those sections of Yangon's urban population that rely on public transport provided almost exclusively by busses. At the demand of the government, the owners of the bus companies had converted the busses to the use of CNG for reasons of economic self-sufficiency – gas is found and refined in Myanmar – as well as ecological reasons. The price increase thus led to an immediate heavy increase in bus fares in Yangon.⁵⁹ On some bus lines, the price was raised by 100 %. People travelling downtown from the suburbs (to which many of them had been forcibly relocated after 1988) thus lost a considerable amount of their wages.⁶⁰ The government money saved by cutting the subsidies had to be paid by the economically disadvantaged people.

The price hike shocked the people.⁶¹ People started hoarding food supplies. The number of commuters sank considerably. Transportation companies complained that they could not afford to operate their busses.⁶²

⁵⁸ There are special regulations for trailers, trucks and motorbikes and, of course, for military vehicles.

⁵⁹ A Yangon blogger described her experiences thus: "When 105 Red Dyna came, I climbed in. The bus was a little crowded as usual, but I got firm footing on the bus so no worry. The fare collector said, "CNG prices have went up 5 fold. So we'll be collecting 100 Ks, even if it was just to the next stop." I didn't pay attention because I still had to pay 100 Ks. to get downtown with that bus anyways. Only after awhile when I got on the bus, while listening to the fare collector and a passenger was talking and complaining that I realized the magnitude of the situation. They said many buses weren't coming out because they couldn't get gas with their given money. The fare collector said, "I just went to the get the gas this morning. The other days, I just had to fill CNG for 3000 Kyats. This morning, I had to pay 15000 ks." On the way there were a lot of crowd at the bus stops, but there were so few busses." (<http://dawn-1o9.xanga.com/610174245/myanmar-fuel-price-hike/> [March 8, 2009]).

⁶⁰ It was estimated that workers earning 1000 Kyat a day had to pay 400 Kyat for travelling expenses (Taylor 2008)

⁶¹ Author's personal observation.

⁶² *Irrawaddy*, August 16, 2007 „Business, transport in Burma hit hard by gas hike”

3.1.2 August 19-21: Marches

Two days after the price rise, Htin Kyaw and his group announced that demonstrations would be held if the gas prices had not been reduced by August 22.⁶³ After that, he went into hiding. Their statement published by DVB said in a highly emphatic wording: “Rather than sitting in our houses waiting to die from starvation, we will go out and face death on the street. The government has treated us inhumanely and we will express our bitterness by staging peaceful, non-violent protests and sacrificing our lives. ... We are going back out onto the street to protest in a non-violent way and show the world that Burmese people are polite, honest and starving.”⁶⁴ The demonstration was scheduled for the coming Wednesday, the “ultimatum’s” deadline.

On Sunday, August 19, a group of people led by the leaders of the 88-Generation Students performed a silent march in Northern Yangon. There were no placards, no slogans, just reactions to the people passed. The walk started at 10 o’clock in the morning and terminated two and a half hours later at Kyaukmyong market in Tamwe township⁶⁵ without being disturbed. According to the reports, about 100 persons were present at the beginning of the walk. The crowd swelled to 400 people. Besides the ex-students, U Win Naing, a veteran politician, participated.⁶⁶ Min Ko Naing and Win Naing later explained about the intention of the action.⁶⁷

On Monday, August 20, Yangon was rather quiet. A group of youths in the Tamwe area, the place the walk had been performed the previous day, protested the fuel price hikes, and no intimidation or harassment by the authorities was reported. According to another report, 200 monks demonstrated in Thanlyin, Yangon for not being allowed to venture outside at night. The protest lasted until 2 a.m. and ended peacefully.⁶⁸

The next day another demonstration took place, starting in the same township of Yangon as the previous walks, but this time leading to the NLD headquarters on Shwegondine Rd. This time, the demonstrators were accompanied and verbally as well as physically attacked by opponents.⁶⁹

3.1.3 Arrests, Further Demonstrations and a Concession

On the evening of Tuesday, August 21, 13 leaders of the 88-Generation Students, the most prominent of them being Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Pone Cho, were arrested or “taken into custody” as the state media reported the next day.⁷⁰

⁶³ According to *Irrawaddy* (August 21 *Junta Targets Opposition Members amid Tension over Fuel Hike*), a student and two workers’ groups distributed leaflets in some areas protesting against the high costs.

⁶⁴ DVB, August 17, 2007 “Activists threaten unrest over gas prices”.

⁶⁵ According to the information provided by the NLM, the march on August 19 started from the house of the late Deputy Chairman U Kyi Maung in Bahan township to Tamwe Market (see Document 3.1).

⁶⁶ Win Naing has a long history of involvement in Burmese politics. In 2007 he became renowned through his donations of food to poor people. The foreign press called him a “self styled nationalist” taking up his Burmese epithet (nationalist). In July, he had called on Burma’s Buddhist monks to use their status to advise military leader Senior General Than Shwe against corruption and unfair taxation. (*Mizzima*, July 6: “Monks Should Advise Than Shwe. Amyotheryei Win Naing”).

⁶⁷ Min Ko Naing (AP, August 19. “Burma’s activists march against fuel price hike “.): “We are staging this performance to reflect the hardship our people are facing due to the government’s fuel price hike“- „Mr Naing ... claimed that the general people wanted to show the government that they were not happy with many decisions of the Generals in the recent past. The participants in the rally did not even try to make any demands, rather they decided to walk showing that they did not have enough money to pay the bus fares.” South-Asian News Feature Service, September 1 (<http://www.sanfeature.com/article-detail.php?aid=875> [February 15, 2009]).

⁶⁸ http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/PDFs/Summary_of_Events.pdf [March 18, 2009 .

⁶⁹ DVB, August 21, 2007 “Protests over gas prices spread”.

⁷⁰ See Document 3.1. According to the NLM, the following persons were “taken into custody“: Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Phyuone Cho (a) Htway Win Aung, Min Zeya, Mya Aye (a) Thura, Kyaw Min Yu (a) Jimmy, Zeya (a) Kalama, Kyaw Kyaw Htwe (a) Markee, Arnt Bwe Kyaw , Panneik Thu, Thaw Thaw Min, Thet Zaw and Nyan Lin.

On August 22, more small demonstrations continued in Yangon and other towns of Myanmar. Win Naing and Htin Kyaw were allegedly involved. Groups aligned with the government intervened. The account of a lady who participated in the protest provides some insights into the activities of the government supporters and the reaction of the demonstrators.

I did not see any weapons that the Union Solidarity and Development Association and Swan Arrshin are using, but what I saw and experienced was that they used their fists and we were pulled and pushed onto the trucks. They used abusive language, and snatched cameras. And when they did that the people started telling them not to act that way. But they forced the people to get in the vehicles.

Among the many injured were two monks and a small boy, the boy being so badly hurt that blood streamed down him. Then Ma Nilar Than [wife of 88 student Jimmy] said we should disperse as things were getting worse, so we caught a vehicle and left the place.

The people were brutally beaten and their [USDA and Swan Arrshin] actions were inhuman. They called themselves the 'people' and did whatever they wanted. The people on our side were angry with them and told them that they do not represent the people. Then these people again forced us to disperse by pulling and pushing. I was also pulled from both sides, so my arms were really badly hurt.

Among those that blocked us and violently beat us, there were people who I had seen several times in front of our office [NLD office] and those taking video recordings when we used to go to pagodas for prayers.

Civilians and the people applauded us and welcomed our movement, and therefore, we have faith in the people. We won't let the people down; we will continue what we have started as we know the expectations of the people. We will continue with our peaceful demonstration.⁷¹

Similar events continued for the next few days. Protests were reported from towns other than Yangon as well.⁷² Groups of protestors were always rather small. Members of the NLD were often involved. Some more arrests occurred. The most prominent of the arrested people was Htin Kyaw who was taken into custody on August 25 after another protest at Theingyi market and a manhunt for him⁷³ after the Burmese-language services of the BBC, Radio Free Asia and Voice of America carried an interview with the protester late on Friday night in which he said he was secretly organising a big demonstration and urged students and Buddhist monks to join in.⁷⁴ Allegedly, the authorities offered a reward of 500,000 Kyats for his arrest.⁷⁵ The next day, DVB launched a video showing the arrest.⁷⁶

Htay Kywe, one of the key members of the 88-Generation students' group went into hiding and allegedly escaped to the Thai-Myanmar border.⁷⁷

On August 23, the government halved bus prices for short journeys. Some planned protests were cancelled due to the concession.⁷⁸

⁷¹ *Mizzima News*, August 22 "Spontaneous demonstration in Rangoon, biggest in decade in Burma".

⁷² According to a list prepared by AAPPB, there were demonstrations in August at Yenangaung (Magwe Division) on 23rd and 24th, Pathein (Bassein) and Musel (Northern Shan State) on 24th, Mogog (Mandalay Division) on 25th, Tungingyi (Magwe Division) on 25th, Aung Dan (Magwe Division) on 26th, three places in Pegu Division on 27th, Sittwe and Taungup (Arakan State) on 28th and 31st (Taungup), Tavoy (Tenasserim Division) on 29th and Kyauk Padaung (Mandalay Division) on 30th; in September: Buthidaung (Arakan State) on 2nd, Labutta (Irrawaddy Division) and Myitchina (Kachin State) on 3rd and on the 4th in Pakokku (Magwe Division), Ha-kha (Chin State) and Taunggyok (Arakan State). - Htin Kyaw allegedly planned to travel to Mandalay on August 23rd to take part a protest there. But no demonstrations were reported in Mandalay. (*Mizzima*, September 23 "Demonstrations continue in Rangoon and spread out to other parts of Burma")

⁷³ Another activist who was wanted by the government was Su Su Nwe.

⁷⁴ Reuters, August 25 "Myanmar junta launches manhunt for two activists".

⁷⁵ *Irrawaddy*, August 25 "Burmese authorities hunt down key activists".

⁷⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQy1tpq6fDY>.

⁷⁷ *Mizzima*, August 27 "Key Burmese activist flees to Thai-Burma border". - Htay Kywe was arrested on October 13 together with two other ex-students in Yangon.

⁷⁸ AP, 24. August "Arrests thwart new Myanmar protest".

Monks participated in only one of the various demonstrations caused by the rise in fuel prices. On August 28, 200 monks were reported to walk through Sittwe, Arakan State without any trouble.⁷⁹ Other news informed that the government warned monks not to join the protests.⁸⁰

3.1 The Media

a) The commentaries on the protests following the price hike on August 15 in the media outside of Myanmar touched on a variety of issues. There were constant comparisons with 1988. Some outside Burmese observers speculated about a mass uprising with the help of the international community⁸¹, criticised the missing support of the NLD's leadership⁸² and were worried about military preparations to open fire on demonstrators.⁸³ On the other hand, the majority of Western analysts looked at the demonstrations as "important, but nothing like the scale of 1988"⁸⁴

It was pointed out that unlike 1988 the authorities had found ways to monitor people opposing the government⁸⁵ and that the USDA and Swan-Ah-Shin members were hired⁸⁶ and used to do "the *junta's* dirty work"⁸⁷ Other reports highlighted the lawlessness in Myanmar that allows arbitrary arrests performed by civilians.⁸⁸

Various leaders of the protests were interviewed by foreign media. They expressed determination to continue and intensify the protests. Therefore, the opinions and intentions of individual protestors were communicated to all people in Myanmar who listened to the foreign media.

b) The state media commented on some of the protests that had gotten some publicity abroad such as Kyin Kyaw's accusation. The NLD was accused of instigating the unrest in cooperation with foreign media.⁸⁹ In August the state media concentrated on covering the last days of the National Convention in detail. Along with usual reports about the government's endeavour to promote the well being of the country and the people in all sectors of society, quite a lot of information was given on activities related to the energy sector.⁹⁰ In addition to this indirect reference to the country's energy problems, there was a long article on August 28 in the government's mouthpiece newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar* on "Today's world and the problem of fuel prices"⁹¹ It was argued that complete privatisation of the energy sector would lead to even higher prices, that the government had to import petroleum products at great expense, that Western sanctions affected oil production, that in China the fuel

⁷⁹ *Irrawaddy*, August 28 "Activist Su Su Nway Escapes Arrest; 200 Monks Protest in Sittwe".

⁸⁰ DVB, August 28 "Hundreds march against fuel prices in Sittwe".

⁸¹ "The people of Burma may well rise up in mass protest, but unless the whole world withdraws support from their rule, the *junta* will carry on as usual." (Burma Digest, August 30, 2007 "Is this a new 8888?").

⁸² *Irrawaddy*, August 28, 2007 "Burma's NLD Leadership Must Take a Stronger Stand (Editorial)".

⁸³ Burma Campaign UK, August 23, 2007 "Regime builds up military in Rangoon as protests continue".

⁸⁴ AP August 26, 2007 "Protests No Immediate Threat to Burma *Junta*, Say Analysts".

⁸⁵ *Irrawaddy*, August 26, 2007 "*Junta* Monitors Activists, Supporters in Burma."

⁸⁶ *Irrawaddy*, August 24, 2007 "USDA Stirs Trouble for Peaceful Protesters".

⁸⁷ Reuters, August 28, 2007 "Civilian thugs doing Myanmar *junta's* dirty work".

⁸⁸ Asian Human Rights Commission, August 27, 2007 "'Arrest' in Rangoon epitomises lawlessness of a country." The report alludes the video showing the arrest of Htin Kyaw.

⁸⁹ See Document 3.1.

⁹⁰ NLM Saturday, August 18: "Progress of Hydropower Projects Supervised" (p. 16); Sunday, August 19: "Laying of natural gas pipeline inspected" (p.16); Monday, August 20 "CNG Filling Station No. 028 opens" (p.8.); Tuesday, August 21 "Electric Power Minister No. 1 inspects Yeywa Hydropower Project" (p. 9); Saturday, August 25 "Lt-Gen Kyaw Win inspects hydro power project ... in Lashio (p.7); Sunday, August 26 "Electric Power No 2 Minister inspects power system supervisory task (p. 8).

⁹¹ NLM, August 28, pp. 10 and 11. See Document 3.2.

prices increased four times since 2003, that Myanmar's prices were still cheaper compared with many other countries and, finally, that "the government is making all-out efforts day in, day out for the emergence of political, social and economic infrastructure."

At the same time, the opposition to the price hike was attacked at length. The first report on the occasion of the arrest of the 88-Generation Students on Wednesday, August 22 was already mentioned.⁹² On August 25, the argument of the government's efforts and the international situation was taken up in an article of three pages entitled "Fruitful result depends on fairness on both sides." The author stresses that he is not "on the side of the government" and does not like the price hike just like all the other people. He compares the state to a family the government being the parents and the people the children. He sums up his argumentation thus:

The government and the people are like parents and children. Every parent does not want to see his or her children get into trouble and every child never defies his or her parents when they arrange something for his or her own good. If there is one, we can say they are like yarning their aunt over their parents. So, we should not take seriously the matter of oil price hike. It is one of the unavoidable issues facing the entire world. No one is to blame for this as the nation has to relax its burden. Here, **we would like to say clearly that we children are willing to share the burden of our parents.** [*Emphasis in the original*]

On Monday, August 27, another author puts the protests in the context of the National Convention as the first step to democracy and denounces the 88 activists as being power hungry.⁹³ On Wednesday, August 29, the title page announces an article entitled "Power of patriotism safeguards the Union." The text elaborates on the richness of Myanmar's natural resources and the various attempts of the "colonialists" to "destroy Myanmar's independence" in order to get hold of these resources.⁹⁴ This argument is supplemented in an article on August 30 dealing with Min Ko Naing and his group and the NLD on the background of anti-government activities since 1948 and thus justifying the arrest of the ex-student. A common feature is stated: "...every time the ruling government made a positive gesture or sign of flexibility they [the opponents] regarded it to be a sign of weakness rather than a positive move."⁹⁵

Finally, on Sunday, September 2 a series of three sequels entitled "Min Ko Naing – A kite without string or danger to the nation" started which was continued in the following two issues. It was allegedly written by "An '88' incident activist" who exposed Min Ko Naing's true colours as somebody who followed the tactics the communists employed in 1988 and who is now hiring unemployed people to join in the demonstrations with money received from abroad. The subtitles of the two sequels of the whole article are "We foolishly entered politics without knowledge while we were students" (September 3) and "It is my wish that the ignorant and innocent students do not get into trouble and fall prey to the machinations of your group" (September 4).

3.2 Summary and Open Questions

The events between August 15 and September 5, 2007 can be regarded as an interlude. The activities of various actors continued in the face of a new situation and – in retrospect – prepared the way for something unexpected: the monks' involvement. The following paragraph tries to summarize the events that occurred in this interlude. Then, some open questions will be put forward and discussed.

⁹² See above 3.1.3 and Document 3.1.

⁹³ NLM August 28, pp.1; 8-10: "It is time they rose up from the whirl of confrontation".

⁹⁴ NLM August 29, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁵ NLM, August 30, pp. 1; 12-13: "Lest they may be left behind". Quotation: p. 12.

3.3.1 Summary

The fuel price hike on August 15 gave rise to various actions by individuals and informal groups highlighting the poor living conditions of many Myanmar citizens. The protests were not coordinated and they did not gain momentum in the sense that many people joined the various forms of protests. Thus, the demonstrations can be characterised as symbolic protests. As such, they were not trying to achieve concrete aims such as a retraction of the price increases. They were expressions of the wish of a better life in a better society under a good government. Su Su Nwe expressed this desire in these words:

I would like to say to the people, that they should get ready to choose what should be done and what should not be, to aspire for a situation where our wishes and our lives are identical.⁹⁶

And 88-Generation student Htay Kyaw said:

These protests constitute our demand to the Burmese military regime that it should [...] resolve the political and economic problems that our people are facing now. I call all the people who love the country and its future to join our endeavours.⁹⁷

With their actions, the protesters were representing “the people” as an entity calling them up to join hands and telling the government to listen to the voice of the people. The memories of what had happened in 1988 played an important role most clearly expressed in the name of the ex-students’ group, the “88-Generation Students.”

The members of the *Sangha* who had not played a significant role in 1988 were not involved directly in the early protests in 2007 either. But they were present nonetheless. In light of their earlier political involvement in politics, they were warned not to take part in the protests. This warning indicates that there may have existed some dormant hopes for the monks’ involvement.

The government shared the memory of ‘88 as well as the notion to represent the true desires of “the people.” It successfully quenched the protests by watering down the consequences of the price increase and, at the same time, by arresting the leaders of the protests and harassing the followers thus employing a carrot and stick policy. The extent of the press articles devoted to discrediting Min Ko Naing shows that he was taken very seriously as a political rival.

The media outside of Myanmar mostly shared the desire for complete change expressed by the activists inside the country and provided a platform for these actors to present their views and opinions to a wide public both outside and inside the country.

Both sides claimed to represent the interests and desires of “the people” and used the economic issues as an argument to underline this claim. Both sides questioned the ability of the respective opponent to govern and – above all – tried to disgrace the other as immoral.

In terms of political strength, the contest was uneven because of the government’s superiority in terms of resources and organisation. Therefore, the basic discontent expressed by the civilians’ protests and existing before August 15 seemed to be under control by September 3, the final day of the National Convention and two days ahead of the events in Pakokku.

3.3.2 Open Questions

a) What were the reasons behind the increase in the fuel prices?

There are various answers to this question. People inside Myanmar with an economic background simply answered “stupidity.”⁹⁸ It was pointed out that the government lacked economic competence even at the level of its advisors. Economic experts outside the country wondered why a country that

⁹⁶ See Document 3.3.

⁹⁷ DVB via BBC Monitoring August 24 “Burma 88 Generation Students vow to intensify protests”.

receives a huge income through selling its rich gas resources would resort to such a drastic measure in the field of energy politics. Some speculated that the government was short of foreign currency to meet high expenditures like building a new capital city, Naypyidaw.⁹⁹ All agreed that Myanmar's economy is basically "diesel-powered."¹⁰⁰ Heavy subsidies in this sector could not be afforded in the light of rising international prices. While the price rise could have made sense because it was "market-oriented," it was not easily absorbed because Myanmar's economy was in no way integrated into the global market, exemplified by the fact that it lacked the capacity to make use of its own natural resources through modern refineries. Thus, the country exported "raw energy" - sometimes as in the case of China at a low "political price." On the other hand it had to import "refined energy" at high prices.

All these explanations, however, do not sufficiently explain the timing of the measure just two weeks before the end of the National Convention. The government had invested a lot of effort to make this event a nationwide big success. It was foreseeable that the price rise would cause discontent.

This last point spurs questions about non-economic motives behind the measure and thus for a deliberately well-timed move.¹⁰¹ According to a Burmese source, the move could be seen as a move that was applied by the military in analogy to the "flash out" tactics in the fight against insurgents. In the military field, the tactic aimed at separating the people from the core of the enemy's fighters mixing with the population of the respective area of combat.¹⁰² In the civilian field, the price hike may have been implemented as a decoy to entice the protestors out and then arrest them.

Out of considerations like this one may ask if there was a link – open or hidden - between the end of the Convention and the beginning of the monks' protests in Pakokku and then nationwide, a protest that foiled every benefit which might have been expected from the step of August 15.

b) How was the Opposition against the Opposition Organised?

The role of USDA and *Swan Ar Shin* members in monitoring, harassing and arresting protesters was often highlighted in the reports. It is, however, not clear how this "opposition to the opposition" was organised. One can suppose that after the foundation of the USDA in 1993, a nationwide parallel structure of local SPDC offices and the state sponsored civic organisations on township and ward levels were formed. But about details, local variations and the role of money in the recruiting of "thugs" more investigation is necessary.

c) Legal Questions

There were a lot of reports about detentions and arrests but very seldom information about the charges under which people were detained. The arrest Min Ko Naing and the other members of the 88-Generation Students is a case in point. In 1989, Min Ko Naing according to Amnesty International¹⁰³ and other sources had been charged under section 5(j) of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act which was enacted to meet the challenges of civil war in Burma. The section reads:

Whoever does anything with any of the following intent; that is to say;-

- (j) to affect the morality or conduct of the public or a group of people in a way that would undermine the security of the Union or the restoration of law and order;

⁹⁸ Personal interviews of the author in October 2007 with a director of a private bank, the editor of an economic journal and a former member of the then Prime Minister Soe Win's (the successor of the ousted Khin Nyunt) staff.

⁹⁹ Turnell, 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Alfred Oehlers, "Behind Burma's Fuel Price Rise" *Irrawaddy*, August 22, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Oehlers suggests that the expected unrest might be used as a pretext to postpone the end of the convention.

¹⁰² Author's personal communication, October 2007.

¹⁰³ <http://www.asyl.net/Magazin/Docs/docs-17/L-28/L9657mya.htm> [March 18, 2009].

shall be punished with an imprisonment for a term which shall extend to 7 years or with fine or with both.

According to most Western sources, Min Ko Naing was sentenced to 20 years, 13 more than prescribed. How can this surplus be explained and why wasn't this difference noticed by Amnesty International or other concerned agencies and individuals? The matter is complicated by a document issued by the "Office of Strategic Studies" under the Ministry of Defence, a department dealing with the international perception of Myanmar, ambitiously named "The Truth" recorded in 2003 in a report meant to correct Amnesty's information about political prisoners in Myanmar on this case:

Paw Oo Tun (a) Min Ko Naing

Paw Oo Tun (a) Min Ko Naing was charged with inciting the people to create unrest in 1989. He also published without permission the "Thamegga" newsletter defaming the government. Hence, a case was filed against him on 17-12-1991 under Section 124(a) of the Penal Code¹⁰⁴ and Section 17 of the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act.¹⁰⁵ He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. He is now serving his term in Sittway prison.¹⁰⁶

Min Ko Naing was released in November 2004, fifteen years after his arrest and one month after General Khin Nyunt, Prime Minister and Chief of the Intelligence Services, was arrested. Shortly after the release, he confirmed in an interview with DVB that he was first imprisoned under "(Act) 10A" for three years and then sentenced for 15 years under Section 124(a) and under the Registration Act for publishing a students' magazine without permission and that he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment later.¹⁰⁷ According to most accounts of his life,¹⁰⁸ his sentence was reduced to 10 years in early 1993 under an amnesty,¹⁰⁹ but was not released in 1999 as expected.¹¹⁰ But if he was sentenced only in 1992, three years after his arrest, the ten years expired three years later.¹¹¹

On 27 September 2006, Min Ko Naing together with two other activists - Ko Ko Gyi and Htay Kywe – was taken from his home by the police for questioning. They had been scheduled to attend a ceremony commemorating the 18th anniversary of the formation of the National League for Democracy at its headquarters on September 28. Some days later, the state media reported the arrest charging the de-

¹⁰⁴ Penal Code 124A: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, bring or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards [the Government established by law for the Union or for the constituent units thereof,] shall be punished with transportation for life or an shorter term, to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine.

Explanation. 1.-- The expression "disaffection" includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity.

Explanation. 2.-- Comments expressing disapprobation of the measures of the Government with a view to obtain their alteration by lawful means, without exciting or attempting to excite hatred, contempt or disaffection, do not constitute an offence under this sedition.

Explanation. 3.-- Comments expressing disapprobation of the administrative or other action of the Government, without exciting or attempting to excite hatred, contempt or disaffection, do not constitute an offence under this section. (<http://www.blc-burma.org/html/Myanmar%20Penal%20Code/mpc.html>)

¹⁰⁵ This law ... requires all books, magazines, other periodicals and even song lyrics and motion picture scripts to be submitted for vetting to the Press Scrutiny Board, which was strengthened after 1988. The PSB, which is answerable to the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, has sweeping powers to ban publications and demand alterations, at great cost to the publisher. Anyone who fails to comply with this law faces a jail term of up to seven years and a fine of up to 30,000 kyat. (South East Asian Press Alliance (2005) *Alert. Reporting free expression violations in Southeast Asia. A manual*: 25-26. – For the context see Allott 1993: 3-8.

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.myanmar-information.net/truth/truth-3.pdf>, p.21 [March 20, 2009].

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.dassk.com/contents.php?id=920> [March 20, 2009].

¹⁰⁸ See Amnesty International's report: <http://www.asyl.net/Magazin/Docs/docs-17/L-28/L9657mya.htm> [March 20, 2009]. Megan Clymer in her biography of Min Ko Naing informs about the three years period of detention and then states that he was sentenced under Section 5(j) of the 1950 act for twenty years (Clymer 2003: 58).

¹⁰⁹ SLORC Order 1/1993 reduced all sentences over 15 years to ten years.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, the Wikipedia articles on Min Ko Naing.

tained to plan “a campaign of destabilization, instigated to cause unrest and undermining the peaceful pursuit of education of students” in cooperation with activists living in Thailand.¹¹² On November 9, they were charged under article 5J of the Emergency Provision Act. On December 5, the 88-Generation students issued a statement denying all charges and calling for the immediate release of the detained. No reference was made to any legal clauses.¹¹³ In mid-December, family members asked for the release because according to law the period of remand ended December 18.¹¹⁴

On January 10, 2007, he was released unconditionally together with four other members of the group.¹¹⁵ Min Ko Naing said in an interview with *Irrawaddy* that it was now clear to the authorities that they had not planned to create unrest or launch terrorist attacks. “Instead of chaos or terror, all of us emphasized that the country needs national reconciliation and peaceful discussion to resolve the existing conflicts.” The release happened shortly before a UN-debate on the situation in Myanmar and a meeting of ASEAN’s foreign ministers and was regarded by an US official as “a cynical ploy to stop the UN Security Council from taking action.”¹¹⁶

The last arrest happened on August 21, after the first demonstration against the fuel price increase. In its first statement, the *New Light of Myanmar* charged the detained persons of “breaking the law guarding against acts undermining the efforts to successfully carry out peaceful transfer of State power and facilitate the proceedings of the National Convention.”¹¹⁷ Given the vagueness of the existing laws protecting the Burmese and Myanmar state, the students could have been charged under a multitude of laws. Finally, in the end of January 2008 some of the detainees were charged under Section 17/20 of Burma’s Printing and Publishing Act, and later under Decree 5/96 dealing with obstruction or opposition to the National Convention.¹¹⁸

This account shows that a lot of reports about Min Ko Naing’s detention in the foreign media were and are not quite correct and that the information given by the state media are not always wrong. It also clearly underlines the argument that the authorities utilized the law quite arbitrarily. But this arbitrariness can be contextualised in manifold ways.. One of these contexts is related to the legal history of Burma, which is closely connected with the country’s volatile political history. It seems that laws as well as constitutions have not so much been regarded as normative rules on which the lives of all members of society were based, but rather as tools of the people in power used to fend off the attacks of state enemies. Another context relates to the understanding of justice starting at the observation that Min Ko Naing’s story is not only one of arrests but one of releases as well. Starting point for deliberations on this point could be some words spoken shortly after Min Ko Naing’s release in November 2004 which need interpretation and a bit of context:

¹¹¹ The passage in the interview (see p. 20, footnote 4) related to an extension of the sentence is not quite clear: “Ko Moe Aye [Interviewer]: As far as we know, after serving 15 years, you were given another 10 years with Act 10A. How did you feel when they charged you with Act 10A? - Min Ko Naing: On the day I had served my sentence, the prison governor came to me and told me that I had served my sentence and that it’s my day for freedom, but added that he received a letter ordering him to continue to detain me. That’s what he said. If you ask me what’s my opinion on this: the people (in power) at the time seemed to have thought that if they kept me outside I would be dangerous. That’s all I could guess.“ It is not clear at what time this event happened.

¹¹² *Mizzima*, October 5, 2006 “Burma’s 88 generation students reject *junta*’s accusation”

¹¹³ BurmaNet News, December 5, 2006 “Statement on the continuing detention of the 88 Generation Students leaders”.

¹¹⁴ DVB, December 15, 2007 “Jailed 88 students’ families call for acquittal as remand deadline looms”.

¹¹⁵ The other two were Min Zeya and Pyone Cho who had been arrested on September 30, 2006.

¹¹⁶ *Irrawaddy* January 11, 2007 „Detained Burmese activist leaders released“.

¹¹⁷ NLM August 22, 2007: 12.

¹¹⁸ DVB February 28, 2008 “88 student leaders charged under press law”; *Irrawaddy*, February 27 “*Junta* charges 88 generation students” Under decree 5/96, the accused could receive sentences of up to 20 years against seven years under the Printing Act.

Ko Moe Aye: As far as we know you were released because the authorities say that they want to compensate for the unfair deeds of the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB).¹¹⁹ They also abolished the NIB. The people who arrested you were also the intelligence people. What is your view on this?

Min Ko Naing: According to their statement, they are trying to do things as closely as possible to the truth. Therefore, in order to do things as gently, as truthfully and as logically as possible, they issued the statement as such. Therefore, people who are released with this are close to the truth and released honestly and it is good. I want to say that the release was a good one.

Finally, the relationship between different conceptions of the universality of human rights in a Buddhist and Western context needs to be clarified. This is a crucial question beyond the scope of this paper.

¹¹⁹ The release happened after the sacking of Khin Nyunt and his intelligence apparatus.

4 PAKOKKU

4.0 Preliminary Remarks

The monks' demonstration in Pakokku on September 5, 2007 and the subsequent incidents created a "turning point"¹²⁰ in the events of August and September, 2007 in Myanmar. Before that date, monks played no significant role in the protest against the economic hardships; after they led large demonstrations in many parts of Myanmar. The demonstrations of monks in Pakokku on September 5 led to a significant and pivotal turning point in the demonstrations against the increase in fuel prices. After the powerless attempts by civilian opposition groups described in the last chapter, the monks of the monasteries in Pakokku with their protest brought the conflict into a new stage. Without doubt, the Pakokku incidents and how they were perceived influenced later developments heavily. They can be seen as the beginning of the countrywide protests led by monks that ended with the three-day crackdown at the end of September. The incidents in Pakokku directly led to the founding of the "All Burma Monks Alliance" who made political demands to the SPDC. Most crucially, they established an ultimatum for meeting the demands and chose a highly symbolic date (September 17), the day before the military took over state power in 1988.

What really happened in Pakokku is disputed. But the reports deserve special and careful attention because of the significance of the events. Moreover, the symbolic significance of what happened has to be taken into consideration.

4.1 Undisputed facts

4.1.1 Wednesday September 5

Some hundreds of monks¹²¹ marched through Bogyoke Street¹²² in central Pakokku protesting the poor economic conditions in the country. They were cheered on by a crowd of bystanders who watched the march, which was performed in the same manner as the morning monks' alms-collecting rounds. When the group reached one of the town's Middle Schools, security forces confronted the demonstrators and fired warning shots in the air. After the shooting, the monks fled.

4.1.2 Thursday, September 6

In the morning, a group of about 20 state officials from Magwe division of which Pakokku is a part arrived in the town and went to one of its monasteries. Some monks detained the officials there and set fire to four of the six cars that the officials had used for their journey. After some hours and the intervention of an abbot, the officials were released.

¹²⁰ Pinheiro 2007: 7.

¹²¹ According to the first account published by DVB (see Document 3.1 600 monks participated. According to the official version of the government, the number was given as "more than 100" (see Document 4.5).

¹²² Bogyoke means "General". The name of the street refers to General Aung San, the hero of the Burmese struggle and father of Aung San Suu Kyi. This name of the place where the trouble started contains two rivalling connotations. It recalls the memory of the great and positive role played by the military in the country's history as well as the opposition to the military and thus symbolises the unsolved conflict between the military and the civil society in Burma/Myanmar that can be traced back to the colonial period.

In the evening, two houses of ostensible government allies were damaged by monks. One was Khin Maung Win, an alleged member of *Swan Ah Shin*, local and partly paramilitary forces established by the authorities to hold up law and order in local communities, and Hla Win Naing, Associate Secretary of the local Branch of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), an organisation established by the government to give public support to its activities.

4.1.3 Friday, September 7

According to one report, it was quiet in Pakokku on that day.¹²³ Another report gives the information that monks raided a shop and offered the goods to the public, thus supplementing the protest of the previous days against the authorities and their supporters with an action of assistance for the people.¹²⁴

4.1.4 Sunday, September 9

A group named “All Burma Monks Alliance” claiming to be an umbrella organisation for some other groups of monks issued a “Letter 1 / 2007” addressed to the military government.¹²⁵ It was distributed as a leaflet and the next day published in the media outside the country. It stated that the “peaceful” demonstration against the fuel prices was “brutally” suppressed, that monks and laymen were tortured and that one monk was killed. The letter issued an ultimatum to the SPDC with September 17 as a deadline. Their demands included an official apology for what happened in Pakokku, the reduction of commodity prices, the release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and the beginning of “dialogue with democratic forces” in the country. If the demands were not met, the Alliance announced a boycott of the SPDC symbolised by turning over the alms bowls and not accepting any donations from military personnel (Pali: *patam nikkujjana kamma*).¹²⁶

4.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports

Compared with the media coverage of the events following the price hike on August 15 and the demonstrations after September 18, there are relatively few reports about what happened in Pakokku. This can easily be explained by two facts. First, Pakokku is a rather remote place compared to Yangon and Mandalay. Therefore, it is even more difficult to assess news originating there and, of course, it is not possible to conduct any neutral investigation into the events afterwards.¹²⁷ Second, and maybe more important, the events in Pakokku occurred unexpectedly. Nobody was prepared for what happened.

¹²³ *Mizzima*. September 7, 2007: “12.25 p.m. Situation normal in Pakhokku, no signs of security forces A resident in Pakhokku told *Mizzima* that there has been no sign of security forces in town. "There are no security personnel to be seen in town. All are free. There are only people going up and down the streets. BEHS No 1 (government high school) is currently closed because of an ongoing training exercise. It was closed about five days ago due to the training. Other schools and universities are operating as normal. Nothing is unusual and there are no public gatherings." "Everything is normal with the monks as well. They went for their usual morning 'Swan' (offering of food) collections. The situation at monasteries like Bodhi Mandaing and Wihthuhtha is normal. Monks are very secretive about their plans. Whatever they plan to do is never leaked. But when we asked them what happened last night, they explained it to us. But they would never let anyone know of their plans." <http://www.mizzima.com/MizzimaNews/News/2007/Sep/30-Sep-2007.html> [January 12, 2008]

¹²⁴ APPPB, 2.-8. September 2007. <http://www.apppb.blogspot.com/>: [January 14, 2008]

¹²⁵ See Document 4.8.

¹²⁶ Vinaya Nikaya, Kullavagga V, Khandhaka, Chapter 20 (see Document 7.1.)

¹²⁷ There were journalists in Pakokku after the suppression of the nationwide monks' demonstrations, but they were not willing to reveal the results of their investigations saying that they had to protect their sources.

As a consequence, the gap between the information available to trace what happened there and the importance of the events to further developments is exceptionally great. Hopefully, it can be narrowed in due time through some investigations in town.

4.2.1 September 5

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) reported about the events on the same day quoting a resident witness and a monk involved in the protest. The monk was quoted thus: “We can’t sit back and watch the people who sponsor us sink into poverty. Their poverty is our poverty as well.” The bystander reported: “They fired about 10 or 15 bullets before they started to drag away the monks and beat up bystanders with bamboos sticks. ... The soldiers were in full uniforms . . . Now they are clearing up slippers left by monks when they fled the scene in dismay.”¹²⁸

4.2.2 September 6

DVB reported about the officials’ detention quoting eyewitnesses.¹²⁹ - The *Irrawaddy* newspaper published an article quoting a pagoda trustee that “three monks were tied to an electric pole and were beaten with rifle butts and bludgeons” and that one monk suffered head injuries.¹³⁰ It was reported as a rumour that a monk – probably one of those allegedly tied to the lamppost - had died from his injuries.

4.2.3 September 7

DVB¹³¹ and *Mizzima News*¹³² reported that the properties of two alleged government supporters in Pakokku had been vandalised. Radio Free Asia published an Internet version of their previous reports.¹³³ According to an RFA informer, the monks were attacked and caught by ropes in a lasso-like manner. A monk informed the Radio that two other monks were bound to a lamppost and beaten.

The *New Light of Myanmar*, the government’s official newspaper, reported for the first time about the incidents in Pakokku on the two preceding days under the headline “So called ‘88 generation students and NLD released announcement the protest was a non-violent one.”¹³⁴ On the title page, an article entitled “Interference of US and Britain in Myanmar political affairs – Part I” begins and continues on pages 8-10. The series’ parts II and III are published on the two following days accusing the governments of the two countries of neo-colonial activities.

4.2.4 September 8

The *New Light of Myanmar* again accused foreign broadcasting stations and the Pakokku NLD of misinforming the public. The main charge was that the media exaggerated what really had happened.¹³⁵ – *Mizzima News* published news about the arrest of people who informed foreign news stations about what happened in the city.¹³⁶

¹²⁸ See Document 4.1.

¹²⁹ See Document 4.2.

¹³⁰ See Document 4.3.

¹³¹ See Document 4.4.

¹³² <http://www.mizzima.com/MizzimaNews/News/2007/Sep/30-Sep-2007.html> [January 12, 2008]

¹³³ See Document 4.6.

¹³⁴ See Document 4.5.

¹³⁵ See Document 4.7.

4.2.5 September 9

The NLM once again accused foreign media of misinforming the Burmese public. It linked the “’88 Students” with the bomb explosion that occurred on December 25, 1996. This blast happened at a place close to the Kaba Aye (Peace) Pagoda where a Tooth Relic of the Buddha is displayed. It was thus alleged that the masterminds of the demonstrations have no respect for the Buddhist religion.¹³⁷ – The SPDC Information Committee’s Announcement 2007/1 explained the connection between the “so called” ‘88 students and Burmese terrorist groups living abroad.

4.2.6 September 10

The NLM on its last page accused again the NLD and the “’88 generation students” of being masterminds of the Pakokku events.

4.2.7 September 11

DVB reported about a meeting of high-ranking military personnel, including the Minister for Religious Affairs and abbots in Pakokku.¹³⁸ Money was offered as compensation to those monks who were beaten and disrobed in the aftermath of the demonstrations. Some abbots showed their disapproval of this action by abstaining from the meeting.

4.3 Summary and Disputed News

a) The skeleton of facts informing us about what happened in Pakokku provides a rather clear picture. There was a demonstration of monks that was impeded by people who – formally and/or informally – assumed responsibility for upholding public order. The encounter developed into a conflict that prompted the security people to shoot in the air. The crowd dispersed hastily leaving behind some sandals and the news that some monks were beaten up by the security people.

The next day, an official delegation came in order to placate the offended members of the *Sangha*. Some monks taught them a lesson and in a way retaliated for the injustice suffered by the people. In the evening the anger of the monks and their lay supporters resulted in some aggressive acts against the property of local alleged government affiliates.

b) The main dispute in the reports about the Pakokku incidents is about “violence” on the side of the demonstrators and “brutality” on the side of the security forces. Whereas the foreign media relying on their interviews with residents of Pakokku from September 6 onwards used the phrase of the “brutal” break up of a peaceful demonstration, the government contrasts the violence of the monks’ actions with the restraint applied by the government forces. It claimed that the shots in the air were necessary because an abbot who opposed the monks’ demonstration was in danger.¹³⁹ The official media denied

¹³⁶ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2007/09/10/mizzima-news-rumours-of-ko-jimmys-death-false-u-myint-thein/> [January 12, 2008]: “2:00 p.m - Situation in Pakhokku. Interview with a resident of Pakhokku town 'The authorities are arresting informers passing on news to foreign broadcasting news agencies. Last night, authorities arrested some of them but we are not sure how many were detained. But I know Ko Than Shin and Ko Thar Aung from ward No. 8 have been rounded up. They are about 40 and 50 years old respectively. It was quite obvious it was them, as there voices could be heard being aired on the Radio Free Asia (RFA) programme. More people have been arrested but I am not sure how many. I heard they have not been released yet and we also don't know who came to pick them up," - "The situation here is quiet now. Because there was a lot of soldiers stationed in front of the police station, market place and in front of the fire brigade.”

¹³⁷ See Document 4.9.

¹³⁸ See Document 4.10.

¹³⁹ See Documents 4.5 and 4.6.

that any harm was done to the monks. They then contradicted these reports with the NLM's statement that the foreign reports about the Pakokku incidents were "exaggerated" because only "one or two persons" were involved.¹⁴⁰ The DVB report on the offering of some compensation to the monks – instead of the demanded apology – also contradicted the government's version of the events.

c) Other disputed facts relate to the number of monks participating in the demonstration on September 5, the number of shots in the air fired by the security forces and the messages expressed at the monks' march. According to the residents quoted by foreign media, monks just chanted Buddhist slogans of *metta*¹⁴¹ and wishing for everyone "to be free from the oppression of others." According to government reports, placards were shown on this march calling for the release of prisoners and the reduction of commodity prices.

d) The single most disputed event and the one with the most impact both emotional and factual is the alleged beating up of monks being tied to an electrical pole. Whereas the first report of DVB quoted eye witnesses who said that bystanders were beaten with bamboo sticks in the attempt to disperse the demonstration, the *Irrawaddy* one day later reported on the beating of some monks.¹⁴² In Yangon, the news caused considerable outrage. It even was reported that monks had been stoned.¹⁴³

4.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies

Why Pakokku? Why was it this town in Upper Burma, an apparently remote place some 520 km north of Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, where the first demonstrations of monks against the increases in fuel prices occurred? There is no obvious reason for the assumption that the citizens of this town were hit more by the economic conditions in Myanmar than people in other parts of the country. Therefore, one has to look for other reasons that may have contributed to the monks' involvement in the protests against the price hike just in this town.

The following sections are restricted to the events in Pakokku. The response of the monks' association leading to the demonstrations that started on September 18 will be dealt with in chapter 6 since there is no indication that monks from Pakokku were members of the core group that founded ABMA.¹⁴⁴

4.4.1 Local Tensions in Pakokku

The damage inflicted on the houses of two Pakokku citizens who were perceived as agents of the government, as well as reports that the abbot of one monastery, the Chairman of the Township *Sangha Nayaka Committee*,¹⁴⁵ had to be protected, that monks demanded his dismissal¹⁴⁶ and later went into hiding¹⁴⁷ points at tensions within the Pakokku residents. Obviously, such tensions between pro- and anti-government advocates existed in the *Sangha* as well. The reports of the *New Light of Myanmar* as well as of the *Irrawaddy* reported that U Tejobhasa (Tay Zaw Batha), the Township *Sangha Nayaka*

¹⁴⁰ See Document 4.7.

¹⁴¹ See the text of the Metta Sutta after the foreword. The usual translation of *metta* into English is "loving kindness".

¹⁴² See Document 4.7. The report of September 6 tells of three monks who were abused. In the visualised reconstruction, only two monks are to be seen. See below 5.2.3.1.

¹⁴³ Author, personal observation.

¹⁴⁴ Monks from Pakokku are neither mentioned in the list of the Minister for Religious Affairs' statement on October 24 (see document 6.7.) nor in the memoirs of U Pinya Zawta (see document 7.3).

¹⁴⁵ These committees were formed in 1980 in order to administer the *Sangha* parallel to the different levels of the government of the state.

¹⁴⁶ *Irrawaddy* September 7, 2007 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=8540 [January 13, 2008])

¹⁴⁷ See Document 4.3.

Committee Chairman, who was the official head of the clergy of Pakokku Township, was attacked by some monks and protected by the security forces.

There were antecedents to such tensions within the local community. A report of the Khonumthung News Group (KNG) a news agency, covering Chin and Burma related issues in English and Burmese, in March 2007 reported about the outbreak of a fire in Pakokku market allegedly set by the authorities in order to obtain free space for military premises.¹⁴⁸

The demonstration can thus be interpreted as a result of two factors: Local tensions between the agents of the government and people opposed to them and the general dissatisfaction with the government caused by the measures announced on August 15 even if these measures did not affect the people Pakokku more severely than they did many people in Yangon. The tensions can be related to the “political economy” of the city that favoured people with good connections to the government. This top-down structure paralleled the structure within the *Sangha*. The monks who claimed that they – due to the impoverishment of their lay supporters – could not afford the 50 Kyats for the razors to shave their heads, thus represented the needs and demands of the general populace as well as the traditional claim of the *Sangha* to challenge the legitimacy of any ruler not meeting these needs.

Thus, the demonstrations of August 5 and its dissolution and the outburst of anger on the following day point to a great schism within the Myanmar society, both locally and nationwide, within the lay society as well as within the *Sangha*. On the local level, the authorities tried to win support through the establishment of a mass organisation, the USDA, members of which enjoyed special privileges, as well as through the members of the *Swan Ah Shin*, who officially take care of security on the local ward level, but can be employed as well as a force bullying people who are not behaving as the authorities would like them to do. In the *Sangha*, the lay authorities aim to win over the leading monks by offering donations and privileges but do not reach the level of the younger ordinary monks who may be opposed to their superiors for a variety of reasons.

Therefore, it can be assumed that the structural tensions within the society as a whole on the local level take the shape of personal enmity and antagonism. One may – somewhat boldly - consider that the harassment of monks on September 5 was partly a result of such personal feuds undertaken by members of the local *Swan Ah Shin* who took advantage of the situation to settle old accounts with some monks who had just put on the robe. Some monks responded by way of retaliation the next day by damaging the property of government supporters, well aware that their actions represented the anger of many people.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ *Konumthung News* March 17, 2007: Local people have blamed the Burmese authorities for the fire in Pakokku Market, Magwe division on the night of February 12. But the reason is still unclear. The market caught fire around 9 p.m. and the authorities were unable to identify what caused the fire. While no one was injured, all the goods were reduced to ashes. "There was no chance of salvaging the goods. Mercifully no one was injured in the fire. It was set on fire by the authorities," a local alleged to Khonumthung News. Pakokku Market has met the same fate as Tahan and LetpanChaung Markets. These too caught fire and when the fire services arrived the markets were gutted. A local told Khonumthung News over telephone that it is hard to calculate the value of goods burnt. But Pakokku Market is bigger than Tahan and LetpanChaung markets, so the losses would be more. There was no official response from the authorities on the fire. Neither has a reconstruction project or compensation been discussed. "They set fire to the market as they plan to build for the army," the local alleged. Chin traders own most shops in Kaley and Tahan Markets in Sangaing Division and Pakokku Market in Magwe Division as the markets are in Chin state. – KNG.

¹⁴⁹ A report of the *Independent Mon News Agency* of September 10 supports an interpretation like this. The report says: "The association of monks in Burma - Sangha Thanmaggi has urged all monks to step outside monasteries and stage peaceful protest walks tomorrow to show their unity and condemn the violence perpetrated by the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and Pyithu Swan Arr Shin on monks in Pakokku. The statement by Sangha Thamaggi said what the pro-junta thugs have done in Pakokku is an insult to the rest of the monks in Burma. They tied the monks to lamp posts and beat them with gun butts. There was also firing in the air." (BurmaNet News, September 8-10).

4.4.2 Local Traditions

Here, only some preliminary deliberations can be presented. It would be necessary to get material to write a proper “local history” of Pakokku.

The town is situated at the west bank of the Irrawaddy River some 30 km away from Bagan, the capital of the first Burmese kingdom, some 60 km away from Chauk, one of the centres of the Burmese oil industry and 100 km away from Mandalay. It is thus situated close to the cradle of Burmese ancient history as well as the places where the first Burmese industries developed and where, in 1938, a strike of workers took place that grew into the attempt to overthrow the government.

Today, some 130.000 residents live in this city at the centre of the Burmese tobacco industry. One of two country’s cigarette factories is located here. In recent times, a garment factory has been constructed.

Historically, Pakokku has played no significant role. Its importance as a trading post increased during the colonial period. In the elections of November 1936, in one of the four constituencies contested in Pakokku, the parliamentarian wing of the *Dobama* movement known as the *Komin Kochin* party won one of a total of three seats in the new parliament. In another of the town’s constituencies, a staunch enemy of the movement, Sir Paw Tun, was elected. He was born in Arakan, educated in Britain, married to an American, became mayor of Rangoon, was Home Minister from 1937 on and served a short time as Prime Minister between February and June 1942 just before the Japanese occupation. One can conclude that in Pakokku – as elsewhere in Burma - a tradition of political controversy exists.

In World War II, the city was of some importance in the reception of Burma by the allies. In the civil war after Independence, the communists occupied Pakokku for some years. In the elections of 1990, the National League of Democracy (NLD) candidates won both constituencies of Pakokku. They each received more than 70% of the valid votes.

4.4.3 Pakokku as a Buddhist Centre

The oldest pagoda in Pakokku is the *Sihoshin* Pagoda believed to have been built by Alaung Sithu, king of Bagan, in the 12th century. On the other hand, there are some big monasteries in town that serve as education centres for the young monks. The reports name *Mahavithutarama* (or Ah Le Taik) monastery as the place where the hostages were held. Apparently this monastery hosted some 700 monks at that time, a majority of whom participated in the demonstrations.

4.4.4 Analogies of 1938

The report of the Riot Inquiry Committee on what happened in Pakokku in August 1938 shows some interesting similarities to the events in 2007. They are related to four themes: the monks as leaders of public opinion; the role of public belief in exaggerated reports about what actually happened; doubts about the proper behaviour of some monks; and the nationwide echo of what happened in Pakokku. It is remarkable that, other than what happened in Yangon at the beginning of the riots, none of the many other incidents throughout Myanmar caught public attention beyond the local sphere.

Before quoting some passages from the report, a summary of what happened in Pakokku between August 1 and 3 shall be given.¹⁵⁰

On August 1, there was a meeting of monks in a monastery followed by a procession of some 250 monks and 50 laymen at 5. p.m. The crowd was armed. Some Indian shops were destroyed and some houses of Indians were stoned. The police arrived and dispersed the crowd. On August 3, officials went into another monastery named as “Mandalay *Kyaungdaik*” because of reports that people had

¹⁵⁰ *Final Report*: 131-137.

been tattooed there.¹⁵¹ The monks were “aggrieved” by the search and informed the lay elders about the event. In the afternoon of that day, a crowd of people composed of monks and laymen assaulted a mosque. Two Indians were killed, one of them after being attacked by a monk. After unsuccessfully warning the mob to disperse “two volleys were fired resulting in the deaths of two of the rioters.” Another shooting took place as the police were attacked by another crowd.

Here are some quotations from the 1938 report:

a) On the search of the monastery (*kyaung*):

We are assured, and we see no reason to doubt it, that no objections [*from the monks inside the monastery*; author] was at the time taken to the search. We have set out the incident at some length as it has been exaggerated to the proportions of a serious grievance and an incident of ‘police excess’. It was exploited to rouse a considerable amount of feeling among Burman Buddhists in Pakokku and to some extent all over the country. This search was portrayed as a gross desecration of a religious building and an insult to the *Sangha* and to the Buddhist religion. Echoes of it reached Rangoon and the Hon’ble Minister for Home Affairs¹⁵² was led thereby to send telegraphic instructions amounting to an order that *pongyi kyaungs* should not be searched.

It was alleged before us and no doubt commonly believed [*footnote at the bottom of the page*: The danger of this sort of thing is the credibility with which it is accepted by the people. It has been noticeable throughout our inquiry. It is one of those reasons why the irresponsibility of the Press is so dangerous], that the police had offered an affront to the feelings of the *pongyis* by effecting a forcible entry into the *Kyaung* at the point of bayonet; that the whole party went into the *Kyaung* with their boots on and searched the *Kyaung* without permission; that robes were stripped off the backs of the *pongyis* by the police and that they were searched. Every incident of the search is distorted as to make it more offensive to Buddhists.¹⁵³

b) On the discipline of the monks:

It is a matter of regret, but it can hardly be denied that with the weakening of the authority of the *Sayadaws* undesirable characters are to be found in some *pongyi kyaungs*. We do not wish to say that *kyaungs* of this type are common or in the majority. There are no doubt a number of *kyaungs* which are put to their legitimate use of providing residence and places of learning for good *pongyis* who are respected not only by Buddhists but by all who come in contact with them. They are the true results of Buddha’s teachings and are entirely a good influence. On the other hand, there are *upazins*¹⁵⁴ who, unfortunately, do not adhere strictly to the laws governing their conduct. *Pongyis* leading crowds and committing serious offences and *pongyis* carrying weapons entirely unsuitable to their robes, have unhappily been a commonplace of our inquiry. In the circumstances those who are responsible for keeping order must necessarily be given a discretion and authority to enter and search *kyaungs* for the bona fide purpose of detecting and apprehending criminals and preserving order.¹⁵⁵

c) On the causes

The report of the Deputy Commissioner says that the genesis of the trouble is not known with certainty. But it seems that Pakokku was visited by two *pongyis* from Mandalay who presumably roused the people through their propaganda. Moreover, people came over

¹⁵¹ Tattooing was regarded as a sign of violent actions planned. Only later did they discover that they had been misinformed. The tattooing actually happened at another monastery.

¹⁵² Sir Paw Tun, see above.

¹⁵³ *Final Report*: 132-133. According to the enquiries of the commission, these allegations were not true.

¹⁵⁴ Another Burmese word for “monks”.

¹⁵⁵ *Final Report*: 133.

from Nyaun-U, where trouble had broken out on the 31st of July 1938, bringing rumours with them. It is suggested, and not entirely without reason, that there was probably some degree of preparation for the disturbance and some little organisation. There can be no doubt that meetings were held on the 1st of August, that persons found among those wounded by the police firing had fresh tattoo marks and that the two Burmans who were shot dead while destroying the contents of the Bengali mosque were fully tattooed. ... On the whole, we take the view that much the same causes operated here as elsewhere though the economic causes were less in evidence.¹⁵⁶

4.5 Open Questions

a) As in 1938, the genesis of the monks' march on September 5 is not clear. According to APPPB,¹⁵⁷ 10 NLD members led by U Aye Hlaing,¹⁵⁸ one of the NLD candidates elected in Pakokku in 1990, went to the township office of the SPDC demanding that they decrease fuel prices. The submission allegedly was watched by many onlookers "with some were clapping hands and offered drinking water and food to the marchers."¹⁵⁹ Thus, the next day's protest can be interpreted the *Sangha's* endorsement of the NLD protest. Without any information about the networks of communication between the local groups in Pakokku, one can only speculate about the concrete sequence of events that resulted in the demonstration on September 5.

b) Another open question is related to the structure of the Pakokku *Sangha* and the role of individual *Sayadaws* played in the conflict. Obviously, the head of the township's official *Sangha* body, the *Sangha Nayaka*, U Tay Zaw Batha, was involved in the conflict as somebody who was at odds with monks and members of the community. This may be attributed to the fact that as chairman of the local *Sangha*, he must have had close contacts to the local authorities. One may ask if there were other reasons for disliking him, but that must remain an open question.

c) Another and more important question concerns the relationship between the Pakokku events and the declaration of the monks' association published on September 9. As the "All Burma Monks Alliance" had not been known before that date, one can only speculate if somebody spontaneously used the news of the Pakokku protest on the backdrop of the people's general discontent to challenge the government, if a group had waited for such an opportunity, or if there was a plot either by opponents or allies of the government to stage a controversy between the country's rulers and the people. The results of the investigation conducted in 1938 suggests that there may have existed a kind of "informal network" within members of the *Sangha* in Pakokku and other cities, most likely including Mandalay, that materialised in the ABMA.

¹⁵⁶ *Final Report*: 139-140.

¹⁵⁷ Asia-Pacific Peoples' Partnership on Burma.

¹⁵⁸ According to a list of elected MPs in the 1990 elections, the name is U Hlaing Aye. Here is the biographical information given in the material on the elections compiled by Khin Kyaw Han: U Hlaing Aye graduated in Science from Mandalay University in 1968. He worked as a high school teacher in Myaing Township from 1969-1973 and in Pakokku from 1973-1981. He has worked as a rice trader from 1981. He had resigned as MP on 3 November 2000, due to "poor health and personal reasons". It is understood that the SPDC used intimidation to force him to resign. U Hlaing Aye received 49,782 valid votes or 70 % in the 1990 elections.

¹⁵⁹ <http://apppb.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2007-09-04T23%3A59%3A59%2B07%3A00&updated-min=2007-09-04T00%3A00%3A00%2B07%3A00> [January 17, 2008].

4.6 Conclusions

- a) The incidents in Pakokku were a response to the government's increase in fuel prices on August 15, as well as a follow up of the protest by civilians against the poor economic situation of the country for which the government was blamed.
- b) Besides the grievances on the national level there were local reasons for the protests, particularly tensions between "agents of the government" inside and outside the *Sangha* and "the people". These two levels of conflict came together in the Pakokku incident. The common dissatisfaction with the government expressed by the August demonstrations was taken up by monks. The answer of the security forces against the monks' involvement was perceived as violent and brutal and looked upon as a reason to express a statement of fundamental opposition to the country's authorities who were held responsible for the incident.
- c) The monks acted on behalf of the people opposed to the local as well the national authorities. A majority of the local community supported the monks' protest.
- d) The first stage of the protests can be labelled as a "peaceful confrontation" of the monks against the authorities. It soon developed into a "violent confrontation" led by monks. Both modes of confrontation mark a new quality of the protests compared to the civilian protests that had started immediately after the upsurge of prices. The new quality can be attributed to the religious element on both sides. The monks later deplored the assault on their dignity while the officials in the confrontation with the monks had to be afraid about their salvation.
- e) Whereas the authorities tried to pacify the situation, the ultimatum of the "All Burma Monks Alliance" signifies the escalation of the conflict both in terms of matter and space. The leaflet threatened to cut off all military personnel from the spiritual benefits traditionally provided by members of the *Sangha*. It thus denied the military on all levels of the hierarchy and in all parts of the country the status of being true Buddhists. Moreover, besides the matter of economic issues, the fundamental question of "dignity" - both of the *Sangha* and the people - was brought in, an issue which could not be compromised.
- f) Foreign media played a crucial role in making the events known nationally and internationally. Soon after the first demonstrations, a kind of "media war" started on the question of who reported the truth about what happened.
- g) The events in Pakokku are in many ways paralleled by former events and thus follow certain patterns of monks' involvement in the country's politics.
- h) There remain open questions with special regard to the channels of communication before the demonstrations of September 5 and after the events.

5 THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In the previous chapter the contours of what may have happened in Pakokku were outlined. The account given rests almost exclusively upon media reports. They allow for a recounting of the basic events. On the other hand, there are some disputed facts and at least one report was never confirmed but may have influenced the further course of events heavily. It was reported that one monk died in the incidents and this report was taken up in the leaflet of the Monks' Association as a proof of how justified the ultimatum to the government was. The question may be raised how the drafters of the announcement got their information – and how the media outside Myanmar got the text of the leaflet.

Another example is the contested information on the violence exerted in the demonstrations and their break-up by the authorities and their assistants. This issue touches a very sensitive point because monks should be treated with the utmost respect. At the same time, monks should refrain from any feelings of anger and hatred in line with the *Metta Sutta* they recited.

One consequence of these observations is to have a very detailed look at the sources available. Since the sources mainly are news published or broadcasted by the media, an assessment of the media is necessary. The first part (5.1.) of this chapter gives some reflections on the media as sources for an academic study. The second part elaborates in some detail about the media involved outside and inside Myanmar (5.2)

5.1 Reflections on the Sources Taken from the Media

The events of August and September 2007 have resulted in an overwhelming flood of information both about what happened and how the events could and/or should be interpreted and assessed. This quantity of news makes it necessary to select some sources and to neglect others. The following paragraphs give some explanations about the reasoning behind the selection adopted in this survey.

Besides and in conjunction with the problem of quantity there are the related issues of quality and reliability of the news informing or promising to inform about the events. This is a very crucial concern for at least two reasons. In general, there exists a global network in which information has become a commodity and which, therefore, is governed by the laws of supply and demand. Exciting news that attracts the interest of a wide public sells better than dry reports. In the case of the xenophobic, self-isolated Myanmar, the non-existence of a broad international public knowledge about particulars can be assumed. At the same time, the background of Myanmar and the scarcity of neutral experts influence the collection and output of information towards rather simplistic pictures fitting into the imagined horizon of the users. This trend might be enforced by the high degree of polarisation characterising the public image of the country, its politics and the key political players.

On the other hand, the situation within Myanmar sharply contrasts the free market oriented flow of information on the global level. There is no freedom of the press, severe censorship of the country's media and heavy restrictions on the possibilities of foreign correspondents to thoroughly investigate into sensitive issues. The same applies for the opportunities of scientists to conduct research and to have a free exchange with colleagues in Myanmar. Nevertheless and despite difficulties and restrictions, Myanmar is part of the global information system. The country is connected with the outside world through various lines of communication. Telephone is widely used inside the country but due to extremely high rates hardly used for overseas calls. On the other hand, calling from abroad into Myan-

mar is easy and not very expensive.¹⁶⁰ Email and Internet phones are frequently used. In this field, in the big cities Internet cafés provide services even during the many hours without electricity. The fees are reasonable, between 400 and 700 Kyat per hour, less than 40 and 70 US cents in March 2008.

Technically, no restrictions exist on the reception of a variety of foreign radio stations broadcasting in Burmese language. These broadcasts have a wide audience and are carefully monitored by government agencies. People, however, widely ignore official bans of the radio programs of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA). People can be seen on the street listening to a foreign radio programs.¹⁶¹ Authorities usually tolerate this behaviour but use the influence of the foreign media in their campaign against dissidents.

This big difference between the situation of the media inside and outside the country contributes to a special kind of flow of information. On the other hand, the particular Myanmar kind of communicating news is just a special case of the global information network that provides only “second-hand information” at the best, even if the media do a lot to suggest that their information is authoritative by sending correspondents and other informants to the spots where the news originated. Because in the case of Myanmar such placing is the exception from the rule, the reports and pictures transmitted from the demonstrations in Myanmar through amateurs who accidentally or intentionally witnessed the events were of particular importance. This can be partly attributed to the fact that such pictures were regarded as a rare commodity and thus outstandingly valued.

As mentioned in the foreword, the idea to write this study was conceived shortly after the demonstrations in Yangon. It was intended to make use of personal experiences and to regard them as primary sources as well.

On the other hand, the experiences of the author and his communication with Burmese people can be compared to a bridge leading to a variety of explanations and views on what happened that may help to understand the cultural and socio-economic context of the protests. Such explanations can be found in secondary sources some of which will be introduced here.

5.1.1 Inside and Outside – Indirect Communication

The first communication after the arrival of a regular foreign visitor in Burma / Myanmar with a Burmese citizen he or she knows can be rendered like this:

Citizen: *Nice to see you again. What is the news about Burma?*

Visitor: *That is what I just wanted to ask you.*¹⁶²

The “insider” expects that the outsider knows better than he himself what is going on in his country. As for the visitor, it is the other way round. Both may then exchange their information and assessments face-to-face and draw some common conclusions. An interchange like this, however, does not happen when information about Myanmar is obtained from the outside through the telephone or the Internet and is reported back into the country through radio broadcasts or telecasts. Here, the principles of gathering and transmission of information can be roughly described in the following way.

A journalist with some experience in Myanmar is looking for news about the country. He or she may be working for an international news agency, for a newspaper or a magazine or a radio or TV station or for more than one media. In any case, he or she has a smaller or bigger network of informants living

¹⁶⁰ In Germany, the cheapest offer for a one minute call to Myanmar is 15 eurocent (landline to landline) and 18 eurocent (landline to mobile) respectively.

¹⁶¹ Author, personal observation.

¹⁶² Author’s personal experience.

in the country, some being journalists themselves¹⁶³ some friends or acquaintances, family members or friends of friends. In addition, they can try to obtain information from officials on different levels of the county's various hierarchies and can consult telephone directories to call somebody up they do not know personally. In any case, they have to rely on the information they obtain through their respective sources without being able to check the information.

For three reasons, journalists or persons working for the media who speak Burmese play a special role here. They can communicate directly with their respective sources; they have a better knowledge about the local environment and, finally, they are able to communicate their information back into Myanmar in the native language. This news reporting is well known inside the country. People trust their compatriots informing them from abroad. Consequently, news reported by international radio stations that broadcast in Burmese and gather their information from within play a salient role. Many people in Myanmar get their information about the events in their country via these broadcasts.¹⁶⁴ Thus, media based in foreign countries took over the role of the primary source of information on what happened in the country. The interviews conducted from the outside and broadcasted into Myanmar substituted the free journalism not existing there.

Among the means of communication within Myanmar, the telephone is the most important medium because the use of Internet until now is restricted to the big cities and is censored by the government. Thus, most news about events in Myanmar is transmitted from the inside to the outside via the telephone and transmitted back via the radio.

5.1.2 Information Gathering – News Laundering – Information Check

The result is a flow of information influenced by a gradient between the amount of information available inside and outside the country and another gradient between the level of press and information freedom in both spheres. Inside the country, there is a lot of information that is difficult to tap because of the restrictions on free speech and free information. Outside the country, there is much freedom, but no information. Furthermore, there is an exchange of news between the inside and outside. These conditions lead to a special kind of information flow that can be divided into three stages – and can be regarded as a particular variation of what happens on the global scale of information systems that is composed of many subsystems of very different kinds.

Stage 1: Information gathering. Foreign journalists cannot work freely in Myanmar. They may visit the country disguised as tourists¹⁶⁵ but have to be cautious and keep a low profile. This is a serious handicap for the aim of gathering information. Therefore, most of the news is gathered by an agent living outside who collects information from sources in Myanmar. The information obtained has to be regarded as hearsay in the literal sense of the word. It is a rumour, rumour being defined as any information that may be true but has not yet been checked and discussed as in the ideal scene of the two people meeting inside Myanmar and being able to sort out doubts, misunderstandings etc. and even ask other people about their information. This precondition does not exist in the information flow considered here. The news agent outside of Myanmar, journalist or not, has to trust his source. The problem is that trust is a very personal category and beyond control. The journalist receiving a piece of news from Myanmar may trust his informant and spread this information. But how can a third person receiving the news from the journalist check the trustworthiness of the informant? He cannot and thus a precondition of the media operating in a free market is rendered inoperative. All news from a coun-

¹⁶³ Officially, there are some journalists in Myanmar who are accredited as international correspondents.

¹⁶⁴ DVB operates a TV programme as well, but only very few people have access to it.

¹⁶⁵ The author met and heard about many journalists in October, 2007.

try like Myanmar communicated directly from the inside to the outside must be suspected to be just unverified, unchecked rumours (in a technical meaning of the term).

Stage 2: News transfer back to Myanmar. In the process of the information flow back to the country of its origin, it is transformed. A singular fact obtained inside the country gets a new quality when it is reported back by a system based outside. The international media are regarded as superior to the system within Myanmar because of their alleged independence and reliability. Thus, a rumour collected in Myanmar may be turned into reliable news when transmitted back into the country, even if the journalist exerts journalistic diligence in introducing his information as hearsay. One may term this process unintended news laundering.

Stage 3: News check. The authorities in Myanmar know about this process and carefully monitor the broadcasts of the foreign media. They cannot prevent the radio waves coming in. Even Myanmar is an integrated part of the global information system. Therefore, they have to counter the information coming from abroad. In the case of the Pakokku incident, they denounced the NLD, the "88 students" and their allies outside the country to exaggerate and distort what really had happened. And, in addition, they provided their own account of what happened.

This process is based on a double twine between inside and outside indicated in the ideal scene rendered above. The absence of information freedom casts a shadow on the news received from Myanmar. On the other hand, the press freedom outside Myanmar forces the rulers inside Myanmar to abide by some rules of a free press.

The observer of the whole process thus gets the chance to check the information on a certain event that is reported both outside and inside Myanmar. The "skeleton of facts" about the events in Pakokku as well as what happened later rests on this course of information flow that is determined by the double gradient of the amount of information and the level of freedom of information.

5.1.3 Reports on the Role of Foreign Media

The observations and reflections presented here are by no means the first ones on this topic. The inter-relationship between inside and outside information itself became a topic for reports in foreign media during the time of the demonstrations. But these reports mainly concentrated on the eagerness of people inside Myanmar to get information from foreign media and on the courage of the amateur journalists in Myanmar providing material and telling the truth about the events. There was no thorough reflection on the role played by the media within the period of time of the demonstrations. Here, as before and after the events focussed on here, the media inside and outside Myanmar exhibit similar attitudes of confining the reports to a matter-of-fact coverage.¹⁶⁶ Each side claims to tell the truth and accuses the other side of distorting it. Thus, the conflict within Myanmar recurs in the journalistic battle about the truth.

5.2 The Media

The following paragraphs provide some information and reflection on the various media referenced in this paper. The main reason for such an account is the fact that the media do not just report what happens, they are part of the events and influence what happens. As the previous paragraph demonstrates, this phenomenon has to be taken into account.

Besides the nexus between the media outside and inside Myanmar described above, there is another mode of involvement. Media based outside Myanmar blatantly and sometimes openly invited people

¹⁶⁶ For a collection of reports on the influence of foreign inside Myanmar see document 5.2.

living in Myanmar to report news to the media abroad.¹⁶⁷ Through this invitation, the media outside the country actively participated in the events.

Therefore, any transformation of information as a part of the involvement of the foreign media in the incidences has to be taken into account in the attempt of presenting a balanced account of what happened in Myanmar in August and September 2007. As a consequence, this description of the events is based on a variety of sources of different origin and kind. The following sections of this introduction will give some more information about these sources. Besides the news received through various agencies outside Myanmar (section 5.2.1), the state media are taken into account (5.2.2). In addition, the pictures covering the events and transmitted abroad are evaluated (5.2.3) and supplemented by some observations from within which defy visualisation but throw a light on the emotional and cultural context in which the events took place (section 5.2.4). Finally, a short note on the “language question” will be given (5.2.5).

5.2.1 Media outside Myanmar

Given the great quantity of material available choices had to be made for this study. Here, a short overview about the selection will be given as well as a characterisation of the sources used.

This account is based mainly on the news services of institutions providing an overview of news from various sources. The oldest and most comprehensive is “BurmaNet News” which provides a daily news service from Monday to Friday on a variety of topics¹⁶⁸ as an “online newspaper that offers general coverage of news and opinion on Burma from around the world.”¹⁶⁹ The news service is part of the New York based “Open Society Institute” sponsored by George Soros and was established together with the “Burma Project” in 1994. The project was founded “for the purpose of increasing international awareness of conditions in Burma and helping the country make the transition from a closed to an open society.”¹⁷⁰

The service thus aims at presenting a non-party coverage of news as a means to help Burma / Myanmar to overcome the present situation of being a society in which one party, the military, dominates. It can be regarded as the most independent service available under the given circumstances of the confrontation overshadowing almost everything related to the country. In practice, the service offers a selection of news and comments from different sources without offering its own conclusions and views. Comments on the news should not be posted.¹⁷¹

Below, a short overview on BurmaNet’s sources¹⁷² together with some remarks on their special feature is given followed by some remarks on media which deserve some special attention because they play a key role in the coverage of the events and “contest of reliability”.

One general factor determining the selection of the news is language. BurmaNet News almost exclusively collects and republishes information in English from various sources, which can roughly be divided into seven groups.

¹⁶⁷ See documents 5.1 and 5.2, article no. 3 published by Associated Press.

¹⁶⁸ The news are presently listed under different categories: Inside Burma, On the Border, Business/Trade, Regional, International, Opinion/Other, Press Release; Statement; Obituaries.

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/> [January 18, 2008]. – The sections are: Inside Burma; Health/AIDS; On the Border; Business / Trade; Drugs; Regional; International; Interview; Statement; Commentary.

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/bpsai/about>.

¹⁷¹ <http://www.burmanet.org/news/faq> [January 18, 2008]

¹⁷² For an overview on various media and groups with a concern on Burma and Myanmar see <http://www.burmanet.org/news/links>.

- a) The big news agencies of different countries that usually employ a rather factual reporting because they sell their news to a variety of customers but on the other hand may focus on specific themes.¹⁷³
- b) Newspapers in countries bordering Myanmar (India, Bangladesh, Thailand) or with a special interest in the country (other ASEAN nations). These media concentrate on factual reports and commentaries reflecting the attitude of the respective government towards the events in Myanmar.
- c) International newspapers publishing information by correspondents posted in the region and as well as commentaries on the events, providing background information and reproducing assessments by Myanmar specialists.
- d) News services, radio stations and TV stations which report almost exclusively on Myanmar or concentrate on special regions of the country.¹⁷⁴ Three media, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima News* provided most of the information on developments inside Myanmar republished by BurmaNet. Because of their special role (see above 5.1.1), some more details about these enterprises are given below (5.2.1.1).
- e) Some radio stations providing broadcasting services for other countries have a special “Burmese section” and communicate their news bilingually, in Burmese and in English. Three of them, BBC (British Broadcasting Service), VOA (Voice of America) and RFA (Radio Free Asia) play a special role and will, therefore be introduced in some detail as well (5.2.1.2). Besides these stations, there are other radio services from abroad like CRI (China Radio International) but these broadcasts have no great impact.¹⁷⁵
- f) Burmese media.¹⁷⁶
- g) Other sources like policy statements of a variety of organisations and institutions with an interest in Myanmar.

5.2.1.1 Burmese Media Abroad: Re-Inventing Burmese Journalism

The three media reported on here share some common features. All three were founded by young Burmese who fled the country after 1988. They are constrained to the interrelated tasks of providing unrestricted information about Myanmar, promoting freedom and democracy in the country and opening a new chapter of Burmese journalism. To achieve these tasks, they need outside funding.

a) The activities of the *Irrawaddy* magazine¹⁷⁷ now published in Chiang Mai can be traced back to the establishment of the Burma Information Group (BIG) founded by Aung Zaw, born 1968, a former student activist of Rangoon University in 1990. Its original aim was to document human rights violations in Myanmar. From 1993 onwards, Aung Zaw worked for the Bangkok newspaper, *The Nation* and in the same year he founded the *Irrawaddy* magazine. As the first independent Burmese media reporting on Myanmar, he transformed the Burma Information Group into the Irrawaddy Publishing Group (IPG). Some three years later, the office of the magazine was transferred to Chiang Mai.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ The Western agencies (AP, AFP and dpa) concentrate on the political development, whereas the Chinese agency Xinhua additionally provides specific information about the national and international business of Myanmar.

¹⁷⁴ There are the Shan Herald Agency for News, Kao Wao News Group (Mon), Khonumthung News Group (Chin), Narinjara News, Kaladan Press Network, Independent Mon News Agency and Network Media Group. <http://www.burmanet.org/news/> links.

¹⁷⁵ See <http://www.chinabroadcast.cn/> [January 16, 2008].

¹⁷⁶ See below 5.2.2.

¹⁷⁷ www.irrawaddy.org.

¹⁷⁸ This information is taken from <http://paraussies.blogspot.com/2008/04/aung-zaw-will-be-speaking-at-carleton.html>. [February 2, 2008]

Aung Zaw is still the editor and manager of *Irrawaddy* magazine and its online edition which provides “in-depth news and information to international readers” about Myanmar and – to a lesser extent - South-East Asia. Aung Zaw is a very outspoken defender of his media’s independence against many threats.

In various articles and speeches, he has defended criticism of the *Irrawaddy* by Burmese exile political organisations and described the attempts to bring the reports in line with the “democracy movement.” He stresses that criticism of opponents of the regime, including Aung San Suu Kyi, is not aimed at denigrating the opposition “but to create healthy democratic debate, to restore a culture of tolerance and constructive criticism, and to educate the ‘democratic opposition’.”¹⁷⁹

Other attempts to influence the reporting come from authorities of the host country, Thailand, which are requested by the Myanmar counterparts to shut down offices publishing critical news about the Myanmar government.

Finally, the media independence has to be defended against the sponsors. *Irrawaddy* needs funds and receives them from various organisations in Europe and the States.¹⁸⁰

b) The *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB) was founded 1992 by former Burmese students who fled to Europe. It transmits both radio and TV services into Burma in Burmese, English and some other languages of the great ethnic groups. The broadcasts are transmitted from Germany, Norway, Tajikistan, Tashkent, Madagascar, and New Zealand. It receives funding from Worldview Rights in Norway, National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, and the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute.

In addition to radio, DVB launched a new Burmese language TV broadcast in May 2005 that can be received via satellite in Burma. The TV broadcast was a main source of news during the September protests. Videos from Myanmar were sent to DVB and after that broadcasted worldwide.

c) *Mizzima News*, founded in 1998 and based in New Delhi, India is the latest provider of news on Myanmar. It disseminates news mainly through a daily email service both in English and Burmese. In addition, *Mizzima* provides radio and TV services via the Internet and a webpage which is regularly updated. *Mizzima* TV provides videos in Burmese that can be downloaded. It receives funds from a variety of donors.¹⁸¹

d) The Burmese media reporting about Myanmar thus try to establish a new way of journalism based on the ethics of independent reporting but are very much involved in the political struggle against the military *junta* and have to fight against the charges of undermining national solidarity. They also have pressures from their foreign donors that can compromise their ability to report independently about Burma.

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-2NRsummer/p23-0602-zaw.html> [January 17, 2008].

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-2NRsummer/p23-0602-zaw.html> [January 7, 2008]. In this article, Aung Zaw just generally informed about the donors and quoted an incident in which he was asked by an US official to take that into consideration in his reporting about the 9/11 events. One of the donors is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which is funded mostly by the U.S. Congress through the State Department (<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0309/S00252.htm>).

¹⁸¹ According to their own statement, *Mizzima* in 2006 received funds from the following organisations:

1. The National Endowment for Democracy (US)
2. International Media Support (Denmark)
3. Internews (Thailand)
4. The Southeast Asian Press Alliance, SEAPA
5. The Open Society Institute Development Foundation, (US)
6. The Euro-Burma Office, (Belgium)
7. The Burma Relief Center (Thailand)
8. Free Voice, (The Netherlands)
9. The Netherlands Embassy in India (Fund directly go into Indian NGO) (<http://www.mizzima.com/MizzimaNews/Others/aboutus.html>).

In a way, their task is to re-invent Burmese journalism.

A short view at the history of the Burmese press underlines the “newness” of the task of establishing free Burmese media.¹⁸² Before the Second World War, the Burmese media were divided between publications owned by the British and those media owned by Burmese that often promoted nationalism. In some cases, media were used by Burmese politicians to further their political agendas.¹⁸³ The tradition of a close affiliation between newspapers and leading politicians – not just political ideologies – continued after Independence and was one cause of much censorship in the troubled days of Burma’s parliamentary era up to 1962.¹⁸⁴ From then on, only state media have been allowed.

Today’s Burmese newspapers not only provide news but also keep archives allowing comparison between current and previous events. The same applies to the Online Burma Library initiated and edited under the umbrella of The World Wide Web Virtual Library.¹⁸⁵ But because all these media were established after 1988, reports about the events of this year are reported in hindsight. This limits a balanced comparison of the events of 1988 and 2007.

5.2.1.2 *International Radio Stations*

The oldest of these services is the **British Broadcasting Service (BBC)**, founded in 1922, still the World’s largest broadcasting service.¹⁸⁶ Broadcasts in Burmese are one of its 33 services in other languages. Whereas the BBC is a quasi-autonomous public corporation broadcasting as a service to the public, VOA was founded in 1942 as the first non-private radio station in the USA to counter Nazi propaganda and is the official external radio and TV service of the United States federal government.¹⁸⁷ Like VOA, RFA is based in Washington, D.C. In 1950, the CIA originally founded RFA through a front organisation to counter communism in Asia. Later, the CIA backed out and the American Congress privatised the radio station¹⁸⁸ with the mission to “provide accurate and timely news and information to Asian countries whose governments prohibit access to a free press.”¹⁸⁹ The Burmese service was launched in 1997.¹⁹⁰

All three stations are related to the governments of Great Britain and the United States respectively, but in very different manners. Whereas the BBC can be regarded as an attempt by the State to secure purely independent journalism, the American based stations are to different degrees policy tools of the American government and the American Parliament. They thus represent a variety of ways of defining the role of the media in a democratic country.

¹⁸² For an illustrated chronology of the history of the Burmese press compiled by the staff of the *Irrawaddy* see http://www.irrawaddy.org/research_show.php?art_id=3533 [January 17, 2008].

¹⁸³ This is exemplified by the fate of the oldest Burmese daily *Thuriya* (Sun), which was founded in 1911 by U Ba Pe and acquired by U Saw in 1938. This acquisition helped Saw to promote his political aims.

¹⁸⁴ For an overview about the state of the Burmese press up to 1956 see Tinker 1957: 77-81.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.burmalibrary.org/>.

¹⁸⁶ It employs some 28,000 people in the United Kingdom alone and has an annual budget of more than £4 billion. BBC was granted a Royal Charter and made a state-owned corporation in 1927. The stated mission of the BBC is “to inform, educate and entertain” (as laid down by Parliament in the BBC Charter); its motto is “Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation”. The Corporation is run by the BBC Trust; and is, per its charter, “free from both political and commercial influence and answers only to its viewers and listeners”

¹⁸⁷ VOA broadcasts in some 45 languages. The Burmese programme is only transmitted as a radio programme, not on TV.

¹⁸⁸ For details, see <http://openncrs.cdt.org/document/97-51>. In, 1997, the “Radio Free Asia Act” was implemented which aimed at increasing broadcasting in Chinese languages, (http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1997_rpt/h105_303.htm [January 17, 2008]).

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.rfa.org/english/> [January 17, 2008].

¹⁹⁰ Other languages: Cantonese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan, Uyghur, Vietnamese.

5.2.2 Sources from Inside Myanmar

After the coup in March 1962, the Burmese press landscape changed step by step. Before that date, a great variety of newspapers existed as private companies.¹⁹¹ In the course of the implementation of the Burmese Way of Socialism, newspapers were nationalised one after another.¹⁹² In addition, in October 1963 a new newspaper, the *Loktha Pyithu Nezin* was launched to propagate the new government policy. In early 1964, an English edition of this paper started to appear, the *Working People's Daily*. After the process of nationalisation had been completed, the two papers served as the mouthpieces of the government reporting on the activities of the government with some news from abroad.

All publications, newspapers, magazines and books, had to be sent to the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB), an institution which has greatly expanded over time and in 1970 was put under the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs.

During the demonstrations in the end of August and September 1988, there was a short “honeymoon”¹⁹³ of press freedom and dozens of unlicensed journals mushroomed. After the coup of September 1988, however, censorship continued and was in a way increased because officially the newly initiated “free market oriented economy” allowed private enterprises to publish magazines and books. As every publication had to pass under the scrutiny of the censors, the PSB continued its work with more manpower. The *Working People's Daily* continued its work as the only daily newspaper. In 1993, the name was changed into “New Light of Myanmar” (*Myanma Alin*) adopting the name of a paper founded in 1914. Thus, the government shed the socialist image of the paper.

In 2000, a weekly journal was launched in English and Burmese language named “Myanmar Times” under the editorship of Australian Ross Dunkley. Other than the many other journals and magazines published by various private people¹⁹⁴ and enterprises, the paper informs about political developments but without being able to take a critical distance from the government. The greatest difference from the *New Light of Myanmar* is style. Like many other magazines, the paper makes use of contemporary journalistic techniques.

The establishment of the “Myanmar Times” as well as the state media’s reaction on the reports published and broadcasted outside Myanmar clearly demonstrate that the government cares about its image and tries to use PR tools to communicate its good intentions and seriousness in carrying them out to its own nationals as well as to the international community.¹⁹⁵

For this reasons, this publication mainly relies on the articles published by the *New Light of Myanmar*. The issues of the last five years are available through Myanmar’s mission in Geneva.¹⁹⁶

5.2.3 The Role of the Pictures

After September 18, 2007, news from Myanmar was aired on TV around the world. It has often been noted that this large international audience made a big difference between 2007 and the last great demonstrations in the country in 1988. This paragraph tries to analyse some side effects of this kind of media coverage.

¹⁹¹ The radio was under state control supervised by the Ministry of Information.

¹⁹² For details see http://www.irrawaddy.org/research_show.php?art_id=3533 [January 19, 2008] and Allott 1993: 5-20.

¹⁹³ Allott 1993: 10.

¹⁹⁴ Officially, there are some 60 magazines registered with the official board. But according to journalists, this number might be exaggerated because the government wants to emphasise that in Myanmar a free press exists [author, personal communication].

¹⁹⁵ With regard to the international community, the Foreign Minister as well as the great embassies abroad (for example in New York and at the United Nations’s offices in Geneva) play a significant role.

¹⁹⁶ <http://mission.itu.ch/MISSIONS/Myanmar/NewsArchives/newsindex.htm> [January 4, 2008].

5.2.3.1 An Elimination of Doubt: The Pakokku Example

Only media specialising in Myanmar reported on the events in Pakokku. The media managed to obtain oral reports (and the informers were questioned by the authorities), but there were no photographs to publish as with later demonstrations in Yangon. In this regard too, the media coverage of Pakokku was a battle about the right depiction of the events.

There was, however, a visual image about a controversial episode, and this drawing was published in the *Irrawaddy's* end-of-year review in January 2008.



Harn Lay, *The Irrawaddy*

The drawing depicts the single-most disputed single of the events, the alleged beating up of monks. The artist, well known for his etching cartoons on the situation of Myanmar under the military,¹⁹⁷ provides a visual reconstruction of what may have happened. He represents one of the many interpretations of the event: that the whole action as well as its brutal apex was a joint venture of military personnel and civilian thugs.

¹⁹⁷ See Defiant Humor, *The Best of Harn Lay's Political Cartoons from the Irrawaddy*. Supported by Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [Chiang Mai, no date].

This reconstruction is problematic because it eliminates any doubt about the event. The observer feels he is an eyewitness to an event, which in reality may or may not have happened. The visualisation creates a virtual reality that was accomplished artificially some time after the events but is projected back to the time of the real event. The picture was retrospectively added to illustrate the *Irrawaddy's* archived September 6 report on the events.¹⁹⁸

5.2.3.2 Trends of Polarisation

This visualisation goes together with a trend toward polarisation in media reporting. A look at the picture clearly tells who is right and who is wrong. This tendency is omnipresent. Another example related to Pakokku is by a German journalist from the renowned magazine *DER SPIEGEL* who visited the town shortly after the events. He informed his readers about the beating of the monks but omitted the subsequent retaliation by members of the *Sangha*.¹⁹⁹

The pictures thus helped to draw a clear line. On one side stands a brutal and oppressive military government enjoying a luxurious lifestyle as shown by the pictures of the wedding of Than Shwe's daughter that can be watched on Youtube.²⁰⁰ On the other side are the poor people led by peaceful Buddhist monks risking their lives for the wellbeing of their fellow countrymen.

5.2.3.3 Photographers as Freedom Fighters

Later in Yangon, there was no need for an artificial visualisation of what had happened. Citizens provided an abundance of pictures. This is due to two developments. Today's Myanmar is much more connected to the world than during the socialist period of the country under Ne Win. The policy of opening the country to foreign investment after 1988 resulted into the influx of new technologies. Mobile phones with photo and video functions and video cameras are now widely in use in the big cities. Images can thus be transmitted to other places on the spot. Second, Myanmar over the last years courted tourists to visit the country. Those staying in the Traders, one of the best hotels in Yangon, were very close to the Sule Pagoda in the centre of the city. They witnessed and filmed what happened on Sule Pagoda Road from above until the authorities closed the viewing platform.²⁰¹

The very contrast between the Myanmar authorities' attempts to keep control over the people news leaks and the great demand internationally for scarce goods like news from an allegedly isolated place, was a salient factor which very much shaped the public perception of the events outside the country. All those who provided these pictures, particularly if they were Burmese, were perceived as heroic freedom fighters defying the control of the military government and thus as representatives of a new, democratic Burma.²⁰² The death of the Japanese photographer Nagai Kenji on September 27 which was documented on the Internet shortly afterward, underlined this message and created a spontaneous solidarity between the demonstrators and the "free world". Later, the photo was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

¹⁹⁸ See Document 4.3.

¹⁹⁹ SPIEGEL 43, 2007: p. 168.

²⁰⁰ Here, an anonymous videographer leaked an informative 10-minute video of the wedding of General Than Shwe's daughter, Thandar, to the press. It was put on You Tube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3_boc9Z_Pc [February 10, 2008]) and could be watched inside Myanmar. It often was quoted how infuriated the Burmese people were about the exposition of wealth. Many people inside Myanmar also had copies of the full length video on DVD which depicted hours of the wealthiest military members displaying their fancy cars and offering expensive gifts.

²⁰¹ Later, many film clips were made public on You Tube and can be watched there.

²⁰² See Document 5.2. – The author witnessed a demonstration organised by Amnesty International in Hamburg with a highly emotional keynote speech calling for support for the Burmese monks who had risked their lives in taking photos of the events. When he told a Burmese participant about his intention to travel to Myanmar soon he was asked to bring more pictures back.



Source: Reuters

The Japanese reporter represented the eyes of the public outside Myanmar. His fate emphasised the necessity of the free world to support the people of Burma against the regime. His destiny and the death of Buddhist monks generated an imagined unity of martyrs bridging national and cultural borders. The idea of the death of innocent people striving for a noble cause evokes extremely strong feelings towards the victims and against the culprits because it connects the local events on the streets of Yangon with the universal sphere of the sacred.²⁰³

5.2.3.4 Emotional before Rational Response

In this way, the emotional impact of the events came to the fore, and was used to call for immediate and spontaneous action against the *junta* and its supporters both on the political and the individual levels.²⁰⁴ On the other hand, sober and detailed reflection on the events was often thrust aside, a perspective which does not contradict but rather complements the message of the pictures.

This trend was intensified by the fact that images – photos as well as videos and films - were reproduced again and again as illustrations in a variety of contexts. In contrast, news, commentaries or reflections both written and oral that contain elements of contingency and singleness must be changed when set in a new context.

Another example of the influence of the “visualisation” of the events in Myanmar is the term “Saffron Revolution” already mentioned in the introduction. The term was taken up within Myanmar²⁰⁵ thus shaping the assessment of the events and, possibly, adding to the frustration of the people who believed that they had deserved a revolution but once more were betrayed.

Finally, one more effect of the pictures on the demonstrations described in detail in the next chapter can be mentioned. The pictures suggested that the monks occupied the whole space of the scene. In reality, every picture shows only a detail of a much greater picture. This feature added to the trend of emotionalising and polarising the conflict.

5.2.3.5 Summary

Within the context of this study, the pictures of what happened during the demonstrations are important for at least three reasons. They show that the events in Myanmar were and are part of global interdependence. Along the possibility of exposing the needs of the Burmese people to consumers of TV

²⁰³ See Document 5.3.

²⁰⁴ Immediately after the protests were suppressed, the EU and the USA called for tougher sanctions. Protesters around the world asked for a boycott against the Olympic Games in Beijing the following year in order to censure Myanmar’s main ally. The “Australians Buddhists” called for a tourism boycott (see Document 5.3).

²⁰⁵ Personal communication to the author, October 20, 2007.

news around the world might have some impact on the events. Second, the pictures point out the limitation of a study like this. It cannot really retell what happened to all the people who could and still can be seen on the videos and photographs. It is still not even possible to clarify the story behind one of the most often reproduced pictures of a dead monk floating in water. Finally, the emotional impact of the pictures outside Myanmar implies the question of how the emotional reactions of people inside the country can be conceptualised and compared to the basic compassion that was evoked outside Myanmar by the reports..

5.2.4 Observations on the Spot

Without a doubt, a main source of information about the events was the perceptions of Burmese witnesses participants and scholars. To collect this primary information was difficult because opinion polls and interviews are not possible. This gulf between the information desired but impossible to obtain is one reason for the “climate of rumours” that is characteristic for Myanmar’s public sphere. Since this study includes observations of how Myanmar people reacted to the events, some remarks on the nature of this kind of material are necessary.

Some of the “inventors” of this study and contributors to it were in Yangon during the period of the demonstrations and their suppression. The author visited the country shortly after the events. Both observations are used as sources signified as: “Personal observation of (or communication to) the author.” This helps to conceal the names of the Burmese witnesses for the time being. Consequently, the above-mentioned refers sometimes to indirect observation and communication. These observations serve two objectives. First, the argument shall be substantiated that besides a generally positive response to the monks’ demonstrations and a condemnation of the authorities’ reaction there existed a variety of assessments of the events within the Myanmar public. Second, it shall be proposed that in Myanmar some interpretations of the events exist which up to now have not been shared with the outside world and deserve further investigation.

The observations presented here are confined by two factors. They were almost exclusively collected in Yangon in contacts with certain strata of the city’s society. It would be interesting to get some information about the perception of the events in rural districts of central Burma and in the areas of the non-Burman ethnic groups.²⁰⁶

5.2.5 The Language Question

The main sources used in this paper are by the majority reports written in English. A random sample of the Burmese and the English issues of *Myanma Alin* and the *New Light of Myanmar* show that the English issue contains literal translations from the Burmese texts. It can be assumed that the news in English published by media like DVB, BBC, VOA and RFA are in some way different from the original broadcasts in Burmese simply because the spoken language bestows a special meaning on the information communicated. It was not possible until now to compare recordings of broadcasts into Myanmar on particular events with the respective accounts in English.

²⁰⁶ Shan Paung and Violet Cho, two ethnic Karen, expressed the problem in an article for *Irrawaddy* (February 1, 2008) thus: “The September 2007 demonstrations, however, will still enter the history books as an urban uprising that lacked truly nationwide backing, especially from ethnic groups.”

5.3 Conclusions

A lot of information exists on the demonstrations and their suppression in Myanmar in August and September 2007. The reports differ both in quantity and quality, causing some methodological difficulties. From the presentation and discussion of the sources some conclusions can be drawn.

- a) The events in Myanmar in August and September 2007 must be seen in a global context, on the levels of the facts, the news about these facts, and various interpretations and perceptions related to them.
- b) In face of the complexity arising from the interdependence of a great variety of factors influencing the events and their perception, any account can only display details from the whole picture by way of reduction.
- c) The documentary part of this study provides a skeleton of facts extracted from a comparison of news published inside and outside Myanmar. Disputed reports are recorded and connected to different interpretations of the background of the events. Finally, the events are set and discussed in different contexts.
- d) Some of the sources used are reproduced in order to give the reader an idea about the complexity undertaken in this study and to help him to make up his own mind (see vol. 2 of this paper).
- e) For any assessment of the events comparisons are necessary. Special attention is given to the historical backdrop of the events drawing parallels to the monks' involvement in politics in the colonial period and after independence.

6 THE MONKS' DEMONSTRATIONS – SEPTEMBER 18 TO SEPTEMBER 25

6.0 Preliminary Remarks

Between Tuesday, September 18, the 19th anniversary of the coup of 1988, and Tuesday, September 25, mostly young monks marched through various cities of Myanmar in a similar manner but with a different purpose than in their usual morning alms rounds. Within these eight days, the monks' message was that they at least symbolically refused to take alms from the ruling military and thus publicly demonstrated their fundamental disapproval of the government.

6.1 Undisputed Information

The following paragraphs give a short and incomplete account of what happened in Myanmar between September 18 and 25, 2007 in Myanmar. The main aim of these reports is to provide a basis for interpretation and reflection on the events. Since the Burmese state media did not report on most of the monks' demonstrations, the following account mainly relies on the coverage of the media outside Myanmar as well as on personal experiences and communication. In most cases, the sources for the information given here are not specified. A special look at the role of the media within this crucial period will be presented in chapters 6.2 and 6.3.

6.1.1 Between September 5 and September 17

The ABMA's ultimatum for the SPDC to apologise for the Pakokku violence, reduce the commodity prices, release political prisoners and start a dialogue with democratic parties expired on the September 17 without any move by the ruling *junta* towards meeting a single one of these demands. On September 14, the ABMA re-announced in a second statement that they would refuse alms from the SPDC officials beginning on September 17.²⁰⁷

The week before the monks' demonstrations started, the SPDC made a few efforts to bring the sympathy of the people towards their aim and to win the support of the *Sangha*. On September 10 they organised mass rallies to welcome the National Convention and on September 16 the families of the Burmese military government defence services made generous donations (rice, cooking oil, salt, medicine and cash) to 15 monasteries and a nunnery in Sangyone, Thakayta and Dawbon Township in Yangon.²⁰⁸

To limit possibilities for actions by the civilian opposition groups, the SPDC deactivated the landline and mobile phone service of key activists, journalists, and the NLD headquarters.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ See document 6.1. – According to Human Rights Watch, Monks and novices throughout Burma responded in large numbers to the ABMA's call to relaunch the protests and senior abbots supported the ABMA boycott and called for the resumption of peaceful protests.)

²⁰⁸ NLM, September 17, 2007.

²⁰⁹ AP, September 13, 2007.

From September 15 onward, monks in Myitkyina and Bhamo, Kachin State, were locked up in their rooms inside the monasteries and the military cared for their food. This way, they didn't have the opportunity to refuse donations by the military on their alms rounds and nor could they communicate with the public.²¹⁰ Parallel to the containment of the monks, a "poster campaign" initiated by students took place in the two towns. A4-sized posters were pasted on central buildings including government offices asking the government to meet five demands.²¹¹

6.1.2 Monday, September 17 - The day of preparation

In the morning, hundreds of monks started the demonstrations in Chauk, Magwe Division and in Kyaukpadaung, Mandalay Division by reciting "*paritta sutta*"²¹² in the morning. One monastery in Tharrawaddy, Bago Division started the boycott and refused donations from the SPDC. The security forces stayed quiet.

6.1.3 Tuesday, September 18 - Beginning of the processions

On the advertised day of the monks' boycott of donations given by any people related to the SPDC, the first processions of monks apart from the usual daily walks were seen in Yangon (Bahan Township and South Okkalapa at 3 pm), Bago and Tharawaddy in Bago Division, Kyaukpadaung in Mandalay Division, Pakokku and Aunglan in Magwe Division and Sittwe (Rakhine State).²¹³ The monks walked to local temples and chanted the *metta sutta* and the *paritta sutta*. The marches were disciplined and the monks didn't allow bystanders to join them. Security forces followed the marches and kept watch over pagodas and monasteries but stayed quiet. They videotaped and photographed the demonstrators.

In Yangon, plainclothes policemen blocked one procession that was heading toward the Shwedagon Pagoda. The monks then walked to the Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon. This procession lasted about three hours.

Only in Sittwe, Rakhine State did civilians including members of the Muslim population join the monks' demonstration. Here, the crowd was violently dispersed with tear gas by security forces. Three monks and one novice were arrested and released in the night.

6.1.4 Wednesday, September 19 - The Second Day

Thousand of monks marched again in Yangon, Gyobingauk and Pyi (Prome), Bago Division, Mandalay and Kalay in Sagaing Division.²¹⁴ Civilians watched the monks' processions on the streets and offered drinking water to them. In Yangon, monks occupied the Sule Pagoda for some time.

In Sittwe, monks marched to a police station and sat down in front of it demanding the release of the civilians arrested on August 28. They further walked to the local SPDC office and demanded an apology for using tear gas the previous day. They occupied the building for two hours and left afterwards.

Police started confiscating cameras in Yangon.

²¹⁰ Kachin News Group, 18.09.07; the same agency had reported a day earlier that "student monks disappear mysteriously from four monasteries in Myitkyina [the capital of Kachin State]".

²¹¹ "To roll back oil and essential commodity prices, to immediately stop the Myitsone Hydroelectric Power project, to release all political prisoners and to solve the country's problems by initiating a "Tripartite Dialogue" which should including the ruling *junta*, political opposition political parties and ethnic leaders." (Kachin News Group, September 20).

²¹² A "paritta sutta" is a special kind of recitation asking for protection from evil. For an overview of such recitation in Burma, see <http://www.aimwell.org/Books/Suttas/Paritta/paritta.html> [April 15, 2009].

²¹³ For an overview on the reported demonstrations, see document 6.2.

²¹⁴ According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) (AAPPB), 9 demonstrations took place on September 19, four of them in Yangon.

6.1.5 Thursday, September 20 - Walking in the Rain

Again, monks marched in downtown Yangon, North and South Dagon, South Okkalapa and Monywa, Mandalay Division. People again offered water and beetle nuts to the monks. In Yangon, the Shwedagon Pagoda was opened for the monks. Some civilian marchers passed by foreign embassies and carried placards calling for a UN Security Council resolution on Burma.

Monks from Bago tried in the morning to travel to Yangon to join protesting monks in the former capital, but the authorities unhitched the carriage in which they were travelling at Toe Kyaung Lay, the last railway station before Rangoon. Another attempt to reach Yangon by car was thwarted as well.

The monks continued to request civilians not to participate in their marches. They maintained that it was their business and they wanted to cope with it by themselves. Nonetheless in Yangon, hundreds of students and young people protected marching monks by joining hands to make a human chain.

6.1.6 Friday, September 21 - Torrential rains, floods, storm in Yangon

Monks marched in Yangon, Shwebo and other places²¹⁵ heavy rain, walking through flooded streets and heavy rain.²¹⁶

The ABMA issued a third statement.²¹⁷ It accused the “evil military dictatorship” to be the “common enemy of all our citizens” and proclaimed that the alliance’s aim was to “banish the common enemy evil regime from Burmese soil forever.” “It is time for the Burmese people to work with monks and courageously demonstrate their genuine aspirations.”

Journalists, artists, actors and singers show their support and call on more people to support and join the monks’ demonstrations.

6.1.7 Saturday, September 22 - Monks Meet Aung San Suu Kyi

Monks marched in Yangon, Sagaing and Mandalay. In Myitkyina and Bhamo monks broke free from their monasteries and marched through the towns.

Monks and civilians walked by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s house in Yangon and stopped in front of it for 15 minutes reciting Buddhist texts. Aung San Suu Kyi came out and talked shortly to one monk while the security forces looked on.²¹⁸ After that, she went back into her house and the monks disappeared.

²¹⁵ The AAPPB reports 14 demonstrations in five divisions.

²¹⁶ *Mizzima News*, reported on September 21 under the headline “Rangoon hit by flash floods”: “Rangoon city has been hit by flash floods following torrential rains, even as small groups of monks demonstrated on Friday. Storms caused by Typhoon Wipha lashed the country late on Friday afternoon causing widespread flooding and cutting off transport links. In places like Kabaraye Pagoda Road, Thamine junction and Inya, there is knee deep water. It resulted in heavy traffic snarls where vehicles moved at snail's pace. There were few buses run on the road. "The road looks like a river," a resident told *Mizzima*. "People have to descend where there is less water. The members of the red cross are helping people cross the road," she added. There have been no reports of casualties as a result of the flash floods. The former capital was flooded in May. Small groups of monks gathered in different parts of the city but the flood hampered their movement. A brief demonstration occurred in Malamu pagoda this morning.” - The following day, the paper reported (headline: „Rangoon inundated by torrential rain.”): “Incessant rain for three days inundated large areas in Rangoon. There is three feet of water on the roads and cars cannot ply. Many vehicles are stranded on the roads. The roads that are flooded include, Strand Road, Phoneyi Road, Dhamazedi Road (near Windermere market), U Wisara Road (opposite Blazon), Sule Padoda Road (South), Mahabandula Street (opposite the Secretariat), Tamwe Plaza Theiby Street (Kandawlay) Moreover, Wayzayanda Street, South Okkala Post Office, North Okkala (Thunanda), and Thamaing intersection.”

²¹⁷ See document 6.3.

²¹⁸ Under http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/burma1207/burma1207_files/image004.jpg [April 15, 2009] one can find a photo of the event.

6.1.8 Sunday, September 23 - Demonstrations and Demands Grow

10.000 monks, nuns and 10.000 civilians marched in Yangon, Magwe, Myitkyina, Bhamo. Monks were hindered from going to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's House again. The authorities tightened the security around her house and blocked the street. Monks in Pakokku renewed their call for an apology and demanded that the regime hand over power to the people (*Irrawaddy*). Students and artists joined the demonstrations and offered food and water to the monks. For the first time, white clad nuns joined the demonstrations. Slogans were shouted at the demonstrations demanding the reduction of prices, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and national reconciliation.

The government tried to discourage civilians to join the monks. Burma's Information Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan told Burmese journalists, writers, movie actors and actresses to sign a pledge not to participate in the demonstrations.

6.1.9 Monday, September 24 - More Civilians Join the Demonstrations and an Official Reaction by the Government

The mass demonstrations by the monks and the general public grew further. In Yangon, one procession passed by the headquarters of the NLD. From there on, some party members who were elected in the 1990 joined the march. Popular celebrities like popular comedian, Zarganar, and the famous poet Aung Way participated as well by donating food to the protesting monks. Thousands demonstrated in Yangon, Bago, Mandalay, Sagaing and Magwe, Kawthaung in Tenasserim Division, as well as in towns in Mon, Arakan and Kachin States. Monks openly called for an end to the military government.²¹⁹

Several high schools, government offices and many private businesses in Yangon closed their doors in case of a possible confrontation between government forces and demonstrators.

Security forces were stationed at intersections leading to Suu Kyi's house. In the evening, Religion Minister General Thura Thint Maung appeared on TV and warned the monks not to break "Buddhist rules and regulations". In addition, the people were warned not to join the protests.

6.1.10 Tuesday, September 25 - More Demonstrations, More Statements

Mass demonstrations in down town Yangon, Mandalay, Mon, Rakhine and Kachin States, Taunggyok, Sittwe holding Buddhist, the students' and the UN flags. Demonstrators shouted slogans demanding that the *junta* reduce commodities prices immediately and other demands. Sittwe hosted the biggest demonstration so far with up to 100.000 participants.

In the evening, soldiers in Yangon moved in on Sule Pagoda after the protest. Truckloads of troops headed downtown after the processions had ended.

Several political groups released official statements. The NLD supported the monks and called for a start to a process of national reconciliation. The ABMA and the '88-*Generation Students* group issued a joint statement in calling for national reconciliation, too, and additionally the release of all political prisoners and an improvement in the living standards of the people.²²⁰ *The Committee Representing the People's Parliament in Burma* demanded a greater pressure on the regime to establish democracy in the country; they urged younger people and students to support the demonstrations.

²¹⁹ According to a list provided by AAPPB, 23 demonstrations took place nationwide. In most of them civilians participated.

²²⁰ See document 6.4

The *Sangha Nayaka* Committee through the *New Light of Myanmar* issued directives to monks and monasteries “prohibiting monks to participate in secular affairs”.²²¹

Trucks circulated in the morning and evening, warning people over loudspeakers not to participate in the protests. In the night a curfew from 9 pm to 5 am and an assembly ban was announced for the next 60 days for Yangon and Mandalay.

Arrests of NLD members were made in North-Western Myanmar.

6.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports

As elaborated in chapter 5, the media played a crucial role in the events not only by reporting about what had happened but by trying to influence public opinion and thus the course of affairs.

6.2.1 Between the Pakokku Events and the End of the Monks’ Ultimatum

6.2.1.1 Inside Myanmar

Chapter 4 documented the attempt of the Myanmar state media to downplay the events of Pakokku and to blame the NLD, the “’88 students” and foreign media to exaggerate what had happened and to have used the price hike as a pretext to stir up unrest among the people. Furthermore, connections were drawn between the ex-students inside the countries and “terrorists” living outside.

In a second announcement of the SPDC Information Committee on September 10, a lengthy explanation was given on the reasons behind the rise in fuel prices. They were necessary, they explained, to reduce the state deficit. Compared to most other countries, the prices were still low.²²² In the same issue on the title page, the *New Light of Myanmar* reported on a donation of the military towards five monasteries in Yangon showing a picture of a general bowing before members of the *Sangha*. Similar events constituted the headlines in the same newspaper’s issues of the two following days, September 11 and 12.²²³ On the September 17, the day before the announced boycott, the title page carried a report about families of the Defence Services donating cash and food to various monasteries and nunneries in Yangon.

All these media reports, further reinforced by the state television news can be regarded as an attempt to show that the top brass of the military as well as the rank and file and their families were good Buddhists and thus next of kin to the people.²²⁴

6.2.1.2 Outside Myanmar

After the Pakokku events, the foreign media covered the ongoing events by reporting about moves by the government, the people and the monks, by analyzing the background of the demonstrations, and by predicting what might happen in the future.

²²¹ See document 6.5

²²² NLM September 10, 2007, p. 16 and 10; see document 6.6.

²²³ On September 14, there is a similar report from the Shan States in a less salient section of the paper.

²²⁴ For the Buddhist rhetoric of the *Tatmadaw* see McCarthy 2006, chapter 8.

The news mostly focused on a variety of repressive measures on the side of the government like arrests,²²⁵ cutting of phone lines²²⁶ and putting pressure on people.²²⁷ Another focus was on the defiant mood of opponents to the government²²⁸ culminating in reports on September 17 describing the tension before September 18.²²⁹

The analyses concentrated on the role of monks in the protests. Aung Zaw, editor of the *Irrawaddy*, in a longer article²³⁰ pointed out that the country's majority of young monks, estimated to number between 250,000 and 300,000 out of a total of 400,000 to 450,000, knew best about the economic problems of the public but understood the "nature of politics" as well. This "nature" is, according to words of the Buddha, "good governance and a good ruler". The article then discussed the disputed involvement of monks in politics in Burmese history and the division of the monkhood mainly along the line of age.

As for the prospects, outside observers like the long standing Burma specialist Larry Jagan compared the situation after Pakokku to the events of 1988 arguing that the protests could result in a "full blown mass political movement".²³¹

6.2.1.3 Summary: Setting the Stage

The coverage of the post-Pakokku events by the media both inside and outside Myanmar reflected an attitude of confrontation on the part of the Myanmar government as well as on the part of its opponents, the people of Myanmar, represented by the young monks. The government media construed a conspiracy theory focussing on the alleged attempt of the NLD to take over state power comparing the Pakokku incident with the incitement of unrest in 1988.²³² As a response, it solemnly declared, "Government will never tolerate such malicious acts and will take effective action against those committing such acts."²³³

On the other side, parallels to 1988 were drawn as well. In an interview with *Irrawaddy*, a member of the '88 Students Group expressed an optimistic opinion about the strength of the opposition: "People today are more aware of politics, and the current political situation thanks to the media abroad". And: "Pro-democracy groups will be able to grab opportunities this time, ... Unlike '88, we have the NLD and other political groups. And Daw Suu [Aung San Suu Kyi] is here though she is under house arrest." But: "Whether or not the current protests will rise up to the level of the one in '88 depends on the ruling generals and the way they treat the protests."²³⁴

²²⁵ Reuters September 12 "Lone Myanmar protester jailed for four years" The man allegedly had encouraged monks to turn their backs to *junta* leader Than Shwe.

²²⁶ *Mizzimna News*, September 12: "Foreign correspondents phones under censorship blade".

²²⁷ *Independent Mon News Agency*, September 12 "Residents barred from listening to *Dhamma* (Buddhist teaching) in Mandalay". - *Irrawaddy*, September 12 "Junta orders monk curfew at some monasteries". According to the report, alms rounds were limited to one hour. - *Kachin News Group*, 17. September: "Student monks disappear mysteriously from four monasteries in Myitkyina." According to a later report, the monks had been closed up in monasteries and were fed by the authorities.

²²⁸ *Reuters*, September 13 "Myanmar protests 'just the start' - top dissident". - *Independent Mon News Agency*, September 14: "Military officials in Mandalay thrown out by monks".

²²⁹ *Irrawaddy*, September 17 "Burmese Turn to Foreign Radios for Latest News"; - DVB, September 17, "Henzada monks hospitalised after food poisoning." It was rumoured that the monks received the food from a person close to the government. - DVB, September 17: "Military steps up restrictions on Muslims".

²³⁰ *Irrawaddy*, September 11.

²³¹ Larry Jagan in *Asia Times*, September 13.

²³² "By observing the incidents which occurred in Pakokku city, the real intention of the NLD vividly show that they have been trying to seize the State power by short cut through inciting unrest like in 1988." (NLM September 10, p. 11)

²³³ *Ibid* p. 16 (see document 6.6).

²³⁴ *Irrawaddy* September 17, 2007 "Leading Activist in Hiding Warns of Dangerous Days Ahead".

In the same report, the situation is characterised as a setting of the stage on which events were moving forward “inexorably”. The drama to unfold was regarded as a resumption of the unresolved confrontation of 1988.

6.2.2 Tuesday, September 18

The events of the first day after the expiry of the monks’ ultimatum were reported in detail in the foreign media specialised on Myanmar. Eyewitnesses were quoted. *Irrawaddy* reported that the boycott went into effect on Tuesday as early as 3:00 a.m. in Pegu Division. According to an eyewitness, some 1,000 monks marched and a crowd of 100,000 people was present, the largest crowd he had seen in his lifetime.²³⁵ DVB reported on an incident in Chauk, Upper Burma, in which a stone thrown over the wall of his monastery into the compound hit a monk on Sunday night. According to the monk, the stone thrower belonged to a group of men fleeing the scene on motorbikes and that other monks believed that the “attack was staged by government supporters” in a reaction to a protest against government harassment by some monks earlier that day. *Mizzima* reported about the seizure of cameras from journalists working for Japanese media covering the demonstrations and removing their memory cards.

Besides the information about the monks’ marches, their attentive observation by the laypeople as well as the authorities and – with the exception of Sittwe – the toleration by the security forces, no details were reported about how the “boycott” was practised. In the reports of the media consulted for this study, there is no report about any act of even symbolically overturning the alms bowl.

6.2.3 Wednesday, September 19

The events in Sittwe of the previous day were reported in the state media and once more in the foreign media as well as a march of some 100 monks in Yangon. Regarding the demonstration in Sittwe, it was stressed that the authorities even tolerated violent attacks by laypeople as well as some monks. According to the reports, the use of tear gas and the firing of three shots in the air were necessary to stop the violence of the crowd.²³⁶ Additionally, former accusations (see 6.2.1.2) were repeated. *Mizzima* published the account of an eyewitness who stated that the confrontation began in front of the SPDC office between USDA members and some protesting monks.²³⁷

According to a report of *Irrawaddy*, monks gave speeches to thousands of people near Sule Pagoda. One monk is quoted thus: “We are marching for the relief of poverty and hardships of the people. Burma is backward in every aspect. The military regime is responsible for all of that. Even if our protesting monks are arrested, we will continue.”²³⁸

6.2.4 Thursday, September 20

The state media ceased publishing news on the ongoing demonstrations until September 25, the day before the security forces started their crackdown. They published only indirect news on the events like the reports about NLD members who had quit the party.²³⁹

²³⁵ *Irrawaddy* September 18, 2007 “Monks march as boycott begins-authorities use tear gas”. – Another big number appears in a piece of news issued by Reuters on the same day. According to the information, 300.000 monks live in Myanmar’s second largest city.

²³⁶ NLM September 19, p. 16 and 9.

²³⁷ For the different accounts, see document 6.9.

²³⁸ *Irrawaddy*, September 19, 2007 “Huge crowds turn out to hear monks condemn junta.”

Foreign media reported from Yangon that the authorities had erected barbed wire around the city hall.²⁴⁰ A spokesman from a Buddhist group calling itself “The Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks” vowed to continue with the protests. According to the same source, the largest number of monks – 1300 – marched in Yangon.²⁴¹

6.2.5 Friday, September 21

According to one report, security forces had the order to protect the monks and to be patient. A government spokesman denied rumours about the declaration of a state of emergency by claiming that some groups had circulated such rumours to destabilize the situation.²⁴²

Contrasting this report and the news about monks’ gatherings on the Shwedagon, which had been closed the previous day, witnesses in Yangon reported about soldiers assuming positions at different parts of Yangon. Another reported that patients were asked to leave a hospital.²⁴³

Other news concerned the participation of laypeople in the protests. A “Federation of All Burma Young Monks Unions” was said to call up the public to join the monks. A prominent author expressed the opinion that poets and artists should join in with the monks and the people. The report states that the monks’ statement for the first time turned away from the previous warning to the public not to join the protests.²⁴⁴

6.2.6 Saturday, September 22

There are some reports quoting people who witnessed the meeting of monks and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in front of her house in University Avenue. The reports stressed that the road leading to her house is usually blocked by guards. The group of monks, however, was allowed to walk past her house and the opposition leader was allowed to greet the monks. “As the rain poured down, Aung San Suu Kyi walked out with two other women and cried as she paid her respects to the monks”, one witness reported.²⁴⁵ According to another report, she had a conversation with a monk, believed to be a leader. What they discussed was not known.²⁴⁶ The number of monks and civilians passing by varies in the reports between 200 and 1000. Comments highlighted the symbolic significance of the meeting. One commentary carried the headline “Silenced Suu Kyi still the voice of Myanmar opposition”.²⁴⁷ Another reported alleged plans conceived by Than Shwe to use violence against the monks by infiltrating bogus monks into the demonstrators and making use of a provoked conflict. This suggestion drew a parallel to the Depayin incident of May 2003²⁴⁸ when the convoy traveling together with Aung San Suu Kyi through Northern Myanmar was attacked. After the incident, she was again put under house arrest where she still was in September 2007.

²³⁹ The NLM had published such information for a long time. The numbers of members who had “no wish to stand as members of NLD” between September 18 and 25 was: 7 (18.9.); 0 (19.9.); the Sittwe-incident was reported on this day); 17 (20.9.); 23 (21.9.); 12 (22.9.); 49 (23.9.); 54 (24.9.); 0 (25.9.); this day, the Myanmar related news almost exclusively dealt with NLD.

²⁴⁰ <http://www.irrawaddy.org/protests/BurmaProtests.php#2004> [January 18, 2008].

²⁴¹ AFP September 20, 2007.

²⁴² AP September 21, 2007 “Public joins monks in Myanmar protest”.

²⁴³ *Irrawaddy*, September 21, 2007 „Soldiers set up security in Rangoon”.

²⁴⁴ *Irrawaddy*, September 21, 2007 “Monks issue call for public to join demonstrations”.

²⁴⁵ http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/301433/1/.html [January 18, 2008].

²⁴⁶ *Irrawaddy*, September 22, 2007 “Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay.”

²⁴⁷ AFP, September 22, 2007.

²⁴⁸ DVB, September 22, 2007 “Than Shwe reportedly orders use of violence to break up monks protests”.

From Mandalay, where some 10,000 monks were demonstrating, a low turnout of laymen was reported and some monks were seen turning over their alms bowls in a symbolic gesture of boycotting donations by the military.²⁴⁹ In Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, officials and monks of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee, the government-organized monks' organization, summoned about 50 abbots to a meeting without government authorities. One abbot who attended the meeting said that monks of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee requested the abbots not to continue protest demonstrations. One abbot told *The Irrawaddy* by telephone that after the abbots rejected the request, the monks from the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* organization urged the abbots to hold peaceful protest demonstrations. The abbot said the gathered monks formed a committee to organize protests in the coming days.²⁵⁰ In Myitkyina and Bhamo, Kachin State, where monks were confined in monasteries for a week, monks broke free and marched through the towns.²⁵¹

More members of Myanmar's entertainment industry, including famous comedian Zaganar reportedly supported the monks' protests.²⁵²

6.2.7 Sunday, September 23

The international media highlight the "challenge" to the government by the monks, which was increased through the meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi on the previous day.²⁵³ The pressure on the government was increasingly "to decide whether to crack down or compromise with the demonstrators".²⁵⁴

Mizzima News reported a new government order issued to Rangoon-based journals and periodicals to publish a declaration denouncing the ongoing protests led by monks. The Burma Media Association said in a press statement, the Burmese *junta's* director of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, Major Tint Swe, instructed the journals and periodicals to publish a declaration stating that they were not interested in the ongoing protest. Nor were they permitted to associate with the newly formed "Association of Journalists and Artists". "We have no choice but to follow the order because the director explicitly said that we will be considered as members of an illegal association if we fail to carry the announcement," an editor of a sports journal was reported to have said.²⁵⁵

According to the *Irrawaddy*, the "Alliance of All Burma Buddhist Monks" issued a leaflet calling up students, workers, peasants, artists and intellectuals to engage themselves in the peaceful demonstrations. The leaflet said the demonstrations should press three demands "relieve the burden of the people's daily lives, free political prisoners and national reconciliation."²⁵⁶

6.2.8 Monday, September 24

Reports stated that the number of people participating in the demonstrations was still increasing. For Yangon it was stated, that more people than before went on the streets. The numbers given varied.

²⁴⁹ *Irrawaddy*, September 22, 2007 "Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay."

²⁵⁰ *Irrawaddy*, September 22, 2007: "Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay."

²⁵¹ <http://www.kachinnews.com/read.asp?mType=1&id=786&CatId=14> [January 18.2008]

²⁵² DVB, September 22, 2007: "Entertainment industry leaders voice support for protests". In Mandalay, Par Par Lay, the leader of the comedian troupe "Moustache Brothers" who have a longstanding history of opposing the government, publicly supported the protests. He was arrested on September 25 and released five days later.

²⁵³ *New York Times*, September 23, 2007 "Challenge to Myanmar's *junta* gains momentum"; AFP, September 23, 2007 "Emboldened Myanmar monks challenge *junta* rule".

²⁵⁴ AP, September 23, 2007 "20,000 march against Myanmar government".

²⁵⁵ *Mizzima News* September 24, 2007 "*Junta* orders Rangoon based journals to denounce ongoing protest".

²⁵⁶ *Irrawaddy*, September 23, 2007 "Burma Bars Artists, Journalists From Joining Protests".

Some sources reported that 10,000 monks participated,²⁵⁷ other that 100.000 people took to the streets.²⁵⁸ For the first time, nuns in their pink robes joined the monks.²⁵⁹ Besides the demands propagated on the streets – national reconciliation and freedom for Aung San Suu Kyi – a new appeal from the ABMA was published calling people “to struggle peace-fully against the against the evil military dictatorship till its complete downfall and to banish the common enemy evil from Burmese soil forever.”²⁶⁰

In Monywa and Myitkyina almost 200 monks were reported to have been kicked out of their monasteries for taking part in protest marches against military oppression.²⁶¹

It was reported that ethnic parties in Burma had joined the protesting monks and Burmese general public in the nationwide demonstrations, according to some top ethnic leaders, chairman of the Zomi National Congress, Secretary of the Arakan League for Democracy, United National League for Democracy Mon National Party, Karen National Union, and from the Shan State Army (South). But some members of ethnic groups had reportedly said that this is a fight “between Burman and Burman” and was not their concern.²⁶²

A report on the broadcast contrasted the Religion Minister’s claim that the monks walking on the streets represented only 2% of the whole monks’ population of the country with the information that 200.000 monks and civilians had protested all over the country that Sunday.

According to Burma Media group formed in exile, the government forbade a newly formed journalists’ organization named “Association of Journalists and Artists”.²⁶³

The London Times quoted human rights activists supporting the Burmese democracy movement as having begun tentatively referring to the prospect of a "Saffron Revolution", after the "colour revolutions" of the former Soviet republics.²⁶⁴

6.2.9 Tuesday, September 25

On the demonstrations of the day, students and members of the All Burma Federation of Students’ Unions waved the “fighting peacock” flag. According to the reports, some 200 members of the NLD joined the demonstration in which 30,000 monks and 70,000 civilians participated in Yangon.²⁶⁵

Protesting Burmese monks today urged the United Nations to intervene immediately in the situation in Myanmar. According to an announcement of an “All Burma Buddhist Monks Union”²⁶⁶ an intervention was necessary to prevent a bloodbath, because the “military junta instead of complying with our demands peacefully, are gearing up for a brutal crackdown.”²⁶⁷

There were speculations about differences in the military leadership as how to respond to the protests. General Than Shwe was reported to advocate the use of force while local and regional leaders dis-

²⁵⁷ *New York Times*, September 24, 2007 “Monks’ protest is challenging Burmese junta”.

²⁵⁸ *BBC, Irrawaddy*, September 24, 2007 “Protests Grow - But So Do Fears of a Crackdown”.

²⁵⁹ *The Times* (London), September 24, 2007 “Nuns join Saffron Revolution”. See Document 1.1.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *DVB*, September 23, 2007 “Burmese military issues threat to monks”.

²⁶² *Irrawaddy*, September 24, 2007 “Ethnics join protests”.

²⁶³ *South East Asian Press Alliance*, 24. September 2007 “Journalists, artistes warned from joining thousands of protesting citizens, monks in Burma”.

²⁶⁴ *The Times*, September 24, 2007 “Nuns join Saffron Revolution”. See introduction (chapter 1).

²⁶⁵ *Irrawaddy*, September 25, 2007 “Top brass reportedly meets as mass protests continue.”

²⁶⁶ According to Human Rights Watch, this name was taken up from a monks’ organisation that was banned after the 1990 crackdown on monks in Mandalay.

²⁶⁷ *Mizzima News*, September 25, 2007 “Monks appeal to UN Chief, activists want peace keeping force.”

agreed. Ethnic Karen rebels on the Thai border told *Reuters* that troops of the 22nd Division had been redeployed to Yangon. That division had played a major role in the 1988 uprising. Another informant reported that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had been transferred to Insein prison on September 23.²⁶⁸

The NLM replied to the nationwide demonstrations on seven pages with clear warnings to the monks if they participated in secular affairs. On the front page they showed several directives signed by members of the State *Sangha Maha Nayaka* committee that appealed to the abbots of the monasteries to supervise their disciples. Again they blamed internal and external saboteurs to have destroyed the nation's peace and the prestige of the *Sangha*.²⁶⁹

6.3 Summary and Disputed Information

6.3.1 Summary

a) There is not much disputed information about the course of events during the eight days of demonstrations led by monks in various parts of Myanmar - at least with regard to what happened in Yangon. This may be attributed mainly to the many people who witnessed what happened and reported on it. Another contributing factor lies in the absence of continual reporting of the events in the state media. Except reports about what happened on the first day of the demonstrations in Yangon and the confrontation that took place in Sittwe and the marches of monks in Yangon, the NLM reported no details. Instead, the line of argumentation generated after the Pakokku incidents was continued. The government blamed an alliance of NLD, ex-students and foreign media for the monks' protests. Thus the dispute about the incidents was shifted to the level of a general reasoning about responsibility, morality and legitimacy. Since the argumentation of the opposition and their foreign supporters to a great extent followed a similar line blaming all evils of Myanmar on the evil triad of military government, USA and Swan Ah Shin, facts and discussion of tangible issues were avoided.

b) What happened during the eight days considered in this chapter can be summarised rather simply. The expiration of the deadline set by the monks' ultimatum on September 17 opened the curtain for a show of confrontation between the government and members of the *Sangha*. Because both sides had declared before that they would not and could not compromise, the events developed by way of a *crescendo* of the pressure exerted. As in any boycott movement, it was an almost unilateral force put by one side on the other, i.e. the monks on the military. Four overlapping levels of the increase can be distinguished: the growing numbers of people participating in the demonstrations; the development of the laypeople's involvements; the increase in demands and the rise of global attention. The combined swell of pressure finally led to a situation in which a new quality of the protests was reached. The combined opposition demanded a regime change, a claim unacceptable for the government that confirmed their original charges against the opposition.

6.3.2 Disputed information

Besides the dispute about the interpretation of the events, there are some facts that can be disputed.

a) As in the case of the events happening in Pakokku, what took place in Sittwe on September 18 was also disputed. Here and there each side put the blame for the undisputed violence that erupted on the opposite party. In both cases, the prehistory of the events and the local circumstances must be taken into account to get hold of a fair picture of the events.

²⁶⁸ Reuters, September 25, 2007.

²⁶⁹ NLM, September 25, 2007.

b) Another discrepancy concerned the absolute numbers of demonstrators. The government tended to downplay the figures, while the opposition may have been tempted to exaggerate the amount of participants. A case in point is the figure of 2 % by the government as the percentage of monks taking part in the protests compared to the number of 200,000 monks and laymen participating on Sunday, September 23 alone.²⁷⁰ Since a count of the demonstrators is not possible in retrospective, the meaning of the given numbers will be discussed below.²⁷¹

6.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies

Unlike the price hike of August 15 and the Pakokku events of September 5, the events of September 18 and what followed were expected. This refers not only to the announced boycott but also to the end of the protest. It was expected and sometimes feared by participants on all sides, by observers and “participating observers” that the military would not tolerate a general uprising of the people. Therefore, one could argue that there is not much space for interpretation of the events but only for elaboration.

The following paragraphs try to present some material and some deliberations that may be helpful for a differentiated view of the monks’ protests and the reaction of the government, which was announced before the boycott and later executed after September 25.

Because the events dealt with in this chapter were expected, their scale was different from what happened before. The demonstrations occurred nation-wide and developed into a global media event. This great dimension poses a special problem for identifying proper contexts and analogies for the monks’ demonstrations. The following sections, therefore, are arranged in a different way than the previous chapters.

Following up the local tensions in Pakokku, an overview of the current status of tensions within the Myanmar society is given. After that, some commentaries on aspects of the events are given concentrating on the events in Yangon and – to a lesser extent – in Mandalay.

6.4.1 Tensions

a) It can be assumed that the local tensions that contributed to the confrontation in Pakokku existed all over Myanmar. The number of members of the USDA,²⁷² given as over 21 million in early 2006, exemplifies the degree of the societal tension. This figure, half of the country’s population, is not contested by critical observers²⁷³ and indicates the extent of control that the government exerted over the population. Even if it can be argued that most of the members have joined the organisation in order to receive certain benefits and do not wholeheartedly support the “Three National Causes”²⁷⁴ and the “Twelve National Objectives” (reprinted in every issue of the official Burmese newspapers and books), it is evident that the tensions in Myanmar society do not only exist between the military and the rest of the population. Neither can it be assumed that all people who join this state-sponsored organisation are “thugs” as they are commonly referred to in reports about the demonstrations, which

²⁷⁰ According to the *Irrawaddy*, the “All Burma Buddhist Monks” claimed that on Monday, September 24, 300,000 monks turned out on Monday, 24 (*Irrawaddy*, September 25: “Top brass reportedly meets as mass protests continue”).

²⁷¹ See 6.4.2.2.

²⁷² For a short history of the association, see Steinberg 2001: 110-115.

²⁷³ For a critical assessment of the USDA, see Network for Democracy and Development, *The White Shirts. How the USDA will Become the New Face of Burma’s Dictatorship*. Mae Sariang (May 2006). Internet: <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/USDAFinal1.pdf>.

²⁷⁴ Non-disintegration of the Union; non-disintegration of national solidarity; perpetuation of sovereignty.

were monitored and often broken up by members of the said association. This may even apply to the members of the Swan-Ah-Shin (or Swan-Ar-Shin), the “power-holders”. They are employed by the government agencies as civil police to enforce law and order and allegedly recruited mainly from ex-prisoners.²⁷⁵

b) The tension within the civil population of Myanmar exists within the *Sangha*, too. Here, however, the influence of the government is not that strong simply because the monk’s status ideally is one of individual freedom – provided that the lay community supports him materially. The outward sign of this inner freedom is the robe and shaved head, which visibly separates the monk or nun from the mundane world. Other factors contributing to the difficulty of controlling the *Sangha* are the high degree of fluctuation amongst monks and nuns ordaining and leaving the *sangha*, and the traditionally high degree of monastic autonomy. Only relatively few monks stay in the *Sangha* for a very long time or lifelong and thus cannot qualify for posts in the *Sangha* hierarchy. Thus the control of the *Sangha* by the government is limited to the small group of mostly old monks who for whatever reason, accept patronisation by the government. These dynamics create a basis for tensions between longstanding monks who are both very familiar with the monastic rules put down in the *Vinaya* and are often more or less directly supported by the state authorities and young monks who are still very much familiar with the life of the lay people which they have just abandoned and to which they may return soon.

c) The societal tensions both within both the civic and monastic community described in the previous two paragraphs have existed quite for quite a long time and can be traced back to Burma’s “socialist periods” after and even before 1962.²⁷⁶ They always existed latently within and between the different segments of Burmese society and have broken out rather unexpectedly on various occasions. A lot of potential, for such occasions has existed because of the variety of regional and local conditions in the many parts of Burma/Myanmar. As the news on the demonstrations show, in Rhakine and Kachin State the demonstrations exhibited some special features. The same must be assumed for any local place where protests took place or – unreported – did not take place.

d) In the light of the great complexity of tensions within the society of Myanmar the concentration on the events in Yangon both in this chapter and in the news coverage may be called a gross oversimplification. But it is a simplification that can be justified by at least two arguments. First, because of its role as the country’s most eminent city both in terms of worldly and spiritual relevance, Yangon is the scene of the crucial events of modern Burmese history from the beginning of the nationalist movements in the 1920s. Second, it is the place from where during the demonstrations the overwhelming majority of news about the events was reported. Yangon is the interface between Myanmar and the world, and if that leads to an unbalanced picture of the whole situation, it can be regarded a “structural imbalance”. As mentioned before, the events happening in Myanmar can only be understood if they are put in a global context, but doing so limits the scope, accuracy and level of detail.

The paragraphs to follow concentrate on putting the events in Yangon and, too a lesser extent, in Mandalay into various contexts.

6.4.2 Space, Time and Memory – Dimensions of the Monks’ Marches

When Burmese monks started their advertised boycott-marches on September 18 in different towns of Myanmar, they created space in a specific manner and at particular times evoking memories of what had happened formerly. The following sections offer some observations, interpretations and analogies related to the marches arranged roughly in chronological order of the growing dynamics of the events.

²⁷⁵ Up to now, no serious investigation into the history and the structure of this paramilitary group exists.

²⁷⁶ After 1962, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSSP) attempted to unite the sectors of Burmese society under one umbrella. For the tensions within the *Sangha* before 1962, see below chapter 7.

6.4.2.1 Pacing Out Sacred Space

The first monks' marches on September 18 can be regarded as a follow-up of the marches initiated by the '88 students' generation on August 19 with a basic difference. Whereas the civilians' walks happened in the mundane sphere and were subject to the very worldly reaction of the authorities, the monks created a sacred space. The monks themselves and the message conveyed through the chanting of the holy Buddhist texts thus became sacrosanct and untouchable because they represented the pureness as well as the coherent unity of the *Buddhadhamma*. Consequently, from the start of the boycott on September 18 the monks told the lay people not to get involved in their business and to stay separate. They emphasised not to chant political slogans. All this would have endangered the purity of the protests and the safety of the civilians.

The demonstrations by the students in August could be successfully suppressed by the government by imprisoning the leaders and thus cutting off the channels of communication to the general public. In contrast, the communication channel of the monks was their own physical appearance, which at the same time was a manifestation of the sacred. The monks marched long ways and were seen by many people. This appearance was very impressive and had a strong emotional effect on the people who could share in the sacred space created by the walks just by standing by and offering water.

Since most of the walks took place after noon and thus after the time reserved for the alms rounds, the communication expressed through the monks' walks signified a specific antagonism which can be unfolded in various ways each amplifying the other. The monks exposed their absolute selflessness by not collecting something for themselves as on their morning rounds. Their action was a demonstration of sacrifice for the sake of the people directed against the country's rulers. The announced boycott was acted out in a rather subtle way. As in the afternoon no alms are collected, the boycott could be performed in a completely symbolical manner without any visible show of disapproval. The *Sangha's* purity was thus emphasized. Finally, the monks' walks brought the sacred sphere onto the streets and thus laid claim to the city as a space ruled by the Buddha's law.

6.4.2.2 Different Kinds of Filling Space

Space can be filled in different ways. A deserted pagoda or church may be full of the aura of the sacred. It can be suggested that the monks filled the streets of Myanmar's cities in that sense. They occupied the cities' space not because they were so many but through their particular appearance. The problem of this kind of occupation is that it cannot be measured and proved because the sphere of the sacred defies measurement. It is complete in itself.

This problem is solved by the addition of numbers, which serve as an indicator of success of an enterprise. The increasing numbers of monks and later laypeople participating in the protests created a certain image for those people who did not participate. This was a picture of almost full partaking of Myanmar's monks and population in what happened. The images on TV that concentrated on places where many people assembled at one time bolstered up the impact of the numbers of participants.

It was very different from the perspective of a local resident staying in Yangon at that time. Demonstrations only took place here and there and even in the days of the clashes following September 25, one could easily cross the big city without taking notice of anything special if one avoided certain places where the protests and the counter-measures took place.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, "the people" in Yangon and elsewhere seemed to be "filled up" with what the monks did on their behalf.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Author, personal observation; Author, personal communication in October 2007.

²⁷⁸ According to the Pinheiro report (p. 26), "strikes" occurred in 36 of Yangon's 45 townships.

6.4.2.3 Tapping Shwedagon's Power

The most powerful symbol of Burmese Buddhism is the Shwedagon Pagoda. From here, spiritual as well as political power emanates and flows into all parts of the country. Consequently, Shwedagon was the origin and/or destination of many marches of monks in Yangon and other cities like Bago. From Shwedagon, demonstrators could obtain energy and inspiration from the many great heroes of Burmese history. Here, the students who led the first strike against the British administration in 1920 took a vow not to abandon their goals. The headquarters of later students' strikes were here. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi gave her first speech to the masses on the invitation of the students and was from that moment on the undisputed leader of the people. From Shwedagon, with its historical relevance as well as spiritual potency, demonstrators felt a new turning point in the country's history could begin.

6.4.2.4 Contested Sacred Space – the Battle for the Pagodas

The pagodas and monasteries are inhabited and administered by monks and are the centres of their services towards the laity. But these sacred places do not belong to the *Sangha*. Members of the laity care for the construction of the buildings as well as for the protection of the monks. In case of confrontation between *Sangha* and laity, a difficult situation arises. The lay authorities are committed not to harm monks, the monks are committed to refrain from any kind of aggression. On the side of the government, a way out of this dilemma was to seal the monasteries off, either by preventing monks to enter from the outside or – as in Kachin State – to prevent them from leaving the monastery. They were just able to disconnect the flow of religious power from the spiritual centres into the secular parts of the cities.²⁷⁹ On the other hand, the monks occupied Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon but since it is only a temple and not a place designated for hosting monks, they had to leave after some time.

6.4.2.5 The Influence of the Supernatural and the Superhuman

From the beginning of the protests, the laypeople were involved in what happened. Many supported the demonstrations just mentally by wishing the monks all the best.²⁸⁰ Some supported their actions by looking on, applauding and handing water out to the monks. The base of the lay involvement lay in the character of the monks' demands. As the events in Pakokku clearly show, the call for an apology by the government for the misconduct against the monks was connected with the mistreatment of the lay people as well. The *Sangha* represented the dignity of "the people" as an entity. Therefore, it was a logical consequence that laypeople would directly get involved in the protest and the monks' pleas for not doing so were an attempt on the monks' part to prevent this logical outcome.

Two events contributed to a direct participation of laypeople in the demonstration. On the day of the torrential rains that flooded many streets in Yangon and caused the water of the Inya Lake to go beyond the height of the dikes, Yangon citizens were frightened²⁸¹ and the AMBA called on the people to help and support them. Indeed, from that day on many more monks and lay people joined the demonstrations.

Since natural disasters in Burmese folk belief are regarded as supernatural signs indicating political turning points because they are seen as results of the rulers' bad *kamma*,²⁸² the floods might have been perceived as a pointer toward direct involvement of the people. That day might have been one major

²⁷⁹ This sealing off was effective: "We could not hold the formal ceremony to impose the religious boycott because we could not enter the Shwedagon compound," a 25-year-old monk told Reuters. (Reuters, 18. September, 2007: "Tear gas used against Myanmar protest, monks hit")

²⁸⁰ Author, personal observation.

²⁸¹ Author, personal observation.

²⁸² For the coherence of cosmology, nature and politics see Heine-Geldern 1967. - In Rangoon, an earthquake and a tsunami heavily hit the city in 1930, which was regarded as a sign that the end of the British rule had approached.

turning point in the events. For a combination of natural, political and economic circumstances the happenings of 1930 in Rangoon, which led to the Burmese-Indian riots in May of that year, can be consulted.

The political situation was at that time uneasy, and feeling ran high when on the 5th of May news was received of the arrest in India of Mr. M.K. Gandhi.²⁸³ Excitement was intensified by a severe earthquake which affected the city shortly before 8.30 p.m. the same day. ... over one hundred and fifty persons were heavily injured and forty-six were killed in the collapsing buildings, ... On the following day there was a general stoppage of work on the loading and unloading of ships, due partly to the political circumstances, partly to the excitement caused by the earthquake. The striking coolies²⁸⁴ refused to return to work unless an increased rate of pay were granted, and for several days the port was idle. On the 14th a stevedore called in Burmese labour, as had been done ... in 1924 so that by the 22nd of the month there were about 2,000 Burmese employed in work previously carried out by Indians. On the 26th May fighting began between Burman and Indian coolies, and grew into a serious communal riot which did not cease before the troops were called out four days later.²⁸⁵

A next turning point was the meeting of monks and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on Saturday, September 22 in front of her house. She showed publicly her affection and sympathy to the monks. Although the whole monks' demonstrations were not only religious but had already a strong political touch from the very beginning, this meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi might have been regarded as another sign that the end of the evil regime had come. At this meeting, the sphere of the sacred, represented by the monks and the sphere of the political, represented by Suu Kyi, came together, merged and thus caused a new kind of energy.

This fusion was natural because Suu Kyi was regarded as a virtuous person with almost superhuman qualities. The meeting might have been interpreted as an omen for her imminent release and the gaining of freedom and prosperity of all peoples of Myanmar. The amalgamation imagined in this meeting brought together monks representing the worldly and political consequences of the spiritual and a politician who represented the full set of Buddhist virtues.

After that meeting of monks and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi day by day a broader participation of various opposition groups were seen in the mass demonstrations on the streets that increased to about 100,000 participants on Monday. At the same time, the calls for a release of political prisoners and Daw Aung Suu Kyi became more frequent.

Another consequence of this union between the spiritual and the mundane can be seen in the growing participation of various sections of Myanmar society in the protests like students, members of the NLD and other groups, the general population, journalists, artists, celebrities and people belonging to ethnic minorities.²⁸⁶ Accordingly, the notion of "unity" was stressed in the joint statement of monks and ex-students.²⁸⁷ The demonstrations not only increased in terms of the quantity of participants but in the quality of those engaged as well.

6.4.2.6 Lucky Numbers

The influence of astrology and, consequently, of numerology cannot be overestimated as a guiding feature for the majority of the Burmese population both at the bottom and at the top of society.²⁸⁸ Much has been said about Ne Win's belief into his lucky number "9" that was highlighted by the issue

²⁸³ M.K. stands for "Mohandas Karamchand" the first names of the Mahatma.

²⁸⁴ Indian workers.

²⁸⁵ Pearn 1939: 290-291.

²⁸⁶ For the minorities: Author, personal observation and *Irrawaddy* "Faces of 2007", December 1, 2007 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9489&page=3 [January 20, 2009]).

²⁸⁷ Document 6.4.

²⁸⁸ See Nash 165: 183-190.

of 45 and 90 Kyat banknotes after the demonetization of September 5, 1987.²⁸⁹ Not so much is said about the use of lucky numbers by the forces opposing forces. One may speculate that the date of the demonstrations in Burma on 8.8.88 was chosen to fight Ne Win's lucky number 9 with another one, the 8.²⁹⁰ But the "9" was used as well as the preparations for the 9.9.99 by Burmese dissidents both in Asia and in London show.²⁹¹

On this background, the date of September 18, gains particular significance. SLORC assumed power on the 18th day of the ninth month in 1988. The monks' ultimatum was set on the last day of the 19th year of the junta's reign. The 18th day of the year 2007, the beginning of the monks' demonstrations can thus supposed to be the end of the evil regime of the Tatmadaw and the beginning of a new just era.

This interpretation is supported by the recollection of events by one of the monks participating in the events who later fled to Thailand.²⁹² U Pinya Zawta writes in retrospective:

But the Saffron Revolution did not simply emerge without effort. The Saffron Revolution was born of the leadership of the All Burma Monks' Alliance - ABMA - the joint organization of four original monks' unions and the extraordinary courage of the member monks, and their ability to unite for the sake their people. The uprising took place precisely because of the determined leadership of the All Burma Monks' Alliance (ABMA). The All Burma Monks' Alliance (ABMA) was founded on 9 September 2007. Numerically it lines up as 9-9-9, when 2 and 7 from the year 2007 are added and also when all numbers $9+9+2+7=27$ are added, including the sum of $27, 2+7=9$.

After the thugs hired by the *junta* government attacked a group of monks marching peacefully in Pakokku, on 5 September 2007, the ABMA made four demands to the Burmese military government, with 17 September 2007 as a deadline to respond. The ABMA announced via local media that if the military failed to accede to its demands, the monks would carry out a boycott against the government officials beginning on 18 September 2007. Numerically digits of the date 09 18 2007 also add up to the numeral 9.

September 18, 2007 was the 19th anniversary of the military coup and therefore an important date for Burma's generals. It also became a symbolically significant day for the Burmese monks, as the severe moral rebuke by the monks against the army *junta*, called 'overturning of the alms bowls', was to begin on the same day.

The monk concentrates his recollection of the events on what happened in the early hours of that special day highlighting the anxiety of whether or not the planned demonstrations would really take place. The beginning of the protests is regarded as the success and paralleled to the date of 8.8.88. What happened later is left out. It is the "efforts" of the monks and their reading of time against that of the ruling generals that really counts.

6.4.2.7 1938

The anti-Muslim riots of 1938 started with a meeting of monks on the Shwedagon followed by the assault of monks and laypeople in Indian shops. The reports about the intervention of the security forces then led the riots to spread all over Burma. In 2007 monks took the lead as well and in Pakokku after the first clash, there was an immediate attack on representatives of the government. We can hence observe a common pattern in different contexts. In 2007, the events developed more slowly due to some

²⁸⁹ Another example: On 21.3.2001 (checksum: 9), he offered food to 99 monks as one of his last public appearances before his death on December 5, 2002.

²⁹⁰ "Since eight is a lucky number in much of Asia, the Burmese people chose the auspicious 8.8.88 for their uprising, just as China decided to open the Olympic Games on 8.8.08. But while the eights still signal a celebration for many Chinese, for the Burmese they mark a massacre." Bo Bo Kyi in International Herald Tribune, 6.8.2008 (<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/08/06/opinion/edko.php> [January 20, 2009]).

²⁹¹ *Asia Age*, 18.8.1999 "Burma's students set a magical date for uprising" (<http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199908/msg00585.html>); The Burma Campaign "Burma Freedom Ride 9.9.99" (http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=121_0_1_0_M [April 17, 2009]).

²⁹² See document 7.3.

retardation first by the time between the end of the ultimatum and later because of the initial abstention of direct involvement of civilians in the demonstrations. The differences, of course, coincide with the different contexts of both protests. In 1938, the Indian-Muslim community was attacked directly as a kind of scapegoat for the British government, the main target of nationalist zeal at that time. The protests in Myanmar after September 18 were directed explicitly against the government and thus gave rise to situation in which the balance of power was clearly in favour of the addressee of the protests.

This imbalance already existed in 1938 in favour of the British colonial power. It can be assumed that the monks' prominent role was an attempt to make up for that through the weight of the *Sangha's* spiritual and moral power. This power in both cases was highlighted by the strong language employed. In 1938, the Muslim community was declared a virtual "enemy no. 1" of the Buddhist Burmese, in 2007 the monks declared the military government to be the "common enemy" of the people.²⁹³

6.4.2.8 Differing Memories of 88

It was the 19th anniversary of SLORC's takeover of power in 1988 that was chosen for the boycott's start. The international media compared the protests immediately with the popular uprising before the coup culminating in the "Four 8" demonstrations on August 8, 1988, and the state media recalled the memory of that year to denounce the "Ex-students cum NLD cum foreign-powers Coalition" as a power hungry alliance only aimed at toppling the Myanmar government at any cost.

Behind these three recollections of "88" very different conceptualizations of the past come into sight. The government treats any open criticism as a case of sedition, which "causes[s] the people to lose respect for the government [and instigates] public unrest".²⁹⁴ The style of announcements like this employs the language of the royal orders of pre-colonial Burma. "88" in retrospect is used as a symbol for the attempts of irresponsible and "un-Burmese" people to bring down a legitimate government which deserves respect.

The media outside Myanmar – both Burmese and Western – defined the monks' protests as a follow-up of the "democracy movement" of 1988. Here, a Western political model was used to compare the events of 2007 to what happened 19 years before.

The monks' perception of "88" does not fit into both concepts. The timing of the boycott and the wording of the monks' groups' announcements suggest that the period after September 18, 1988 is conceived as an era of "evil" – morally, economically, politically - that now will be replaced by a new era of virtue and well-being. This argument is mainly based in the cyclic conception of the world in Buddhist thought and Burmese history.²⁹⁵ The solemn language of ABMA's declarations²⁹⁶, that adopt the pattern of reciting sacred texts supports this argument. It can be observed that the joint declaration signed by ABMA members and leaders of the "88 Generation" uses a quite different style.²⁹⁷

In the 1988 uprising, members of the *Sangha* mainly tried to uphold public order. The government asked the *Sangha* Committee to help restore order, and senior monks appeared in live television broadcasts appealing to the public for calm.

Furthermore, in August 1988, days after the death of many people in Rangoon, monks expressed sorrow for the loss of life and also appealed to the regime to govern in accordance with the 10 duties prescribed for rulers, an appeal which failed to calm the public mood.

²⁹³ Document 6.3.

²⁹⁴ See Document 6.6.

²⁹⁵ For Burmese pre-colonial history see Lieberman 1984, for Burma's modern history Maung Maung 1999: 9-29.

²⁹⁶ See Documents 6.1 and 6.3.

²⁹⁷ See Document 6.4.

On August 30, 1988 the *Working People's Daily* reported: "1,500 members of the *Sangha* marched in procession through the Rangoon streets and gathered in front of the Rangoon General Hospital emergency ward, where they recited the "*Metta Sutta*" in memory of monks, workers and students who had died. Many young monks had been among the demonstrators.²⁹⁸ The monks' activities followed those of the civilians in a very different way than in 2007.

It can be thus observed that the events of 1988 were remembered and recalled in diverse ways by the parties involved. Consequently, one can conclude that a variety of aims and expectations regarding the outcome of the protests existed. The monks aimed at a completely "new Burma" based on Buddhist virtues, the government claimed that the already commenced way towards a new epoch in the country's history must not be endangered. The ex-student leaders were caught between these two comprehensive approaches advocating a step-by-step approach starting with an ease of the economic hardship. It can be assumed that there were more perceptions of how the 2007 and the 1988 events were related.

Anyway, the leading role of members of the *Sangha* in the 2007 events brought a new dimension into the discussion about Myanmar's future which does not fit well into rational Western political thought. 1988 was mainly a popular uprising led by students representing the desire of "the people" and in some aspects supported and "contained" by monks whereas in 2007 monks expressed the people's will after rather restrained protests by ex-students and some provocative actions by single dissidents. Greater numbers of laypeople from a variety of walks of life only joined the protests after the monks had taken to the streets.

6.4.2.8 Memories of 1990 (Mandalay)

The events that can be regarded as having the closest resonance to the events of September 2007 happened in 1990 in Mandalay and some other cities.²⁹⁹ Like the protests in 2007, the events started on a day carrying a special connotation. In 1990, it was the second anniversary of the "Four 8 Protests" in 1988. Although the details of the events are not very well documented, it seems clear that here a factual and not just symbolic boycott of the military by "overturning the alms bowl" was at least attempted and – as in 2007 after some delay – consequently repressed by the state authorities. One can conclude that the monks in 2007 could have known the risks involved in boycotting the SPDC through *Patta Nikkujjana Kamma*. This knowledge may have resulted in a different scheme of the boycott in 2007. The focus was more on a symbolic boycott, which differently from 1990 was however performed in many parts of the country including Yangon. The memories of the 1990 protests may have contributed to the special way the demonstrations were performed in the last capital of royal Burma. Here, monks were seen to have turned down their bowls during their afternoon walks and so in a straightforward manner expressed their opposition to the military.

6.4.2.9 Two Dilemmas, Unevenly Reported

From the beginning, the media outside Burma had stressed the dilemma put forward for the government by the demonstrations of the monks. A Burmese analyst living in Thailand said:

"It's a dilemma for the *junta*. If they don't crack down on protests by monks, more people will join protests. But if they do, it could trigger massive public outrage against the government".³⁰⁰

Not mentioned here and in other publications was another part of the military's dilemma. Any violent action against the monks would severely affect the balance of the offender's *kamma* and therefore would have the same result as the monks' refusal to accept alms from people connected with the military.

²⁹⁸ Aung Zaw in the *Irrawaddy*, October 5, 2007 „The Power behind the Robe”.

²⁹⁹ For some more details see below 7.4.2.1.

³⁰⁰ AFP, September 19, 2007 "Myanmar monks defy *junta* with third day of protests”.

Neither publicised was the dilemma faced by the monks. They could claim a mandate to publicly demonstrate for the implementation of Buddhist virtues but the *Vinaya* rules prohibited them to propagate their message in any worldly manner by way of confrontation. The initial appeal for non-participation of laypeople in the marches is a clear sign that the monks were aware of this problem.

The dilemmas on both sides contributed to the reluctant reaction of the authorities to the monks' demonstrations in the first days. On the other hand, the uneven reports on the given situation helped to increase the elements of antagonism already contained in the conflict. The above quotation is only referring to the government's weak position and thus emphasises only the strength of the monks' actions. These unbalanced views may have contributed to the escalation of the protests and to their eventual suppression.

On the other side, the government in its propaganda against the protesting monks as well blanked out one important aspect of the monks' protests and only pointed to the contradiction of being a monk and participating actively in worldly, secular affairs. The monks participating in the protests were called "bogus" monks and based this label on the fact that they used violence. Real and prestigious monks would never do so. The reports in the daily newspapers constructed a one-sided picture of "internal and external destructionists, who are jealous of national development and stability", who "harm all the Government's endeavours" and who wanted a short cut to power that egged them on to violate the Buddhist disciplinary code by entering the political realm. They did not mention the social role of the *Sangha* in Burmese society and of the critical role of the monks against bad government that was praised in the schoolbooks' teaching about the colonial period.

It can be concluded that the reports in the media, which had an impact on the events³⁰¹ regardless of their affiliation, mirrored the increasing dynamics of the events towards a final "showdown" and at the same time contributed to the final occurrence of the confrontation.

6.5 Open Questions

6.5.1 Organisation

Whereas the "'88 students" are associated to one another by a common history of fighting the authorities, prison terms and attempts to educate the population on their basic rights, there is no such information about any kind of organisation on the side of the protesting monks. Therefore, the question arises what kind of bonds existed between the monks? It seems to be clear that the "All Burma Monks' Alliance" that issued the boycott call was an *ad-hoc* association just formed to meet the special occasion. It can be assumed that there existed a kind of network before, but the structure and extent of such a network is unclear. The same applies to the question of how the communication between the monks worked after the protest marches had started.

We know from the monks' statements that there were leaders. But the particular character of this leadership is not yet known. Did the monks who signed the declaration of September 25 together with some members of the '88 Students' Group not yet arrested³⁰² act by way of joint leadership? Did they have control over groups from other monasteries? Did the leaders of the protests lose control? What kind of arrangements for the days to come was made? What kind of reaction by the government was anticipated?

In a long statement made on October 24 before the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee at Kaba Aye Pagoda, the Minister for Religious Affairs Brig-Gen Thura Myint Maung informed about the findings of

³⁰¹ For an alternative view on the events see "Burma: Not yet a saffron revolution" in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2007.

³⁰² Document 6.4.

the authorities about the organisational backgrounds of the monks' protest trying to prove that a conspiracy of a small group of troublemakers was behind the demonstrations.³⁰³ Of course, the content of the Minister's declaration is very questionable. Nevertheless, it can be tentatively assumed that there was a loose network both of monk-to-monk and monk-to-laypeople relations. But is not clear, what kind of relationship existed between the monks, the '88 students, the NLD and other opposition groups as well as their presumed cooperation. Further, it might be asked how the relationship changed during the protests.

6.5.2 The Leaders

In an official government report published October 6 in the state media, they name 18 monasteries that were searched in Yangon and the names of 29 monks are listed who allegedly "led, generated, participated and supported the disturbances". The same publication reports that 513 monks, one novice, 167 men and 30 women were arrested for questioning. After the interrogation, most detainees were found innocent. 109 monks and 17 men were still detained on October 5.³⁰⁴ These figures are rendered here just to give an idea about the number of monks who were leading or were regarded as leading the marches. Nothing is however known about the background of most of the monks whose names are known from different sources.

The only notable exception is U Gambira (U Gambiya) who is regarded as the leader and organiser of the boycott. His biography was put on the net.³⁰⁵ He was born in Magwe Division in 1979. His father was of a former military man who left the military because of differences with his superiors and became a rich merchant and a selfless aide of people in need. His mother was a teacher. The father was involved in the 1988 uprising and became a member of the NLD.³⁰⁶ He and his eldest son were jailed for their participation in opposition politics. Young Gambira was a brilliant but rebellious child who only returned to the right track after he became a novice. His character is described thus:

U Gambira is a deep lover of his own country and people, devoted to justice and freedom. He abhors oppression and bullying. As an enthusiast for literature, he frequently purchased and collected books on religion, English language and computer technology. He also donated books to libraries throughout Burma. He set up a library in his native Pauk Town and donated books to it. He also made blood donation every year.

As a brilliant scholar in ecclesiastical studies he was offered to become an abbot- an offer he turned down - and had some ambitions to become a Buddhist missionary. But he left ambitions aside to lead the 2007 uprising. The biography continues: "His tireless hard work is a wonder. As a consequence, he was able to unify the clergy nationwide leading to the successful launching of 2007 September uprising."

U Gambira went into hiding but refused to go into exile after the suppression of the protests. He was arrested on November 4. He is now charged under the Unlawful Association Act.

This is clearly the biography of a saint exposing almost superhuman qualities. In conclusion, one can deduct that the leadership and organisation of the protest was guided mainly by personal example, not by technical skill. But given the meagre data on other leaders involved, a lot of questions remain.

³⁰³ Document 6.7.

³⁰⁴ A list provided by the Bangkok based Assistant Association for Political Prisoners in Burma (aappb) has the names of some 150 detained monks (http://www.aappb.org/list_arrest_aug_sep_07.html (last update: January 30, 2008) [February 7, 2008].

³⁰⁵ http://vimutti-englishpage.blogspot.com/2008/01/ah-shin-gambira_16.html [January 16, 2008].

³⁰⁶ The biography tells that the father, U Min Lwin, was elected as an independent in the 1990 elections, but his name could not be found in the lists of MPs consulted for this study.

6.5.3 Numbers

The numbers of demonstrators on single days and the ratio of monks and laypersons involved in the events will never be precisely obtained. The same applies to the number of places where monks took to the streets as a sign of protest against the government. As a rule-of-thumb, one may assume that they were not so high and not so low as reported by the media conducting the struggle about the truth.

6.5.4 The Big Question: What Did the Protesters Want to Achieve?

There is one rather simple and rather vague answer to the question of the monks' goals: CHANGE. The monks and the people applauding and later joining in the marches hoped for it, the government feared it. The understanding of what should be changed varied. The monks' understanding might be termed a complete turnover from evil to good government thus giving the gesture of boycotting donations a deeper meaning. Other people involved in the events might have had different ideas.

6.6 Conclusions

- a) The last question may lead to the conclusion that the monks' protests were a demonstration of the people's discontent but in no way a move towards precisely defined goals. On the other hand the greatness and the vagueness of the whole enterprise made it a perfect screen for casting a variety of aims, real or fantasized, onto it.
- b) The monks' marches can be regarded as symbolic processions contesting the state's power over the country. A power not based on material means but on spiritual resources was demonstrated. In this way, the protest was a purely symbolical one. But on the other hand, the spiritual dimension from the beginning was connected to material matters both economically and politically.
- c) This correlation of the spiritual and the material based in Buddhist custom can be regarded as one main factor affecting the dynamics of the events which resulted in the participation of more and more laypeople. Furthermore, happenings like the floods and thunderstorms contributed to growth of the protests both in number and expectation. Finally, the media broadcasting from abroad, added to rise of expectation of a showdown of uncertain outcome.
- d) The showdown was expected on all sides compared to what had happened in 1988. This year was the benchmark for the government, which tried to prevent anything from happening close to the mass demonstrations of that year as well as for the protestors who strived for a success of the "revolution" which had failed 19 years before. With regard to the monks' involvement, however, the events of 2007 were a blend of the lay uprising of 1988 and the monks' boycott of 1990
- e) The opponents in the symbolic power struggle were linked to one another by some hidden bonds. Neither the monks nor the government and its agents could profit from open violent confrontation. On the other hand, neither side could effectively control the events simply because there was no direct communication between the rivalling forces inside as well as outside Myanmar.
- f) Therefore, what started as monks' demonstrations on September 18 but quickly developed into an imagined people's uprising à la 1988 may be compared to the unfolding of a tragedy influenced by rational as well as irrational forces rather than a series of events which can be logically reconstructed.

There remains the big open question: what kind of change do Myanmar and its people need and how can it be achieved.

7 MONKS, SOCIETY AND THE TURNOVER OF THE ALMS BOWL

This chapter offers some background material on the role of the Monks in Burmese society. It may help the reader to better understand the events described and commented upon in the previous chapter and to differentiate the general assessment of the role of Buddhism and its institutional form, the *Sangha*.

It is generally acknowledged, “monks are highly respected in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar”.³⁰⁷ Another feature is the allusion that monks were involved in Burmese politics in the country’s previous epochs as this quotation shows

Buddhist monks have a history of political activism in Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country. The monkhood played a prominent role in Myanmar's struggle for independence from Great Britain, which came in 1948, and joined students in the anti-military demonstrations that rocked Myanmar in 1988 and ended in bloodshed.³⁰⁸

This quotation suggests that the monks always supported the Burmese political movements that were righteous and just. This is a one-dimensional statement that does not correspond with a detailed look at Burma’s history. The following sections will try to show that the monks’ role in Burmese history share the same ambivalences as the actions of all other participants.

This chapter will focus on two interconnected aspects of the monks’ role in Burmese society, the general and the political side. Both of them have undergone changes in the course of history. Therefore, this chapter is arranged chronologically after some remarks on a central symbol of Buddhism in Myanmar and other Theravada Buddhist countries, the alms bowl – a symbol that played a salient role in the demonstrations (6.1).

7.1 The two Sides of the Alms Bowl

7.1.1 Harmony: The traditional relationship between laity and monks and its variations

The traditional relationship between the monks and the laymen is one of reciprocity symbolised by the alms bowl.³⁰⁹ Only through the monk can the Buddhist layman acquire merit and thus survive spiritually. Only through the layman can the monk survive physically. The collections of alms every morning by the monks from the laity is the essential ritual through which the mutual dependence is expressed. It has to be noted that it is the layman or mostly the laywoman who expresses gratitude for the monks’ accepting the alms in their bowls not the other way round. The spiritual gift is more valuable than the material one. But on the other hand, through the interchange, the monk is connected to the economic situation of the place where he is living.

The fundamental relationship can take very different forms depending on the characters, interests and inclinations of the respective partners and the place and situation that bring them together. Within the monkhood, two kinds of hierarchies exist. One is based on individual charisma. Particular monks are believed to have accumulated great merit and are held in extraordinarily high esteem for that which

³⁰⁷ http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/09/18/myanmar.monks.ap/index.html?eref=rss_world [January 30, 2008].

³⁰⁸ http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/asiapacific/news/article_1358969.php/Myanmars_monk-led_rebellion_gains_page_1st_Lead_ [January 30, 2008].

³⁰⁹ For more details, see Spiro 1970. His book is based on a field study in Burma in 1961/1962.

results in great veneration as well as material support. The other kind of hierarchy is connected with the organisation of the *Sangha*, the community of the monks, in the different periods of Burmese history. The co-existence of both hierarchies may result in cooperation as well as tensions both within the *Sangha* and between monks and laymen.

7.1.2 Protest: Keeping the Alms Bowl Empty

Other than the exchange of material and spiritual gifts by way of filling the bowl every morning, the turnover is an absolute exception, a borderline case both in theory and practice. In the canonical Buddhist scriptures there is just one reference to this act³¹⁰ (Pali: *Pattam nikkuggatu*; Burmese: *Patam nikkujjana kamma*). In the long history of Buddhism, there are only a few known reports of an organised turnover of the bowl. Moreover, there is no academic research on this topic neither within the Buddhist countries nor in the large Western academic community dealing with Buddhism. The scientists who are interested in the societal and political ramifications of Buddhist countries have neglected this topic as well.

In the reports about the monks' protest the act is translated into Western understanding as a kind of "excommunication",³¹¹ but no discussion or interpretation of the text and its concrete implementation was given by the mostly Burmese authors who referred to the act and its scriptural background. Therefore, the following deliberations are very preliminary ones.

The only occurrence of the phrase *Pattam nikkuggatu* in the *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist canon, reports a punishment for a layman's offence against a monk.³¹² It is contained in the *Kullavagga*, the fourth book of the *Vinaya-Pitaka*, the first of the three "baskets" of the whole canon. The "Burmese Pitaka Association" in an introduction to the *Tipitaka* describes the contents thus: "The *Cullavagga Pali* ... continues to deal with more rules and procedures for institutional acts or functions known as *Samghakamma* [ecclesiastical acts; HBZ]." ³¹³ Part 5 of the book which contains the text is entitled "On the daily lives of the *Bhikkhus*" by the translators. The incident told in section 20 of the book is an exceptional one because it deals with the "sin" of an *upasaka*, a layman. The case brought before the Buddha is a layman's unjustified charge against a monk of sexual misconduct. The Buddha orders the turnover of the alms bowl against the layman. In this context, a general rule is proclaimed:

There are eight things, O *Bhikkhus*, which when they characterise an *Upāsaka*, the bowl is to be turned down in respect of him; when he goes about to bring loss of gifts on the *Bhikkhus*, when he goes about to bring harm to the *Bhikkhus*, when he goes about to cause the *Bhikkhus* to want a place of residence, when he reviles or slanders the *Bhikkhus*, when he causes divisions between *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhus*; when he speaks in dispraise of the Buddha; when he speaks in dispraise of the *Dhamma*; when he speaks in dispraise of the *Samgha*. I allow you, O *Bhikkhus*, to turn down the bowl in respect of an *Upāsaka* who is characterised by these eight things.³¹⁴

After this, the offender gets the chance to make up for his misdeed and the alms bowl is turned up again. For both rituals, a motion is needed e.g. the respective community of monks has to decide on the actions taken.

The whole text is worded in phrases that are used with regard to the main theme of the *Vinaya* e.g. the behaviour of monks. That does not mean, however, that there exists a reciprocal rigidity towards the layman's conduct as shown in the strong rules governing the lives of the monks. The translator of the

³¹⁰ *Vinaya*, *Kullavagga* V 20. see Document 7.1.

³¹¹ Human Rights Watch 2007: 34.

³¹² *Vinaya*, *Kullavagga* V, 9, 4 has the phrase in its literal meaning.

³¹³ [Myanmar Pitaka Association] (1993): 11.

³¹⁴ Some of the offences occur in another text proscribing false actions of monks against laymen (*Kullavagga* I, 20).

text remarks on the mode of punishment of the lay offender in the text: “It is characteristic of the mildness of early Buddhism that this should be the only penalty imposed upon a layman.”

Other Commentaries on the text could not be found. The Myanmar Pitaka Association in its short summary of the *Kullavagga* does not mention this text.³¹⁵

7.2 From Early Times to the End of the Burmese Kingdom 1885

7.2.1 General Features

7.2.1.1 The roots of the Sangha’s (dis-)organisation

On the side of the monks, unity as well as tensions have a long history and are rooted in the authoritative text that regulates monastic life, the *vinaya pitaka*. The first of the three “baskets” of the *Tipitaka* in its first part contains the 227 rules for the behaviour of the individual monk whereas the second part tell the monks how to perform acts such as ordination and expulsion from the order that need to be performed jointly. The basic organisational unit is the *sima*, the parish boundary. Since in the scriptures no higher organisation is mentioned, “the Buddhist *sangha* as a collectivity is simply the totality of *sima* communities.”³¹⁶ As a consequence, unity within the *Sangha* has been always the exception to the rule of a wide diversity of interpretations of the rules laid down in the *vinaya*. Sometimes these different interpretations and their practical consequences have co-existed; sometimes they have clashed.

7.2.1.2 The Sangha and the Ruler until 1885

On this background, there is a special relationship between the ruler and the communities of monks. The ruler who was an absolute one before 1885 among his many titles was called the “Protector of (Buddhist) Religion”. This protection basically was twofold, to provide the basis for the material well-being of the order – that is, among other things, a sound economy - and to clean the *Sangha* in cases of misconduct of her members, which might endanger the purity of the order.³¹⁷ This purity was a precondition for the good of the state as the other way round the good conduct of the ruler was necessary for the blossoming of the *Sangha*. The reciprocity of monk and layman can be found here again on a high level. The ruler benefited from the monks in various ways. They provided advice and through their involvement in the court rituals assured that his rule was legitimated by the Buddhist norms of conduct prescribed for a ruler.

As a consequence, a very strong ruler was necessary to achieve the connected aims of material well-being for the people and spiritual purity within the monks’ communities. Such a strong ruler was Bodawphaya (Badon) who ruled Burma from 1782 to 1819. Under him, the Burmese empire reached its greatest extension and the *Sangha* was united after he had decided the controversy of high-ranking monks on the question of whether one or two shoulders must be covered by the robe in favour of the “Two Shoulder” monks.³¹⁸ Like some of his predecessors, the king appointed a Supreme Patriarch (Burmese: *thathanabaing*) who due to the king’s power was able to control the *Sangha*.

Bodawpaya’s successors were not so successful neither in the field of politics nor in the field of religion. Seven years after the death of the great ruler, Burma was defeated in the first Anglo-Burmese war. Under King Mindon who came to power after Burma was once more beaten in 1852, a religious reform movement resulted in the establishment of a small and strict reformist Buddhist chapter, later

³¹⁵ Myanmar Pitaka Association 1993.

³¹⁶ Huxley 2001: 116.

³¹⁷ For a detailed account see Tambiah 1976 and Lieberman 1984.

³¹⁸ Huxley 2001: 118-119.

called the *Shwegyin* sect, but it was not able to implement unity. Accordingly, Thibaw his successor and Burma's last king, appointed two Supreme Patriarchs. The split was exported to British-ruled Lower Burma and continued after the East India Company incorporated the whole of Burma into their Indian possessions.³¹⁹

In 1903, the *thathanabaing* was reinstalled in Rangoon but without any effect on the further developments. He got some funds to care for the spiritual uplift of members of the *Sangha*, but had no legislative authority.³²⁰

After the second Anglo-Burmese War after which, the whole of Lower Burma came under British control – including the monks living there and another division within the *Sangha* ensued. They lost the direct contact to the hierarchy peaked at the royal court, magnifying already existing differences between the *Sangha* in Lower and Upper Burma. The result was the emergence of two *Sangha* organisations in the two parts of the country. Due to the legends connected to the foundation of the new royal capital, Mandalay, the 5th Buddhist Synod convened there by King Mindon and the fact that Mandalay was the last capital of independent royal Burma, Mandalay monks up to the present day are representatives of “political Buddhism” based in the belief that the ruler of a Buddhist state has to abide by Buddhist norms and that the *Sangha* is called up to test these virtues and criticise the leaders if the outcome of the check is in the negative.

7.2.2 The Politicised Bowl

Since the early times of Burmese history, only two incidents could be found mentioning the turnover of the alms bowl as an act touching the public sphere. Both cases occurred in the time of the first Burmese kingdom of Pagan, senior monks were dissatisfied with the respective king's performance and threatened not to accept any gifts from him. In both cases, the king did not give in and the monk had to leave the country. In both cases, after the conflict the kingdom was ruined.³²¹

7.3 The Colonial Period

7.3.1 General Features

7.3.1.1 Rise and Fall of State Supported Buddhism under British Rule

The British conquest of Burma in 1885 removed both the king and his spiritual counterpart whereas the relationship between the two realms of world (*loka*) and the transcendent (*lokuttara*) remained unchanged on the local level. This caused a vacuum of legitimacy, which has yet to be filled satisfactorily. In the first years of British rule until the end of World War I, the new courts learned to apply texts of the *vinaya* in deciding cases related to matters of the *Sangha*. After 1918, however, the application of canonical Buddhist rules was reversed. At the same time, Buddhist monks and Burmese lawyers rose to become leaders of the nationalist movement.³²²

7.3.1.2 Rise and Decline of the Political Monks after 1920

Together with this decline of the application of Buddhist law a boycott movement encompassing both monks and lay people came into being together with a division of labour between members of the

³¹⁹ Today, ten „branches“ (*gaing*) can be discriminated within the *sangha* of Myanmar (Matthews 1993: 410).

³²⁰ *Proceedings* IV.

³²¹ Rewata Dhamma 1989.

³²² Huxley 2001: 120-133.

Sangha and laymen.³²³ The General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) acted as an organisation uniting all Burmese nationalists. Members of the *Sangha* worked at the grass root level using their solid connection with the people in the mostly rural areas of Burma. On the other hand, some leaders of the *Sangha*, *sayadwas* (abbots) advised and controlled the GCBA. The model relationship between the leaders of the State and the *Sangha* from the periods of the Burmese kingdom was taken up in a modified way. One crucial difference was the inability of the GCBA to control and, if necessary, to purify the *Sangha* because the State was controlled by the British.

As a consequence, the splits in the nationalist movement as a result of differences of opinion on how to react to the policy of the British were accompanied by splits within the *Sangha*. These splits severely tarnished the image of the *Sangha* as a pure community and thus its trustworthiness as a prerequisite for public acts. At the end of the 1920s, the *Sangha* as a whole and many “political monks” as individuals had lost their power. When a new wave of nationalism emerged after 1930, monks did not play a leading role but just took part in the events in a rather disorganised manner.

7.3.2 The Politicised Bowl

7.3.2.1 Secularisation of Religion, Sanctifying of Politics

The political role of members of the *Sangha* between the two world wars and the monks’ participation in the nationalist movement is well documented.³²⁴ As argued above, the eminent political influence of monks on Burmese politics at that time can be ascribed to the vacuum created by the abolishment of the symbiosis of king and *Sangha*.

The turnover of the alms bowl is not mentioned in any of the accounts for a simple reason: The British were not Buddhists. Since they did not fill the bowl it was no use to overturn it to protest their actions. The symbol of the empty alms bowl instead received a new meaning with a secularised and political connotation, similar to a boycott. This can be understood as a transformation of a traditional practice regulating relations between individuals in a hierarchical society into the modern world that emphasises equality. The religious meaning of the alms bowl turnover was modernised as a secular weapon against a pagan, non-Buddhist foe. This transformation into the secular field could later be reversed in the way that a protest on a secular matter was “sanctified”.

This highly ambivalent process began after the end of the Burmese kingdom and the beginning of the struggle for independence and resulted in a linguistic ambiguity.

The Burmese word for ‘strike’ or ‘boycott’ (*thabeik-hmauk*) in a general sense literally translated means “alms bowl turnover”. It thus denotes not an individual act of censuring somebody but a collective way of protest. Up to now, no study exists tracing the change of meaning of the term from the *Nikaya* to modern times nor inquiry into the application both within the *Sangha* and society in Burma/ Myanmar as well as in other Buddhist countries

The following remarks present some material on the topic. They are based on the traditional close relationship of Buddhism and State in Burma as described in the previous paragraphs.

The first boycott in the modern history of Burma of some significance was the students’ strike of 1920, which is still commemorated as Myanmar’s National Day. The boycott was directed against the establishment of a University in Rangoon by the British administration and their Burmese supporters. The student-led strike was conceived and organised at the Shwedagon Pagoda, the country’s most holy

³²³ For details see Moscotti 1974, (U) Maung Maung 1980 and Zöllner 2000: 181-240.

³²⁴ Maung Maung 1980. Moscotti 1974.

place. Its organisers vowed to stand and fall together in victory or defeat.³²⁵ Later, the boycotters camped in the halls and on the slope of the pagoda and chose three raised fingers as a code sign alluding to the three Buddhist Jewels – *Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha* – as well as three o'clock, the time of the strike's beginning.³²⁶

These details clearly indicate the strong intertwining of the religious and secular side of the boycott also represented in the Burmese word for 'boycott'. This inseparable connection surfaced again in the first elaborate assessment of the boycott written in 1927 by U Lun who was to become Burma's *poeta laureatus* later. From 1920 onwards, Lun commented on the events of his country in newspaper series named *tikas* a term denoting commentaries on Buddhist scriptures. The *Tika* is entitled "Boycott-tika" using the English word. The text praises the students and elaborates on the term *thabeik-hmauk* by setting it in various contexts. Information about alms bowls is provided together with an overview on the boycott movement in Burma.

Lun also explains the origin of the English word, which is related to Charles Boycott, an English estate agent of an absentee landlord in Ireland³²⁷ who was subject to social ostracism organized by the Irish Land League in 1880. Protesting tenants demanded from Boycott a substantial reduction in their rents. He not only refused but also evicted them from the land. A leader of the League gave advice to the tenants that everyone in the locality should refuse to deal with him rather than resorting to violence. Despite the short-term economic hardship to those undertaking this action, Boycott soon found himself isolated - his workers stopped work in the fields and stables, as well as the house. Local businessmen stopped trading with him, and the local postman refused to deliver mail.

It can be assumed that Lun's explanation was based on information he got from Burmese writers who had investigated into the matter since he himself had no command of English. Most probably therefore, the Burmese word *thabeik-hmauk* got a new religious-secular meaning when it was used as an equivalent for the newly coined English word "boycott". This special meaning may have been coined at the beginning of the 20th century and became a catchword through the students' boycott of 1920.

This explanation can be substantiated through the argument that the original "Boycott case" was directed against a single person like the turnover of the alms bowl in the Buddhist story. In addition, the combination of the Irish and the Buddhist roots of the Burmese word is interesting because of the big influence of the Irish independence movement on the Burmese nationalists, highlighted by the phrase "the Irish of the East" for the Burmese people.

7.3.2.2 A Single Case of Turning the Alms Bowl Down against Individuals

This turnover of the alms bowl against an individual Buddhist can be related to a story reported about what happened to a Burmese writer in the late 1930s. According to a source³²⁸, the writer Thein Pe (Myint) was censored in this way after his first novel *The-ponyi* (Modern Monk) was published in 1937 which was regarded as a defamation of the *Sangha*. Thein Pe, however, lived in Calcutta at this time. Maybe the threat was directed against the supporters of the publication, among them later Prime Minister Nu who was a pious Buddhist. Nu and a young friend left Burma after the monks' outcry to make a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment and one can assume that they did so to make up for their contribution in an insult of the monks.³²⁹ It can be strongly assumed that there are more examples like this. According to the same source, more instances of laymen's boycotts

³²⁵ The place is commemorated by a stele built in the 1980s at the South Western corner of the Shwedagon.

³²⁶ Aye Kyaw 1993: 21.

³²⁷ The information on the Boycott Tika was provided by Dr. Nay Lin, Yangon.

³²⁸ Author, personal communication in March 2008.

³²⁹ For details of the episode see an interview with U Tun Aye who told that he accompanied Nu on this journey. An English translation is reprinted in MLP 1: 37-38.

of monks were reported from the colonial times. A prominent monk who advocated the right of women to get ordained in the same way like men and become nuns with the same rights and obligations like monks was threatened with the withdrawal of alms.

These examples underline the asymmetry of monks and laypeople incorporated in the exchange of spiritual and material goods symbolised by the alms bowl. The purity of monks is much more endangered than the purity of laymen. Therefore, on the individual level monks are and must be more often criticised by the laity because of their lax conduct than the other way round. Thein Pe's book was one such a criticism. The angry response of some monks illustrates the unstable nature of relationship between *Sangha* and society during the colonial period.

7.4 After Independence

7.4.1 General Features

7.4.1.1 Buddhism in Independent Burma / Myanmar – An Unfinished Task

One legacy of the colonial period of Burmese history was to fill the void that had emerged from the abolishment of the state-*sangha* relationship after 1886. None of the governments since Independence have managed to accomplish this task. Aung San, the young “father of the nation” envisaged a secular Burma with a strict separation of state and religion.³³⁰ His successor, Nu, greatly made use of Buddhism to achieve political goals, a tactic that contributed to his downfall in 1962.³³¹ Ne Win, his successor, first neglected religious issues thus encouraging a relaxation of monastic practice and the rise of esoteric cults. Through a new law imposed in 1980, he created a tool to purge the *Sangha* in a similar way as Bodawphaya had done and paved the way to the present practice of the government enforcing its will through a body of loyal monks.³³²

On the other hand, the present rulers try hard to present themselves as good Buddhist rulers by donating large sums of money to the *Sangha* and by building pagodas and other sacred structures.³³³ They attempt to follow the model of the kings of the old times and thus win the support of the people by patronizing the heads of the *Sangha* without realising that the old times cannot be restored. Their behavior begs the question, who is authorised to supervise the conduct of the monks.

7.4.1.2 The Monkhood in the Parliamentary Period (1948-1962)

The period between 1948 and 1962 deserves special attention because during most of this time³³⁴ Burma was governed under a parliamentary democratic system. U Nu, the Prime Minister, stressed the importance of religion (*sasana*) in general and acted as a protector and patron of Buddhism in particular.³³⁵ On his initiative, the Sixth Buddhist Synod was convened in Rangoon between 1954 and 1956 finishing at the day commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the *maha-paranibbana* of the Buddha, his death and entrance into *nibbana*. The promotion of Buddhism was connected with the expectation of positive impacts on the lives of the Burmese people.

³³⁰ Zöllner 2008.

³³¹ One major issue was Nu's promise before the elections of 1960 to make Buddhism the state religion, which infuriated ethnic cum religious minorities and provided a pretext for the military to take over power to prevent the disintegration of the Union of Burma. For some more details of Nu's policy, see Huxley 2001: 134-135.

³³² For details of the reform see Bechert 1988.

³³³ For details see McCarthy 2007 and Philp/Mercer 1999.

³³⁴ The exception was the period of October 1858 to February 1960 known as “caretaker government” under General Ne Win.

³³⁵ For details see Tinker 1957: 165-177.

Shortly after Independence, laws were passed to organise the *Sangha* in terms of jurisdiction, education and organisation. In addition, a Ministry of Religion was established in 1950. Nevertheless, neither unity nor strict discipline among the monks was achieved. Mainly three Buddhist associations existed the oldest of them being the Young Monks' Association (YMA) founded in 1938 continuing a nationalistic course in advocating to make Buddhism the state religion and fighting the grants of equal rights for other religions.³³⁶ To counter the activities of the group, another alliance was formed, the Younger Monks' Association (YA). After the attempt to bring the group under government control failed, a third group mainly consisting of older monks was formed named the Presiding Abbots' Association.

All groups favoured U Nu's promise to make Buddhism the state religion if his party won the elections of February 1960. Both of the two rivalling groups of "young" monks resorted to violent means to achieve their ends like looting, burning, pillaging, obstructing the traffic, overturning cars seizing buildings, beating enemies and – allegedly – threatening others with murder. Besides, the groupings of monks associated themselves with the various political parties contesting power.

The divide among the young monks and the divide between "young" and "old" monks reveals fractures in the *Sangha* regarding the role of the Buddhist clergy in politics. According to Spiro, in the rather heated political atmosphere of the early 1960s, a majority of monks, even in the cities, were "non-political" and stressed the otherworldly goals of Buddhism.³³⁷ Any organisations of monks affiliating themselves with political parties or political aims could be, according to an abbot interviewed "bad not only because their interests are worldly, but also because they create disunity in the monkhood and quarrels among laymen."³³⁸

The monks' role in the 1950s and early 1960s illustrates the continuing eminent position of the *Sangha* in independent Burma. Moreover, it shows that monks' opposition to the government did not cease after Independence had been achieved. A Buddhist majority ruled the state and the country's leader was a devoted Buddhist himself.

In addition, there was a continuing generation gap within the *Sangha* as well as doctrinal disputes about the worldly involvement of monks and thus a continuity of the spirit of independence of single units of the *Sangha*, which may be labelled "democratic" but "anarchical", too.

7.4.1.3 Interlude: The Uprising of 1988

After the coup d'état of 1962, all sections of Burmese society were successively put under government control including the *Sangha* as manifested in the already mentioned *Sangha* Act of 1982. On this background, monks played only a secondary role in the events of 1988, which were mainly initiated by students who expressed the general peoples' discontent of the economic and political conditions. The – relatively few – pictures of the events in 1988 give the impression of a protest overwhelmingly undertaken by civilians.

The *Sangha Maha Nayaka* together with other religious associations appealed to the public for calm. Senior monks appeared in live television broadcasts. In August 1988, days after the suppression of demonstration that caused many deaths in Rangoon, monks expressed sorrow for the loss of life, but - to the surprise of many - they also appealed to the regime to govern in accordance with the 10 duties prescribed for rulers of the people. The appeal, however, failed to calm the public mood. Monks to-

³³⁶ For the following see Spiro 1970: 385-395.

³³⁷ Spiro 1970: 392-395.

³³⁸ Spiro 1970: 393.

gether with students tried to uphold peace in parts of the city where the public administration had broken down.³³⁹

On the other hand, in the course of challenging the institutions established by the previous government under Ne Win's supervision, the Supreme Council of the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* was challenged, too. On August 25, a gathering of some 600 monks required the resignation of the members of the council as well as the release of monks arrested during the previous protests. In Mandalay, an association of young monks was founded reviving an association founded in 1938.³⁴⁰

This information points out at a general restraint of the *Sangha's* direct participation in the 1988 demonstrations. On the other hand, there are some indications for a difference in attitude between older and younger monks and to Mandalay as a centre of younger monks' anti-government activities.

7.4.1.4 Monks, Students and Soldiers

There is a Burmese saying telling that the country will blossom when harmony between monks, students and soldiers exist.³⁴¹ This maxim connecting the three groups of younger people who participated in the events reflects the close connection between them in modern Burmese history and even more the problems that arise if a good relationship does not exist. It can be traced back to the Burmese independence struggle led by students and monks. This fight gave rise to the foundation of the Burmese army, which helped the country to gain its independence. In the ideal case, a young man takes on all three roles for some time. In any case, one can assume that almost all soldiers entered a monastery for some time. According to another Burmese saying, a young man who is looking for a place where he will be fed has two choices: The monastery and the army. Given these interrelations between soldiers and monks, one can take for granted that the confrontation that took place between the two groups on the streets of Myanmar was a highly dramatic matter. Further details about the relationship of the three parties would be helpful to know more about the nature and background of such dramas.

Another point is related to the explanation of why Burmese soldiers opened fire on their fellow countrymen in 1988. Mary Callahan has tried to explain this attitude by the takeover of the military of a barely functioning state in 1962 turning soldiers into state builders. Citizens who were perceived as threats to national security were thus regarded as enemies.³⁴² Another explanation could be based on the information that in 1988 troops were brought into Rangoon from the borders composed of non-Burmans.³⁴³

7.4.2 The Politicised Bowl

During the various periods of independent Burma, the monks' performance did not deviate significantly from the general public. In the period under U Nu there was a lot of agitation, many factions and fighting both within the *Sangha* and against other groups. After the coup of 1962, the monks were predominantly quiet. In the tense and confrontational situation after 1988, part of the *Sangha* resorted

³³⁹ Lintner 1990: after page 121 reproduces a photo showing monks in Mandalay taking care of law and order. On p. 199 the trial of 20 alleged government agents by an instant court set up by the people and the beheading of the acquitted in South Okkalapa (Rangoon) is reported, an event which could not be prevented by local monks and students of the local "Citizens' Committee". Some of the captured were ordained as monks and thus saved.

³⁴⁰ Lintner 1990: 119-120. - "Another organisation called *Galon-ni* (Red Galon) was organised by monks and laymen" (Human Rights Yearbook 1996: 5) taking up the name of an organisation established in course of the Saya San rebellion in 1930 (Galon – or Garuda - is the name of the mythical and powerful king of birds) which was used as symbol by various groups and individuals like U Saw, the politician who ordered the killing of Aung San in 1947.

³⁴¹ Maung Maung 1999: 7.

³⁴² Callahan 2005: 1-5; 221-228.

³⁴³ Personal communication to the author by a diplomat who was in Burma in 1988. The same was reported in 2007 (see below).

to confrontation. The boycott actions of 1990 that some interpret as an antecedent to the 2007 demonstrations exposed this attitude.

7.4.2.1 The Overturning of the Bowls, 1990

On May 27, 1990, the government held elections. The National League of Democracy (NLD) led by Suu Kyi, the daughter of national hero Aung San, gained a landslide victory. The military government did not honour the election result but claimed that a slow and carefully supervised transition to a new constitution was necessary.

On August 8, on the second anniversary of the greatest demonstrations in 1988, there were demonstrations by students and monks in Mandalay. Clashes with the military occurred and allegedly two monks and two students were killed.³⁴⁴ A group of monks, according to some reports the “Young Monks’ Association”,³⁴⁵ then called a meeting at which they “persuaded” thousands of others to join a boycott of the military by refusing to accept alms from military men and their families. The boycott started end of August or beginning of September³⁴⁶ and spread to other parts of Burma but apparently was not a nation-wide one.

On October 20, the chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), General Saw Maung met 20 abbots in Rangoon in a meeting broadcasted by state radio and TV and ordering an end of the boycott.³⁴⁷ Two orders were issued on the same day. Order 6/90 dissolved “illegal” monk organizations and unions. Order 7/90 declared that any monk who took part in non-religious activities would be expelled from the *Sangha* and prosecuted. After these orders were not obeyed in all monasteries, troops sealed off monasteries, arrested monks and forced abbots to sign documents in which they declared that they had stopped the boycott. Commanders were authorised to try monks under martial law tribunals.³⁴⁸ State radio informed the public about “illegal organisations” of monks that had taken up politics and would be dissolved. Army helicopters flew over monasteries and dropped leaflets informing about the orders.³⁴⁹ In later reports, Western “rightist” organisations and the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) were blamed for having misused the *Sangha*.³⁵⁰ According to reports, representatives of the monks asked for an apology by Gen. Gen. Saw Maung but only the regional commander of Mandalay talked to the local abbots.³⁵¹

Obviously, monks of some monasteries continued with the boycott. In response, monasteries were searched, monks arrested and material allegedly found in the monasteries such as weapons, propaganda material and women’s underwear, exposed. The total number of arrests was given at 350 all over the country and at 200 in Mandalay alone.³⁵²

³⁴⁴ The authorities denied that anybody was killed (*The Nation* October 20, 1990)

³⁴⁵ *The Nation* October 20, 1990.

³⁴⁶ *The Nation* October 20, 1990 gives September 6 as the date of the boycott’s begin, the *Bangkok Post* October 22 vaguely states that the strike started “in August”.

³⁴⁷ *The Nation* October 20, 1990. The newspaper reports adds: “In reply, the vice chairman of the Central Sangha, Rev. Khama Wuddha, urged Saw Maung and other military leaders to be wise and diligent so their work would be beneficial.”

³⁴⁸ *The Nation* October 24, 1990

³⁴⁹ *The Nation* October 21, 1990

³⁵⁰ *The Nation* October 31, 1990; see Document 7.2. The cartoon is ridiculing the allegation

³⁵¹ *The Nation* October 23, 1990

³⁵² *The Nation* October 31, 1990; November 6, 1990; the Bangkok-based Assistant Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) published in 2004 a detailed report on the fate of some of the detained monks. The report can be downloaded as a pdf-file: http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Detained_monks.pdf.

7.5 Conclusion

A retrospect into Burmese history unveils the contours of some patterns that may help to understand the monks' protest in 2007. First, in 1988 as well as in 1938, the background of the protests was a severe economic crisis. This factor can be substantiated by the events of 1930 both in May and December. In May, the first severe Burmese-Indian riots broke out in Rangoon on the issue of competition between Burman and Indian workers. Shortly afterwards, the *Dobama Asiayone* was founded and proclaimed among other goals a greater role of Burmese people in the country's economy. In December, the peasant rebellion led by Saya San broke out as a response to the deteriorating conditions of the farmers, which had worsened by the global economic crisis after the stock exchange crash of 1929. Finally, in the first student strike of 1920 one of the main complaints of the strikers was the cost of the new university system. Students from poor families, it was argued, would not be able to afford the expenses of a residential university.

A second pattern becomes apparent if we look closely at the engagement of laymen and monks in the protests. In 1938 as well as in 1988/1990, laypeople expressed their grievances. After the respective authorities did not appropriately meet their demands, members of the *Sangha* stepped in to upgrade public opposition to the government in a non-compromising way, depicting "the other" as an enemy of Buddhism.

This shift from concrete and negotiable claims expressed by laypeople - assembling very often on holy grounds - to uncompromising and highly symbolic actions spearheaded by mostly young members of the *Sangha* may partly explain why the rigid opposition between two camps happened in pre- as well as in post-colonial times. The main difference is that the authorities in the colonial times viewed the incidents in a secular way whereas after independence two "Buddhist parties" met both claiming the right to interpret the Buddhist traditions in the correct way and demanding the other side to give in. Monks, according to their interpretation of the Buddha's teaching on the monks' right to reject alms, demand apologies from the rulers while the authorities stress the rule that monks should not get involved in politics.

If there should be some truth in this observation, it will be extremely difficult to solve the problems arising out of the encounter of two antagonistic interpretations of the relationship of *Sangha* and State by way of compromise. What can be done is to explain the history of this confrontation.

Finally, as early as 1990 there are media campaigns on the question of who is reporting correctly about what happened and who is to blame for the events.

8 CRACKDOWN AND SUPPRESSION

8.0 Preliminary Remarks

To accurately represent the events covered in this time period causes specific difficulties even though it deals with just three days, September 26 to 28. Superficially, this can be explained by the overwhelming amount of information available about the events. There are many more reports by news agencies and newspapers as well as photos and videos and private information. What “really” happened almost disappears behind the accounts.

The sheer bulk of information is a consequence of the impact of the events both inside and outside of Myanmar. Inside, according to the perception of the author, most people perceived the violent suppression of the demonstrations as an extreme dramatic and unique event, a turning point in the country’s history. Outside, the events caused a huge media hype that exceeded the coverage of similar events at other places of the world.³⁵³

The intensity of the reactions may lead to what lies at the bottom of the difficulty to present a fair and adequate picture of the events. The actions ordered by the Myanmar authorities, the searching of monasteries, the detentions and the beating and killing of protestors, from September 26 to 28 were intuitively perceived as acts directed against humanity. The core of this spontaneous reaction may be attributed to the extreme antagonism of the two sides involved in the events. On the one side the monks, symbols of loving kindness (Pali: *metta*), non-violence (Pali: *ahimsa*) and compassion (Pali: *karuna*) who took to the streets for the sake of their fellow countrymen to demand for them decent standard of living. On the other hand a brutal military with a long record of incompetence and merciless suppression of protest symbolised by the violent suppression of the popular uprising of 1988.

This antagonism and the feelings affiliated to it as a strong sympathy for the protesters form an essential element of the events dealt with here. However, while this constitutes a very noble and important piece of the story, it represents just one of many aspects of a whole and truthful account of the events. It is an aspect which deserves to be portrayed by poets and playwrights who have a special gift to express the many and diverse depths of human experience.

In contrast to such a depiction the description and interpretation will and must be rather detached. But they metaphorically borrow some elements from the classical definition of a tragedy.³⁵⁴ What is described and analysed in this chapter may then be regarded as the ending of a tragedy the only positive aspect of which may be to have a purifying effect.

Taking up this metaphor, the demonstrations initiated by the ‘88 Generation Students together with the Pakokku incidents formed scenes of the first act of the drama. The demonstrations led by the monks after September 18 then compose the middle and central part unfolding the characters of the actors leading to and culminating in a tragic and inevitable finale. The following sections describe the bare facts of the drama’s awful ending.

³⁵³ Observation of a German Southeast Asia specialist.

³⁵⁴ Aristotle: “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete (composed of an introduction, a middle part and an ending), and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.”

8.1 Undisputed Information

It can be noted that there is not much dispute on the facts of the “last act” of the events. Only the interpretations given are controversial.

8.1.1 Wednesday, September 26 – Full Moon Day

During this full moon day of the month all government schools were closed and most of Yangon’s citizens stayed at home, streets were not as bustling as usual and shops were closed from early afternoon on. On full moon days, Buddhists in Burma usually go for prayers at pagodas but due to heavy security at the pagodas only a few people were seen.³⁵⁵

Following the announcement of the government on September 24 and the orders issued by the *Sangha Maha Nayaka*, a curfew was imposed on September 25 under section 144 of the criminal law from 9 p.m. to 5. a.m. for a period of 60 days for Yangon and Mandalay. At the same time, gatherings of five people or more were – once more - banned.³⁵⁶ The orders were announced through loudspeakers on pick-ups driving through the cities. More security forces were deployed.

Demonstrations continued in Yangon and other places.³⁵⁷ In Yangon, the security forces deployed violent means against the demonstrators at Shwedagon Pagoda and downtown around the Sule Pagoda.³⁵⁸ Tear gas, smoke grenades, wooden and bamboo sticks, rubber batons and slingshots (catapults) were used to disperse the demonstrations.

At around 1 pm the first reported violent confrontation at the Eastern entrance of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, which had been widely closed up by soldiers and police took place. A whole battalion was deployed there.³⁵⁹ At about that time a thunder was heard on this sunny day. Police dispersed monks who were trying to enter the Pagoda and fired tear gas and warning shots. Some monks were knocked to the ground. Monks and civilians were reported to have been injured and arrested.³⁶⁰ After not being able to enter the Shwedagon Pagoda, the demonstrations then went to other parts of the city. Here, shooting took place. One demonstrator was killed.

³⁵⁵ Personal communication to the author.

³⁵⁶ These measures are based on one of the first orders issued by the military *junta* in 1998:

“Order No. 2/88 of the Organization for Building Law and Order in the State, dated 18 September 1988 - the 8th day of the waxing moon of Tawthalin, 1350.

In order to ensure law and order, and peace and tranquillity, as well as to ensure the security and ease of transport and communications and the people's livelihood, the chief of staff, Office of the Chief of Staff, issues the following order for all monks and people to abide by:

- a. No one, without proper authorization, is permitted to travel on the streets between 2000 and 0400.
- b. Gathering, walking, marching in procession, chanting slogans, delivering speeches, agitating, and creating disturbances on the streets by a group of five or more people is banned regardless of whether the act is with the intention of creating disturbances or of committing a crime or not.
- c. No one is permitted to open strike centres regardless of whether or not the intent is to create disturbances or to commit a crime.
- d. No one is permitted to block roads or to demonstrate en masse
- e. No one is to interfere or obstruct people carrying out security duties.

2. This order will stay in force until another order countermands it.

Signed: General Saw Maung, chairman of the Organization for Building Law and Order in the State.”

(Source: http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/SLORC_Order_2-88.htm; [February 29, 2008])

³⁵⁷ According to the records of AABBP, demonstrations took places at five places in Yangon (Shwedagon, Sanchaung Township, Bahan Township, near Sule Pagoda, Bogyoke Aung San Street) and in six other cities (Mandalay, Myingyan, Monywa, Pakokku, Sittwe and in Mon State).

³⁵⁸ There are no reports about the violent suppression of demonstrations at other places.

³⁵⁹ Author, personal observation.

³⁶⁰ *New York Times*, September 26, 2007 “Police clash with monks in Myanmar - Seth Mydans; *Irrawaddy* September 26, 2007; AFP September 26.2007.

Protests were also staged in Mandalay, Bago, Pakokku, Mon and Kachin State and Sittwe in Rakhine State. Here, a lot of people from the city's Muslim community joined the protest.³⁶¹

Arrests of opposition politicians – among them Win Naing who had participated in the first protest march on August 19 - and artists – among them Zarganar who had sponsored food for the monks on Shwedagon - were made throughout Yangon, Myitkyina and Bhamo in Kachin State. Phone connections broke down very often³⁶² and phone lines were cut off.

The authorities started to stop the flow of information out of the country to the rest of the world. Domestic blogs³⁶³ that had continuously posted news and photographs of ongoing protests were blocked at about 6 p.m. to restrict the free flow of information.³⁶⁴

Between 8 and 8.30 pm it came to violent clashes with guns shot and police motorbikes were burned down. The railway to Yangon's main train-station was busily operating even during the curfew hours.³⁶⁵

8.1.2 Thursday, September 27 – Inauspicious Day

According to Burmese folk belief, astrologers had predicted violence on this date, whose digits – once more - add up repeatedly to the astrologically powerful number 9: The 27th day of the ninth month in 2007.³⁶⁶

During the night the security forces began raiding monasteries throughout Yangon and arrested hundreds of monks, thus emptying the monasteries. Civilians who tried to protect the monasteries were arrested as well.³⁶⁷ The raid on Ngway Kyar Yan monastery in South Okkalapa started at 1 a.m. People arrested on these and other occasions were brought to various detention centres in Yangon.³⁶⁸

Demonstrations continued as did clashes with the security forces at Sule Pagoda and in the townships of South Okkalapa, Tamwe and near Moe Gaung Pagoda in Yankin. Tear gas and rubber bullets by the security forces were used. Around the Sule Pagoda where the biggest crowd had assembled, security forces issued a 10-minute warning to the demonstrators to disperse from the areas. After the people, mainly civilians and only a few monks, did not obey the orders, shots were fired in the air and at the demonstrators. Nine people died, among them the Japanese Journalist Kenji Nagai whose death was filmed and displayed the next day by DVB.³⁶⁹

Another great demonstration in Sittwe with an estimated 50,000 participants ended peacefully without intervention of the high number of deployed soldiers.³⁷⁰ Monks and civilians staged protests in other towns as well. From Mandalay, clashes and arrests were reported.

Outside the “hot spots“ in Yangon it was quiet and although many people feared to leave their houses, the streets were not totally deserted. A few cars and taxis drivers who each had a new story to tell carried on with their business.

³⁶¹ *Narinjara News* September 26, 2007 “Akyab Muslim community joins monks protest”.

³⁶² Personal communication to the author.

³⁶³ <http://www.kohtike.blogspot.com>, <http://niknayman.blogspot.com> and <http://soneseyar.blogspot.com> [January 20, 2008].

³⁶⁴ *Mizzima*, September 26, 2007 “Junta blocks popular blogs”.

³⁶⁵ Personal communication to the author.

³⁶⁶ *New York Times*, September 27 “Nine deaths reported in Myanmar crackdown”.

³⁶⁷ DVB, September 27, 2007 “Residents surround security forces at raided monastery”.

³⁶⁸ For details see Human Rights Watch 2007: 90-97. The three main centres were at the City Hall in downtown Yangon, near the Kyaik Ka San Racing Course in Tamwe Township and the Government Technical Institute adjacent to Insein Prison.

³⁶⁹ See http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Kenji+Nagai&search_type=.

³⁷⁰ *Narinjara News*, September 27, 2007 “Army reinforces troops in Akyab with rural battalions”.

In the curfew hours heavy trucks drove along the main roads leading from the north to downtown Yangon. Trains arrived on the railway line into the main train-station in about ten minute intervals.³⁷¹

The international community, including China, criticised the action of the Myanmar authorities and called for restraint. The *junta* agreed to receive Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, the United Nations special envoy to discuss the crisis in their country.

The KNU, SSA-South and other ethnic groups announced their support for the monks and demonstrations against the military dictatorship. The KNU urged all the ethnic ceasefire groups to join forces and unite in revolt. SSA-South leader Gen Yawdserk proclaimed that although this struggle is a different one to theirs, his forces were ready to defend monks or other protesters in their areas if government forces ever attacked them.³⁷²

8.1.3 Friday, September 28 – Fading Out

Burmese authorities announced in the morning in Yangon downtown through loudspeakers that they were about to check on residents in the area around the Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon. Before 12 p.m. the town centre was vivid as usual and no apparent change was seen in the daily life except that people warned each other that another riot would happen and that it was better to leave and not to stay.³⁷³ Around 12 p.m. demonstrators gathered in front of the Traders Hotel and thousands of protesters confronted soldiers and security forces near Sule Pagoda. Only a few monks were seen among the crowd.³⁷⁴ Potentially deadly games of cat and mouse went on for hours around the barbed-wire barriers. Burma's main Internet provider (government run service) was cut off and Internet Cafés in Rangoon were closed. Several newspapers stopped publishing. Soldiers beat and arrested people found with mobile phones or cameras.³⁷⁵

The government declared no-go zones around five key Buddhist monasteries as well as Shwedagon and Sule Pagodas.³⁷⁶

8.2 On the Coverage of the Events – Media Reports

8.2.1 Wednesday, September 26

“Burma army starts killing” - this headline of the German news agency dpa expressed the general tendency of foreign media's reports on the change of the government's approach towards the demonstrations. According to dpa and *Irrawaddy*, up to six people were killed on this day.³⁷⁷ Some details were reported. According to AFP one monk died as he tried to take a weapon away from a soldier, and two others were beaten to death.³⁷⁸ The same agency reported an incident happening in Yangon's Ahlone Township. Witnesses said that 300 monks protested but were blocked by armed soldiers who began firing over their heads. The monks urged the people to stay away from the protest, but when the bullets

³⁷¹ Personal communication to the author.

³⁷² *Irrawaddy*, September 28, 2007 „KNU call on ethnic ceasefire groups to support uprising”.

³⁷³ Personal communication to the author.

³⁷⁴ *Irrawaddy*, September 28, 2007 “Burma Protests: the Situation on September 28,”

³⁷⁵ Personal communication to the author; AFP, September 28, 2007 “Burma death toll much higher than reported: Downer”.

³⁷⁶ AP, September 28, 2007 “Myanmar junta declares no-go zones at Buddhist monasteries seen as flashpoints of protests”.

³⁷⁷ dpa, September 26, 2007 “Burma army starts killing”; *Irrawaddy* September 26, 2007 “Burmese troops fire on Rangoon protestors; unconfirmed reports say five monks, one woman dead”. – For an overview of the day's events provided by *Mizzima News* see document 8.1.

³⁷⁸ AFP, September 26, 2007 “At Least Four Killed, 100 Hurt in Burma Crackdown”.

started whizzing overhead, hundreds of people sat on the ground around the monks in a show of protection and solidarity.³⁷⁹

The Ethnic Youth Network Group (EYNG), alliance of non-Burman nationalities, announces on this day that it has been involved in the protests since the beginning thus spurning criticisms that the non-Burmans are merely contenting themselves as spectators while the confrontation between Burma's ruling generals and the Buddhist monks are gearing up to the breaking point.³⁸⁰

The NLM reports an incident on September 24 when protesters, monks and NLD members tried to incite monks in the Kyakhatwaing Monastery in Bago. Furthermore, a foreign radio station is accused of stirring up the monks for unrests and that it “ broadcasts exaggerated and made-up stories”. It reiterates that the majority of the people were opposed to all activities causing instability and unrest.³⁸¹

8.2.2 Thursday, September 27

The foreign press highlighted the raids in the monasteries and that hundreds of monks were carted off. *Irrawaddy* titles: “They came in the night, ready to kill.” Here are some excerpts of this report:

The military government has no conscience and it's cruel. It has no heart or sympathy for its own people-not even respect for the monks. The government's forces beat and shot peaceful demonstrators and monks, killing and injuring many of them. Soldiers look into the innocent faces of peaceful demonstrators and shoot them in cold blood. ...

One of the raided monasteries, Maggin, has become a refuge for HIV/AIDS patients after the authorities launched a manhunt for those taking care of them when they took part in the recent demonstrations against the sharp rises in fuel prices and other commodities. The abbot and four senior monks, two of them over 80, were arrested, along with four other people found at the monastery. ...

[One] patient said he awoke at midnight to the sound of whistling and movement outside. He went to the window and saw many uniformed soldiers in the monastery compound, carrying guns and batons. The soldiers walked through the monastery in their combat boots, kicking novices awake. They poked the abbot awake with a baton.

The soldiers then entered the building housing the HIV/AIDS patients. The patients were at first mishandled but were then released after showing documents confirming they were receiving treatment.

“None of us dared to speak out,” the patient said. “They looked as if they would kill anyone who spoke out. I was afraid and didn't dare to move. I am also very afraid of them and dare not to move. They looked evil and were ready to kill.”

Irrawaddy reported about the troops involved in the suppression of the demonstrations and reported about an alleged relocation of units of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army - an ethnic army that has declared a ceasefire with the *junta* – from Myawaddy at the Thai border to Yangon.³⁸² From Sittwe, the reinforcement with rural battalions was reported.³⁸³

Furthermore, protests against the crackdown in Myanmar were reported. *The Asia Times* published a report about “the man behind the Myanmar madness”, General Than Shwe, quoting rumours circling in Thailand's Burmese exile community that he had sent members of his family to Bangkok.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁹ AFP, September 26, 2007 “At least 17 monks injured in Myanmar crackdown - witnesses”.

³⁸⁰ *Shan Herald Agency for News*, September 26, 2007.

³⁸¹ NLM, September 26, 2007

³⁸² *Irrawaddy*, September 27, 2007 “Crackdown troops from division 77, says researcher”

³⁸³ *Narinjara News*, September 27, 2007 “Army reinforces troops in Akyab with rural battalions”.

³⁸⁴ *Asia Times*, September 27, 2007 “The man behind the Myanmar madness”.

The NLM on its title page published a report on the Full Moon Day ceremonies of the previous day. In the inner parts, the foreign press was accused in a longer article to have published a “skyful of lies” referring to previous biased information of Western media against Myanmar and China.³⁸⁵ Finally, on the last page the violence on the side of demonstrators against security forces is highlighted. The forces were forced to open fire on demonstrators who failed to disperse. One person was killed, two motorbikes were destroyed and eight members of the security force members were injured.³⁸⁶ In addition, the protesters were accused of threatening families into joining the protests and called on people to report such incidents to the authorities.³⁸⁷

8.2.3 Friday, September 28

The New York Times characterized the situation as an apparent success of the authorities in containing the monks and now concentrating on attacking smaller groups of civilians.³⁸⁸

The *Irrawaddy* reported that in the afternoon trucks loaded with troops raided the offices of Burma’s main Internet service provider, Myanmar Info-Tech, located at Rangoon University (Hlaing campus) around noon on Friday in an effort to cut all public access to the Internet.³⁸⁹

Irrawaddy reported a violent raid of Pauk Myaing Monastery in Mandalay at about 7:30 pm. About 50 monks were praying in front of a Buddha image when they were attacked, beaten with batons and kicked with boots before being taken away by troops. A witness said, “numerous monks were bleeding from the beatings. Most of the monks were arrested, but a few managed to escape.”

According to the Thai Newspaper *The Nation*, Gen. Than Shwe brought his family out of the country. Eight members of his family were said to have boarded an Air Bagan flight, which landed in Vientiane on Thursday evening.³⁹⁰

State-run television said nine people were killed.

An urgent report from *Mizzima* was published that Burmese troops from middle Burma had started to march towards Rangoon. The reported troops are from Central Command based in Taung Oo and South East Command. It was not clear if the troops were marching to reinforce or to challenge the troops in Rangoon for shooting the Buddhist monks. “Maung Aye and his loyalists are opposed to shooting into the crowd,” a source close to the military hierarchy told *Mizzima* referring to the major differences that the head of *junta* Senior General Than Shwe and his second-in-command, Vice-Senior General Maung Aye had over the brutal crack down on protesters in Burma.³⁹¹

About worldwide reactions to the violent crackdown in Myanmar many news agencies reported groups in various countries demonstrating their solidarity for the suppressed Myanmar citizens through statements and demonstrations in front of Myanmar embassies.

³⁸⁵ NLM, September 27, 2007,, p. 16, pp. 7-8: “Tsunami, Mattel and a skyful of lies”.

³⁸⁶ NLM, September 27, 2007, p. 16 “Protesters throw stones at security forces and use catapults. Two senior police, six others wounded. One protester killed, three wounded”.

³⁸⁷ NLM, September 27, 2007. p.16 “Some monks and people enter homes. Saboteurs threaten families demanding them to join protest if not provide cash, kind. Authorities urge people to make complaints in person or on line to Wards PDCs, Township PDCs or local authorities against intimidations, extortions, coercion.”

³⁸⁸ *New York Times*, September 28, 2007 “With monks contained, Myanmar authorities attack civilians”.

³⁸⁹ *Irrawaddy*, September 28, 2007 “Burma Protests: the Situation on September 28”.

³⁹⁰ *The Nation*, September 28, 2007. According to local rumours, the family was flown to Bangkok and even other places (personal communication to the author).

³⁹¹ *Mizzima News*, September 28, 2007 “Speculation over possible confrontation among Burmese generals: Troops marching to Rangoon. Burmese Air Force planes airborne.” The Burmese section of the News contained an article entitled “Junta being”.

Furthermore much is written about the reactions and possible interventions by neighboring countries. According to AP the Southeast Asian nations issued a statement expressing “revulsion” over the violent repression of demonstrations and strongly urged the military government to call off its troops and seek a political solution. China had refused to intervene, calling the protests an internal affair that didn’t threaten regional or global stability, the criteria for action by the U.N. Security Council. AP quotes an expert for Southeast Asia of the Beijing University who said that it is essential for China that Myanmar stays stable so that the southern border region remains calm and that the delivery of oil supplies via a cross-border pipeline is ensured. He emphasized by echoing earlier statements by Chinese academics and diplomats that the international community might be overestimating China’s influence over the regime.³⁹²

The German news agency dpa said about India – the world’s largest democracy – that it abides by its principle of non-interference with its neighbours’ internal policies and that Thailand, whose current government was appointed by a military *junta*, is in no position to talk.³⁹³

On the front page of the *New Light of Myanmar* the government tries to affirm that they serve in the interest of the nation and the collapsing” people. Furthermore they warn the readers to “be aware of the plots to organize people offering money to take part in the disturbance and false news reports and propaganda collected and distributed by the persons hired by certain foreign news agencies.” On the last page they summarize the damage of the demonstrations. “31 security members wounded, nine unidentified male protesters killed, 11 others including a woman wounded.”³⁹⁴

8.3 Summary and Disputed Information

8.3.1 Summary

The authorities pursued a clear strategy. They tried to separate the monks from the people and thus prevented the monks’ occupation of the public and political space. To achieve this goal, they employed two strategies.

First, they contained most of those monks who formed the core of the demonstrations, meaning mostly the young ones who usually stayed only for a short time in the monastery.³⁹⁵ That made it easy to disperse the lay protesters by the use or just the threat of force. This was relatively easy because the civil protestors were bereaved of the spiritual force providing immunity. Whereas during the first stage of the demonstrations, the security forces were ordered to keep the monks out of the Buddhist places with a paramount spiritual and national prestige like Shwedagon or keep them inside like in Myitkyina, with the beginning of the crackdown they employed a different and more radical strategy. They raided the monasteries and forced monks to leave them for different locations, mostly to their hometowns or villages. Some monks were arrested; others fled to various destinations.

Secondly, the authorities tried to isolate the protests from the international community by temporarily cutting off Internet connections as well as telephone lines, closing Internet cafés and blocking blogs.

In material terms the strategy was successful. Compared to 1988 the big point of comparison for all sides participating in the events was that no mass movement developed and the amount of force em-

³⁹² AP, September 28, 2007 “China, Japan to cooperate on solution to Myanmar crisis amid international outcry”: “China’s diplomacy is more pragmatic. They are concerned mainly about securing a government that is friendly toward China to protect their interests in Myanmar.”

³⁹³ dpa, September 28, 2007 “Analysis: Crisis highlights world’s failed diplomacy in Myanmar.”

³⁹⁴ NLM, September 29, 2007: p. 16.

³⁹⁵ Statistics about the length of the average stay of “short term” and “long term” monks are not available.

ployed as well as the number of physically affected people was low. In terms of the public reaction both inside and outside the country, the result of the oppression of the demonstrations was devastating.

8.3.2 Disputed Information

8.3.2.1 Numbers

As usual, the number of people killed, wounded and arrested is contested. The government admitted that 15 people had been killed. According to the findings of Special Rapporteur Paulo Pinheiro, 16 more people whose names were known were killed. He secured information on 653 arrested people and 74 persons who had disappeared.³⁹⁶

8.3.2.2 The Extend of the Disruption of Communication Lines and the Duration of the Curfew

At 3 p.m. on September 27, the authorities were reported to have disconnected most of the country's mobile phone lines.³⁹⁷ This could not be confirmed by observations³⁹⁸ on the spot.

According to some reports, the imposed curfew had begun at six o'clock already. This may have never been the case but was believed by Yangon people and foreigners.³⁹⁹ But loudspeaker trucks toured South Okkalapa on Friday, September 28, announcing a four-hour extension in the area to the curfew imposed on Yangon and the second city of Mandalay on Tuesday.⁴⁰⁰

8.4 Interpretations, contexts and analogies

8.4.1 The Supernatural

Linked to the crackdown were three supernatural events. First, there was the thunder on a sunny day at the same time of the first shooting. According to Burmese folk belief, the thunder is a supernatural sign for a mannerless improper behaviour of a person or group towards a higher ranked person or group. The demonstrators - aware of the superstitious ness of the ruling Generals - were shouting: "May the people who beat monks be struck down by lightning."⁴⁰¹ Secondly, the full moon day on 26.09.2007 coincided with the first day for the crackdown and third the auspicious date "27.09.2007" which became the most violent day in the crackdown. It may be questioned if the crackdowns as well as the demonstrations were planned in advance to happen on foreseeable days with a special meaning or not. Even if the concurrence was just coincidental, the events later were interpreted as an incursion of a higher power into the worldly realm and thus influencing the outcome.

8.4.2 Symbolic and Real Power Contests

Inside Myanmar and outside of the country, the beginning crackdown was perceived as a struggle of two equal forces, not as a suppression of demonstrations by a superior government and its agents.⁴⁰² This may partly account for the outside media's tendency to exaggerate the amount of force deployed

³⁹⁶ Pinheiro: p. 20.

³⁹⁷ <http://www.govtech.com/gt/149323>. [April 17, 2009].

³⁹⁸ Personal communication to the author.

³⁹⁹ Personal communication to the author.

⁴⁰⁰ NLM, September 28, 2007.

⁴⁰¹ AFP, September 28, 2007 "Burma death toll much higher than reported: Downer"

⁴⁰² For the inside view: personal communication to the author; for the outside reports, see above, 5.2.

by the government against the monks who had been rather rigorously and effectively prevented from further demonstrations after the government's announcement of the end of tolerance towards the clergy's protests.

Only later, a reflection on the uneven balance of power set in resulting in a deep feeling of frustration inside the country and a search for explanations – mostly concentrating on the role of the regional players and other international issues. These impressions may be explained by the coexistence of symbolic and real power. The monks and their supporters challenged the government symbolically and were perceived as morally superior thus balancing the material superiority of the government.

8.4.3 Comparisons to 1988

In comparison to 1988 much of the violence happened behind the doors and not that much on the streets. On the other hand, there were much more reports about the suppression of the demonstrations than in 1988. This imbalance is one factor hampering a straight comparison.

In the light of this and other differences, one may ask if it was appropriate at all to compare the events with those of 1988, something almost all parties and commentators – both inside and outside Myanmar – did. Given the predominance ascribed to this relationship, a thorough look into the diversities as well as the similarities of both events should be undertaken.

Similarities between 1988 and 2007:

- Public dissatisfaction with the government turned into public protest after a worsening of the economic situation of many people, mainly in the urban centres;
- The military is the only stable organisation within the country;
- Military force was employed to suppress the public protest;
- The confrontation between people and government happened in a situation of constitutional transition;
- The demonstrations were spontaneously organised.

Differences, distinguishing 2007 from 1988:

- The government was well prepared for suppressing the protests;
- Besides the security forces, civil forces were used to quell an uprising;
- The government has not just proclaimed but implemented measures for a transition to a different form of government;
- The demonstrations were led by monks;
- The number of victims was much lower;
- Detailed reports about the events were transmitted to the international world;
- The state media directly reacted to the foreign reports on the events;
- No prominent leader of the opposition was directly involved in the protests.

This list shows that the similarities between the events of 1988 and 2007 are mainly related to the causes of the protests and the main actors, military versus “the people”, whereas the modalities of the confrontation and the political context were quite different.

In a very abridged way, one can say that in 1988 the political situation was unsettled and facilitated quite a number of options. In retrospect, this very open situation was termed “chaotic” by the military

and “promising” by the opposition. The military coup terminating the protests in 1988 was just one of many options leaving a number of options of how the military domination would be implemented undecided.

In 2007, there was a rather stable political situation containing just two options, the ongoing dominance of military rule or the termination of it. But the latter choice was very unlikely for a number of reasons. One of them related to the monks’ initiative lies in the fact that the Buddhist *Sangha* could provide a lot of “moral capital” but absolutely no other forms of political capital necessary to run a state.⁴⁰³

The events of 1988 may therefore be termed a “popular uprising” aimed at a political transition. What happened in 2007, in contrast, was a “moral protest” which could not be converted into any tangible political changes.

8.5 Open Questions

The open questions related to the crackdown on the protests, therefore, are related to the assessments of what happened.

8.5.1 Whereabouts of the Monks

Almost over night, thousands of demonstrating monks vanished from the streets. “Where have all the monks gone?” was a question often uttered in Yangon after the crackdown.⁴⁰⁴ The question is not just interesting for statistical reasons but for drawing conclusions on the nature of involvement of the monks participating in the demonstrations.

Many monks were questioned, a few were imprisoned and charged the most prominent of them being U Gambira.⁴⁰⁵ Some others fled to Thailand the most often quoted being U Pyinnya Jota. Most monks participating in the protests just vanished from the public eye. Given the fact that the demonstrations took place during the Buddhist Lent Season during which many young people are ordained and stay for a short time in the monastery one may assume that quite a lot of the demonstrators just left the *Sangha* after their monasteries had been occupied by the authorities and the non-resident monks were told to leave. Most of them may have returned to a secular life just a little bit earlier and with very different feelings than expected before their retreat. Others may have entered another monastery or gone back to the one in which they stayed at the time of the crackdown.

8.5.2 The Role of Swan Ah Shin and USDA People in the Crackdown

That “thugs” hired by the government were involved in the suppression of the protests, has been mentioned very often. Details about their involvement are rare, however. The reports available point to an involvement of *Swan Ah Shin* members in the suppression of the civilians’ protests after the crackdown on the monasteries. There is one detailed account of what happened near Sule Pagoda on September 27.⁴⁰⁶ According to eyewitnesses, members of the organisation were brought to the place in large numbers and were ordered to attack the protesters with sticks and to arrest people. Their behaviour is described as more “brutal” than that of the soldiers.

⁴⁰³ On the term “political capital” see Kane 2001 and Fleschenberg 2005.

⁴⁰⁴ Personal communication to the author.

⁴⁰⁵ See above, 6.5.2.; Human Rights Watch: 81-89.

⁴⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch 2007: 62-68.

The information indicates a systematically planned employment of a paramilitary force of civilians. It can be assumed that there was some training – both physically and mentally orientated - preparing the members of the groups for activities like this. The number of people involved in these groups obviously is quite high and the same applies, accordingly, to the costs of maintaining this special force.

Such general deliberations need to be substantiated. Based on such findings, conclusions should be drawn on the stratification of the present society of Myanmar. The confrontation at Sule Pagoda and other places after the disappearance of the monks point to the existence of two pretty large groups of mostly young people one of which actively supports the government while the other is willing to attack security forces if the occasion arises. In between, the majority of citizens try to avoid confrontation.

8.5.3 The Psychological Impact of the Suppression on the People

Without any doubt, the crackdown of the demonstrations had a deep impact on the people's minds as the reactions collected and presented at the end of this study indicate.⁴⁰⁷ To get an idea of how this impact may influence the future of Myanmar, a lot of conceptual and empiric work has to be done.

8.6 Conclusion: Two Pyrrhic Victories

As stated above, the suppression of the demonstrations were both a success and a failure at the same time. The government was very quickly able to suppress the protests but at a high cost. Its already low reputation has been tarnished even more, inside and outside the country as well mainly due to the course of action taken against the monks.

On the other hand, the monks as well as their civilian supporters paid a high price for their moral victory. The crackdown hardened the lines of confrontation between the opposing camps, again inside and outside of Myanmar, diminishing the chance for dialogue – the fourth demand of the monks' first public declaration.

⁴⁰⁷ See chapter 9.2.

9 EPILOGUE

As the comparison of the suppression of the uprising in 1988 and the demonstrations in 2007 showed, the latter events were neither connected to the end of a political era nor paved the way for something new. In the end, it was just an episode connected with step one of the *junta's* “roadmap to democracy”. As a consequence, this final chapter of our study will not draw a fixed conclusion but just discuss some events which happened after the suppression of the protests (6.1.) and quote some statements from Myanmar citizens making evident the spectrum of opinions related to the events (6.2). These anonymous and edited quotations will lead into to some assessments of the happenings from outside observers (6.3) which may further help the reader to make up his own mind.

9.1 The Aftermath

The following paragraphs are divided into four sections. First, some government measures and public reactions are reported (9.1.1). Second, some information on the continuing protests (9.1.2) and the coverage by the international media (9.1.3) are reported. Finally, there is some information about the visits of the UN envoys and the reaction of other governments (9.1.4).

9.1.1 Government measures and public response

9.1.1.1 Restoration of Law and Order

After the three days of violent suppression of the monks' and civilians' demonstrations the state media announced on September 29 that peace and stability had returned to Myanmar.⁴⁰⁸ On this day, the special envoy of the UN, Ibrahim Gambari arrived in Yangon. Three days later, the imposed curfew was eased to 10pm to 4am.⁴⁰⁹ On October 20, the curfew was lifted completely. The streets had been emptied of demonstrators and returned to their familiar appearance even earlier.

Places affected by the crackdown were cleaned up.⁴¹⁰ Police and military tightened the security on all places of previous events to prevent new eruptions of unrest. Checkpoints were set up around the city and soldiers stopped and searched civilians, particularly young people who carried bags. Buses and taxis were checked for suspects. Troops were stationed at pagodas, monasteries and street junctions.⁴¹¹

Many of the detained civilians and monks were released⁴¹² as well as some prominent supporters of the protesting monks like comedians Zarganar⁴¹³ and Par Par Lay, the oldest of the famous Moustache Brothers of Mandalay.⁴¹⁴

The Thadingyut, festival of light, which was celebrated on October 22, demonstrated the efforts by the government to tighten the control over the people. Thadingyut is the Buddhist festival that ends the

⁴⁰⁸ See Document 9.1.

⁴⁰⁹ *The Nation*, October 2, 2007.

⁴¹⁰ See Document 9.2.

⁴¹¹ *Irrawaddy*, October 4, 2007 “Rangoon is still a battleground”.

⁴¹² Dpa, October 6, 2007 „Burma releases detained monks but diplomats not hopeful”.

⁴¹³ *Irrawaddy*, October 18 „Comedian Zarganar, Actor Kyaw Thu released from Insein Prison”.

⁴¹⁴ *Mizzima*, October 31, 2007 „Junta release famous comedian, seven political prisoners”.

lent period and is celebrated on three days around the full moon day of October by lighting candles, lanterns and fireworks. The main spot for the festivities is usually in Yangon's Chinatown. This year the government prohibited citizens from lighting fireworks. Despite the prohibition, loud fireworks were blasted, but fewer than in previous years. Security forces in civil dresses mingled with the crowds and arrested illegal firework-sellers.⁴¹⁵

Government officials were again reported to hand out donations to monasteries and nunneries.⁴¹⁶

9.1.1.2 Continuing Raids and Arrests

More monasteries were raided and searched. Some monks were arrested.⁴¹⁷ The authorities continued the crackdown on the houses of the civilian participants of demonstrations in visits at night. With the help of photographs and videotapes made during the demonstrations, the government searched for the people involved in the demonstrations, especially those regarded as having performed leading functions.

Civilians accused of participating in the demonstrations were sorted out in different categories according to their alleged involvement in the demonstrators.⁴¹⁸ Military vehicles patrolled the streets before dawn with loudspeakers blaring, "We have photographs. We are going to make arrests!"⁴¹⁹

9.1.1.3 Interrupting Communication Lines to the Outside World

On September 28, Internet connections were cut off. They were reopened on October 5, but at first only during curfew hours. Bloggers were still banned.⁴²⁰ After that, public Internet access was made possible stepwise. On October 11, they had been open for a few days from 12.30 to 16:00. On October 18, the opening times were as usual until 10 o'clock p.m.⁴²¹ Visas were denied for some foreigners, mainly Americans, British, Australians and all journalists. Local journalists who had allegedly sent reports and photographs to foreign media were intimidated.⁴²² On the other hand, there was no general restriction on visas. Many journalists who applied for tourist visas came in, talked to many people and even visited sensitive places like Pakokku.⁴²³

9.1.1.4 Charges

Only a few reports are available about the legal actions against protestors. The members of the "'88 group" were charged under two different sections of the law. Other detained persons like Htin Kyaw remained in prison.

⁴¹⁵ Personal communication to the author.

⁴¹⁶ NLM reported such a ceremony on October 8 on p. 1. One day before, there was a report on the meeting of the Minister for Religious Affairs with some Sayadaws that justified the government's action against the monks.

⁴¹⁷ *Irrawaddy*, October 1, 2007 "Rangoon quiet but raids on monasteries continue". *Irrawaddy*, October 5, 2007 "Overnight arrests of monks continue in Rangoon". The report says that 5 monasteries in South and North Okkalapa were raided and 36 monks arrested.

⁴¹⁸ It was reported that there were three categories: 1. by-standers, 2. clappers and cheerers, 3. followers (personal communication to the author). – According to the NLM (October 5, p.16) "through investigation the authorities found out that the detainees included those who took part in the disturbances, those who followed and supported the noisy protests and those who unwittingly joined them. As the persons who unknowingly joined the noisy protests are also violators of the section, the authorities are releasing them after they have signed the pledge."

⁴¹⁹ *Mizzima News*, October 3, 2007 "Security forces search for protestors photographs in hand".

⁴²⁰ See document 9.3.

⁴²¹ Author, personal observation.

⁴²² DVB, October 3, 2007 "Burmese authorities target citizen journalists".

⁴²³ Author, personal observation and communication. One Burmese journalist remarked that his office had been somewhat like the Foreign Correspondence Club of Myanmar.

Buddhist monk U Gambira and his brother Aung Kyaw Kyaw who were arrested in November were charged at the end of January under Section 17/1 of the Unlawful Associations Act, which carries a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment. A sentencing hearing scheduled for 4 February was postponed and the authorities gave no new date. It was reported earlier that U Gambira was charged with treason, which carries a sentence of life imprisonment or the death penalty. Amnesty's report states that U Gambira has been stripped of his monk's robes, and that he and his brother have both been tortured in detention. It is not known whether they have been granted access to a lawyer.

Similar motivated charges have also been brought against labour activist Su Su Nway, who was arrested on November 13, 2007. She has reportedly been charged under sections 124, 125 and 505 of the Penal Code. Sections 124 and 505 relate to sedition and incitement to offences that damage "public tranquillity". Su Su Nwe was reportedly due to stand trial on 6 February in Yangon's Bahan Township.⁴²⁴

The slow process of bringing the people charged before courts may be attributed to the preoccupation of the government with a smooth preparation and execution of the referendum on the draft constitution in May 2008.⁴²⁵

9.1.1.5 Pro-Government Rallies

The government made efforts to restore a good reputation and to show images of people demonstrating their support for community peace,⁴²⁶ the road-map to democracy and the recently completed National Convention.⁴²⁷ The rallies were organized by the USDA and – according to the information available - took place in Yangon, Shan, Arakan and Karenni states, in Bago, Mandalay Myitkyina, Kyaukpadaung, Myingyan and Nyaung Oo.

In conversation with foreign media, people reported that they were forced to join the mass rallies. USDA members went to the houses and called on every household to send two people to the rallies or to pay three or four thousand Kyat.⁴²⁸

State television MRTV broadcasted the pro-government mass rallies and *The New Light of Myanmar* printed those pictures and gave the figures of 110,000 people attending a rally in Pegu division, 138,000 in Mandalay division, 71,000 in Sittwe and 13,000 in Mongnai Township in Southern Shan State.

⁴²⁴ Information according to Amnesty International. The organisation added that U Gambira's father who had been detained as well was released in early December. (<http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/ASA16/004/2008/en/0DQTopO7MY4J> [January 24, 2009]).

⁴²⁵ Author, personal communication in March 2008. – The new charges against the '88 students under the decree protecting the National Convention support this assumption (see 3.3.2 c)).

⁴²⁶ NLM September 29, p.1: "With concept that ongoing protests harm community peace. Peace-loving people of Taungtha Township stage mass rally"

⁴²⁷ NLM September 30, p.1 reporting about a mass rally in Myitkyina, Kachin State. From there on, the newspapers and other media reported daily about such rallies. – On the rally, a report in *Irrawaddy* (October 1 "The *junta* mobilizes its mouthpieces": "A resident of Myitkyina said that on September 28, high school students in Myitkyina were taken in local authorities' vehicles and forced to attend a gathering at a football park at 5:30 a.m. Teachers told the students that if they didn't join the rally, they wouldn't be allowed to take their final exam, the resident said. It is believed that teachers were forced to convey that message to their students. A resident from Taungwingyi said, 'We have to go their rallies. If I don't, I'll get fined 10,000 kyat (US \$7.1). However, if I do go, I was told I'd receive 3,000 kyat (US \$2.1)."

⁴²⁸ DVB September 30, 2007 "USDA slams public protests at rally"; Personal communication to the author. – Obviously to counter the street demonstrations in Yangon, people were not just called to public meetings at football stadiums, but were seen walking on the streets carrying placards. (*Irrawaddy*, October 29, 2007 "Rangoon Residents Forced Onto the Streets").

9.1.2 Continuation of Protests

The suppression of the protests, however, did not result in a complete end of all activities against the situation in the country. A variety of more or less visible signs of solidarity with the monks or protests against the government continued after the crackdown.⁴²⁹ These continued signs of disapproval with the prevailing economic and political situation must be taken into consideration in any assessment of possible future developments within the country.

9.1.2.1 Civilians and Monks on the Streets

According to BBC, on September 29 several hundred civilians gathered in Yangon and chanted slogans. They were surrounded by police and allegedly beaten but no shots were fired.⁴³⁰ On October 3 a group of 800 demonstrators was dispersed in Rakhine state.⁴³¹

But in the following weeks hardly any anti-government actions were reported. Again in the end of October there were a few more incidents. About 100 monks marched through the streets of Pakokku chanting the *Metta Sutta*⁴³² and in Mawlamyine, Mon State, five soldiers were killed at a pagoda Festival.⁴³³

9.1.2.2 “Mental Continuation” of the Boycott

Irrawaddy reported in the week after the crackdown that monks were still carrying on the boycott of alms from government members and their families.⁴³⁴ Neither ABMA or any other monks’ organization or individual gave any statement about an end to the boycott. Who carried on is not clear but a few determined voices from monks were heard again. In the end of October the *Irrawaddy* quoted a monk from Pakokku who said that “We are still holding *patam nikkujjana kammam* (...) “We won't accept the alms they offer until they apologize for their treatment to the *Sangha* [the community of Buddhist monks].”⁴³⁵

9.1.2.3 Expression of Solidarity with the Monks

Expressions of solidarity with the monks were seen in some parts of daily life. A few famous singers, actors and actresses shaved their hair to resemble the monks and nuns. Acts like this could be witnessed even some months after the events. In public, persons who had shaved their heads wore caps.⁴³⁶

9.1.2.4 General Disappointment

That the “saffron revolution” on which many, mostly younger people had pinned their hopes for a change in politics and a better life had failed, and that the chance to overcome the military rule did not lead to an overthrow of the ruling generals created widespread disappointment among the people. The Burmese phrase “*hsaik nyit dae*” was often heard on the streets. It can be translated as “to be depressed, be unhappy, be troubled.” The “*hsaik*” – mind or heart – is burdened with something negative or dirty - “*nyit*”. According to an older man, it is

⁴²⁹ Author, personal communication in January 2009. Not just from Burman Buddhists remembered what had happened, but people from other ethnic and religious communities as well.

⁴³⁰ BBC, September 29, 2007 “New protests on Rangoon streets”.

⁴³¹ DVB October 3, 2007 “Arakan protests continue despite threats from authorities”.

⁴³² *Irrawaddy*, October 31, 2007 “Pakokku Monks March Again”.

⁴³³ Personal communication to the author.

⁴³⁴ *Irrawaddy*, October 4, 2007 “Rangoon still a battleground”.

⁴³⁵ *Irrawaddy*, October 25, 2007 “Gloomy Start to Burma’s Festival of Lights”.

⁴³⁶ Author, personal observation in March 2008.

rather a temporary feeling and it is not too serious. It is like someone has a problem that cannot be solved at the moment but still contains a possibility of a solution for later.⁴³⁷

9.1.3 Foreign Media

9.1.3.1 Horror-Scenarios⁴³⁸

In the first days after the crackdown, there were terrifying reports about what had and was still happening in Myanmar.”

The Daily Mail, a British newspaper, published on October 1 a report by Marcus Oscarsson entitled: “Burma: Thousands Dead In Massacre of The Monks Dumped In The Jungle” which was republished in other media:⁴³⁹

Thousands of protesters are dead and the bodies of hundreds of executed monks have been dumped in the jungle, a former intelligence officer for Burma’s ruling *junta* has revealed.

The most senior official to defect so far, Hla Win, said: “Many more people have been killed in recent days than you’ve heard about. The bodies can be counted in several thousand.”

Mr Win, who spoke out as a Swedish diplomat predicted that the revolt has failed, said he fled when he was ordered to take part in a massacre of holy men. He has now reached the border with Thailand.

A related report, “that Myanmar’s repression has become open religious persecution and the cruelty used against protesters asking for an end to the dictatorship, has gone beyond all stretches of the imagination. *AsiaNews* sources confirm the existence of a crematorium in the suburbs of Yangon, where soldiers burn the bodies of protesters as well as detainees gravely injured during the anti-regime demonstrations. In this way the military *junta* hopes to make it impossible to estimate the exact number of victims.”⁴⁴⁰

DPA reported on October 6: “Residents near the Yeywey crematorium in Yangon saw government personnel burning 71 bodies on the night of Sep 26, and people living near Insein prison have witnessed three to four dead bodies being brought out nightly from the notorious jail, where many of the protesters were detained and reportedly beaten.”

The “top US-representative in Myanmar, Shari Villarosa, was quoted in the same report thus: “We are doing our best to get more precise, more detailed information, not only in terms of deaths but also arrests.” Villarosa said her staff had visited up to 15 monasteries around Yangon and every single one was empty. She put the number of arrested demonstrators - monks and civilians - in the thousands. “I know the monks are not in their monasteries,” she said. “Where are they? How many are dead? How many are arrested?”

Other reports suggested a food shortage as an outcome of a nation wide state of emergency on the daily life. *The Irrawaddy* quoted a shop owner who had had only rice to sell for two to three days and who said that the price of basic food in Rangoon was increasing hour by hour. *The Irrawaddy* also reported that the government hindered the World Food Program’s efforts to deliver food to 500,000 vul-

⁴³⁷ Personal communication to the author.

⁴³⁸ See document 9.5.

⁴³⁹ See http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/100107R.shtml [January 24, 2009].

⁴⁴⁰ *AsiaNews* October 8, 2007. (The Asia News Network (ANN) is a network of national daily newspapers published in Asian cities, organized to provide avenues for cooperation and to optimize coverage of major news events in the region. See <http://www.asianewsnet.net/index.php#>).

nerable people in different areas of Burma. Burmese authorities had stopped all movement of food commodities out of Mandalay and Sittwe.⁴⁴¹

9.1.3.2 Assessments and Reflections

From mid-October onwards, the tone of the news coverage on Myanmar changed. Evaluations of what had happened and proposals for the future were published covering a wide range of topics. Here is an overview of some headlines from the *BurmaNet News* of October 27-29 and 30:

October 27-29:

REGIONAL: *Mizzima News*: Singapore pursues policy, not regime change; - *Mizzima News*: Taiwan to work for democracy in Burma.

INTERNATIONAL: *Mizzima News*: Burmese Americans question US on sanctions policy; - AP: French FM says sanctions against Myanmar should be coupled with incentives.

OPINION / OTHER: *YaleGlobal*: The next steps for Burma (Amitav Acharya); - *Irrawaddy*: A meaningful dialogue needs courage (Htet Aung); - *The Nation*: Time for Thailand to revisit its policy on Burma (Kavi Chongkittavorn); *Financial Times*: Battle to beat Burma *junta's* siege mentality (Amy Kazmin); - *Forbes*: The Sanctions Myth (Matthew Swibel and Soyoung Ho).

October 30:

REGIONAL: *Reuters*: RPT-Singapore distancing itself from Myanmar -analysts – Ed Cropley.

INTERNATIONAL: *The Straits Times* (Singapore): Back to the past for Myanmar? No way: France; Paris will help Asean push for change: French foreign minister (Chong Suk Wai); - AP: Germany, India urge Myanmar to release political prisoners, hold talks with UN; - *The Hindu*: S. Africa welcomes Myanmar regime's talks with Suu Kyi; - *Christian Today*: Christians join MPs in Day of Action for Burma in London.

OPINION / OTHER:

Mizzima News: What shapes the mind of a soldier? (Klose Htoo); - *Press Trust of India*: Churnings in Myanmar: Old Dilemma for India (Pallab Bhattacharya); - *The Lancet*: Burma and the challenge of humanitarian assistance (Chris Beyrer).

With regard to the role of the monks, there were some reports which put the monks' protests into perspective.⁴⁴²

9.1.4 The Visits of the UN Envoys and the Reaction of Other Countries

9.1.4.1 The UN

Ibrahim Gambari

Gambari, born 1944 in Nigeria, working at the United Nations since 1990 and assigned the organisation's Under Secretary General for Political Affairs visited Myanmar in May 2006 for the first time. He returned in December of the same year. After the demonstrations in Myanmar, he came back to Myanmar on September 29 and stayed until October 2. He met Aung San Suu Kyi twice and the top leadership of the *junta* once.

⁴⁴¹ *Irrawaddy*, September 29, 2007 „Irrawaddy, Monks sentenced to six years imprisonment; Rangoon, Mandalay locked down by troops“. According to the author's sources, there was never a fear of food shortage in Yangon. When she asked if she should stock some food stuff she was told that that was not necessary.

⁴⁴² *International Herald Tribune* October 23, 2007 “Burmese monks are shown the limits of their moral authority”; *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2007 “Burma: not yet a saffron revolution“.



Gambari and Aung San Suu Kyi on September 30, 2007 (Reuters)

After the visit, the *junta*'s leader Than Shwe said on TV that he was willing to meet Aung San Suu Kyi personally but under the condition that she abandoned her calls for "confrontation, utter devastation, economic sanctions and all other sanctions."⁴⁴³ On October 8, on Gambari's recommendation to appoint a liaison officer for relations with Aung San Suu Kyi a "Minister for Relations" was appointed. On October 25, the first meeting took place and was reported in the state media.⁴⁴⁴

The UN Security Council received a report about the findings of the special envoy and passed a resolution on October 11 "deploring" the violence in the country and calling for a "genuine dialogue" with Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴⁴⁵

Gambari made a follow-up visit in November (3.-8.11.) He visited Aung Suu Kyi again twice and had talks with members of the government but not with General Than Shwe. On November 13, he reported again to the Security Council expressing cautious optimism about the dialogue between the government and Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴⁴⁶

People in Myanmar had pinned high hopes on Gambari's visits⁴⁴⁷ and were very much disappointed later. This disappointment was most clearly shown in the name Gambari was given in Myanmar: *U Kyauk Yu Pyan* meaning "The one who takes gems then leave".⁴⁴⁸ This and other commentaries were communicated via blogs.

⁴⁴³ See Document 9.6

⁴⁴⁴ See Document 9.7

⁴⁴⁵ <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Myanmar%20S%20-PRST%202007%2037.pdf> [January 25, 2009].

⁴⁴⁶ The official UN statement said: "Despite voicing continuing concerns over human rights in Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, the Secretary-General's Special Adviser, said that the positive outcomes of his recent mission to the country showed that the Government could be responsive to the concerns of the international community, as he briefed the Security Council this afternoon. - A process was now in motion, he said, that would hopefully lead to dialogue between the Government and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the main opposition party who had long been under house arrest. Such dialogue would require flexibility on all sides and the sustained engagement of the international community, which also needed to hear the concerns of all sides."

⁴⁴⁷ Personal communication to the author.

⁴⁴⁸ <http://burmasitnone.wordpress.com/2007/11/05/mr-gambari-has-a-burmese-name-u-kyauk-yu-pyan/>. - The blog is now deleted.

On November 20, the General Assembly passed a resolution strongly condemning the “use of violence against peaceful demonstrators”.⁴⁴⁹ The UN’s General Secretary on December 19 convened a meeting of a 14 member “Group of Friends” Australia, Indonesia, Russia, the United States, China, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, France, Norway, Thailand, India, Portugal und Great Britain⁴⁵⁰ to assist Ibrahim Gambari in his efforts.

Gambari’s visited Myanmar a third time after the protests between March 6 and 10. Again, he did not meet with Than Shwe but two times again with Aung San Suu Kyi, with some leaders of ethnic groups and NGO-people. The government turned down his proposal to allow foreign observers monitor the referendum in May.

Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro

Between November 10 and 15, the UN’s “Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar” since 2001, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, visited Myanmar. He had not been allowed to come to Myanmar since 2003. He met government officials, visited detention centres and Insein prison twice where on the last day of his visit he was allowed to meet some prominent prisoners such as Su Su Nwe and journalist Win Tin, 74, who has been imprisoned since 1989.

He also tried to find out what had happened at Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery in South Okkalapa. He was able to meet with representatives of 92 monks still staying at the monastery of some 180 to 200 before the raid. He voiced his concern regarding the whereabouts of the other monks.⁴⁵¹

On December 7, 2007, he submitted his report to the UN’s Human Rights Council. The report stated “that security forces, including the army and riot police, used excessive force against civilians from 26 to 29 September 2007, in spite of several international appeals calling upon the Government of Myanmar to show restraint in policing the demonstrations.”⁴⁵² Further, the report stated that the government had been “inconsistent with the fundamental principles reflected in the basic international Norms“ and “that the participation of USDA members and SAS militia largely contributed to the excessive use of force against the peaceful protesters”.⁴⁵³ The arrest of political activists like Su Su Nwe was “condemned” because it was allegedly a breach of a promise made by the Myanmar Prime Minister toward Ibrahim Gambari.⁴⁵⁴

In his answer,⁴⁵⁵ the Myanmar delegate “strongly condemned” these statements, because no such commitment was made and “the arrests carried out for those who had violated the existing laws of Myanmar

⁴⁴⁹ “By the terms of a draft entitled “Situation of human rights in Myanmar (document A/C.3/62/L.41/Rev.1),” approved as orally revised by a recorded vote of 97 in favour to 23 against, with 60 abstentions, on 20 November, the Assembly would strongly condemn the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators who had been exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression. Grave concern would be expressed about ongoing systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, arbitrary detentions, repeated violations of international humanitarian law, discrimination suffered by persons of ethnic nationalities, the absence of genuine participation by representatives of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other political parties, and the continuous deterioration of living conditions, as well as increasing poverty. The Government in that country would be strongly called upon to ensure full respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to give serious consideration to recommendations and proposals put forward by the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General during his visit in October 2007.” (<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10678.doc.htm>). – Among the countries voting against the resolution were China, India and Russia.

⁴⁵⁰ Australia, China, France, Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, the United States, Vietnam.

⁴⁵¹ Pinheiro: 18.

⁴⁵² Pinheiro: 10.

⁴⁵³ Pinheiro: 11; 12.

⁴⁵⁴ Pinheiro: 16.

⁴⁵⁵ http://mission.itu.ch/MISSIONS/Myanmar/pressrelease_PMgev/HRC%206%20session%20Resumed%20Dec%2011%20to%2014_07.htm [January 24, 2009].

mar and were not related with the September event". Further, the Myanmar delegate stated that some allegations contained in the report were obtained from unreliable sources.

9.4.1.2 Reaction of Other Countries

From the point of view of Burmese citizens who hoped that the international community would react in a way that alleviated their grievances, the reaction of the international community was as disappointing as the outcome of the visits of the UN envoys and their reports back home.

Like in Pinheiro's report, the crackdown on the demonstrators was almost unanimously condemned or at least regretted, but no action was taken which effected change in Myanmar. Here is a short survey of the reaction of some concerned members of the international community. All regional blocs and individual countries just continued their previous policies towards Myanmar.

a) ASEAN. "We are most disturbed by reports of the violent means that the authorities in Myanmar have deployed against the demonstrators, which have resulted in injuries and deaths," Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong, the current chairman of ASEAN at that time, wrote in a letter to General Than Shwe published on September 29.⁴⁵⁶ One month later at the association's meeting in Singapore, Ibrahim Gambari did not get the opportunity to report on his initiatives in Myanmar, allegedly after an intervention by Myanmar's Prime Minister.⁴⁵⁷

b) China had supported the Security Council's resolution of October 11 but gave a special interpretation of it. The statement was intended "to support the mediation efforts of the United Nations Secretary General and his special adviser Ibrahim Gambari, and provide constructive help to all parties in Myanmar to realise domestic reconciliation through dialogue and promote democracy and development," spokesman Liu Jianchao said in a statement on the ministry's Web site.⁴⁵⁸

c) India. India's army chief who took over his post on October 1 called the suppression of the demonstrations an "internal matter" and stressed the "good relationship" with the neighbouring country.⁴⁵⁹ India had supported Aung San Suu Kyi until the mid 90s but then changed her attitude because of economic and strategic interests.⁴⁶⁰

d) Thailand. General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the Thai *junta* chief who had staged a coup in September 2006, said in an interview with a local TV station: "The military rulers have their own stance which is unlikely to change. Any pressure to let democracy take place in Myanmar is difficult."⁴⁶¹

e) Japan's position was affected by the death of the photojournalist Kenji Nagai. The country lodged a protest against the killing, which was regretted by Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win who met his Japanese counterpart in New York. There was news that Japan considered imposing sanctions,⁴⁶² but no such measures were imposed.

f) United States. Politicians in the country being divided over many issues were united in the criticism of the *junta's* crackdown and in the support of the opposition. "Burma is a place where the line between good and evil is absolutely clear", as a human rights activist put it. The President's wife, Laura Bush, who had engaged in the Burma issue before, once more called for a strong international reaction. On the other hand, the US based company Chevron's engagement in the exploitation of My-

⁴⁵⁶ AP October 1, 2007 "ASEAN turns screws on Myanmar as Japan mulls sanctions".

⁴⁵⁷ *The Sun* November 20, 2007 "Asian Nations Deal Blow To U.N. Efforts on Burma".

⁴⁵⁸ *Reuters* October 12, 2007 "China calls on Myanmar to solve its own problems".

⁴⁵⁹ AFP October 1, 2007 „New Indian army chief calls Myanmar crackdown 'internal matter'".

⁴⁶⁰ See Lall 2006.

⁴⁶¹ AFP October 1, 2007 "Myanmar regime unlikely to change: Thai junta chief".

⁴⁶² AP October 1, 2007 "ASEAN turns screws on Myanmar as Japan mulls sanctions".

anmar's gas fields was not affected by the popular outrage.⁴⁶³ The US government imposed new sanctions including restrictions on gems.

g) European Union: The EU pursued its policies of imposing sanctions on the ruling government of Myanmar and at the same time tried to improve the fate of the population through humanitarian aid.⁴⁶⁴ On October 16, after a meeting of ministers in Luxembourg, a joint declaration was published underlining this policy.⁴⁶⁵ On 6 November 2007, Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy appointed Piero Fassino as EU Special Envoy for Burma/Myanmar.⁴⁶⁶

9.2 Instead of a Conclusion

The following section comprises some “voices from within”, assessments of Myanmar citizens about what happened between August and October 2007. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first presents some comments collected in September and October 2007, the second contains statements collected in March 2008, half a year after the demonstrations.

Of course, the following account represents only a small section of public opinion. This limitation is due to the very limited amount of dialogue partners for Westerners who can accumulate such expressions of opinion. The shortcoming of a collection like the one presented here has at least partly to be traced back to the limitations of the observer.

Three lessons shall be underlined which can be drawn from the following. First: Even within a restricted choice of public opinion there exists a great variety. Second: Great caution is advisable in drawing general conclusions about the “real” situation of Myanmar past, present and future. And third: It is the people that matter. To assist them in what they need one has to listen very carefully first.

9.2.1 Voices I : September / October 2007

A housewife recalls the brutality she witnessed during her downtown food Shopping on September 28 - and its after effects on families:

“I saw people in the street just beaten up for no reason — just walking along the road not even part of the protests. There was this young boy, he was alone and not shouting with the crowd or clapping. This captain came up to him, just started beating him and the boy fell on the street. Then the police pushed him into one of those trucks which were lined up to take demonstrators. As they pushed him, he fell again, then the police took out a big stick and gave him a huge blow on the back. After that, the captain told everyone in the street that they had 10 minutes to clear off. People were running for their lives. The vendors started to grab their things. There was one lady selling fritters and she had a big vat of hot oil — she had to walk with this oil and they came after her and beat her to make her move faster.

⁴⁶³ *Wall Street Journal Online* October 1, 2007 “Myanmar Issue Is Unifier”.

⁴⁶⁴ dpa, October 1, 2007 „EU members agree on tougher sanctions on Myanmar”.

⁴⁶⁵ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/96525.pdf [January 24, 2009]. On sanctions, the statement said: The “EU deems it necessary to increase direct pressure on the regime through stronger measures as well as the following additional restrictive measures: an export ban on equipment to the sectors of logs and timber and mining of metals, minerals, precious and semi precious stones; an import ban of products of the sectors mentioned before; and an investment ban in these sectors. It will therefore adopt a package of measures that do not harm the general population but that target those responsible for the violent crack-down and the overall political stalemate in the country.” On the issue of humanitarian assistance, no details were given, but beginning of December 1,5 million US \$ were allocated for the assistance of the Rohingyas in Rakhine (Arakan) and 5 millions for the support of WHO programmes. On the EU's “Multi-Annual Indicative Programme for Burma/Myanmar (2007-2010) see <http://www.deltha.ec.europa.eu/Myanmar/MM2008/BurmaMIP2007-|2010EN.PDF> [January 24, 2009].

⁴⁶⁶ Piero Fassino is an MP and former Italian Minister of Justice. He was expected to work in close coordination with Ibrahim Gambari.

I saw two boys at that moment walking up with cell phones. The captain grabbed the boys, took their cell phones and pushed them into the truck.

Someone who was with me at a previous job lost her son in these protests. He might have been on his way home, but we don't know. This mother had a friend in the Army whom she sought out for help. He told her to stay home and – no questions. The son – her only child – is still missing.”

A young man explains how the regime has clamped down on social exchange. Trust among people has been destroyed:

“There is no more connection between people. It's been broken. In our own neighbourhood, the security groups will arrest anyone who is heard to be talking about these events. Even at teashops we can't talk about these matters - these thugs will remember who you are and come to arrest you later. We can only talk to people we know on the street and never to strangers now. No one says anything at the market and everything has to be in secret. The bars have emptied out both because no one has any more money and what fun is it to get drunk when you can't talk? Even now we no longer dare to take our transistor radios to listen to foreign broadcasts outside. Just in the last few days, we have been threatened with arrest by local authorities for doing this in our ward. Anyone with a cell phone or camera will have it confiscated.

This is not the end. This is just a stopping point and we are not satisfied. We don't know the future but we will keep our anger burning inside.”

A Christian teacher with a lot of contacts to people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds:

“The unrest was stage-managed by the government and are part of a conspiracy. After the monks came in, the things got out of control. Shooting at monks never happened before. There are two options. Realistically, everything will be like before for a very long time. The other option is related to Christian hope: The monks' blood could pave the way to salvation.”

A teacher talks about the pain of seeing Buddhism desecrated in Myanmar as fear of the military and distrust of the monkhood spread among younger monks.

“It is almost coming on 50 years that we have clung to our culture by tolerating this military government. But something we revered was deeply insulted. I cannot continue to tolerate this. We only hope that bad *Kamma* will fall upon them because we can't do anything at the moment.

I know dozens of monks. One monk is very old. He is 78. It never occurred to him that in his lifetime he would have to hide.

The day after the shootings started, I went to this monastery and the faces that I saw on those monks was something I had never seen. It is not fear. It was a sadness so unbelievable.

Now the young monks that I talked to - who weren't rounded up - they want to disrobe. They don't have the moral courage to go on. "Better to be a layman", they said. I told them that this would be a terrible loss for our Buddhism. "No", they say, "What's the use of meditation? The power of meditation can't stop them from beating us." The worst thing now is that no amount of persuasion from the abbots will stop the young monks from disrobing.”

A retired Professor of Zoology:

“The situation is depressing. The power in the country relies on the guns, innocent people are killed, the people cannot defend themselves because they do not have weapons. One only can hope, hope, hope – hope for help from outside.”

A businessman whose company is suffering a catastrophic shortfall this month due to recent events believes that increasing stricter sanctions will not help and that isolation is not the answer:

“I joined the peaceful demonstrations to show my support. I would do it again. I don't agree with Sanctions on Myanmar. Of course, I may be biased because I'm a businessman. My own experience of traveling to other countries opened my mind and changed my life. I loved the freedom that I found in the United States. It was something that I had never tasted. Had I not spent time abroad, I would have ended up as a military man. Or else I could have been an informer exposing the conversation we're having right now.”

An old bookworm with a philosophical mind:

“*Dhamma* is divided. There is the monks' *dhamma* and there is the soldiers' *dhamma*. This is a very unfortunate situation.”

A waiter in an empty restaurant

“We are suffering. The economy is down. We would like to escape. Be careful, please. Have sympathy with us. We would like to help you but we cannot do much.”

An old journalist and former member of the Communist Party who lived together with Thakin Than Tun in the jungle until 1960:

“I do not think much of the demonstrations. The monks (and their supporters, the students) did not have real objectives. They should have concentrated on the immediate cause of the protests, the price hike. The students should have been content with the outcome of 1988. They have toppled the one party rule of General Ne Win. Now they should cooperate with the soldiers. Burma only will prosper when students, soldiers and monks live in harmony.”

An Abbot of a Monastery near Yangon talks of the loss of his monks:

“How difficult this is. Before we had 200 monks and now there are only 50 left in my Monastery. They ran away for their security. We have 500 children in our Monastery School and 100 students studying English — but our English teaching monks have left us. We are very unhappy now. I would like to invite guests to see this, but I am afraid.”

A teacher who organizes curriculum for the monks and teaches at the school adds:

“When the soldiers raided the monastery, they came into the school and tore down pictures of some tourists with whom the monks had been practicing English at Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The soldiers would circle the monastery at night to see if these monks would come back so they could be arrested.”

From a local writer:

“The *junta* has finally shown its true colors that it will stop at nothing to maintain its iron grip on the people and country, even to the extent of brutally trampling on the much revered Buddhist *Sangha* which it had formerly used to prop up the regime and to legitimize the regime as an upholder of true Theravada Buddhism. When the soul of the Myanmar people has thus been ravaged, what shred of legitimacy does the *junta* have left to call itself civilized? Why are ASEAN and the world still watching the atrocities of these brutes against the people and their religion? Is our chained, tortured and bleeding pulp of our pitiful country some kind of freak show to the world out there? When will someone start to act and do something concrete instead of trading in ‘diplomatic’ words?”

From a former political prisoner:

“They are crushing the monkhood with the efficiency that they crushed my generation of '88 students. What we wish is for the UN to listen to what we want to say - but our leaders are in jail. The military is staging fake demonstrations but we who suffer have been silenced. We have the courage to express what we feel if only we had a forum or could be free to talk. I remember when the ICRC would visit the prison where I was detained for four years. The guards would always hide us and bring out the street criminals to talk instead. And now, the ICRC won't come into Myanmar.

My own opinion is that we Burmese should boycott all Chinese goods and insist that the world boycott the coming '08 Olympics in China until the Chinese gov't stops supporting the military regime.”

Another former political prisoner:

“There are two vicious circles affecting Myanmar. Inside Myanmar, there is the mass of uneducated people, mostly in the rural areas. Between them and the at least technically skilled young middle class in the towns a big gap exists. But even in the towns there is no political education, just the desire that the government may step down. The monks are not politically educated either, even those older monks who received a monastic education let alone the young demonstrators who just entered the monasteries for the Buddhist Lent season. The older monks just learned about Buddhism – and foreign languages for mission purposes. The majority of the people are thus not enlightened and, ironically, in this regard and in terms of religious belief Than Shwe is a true representative of the people. Therefore, the demonstrations could achieve nothing other than to articulate the deep general resentment and frustration. The people admire the monks' readiness to sacrifice their lives. But they should have returned to the monasteries after the first processions and practice the boycott against the military through not accepting their alms. In addition, the NLD acted stupidly. By participating in the protests, the party added fuel to the fire. Aung San Suu Kyi is now trapped.

This vicious circle can only be breached by abandoning something, for example the claim of implementation of the elections of 1990. Instead of aiming at a changeover of power the rulers should be taken to their word and to demand that the new constitution is implemented as soon as possible. In the slip stream of big politics dearly required education work could be performed. People should know their rights, learn to speak out properly and fight for their rights.

There is another vicious circle outside of Myanmar. It is fuelled by some Burmese in exile who influence the foreign media with their demands, and thus play into the hands of the rulers. Their task would or could be to care for a diminution of the great gap in terms of education within the country.”

9.2.2 Voices II : March 2008

An intellectual

“It was and it is more than economic hardship that brought the monks and the people on the streets. It was a deep feeling of injustice and “inhuman treatment”, something which is not easy to conceptualise. There may not even be a Burmese word to name it. It is a mixture of Burmese-Buddhist and Western-universal values and ideas. What exploded last year, was a deviation of the Burmese way of “indirectness”. The general populace will face difficulties to articulate their assessment of the situation. People are psychologically confused, they don’t know what to do and that makes the situation worse than in 1988. For many, a way out from this mental emergency is taking refuge in traditional means of escape as the cult of the Nats.

Intellectually, we need to conceptualise the link between globalisation and glocalisation, depending on the past and present events. We need to reconsider the concept of ‘internationalised territory’, too. In times of crisis (social, economic, political and educational), I think that interim solutions are vital to build up room for intellectual and critical judgement, reflecting the present reality.”

A taxi driver:

“We hate them since September. They shot at monks. But we are afraid. They only care for their families and for themselves.”

A poet:

“Something will happen soon in connection with the referendum. The regime will collapse. I do not know exactly what it will be but one thing can be said for sure: the main movement to change the regime will come from within the people. Some foreign aid will assist. The background: The suffering of the people is beyond the limits that can be endured.

There was and there is no political organisation, even not in connection with the NLD. There were and there are grievances that were expressed at different times and in different places. Out of these expressions organisations emerged spontaneously like the monks’ organisation ABMA as a kind of Central Committee of the monks. And U Gambira is a mystic, a very profound human being who came to the fore through the logic of events. In Northern Thailand live many monks who can influence the events here. But the main momentum for change will come from within.”

A development worker:

“One can change people’s attitudes, not their belief. The belief of the people in the government has been destroyed. Before the unrest, the government tried to convince the people of their good Buddhist intentions as a base for a good relationship with the people. This relationship is now destroyed. Anger and mistrust prevail but because of fear nobody speaks out. It is necessary to start at the roots of the peoples’ living condition, to promote economic progress and to strengthen the faith of the people in their own abilities instead of the faith in those on the top. “Small is beautiful” that is one of the pillars on which the country should be built up.”

A former political prisoner:

“The protests last year lacked organisation. But organisation is necessary as well as turning away from black-and-white thinking. The monks protested for their economic survival but they went too far. They should have insisted in a proper apology from the authorities and underline this demand with the threat of a boycott. The monks should have minded their business.”

A monk on the question of the canonical and traditional Burmese background of the “turnover of the alms bowls” (patam nikkujjana kamma)

“That is a too sensitive issue. I cannot answer.”

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