

# Burma Briefing

by Donald M. Seekins\*  
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**Question:** Over the past few days, unrest in Burma has become front-page news around the world. Who is protesting, and why?

**Answer:** Most of the protesters are city people, especially residents of Rangoon, Burma's largest city and former capital, which has a history of anti-government resistance going back to the British colonial period. Other cities such as Mandalay, Sittwe and Pakokku have also experienced unrest, though on a smaller scale. This opposition movement is separate from, and largely unrelated to, ethnic minority armed resistance to the central government in Burma's border areas.

The immediate cause of the popular protests in August and September was the sudden decision of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military junta that rules Burma, to cut gasoline subsidies on August 15, which caused the price of diesel fuel and compressed natural gas to rise by as much as 500 percent. This had an immediate impact on already precarious standards of living. The cost of public transportation, especially in Rangoon, became unaffordable for many if not most working people. Shop owners and business people couldn't afford gasoline to run the generators that provide the city with most of its electricity.

Small-scale citizen protests started on August 19 and participants were beaten by pro-regime thugs and taken off to jail, including Min Ko Naing, a prominent opposition leader and veteran of the massive popular uprising of 1988.

**Question:** We have seen pictures of thousands of brown-robed Buddhist monks marching in Rangoon. They seem to have played a central role in the protests, but how did they become involved?

**Answer:** Burmese monks—who number between 300,000 and 400,000—are the most highly revered members of this devoutly Buddhist society and became active after government soldiers beat and humiliated several of them during a demonstration in the central Burma city of Pakokku on September 5. They demanded an apology from the government, which was not forthcoming, and began demonstrating en masse on September 18, proclaiming that they would not accept offerings from military or SPDC personnel, a "monk boycott" that is particularly distressing to conservative Buddhists in the army rank-and-file.

At first, the monks advised lay people not to join in their marches, but as their leaders called for the overthrow of the SPDC regime, they were joined by tens of thousands of ordinary citizens, especially in Rangoon.

On Saturday, September 22, police inexplicably allowed a procession of monks to walk to the house of Aung San Suu Kyi, and for the first time in more than four years, people got a glimpse of the pro-democracy leader, who has been under house arrest since 2003. The impact on the public, who deeply respect Ms. Suu Kyi, cannot be overestimated. By Tuesday, September 25th, some 100,000 monks and lay people marched in Rangoon, the largest public demonstration since the 1988 uprising.

**Question:** By Wednesday the 26th, though, we began seeing pictures of the SPDC cracking down on the demonstrators, sometimes shooting into crowds. Why has the junta refused to compromise and has been so brutal, especially toward the monks?

**Answer:** The monks became involved in the demonstrations because they hoped their exalted status would oblige the SPDC to refrain from using violence, and they could best articulate the people's economic and other grievances. But although the SPDC has assiduously cultivated the support of older, high ranking monks who are prominent in the Buddhist hierarchy, it regards younger, more restive monks with suspicion and hostility. Since 1988, many activist young (and some not so young) monks have been jailed, tortured and killed, and so the SPDC's brutality toward them on and after September 26 is not really surprising

It is true that Burma is a Buddhist country, but the relationship between the religion and the state is complex and paradoxical. The top generals give offerings to prestigious pagodas such as the Shwedagon in Rangoon and compliant senior monks, because this enhances their legitimacy. They suppress uncooperative mostly younger monks, because they fear that their criticism of the regime, based on Buddhist moral principles, will undermine their legitimacy. This has historical resonance.

In 1757, the tyrannical Burmese King Alaungpaya captured the Mon capital of Pegu, extinguishing the Mon [ethnic minority] royal dynasty. His troops slaughtered some 3,000 Mon monks because of their loyalty to their native ruler. According to historians, the moat around the city of Pegu ran red with their blood. With few exceptions such as the 19th century King Mindon and the 15th century Mon Queen Shinsawbu, Burmese Buddhist rulers over the centuries have been neither pacifist nor non-violent.

**Question:** There was a huge popular uprising in 1988. What are the differences and similarities between 1988 and the events of this September?

**Answer:** Both movements were initially sparked by economic grievances. But the biggest similarity is the brutal and uncompromising response of the military regime to popular dissent. The armed forces are the most powerful and unified institution in Burma today, whose leaders view any opposition as a threat to national unity and independence—thus, the perceived need to use lethal force to quell even moderate, non-violent dissent.

But comparatively speaking, the regime's violence has been more restrained this time than in 1988, when troops poured live ammunition into packed crowds and killed an estimated 3,000 demonstrators in Rangoon. Observers believe around two hundred persons were shot dead in Rangoon between September 26 and 29. Thousands of other demonstrators, including monks, have been arrested and put in special detention centers.

Moreover, in 1988 it was university students rather than monks who were the most active elements in the popular movement. After almost two decades of tight controls over the colleges, students seem to have been much less active in 2007.

Another major difference is that while information on the events of 1988 was limited because Burma was an isolated country, bloggers have been able to speedily convey photos, videos and other information out of Rangoon to the outside world, despite SPDC attempts to construct an IT firewall. The photographs, including one showing the apparently deliberate killing of a Japanese journalist by a soldier on September 27, are stunning testimony to the regime's brutality.

**Question:** What can the international community do to stop the bloodshed?

**Answer:** It seems relatively little, despite United Nations involvement in brokering a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Burma is a resource (especially energy resource) rich country, and since 1988 the SPDC has been able to buy collaborators, if not allies, through exports of natural gas, lumber, minerals and other raw materials.

China has been the regime's biggest economic and geo-political supporter, and the spotlight is now on Beijing to pressure the junta to improve its behavior. Unless Beijing changes its fundamental policy of uncritically supporting the SPDC, criticism against China will intensify, including a movement to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which figure importantly in China's quest for international big power status.

Fundamentally, what is needed is for the international community to have a unified and severe policy toward the SPDC, in order to make the costs of the junta's violating human rights norms prohibitively high. But that is not likely to happen soon, unfortunately.

**Question:** Could a reformist faction within the military elite overthrow the SPDC, and allow Burma to democratize, in a manner similar to the Philippines in 1986?

**Answer:** That is what everyone is hoping for, but it hasn't happened yet—and Burmese people are likely to have to endure a lot more misery before it does.

**Question:** What online resources do you recommend for keeping up with rapidly developing events in Burma?

**Answer:** Among major media, the British Broadcasting Corporation <<http://www.bbc.co>> and the *International Herald Tribune* <<http://www.iht.com>> have the most detailed coverage and analysis of on-going events in Burma. The *Irrawaddy*, a hard copy and on-line <<http://www.irrawaddy.org>> magazine published by Burmese dissidents in Thailand, is highly recommended—so good, in fact, that pro-regime hackers have tried to disable it with a virus.

Finally, the On-line Burma/Myanmar Library <<http://www.burmalibrary.org>> is huge and has both historical and contemporary material.

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**\*About the author.** Dr. Seekins earned A.M. and Ph.D. degrees at The University of Chicago. A comparative politics specialist, he is an expert on Burma/Myanmar. Two recent books by Seekins on this topic are *Burma and Japan since 1940: From 'Co-Prosperity' to 'Quiet Dialogue'*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies monograph 106 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007) and the *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

A Fulbright Guest Lecturer at the University of the Ryukyus, Seekins stayed on to join Ryudai's Law and Political Science Department. Since 1995, Professor Seekins has been teaching political science and Southeast Asian studies courses in the College of International Studies, Meio University, Nago City, Okinawa, Japan.

**For additional information.** To contact Dr. Seekins with additional questions, e-mail him at <[kenchan@ii-okinawa.ne.jp](mailto:kenchan@ii-okinawa.ne.jp)>.

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