

Fighting for a Fresh Start

*By Lennox Samuels
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As the vast majority of Burmese citizens clamor for change, ethnic minorities could be keys to the country's future. How they're planning ahead.

Oct. 6, 2007 - The first clue may have been that almost from the outset "the union of Burma" consisted of seven "divisions" inhabited by Burmans plus seven "states" occupied by ethnic peoples. That distinction immediately denoted a certain otherness for the minorities in the former British colony.

The ethnic populations have been fighting the government ever since, for recognition, a share of the country's natural resources and some degree of autonomy. Since the military seized control of Burma 50 years ago, those minorities have been trying, with mixed success, to at least hang onto their lands. The current junta has been battling them with disproportionate ferocity, killing thousands in the jungle, far from the public eye.

Now, as the vast majority of all Burmese citizens clamor for change, ethnic minorities could be keys to the country's future. And after decades of false starts, they say they are determined to work as one to force the military to make a deal. They advocate a power-sharing arrangement involving them, the generals and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. Some even say they might have forced the junta to negotiate during the recent demonstrations if the international community had offered material help rather than just expressions of outrage and support.

"We could have gotten to the endgame the last two weeks if some of the donors had listened to us," says Muang Muang, general secretary of the National Council of the Union of Burma, a liberal, pro-federal resistance group founded in 1992. "They had their own vision, their own perspective on how things should be run. That's my frustration. We could have caused the regime to come to the table." He leaves no doubt that he had envisioned a strategy of wider civil resistance during the recent mass protests. "They [the government] were shooting in the city. We could have had operations on the outskirts of Rangoon; blocked it up. They don't have the guts to beat up people in small places."

If Muang Muang sounds irritated, he has cause. Numerous entities, from the United Nations to the European Union to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have condemned the junta's harsh treatment of monks and civilians, but few have offered anything concrete. The world watched as U.N. envoy Ibrahim Gambari waited while Senior General Than Shwe pondered whether to meet with him. And for years, influential neighbors, notably China, have self-righteously declared that they could not interfere in Burma's internal affairs. The United States, preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan, has excoriated the junta, but has little leverage or appetite to do much more.

"Sympathy will not solve the problem. Action is needed," says **Dr. Lian H. Sakhong**, *general secretary of the Ethnic National Council*, an umbrella ethnic congress. "I tend to agree that international public opinion is not as effective as we'd like," says

Asda Jayanama, a former Thai ambassador to the U.N. “International diplomacy is not enough. There have to be activities inside the country.”

The ethnic groups say there is such activity inside Burma. And they say that the activity will continue. “We have been telling the international community that there are efforts inside Burma and [they] must be supported,” says Muang Muang. “Please listen to us and keep the pressure going.”

“The networks will not disappear because of the regime,” he said at a press conference Friday at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand. “We want the international community to use whatever means they have to stop the crackdown. And we need meaningful action against the regime.” He called for tough sanctions, especially by regional governments, an insistence that the generals release all political prisoners and a U.N. inquiry into the recent uprising. The pro-democracy movement, he added, should receive direct funding, and he noted that monks and their supporters were “marching on hearts and water.”

At the press conference, the ethnic-group representatives at once attacked and embraced Gen. Than Shwe’s current offer to meet with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who for years has been under house arrest in Rangoon. They said it was an empty gesture and included unreasonable preconditions—the general essentially said she must stop opposing his regime. But the groups also said the offer should not be rejected out of hand.

“Something is better than nothing,” said *Lian Sakhong*. “The offer is a positive sign. What we need to do is push for meaningful dialogue. The regime should come out in any form so we can engage them in dialogue.”

Dialogue, however, does not appear to be high on the to-do list of Than Shwe and his largely faceless colleagues. Over the years, the generals have spurned several olive branches extended by the opposition. Instead, they have pressed on with military campaigns apparently designed to permanently uproot the ethnic minorities. Those operations have sent at least 1 million refugees into Thailand and made the Thai-Burmese border a danger zone, says Jayanama.

But the Maroon Revolution and its aftermath shows that opposition to the generals will continue, says Dr. Naing Aung, secretary -general of the Forum for Democracy in Burma. He says there have been 227 protests openly defying the regime; 1 million people took to the streets in 26 cities and towns across Burma on Sept. 24 and demonstrations have occurred in 66 cities and towns across the country, in all 14 states and divisions. He also said, however, that 200 people have been killed, 1,000 disappeared and 3,000 detained, including 1,400 monks and nuns. Other groups have released different estimates for the numbers detained and killed.

It is statistics such as those that contribute to the obstinacy of the junta, says Ambassador Asda. Any deal with the generals must address that issue, he says. “If the military is guaranteed there will be no trials against them if they share power [they would consider it] because they fear trials,” he says.

That assessment of the generals’ willingness to negotiate in good faith, however,

seems overstated, trials or no trials. “These people are only interested in power,” says ***Harn Yawngghwe, director of the Euro-Burma office*** at the European Office for the Development of Democracy in Burma. “You can’t offer them money, power-sharing, nothing. Yes, we are pushing for dialogue, but I don’t see them agreeing any time soon.”

Further, added ***Saw David Taw, a top official with the Karen National Union***, the generals could at any time dissolve the National League for Democracy. The league won the last democratic election in 1990, garnering 395 seats in parliament. The ethnic minorities’ umbrella party won 67 seats and the military’s National Unity Party won 10. The junta promptly vacated the results and detained Aung San Suu Kyi.

But the junta wouldn’t really shut down the NLD, would it? “Well sure,” says ***Saw David Taw***. “Of course. They can do whatever they like, and they don’t care.”

The military’s baby steps toward democracy seem to bear out the men’s skepticism. The government recently announced that after more than a decade’s study, it has come up with guidelines for a new constitution that would establish their version of democracy in Burma.

Among other provisions: The country’s president must have military experience. The commander-in-chief of the Army can seize power if he deems the country’s security at risk. The president has the power to appoint the leaders of all 14 states and divisions. And one provision that ethnic leaders find particularly risible: The commander-in-chief will have the power to appoint the defense minister—his boss.

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