

Through Myanmar Darkly

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On a Saturday afternoon in September, I strolled through downtown Yangon in the rain, trying to absorb everything — the smells of mildew and diesel fuel, fish paste and sandalwood, the sounds of honking, shouting and chanting and the sight of old buses disgorging their passengers into the ankle-deep water on Anawratha Road in the center of the city. Three young monks hopped off the bus and began weaving through the crowds, their maroon robes sopping wet. I followed them toward Sule Pagoda, an ancient temple said to contain a hair of the Buddha.

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Even after two weeks as a tourist in the country that used to be called Burma but that the government now calls Myanmar, I still found the mixture of the sacred and the profane remarkable. Black market money-changers and digital photo shops clustered around the base of Sule Pagoda, whose golden spire rises 150 feet. It's a sacred site for Burmese Buddhists, who make up about 90 percent of the population.

For weeks, monks had been marching in the cities throughout the country to protest the economic hardship and repression imposed by the ruling military junta. Some of the protests in Yangon used Sule Pagoda as a staging ground. But until this one Saturday, I had been living in a different world, of shrines, horse-drawn-carriage rides through ancient ruins and boat trips through floating villages. I had seen the country shown in the guidebooks, not the one in which people suffer forced labor, torture and rape. Like one of Italo Calvino's invisible cities, Myanmar and Burma exist in the same space, contain the same buildings and people, but are entirely different countries.

Early on in my trip, a young man befriended me on the street, practicing his English. He was 17 and enjoyed serving as my amateur tour guide while in Yangon. "Many monks in Burma," he said. "In Amarapura, you see 1,000 monks taking lunch. Many pagoda also. Burma people love the Buddha." Then the conversation turned. "Politics," he whispered, "no good here. No money. You see villages. ... Monks try to help. ... " He trailed off.

During my stay, monks continued to march, and though locals seemed to know when and where these marches would occur, many said they were hesitant to go for fear of being blacklisted, having their children barred from school, their families questioned. In Mandalay, people told me the use of loudspeakers by religious groups had been outlawed, irritating Muslims who were in the midst of Ramadan. Though the muezzins were silent, the monks continued to organize new protests. I grew bolder, began to ask about the marches. "Will anything come of it?" I asked a Yangon resident at one point. "No, nothing," he said. "Stay away from the city center. The military. ... " Then he smashed his fist into his palm. Myanmar, land of unfinished sentences.

By that rainy Saturday, my last day in the country, I couldn't help but follow the three young monks as they wove through the downtown crowds. I saw another group hop off a bus, sloshing through puddles, also walking intently to Sule Pagoda. I noticed a crowd

forming outside the temple. I joined it. Behind me, the police at City Hall unlocked the barbed-wire gate there. They started the engine of a jeep, but no one in the crowd took notice.

Suddenly, 500 monks emerged in rows four across. They carried flags and overturned alms bowls. When the first group stopped and chanted a prayer, some people in the crowd dared to clap. It was timid at first, but as more monks emerged to begin their protest, the clapping grew louder until the whole crowd seemed overcome by it. A Burmese man leaned toward me. "They have never done this before," he said. "They clap for freedom." The faces in the crowd were excited, part bliss, part terror.

As the monks kept pouring out of the temple, the clapping turned to cheers. They walked on and hundreds of civilians marched with them, in spite of the rain. "We march to University," a man said, urging me to come. University Avenue is the home of Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader who has been under house arrest for many years. I did not have the nerve to go.

The clapping seemed to shatter the notion that the movement would be limited to the clergy. Back at my hotel, I noticed that CNN was scrambled. A veil was being lowered between Myanmar and the rest of the world. The Internet was cut, and soldiers from the country moved into the city. The morning I left, I heard that my young guide was looking for me. I can't be certain why. But a few days later, back in New York, as I was scouring blogs for news of the crisis, I saw his picture. The junta had finally lashed out against the protesters. His forehead was bandaged. His white shirt was spotted red. I have no way to ask him what happened. He's inside a country a tourist was never meant to see.

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