

The Fighting Monks of Burma

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Nearly 400 Burmese Buddhist monks march through Yangon to protest the military junta's alleged use of violence against Buddhist monks at Pakoku, a site in the upper part of Myanmar.

Saffron robes usually evoke spiritual calm. But for Burma's military leaders, a surprise gathering of monks is anything but peaceful. On Wednesday in the commercial capital Rangoon, hundreds of Buddhist clergy gathered around the nation's beloved Shwedagon pagoda to protest August price hikes that are pummeling an already impoverished populace. More than a thousand monks also rallied in other parts of the country, their daily alms routes turned into paths of protest.

Wednesday's demonstrations cap what has turned into the longest sustained display of dissent in Burma in nearly two decades. At first, the ruling junta, which has maintained an iron grip for 45 years, tried to extinguish the protest movement by arresting dozens of pro-democracy activists. But clapping handcuffs on Buddhist monks is a far more difficult proposition in this deeply devout nation. "The monks are the only ones who really have the trust of the people," says Khin Omar, an exiled dissident now living in Thailand. "When they speak up, people listen."

Unluckily for the junta, the monks have been speaking up ever more loudly. On September 5, protests by clergy members in the holy city of Pakokku turned violent when security forces fired warning shots in the air, only to have the monks respond by taking officials hostage and torching their cars.

Unholy behavior, perhaps. But the incident prompted senior spiritual leaders to demand an apology from the government by Sept. 17 or else rallies would resume. On Tuesday, with no apology in sight, the monks began marching anew.

The spectacle of more shaven-headed youth crowding the streets must send chills down the ruling generals' spines. After all, it was Burma's monks who spearheaded acts of civil

disobedience against British colonialists. Buddhist clergy were also at the forefront of mass protests in 1988, which ended when the army gunned down hundreds of peaceful protestors and declared martial law. So far, the military has avoided firing directly at the monks. But with these spiritual warriors showing no sign of giving up their cause, a violent confrontation may be unavoidable.

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