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BURMA

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FACE OFF IN BURMA: MONKS vs SPDC

- **Between 18 and 24 September, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks led massive anti-junta demonstrations across most of Burma's States and Divisions. In the largest show of peaceful protests against the military regime since 1988, thousands of Burmese civilians joined the rallies.**
- **On 22 September, hundreds of monks in Rangoon walked past a roadblock and greeted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The rally served as a strong assertion of unity between the monks and the pro-democracy movement.**
- **The military junta faces a "lose-lose" situation. If they crack down harshly against the monks, they will inflame an already angry population into a sustained uprising. If the army remains passive, it will embolden the population to take a stronger stand for their rights. The situation may even precipitate an internal coup in the SPDC. A coup will either bring out hardliners who will engage in a harsh crackdown or elevate pragmatists, more likely to engage in genuine reforms.**
- **The mounting protest revived calls for the UN Security Council to increase pressure on the military regime. The current vulnerability of the SPDC will ensure that any positive international intervention is more likely to have an impact.**
- **China, India, Bangladesh, as well as ASEAN countries, should be gravely concerned by the regional repercussion of instability inside Burma and work together to pressure the regime for genuine reforms.**
- **The new wave of nationwide protests was triggered by the junta's failure to meet the demands of the All Burma Monks Alliance. The junta's failure to meet the monks' demands also resulted in the monks' refusal to accept alms or provide spiritual services to members of the regime and their families.**
- **The monks' act of excommunication of SPDC personnel and their families is considered the most severe form of public humiliation in Burma. It also increases internal pressure among SPDC personnel, because of the widening economic gap between military leaders and those in the rank-and-file.**
- **The Buddhist clergy is the largest organized civilian institution in Burma. Numbering over 300,000, it matches the army in terms of size. Buddhist monks enjoy high status in Burmese society.**
- **For updates, photos, and videos of the protests, please visit ALTSEAN's interactive map at: <http://www.altsean.org/Photogalleries/ProtestsMap.php>**

The "saffron revolution"

On 24 September, Buddhist monks throughout Burma marched for the seventh consecutive day protesting against the military regime [See below, *The protests*]. In the largest public demonstration since 1988, about 20,000 monks led as many as 100,000 people through the

streets of Rangoon.¹ In a dramatic development, on 22 September a crowd of 2,000 monks and civilians walked past a roadblock and rallied outside the lakeside house where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remains detained.² The rally served as a strong assertion of unity between the monks and the pro-democracy movement.

The monks' involvement added momentum and brought greater legitimacy and support to the ongoing demonstrations triggered by the junta's decision to increase fuel prices on 15 August. [See *August 2007 Burma Bulletin* and the briefer *Fuel price hikes inflame Burmese people*] Initially wary of taking part in the demonstrations, bystanders cheered and showed solidarity with the monks. However, as the protests grew in size and spread throughout most of Burma's States and Divisions, tens of thousands of ordinary Burmese from all walks of life joined the monks in the anti-junta protests.

The 2007 "saffron revolution" appears to have built on the experiences and lessons learned since 1988. Activists have been more proactive in ensuring that photos and footage of the protests are distributed domestically and internationally, and tactics seems to have taken into account the likely reactions from the junta's intelligence apparatus.



Calls for UNSC action revived

The recent protests in Burma caused renewed calls for UN Security Council action. On 24 September, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) said that the situation in Burma and the violence displayed by the military regime required UNSC intervention.³ The AIPMC statement followed a 23 September request by the Indonesian Myanmar Caucus Chairman, Djoko Susilo, for the Indonesian President to direct the UN General Assembly's attention to the situation in Burma.⁴ Indonesia is currently a non-permanent member of the UNSC and Indonesia's support for UNSC intervention in Burma is considered critical.

¹ AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar anti-government protesters claim 100,000 marching through Yangon; DVB (24 Sep 07) Protests swell as monks receive increasing support

² AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar celebrities support monks in wave of anti-government protests; New York Times (23 Sep 07) Challenge to Myanmar's junta gains momentum

³ AIPMC Press Release (24 Sep 07) Prevent bloodshed of the innocent and the revered in Burma

⁴ Jakarta Post (24 Sep 07) President asked to bring Myanmar issue to the front at UN assembly

The current turmoil prompted the UN Special Advisor on Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, to brief the UN Security Council on 20 September.⁵ Following the briefing, the US Ambassadors to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, indicated that the situation in Burma demanded UNSC attention.⁶

The monks' ultimatum

The new wave of nationwide protests was triggered by the junta's failure to meet the demands of the All Burma Monks Alliance by the deadline of 17 September. On 9 September, the All Burma Monks Alliance had threatened to excommunicate members of the military and their families if the regime failed to roll back the fuel price hikes.⁷

The All Burma Monks Alliance comprises various Buddhist monastic associations from across the country, including the All Burma Young Monks Union, the Federation of All Burma Monks Union, the Young Monks Union (Rangoon), the Monk Duta, and all monks unions in different States and Divisions.

In addition to the economic hardship exacerbated by the 15 August fuel price hike, monks were enraged by the regime's violent crackdown on their peaceful protests. On 5 September, SPDC Army soldiers fired warning shots to break up a demonstration of several hundred monks in Pakokku, Magwe Division. Some of the monks were severely beaten and three were arrested.⁸ The following day, angered by the SPDC's violent reaction, monks from Pakokku's largest monastery held about 20 junta officials hostage to secure the release of their three detained colleagues.⁹ Both the SPDC officials and the monks were released on the afternoon of 6 September.¹⁰

The All Burma Monks Alliance demanded that the SPDC:

1. Apologize for the Pakokku incident.
2. Immediately reduce all commodity prices, fuel prices, rice, and cooking oil prices.
3. Release all political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all detainees arrested in the ongoing demonstrations over the fuel price hike.
4. Immediately enter into dialogue with democratic forces for national reconciliation to resolve the crises and difficulties suffered by the people.

The protests

On 18 September, which also marks the 19th anniversary of the junta's military coup, monks began marching through the streets of Burma's main cities to protest against the military regime.¹¹ The demonstrations quickly spread to other towns across Burma. Below is a summary of the anti-junta demonstrations held by the monks since 18 September:

⁵ AFP (21 Sep 07) US, Britain urge Myanmar to accept early visit by UN envoy

⁶ AFP (21 Sep 07) US, Britain urge Myanmar to accept early visit by UN envoy

⁷ Burma Update 168 (09 Sep 07) Announcement of All Burma Monks Alliance

⁸ AP (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks briefly hold hostages; AFP (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks end standoff, release local officials; Reuters (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks seize govt officials, burn cars;

⁹ Reuters (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks seize govt officials, burn cars; AP (06 Sep 07) Protesting Myanmar monks free hostages; AFP (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks end standoff, release local officials

¹⁰ Mizzima News (06 Sep 07) Junta, monks exchange detainees in Pakhokku

¹¹ Irrawaddy (16 Sep 07) Monks Ready to Demonstrate Tuesday; Regime Ready to Crackdown

18 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 100 monks demonstrated in Chauk, Magwe Division.¹² • More than 250 monks marched through the streets of Kyaukpadaung, Mandalay Division.¹³ • About 100 monks demonstrated for two hours chanting <i>metta</i> [traditional religious chants to ward off evil] and marching through the streets of Allen, Magwe Division.¹⁴ • More than 600 monks marched in Pakokku, Magwe Division.¹⁵ • About 2,000 monks demonstrated in Pegu, Pegu Division.¹⁶ • More than 300 monks marched through the streets of Rangoon.¹⁷ • About 1,000 monks rallied in Akyab, Arakan State.¹⁸ At least three monks were arrested.¹⁹
19 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 500 monks peacefully occupied Rangoon's Sule pagoda. About 200 others demonstrated in other suburbs of the city.²⁰ • More than 1,000 monks from various monasteries marched to the Maha Myat Muni pagoda in Mandalay.²¹ • About 500 monks held an anti-junta protest in Prome, Pegu Division.²² • Around 200 monks marched through the streets of Kalay, Sagaing Division.²³ • More than 1,000 monks staged a sit-in outside a police station in Akyab, Arakan State.²⁴ • Over 50 monks demonstrated in the street of Ponnagyun, Arakan State.²⁵
20 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 1,300 monks joined by thousands of ordinary Burmese marched through the street of Rangoon. Several monks taking part in the rally reportedly waved placards calling for UN action on Burma. The monks concluded the protests by demonstrating at the Shwedagon pagoda.²⁶ About 200 other monks from the Nikal Ngar Yat monastery in Rangoon also held an anti-junta protest, chanting <i>metta</i> and refusing to accept any donations.²⁷ • About 400 monks marched for an hour to protest against the junta in Monywa, Sagaing Division.²⁸ • About 20 people marched in support of the monks' protests by peacefully marching for about an hour in the streets of Rathidaung, Arakan State.²⁹
21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 3,000 people, including about 1,500 monks, marched along the streets of

¹² DVB (18 Sep 07) Monks mark start of boycott with metta chants; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

¹³ DVB (18 Sep 07) Monks march in Kyaukpadaung, Aung Lan and Pakkoku; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

¹⁴ AFP (18 Sep 07) Hundreds of monks protest around Myanmar; DVB (18 Sep 07) Monks march in Kyaukpadaung, Aung Lan and Pakkoku; Telegraph (19 Sep 07) Burmese monks defy junta with Buddhist prayers; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

¹⁵ AFP (18 Sep 07) Hundreds of monks protest around Myanmar; DVB (18 Sep 07) Monks march in Kyaukpadaung, Aung Lan and Pakkoku; Telegraph (19 Sep 07) Burmese monks defy junta with Buddhist prayers; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

¹⁶ AFP (18 Sep 07) Hundreds of monks protest around Myanmar; Reuters (18 Sep 07) Tear gas used against Myanmar protest, monks hit; AP (18 Sep 07) Monks march in Myanmar amid tight security at temples; AP (18 Sep 07) Monks protest in Myanmar amid tight security; DVB (18 Sep 07) Two thousand monks march in Bago; Telegraph (19 Sep 07) Burmese monks defy junta with Buddhist prayers; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

¹⁷ AFP (18 Sep 07) Hundreds of monks protest around Myanmar; AP (18 Sep 07) Monks march in Myanmar amid tight security at temples; Reuters (18 Sep 07) Tear gas used against Myanmar protest, monks hit; AP (18 Sep 07) Monks protest in Myanmar amid tight security; Mizzima News (18 Sep 07) Overturning of rice bowls" headlines largest protests to date, as monks lead the way

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¹⁹ Reuters (18 Sep 07) Tear gas used against Myanmar protest, monks hit; Telegraph (19 Sep 07) Burmese monks defy junta with Buddhist prayers

²⁰ AP (19 Sep 07) Buddhist monks occupy Myanmar pagoda as part of protests; AFP (19 Sep 07) Myanmar monks defy junta with third day of protests; DVB (19 Sep 07) Thousands turn out to support Rangoon protests

²¹ AP (19 Sep 07) Buddhist monks occupy Myanmar pagoda as part of protests; AFP (19 Sep 07) Myanmar monks defy junta with third day of protests; DVB (19 Sep 07) Thousands turn out to support Rangoon protests

²² AFP (19 Sep 07) Myanmar monks defy junta with third day of protests; DVB (19 Sep 07) Thousands turn out to support Rangoon protests

²³ Khonumthung News (19 Sep 07) Hundreds of monks protest in Kalay, Burma ; DVB (19 Sep 07) Thousands turn out to support Rangoon protests

²⁴ AFP (19 Sep 07) Myanmar monks defy junta with third day of protests

²⁵ Narinjara News (20 Sep 07) Demonstrations spread to another Aakan town

²⁶ AFP (20 Sep 07) Buddhist group vows Myanmar protests will continue; AP (21 Sep 07) Myanmar Protests Enter 4th Day; DVB (20 Sep 07) Rangoon monks call for UN action

²⁷ DVB (20 Sep 07) Monks sponsored by junta leader's wife join protests

²⁸ DVB (20 Sep 07) Monywa monks defy official warnings over protests

²⁹ Narinjara News (21 Sep 07) Small demonstration in Rathidaung, Arakan

Sep	<p>Rangoon.³⁰ More than 200 monks held a prayer vigil at the Maelamu Pagoda in North Rangoon.³¹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 1,000 Buddhist monks held a one-hour rally in Shwebo, Sagaing Division.³² • About 200 monks led a two-hour peaceful demonstration through the streets of Daik-U, Pegu Division.³³
22 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 1,500 monks marched through the streets of Rangoon and held a vigil prayer at the Shwedagon pagoda.³⁴ A crowd of 2,000 monks and civilians passed through a roadblock and walked to the lakeside house where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remains detained. Daw Suu greeted the demonstrators from her gate in her first public appearance in more than four years.³⁵ • 10,000 people, including 4,000 monks, marched through the street of Mandalay.³⁶ • About 200 monks demonstrated in Mrauk U, Arakan State.³⁷ • About 60 monks peacefully marched for about an hour through the streets of Kyauktaw, Arakan State.³⁸ • About 200 monks staged a peaceful demonstration in Sagaing Township, Sagaing Division.³⁹
23 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 20,000 people led by 10,000 monks demonstrated against the SPDC in Rangoon. The demonstrators marched from the Shwedagon Pagoda to the nearby Sule Pagoda. Some monks shouted support for detained democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, while people in the crowd formed a human chain to protect the clerics. At least 100 nuns joined the demonstration.⁴⁰ Armed riot police prevented a crowd of about 400 monks and demonstrators from again approaching Daw Suu's home.⁴¹ • About 300 monks marched through the streets of Myitkyina, Kachin State.⁴² • Over 400 monks demonstrated against the military junta in Bhamo, Kachin State.⁴³ • About 300 monks held a prayer vigil for one hour in Magwe, Magwe Division.⁴⁴
24 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 20,000 monks led as many as 100,000 people in a 15-kilometer rally in Rangoon.⁴⁵ • As many as 600 monks rallied in Mandalay.⁴⁶ • Over 300 monks marched in Bhamo, Kachin State.⁴⁷ • About 200 young monks rallied for more than two hours in Myitkyina, Kachin State.⁴⁸ • More than 5,000 people including 100 university students joined in a demonstration led by 1,500 monks from various monasteries in Moulmein, Mon state.⁴⁹ • Thousands of people including university students joined a peaceful anti-junta demonstration led by about 600 monks in Kalay, Sagaing Division.⁵⁰

³⁰ AFP (22 Sep 07) Protest monks call for prayer vigils in Myanmar; AP (22 Sep 07) 10,000 protest against Myanmar gov't

³¹ AFP (21 Sep 07) Myanmar monks march again as pressure mounts on junta; AFP (22 Sep 07) Thousands march in Yangon as pressure mounts on Myanmar; IMNA (21 Sep 07) Determined monks continue protests in Burma

³² Mizzima News (21 Sep 07) Monks in Shwebo join protests today

³³ Irrawaddy (21 Sep 07) Burma Protests: the Situation on September 21; Mizzima News (21 Sep 07) Monks in Shwebo join protests today

³⁴ AFP (23 Sep 07) Emboldened Myanmar monks challenge junta rule; AFP (22 Sep 07) Monks lead protest rally in Yangon; Irrawaddy (22 Sep 07) Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay

³⁵ AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar celebrities support monks in wave of anti-government protests; New York Times (23 Sep 07) Challenge to Myanmar's junta gains momentum

³⁶ New York Times (23 Sep 07) Challenge to Myanmar's junta gains momentum; Irrawaddy (22 Sep 07) Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay

³⁷ Narinjara News (23 Sep 07) Monks Protest in Mrauk U and Kyauktaw

³⁸ Narinjara News (23 Sep 07) Monks Protest in Mrauk U and Kyauktaw

³⁹ Irrawaddy (22 Sep 07) Suu Kyi greets monks at her home; 10,000 monks demonstrate in Mandalay

⁴⁰ AP (23 Sep 07) 20,000 march against Myanmar government; New York Times (23 Sep 07) Challenge to Myanmar's junta gains momentum; AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar police stop Suu Kyi march

⁴¹ Irrawaddy (23 Sep 07) Police bar second visit by monks to Suu Kyi's home

⁴² Kachin News Group (23 Sep 07) Monks in Kachin state storm out of confinement to protest

⁴³ Kachin News Group (23 Sep 07) Monks in Kachin state storm out of confinement to protest

⁴⁴ AFP (23 Sep 07) Emboldened Myanmar monks challenge junta rule

⁴⁵ AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar anti-government protesters claim 100,000 marching through Yangon; DVB (24 Sep 07) Protests swell as monks receive increasing support

⁴⁶ AP (24 Sep 07) Myanmar anti-government protesters claim 100,000 marching through Yangon

⁴⁷ Kachin News Group (24 Sep 07) Monks demonstrate for second day in Kachin State

⁴⁸ Kachin News Group (24 Sep 07) Monks demonstrate for second day in Kachin State

⁴⁹ IMNA (24 Sep 07) Over 1500 monks protest in Moulmein

⁵⁰ Khonumthung News (24 Sep 07) University students and people join monks in Kalay

Even before the All Burma Monks Alliance's ultimatum, monks in Burma had been at the forefront of the massive protests against the junta's decision to increase fuel price on 15 August:

- **28 August:** About 200 monks protested the fuel price hikes in **Akyab**, Arakan State.⁵¹ A monk from Payagyi monastery was arrested during the protest and released the following day.⁵² Two other monks were detained in connection with the protest. Their whereabouts remain unknown.⁵³
- **5 September:** About 500 Buddhist monks hold an anti-junta protest march in the town of **Pakokku**, Magwe Division.⁵⁴ Some of the monks were severely beaten and three were arrested.⁵⁵ [See above, *The monks' ultimatum*]
- **17 September:** About 30 monks staged a protest in **Chauk**, Magwe Division, marching through the town and chanting *metta* for several hours.⁵⁶
- **17 September:** More than 700 monks held a demonstration against the military junta in the town of **Kyaukpadaung**, Mandalay Division.⁵⁷



SPDC excommunicated

The SPDC's failure to meet the monks' demands also resulted in the excommunication of military men and their families. The monks now refuse to accept alms or provide spiritual services to members of the regime and their families.

The monks' excommunication of the SPDC by the monks is a very extreme measure. Traditionally, monks are not allowed to deny help to anyone, including murderers or wrongdoers, but only to those who attack the Buddhist institution.

The boycott of the alms – called *patam nikkujjana kamma*, the act of overturning the bowl - is taken extremely seriously in Burma, where giving alms to monks is a religious practice

⁵¹ Reuters (28 Aug 07) Myanmar fuel protests spread to northwest oil city; DVB (28 Aug 07) Hundreds march against fuel prices in Sittwe

⁵² Kaladan News (29 Aug 07) Monks and students demonstrate in Arakan State

⁵³ Reuters (17 Sep 07) Myanmar monks locked up

⁵⁴ AP (05 Sep 07) Myanmar Breaks Up Monk Protest; Reuters (05 Sep 07) Myanmar troops fire warning shots at monk protest

⁵⁵ AP (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks briefly hold hostages; AFP (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks end standoff, release local officials; Reuters (06 Sep 07) Myanmar monks seize govt officials, burn cars;

⁵⁶ DVB (17 Sep 07) Chauk monks stage small protest

⁵⁷ AFP (18 Sep 07) Buddhist monks march in Myanmar amid threats of tougher action; BBC (17 Sep 07) Burma monks stage fresh protests; DVB (17 Sep 07) Kyaukpadaung monks march against the military

associated with paying respect to ancestors, atoning for bad deeds, and storing up merit for rebirth.

A monks' boycott destroys any sense of legitimacy enjoyed by the SPDC leaders, who portray themselves as defenders of Buddhism by building pagodas and public "good works".

Such a religious and social isolation of SPDC personnel and their families is considered the most severe form of public humiliation in Burma, which is largely a Buddhist country. It increases internal pressure amongst SPDC personnel and their supporters, already resentful over the widening economic gap between military leaders and those in the rank-and-file.

Importance of monks in Burma's society

The Buddhist clergy is the largest organized civilian institution in Burma. Numbering over 300,000, it matches the army in terms of size.⁵⁸ Almost all Buddhist male adults have served as monks or novices at least once in their lives.

Buddhist monks enjoy high status in Burmese society. In addition to being responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the people, monks are also responsible for their education and welfare; hence they have a moral duty to protect them.

In a similar way, the monks' material survival and work depend on the wellbeing of people, as they rely on the general population for alms and donations. "We can't sit back and watch the people who sponsor us sink into poverty. Their poverty is our poverty as well," a monk was quoted as saying during the recent wave of protests.⁵⁹

Monks have been at the forefront of past protests against British colonialism and the military dictatorship.



Background: the 1990 boycott of alms

The monks are repeating the confrontation with the military regime in 1990. On 8 August 1990, in commemoration of the second anniversary of the pro-democracy uprising, over 7,000 monks and novices walked through the streets of Mandalay. Soldiers confronted the monks and opened fire, killing two monks and two students and wounding seventeen others. Following the massacre, the Monks Union of Mandalay announced a boycott of the alms against the military and their families.⁶⁰

The boycott, which began in Mandalay, spread quickly across Burma. Feeling threatened by the monks' peaceful defiance, the regime heavily cracked down on them. Monasteries were surrounded by armed troops trapping monks inside. Electricity, water, and communication lines were cut off and monks were prevented from going on their daily alms round. After maintaining the blockade for one week, armed troops raided more than 35 monasteries throughout the country. More than 3,000 monks and novices were arrested.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Reuters (05 Sep 07) Reuters: Myanmar troops fire warning shots at monk protest

⁵⁹ AP (05 Sep 07) Myanmar soldiers fire shots in air to break up Buddhist monks' protest, exile media report

⁶⁰ HRDU, Human Rights Yearbook 1998-99: Burma, Chapter 9: Freedom of Belief and Religious Discrimination

⁶¹ HRDU, Human Rights Yearbook 1998-99: Burma, Chapter 9: Freedom of Belief and Religious Discrimination