Losing my Religion?
Protest and Political Legitimacy in Burma

Stephen McCarthy
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Buddhism, Monarchy and Legitimacy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The 1990 Religious Boycott and SLORC's Pious Redirection</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The SPDC and the 2007 Religious Boycott</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

The 2007 demonstrations in Burma posed the greatest threat to military rule in almost 20 years. The involvement of thousands of monks across the country was of particular concern to the authorities as well as their threat of performing a religious boycott against them. The generals considered the threat of a religious boycott very seriously because, as in 1990, this threatened to demoralise the tatmadaw (armed forces) and questioned the loyalty of its soldiers and security forces, now almost entirely composed of Burman Buddhists. This paper traces the importance of Buddhism to the political legitimacy of rulers in Burma and examines how the authorities’ relationship with the sangha (religious order) has undergone significant changes under military rule. It compares the 2007 demonstrations with earlier protests and examines how the regime’s legitimacy has suffered as a result of yet another crackdown, significantly this time against demonstrations led by the largest institution outside of the tatmadaw.

The involvement of monks in mass demonstrations against the military regime has undergone considerable change since 1988. The demonstrations of 1988 were in large part led by student groups and democracy advocates, with elements of the sangha taking part along with most representatives of civil society in Rangoon. Since 1988, however, the regime’s suppression of student activists as well as the closure of schools has meant that the sangha have adopted a higher profile in airing societal grievances and, as in 2007, in leading public demonstrations. And since the regime has all the guns, the monitoring personnel, and keeps the prisons well-occupied with political dissidents, the burden of opposition will from time to time fall upon the more passionate inside the monasteries. This will likely continue to occur until the regime’s leaders dare to step back once again and allow some form of civilian political opposition to arise.

That the generals were able to suppress the demonstrations in 2007 says more about their own survival skills, in particular their tactical management of the situation and of their own security forces, than it does about their ability to foresee the events occurring. Now living luxuriously in Naypyidaw, secluded from the main populated centres, the top generals are so divorced from the suffering caused by their own ineptitude that the future possibility of urban unrest remains real. Added to this the fact that the generals have lost an enormous amount of legitimacy by committing violence against the very institution they are meant to support and whose traditions they promote, the sangha, and that it took only one visit by some of the monks to Aung San Suu Kyi’s home to inflame the demonstrations, means that they have a monumental task in garnering future domestic support for the regime. After 2007, the simple fact remains that the only claim the generals have to running the country is that they hold all the guns. The move to Naypyidaw has meant that they are now more remote and alienated from the general community and, most importantly, less in contact with the local communities than is the sangha. Because of this, the shift to Naypyidaw may lead to a more fragile state than they had bargained for at the time.

It is uncertain, however, whether the younger monks involved in the 2007 demonstrations will continue their fight after the crackdown. Many will have shed their robes voluntarily. But for those that remain, they will have surely been emboldened by the experience, perhaps their first real taste of what deeds this regime is capable of. Because the sangha remains the only sizeable, potentially rapidly organisable, and morally dangerous opposition in Burma, with the passing of the older loyal sayadaws (senior abbots) the tatmadaw must continue buying the loyalty of the younger monks. Yet because of the size and significance of the 2007 demonstrations, which far outweighed the sangha’s involvement in both the 1988 demonstrations and the more localised protests of 1990, it is difficult to see their loyalty forthcoming.
1. Introduction

The mass demonstrations of September 2007 in Burma attracted worldwide attention and, in many cases, international condemnation. In contrast to previous protests and demonstrations, technological advances allowed the events to receive widespread media attention and they were well documented by various international organisations. Considerable notice was paid to the role played by Buddhist monks in leading some of the demonstrations, as well as to the regime’s subsequent crackdown and invasion of their monasteries. While the participation of sections of the sangha (religious order) in protests is not uncommon in Burma, the sheer size of the gatherings generated in 2007 indicated how out of touch the generals were with public sentiments. Their brutal response to the demonstrations, furthermore, while not unexpected, may seriously damage their own credibility inside the regime.

This paper discusses the consequences of the demonstrations and their subsequent suppression on the political legitimacy of the ruling generals, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). It also addresses how the junta had earlier attempted to institutionalise the sangha in order to control their movements, and why it was important to do so. That the protests were organised and spread rapidly throughout the country, and that at the height of the crisis the generals continued to placate senior abbots with gifts shows a lack of attention paid to internal social forces and to the credibility of their own religious policies. The generals, it seems, have in recent years been occupied elsewhere; in order to maintain their standing within ASEAN they were prompted to produce their own ‘roadmap to democracy’, and in order to prevent the United Nations Security Council imposing sanctions on the regime they have courted China and Russia assiduously. All this while running up a large budget deficit constructing their new capital, Naypyidaw, and being pressed by international monetary organisations to implement liberalising reforms.

In 2007, however, external demands for reform clashed with internal grievances – most forcefully expressed by the thousands of monks that took to the streets across Burma. By overturning their alms bowls and refusing to accept donations from the military, the participating monks threatened to expose the veil of political legitimacy that the current rulers have attempted to maintain internally since the early 1990s. The paper will briefly illustrate how this was done – through their ‘royal’ monopolisation of Buddhism and occasional public acts of obsecience to the sangha – and it will place the handling of the 2007 demonstrations in comparative perspective with earlier protests by monks under the military regime while drawing insights on the future relationship between the generals and the sangha.
2. Buddhism, Monarchy and Legitimacy

The historical impact of Buddhism on Burmese political legitimacy cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it was the monarch’s unique role as defender and promoter of Buddhist religion which in the final analysis confirmed his legitimacy. Since Burma gained its independence in 1948, all rulers to varying degrees have tapped into Burma’s Buddhist and monarchic traditions in order to gain political legitimacy, express their piety, or indeed to seek recourse for past misdeeds. During Burma’s only experiment with democratic rule, then prime minister U Nu blended Buddhism and his beliefs in spirits (nats) with politics to such a degree that some have described his administration as one long Buddhist ceremony. Under U Nu’s patronage, the Sixth Great Buddhist World Council was held in 1956, wherein Buddhist texts were translated, Buddhist relics were collected from Ceylon, and a World Peace Pagoda was built. Buddhism also became part of the school curriculum, and Ecclesiastical Courts and Pali universities were created. His government also formed the Buddha Sasana Council, headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, which was devoted to the promotion of all aspects of Buddhism.

The U Nu government’s various policies embraced Buddhism and the sangha and, during his time in office, the senior abbots (sayadaws) were far more vocal in their protests, presenting petitions to Parliament and to U Thant – then Secretary General of the United Nations. In 1960, facing pressure from the sangha, U Nu’s electoral campaign included a desire to make Buddhism the official state religion and, in 1961, U Nu used his parliamentary majority to do so. This was one of the factors prompting the military’s coup the following year – granting the ethnic minorities more independence on the one hand while also attempting to meet the demands of radical monks and officially sanctioning the Burman majority’s religion would fuel the already widening ethnic and religious divisions across the country.

Since Buddhism’s influence in Burma’s politics has always been present, and was permitted to flourish during the democratic period, the important issue for military rulers was how to define and control the sangha’s role in politics. Following his coup in 1962, Ne Win repealed U Nu’s religious laws, including the State Religion Promotion Act along with government subsidies, and it seemed that for most of his rule he was not at all interested in openly politicising Buddhism or the sangha – Buddhism was the preserve of the sangha and monks should avoid politics. The Burma Socialist Programme Party’s (BSPP) guiding ideology, for example, posited the BSPP’s philosophy as a purely mundane and human doctrine, without any connection to religion. Despite its use of Buddhist and metaphysical terminology, this reflected Ne Win’s opinion concerning the relationship of religion and politics which was closer to the secularist Aung San than U Nu, although this has been disputed. Attempts were made in 1964 and 1965 to impose a registration of monks and monk associations, and a reform council was convened, but these measures were largely resisted by the sangha. Ne Win arrested large numbers of monks several times, including in 1965 and in 1974 – when he refused to allow a proper funeral for the former United Nations Secretary General, U Thant.

Ne Win seemed to change course in 1979 when he called upon his Minister of the Interior and Religion to request the sangha to convene a conference the following year at which delegates of all groups within the sangha would take part. The program, however, included a registration of all monks and the creation of a Supreme Sangha Council, or Sangha Maha Nayaka, that included sectarian and regional differences and whose hierarchical structure aimed at tightening the state’s control of the sangha.
1980, sangha organisations or councils were also created at the village, township, city and district levels, and members were appointed by the government. Boards of trustees in charge of administering monasteries and pagodas were filled with retired military officers who took over the handling of finances and donations from the public. It has been argued that through this new religious policy, Ne Win was carrying on the tradition of the Burmese kings as well as the religious policy of U Nu. Yet unlike U Nu, it is significant that Ne Win did not personally take part in the sangha convention and that all decisions were taken by the sangha and not by government institutions. Moreover, the institutionalisation of the sangha in such a way would make sayadaws responsible for any political activities of their monks. Ne Win did, however, manage at the time to gain the sympathy of a large part of the population who had so far disapproved of government policy.9

Ne Win later engaged U Nu to edit Buddhist texts, openly gave gifts to the monks, and would begin a pagoda-building project behind the Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon, personally raising the hti, or spire – a kingly function symbolising royal power, glory, and religious merit.10 In the mid-1970s, he married a descendant of the last Burmese royal family and began to appear at state functions dressed in full classical regalia, being convinced that the last royal family were among his ancestors.11 In 2001, he also hosted a luncheon in a Rangoon hotel for an auspicious number of 99 senior monks. While speculation over Ne Win's 'conversion' included reports that he wished to avoid going down in history as a tyrant, Matthews argues that the military regime, beginning with Ne Win, have always sought after the animistic powers associated with various rituals to overcome bad omens, avoid a loss of power that would follow their karmic destiny, and to ease the guilt associated with clearly dreadful sins.12

Ne Win's disastrous decision, based on numerological advice, to demonetise 60 to 80 per cent of Burma's currency, the Kyat, in late 1987 destroyed most people's savings overnight, causing a groundswell of discontent that eventually erupted in the mass demonstrations of 1988.13 He retired as chairman of the BSPP at an extraordinary party congress in July 1988 and the demonstrations which peaked over the following months were violently suppressed. On 8 September 1988, a military coup, led by Senior General Saw Maung, under the direction of Ne Win, ended the 14-year period of constitutional military rule since 1974. A 19-member State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) placed Burma once again under direct military rule by assuming comprehensive executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Composed entirely of military officers, SLORC declared martial law and ruled by decree. The armed forces (tatmadaw) have ruled the country directly under the auspices of the SLORC, from 1988 to 1997, and the SPDC, from 1997 to the present. In late September 1988, the BSPP renamed itself the National Unity Party and although Ne Win distanced himself from the party’s new ‘democratic’ political identity, he remained in the shadows well after the SLORC came to power amid the political crisis of 1988.

The promotion of Buddhism during times of political crisis is a long-standing cultural tradition in Burmese politics, dating back to the eleventh-century kingdom of Pagan. Where a government has faced erosion of political legitimacy, it returns to Buddhism.14 It would be difficult to return to Buddhism, however, when thousands of monks had taken part in the mass demonstrations of 1988. Ne Win’s reorganisation and institutionalisation of the sangha hierarchy, it appeared, had failed the ultimate test. The SLORC’s first major miscalculation was to placate the public by staging general elections in 1990, convinced that their own National Unity Party would win. Monks came out in support of the democratic movement and the elections were comprehensively won by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD). Refusing to hand over power, the generals explained that the election was merely a signal for constitutional change and that all major parties would be invited to attend a national convention designed for that purpose.
3. The 1990 Religious Boycott and SLORC’s Pious Redirection

The SLORC’s refusal to hand over power in 1990, as well as the tatmadaw’s shooting of a monk and several students during a pro-democracy demonstration, triggered a rebellion by thousands of monks in Mandalay. While the monks sought an apology from SLORC’s first chairman, Saw Maung, the shooting incident was denied by the tatmadaw.

In October 1990, Saw Maung moved to suppress the rebellion following the decision of sayadaws to invoke a religious boycott – to discourage the sangha from accepting alms from, and performing religious services for, members of the military and their families. This was a highly significant ceremony that had rarely been performed but was repeated in monasteries across Burma, and it effectively denied the tatmadaw and its supporters the ability to gain ‘merit’. Having ordered the revocation of the boycott, the dissolution of all independent Buddhist organisations and monks associations (Order 6/90 – this included the Young Monks Association and the Monk’s Union), the surrounding of monasteries, the arrest of over 400 monks, and the destruction of buildings near the monasteries, Saw Maung claimed in a meeting with the senior abbots that his regime’s actions against the monks was analogous to the action of King Anoryahtah of the thirteenth century in the purification of religion and monks during his reign. Moreover, quoting the Buddhist scriptures and king’s law (yazatharth), he claimed the right of the Buddhist rulers to invade and purify the domain of the Buddhist monks.

Soon after, the SLORC issued a law stipulating the proper conduct for a Buddhist monk and penalties for their violation by monks or monk organisations (Order 7/90). Monks would have to obey the orders of the state sangha organisations, whether or not they belonged to them, and avoid politics. If they did not follow the regulations, then they would not be considered a member of the sangha and would face prosecution. Order 7/90 decreed that the only sangha organisation would be the Union of Myanmar Sangha Organization and that no other sangha organisations could be formed. Any new construction in or around monasteries as well as the conduct of traditional religious ceremonies would require the permission of local Sangha Maha Nayaka committees. The following year, in December 1991, Saw Maung would pronounce that he was the reincarnation of King Kyanzitha of the Pagan period. Since then, the government sought after the blessing and support of senior monks with a carrot and stick. Those who resisted joining local sangha committees had their monasteries placed under surveillance and were sometimes arrested, while those who joined the ranks received lavish donations, gifts, and sometimes elaborate ceremonies to grant honours and titles that were previously rarely awarded. Depending upon their level of support, they could also often find themselves shunned by the public.

From the early-mid 1990s, all of the top generals had been performing their roles, in speeches and public ceremonies in a manner that could only prompt observers to question whether they were reinterpreting, and adopting for themselves, the roles and duties of Burmese kings. Their ideological program, as such, gravitated towards linking the maintenance of law and order with a renewed reverence for Buddhist traditions. By promoting Buddhism, the generals were responding to the threat of Suu Kyi – who courted the support of the sangha – while at the same time assuming the legitimacy of a Burmese monarch for themselves. It was indeed ironic that institutions of the military government promoted a similar kind of devotion to the Buddhist traditions that U Nu’s government institutions were advancing in 1962 – the same reasons that prompted the unauthorised military intervention then were being adopted by the tatmadaw to legitimise their rule. Also, ironically, ethnic minorities had to come to terms yet again with policies that promoted Buddhist nationalism.
This strategic redirection adopted by the current generation of tatmadaw generals towards promoting Buddhist culture had intensified following the decision by a large number of the sangha to side with protesters and opposition parties in 1988 and 1990. It also gained pace following the publication of offerings made by National League for Democracy (NLD) candidates to the sangha prior to the 1990 elections; the theoretical development of Suu Kyi’s Buddhist political thought — much of which transpired during her early years spent under house arrest from 1989 to 1995 and in her publications and speeches thereafter; and Suu Kyi’s subsequent visitations to monasteries after her various releases. To be sure, Aung San Suu Kyi’s political rhetoric involves a conscious use of Buddhist ideas that developed into a discourse on the compatibility of Buddhist thought with a democratic society and the attainment of freedom, through Buddhism, under authoritarian rule. The grounding of her message in the union of Buddhist thought and democratic government offered a political alternative in terms of Western democracy and liberalism.17 As such, she posed a direct threat to the legitimacy of the tatmadaw’s authoritarian rule. Her support from within the sangha community challenged the military’s authority primarily because the sangha are respected by laymen for moral and civil guidance in major urban areas and at the local village level in rural areas dominated by Burmans.

Since the early-mid 1990s, therefore, the military had been pressured to respond not only to vocal opposition within the sangha, but also to Suu Kyi’s actions, speeches, and writings by creating an image of themselves as better Buddhists than Suu Kyi and, more generally, as being responsible for the preservation and promotion of Buddhist traditions in Burma. To negate the influence of Suu Kyi and the NLD, the SLORC embarked upon a massive campaign to promote its own version of nationalism and order through Buddhist culture. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), for example, a mass organisation which the tatmadaw uses for rallies in support of the government and to launch attacks upon the NLD, offered free courses in Buddhist culture after it was established in 1993. According to Steinberg, the USDA was the regime’s attempt ‘to recreate civil society in its own manner while suppressing alternative possibilities’.18 In order to carry out this enterprise, the tatmadaw interpreted Buddhist traditions in a way that conformed to their orderly vision for society and promoted one monolithic Burmese culture. The generals publicly consecrated Buddhist sites and invented prominent roles for themselves in Buddhist ceremonies. In addition, the generals began meddling in what Seekins calls “monumental Buddhism”, building or renovating pagodas and centres of devotion in order to acquire legitimacy’.19 Indeed, this also revealed a concerted attempt on the part of the military rulers to annex Buddhism for themselves.

By 1995, the generals, who had previously paid relatively little attention to attending or hosting religious ceremonies and observing holy days, now took it upon themselves to do so in an official capacity as well as to be seen publicly making offertories and donations to the sangha. The tatmadaw had by now developed ceremonies to complement their public shows of piety and these were broadcast on state television and replicated in their newspapers. Depending upon the occasion, these would consist of some generals draping white sashes over their uniforms and solemnly standing in a circle reciting prayers; receiving the Nine Precepts and a sermon from the leading sayadaw or the Sangha Maha Nayaka sayadaw, presenting offertories (alms or soon), robes, or cash donations to sayadaws while kneeling in submission; receiving a recitation of the Paritta texts by the sangha — from which both sangha and laymen gain merit; and would conclude in the sharing of merits gained.

In the 1990s, the generals’ restoration and construction of pagodas may have reflected their concern for restoring their credibility with the sangha following Saw Maung’s activities in Mandalay. They developed intricate ceremonial roles for founding and consecrating them — including the recitation of prayers and sprinkling of scented water over the site or the hti daw (gold umbrella spire) before raising it atop a pagoda. A pagoda with hti symbolises the accumulated merit of the Buddha, the previous Buddhas, the future Buddha, the Cakkavatti (universal monarch) and the sangha, and those who
donate pagodas also accumulate merit. The hoisting of the *hti* symbolises royal power, the crown on the king's head, and was a function previously reserved for a king, either at his inauguration or otherwise. Yet the SPDC's Chairman and Senior General, Than Shwe, would perform these duties on numerous occasions and at locations across the country, including the most prominent of Buddhist sites in Rangoon – the Shwedagon pagoda. The day following the government's Proclamation 1/97 – constituting the SPDC – the state media announced the renovation of 287 pagodas and the excavation of another 890 pagoda sites 'to be rebuilt with original style and taste of 11th century', along with the addresses at which cash donations would be received. Further examples of the regime's promotion of 'monumental Buddhism' in recent years include the building of an International Tharavada Buddhist Missionary University, a pagoda housing a replica of the Buddha Tooth Relic donated by the Chinese government, and a complex at Mindhama Hill containing a large marble Buddha image from the Mandalay region.

Although the state media often published articles by the Department of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Information interpreting Buddhism and the religious significance of certain holy days or sacred Buddha images, beginning in 1990s, religious messages appeared outside the normal text of state-run newspapers. These included pre-Sabbath reminders, whereby the government earned merit by reminding its people of keeping precepts on the Sabbath day and the appearance of proverbs and words of auspiciousness from the *Mingala Sutta* – the sermon given by the Buddha containing the 38 rules for a beatific life. It also included 138 of the 167 stanzas from the *Loka Niti* (guidance) – a collection of proverbs for social conduct and social discipline originally compiled by a minister of the government during King Thihaths's (Sihasu) reign in the fourteenth century and were originally published as texts for use in monastic education. Cartoons also carried Buddhist themes or references to the State's successful efforts in preserving Buddhist tradition and culture, and photographs often depicted persons publicly greeting the generals with a *shekho* or *wai* – a custom adopted by the generals and encouraged among their subordinates since the late 1980s but which was normally reserved to show reverence towards monks or elderly relatives. Criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD was often placed in a sacrilegious context, both in the text and in cartoons.

By assuming a high profile in the collection and donation of monies for the restoration and construction of pagodas and Buddha images, the tatmadaw attempted to establish a monopoly over the performance of some private merit-making and the more public religious services. Their appeals for public donations and their management of these funds were accompanied by the involvement of local tatmadaw units in the renovation of religious sites. State-sponsored ceremonies and rituals illustrated how traditional merit-making for individual lay patrons had been appropriated by the military regime in favour of state-sponsored religious devotions. The *Protection and Preservation of Cultural Heritage Regions Law* of 1998 ensured the maintenance of the tatmadaw's monopoly by restricting the independent construction and renovation of Buddhist structures, effectively assigning the accompanying merit-making ability over to the generals.

The SPDC also used museums to promote their piety. Both the National Museum and the Historical Museum of Six Buddhist Councils advanced Burma's monarchical heritage and its importance in upholding Buddhism and the unification of the country. The generals constructed statues of monarchs in public places, renamed important streets after Burmese heroes, and the Mandalay Palace, home of the last Burmese monarch, King Thibaw, underwent a complete reconstruction after 1989. Remarkably, in the absence of the senior SPDC generals, their wives also took over the religious duties of their husbands, hoisting the *htidaw* atop the *Maha Sakkja Muni* Buddha image at Kyaunggyi Taik monastery for example. The wives of SPDC generals continued to perform *htidaw* hoisting and consecration, robes offering and donation ceremonies in the presence of *Sangha Maha Nayaka* Committee *sayadaws* of the state, division and township levels.
In many instances, the SPDC’s pious behaviour arose in direct response to the acts of Aung San Suu Kyi (and the NLD) since her actions posed a direct threat to their legitimacy. In 2003, for example, the well respected Karen-based sayadaw, U Bhaddanta Vinaya (Thamanya Sayadaw) died and, unlike Ne Win whose passing received no state media coverage, the passing of the influential abbot was broadcast on the state radio, television, and in newspapers. The SPDC donated cash for his final rites and the tatmadaw attended the ceremony, carrying his remains to his tomb. Suu Kyi had visited him upon her releases in 1995 and 2002.

The promotion of Buddhism and association to Burma’s monarchical traditions continued to resonate in domestic affairs leading up to 2007. On 6 November 2005, the tatmadaw began the mass relocation of government ministries – including civil servants and their desks – from Rangoon to a site it had been developing for a number of years near remote Pyinmana, 240 miles to the north. On 27 March 2006 (Armed Forces Day), state television broadcast pictures of troops parading at the site in the shadows of three massive statues of kings Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungphaya – the three kings most noted for uniting the people in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, and the founder of Burma’s last dynasty in 1798 – and Than Shwe officially named the new capital Naypyidaw (Royal City). By heeding the advice of astrologers and founding the new capital, Than Shwe had asserted his own ‘royal’ legacy.
4. The SPDC and the 2007 Religious Boycott

While the cost of Naypyidaw’s construction has been enormous, it has been but one of many major projects that the SPDC have continued to pour the country’s resources into. These include new dams, bridges, energy projects, and of course the military’s own lions share of the budget. So as to avoid resentment and maintain loyalty to the regime, the government also significantly raised the salaries of civil servants and the military in 2006, and may need to continue doing so. Government expenditures, therefore, have in recent years far outweighed revenues (including gas), which has led to high budget deficits that the IMF and World Bank warned must be reduced. Since the government resisted cutting expenditures on its major pet projects, it focused its attention instead on raising more taxes and reducing subsidies on gasoline products – the latter reform having been strongly recommended by the IMF for some time and indeed their annual visit to Burma was looming when the subsidy-cuts were implemented. But if the SPDC was trying to appease the IMF, its strategy risked inviting the same political instability that hit the region ten years prior.

In a move that harkens back to the reforms introduced in Indonesia during the last days of Suharto, on 15 August 2007 the generals chose not to implement gradual reductions in subsidies but rather across the board in one hit, raising the price of diesel oil by 100 per cent and compressed natural gas by almost 500 per cent. This had an immediate impact on the cost of food, transport, and electricity generation in Rangoon and across the country, fuelling a growing resentment against the SPDC’s economic mismanagement – in Rangoon there had already been a number of rare small protests earlier in the year over the rising price and availability of basic commodities and electricity. In this sense, the initial trigger for the mass demonstrations in 2007 was remarkably similar to that in 1988. Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew even remarked that this kind of economic mismanagement by the generals meant that they could not survive indefinitely and that the population was likely to revolt against their excesses: ‘These are rather dumb generals when it comes to the economy … How they can so mismanage the economy and reach this stage when the country has so many natural resources?’

Protests of some 400–500 people led by a group called the ‘88 Student Generation Group began four days after the price hike in Tamwe Township in Rangoon. The protesters were attacked by members of the USDA and their Swan Arr Shin militia, and the ringleaders, Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, were arrested along with some 100 others including members of the NLD. The SPDC announced the completion of its national convention on the new constitution soon afterwards and claimed the protesters were undermining their roadmap to democracy. The convention had been heralded for the past 15 years or more and had been convening on and off with hand-picked representatives from the ethnic minority groups. The NLD had walked out of, and were later expelled from, the national convention in 1995 (many of their members were still incarcerated), and in 1996 the SLORC had issued Order 5/96 silencing any criticism of the convention and the constitution after the NLD threatened to write their own. Later in October 2007, in a scene reminiscent of a choreographed North Korean rally, the SPDC would hold a 60,000 strong ceremony to support the National Convention in Hpa-an, Kayin state.

A number of reasons pre-empted the sangha’s participation in the 2007 protests. While they saw it as their moral obligation to reflect the suffering of the people and to protect their welfare, their own daily survival is dependent upon public donations of food (almsgiving) that lay people offer to them each morning. Although some monks in the Arakan state had already joined the outcry by late August, on 5 September several
hundred student monks at a large monastery in Pakokku decided to march against the sudden price-hike. Pakokku, a centre of Buddhist learning, lies along the Irrawaddy River some 300 miles north of Rangoon and 80 miles south of Mandalay. After Mandalay, it is home to the second largest sangha community in the country. The monks were attacked and beaten by USDA and Swan Arr Shin militias, around ten were arrested – some reports claimed that one was beaten to death – and soldiers were called in for the first time to disperse the demonstration. An angry crowd of monks and civilians gathered at Maha Visutarama monastery the following day, prevented a group of visiting local officials from leaving for more than six hours, burned their vehicles, and demanded the release of the detained monks.

News of the beating of monks at Pakokku rapidly spread through monasteries across the country, after which a newly formed group called the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) issued a leaflet giving the SPDC until 17 September to meet four demands or face a religious boycott: apologise to the monks for the Pakokku violence; immediately reduce commodity prices including fuel, rice, and cooking oil prices; release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and those arrested during the current protests; and an immediate dialogue with the ‘democratic forces’ to resolve the suffering of the people.24 The SPDC ignored these demands and instead offered sayadaws at Pakokku financial compensation, which was refused. They also made high-profile offerings of money, robes and gifts to monasteries elsewhere while at the same time it stepped up security around key monasteries in Rangoon, Mandalay, Pakokku, Pegu and Sittwe. The monks had been particularly irritated by the local authorities’ use of violent militia gangs to suppress peaceful demonstrations, yet this militia remained present and were later armed by the authorities with machetes. Local tatmadaw commanders also asked leading citizens to persuade the monks not to participate in the boycott.

The SPDC would have considered the threat of a religious boycott very seriously because, as in 1990, this threatened to demoralise the tatmadaw and questioned the loyalty of its soldiers and security forces, now almost entirely composed of Burman Buddhists. On 15 September, the ABMA issued a second leaflet calling for a pattta nikkujana kamma – a refusal to accept alms or an alms boycott – of the military and all members of the USDA, Swan Arr Shin, and all government workers, beginning on 17 September as well as a call for a peaceful march in Rangoon, Mandalay and elsewhere the following day. Although the monks involved called for sangha unity on the boycott issue, it cannot be said that all monasteries participated but certainly that there was enough agreement to initiate the marches on 18 September; these went ahead in towns across the country, the largest of over 1,000 monks in Rangoon. At some monasteries and pagodas the ABMA’s religious boycott decree was recited wherein the monks referred to the military rulers as ‘evil, sadistic and pitiless … tyrants … [and] … despots’.25

Over the next week the authorities by and large held back, photographed and videotaped the demonstrations in order to coordinate their retaliation. Since the authorities had not yet responded to any significant degree, they were soon joined by thousands of lay citizens. Although the authorities had on certain days assigned plain clothed men to block the entrances to major pagodas, denying the marchers additional religious significance, on 22 September a group of 500 monks were inexplicably allowed through road barriers to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, a mistake that the SPDC would not allow to be repeated. The significance of this event should not be downplayed because it showed that despite the SPDC’s best efforts to sideline Suu Kyi and the NLD, the monks still sought after her approval and it was at this point in the demonstrations that the movement became an intensely political force. Indeed, as a direct consequence of their meeting, the protests swelled considerably overnight across the country and to some 20,000 in Rangoon; the numbers of monks participating in the marches had doubled the following day and, led by monks carrying overturned alms bowls, they were joined by nuns as well as members of the NLD and student groups. On the final days before the crackdown, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 monks were joined by the same number of civilians, many holding flags including the NLD and the banned All Burma Buddhist Monks Union.
On 24 September, the religious affairs minister, Brig-Gen. Thura Myint Maung blamed the NLD, the Communist Party of Burma, and foreign broadcasters (BBC and VOA) for instigating the monks and others to demonstrate. On 25 September the state-run New Light of Myanmar published Directive 93 (2007), signed by the chairman of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, along with Directives 65 (1984), 81 (1990), 83 (1991), and 85 (1996) which, when combined, directed the proper roles of monks – prohibiting them from participating in secular affairs and party politics, requested sayadaws to instruct their disciples to refrain from joining illegal sangha organisations (such as the ABMA), and directed sayadaws not to harbour monks who violated these rules. This did not prevent the demonstrators from returning, and the authorities amassed large numbers of soldiers and paramilitary while reinforcing their warnings. A curfew was imposed, major arrests began, and monasteries were surrounded and shut down on the eve of the crackdown, thus removing the bulk of the sangha from the following day’s suppression.

From 26 September on, the SPDC used soldiers, police, USDA and the Swan Arr Shin to suppress demonstrations around the country – the violence used by the authorities has been well-documented. Although the SPDC did seem to act with restraint when compared to the 1988 demonstrations, their retribution on the sangha was just as repressive as in 1990. Around the country, rebel monasteries were invaded, desecrated and sacked; thousands of ‘bogus monks’ (as labelled by the authorities) were beaten, interrogated, disrobed and imprisoned; and an unknown number of deaths almost certainly occurred. The abbot leader of the ABMA, U Gambira, was arrested and charged with treason. Notably, in many cases the authorities refused to issue families with death certificates, meaning that a large number were classified as ‘missing’. The SPDC meanwhile resumed its carrot and stick approach to the sangha, publicly offering lavish gifts to loyal sayadaws and their monasteries while the occupation of rebel monasteries continued into 2008.

The involvement of monks in mass demonstrations against the military regime has undergone considerable change since 1988. The demonstrations of 1988 were in large part led by student groups and democracy advocates, with elements of the sangha taking part along with most representatives of civil society in Rangoon. Since 1988, however, the regimes suppression, detention, and monitoring of students – most of whom fled to the border areas and into Thailand – as well as the sporadic closure of schools and the university, has meant that the sangha have adopted a higher profile in airing societal grievances and, as in 2007, in leading public demonstrations. The monks involved in the 2007 protests, in other words, were putting themselves on the line more so than in 1988 and leaving themselves open to inevitable retaliation. Although this growth in their emboldened attitude towards resistance may point to a growing long term trend in Burmese opposition politics, it would not be an entirely new development but rather the latest episode in the long the cycle of Burmese political history. The political strength of the sangha lies not in producing opposition leaders but in supporting opposition politics; and since the regime has all the guns, the monitoring personnel, and keeps the prisons well-occupied with political dissidents, the burden of opposition will from time to time fall upon the more passionate inside the monasteries. This will likely continue to occur until the regime’s leaders dare to step back once again and allow some form of civilian political opposition to arise.
5. Conclusion

In 2007, the Burmese generals successfully fended off the greatest challenge to their rule in almost 20 years. One of the most remarkable differences between the events of 1988 and 2007, however, is that they had spent a large part of their time following the beginning of their nation-building program in 1993 publicly promoting Buddhism. Like the Burmese kings of old, the generals attempted to turn their vices into virtues by symbolic, very visible, acts of piety. Lacking the valid title of ‘kingship’, the generals behaved as if they were continuing in a royal tradition to which they had no legal claim. Moreover, by 2007 the tatmadaw had come full circle since 1962 by actively promoting Buddhism as, if not the state religion, then at least the next closest thing to one. And since it could be considered sacrilege to question the intent behind religious acts performed by them, their appropriation of the Buddhist concept of cetana (intent) had become an extremely effective means of imposing its power and authority. Yet despite lacking credibility because of occasional acts of violence that betray their intent, they continued regardless. The religious boycotts of 1990 and 2007, however, were supremely important to the generals, not only because they threatened cohesion within their ranks, but also because they exposed the intent behind their piety – survival – and they challenged their claim to ‘traditional’ Burmese legitimacy as rulers in a devoutly Buddhist country. That they may also be concerned for their own religious well-being also remains likely.

That the generals were able to suppress the demonstrations in 2007 says more about their own survival skills, in particular their tactical management of the situation and of their own security forces, than it does about their ability to foresee the events occurring. Now living luxuriously in Naypyidaw, secluded from the main populated centres, the top generals are so divorced from the suffering caused by their own ineptitude that the future possibility of urban unrest remains real. Added to this the fact that the generals have lost an enormous amount of legitimacy by committing violence against the very institution they are meant to support and whose traditions they promote, the sangha, and that it took only one visit by some of the monks to Aung San Suu Kyi’s home to inflame the demonstrations, means that they have a monumental task in garnering future domestic support for the regime and that a more legitimate challenger, in the eyes of the public, remains ready to claim the throne. After 2007, the simple fact remains that the only claim the SPDC have to running the country is that they hold all the guns. The move to Naypyidaw has meant that they are now more remote and alienated from the general community and, most importantly, less in contact with the local communities than is the sangha. Because of this, the shift to Naypyidaw may lead to a more fragile state than they had bargained for at the time.

To diffuse the unrest of 1988, the SLORC announced that they would schedule general elections for 1990. In February 2008, the SPDC announced that they would hold a referendum on a new constitution, and schedule general elections for 2010. While the SPDC may have hoped to diffuse the unrest of 2007 with these pronouncements, upholding their referendum promise in May 2008 drew widespread international condemnation not only because it was viewed as a contrived entrenchment of future military rule but also because it drew attention and much-needed resources away from dealing with the devastation caused by cyclone Nargis. Perhaps the only saving grace for the generals in the wake of Nargis was that those most affected by the cyclone were located in the Irrawaddy Delta rather than in the centres of urban unrest in 2007. Official results for the first round of the referendum (excluding those areas affected by cyclone Nargis) showed that the new constitution, a 235 page document containing 15 chapters of detailed provisions, was passed by a remarkable 92.4 per cent of voters.
Throughout the 1990s the generals had been considering the merits of Indonesia’s constitution where, under Suharto, a permanent place remained for the military and its Golkar party – in Burma’s case it would be the USDA. However, with Suharto’s demise they lost interest and used the national convention as a tactical stalling device along with their ‘roadmap for democracy’. Ironically, while it seems that their own economic mismanagement forced them to revise their schedule for the referendum on the new constitution – i.e., as a consequence of imposing remarkably similar reforms to those that eventually led to Suharto’s demise – a national disaster could not alter this schedule once it had been forced upon them. While seeking political legitimacy through the engineering of a referendum that would ensure a place for their political future, they may have lost legitimacy through their inflexible attitude towards staging it under the circumstances – the contrast between the Burmese and Chinese handling of their natural disasters in 2008 was telling.

The new constitution contains provisions relevant for the sangha and their role in politics; it specifically disenfranchises the entire sangha community. It is uncertain, however, whether the younger monks will continue their fight after the crackdown of 2007. Many will have shed their robes voluntarily. But for those that remain, they will have surely been emboldened by the experience, perhaps their first real taste of what deeds this regime is capable of. Because the sangha remains the only sizeable, potentially rapidly organisable, and morally dangerous opposition in Burma, with the passing of the older loyal sayadaws the tatmadaw must continue buying the loyalty of the younger monks. Yet because of the size and significance of the 2007 demonstrations, which far outweighed the sangha’s involvement in both the 1988 demonstrations and the more localised protests of 1990, it is difficult to see their loyalty forthcoming.
Notes


3 Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma, p. 23.

4 Although over 80 per cent of the population are Buddhist (the figure is difficult to estimate for a number of reasons including the government’s willingness to inflate the numbers in line with their promotion of a Burman Buddhist national identity), it would be misleading to classify the religion as it exists in Burma as purely of Buddhist origins since it incorporates many traditional animistic cults such as spirits and deities (nats), numerology, and astrology, all of which could be argued to offer further guidance or perhaps the opportunity to neutralise the karmic consequences generated by worldly wrongs.

5 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma, p. 56.


10 Seekins, The Disorder in Order, p. 46.


13 Demonetisation was used to strike at insurgents and black marketeers operating along the Thai and Chinese borders. However, since neither group traded in Kyat because it had long been unconvertible, the demonetisation hit ordinary Burmese citizens the hardest. The 75 and 35 Kyat notes had been introduced in 1985 and 1986 respectively because they were said to be, according to Ne Win’s numerical superstitions, luckier than the 100 and 50 Kyat notes, and the 75 Kyat note was also introduced on Ne Win’s 75th birthday. The 75 and 35 Kyat notes were then replaced with the 90 and 45 Kyat notes in 1987 because nine was Ne Win’s lucky number.

14 Houtman, Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics, p. 160.


16 Chirot, Modern Tyrants, p. 309.


Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, p. 91.


*The New Light of Myanmar*, ‘State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee has duty to reinforce and observe basic principles and rules and regulations and implement religious matters’, 25 September 2007.


See Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*.
