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A cry for freedom

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Arriving in Burma, the facades are almost normal: traffic in the streets of Rangoon, crowds in the markets and tea stalls, astrologers announcing the future at the great Shwedagon pagoda; families playfully dousing small ivory Buddhas in water.

In the botanical gardens, where people go to speak freely, a young man seated on the bench next to me stared at his book, the pages unturned, before summoning the courage to speak - then looked away as he did. Strangely, he began each sentence with a verb, making our conversation at times hilarious. 'Permitting us never English', he said as he described the long ban, now lifted, on learning English. That was one of the old tyrant Ne Win's specialities, he said; another was his infamous cancellation of most of the banknotes in circulation thus ruining most people with savings. As we talked, I became aware of a face in sun-glasses peering through the iron railings, the lips silently moving through a half-smile. My friend's face tightened and he hurried away without saying goodbye. Prague used to be like this.

The golden dusks bring a less ambiguous atmosphere. Colonial colonnades frame people motionless before they move on quickly. The only cyclo driver dismounts and slips into the shadows. 'It is common,' said an informant, 'for people to be kidnapped at night and never be seen again. Cyclo drivers have been taken away to become porters for the army, pack animals with ammunition and sometimes human mine-sweepers. You never know when it will happen; there is no pattern.'

Milan Kundera once wrote that the 'struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. Few outside Burma will know about the epic events here between 1988 and 1990. Few will have heard of the White Bridge on Inya Lake in the centre of Rangoon, now known to foreign business people as the site of an 'international business centre'. Yet it was here that an uprising as momentous as the storming of the Berlin Wall 1989 was sparked. On 18 March 1988 hundreds of schoolchildren and students marched along it, singing the national anthem. It was as joyful as it was defiant. When suddenly they saw behind them the steel helmets of the Lon Htein, the 'riot police', and knew they were trapped.

According to eye-witnesses I have interviewed in exile, the soldiers systematically beat many of them to death, singling out the girls. 'A soldier reached down to his victim,' I was told, 'put his boot on her head and ripped the gold chain from her neck'. A few managed to escape into the lake where they were caught and beaten and drowned. Of those who survived 42 were locked in a waiting van, parked in the noonday outside Insein prison where they suffocated to death. At the White Bridge fire-engines were brought in to wash away the blood.

The students now marched in anger to the centre of the city and were joined by some 10,000 ordinary people who probably, until then, could not have imagined such a challenge to the military dictatorship that had ruled for 26 years. After months of rising popular confidence, the moment of general uprising came precisely at eight minutes past eight on the morning of the eighth day of the eighth month of 1988. This was the auspicious time the dockers chose to go on strike, and the country followed: teachers, journalists, railway workers, weather forecasters, grave-diggers, even prison warders and police.

Martin Moorland was British ambassador at the time. 'It was unforgettable and so very moving,' he said. 'All you could see were people and all you could hear was Do-a-ye! Do-a-ye! - "our country is our business". I had seven years of experience in Burma and I have to say I was astonished by the events of 1988. There was a degree of repression in the Burmese system which I thought the Burmese people took for granted and I discovered in 1988 they did nothing of the kind. My assumptions had been wrong. They wanted the same human rights, broadly speaking, as we want in the West.'

Unlike the bloody response to China's democracy movement in Tainanmen Square the following year, there were no TV cameras linked to satellite dishes when Ne Win kept his promise to 'shoot to kill those who stand against us'. As many as 10,000 died in the streets and in the prisons, under torture, and even in their homes as the army's feared Brengun-carriers stormed the crooked lanes, firing at random into flimsy homes. Anyone with a camera was a target. Perhaps the world only really took notice when a charismatic woman, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the national hero Aung San, was placed under house-arrest in July 1989. Thereafter, so the generals calculated, they could proceed with an election that, without her, they were certain to win and which would legitimize their dictatorship. In fact, they lost spectacularly; Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won 82 per cent of the Parliamentary seats; she even swept the board in principal army cantonments.

Shocked, the generals (who had renamed the regime the State Law and Order Council, known by its Orwellian moniker SLORC) threw most of the newly elected Parliament into prison and turned Burma into what Amnesty has described as 'a prison without walls'. Since then, year upon year, the United Nations Commission of Human Rights has translated Burma's tyranny into the following catalogue: 'Torture, summary and arbitrary executions, forced labour, abuse of women, politically motivated arrests and detention, forced displacement, important restrictions on the freedoms of expression and association and oppression of ethnic and religious minorities...' One report that drew me to Burma earlier this year was by Human Rights Watch which said that despite the release of Aung Sang Suu Kyi from house arrest in July last year, 'the overall human-rights situation is worsening... As the SLORC has moved to attract international investment at least two million people have been forced to work for no pay under brutal conditions to rebuild Burma's long-neglected infrastructure.'

The euphoria following the release of Aung San Suu Kyi was extremely important to the regime. In the House of Commons the Foreign Minister Jeremy Hanley said: 'The welfare of the Burmese people continues to concern us [but Suu Kyi's release] represents the first step in an irreversible pursuit of progress towards a prosperous and democratic Burma.' Although he counselled against 'moving too quickly', the British Government was 'heartened' and 'encouraged' by the SLORC's conciliatory gestures. Furthermore, the Burmese people could only 'gain experience of democratic principles' from 'increased commercial contacts with democratic nations such as Britain'. Running down the list of the regimes exposed to 'democratic principles' of

British companies - Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Nigeria, not to mention Iraq and Iran - you could get a pretty good grasp of the true meaning of his verbiage.

Having opened Burma to the 'free market' and released its most famous prisoner, the SLORC bargained that the rapacious instincts of the 'Asian tiger' states and the venerable plunderers of the West would respond with the investment it craved. The SLORC was not disappointed. The British Government mounted a trade conference in London - 'Burma: the next tiger?' - funded by the Department of Trade, which was told about the 'visionaries' in the SLORC. This was followed by a business delegation to Rangoon, inspired and partly funded by the Government. (Britain's Premier Oil already had a \$30 million investment and Powergen and Rolls Royce were 'very interested'.)

Immediately Aung San Suu Kyi was released the Japanese Government restored some \$50 million in aid. The new Australian deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer, who had previously announced that 'democracy is coming' to Burma, said that Australia could now adopt a 'flexible' approach to a country that offered 'great economic opportunities'. The US Government, in spite of a certain sound and fury by its representative at the UN, said it would continue 'neither to encourage nor discourage' trade and investment.

However, by far the biggest investment was already well established: a one-billion- dollar pipeline being built by the French oil company Total, partly owned by the French Government, and its US partner UNOCAL. This will carry Burma's natural gas into Thailand and give the generals an estimated \$400 million every year for 30 years. Indeed, more than two thirds of the SLORC's foreign underwriting now comes from foreign oil companies. Potentially, tourism, the world's fastest-growing industry, promises to complement this, if not in Visit Myanmar1 Year 1996 then when the country's roads, railways, bridges and airports are rebuilt.

Scheming despots are, of course, nothing new. What sets SLORC-run Burma apart is slave labour and massive displacement of whole sections of the population. No modern state, whatever its totalitarian stripe, has turned itself into a vast slave labour camp in order to 'develop'. Certainly, Pol Pot tried it as a means of control, but none matches the SLORC in paving its way to 'the market' with such brutal audacity. If the generals are allowed to succeed in this project - and their important allies like Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia have been promoting 'constructive engagement' (a euphemism borrowed from the Reagan administration's support for the apartheid regime in South Africa) - they will command a pool of labour that will undercut the cheapest in Asia. This will attract capital and eventually loans will be granted by the World Bank and the IMF; and 'globalization' will mark another gain and humanity another loss.

Little of this has been news. 'I'm afraid,' Aung San Suu Kyi told me, 'countries and events keep slipping from the headlines, and we slipped'. She has asked investors and tourists to stay away, pointing out that the foreign exchange they bring will widen the gulf between rich and poor and reinforce the power of the SLORC. 'It is just not possible,' she said, 'for foreign visitors, on a short guided trip, to know the truth, if they are interested in the truth'.

The famous picturesque view from Mandalay hill is testament to this. On one side is the new white Novotel Hotel, whose brochure boasts 'a computer socket, multi-channel in-house music and TV, a fitness centre and an 18-hole golf course'. Room rates range from \$200 to \$650 (a Burmese family has to survive on around \$200 a year). Facing it across a landscape of pagodas is another white building, a maximum- security prison where there are people serving tens of years for writing poems and songs about freedom. Beyond this, and a Foster's Lager billboard, is a shrine, which I watched being built with forced labour. I explained to an Australian tourist enjoying the golden sunset. 'I would never have known that,' he said.

Indeed, few foreigners, if any, will be aware that a thousand people were recently thrown out of the village they occupied for generations near Lashio in Shan State, so that the army could extend the golf-course for tourists. Dumped at gun-point on land that is dry stubble, where it is not possible even to sink a well, they can only watch helplessly as their precious water sprays the greens of a new gold course. This is not unusual. Last year, in order to bring Rangoon's main golf course up to standard for rich foreigners - mostly Japanese investors - the army seized adjacent land where a community lived for 40 years. When an army blockade failed to make them move, one member of each family was arrested and taken to prison. The rest were driven in trucks to a 'satellite town' 15 miles away.

The full force of these events struck me in the deep south of Burma, in Mon State, where David Munro and I found what has been described as the 'second death railway'. Connecting the towns of Ye and Tavoy, it is an extension of the notorious line built by the Japanese with the lives of more than 100,000 Asians and Allied prisoners of war. We came upon it in dense jungle beyond a village where emaciated young girls held out silver urns for contributions to the welfare of their community, a Buddhist tradition. Their face masks of thanaka - a yellow paste from treebark that protects and nourishes the skin - gave the appearance of small ghosts emerging from the undergrowth. They were fortunate compared with the gangs of children at work half a mile away.

While adult slave workers toiled on 20- foot embankments, the children were engaged in a crude brickworks, most of them exposed to the pre-monsoon glare and heat. Their ages ranged from teens down to nine years old. A ten-year-old boy was employed in a hole beneath a clay-mixer, turned by two yoked buffalo. His size was crucial; an adult would not be able to do his job, which was to catch the cement-like clay as it oozed out of the grinder, in time to be collected in a barrow. There was an urgent rhythm about his movements: there had to be; if he faltered the clay would bury him. As we approached him a barrow-load fell sideways onto him and I had to intervene to free him. One estimate is that, out of 200,000 adults and children forced to build the railway, up to 300 have died from exhaustion and disease or have been killed. This seems conservative. We counted some 20 bridges in the area and children appeared to be working on all of them. 'No one can escape [forced labour],' one villager told me. 'SLORC officials or the army go from village to village. They take a child, as long as he is strong enough, without asking permissions of the parent.'

In one of its recent annual reports on human-rights abuse throughout the world, the US State Department says the SLORC 'routinely' uses slave labour and 'will use the new railways to transport soldiers and construction supplies into the pipeline area'. The oil companies deny the railway is linked to the pipeline project, and although most supplies are likely to arrive by sea, there can be no doubt that the railway will allow the generals to protect the companies' investment and their own cut from it. In 1993 Total was contacted by officials of the Burmese Government in exile, representing Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy. They provided the company with extensive evidence of slave labour along the route of the pipeline. They also demonstrated how the profits from the project would invariably buy the arms and military equipment to which about half of the SLORC's budgetary spending is devoted, thus helping to underwrite the repression of the population. Total's response was it would 'continue'. UNOCAL has described reports of slave labour as 'fabrications'.

None of this would be possible without the collaboration of the Thai Government, especially the Thai military whose Petroleum Authority will be the only importer and consumer of the gas. The deal is little different from the logging, mining and fishing concessions which Thai interests have negotiated with Rangoon since 'development' in their own country has all but destroyed

its principal natural resources. Part of the unspoken deal appears to be that the Thai military sends back Burmese refugees. In April 1993 Thai troops burned down two refugee camps in an operation, reported the Bangkok Nation, 'probably related to the gas pipeline'. Thousands of ethnic Mon refugees have since been forced back into Burma, many straight into the hands of the SLORC military. On the border, where the pipeline will enter Thailand, SLORC troops display Total pens in their uniforms. 'Total is coming,' said one of them, with a broad smile.

Desmond Tutu - like Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel peace Laureate - has said: 'International pressure can change the situation in Burma. Tough sanctions, not "constructive engagement" finally brought about a new South Africa. This is the language that must be spoken with tyrants, for it is the only language they understand.' What is hopeful is that there is the promise of sanctions, coming not initially from governments but from a remarkable grassroots disinvestment movement in the United States. Modelled on the campaign to boycott apartheid South Africa, selective purchasing laws have been enacted by several American cities, including San Francisco.

These prevent public funds going to companies that trade with or invest in Burma. At the time of writing, New York State is likely to enact similar legislation and one of the biggest investors in Burma, Pepsi Cola, is withdrawing. The threat is not only loss of profits, but bad publicity, especially when applied to a company like Pepsi that says its product is 'bringing people and nations closer together towards world peace'. Byron Rushing, who has written a selective purchasing law for the state of Massachusetts, told me: 'In the case of South Africa, we were able to put pressure on a whole range of companies like General Motors, Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola, and eventually most withdrew. And that really added to the pressure on the white South African government. That was a victory. As for Burma, it's not going to happen overnight, but we have started. The civilized world should follow.'

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