

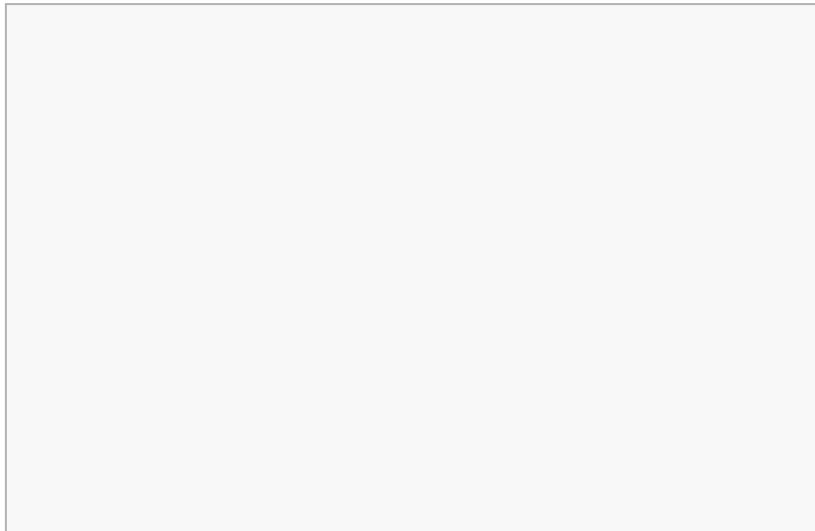
No. 11, December 2007

**The State of the  
Pro-Democracy Movement  
in Authoritarian Burma**

*Kyaw Yin Hlaing*



East-West Center  
Washington



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## East-West Center Washington Working Papers

*This Working Paper is a product of the East-West Center Washington's Southeast Asia Fellowship Program.*

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Washington



# The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Burma

When Burma gained independence in 1948, its regime was a part of the phenomenon, which Samuel Huntington called the second wave of democracies. Although Burma's parliamentary democracy was by no means perfect, opposition parties were allowed to exist and elections were held regularly. The coup staged by the Revolutionary Council, which was led by the military on March 2, 1962, brought an end to this brief period of electoral democracy in Burma. A long period of military rule began. The Revolutionary Council instituted a one-party socialist system by forming the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) and banning all opposition groups. This new government ruled the country with an iron fist. Although students, workers, and Buddhist monks organized protests against the BSPP government between 1960s and 1970s, the government easily cracked down on them. On August 8, 1988, a large number of people led by university students in Yangon,

Mandalay and a few other major cities took to the streets and protested against the then military-dominated government. Many people came out to watch the protestors. Student leaders announced that the Four-Eights Nationwide Democratic Movement had begun on the *eighth* day of the *eighth* month in the year 1988 and called for the entire nation to join them. As most people at that time were very unhappy with the mismanagement of the country by the BSPP government, they expressed their support for the protest by cheering enthusiastically. However, most spectators at that time had serious doubts regarding the ability of the movement to effect any tangible changes in the political system of the country. Naturally, they were very impressed with the ability of student leaders to launch protests in many parts of the country on the day they claimed they would. They, however, thought that the new head of the state, Sein Lwin, who was then known as a

“butcher” among the general public, would crack down on the demonstrators and that the demonstrations would eventually evaporate. Many people who were in college at that time recalled that many of their professors and parents asked them to stay away from the protestors as they believed that the movement was no match for the well-established and strong BSPP government. It was also just a few weeks before that the long time dictator of the country, Ne win, angrily noted in the speech he gave immediately before he stepped down that “when the army shoots, it shoots to hit.”<sup>1</sup> Ne Win made it very clear that once the army was brought in to restore the order, there would be a lot of bloodshed and that people who did not wish to be hurt should not come out. As expected, riot police and soldiers shot at the demonstrators in Yangon, Mandalay and Sagaing. Several hundred people were allegedly killed or wounded. The government showed that it was prepared to use force to crack down on the protestors. To the surprise of many people, the government’s forceful repression did not bring an end to the demonstrations. More and more people from different parts of the country came to join the movement as days passed by.

By the middle of August, security forces in most places stopped shooting at demonstrators. This truce lent impetus to the movement which spread to all corners of the country. Although students, Buddhist monks, and workers, were the main participants in early demonstrations, by the middle of August, members of several societal groups including lawyers, doctors, civil servants, beauticians, businessmen, and Muslim and Christian religious leaders, joined the movement. By the last week of August, the socialist government had been immobilized in most parts of the country and the administration of civil matters was taken over by community leaders and Buddhist monks. As a result, most Burmese, including senior government officials, reasoned that the days of military rule in Burma were numbered and that the

country would finally be on its way to becoming a politically open state.

The greatly anticipated absolute victory of the Four-Eight movement did not come about. Although the military decided to do away with the socialist system, it reclaimed control over the country by forming a military council known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). While offering promises to institute a democratic system within the country, the military junta cracked down on pro-democracy groups. Understandably, many pro-democracy activists did not trust the new military regime and continued their fight for democracy. Some of them formed political parties so as to effect political changes from within the institutional framework of the junta while others went to the border areas to start underground antigovernment activities.

After mobilizing a nationwide demonstration that brought an end to the rule of the BSPP government, many activists appeared confident that with the support of the people, they could pressure the new military regime into giving way to a democratic government. Given the strength of the pro-democracy movement and the support of the mobilized populace, such an expectation was not exaggerated. Pro-democracy groups, on their part, were also engaged in both confrontational and conciliatory activities in their efforts to convince the military junta to work with opposition groups in effecting political changes within the country. However, with the passage of more than 18 years since the military junta took control of the country, the projected democratic changes remain nowhere in sight; the military junta appears far from the verge of collapse. Although the movement has been ongoing, most pro-democracy groups have been weakened over time. In summary, regardless of their attempt to bring about political changes within the country over what has been almost two decades, the Burmese pro-democracy movement has yet to achieve what it first set out to do.

Many political activists, scholars and journalists have discussed the slow pace of the progress with the pro-democracy in the last half a decade or so. The Burmese language programming of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), activist news magazines like Irrawaddy Magazine and the Mizzima online magazine, and internet forum like "Democracy for Burma" enabled political activists and their sympathizers to share their position on political deadlock in Burma. More than 95 percent of the radio programs and the short articles about the state of the pro-democracy movement written by political activists directly or indirectly referred to the junta's unwillingness to give up power as the *raison d'être* for political problems in the country. A large majority of the populace and the international community joined the pro-democracy groups in holding the junta responsible for political problems prevalent in the country.<sup>2</sup> Reports prepared by the U.S. State Department and international human rights organizations and about 90 journalistic and scholarly articles on the political deadlocks in Burma all accused the junta of being the main culprit in the country's social, economic political problems. Political activists and their sympathizers also argued that the military government's brutal repression of opposition groups have also undermined the ability of pro-democracy groups to undertake any form of political activity in the country and with it any prospect for political reconciliation.

The government, on the other hand, argued that the political deadlock in the country persisted mainly because opposition groups under the influence of Western countries did not understand the goodwill of military leaders. In speeches, senior government officials repeatedly noted in their speeches that they were trying to lead the country toward a disciplined democracy and that only the military government could undertake such activities.<sup>3</sup> They also noted

that patriotic citizens could not and should not do anything but support the government and its activities.<sup>4</sup> Government newspapers published the articles that praised the government for its 'nation-building' activities such as construction of new roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and renovation of historical and religious buildings. These self-congratulatory articles were often accompanied by the articles that criticized opposition organizations as unpatriotic groups.

A few political activists also started to argue in the early 2000s that pro-democracy groups were also partly responsible for their own inability to achieve the movement's goal. They criticized their fellow activists for not being able to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with the military government and for not finding a way to resolve factional disputes between and within the various pro-democracy groups.<sup>5</sup> All existing explanations are in line with the scholarly explanation of the rise and fall of social movements that placed emphasis on the absence of political opportunities and presence of constraints for social movement activists. While the first and most popular explanation highlighted the government-inflicted constraints on the movement, the second and third explanations emphasized the social movement organizations' self-inflicted constraints. However, none of the existing explanations paid attention to how social movement activists perceived opportunities and constraints. As Doug McAdam and many others have pointed out, "...the movement analyst has two tasks: accounting for the structural factors that have objectively strengthened the challenger's hand, and analyzing the processes by which the meaning and attributed significance of shifting political condition is accessed."<sup>6</sup> People could perceive opportunities and constraints differently. The failure to see or to grasp opening opportunities is different from the absence of opportunities. At the same time, along with most studies of contentious politics, the existing studies of the Burmese pro-democracy movement also failed to pay

sufficient attention to the fact that social movement activists could find a way to overcome the constraints to which they were subject. Therefore, in order to understand the state of a social movement, one must also consider the way social movement activists dealt with constraints. The constraints inflicted by the government on the movement seriously weakened the movement. However, all authoritarian governments try to vitiate their opponents forcefully. The opposition groups would just have to find a way to survive the repression. The opposition groups must find a way to overcome the constraints before they can achieve their goals.

In addition, most existing explanations are either factually incomplete or based on flawed logic. It is hard to defend the argument put forward by the junta. After breaking its own promise to the public, the government should not expect the cooperation, understanding, and support of the opposition groups. However, the government's argument sheds light on the fact that pro-democracy groups did not understand or pay sufficient attention to the mindset and values of military leaders. Pro-democracy groups often make moralizing statements in arguing that the junta must give up power. It is futile preaching to hardheaded military leaders who want to keep themselves in power at all costs. The first and third explanations highlights important constraints pro-democracy groups were subjected to, however, they are incomplete.

The purpose of this study is to explain why the pro-democracy movement has yet to be able to bring democratic transition to the country. It will first discuss how the pro-democracy movement came into existence. The study will then examine the successes and failures of the activities undertaken by various pro-democracy groups and explain why the pro-democracy groups failed to topple the military government. In so doing, the paper will argue that Burma's long isolation from the international community; the support of the military regime by China, India and ASEAN countries; and the rich natural

endowment of the country enabled the government to resist all the pressures and challenges generated by the activities of pro-democracy groups. The study will also explain why the pro-democracy movement was weakened over time. It will also probe the political opportunities and constraints to which social movement entrepreneurs were subjected. Going beyond the argument of pro-democracy activists and their sympathizers, the study will demonstrate that focusing only on government repression of pro-democracy groups will not be sufficient to understand the current state of pro-democracy groups. One will need to take into account the constraints inflicted on pro-democracy groups by the long tenure of the movement, the limited availability of financial resources, host areas (in the case of exile pro-democracy groups), and internal problems of the movement such as factional struggle, low trust, and the prevalence of cronyism within and between various pro-democracy groups, and a lack of strategic planning on the part of these groups. Furthermore, going beyond merely illustrating the presence and absence of opportunities or constraints, the study will examine how pro-democracy groups handled the opportunities and constraints. It will show that it was not merely because of the presence or absence of opportunities and constraints, but because of pro-democracy groups' failure to exploit political opportunities and find a way to overcome the constraints that Burmese pro-democracy groups failed to keep the pro-democracy movement vibrant.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify that due to the unfavorable political situation in Burma, the survey results cited in the paper are by no means representative. They are quoted to show the trend rather than be an absolute measure of the issues. Furthermore, at the request of most of the interviewees names have been omitted.



## **The Four-Eights Movement**

As noted earlier, the BSPP government did not allow any form of independent political groups in the country.<sup>7</sup> The 1964 National Solidarity Act warned all potential challengers of the government that high treason is punishable by death. The BSPP government's actions did not, however, bring an end to autonomous political organizations. When they could not engage in autonomous political activities legally, students, teachers, lawyers, and writers created informal discussion groups and engaged in illegal political activities. As a result of political constraints, membership in such organizations was strictly confined to the social networks of their initial founders. If the founder were a teacher, he would try to recruit politically conscious colleagues and students. If students were the founders, they would try to approach their peers. Informal study groups formed by lawyers and writers usually consisted of people from different social backgrounds, including monks and laborers. In the initial stage, those who wished to form an informal organization would try to recruit members by asking like-minded people to read books and articles on politics, history, and social analysis. They then discussed the readings with potential members of their discussion group, sometimes individually and sometimes in small groups. Usually, they ended up inviting readers who expressed genuine enthusiasm about the books and exchanging views.

Many ambitious informal organizations were loosely connected to illegal political groups, especially the Burma Communist Party (BCP). Some political activists, however, created informal organizations independently but later tried to contact either the BCP or right-wing political masterminds in search of leaders who could give them guidelines for their activities. Some of these groups became affiliates of illegal political organizations, while others simply remained sympathizers. The informal affiliates functioned according to the instructions received from their illegal

political organization. The sympathizer groups did not always follow instructions, however they did occasionally listen to sound advice on organizing certain activities. There is no way of knowing the exact number of affiliated informal groups or independent informal groups, but independents appear to have outnumbered groups that were connected to illegal political groups.

Because the socialist government was prepared to do whatever necessary to eliminate its foes, it was not easy for informal political organizations to organize overt protests. The government cracked down on all antigovernment demonstrations in a consistently forceful manner. Several members of the two major anti-socialist movements—commonly known as the U Than movement and the Hmaing Centenary movement—were shot dead on the streets by government security forces. Others received long prison terms. One activist who played a leading role in both movements was hanged. Given such brutal actions on the government's part in the 1970s, no major antigovernment activities occurred in the first half of the 1980s. Most informal study groups confined their activities to discussing the country's political and economic problems and celebrating special anniversaries by distributing antigovernment brochures and pamphlets. Those who wanted to engage in open antigovernment activities joined one of the insurgent groups operating in various border areas. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, sociopolitical and economic developments allowed these informal study groups to organize a nationwide democratic movement.

The 1980s were, in fact, bad years for both the socialist government and the people. The country's economic growth had stalled and the cost of living was exorbitant. In 1985, approximately 40 percent of the population was living below the absolute poverty level.<sup>8</sup> Since the socialist government controlled the entire economy, it was responsible for the bad economic conditions. Public grievances against the government were heightened

when people found out about its inept handling of the country's economic problems. Instead of correcting its mismanagement, the government laid the blame for the failing economy on the international economic situation. Then, in an attempt to control the illegal money circulating in the black market, the government carried out demonetization in 1956 and 1987. As a result, the country's two largest banknotes became worthless in the first demonetization initiative and the next three banknotes followed in the second. In the first demonetization, people who had paid taxes on their income could convert all of their demonetized banknotes into legal tender; those who could not prove their tax payment could convert only 75 percent of their banknotes and the rest was confiscated by the government as a fine for presumed tax evasion.<sup>9</sup> But in the second, there was no systematic conversion of demonetized bills to legal tender.

Not only did the government's negligence have a negative impact on many people, but the Burmese banking system was so inefficient that most people chose to keep their money with them rather than depositing it in a bank. Many lower middle class families in fact lost their life savings owing to the inefficient banking system, and all business transactions came to a halt during the second demonetization exercise. The country was in shock and people's resentment intensified when they learned that the United Nations had given Burma the status of least developed country.

Taking advantage of this situation, BCP-affiliated student study groups in Yangon and Mandalay distributed a series of pamphlets urging college students in Rangoon to rise up against the government. At the outset, most students distanced themselves from such activities—the cost of participating in antigovernment protest would be too high—but an unexpected development brought changes in favor of opposition groups. In the middle of March 1988, a minor off-campus brawl between some engineering students and

some outsiders broke out near the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). Initially, the incident was nonpolitical, but it grew into a violent riot because of mismanagement by local authorities. In the course of its suppression, a student was fatally wounded, infuriating students at Rangoon University and RIT. Taking advantage of the situation, leaders of informal study groups publicly urged students to express their unhappiness with the government's handling of the incident by participating in antigovernment rallies at the university. On March 17, when leaders of an independent group marched to RIT with five thousand Rangoon University students, they were stopped on the way by well-equipped riot police. When students refused to comply with their orders, the police crushed the demonstration by force. The cost of launching an antigovernment protest proved to be very high. A number of students were alleged beaten or shot dead, hundreds of students were arrested, and forty-one students suffocated inside an over-packed police van.

As people's resentment of the government mounted, study groups tried to arrange mass rallies at Rangoon University and RIT, and more antigovernment pamphlets began circulating on campus. To control the situation, the government closed down every university in the country. When universities were reopened in May, students at Rangoon University and RIT found many of their friends missing. By this point it was not difficult for opposition groups to provoke students into joining antigovernment rallies. Moreover, various study groups turned themselves into full-fledged SMOs. Many began recruiting new members into the inner circles of their organizations. Small independent study groups began joining bigger BCP-affiliated or independent groups. When student-led SMOs from Rangoon University and RIT undertook antigovernment activities on their respective campuses, the government again suspended classes at all universities. While informal study groups-turned-SMOs were pondering their next step,

the BCP instructed its agents to organize nationwide antigovernment rallies with the help of its affiliated and sympathizer groups. Similarly, independent student groups started mobilizing for the nationwide movement when they learned about it from their friends.

Having witnessed the regime's brutal actions against its opponents, most Burmese thought of themselves as utterly powerless against the government. SMOs therefore needed to convince the public that it was possible to alter conditions through collective action. Although they did not collaborate, BCP-affiliated and independent SMOs alike, sought to rouse people out of their reluctance and bring them "into action in conflictual settings" by informing them of the "diagnosis and remedy for existing forms of suffering." Antigovernment pamphlets distributed by various SMOs blamed all suffering of the people on government corruption. And these pamphlets added, replacing the authoritarian government with a democratic one through collective action was a good way of eradicating all of the suffering. The government, of course, responded harshly. A number of political activists were arrested while engaging in antigovernment activities and were not only jailed without trial but tortured. Given these political constraints, many people, among them several political activists, were not optimistic about the possibility of a nationwide antigovernment movement.

Political development in the first half of 1988, however, gave activists the confidence they needed to persist in their antigovernment activities. At the special party congress held in July, Ne Win, chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party, stepped down after proposing a referendum on whether Burma should adopt a multi-party system.<sup>10</sup> To many people's surprise, the congress voted down Ne Win's proposal. For the first time in the history of the BSPP, an irreconcilable split occurred between the party's chairman, Ne Win, and his comrades. Until then, the congress had been a mere rubber stamp, and party members had meekly followed Ne Win's instruction. Those

who defied him were fired immediately. This is why Burma-watchers jokingly remarked that the BSPP did not have a chairman, the chairman had a party. The 1988 split was not a division between soft-liners and hard-liners, however, as in China or eastern Europe. Instead, it was due to the congress's fear of losing the privileges it had acquired. Although party delegates officially asked Ne Win to remain in power, he prudently chose not to stay.

Political activists sensed the opening up of opportunity. They found Ne Win's disappearance from active politics especially significant, because none of his potential successors seemed as capable as he was. "The government at the time," says a leading member of an opposition group "was very unstable. Most high-ranking officials did not know Ne Win would resign. Although they voted down Ne Win's proposal, they were not prepared to handle the ongoing political situation properly. People were very angry with them. It was impossible for the government to consolidate its position in one or two days or even a few months. It was in almost untenable position. We thought the time was right to organize a nationwide demonstration."<sup>11</sup> Another activist also said, "Ne Win resigned because of our protests. We concluded that if we could bring him down, we could bring down the entire government as well."<sup>12</sup> In fact, Ne Win also helped political activists set the goals of the movement. Until Ne Win mentioned holding a referendum for the country's party system, political activists were not asking for democracy. They did not even think that they could bring down the government. They merely tried to make the government more accountable. After listening to Ne Win's speech, political activists began calling for the people to fight for democratic transition in Burma. Furthermore, SMOs began receiving moral and material support from major foreign embassies, including those of the United States, Japan, Germany, and Australia. A delegation from the Japanese government, for example, informed the

opposition groups of its eagerness to work with them. "It was a great encouragement to learn," notes a student leader, "that all these leading democratic countries supported us. They were eager to work with us. Their support encouraged us to increase the momentum of our activities."<sup>13</sup> The material assistance political activists received from foreign embassies, however, was quite limited. The political situation at that time was so precarious that foreign embassies did not know to what extent they should help antigovernment protestors openly.

Despite the new political opportunity and the support accorded by major foreign embassies, SMOs still had trouble disseminating information about a nationwide movement. Ne Win's successor, Sein Lwin, was not very conciliatory. Because of his alleged involvement in dynamiting the student union building at Rangoon University in 1962 and in the forceful repression of subsequent antigovernment protests, he was nicknamed "the butcher." In a speech given to state and divisional council members, he mentioned that he would try to restore discipline in the country.<sup>14</sup> A retired BSPP official recalled that Sein Lwin was prepared to do anything to get things right.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it was too dangerous to transport anti-government pamphlets freely, of course, and they had no access to the state-controlled media. Even late in July 1988, many people, especially in rural areas, did not know that the opposition groups were trying to organize a nationwide democratic rally on August 8. A survey of 100 urbanites and 100 rural people conducted in 1999 indicated that only 15 of the rural people and 25 urbanites knew about the Four-Eights movement two weeks before the rally began. The rest did not learn about it until the following week. The problem was resolved when members of an independent student SMO happened to run into the BBC correspondent Christopher Guinness. On August 6, 1988, an interview with a group of Rangoon University students was aired by the BBC. In the interview, the student leaders first

described how students were tortured in prison. They then called for the whole nation to rise up for democracy. Finally they outlined the country's social, economic, and political problems and reminded people that these hardships would continue so long as the dictatorial government stayed in power. This BBC broadcast helped the movement turn bystanders into participants. According to many student leaders I interviewed, people from the peripheral northern, eastern and southern regions, decided to become involved in the movement after listening to the interview.

At about the same time, the Voice of America (VOA) came to serve as a source of information about the movement. SMOs used both the BBC and VOA as a coordination mechanism between the summit and the base. It reminded people living in the peripheral areas to pay serious attention to the activities of SMOs at the center. In fact, student activists framed the BBC interview exactly in the way they wanted. Taking advantage of rumors circulating in Yangon regarding students being tortured and raped in prison, they convincingly portrayed how they had suffered. In reality, none of the students involved in the interview had been tortured or raped (at least at the time of the interview). They simply made it up "to provoke the whole country to rise up against the government."<sup>16</sup> After all, there was no other source of information the BBC could use to verify the authenticity of what the student leaders said in their interview. Setting aside any ethical considerations, their tactics worked well. By co-opting an external resource, namely, the foreign media, the movement spread word of uprisings throughout the country.

The two broadcasting stations also helped the movement convince people that the cost of participating was not as high as they thought. Many people, although angry with the government, continued to remain bystanders. Most of these people believed that a nationwide movement would bring changes

to the country, but what kind of changes would such a movement yield? The uncertainty led many potential participants to adopt “a wait and see attitude to determine if collective action is likely to be viable before tossing their own hats into the ring.” I myself, as a student protester, discovered that many activists would join the movement only when they thought enough people would take part “to make it viable.” To mobilize these people into the movement, SMOs needed to furnish them with information about the opening up of opportunity. Again the BBC and VOA removed this responsibility from the shoulders of the SMOs by highlighting in their broadcasts the state of political opportunity in the country. Through these broadcasts, people learned about the support of major democratic countries. Both stations reported in detail how US senators had pressed the government to stop using force against peaceful demonstrators. Since many Burmese regarded the United States as a model democratic country, American support for their movement meant a lot. Once they found out that leading democratic countries backed them, SMOs escalated the momentum.

Despite the wavering populace, by August 8, 1988, the SMOs in Yangon and Mandalay had mobilized enough people to begin the movement. For the first few days, however, the government fired on demonstrators. If the security forces had kept shooting, the movement might have collapsed at once. It was in part because some differences between some senior BSPP government officials and in part because of Ne Win’s order that they should not use excessive force against demonstrators.<sup>17</sup> Although Ne Win had stepped down, he was still running the government from behind the scene.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, BSPP government officials could not do much without getting his approval. No one knew for sure why Ne Win did not allow them to crack down on the demonstration forcefully at that time. In any case, their change of policy enabled SMOs to mobilize even more people into the movement.

SMOs, however, suffered from an “organizational deficit”—that is, the network of the BCP’s affiliated study groups was not large enough to organize a nationwide movement. To make up for this deficit, SMOs tried to find a way to appropriate existing social organizations. BCP-affiliated SMOs first tried to appropriate the associations in which members of their “brother reading groups” were involved. In such cases, the agents of SMOs tried to control the associations from behind the scenes and turn them into SMOs. In places where there were no affiliated reading groups, BCP-affiliated SMOs sent out their agents to establish contact with well-respected figures with the intent of using them as brokers who could help them turn local organizations into SMOs. Independent SMOs sent out their agents as well. Since they did not have brother study groups beyond Yangon, agents of independent SMOs were usually sent where they had personal friends or relatives and through these personal connections tried to enlist the help of established organizations and social networks: bar associations, monasteries, the Sangha, community and alumni organizations, and local branches of Burma’s medical association. By the second week of the movement’s inception, a number of conventional religious and social organizations had emerged as SMOs. By then the movement had spread to every corner of the country. At about the same time, popular figures like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw Suu),<sup>19</sup> the daughter of the national hero, Aung San, and U Nu came to join the movement. BCP agents then tried to unite the movement by forming general strike committees in various parts of the country. At about the same time, Sein Lwin was replaced with Attorney General Dr. Maung Maung. Many protestors interpreted the fall of the butcher as the harbinger of the victory of the movement and started shouting “victory” in the streets.<sup>20</sup> At that time, Dr. Maung Maung, the last president of the socialist regime, declared to the nation that the government would hold a multi-party election. Dr. Maung

Maung also requested the people to call off the demonstration so that the government could make the necessary arrangements for holding an election. Dr Maung Maung's apologetic and compliant manner on national television made many assume that the government was no longer the confident leviathan it used to be.<sup>21</sup> Many social movement leaders in various parts of the country even came to make fun of socialist government in their speeches delivered to demonstrators. Meanwhile, former Primer Minister U Nu formed an interim government. At about the same time, veteran politicians and Daw Suu attempted at forming a national consultative committee in order to deal with the problems prevalent in the country.

In the last week of August 1988, the socialist government stopped functioning and the country found itself in a state anarchy. When it became abundantly clear that the socialist government could not reimpose its control over the country, President Maung Maung promised to hold multi-party elections. He then asked the strike committees and SMOs to call off their demonstrations and start preparing for elections. SMOs did not trust the part-state, however, and along with strike committees through out the country, they asked the BSPP government to hand over power to an interim government instead. Student protestors from various universities in Rangoon then invited five prominent political figures, former prime minister U Nu, a member of the Thirty Comrades<sup>22</sup>, Bo Ye Htut, former senior BSPP official Brig. General Aung Gyi, former Commander in Chief General Tin Oo, and Daw Suu. When these so-called "big fives" of the movement could not reach an agreement, some student leaders decided to support U Nu's interim government, for U Nu said he would hold an election within six months and that he and other members of the interim government would not run in the election.<sup>23</sup> When the SMOs persistently refused to accept Maung Maung's reassurances, Ne Win reportedly met with some senior BSPP officials and the then

Commander in Chief General Saw Maung.<sup>24</sup> In that meeting, he ordered some BSPP officials to form a new political party, known as the National Unity Party, and Saw Maung to take over the government. The military then formed an "interim" government called the State Law and Order Restoration Council, which became the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

### **The SLORC/SPDC and the Pro-Democracy Movement**

As soon as the State Law and Order Restoration Council took control of the country, it promised the people that upon restoring law and order in the country, it would hold a multi-party election, and power would be transferred to the winner of the election. On May 27, 1990, the government held the promised election. To the surprise of both the Burmese and the international community, the election was free and fair. However, the junta refused to concede power to the winning political party: the National League for Democracy (NLD). In fact, when it became very obvious that the main opposition party—the NLD—would emerge as the winner, a senior military officer hinted as early as a week before the election that military rule would continue until a new constitution was drafted. In return, the NLD and other pro-democracy groups called for the swift handover of power. The NLD also offered to present a constitution drafted upon the model of the country's first constitution, which was annulled by the Revolutionary Council in 1962. The international community, especially the U.S. and the EU countries, also pressured the junta to honor the results of the election. The military government resisted all domestic and international pressures, announcing that it would attempt to institute disciplined democracy within the country. Although the junta held a National Convention in 1992, each of its moves indicated that there was not the least intention to surrender power in the near future. The

junta artfully manipulated the National Convention so as to bring about a constitution that would secure the military of a strategic role in Burmese politics for many years to come—or, to quote a veteran Burmese politician, “eternally”. Outnumbered by delegates handpicked by the military government, representatives of the opposition parties had most of the proposals they made at the National Convention rejected. Military leaders also publicly refused to spell out the exact duration of the National Convention, to pronounce on the delivery of the new constitution. As a result, opposition groups came to conclude that the junta would do everything within its means to delay the drafting of the constitution.

Pro-democracy groups knew that the movement would have to persevere until the advent of a genuine democratic transition within the country. Therefore, while leading political activists established political parties in 1988 and 1989 in order to undertake political activities legally, many students and Buddhist monks maintained their political organizations and informal networks in spite of the government’s order to disband them. Many students and political activists also fled to the border areas in order to undertake pro-democracy activities from either insurgent-controlled areas or neighboring countries. Leaders of the NLD and other major opposition parties declared that they did not trust the military junta. They claimed that not only had it worked for the previous regime, but it had also cracked down on the pro-democracy movement brutally. As such, major opposition parties functioned like social movement organizations, and students and Buddhist monks continued to stage antigovernment activities whenever an opportunity arose. In a similar vein, exile pro-democracy groups sought to bring the political situation in Burma to the attention of the international community.

Leading political activists understood that in order to achieve the goal of the movement, social movement organizations

and political parties must constantly strengthen themselves while trying to weaken the military government. One leading activist noted,

We were aware of what happened in the Philippines and Latin American countries. Authoritarian governments don’t usually give up power easily. The military government made it very clear that it was not going to undertake genuine reform. We knew we would have to try to find a way to get rid of the government. Unless the government was weakened by a war or the death of some senior military officers, we won’t get democracy easily. We knew we would have to continue to fight for it. If they were too weak to rule the country, they would give up the power. We therefore tried to weaken its position both in the country and in the international community.<sup>25</sup>

It was quite obvious that Burmese pro-democracy leaders were aiming for either the transplacement or replacement mode of transition. Not surprisingly, pro-democracy groups tried to undermine the military government by organizing protests within the country, disseminating information about human rights violations, corruption, and mistakes committed by the military government and lobbying foreign governments and international organizations to pressure the junta to effect genuine political changes in the country. In addition, some pro-democracy groups also planned to undermine the junta by undertaking military operations and engaging in activities that were designed to split the military government.

Therefore, to understand the present state of the Burmese pro-democracy movement, it is necessary to examine to what extent major pro-democracy groups have realized these goals.

### **The Political Parties and the Pro-democracy Movement**

As soon as the junta allowed civilians to form political parties, many social movement

organizations and political activists came to form them. Although more than two hundred political parties came into existence during that time, only 93 of them contested the election of 1990. After the election, the junta had deregistered the parties which did not win any seats. As a result, there currently exist only ten legal political parties in the country. Of the ten, only the National Unity Party (NUP)—the new name for the Burma Socialist Program Party—the National League for Democracy and the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) remained very active in the first decade of 2000.

Among them, the NUP has been labeled as the government-backed party. Since both the NUP and the junta were created by Ne Win, the accusation was not deemed outlandish. However, many NUP members noted that they did not receive any assistance from the government at the election, contrary to their expectations. All the while, the NUP did not do anything that changed the status quo. Therefore, it should not be considered a political group that is working for democratic changes in the country.

The NLD and the SNLD, on the other end, functioned like major opposition parties. Although the SNLD was a small ethnic-based party, it was the “second largest winning party in the 1990 election.” It strove to consolidate its position by forming the Union Nationalities Alliance (UNA) with nine election winning ethnic minority parties and the Union National League for Democracy (UNLD) with 21 other ethnic parties that entered the 1990 elections. While calling for “democratic rights, equality, self determination for all ethnic minorities,” the SNLD also formed alliance with two Shan ceasefire groups and signed a declaration issued by the NLD.<sup>26</sup> The SNLD allegedly supported some underground Shan organizations as well.

SNLD leaders repeatedly argued that all negotiations for political problems in the country must include democratic forces including the NLD and other democratic

elements, democratic nationalities, leaders and armed nationality groups and the junta. They also directly and indirectly warned both the junta and democratic forces (by which they meant pro-democracy groups led by ethnic Burman) that any resolutions adopted without consulting ethnic minorities would not bring a genuine peace and national reconciliation to the country. At the national convention, the SNLD along with many other minority delegates proposed the adoption of a federal system that was based on the federal union. When the junta did not comply with its demands both at and outside the national convention, SNLD leaders criticized the government and described senior military leaders as insincere power mongers both in their press releases and interviews with the Burmese language programming of the BBC, VOA, and RFA. In some cases, it also acted like an associate party of the NLD. SNLD leaders noted that they supported the NLD and accepted Daw Suu as the national leader. When the junta resumed the National Convention in 2004, the SNLD joined the NLD in boycotting the former. The government also accused some SNLD leaders of distributing antigovernment pamphlets in collaboration with some NLD members. The SNLD ceased activity when the government arrested its leaders on charges of discrediting the National Convention and sentenced them to more than 90 years in prison terms.

Since it was a coalition of the three most prominent leaders of the Four-Eights movement—former deputy chief of staff of army, Brig. General Aung Gyi, well-respected former commander-in chief of armed forces General Tin Oo, and Daw Suu, the daughter of national hero Aung San—the NLD emerged as the most popular opposition party since its inception. In fact, the NLD was supposed to be a broader coalition as more prominent veteran politicians initially planned to join the party. However, after they could not reach an agreement on the structure of the party, many veteran politicians formed their political parties. Although all three in the party were



critical of the government, each wanted to resolve the political impasse differently. The group led by Aung Gyi was made up of former military commanders, retired civil servants and professors. They wanted to prepare for the elections within the legal framework of the military junta. The group led by Tin Oo was mainly composed of veteran military officers. They also looked forward to engaging in election campaigns without antagonizing the military government. Daw Suu and her group, which is commonly known as the intelligentsia group, wanted to take on a more aggressive approach by disregarding the rules which they considered unfair. A few months after the party came into existence, Aung Gyi asked Daw Suu to expel former communists from the intelligentsia group.<sup>27</sup> When Daw Suu refused to comply, the party central executive committee decided to solve the issue by vote. After losing the vote of confidence, Aung Gyi and his group left the NLD to form a new party. Since then, the more aggressive intelligentsia group of Daw Suu has dominated the NLD.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between the NLD and the army has always been fraught with hostility. Since it came to power by cracking down on the pro-democracy movement, the junta's discourse has been constructed upon the self legitimization by way of delegitimizing the pro-democracy movement. Since it emerged out of the pro-democracy movement, the NLD tried to legitimize itself by way of delegitimizing opponents of the movement. The discourse between the two groups effectively constituted that of the virtuous self versus the stereotypical other. This polarization of the discourse has since laid the groundwork in turn for a very bifurcated political discourse that has in turn had a spillover effect on the broader political landscape, making reconciliation much more difficult. At present the situation is viewed by both parties in zero-sum terms.

Since its inception, Daw Suu and the members of the intelligentsia group had been

open about their distrust of the government. When the government refused to lift the restrictions imposed on political parties, Daw Aung San Suu and her colleagues intensified their anti-regime activities. Although they harshly criticized the government Daw Suu and other NLD leaders engaged in non-violent activities. Defying the restrictions the government had imposed on political parties, they organized public meetings and walked around in large groups during their trips to various parts of the country. NLD leaders sought to expose the military's anti-democratic actions by distributing anti-government pamphlets throughout the country, by discussing human rights issues in the country in the letters they wrote to foreign government and international organization officials and in their interviews with foreign media. They also fed the international media and foreign governments with their version of the latest developments within the country. The NLD's non-violent confrontational style went down well with the majority of the Burmese people. The more defiant they were, the more popular they became. Being the most outspoken and confrontational leader of the party, Daw Suu emerged as the most popular leader of the party, to the point that she has become synonymous with the party. Consequently, the destinies of Daw Suu and the NLD are one and the same at the present time.

In 1989, forty-one political parties came together and entrusted Daw Suu with the power to deal with the military government on their behalf. Due to her forcefulness as an opposition leader and the endorsement of her persona as an irreplaceable leader of the democratic movement by Burmese pro-democracy groups, Daw Suu was readily accepted by the international community as the only viable alternative to the military government and the NLD, the leading pro-democracy group. Consequently, many Western governments came to structure their foreign policies with Burma either upon the NLD's, or rather Daw Suu's, course of action

against the military government, or according to what they assumed Daw Suu would want of them. It is therefore fair to say that the NLD successfully undermined both the domestic and international legitimacy of the junta.

Predictably, Daw Suu's rising popularity drew negative reactions from the country's military leaders. In order to restrain the activities of Daw Suu and other NLD leaders, the military government began to arrest important NLD members under the smallest pretext of breaking laws. Confrontation between the army and the NLD reached a climax when Daw Suu was placed under house arrest in July 1989. However, a large majority of the populace loved and cherished Daw Suu so much that they voted for her party even though she could not run for election. When the junta again refused to relinquish power, the NLD intensified its campaign to undermine the junta's reputation both inside and outside the country. NLD leaders who remained free gave the junta an ultimatum to hand over power to it. When the junta responded by arresting many NLD members, NLD leaders had to decelerate the activities of the party and toned down their criticism of the government. In order to save the party from being disbanded by the government, the party leadership also expelled the detained leaders of the party, Tin Oo, Daw Suu and Kyi Maung in 1991. The NLD then kept the activities of the party to a minimum until Daw Suu was released from house arrest in 1995.

As soon as she was released, the party reinstated Daw Suu as the secretary general of the party. Although she was placed under house arrest for about five years, Daw Suu was less confrontational in her dealings with the junta. Daw Suu called for military leaders to work together for the betterment of the country. Instead of trying to undermine the junta, Daw Suu began to try to convince military leaders that she was a worthy dialogue partner. In order to mobilize public support for the party, Daw Suu continued to play the role of the mouthpiece of the

oppressed people by holding daily public meetings in front of her residence. At these meetings, Daw Suu responded to questions submitted in advance by the audience supposedly coming from various parts of the country. Needless to say, the questions addressed concerns of injustice experienced by the masses from across the country, many of which were not independent of the failures and mismanagement of resources by the junta. Unlike in the past, Daw Suu did not place excessive blame on the government. What remained unchanged was that she continued to call on the international community to do its best in ushering democracy in the country – including the imposition of economic sanctions upon Burma. For many people, Daw Suu could do no wrong, so they welcomed her change of strategy.

However, Daw Suu's goodwill towards the junta did not last long. She started making disgruntled and antagonistic statements when the government did not react to any of her requests for meetings and dialogue. Due to the economic growth engendered by its economic reforms, the junta at that time seemed to have thought highly of itself. The government also seemed to have thought that it could rule the country without the support of Daw Suu. A retired government official also noted that some senior government officers thought that they could keep Daw Suu and the NLD under control.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the NLD asked the government to make the national convention more democratic and transparent. When the government ignored its demand, the NLD decided to boycott the national convention in 1996. In 1998, Daw Suu and her colleagues formed the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) with 250 people who won the 1990 election representing various political parties as a challenge to the government's National Convention. The government responded by outlawing the group and arresting a large number of politicians who were involved. She then proclaimed that "economic sanctions are good and necessary for the rapid democratization of Burma."<sup>30</sup> At

about the same time, she also began making trips to outlying areas to meet the general public. When the government stopped her from making such trips, she traveled as far as she could and staged protests by refusing to return to Rangoon. In 2000, after several attempts to leave Yangon, Daw Suu was placed under house arrest again.

In late 2000, there emerged rumors that meetings between senior military leaders and Daw Suu were held in secret. After her release from house arrest in early 2002, Daw Suu did much to avoid offending senior military leaders. She declared that the necessary confidence between the junta and the NLD had been established. She then visited some major projects undertaken by the government. However, this thaw period was also rather short-lived. When the junta failed to comply with her demands to resume dialogue on her terms, Daw Suu reverted to a confrontational approach, calling on the government to release all political prisoners and to honor the election of 1990. To the junta's dismay, the NLD also renewed its commitment to the outlawed the CRPP and refused to call for the lifting of economic sanctions on the country.

Daw Suu and other leading NLD members then toured the country while engaging in party organizational activities. Between June 2002 and May 2003, Daw Suu visited 95 townships where local authorities allegedly discouraged people from helping her and the NLD. All the speeches made by Daw Suu on these trips attacked the government in one way or another. In all places she visited, a large number of people came out and listened to her speeches. The public also expressed their support of her by clapping every time she criticized or ridiculed government officials or activities of the government. The large number of people who came out to listen to her speeches clearly indicated that her popularity remained very high in the country. The government appeared to have interpreted Daw Suu's trips as a demonstration of defiance. Members of the government-backed Union Solidarity and

Development Association (USDA) were deployed to distribute anti-NLD pamphlets and to organize anti-Daw Suu protests. Despite the government's efforts, Daw Suu continued to tour the country amid great public support. However, in certain townships, USDA's local branches of anti-NLD protests became so aggressive that by early 2003, many predicted the inevitable spilling of blood between the government orchestrated protest group and the NLD members should Daw Suu continue to tour the country. Things came to a head on May 30, 2003 when a clash broke out between government supporters and NLD members accompanying Daw Suu near the town of Depeyin in central Burma. According to government sources, only 4 were killed and 40 injured. Opposition sources however reported some 70 deaths and over 100 injured. Attributing the event to the unruliness of the NLD members and their supporters, the government placed Daw Suu under "protective custody." As before, Daw Suu was thrown back into the limelight as one of the world's most famous political prisoners.

Soon after the Depeyin incident, the junta decided to resume the stalled national convention and invited the NLD to it. Although the NLD said it would attend the national convention, NLD leaders soon changed their minds and set a condition that the government must release all NLD leaders before the NLD could join the national convention.<sup>31</sup> When the government did not comply with their demand, NLD leaders boycotted the national convention again. Senior military leaders then publicly said that the national convention would go on without the NLD. NLD leaders responded by issuing one statement after another and by giving interviews to foreign radio stations. On February 12, 2006, the NLD "issued a special statement calling for the formation of a People's Parliament to proclaim the State Peace and Development Council as a legitimate ruling council."<sup>32</sup> The NLD statement noted that only a legitimate

government could resolve the ongoing problems in the country and asked the government to reply by May 27, 2006. The government publicly rejected the NLD statement by noting that its proposals were merely "fantasy." The junta also made it clear that the NLD would not be welcome back to the national convention. Some observers have concluded that the NLD has missed the last train and the military would continue its plan to establish the disciplined democracy in Burma without it. Supporters of the NLD could only foresee prolonged political impasse in Burma.

Whenever Daw Suu was not under house arrest, the NLD's activities mainly aimed at demonstrating that it still enjoyed strong public support and at undermining the domestic and international legitimacy of the military government by criticizing its unwillingness to undertake genuine democratic reform. Whenever Daw Suu was under house arrest, however, the NLD's caretaker leaders mainly focused on keeping the party alive and making the party's existence felt by issuing hollow ultimatums to the government and by giving interviews to the international media. The NLD's anti-regime activities seriously undermined the legitimacy of the military government even when it was issuing merely hollow ultimatums. Many Western countries, especially the United States, based their Burma policy on the statements of Daw Suu and other NLD leaders. A former American government official noted that the U.S. policy towards Burma was controlled solely by Daw Suu. He also noted that although many U.S. government officials were aware of the fact that economic sanctions were not working, they would not discuss lifting economic sanctions on Burma until Daw Suu called for it. The existence of the NLD as a legal opposition party that had won a landslide victory in the election held by the military government alone has undermined the legitimacy of the military regime. In fact, that is one of the things that distinguishes the

Burmese government from its Vietnamese and Laotian counterparts. In terms of the human rights record, the latter are not much better than their Burmese counterpart. However, the Burmese government's mistreatment of a legal political party led by a noble laureate attracted the attention of the international community more than the harassment of little known illegal opposition groups in Laos and Vietnam. As will be discussed in some detail later, a major weakness of the NLD was that it was not able to organize social movements by taking advantage of the public anger instigated by the government's mistreatment of Daw Suu and other NLD members. Furthermore, although a large majority of the people and the international community could not imagine any long lasting political solution without the NLD, NLD leaders have not been able to find a way to convince military leaders that they are worthy dialogue partners. While few activists began to discuss the transition without the NLD, many people seriously called for the NLD caretaker leadership to reform the party before it could have any meaningful dialogue with the junta. At the end of 2006, the NLD did not still find a way to convince the military government that any political transition without the NLD would be meaningless.

#### **Students and the Pro-Democracy Movement**

Immediately after it took control of the country, the military government tried to divide students and other political activists by allowing the All Myanmar Federation of Student Unions led Min Zaya, a prominent student leader known to be close to some right-wing veteran politicians, to form student unions. In return, Min Zaya and his colleagues had to promise that they would confine their activities to student affairs and would not be involved in any political activities, especially antigovernment activities. The All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) led by Min Ko Naing took the hardline position by refusing to work with the government. Many ABFSU members labeled the Min Zaya group

“government apologists.” However, the government later arrested Min Zaya, Min Ko Naing and many of their friends on the charge of organizing underground activities and communicating with antigovernment groups from border areas.<sup>33</sup> This did not bring an end to student protests. The ABFSU and other small student organizations and networks kept themselves alive and engaged in antigovernment activities whenever they could. Being overly motivated by the Four-Eights movement, student activists were willing to take the risk of getting arrested and openly celebrated anniversaries of various past student movements in the early 1990s. Contrary to what scholars of social movements and contentious politics have suggested, student activists did not often wait for a split in the government or a powerful ally to emerge before they could organize protests. They launched protests whenever they could find an excuse to do so. For instance, in October 1996, taking advantage of the police’s mishandling of a dispute between some university students and a restaurant owner, several hundred students took to the street and staged demonstrations. Although they initially called for the government to take appropriate actions against the police officers, they later shouted political slogans, urging the government to undertake genuine political reforms. Therefore, even though the junta closed down universities for almost three years, several sporadic student protests took place in major cities between 1988 and 1996. Many students were also involved in party politics. While some student activists were aggressively campaigning for established opposition groups, others formed their own political parties. There were about ten political parties formed by students. However, the Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS)—the party founded by some members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions—emerged as a credible political party. Although the DPNS entered the elections, it did not win any seats. When the government refused to honor the outcome of the elections

and hand over power, the large number of students supporting the NLD organized occasional antigovernment protests to indicate their dissent. In the wake of the 1996 protest, many student leaders were arrested and those who remained free had to keep a low profile. In 1998, when the NLD organized the CRPP meeting, members of the ABSFU organized a protest at a junction near the Yangon University campus. Although the protest was rather small, it was politically significant. All leading members of the ABSFU who managed to stay out of the sight of government agents until then came out in anticipation that the NLD and the CRPP would stage large antigovernment activities. This turned out to be incorrect and a fatal mistake on the part of students. The NLD did not engage in any large antigovernment protests. As a result, the ABSFU members had to call off their own protests. The bigger problem was that they were exposed to government agents. While feeling disappointed with the NLD, many participants found themselves being arrested by the government. Those who escaped to border areas found out that it was hard, if not impossible, to revive student activism from outside the country. Since then it has been widely accepted in activist circles that student activism in Burma has been in decline.

In 2005, the government released prominent student leaders, including famous leader of the All Burma Student Federation of Unions (ABSFU), Min Ko Naing, who had been jailed since 1989. Soon after their release, many student leaders came together and formed an informal student group which people referred to as the 1988 generation students group. Since Min Ko Naing was the most popular political activist after Daw Suu, many people had expected that he and his comrades might be able to effect political changes in the country. However, they confined their activities to issuing statements about their positions on the social, political, and economic deterioration in the country, giving interviews to the international media and organizing some functions such as

commemorating the anniversary of the Four-Eighths Democratic Movement. Although they possessed strong public appeal and their functions attracted a good number of people, they have not been able to revive student activism in the country. Most participants of their activities were mainly people from their generation rather than young university students. A former student leader noted that he did not know how he could mobilize current university students. In addition, the leaders of the 88 generation students group were not in a good position to be involved in underground political activities, for they were being monitored by government agents. Since the government has issued a plethora of executive decrees and laws to control political activists, it is impossible for them to do anything political without breaking laws. That is, if they remain active in politics, the government can arrest them whenever it likes. After one of the functions they organized drew more than two thousand people, the government arrested Min Ko Naing and four other prominent leaders of the 1988 generation student group. The government has so far ignored the request and pressure from community leaders from inside the country and the international community to release them; it only announced that the detained former student leaders were planning to organize antigovernment protests in collaboration with members of exile groups. Some members of the 88 general groups and the NLD undertook a signature campaign by asking the public to sign the petition for the release of student leaders. To the surprise of many people, more than a hundred thousand signatures were collected within a few days. However, the campaign did not lead to any bigger open protests. Although some of the signatories were reportedly students, some university students and teachers from universities in two major cities I communicated with by email noted that they did not come across any form of direct or indirect protests on university campuses. A student remarked that most of his classmates were not

interested in the news about the detention of the student leaders. A university lecturer confirmed that only a few students showed some interest in the news.

It is not that that student activism in Burma is dead. While people occasionally find antigovernment pamphlets on university campuses, some small sporadic student protests also continued to occur. However, the number of such activities and the number of students involved in them have decreased from about 50 in the first half of 1990s to about 5 between 1998 and 2006. Likewise, although several hundred students were involved in the protests that took place between 1988 and 1996, fewer than 20 students were involved in the protests that took place since 1996. About 120 students I interviewed were not ignorant of politics. All of them claimed that although they had never had a serious discussion about the NLD's role in politics or its platform, they were worried about the political instability in the country.

In fact, student activism survived the harsh repression of the previous socialist regime. However, since the collapse of the Burma Communist Party (BCP), no new organization has made an attempt to help students organize informal student groups. Due to political constraints, the NLD did not approach students; it only worked with students who came to join the party. It also appeared that the NLD and other pro-democracy organizations attributed more resources to attracting international attention than promoting civil society and organizing underground political organizations. Likewise, exiled organizations, including All Burma Federation of Student Unions, which were based in Thailand, did not make efforts to mobilize students the way the BCP did. Although all exile activists I interviewed admitted that they have not worked sufficiently to revive student activism, none of them gave me satisfactory answers as to why exile pro-democracy groups have failed to do so. While some blamed the government repression, others noted that students could

now be involved in nonpolitical and fun activities such as visiting night clubs and playing computer games. A prominent political activist, however, noted that the existence of legal opposition parties in the country might have something to do with the decline of student activism.<sup>34</sup> He said that the majority of exile groups spent most of their time and resources working with legal opposition groups than creating underground political groups. My interviews with students, teachers, retired political activists and veteran politicians suggested that all the reasons highlighted by the exile activists I interviewed, in one way or another, have something to do with the decline of student activism. Unless there emerges a vanguard group that can instill activism into the new generation of students, the likelihood of a large student-initiated protest will remain very low. Members of the 1988 generation students group will, however, remain important and influential. The government's detention of their leaders not only made the group more popular among the general public but also gave pro-democracy groups more ammunition which they could use in lobbying Western governments. The influence these former student leaders can have on the movement after they are released from the prison will depend upon their ability to come up with a concrete strategy to deal with the government and the rest of the movement.

### **Buddhist Monks and the Pro-Democracy Movement**

Like students, Buddhist monks have also played a crucial role in Burmese politics since colonial days and actively participated in the 1988 pro-democracy movement. Because monks were considered community leaders in Burmese society, many prominent Buddhist monks emerged as protest leaders in many parts of the country. In fact, most general strike committees founded by left-wing political activists were chaired by Buddhist monks. When the BSPP government stopped functioning, monks played a crucial role in

keeping law and order. After the military took control of the country, Buddhist monks continued to organize processions. Buddhist monasteries also provided shelter to lay protesters. In response, the government took very severe measures against activist-monks by arresting many of them. Those who continued to organize antigovernment protests were also arrested; they were either sent to prisons or simply shot. In the early 1990s, on the grounds that the government had shot a monk to death, the Buddhist monks in Mandalay launched a boycott against the SLORC/SPDC whereby they refused to perform religious rites for government officials. This had tremendous negative impact on the legitimacy of the government as military officers were equated with heathens. The situation was so dire that the chairman of the military council had to go to Mandalay to beseech the monks' pardon. According to Buddhist law, the monks had to lift the boycott once the offender apologized. After the apology was made and the boycott lifted, the junta proceeded to arrest the leaders of the boycott and sent them to prisons. Since the early 1990s, Buddhist monks have not been involved in protests against the government very actively.

The withdrawal of several monks from political activities did not imply that the Sangha community is now politically apathetic. Many Buddhist monks listen to political news on the Burmese language program of BBC, VOA and RFA and regularly discuss political issues with fellow monks and lay-patrons. Some monasteries reportedly continue to host some political activists. Some eminent monks publicly called for national reconciliation between the government and pro-democracy groups. Some monks also openly mentioned the social and political problems prevalent in the country in their sermons and refused to take part in any religious activities organized by the government.

Due to the government's activities to promote Buddhism, many ex-activist monks

also came to be close to senior military officers. Many people accused such monks as corrupt laymen in monk robes. It is worth nothing that many monks who were close to military officers do not always turn their back on pro-democracy activists. Although they did not criticize the junta, some so-called turncoat monks pressure military leaders in private to resolve the political impasse and to avoid taking reckless actions against anti-state activists, especially activist monks.

Since Burma is predominantly a Buddhist country, even the symbolic protests of individual monks did have some impact on the legitimacy of the country. Monks, as religious teachers, have tremendous moral authority over a large majority of people in the country. People enjoyed talking the news about a Buddhist monks refusing to receive senior government officials or criticizing the government in his sermon. Buddhist monks therefore remain politically important.

### **Exile Pro-democracy Organizations and the Pro-Democracy Movement**

In the wake of the military crackdown on the Four-Eights Democratic Movement, many students and political activists fled to the areas along Burma's borders with Thailand, India, China and Bangladesh, then dominated by the ethnic insurgents. At the request of the leaders of the Kachin, Karen, and Mon insurgent groups, leaders of students based along the Burma-Thai, Burma-India, and Burma-Bangladeshi borders came together and formed the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). Many non-student activists who did not want to or could not join the ABSDF also formed exile pro-democracy groups under various names. As a result, more than fifty exile organizations emerged in various border areas. Among these organizations are the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the National Council of Union of Burma (NCUB), the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Free Burma Coalition (FBC), the Burma Strategic Group, the NLD

(Liberated Area or NLD-LA), the All Burma Federation of Students Unions (ABFSU), the Association to Assist Political Prisoners (AAPP), the Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB), Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB), the Democratic Alliance of Burma, the Members of Parliament Union (MPU), The Ethnic National Council (ENC), the Euro-Burma Office (EBO) and the Vigorous Student Warriors.

The activities of exile pro-democracy organizations included armed struggles against the government forces, the directing of international attention to developments in Burma, the organization of capacity-building workshops for members of pro-democracy organizations in exile, and underground activities inside the country, as well as assistance rendered to political parties and other pro-democracy groups within Burma. It is noteworthy that not all exile organizations have been engaged in these activities; neither have they been equally active in each of these activities. Although all organizations work at drawing international attention to the issue of human rights in Burma, the NCUB, the NCGUB, the AAPP, the NDD, the ENC, and the EBO have been more active in the disseminating information to the international media and lobbying Western governments. Likewise, although many organizations have been organizing capacity-building workshops, only the NDD, the FDB, the NCUB, the NCGUB, and the ENC perform this function on a regular basis. Whereas the ABSDF, the Vigorous Student Warriors and ethnic insurgent organizations have been engaged in armed struggle, only the NCUB, the NCGUB, the NLD (LA), the FTUB, the ABSFU, and the ABSDF claimed to have been engaged in underground and other political activities within the country.

Needless to say, pro-democracy exile organizations enjoy more freedom than opposition groups which operate inside the country. Since most of the former's activities take place beyond the influence of the military junta, they are less subjected to the direct



harassment of the junta. In addition, since the end of the Cold War, the international community—especially the Western countries—has placed greater emphasis on the issues of human rights and democracy. As a result, since the inception of their activities, pro-democracy organizations won the sympathy, advice and support of several governments in the West, that of international NGOs and even of some civil society organizations from several countries. Relying on their newfound allies and the new knowledge they learned from them, pro-democracy organizations were engaged in lobbying the UN and Western countries to take effective punitive actions against the Burmese military government. They also fed the international media, human rights organization, and foreign governments with information on the violations of human rights in Burma. A foreign diplomat confirmed, “exile pro-democracy organizations have tremendous impact on Western governments’ policies towards Burma. Even the US state department reports relied on the NCUB, the NCGUB, the ENC-affiliated ethnic organizations, and other organizations as sources of information. These organizations are very critical of the military junta. Our Burma reports often echoed what these organizations thought of the government.”<sup>35</sup>

In fact, evidence of the many achievements attained by the exile organizations abound. For instance, after the report of the government’s use of forced labor to ILO and the international media by the FTUB, the military junta began to issue payment in exchange for labor in many—if not most—of its infrastructural development projects. When the junta first seized the government, forced labor was rampant throughout the country. The change was largely due to the activities of the FTUB and its allied international labor organizations, which led the ILO to pressure the military government on the issue of forced labor in state projects. Concomitantly, the ILO also sent an official to Burma to monitor the situation within the country. In my interviews with 87 people from nine different states and

divisions, all recalled that forced labor was pervasive in their neighborhoods until the FTUB and other pro-democracy groups started criticizing the government through the Burmese language programs of the BBC, VOA, and RFA. Since then, demands by the local authorities to contribute free labor to government projects had become less frequent. More than two-thirds of my interviewees also confirmed that the use of forced labor had been almost non-existent in their areas since the beginning of 2000. Due to protests made by the FTUB and other pro-democracy groups, the international community discovered that some of ILO informants in Burma had even received death sentences for having disseminated information on forced labor. It was only following the mounting criticism of the international community mobilized by the FTUB and other pro-democracy groups that the government released ILO’s informants. A western NGO activist also noted that due to the propagation of issues of human rights violations by overseas Burmese pro-democracy organizations to the international community, the deteriorating situation in Burma was brought to the world’s attention.<sup>36</sup>

Exile groups attained their biggest victory in pressuring Western governments to take harsher stance against the military junta. Although Western countries suspended all military and non-humanitarian financial assistance to Burma in 1990, western business companies could do business freely in Burma or with Burmese military officers in the first half of the 1990s. Likewise, military leaders and their family members could go to Western countries freely until early 1996. However, due to the collective effort of several pro-democracy organizations, the U.S. and EU countries imposed a visa ban on senior military officers and their family members. The U.S. government also barred American companies from making new investments in 1996. When the clash between government supporters and NLD members broke out in 2003, many pro-democracy activists,

especially members of the FBC, successfully convinced U.S. senators and representatives that the time had come to take severe punitive actions against the Burmese government. Although they harshly criticized the Burmese government, EU countries did not join the U.S. in imposing a ban on imports from Burma. When sanctions did not bring any major changes in the country, pro-democracy groups, especially the NCUB and the NCGUB, began to approach ASEAN governments and the UN to help Burma democratize. While asking the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on the Burmese government, pro-democracy groups asked ASEAN governments to change their Burma policy. Although ASEAN governments did not deal with pro-democracy groups directly, the ASEAN democracy caucus for Burma formed by opposition parliamentarians of ASEAN countries has worked very closely with groups. Members of pro-democracy groups regularly provided the information needed by the ASEAN democracy caucus. Although it is too early to know the extent to which these activities have affected ASEAN countries' Burma policy, many ASEAN governments publicly said in September 2006 that they would no longer defend Burma at the UN. At the Third Committee meeting of the UN General Assembly in November, major ASEAN countries, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines abstained from voting against a resolution on human rights situation in Burma for the first time since Myanmar became a member of the ASEAN.<sup>37</sup>

At the request of the U.S. government, the UNSC also discussed if the Burma issue should be put on the agenda of the UNSC. In late September 2006, ten members of the current 14 members of the UNSC voted in favor of the U.S. proposal. Although it is very likely that China and Russia would prevent the UNSC from taking any punitive actions against the government, the fact that the Burma issue would be on the agenda of the UNSC came up as a moral triumph for the pro-democracy movement.

As will be discussed in some detail later, exile groups were subjected to several constraints when they organized underground activities. Nevertheless, the ABSDF, the FTUB, and the ABFSU managed to organize several protests in the country in the 1990s. The protests organized by pro-democracy groups did delegitimize the government. While the protests reflected that people in the country were not happy with the government, the government's harsh actions against political activists gave ammunition to the pro-democracy organizations that were trying to convince Western governments and international organizations to take punitive actions against the military government.

Pro-democracy groups' military operations against the governments proved to be quite ineffective. Although ABSDF members fought along with members of the Mon and Karen insurgent groups, the government managed to keep most of their activities in border areas. When some ethnic insurgent groups started making ceasefire agreements with the government, government forces could reallocate their resources to their operations against hostile groups. After the government managed to occupy major camps of the Mon and Karen groups in the early 1990s, more insurgent groups made ceasefires with the government. As a result, the ABSDF and its remaining allies were seriously weakened. While insurgent groups posed a significant threat to the government at the time the military took control of the government, most had ceased to be a threat by the middle of the 1990s. A prominent insurgent leader noted, "We don't have money to buy arms and ammunition. We cannot collect tax at border checkpoints any more. We are having difficulty keeping our troops together. We don't have sufficient resources to launch offensive attacks against government forces that are much stronger than before."<sup>38</sup> It is, of course, hard to know how long the army will manage to maintain the ceasefire agreements with the ethnic insurgent groups. However, a veteran political

activist who has dealt with various insurgent groups in the last fifteen years noted that “unless they all rose up collectively, insurgent groups no longer pose any major threat to military rule.”<sup>39</sup>

While the end of the Burmese pro-democracy is not in sight, many exile pro-democracy groups appeared prepared to remain in the movement. Their existence as exile groups in Western countries, Thailand, and India and their activities have made the military government an international villain.

### **The State of the Movement: the Junta V. Pro-Democracy Groups**

At the time the military took control of the country, its foreign exchange reserve was less than U.S.\$30 million and the economy was in disarray. The government had to sell part of the property of the Burmese embassy in Tokyo to earn some foreign exchange. While the entire bureaucracy, with the exception of the armed forces, was not functioning properly, it had to try to reassert control over the country by cracking down on the pro-democracy movement that was supported by a large majority of the population. The generals appeared concerned about their ability to reassert control over the country. They had to work by trial and error. A retired government officer recalled that some senior military officers were initially not confident about their ability to deal with the problems they encountered.<sup>40</sup>

Many pro-democracy leaders, on the other hand, were very confident about their ability to continue to fight for the democratization of the country. Prominent political activist Moethee Zun remembered that he and his colleagues including Daw Suu believed that they could beat the military. He said, “I accompanied Daw Suu in her trips to some cities in lower Burma. Many people came out and welcomed us. When soldiers came, they swore at them. The fact that they had to be very repressive showed that they did not believe in their ability to rule the country peacefully. We all thought they

wouldn’t last very long. We all thought our country would definitely become a democratic country soon.”<sup>41</sup>

While the pro-democracy groups, especially the NLD, managed to win a landslide victory in the 1990 election, they also managed to undermine the legitimacy of the government both domestically and externally. In the survey with 500 people conducted between 2004 and 2006, 75 percent of the people said that they disliked the military government more than they disliked the socialist government. Of the people who did not like the military government, 73 said they had consistently disliked the government since it took control of the country. When asked if they preferred a democratic government to the military government, 87 percent answered “yes,” 3 percent said “no,” and the rest answered, “don’t know.” When asked if they were economically better off under the military government, 76 percent said they were better off during the socialist period, 20 percent said they were better off during the SLORC/SPDC period and the rest said “don’t know.” 67 percent of the people also said their lives have gotten worse over time since the military took control of the country.

As noted above repeatedly, the activities of the pro-democracy groups seriously undermined the junta. In addition, the withdrawal of several international enterprises, western economic sanctions and the unavailability of technical and financial assistance from developed countries and international financial institutions made it impossible for the junta to undertake fundamental economic reforms. Since it took control of the country, the government tried to legitimize itself by undertaking infrastructural development programs in various parts of the country, by renovating and rebuilding historical and religious monuments and by organizing very grand cultural and sports festivals. As western economic sanctions and withdrawal of multinational and regional enterprises from the country seriously

weakened the government's fiscal capacity, the government had to cut down its legitimating activities. Nonetheless, such activities are given prominent coverage in the government-controlled mass media.

In spite of the aforesaid unfavorable conditions for the military government and the achievements of exile pro-democracy groups, the military junta did not look like a regime that was on the verge of collapse. In fact, the military government remains stronger than all of the pro-democracy groups combined. While the size of the government-controlled area in the country became larger than ever, the areas where pro-democracy groups could keep their camps shrank significantly. In the early 1990s, exile groups had more than 8 camps inside Burma. Now, most exile groups operate either in Thailand or some other foreign countries. Only the ABSDF, the Shan State Army, and the Karen National Union have small camps inside the country. At the same time the pro-democracy groups had become very fragmented. The movement has become riddled with splits since its inception. In the meantime, the size of the junta's armed forces increased from about 180,000 in the 1990s to more than 300,000 in the 2000s. It now has U.S.\$763 million worth of reserves of foreign exchange and gold. Regardless of harsh international pressure, the government remains defiant and looks prepared to continue to implement its seven-point road as it planned.

As discussed above, while the NLD was seriously weakened over the last ten years, political activism among students and Buddhist monks has declined since the middle of the 1990s. As will be noted in some detail later, due to a split in its leadership, the ABSDF has declined dramatically. As a result, it is no longer a credible student army. Despite its initial ability to attract more than ten thousand members, it is clear that the number of ABSDF members has steadily declined over time. In the beginning of 2004, it had only a few hundred members. A social worker working closely with ABSDF members wrote

that they "are now reduced in size [and] wracked by division, one might be forgiven for thinking they are a spent force."<sup>42</sup> They had not been able to fight against the government forces since the early 2000s. Over the last ten years, many ABSDF members have left the organization. Some returned to Burma and many others took political asylum in the Scandinavian countries, America, Britain, and Australia. According to a prominent activist, the number of activists who devoted all their time and energy to the movement has decreased from a few thousand people in the early 1990s to less than a hundred in the middle of the 2000s.

Even the NCGUB appeared to be in bad shape. When Dr. Sein Win, leader of the NDGUB, first arrived in Thailand, pro-democracy activists treated him like a real prime minister. Because he was a close cousin of Daw Suu, leading pro-democracy activists and ethnic minority leaders came together to help him and the exile government out. Many Burma watchers referred to the activities jointly organized by the NCGUB, other pro-democracy groups, and ethnic minority organizations as some of the indicators that Burmen and ethnic minorities were genuinely working together towards the democratization of the country. However, this informal alliance collapsed in the late 1990s. Since the early 2000s, Dr. Sein Win has been treated as a laughing-stock. Many people from inside the country and many members of overseas groups were not impressed with the performance of the members of the NCGUB, especially exile prime minister Dr. Sein Win. More than fifteen members of the pro-democracy movement said that Dr. Sein Win, though nice, did not have the ability to lead. Political satires written by some political activists even portrayed Dr. Sein Win and his members as ineffective and indecisive activists who were totally oblivious of the situation most of the time.<sup>43</sup> Another activist even suggested that the NCGUB was dead.<sup>44</sup> Frustrated with the indecisiveness of the leadership of the NCGUB, many of the

smartest members of the Burma Fund, a think-tank affiliated to the exile government, left the organization and formed a neutral think-tank that called for pro-democracy groups to find a way to work with the military government by acknowledging the role of the military in Burmese politics.

Exile activists understood the importance of establishing unity among themselves. It is discernible in that they have established umbrella organizations like DAB and NCUB. However, exile groups have yet to manage to establish long lasting unity. Although DAB and NCUB were made up of the people elected by its member groups, they and their member groups functioned separately once the elections were over. While most member groups of the DAB and the NCUB did not treat the chairmen of the two umbrella organizations as their leaders, some activists, probably out of jealousy, tried to undermine the legitimacy of their fellow activists who were elected to the executive committees of the NCUB.

Pro-democracy organizations' ability to mobilize protests in the country also has declined since 1996. Although they repeatedly stated that tangible political change could only be brought about by the activists inside the country, exile activists did not manage to find a way to revive the movement inside the country. It was not that pro-democracy organizations suddenly stopped investing their resources in instigating protests inside the country. In 1999, several overseas pro-democracy organizations tried to recreate the Four-Eights Movement under the rubric of the Four-Nines Movement on September (the ninth month of the year) 9, 1999. Through the Burmese language programming of the BBC and VOA, the call for a nationwide movement was made. Many activists who were based in Thailand were prepared to go into the country once the movement started. Although many overseas activists predicted a massive movement, no major protest took place on September 9, 1999 or later.<sup>45</sup> A prominent pro-democracy activist disappointingly noted:

We still think that we must do more work inside the country. We are still in touch with our comrades there. We talk to many of them regularly. To tell you the truth, communicating with people from inside the country has gotten much easier. We can communicate with them via internet. However, it is getting more and more difficult to organize protests inside the country. We tried to do that in 1999. Although we don't try to mobilize protests inside the country as much as we used to, we still continue to try to do it. However, whatever we have tried to do do not seem to be working. We haven't been able to mobilize any major protests in the last ten years or so.<sup>46</sup>

In sum, pro-democracy organizations managed to undermine the legitimacy of the military. However, while they have yet to manage to pressure the junta to have dialogue with opposition groups, pro-democracy groups declined both in terms of their own organizational strength and their ability to mobilize protests inside the country.

#### **Why did the activities undertaken by pro-democracy groups not bring down the military government?**

As noted above, the tremendous international pressure the pro-democracy movement had helped generate has not forced the military government into meaningful dialogue with the NLD and other opposition groups, let alone bring it down. This might have something to do with Burma's long isolation from the international community. Unlike the Philippines, Burma had never relied on any major power. No Western government therefore wielded sufficient power to change the mind of the Burmese military leaders. At the same time, unlike most East European countries, Burma was never a part of any major political bloc. Therefore, while harsh criticism of Western countries did not usually force the military government to comply with the demands of pro-democracy groups, the

collapse of the Eastern bloc and the end of Cold War did not make the military government lenient toward the political activists or pressure it to undertake political reforms swiftly.

However, western economic sanctions did affect the military government negatively. As noted above, with the decline of its revenue, the government could not undertake infrastructural projects and other legitimating activities as much as it used to. In addition, it could no longer take credit for the country's economic growth the way it used to be able to do in the early 1990s. Sources close to various government agencies noted that due to shortage of foreign exchange, state-owned factories were not functioning properly. A businessman who did business with government agencies noted,

Government agencies were short of budget. In the early 1990s when the economy was doing fine, our government agencies were functioning like their counterparts in Thailand or Malaysia. We could sell the government a large number of computers and new machines. In the past, the government made the payment for the merchandise it bought from us very quickly. Nowadays, it takes a long time to receive payment from government agencies whenever we sell something to them.<sup>47</sup>

If the entire world isolated Burma the way it did with South Africa during the apartheid period, the military regime might have collapsed within a decade. However, the Chinese government recognized the military government as soon as it took control of the country. Regardless of the western arms embargo on Burma, the military government reportedly bought U.S.\$2 billion worth of military hardware at "friendship prices" from China.<sup>48</sup> The military government also reportedly received assistance in building new radar stations, roads, railroads, ports, dams, sports stadiums, and bridges. Furthermore, the Chinese government also gave the military government more than U.S.\$500 million

interest free and low interest loans in the last 18 years.<sup>49</sup> The Chinese government also allowed its citizens to invest freely in Burma. Since most Chinese investment came into the country through overseas Chinese, it is hard to know how much China has invested in Burma. Some local analysts and businessmen surmised that China is the largest foreign investor in Burma. China is also Burma's largest trading partner. Of Burma's 2005 total trade of \$5 billion, Burma's trade with China accounted for \$1.5 billion.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, many Burma analysts have noted that China helped Burma to alleviate the problems engendered by the western economic embargo.

Although India initially supported the pro-democracy movement wholeheartedly, it changed its policy towards Burma after realizing that China's extended presence in Burma could hurt India's interest in the region. Since the early 1990s, India has stopped criticizing the Burmese government and started giving economic and technical assistance. In the early 2000s, Indian and Burmese armies cooperated closely enough to jointly fight insurgent groups that were fighting against the Indian government and operating along India-Burma border.<sup>51</sup> After the discovery of a large off-shore gas reserves in western Burma, the Indian government has planned to make large investments in building a gas pipeline to transport gas from Burma to India. As a result, Burma became a trading partner which the Indian government had to have good relations with. Russia also sold several million dollars worth of arms and MiG 29 fighters to the Burmese government. Although the Russian top leadership appeared to have kept some distance from the Burmese leadership, Russia had sold several million dollars worth of arms and MiG 29 fighter planes, and offered technical training to Burmese civilian and military technicians and officials. Russia has reportedly agreed to build factories "for repairing and upgrading arms bought from the former Soviet Union."<sup>52</sup>

Most ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, also adopted a constructive engage-

ment policy toward Burma soon after the military reasserted control over the country. Some ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia, invited Burma to join the Association in the middle of the 1990s. Unlike the European Union, there is no political requirement for Burma to be a member of ASEAN. Many ASEAN countries at that time were not democratic. Therefore, unlike the case of Eastern European countries that wanted to join the EU, Burma was never pressured to undertake political reforms before it joined ASEAN. Although not every member state wholeheartedly supported Burma's membership into the organization, all ASEAN countries backed the country whenever it was criticized by Western countries at the UN or at ASEAN's meetings with Western countries. Membership in ASEAN did provide the military government with much needed legitimacy in the international community. Burma also received large investments from ASEAN countries especially before the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Even after the crisis, Singapore and Thailand remained Burma's second and third biggest investors respectively. Although the assistance and investment it received from the aforementioned friendly countries were by no means sufficient, they helped the Burmese government keep the government and private businesses running. To begin with, the support of China, India, Russia, and ASEAN countries gave government officials much needed confidence to deal with Western countries. A retired Burmese diplomat noted,

Western countries treated our country like a pariah state. If our neighboring countries sided with Western countries, it would have been very difficult for us to withstand international pressure. We are now confident that China would not support any UNSC move to impose economic sanctions on our country. As for senior government officials, the support rendered by countries like China, India and Russia, and ASEAN countries convinced them that they did not have to yield to pressure from Western countries.

With the help and support of friendly countries, they believed that we could beat the sanctions. Whether we could beat the sanctions or not is a different matter. What was more important was that our superiors believed that they could handle western economic sanctions as long as they could work with some major countries like China, India, Russia and ASEAN countries.<sup>53</sup>

However, as noted above, since early 2000 many of ASEAN's founding members have begun to express their frustration with the slow pace of political reform in Burma.<sup>54</sup> The Burmese top leadership did not appear to be worried about possible expulsion from ASEAN. Some top government officials were reportedly not very enthusiastic about joining ASEAN from the beginning. A senior government official was quoted as saying that his government did not worry about expulsion from ASEAN or western economic sanctions as long as they had good relations with China, India, and Russia.<sup>55</sup> The same official was also quoted as saying that his government did not need very many friends. With the support of and business with India, China, and Russia, he believed he and his colleagues could keep the government running.<sup>56</sup> The sale of the country's rich natural resources to neighboring countries had alleviated many of the problems the government faced. Although the resources will gradually deplete, many local analysts surmised that the country still had sufficient natural resources to keep the government running for another half a decade. The recent discovery of large offshore gas reserves in western Burma will strengthen the government's ability to resist western economic sanctions. According to some analysts, the Burmese could earn from U.S.\$800 million to U.S.\$3 billion a year once the production from the new gas fields begins. The military junta could get into trouble if its three allies, especially China, were to begin to support the pro-democracy groups. However, there is no indication on the part of all these

three countries that they will change their positions towards the military government in the near future.

The absence of a strong middle class and civil society in the country made it easier for the government to control the public as well. If membership in the “middle class” is based on one’s salary, even senior government officials could not be considered middle class. Only a small number of businesspeople would be qualified to be members of the middle class. Unlike their counterparts in Thailand, the small middle class in Burma could not be expected to play a crucial role in the democratic movement. Most rich businesspeople could not afford to engage in any form of antigovernment activities as the success of their business activities depended upon their connections with the government. In other words, their business interests were intertwined with those of the government. Although the cronies of senior government officials were hurt by western economic sanctions, they also found a way to circumvent the restrictions. Due to the U.S. economic sanctions, Burmese businesspeople could not undertake business transactions in U.S. dollars legally. However, many big business enterprises managed to do business even with Western countries through their business partners in neighboring countries. Although no systematic research has been done on the impact of western economic sanctions on Burma, interviews with more than 50 businesspeople indicated that business enterprises that were hurt most were medium and small ones. Although people could have different positions on the western sanctions on Burma, most agreed that sanctions also hurt ordinary people.

While undermining the government, sanctions also hurt ordinary people who already suffered a lot from the economic hardships engendered by the mismanagement of the country by the government. While about 25% of the population lived under the poverty line, most people had to devote most of their time to economic survival.<sup>57</sup> When 300

survey respondents were asked in 2004 what they spent most of their time, energy, and resources on, 78% answered “economic survival,” 12% said “academic pursuit,” 5% said “religious practices,” while the rest expressed no opinion. This outlook prevented many people from participating in antigovernment activities. When asked whether they would join a movement akin to that in 1988, only 10% responded positively; 68% said no, while the rest expressed uncertainty. Currently, the public does not appear keen to be involved in any political movement that seeks to bring down the regime. When asked whether they would join the NLD, 80% of the 300 survey respondents said that they would not, 15% said that they would, while the rest expressed no opinion. The rising cost of living and economic problems also prevented many students from taking part in any political activities. The cost of university education during the pre-SLORC/SPDC days was approximately 12,000 *kyats* a year; now, a student needs 30,000 to 40,000 *kyats* a month. Therefore, 93 out of the 120 students interviewed added that one of the reasons why they stayed away from involvement in politics was that they did not want to create additional problems for their families, who were already going through several economic difficulties.<sup>58</sup> Economic sanctions are most effective when they enable civil society to organize social movements by taking advantage of the weakening state. In the case of Burma, although economic sanctions vitiated the military junta, civil society remained weaker than the weakening state. Realizing that, many EU and American officials have both privately and publicly noted that the sanctions imposed on Burma by Western countries did not generate the desired or intended results.

All in all, regardless of the fact that the activities undertaken by pro-democracy groups and the international community have undermined the government both in terms of fiscal capacity and legitimacy, the military



remained the strongest institution in the country. While it has kept all opposition groups in the country under control, it kept the government functioning. Because of their disengagement from the Burmese government, Western governments had less influence over the military government. Although China has a lot of influence over the Burmese government, the Chinese communist government seems keen to continue to support a subservient government in a neighboring country. If western economic sanctions persist for a long time, the government gradually might go bankrupt, especially when the country runs out of its natural resources. No one knows for sure when that will happen. In the meantime, however, although it has become one of the most notorious governments in the world, the military government has managed to retain power.

### **Why was the movement no longer vibrant?**

Of 65 pro-democracy activists I interviewed between 1999 and 2006, only seven said the movement was doing well and the rest expressed their frustration with the failure to mobilize major protests inside the country and noted that the pro-democracy movement became significantly weakened over time. Of the 58, only 3 said the movement would take off again soon; 29 said the movement would have to try to come up with a new strategy before it could effect any substantial changes inside the country; 23 said there must be a leadership change in the movement before it could achieve anything; 3 said nothing would come out of the movement. Frustrated with the state of the overseas pro-democracy movement, one of them even said, "Even if the military government were to invite these groups to a dialogue session, none of our organizations are prepared to talk to the government. We have been doing everything that we could to bring political change to the country and we have been doing whatever we could to undermine the government. But, we

haven't been able to bring the government down."<sup>59</sup> After a long pause, this leader also said, "I think, the movement is hopeless now. I don't think we can expect anything out of it."<sup>60</sup> Although the exile movement is by no means hopeless, this statement indicated the magnitude of frustration members of the exile movement were having with their own movement.

Scholars of contentious politics have explained the rise and fall of social movements in terms of opportunities and constraints social movement activists are subjected to. However, as noted above, focusing on the existence of opportunities or constraints alone will not help us better understand the state of a social movement. We will have to probe if political activities are able to exploit the opportunities. Also, if political activities manage to find a way to overcome the constraints they are subjected to, the movement can move forward regardless. Therefore, in order to understand the current state of the Burmese pro-democracy movement, must pay attention not only to the structural and cultural opportunities and constraints activists are subjected to, but also to the ability of activists to deal with those opportunities and constraints in trying to mobilize the public, to keep the movement in a vibrant mode and to influence the government's decision making process. The constraints that political activists are subjected to often come from various different sources. It is very natural that the government will try to curb the activities of its enemies by imposing various forms of constraints on them. At the same time, the constraints encountered by social movement organizations are not confined to the ones created by their enemies. Exile pro-democracy groups that are based in foreign countries, especially are often exposed to the constraints created by the conditions in the host areas. Furthermore, not all constraints pro-democracy groups encountered are external; many could be caused by their own internal problems and weaknesses.

### **The Government-inflicted constraints and Pro-Democracy Groups**

The current military government seems to be prepared to do anything to keep itself in power. It has exerted constraints on pro-democracy groups through repression, smear campaigns and offering incentives. The repressive actions the military government has been willing to take are hard to exaggerate. The government first used existing rules and regulations and made new ones to control activities of legal opposition groups and to punish the people who helped illegal opposition groups both inside and outside the country. The new rules and regulations promulgated by the government were so rigid that opposition groups often found it hard to do anything without breaking laws. The government then detained opposition group members whenever the opportunity arises. Many political activists were detained more than once. Not only were party leaders arrested, they were also “neutralized” upon their release from prison: upon leaving the prison, all had to sign an agreement in which they vouched that they would refrain from politics. While it was not mandatory for every individual to sign similar agreements, all were warned against participation in opposition movements. The writers among the arrested NLD leaders were reportedly cautioned that they could write freely—so long as they stayed out of politics. Once they joined opposition parties, the government’s censorship board banned the publication of their articles, thereby depriving them of an income. As a result, many ceased participating in opposition activities altogether. A prominent writer who was also a leading NLD member told the author,

My family suffered a lot when I was in prison. My children had to support me. I am a writer. I make a living by publishing news articles and short stories in local magazines and journals. If I continued to be involved in politics, I would not be able to publish my

articles and short stories. In this case, I would not be able to support myself or my family. I, therefore, had to stay away from politics. I have stopped involving in the activities of the NLD since my release from prison.”<sup>61</sup>

The government also increased the prison terms of many NLD members when they were about to be released. Some local NLD leaders were not allowed to leave their townships until they agreed to quit the party. A local NLD member was quoted as saying, “I did not have a choice. Military intelligence officers said that they would arrest me if I left my township. I got a family to feed, so I had to resign from the party.”<sup>62</sup> In some areas, NLD members were forced by the local authority to quit. They were threatened that remaining in the party would not be good for them and their families. Several thousand members were reportedly forced out in the last five years of so. The government’s repressive actions against the NLD made it very difficult for its leadership to coordinate the activities of the party with those of the groups operating in border areas and foreign countries. The government repeatedly accused the NLD of working with antigovernment activists and warned that it could disband the party any time. The NLD leaders, including Daw Suu, became very careful about communicating with members of other pro-democracy groups. The government successfully undercut the NLD’s ability to engage in antigovernment activities by keeping it as a legal political party.

Learning lessons from the way the Four-Eights Democratic movement spread throughout the country, the government did not show any mercy for student protestors either. The government reportedly arrested about several hundred students between 1988 and 2000. Although the government released ordinary participants of the movement within a few years, it gave long prison terms to leaders of the movement. The government’s treatment of political prisoners also dissuaded many students to join antigovernment

movements. During the parliamentary period, student activists were considered "A" class detainees who were given decent food. They were also allowed to read and write freely. Since the middle of 1960s, political prisoners no longer enjoyed special privileges. They have been given the same food was distributed to all other prisoners. Under the rule of the SLORC/SPDC government, political prisoners were not even allowed to read and write freely. They were only allowed to read religious writings. Some prisoners were allowed out of their cells only once a week.<sup>63</sup> Many were also sent to prisons in far-flung areas, making it impossible for their families to send food to them regularly. All 120 survey participants noted that they would refrain from any activity that could risk them getting detained by the government. All claimed that they had heard of the atrocious treatment in government prisons. The government also established more universities with the intention of breaking up high concentrations of students, making it harder for students from different universities to get together, for the campuses, which are located in outlying areas, are far from each other.

Although most military leaders were Buddhists, they did not tolerate activist-monks that were actively involved in antigovernment activities. After it took control of the country, the government arrested and sent monk activists to labor camps. The government humiliated many monks by forcing them to leave the monkhood and wear prison outfits. The government also issued a law banning any *sangha* organization other than the nine sects which had existed in the country since pre-colonial days.<sup>64</sup> Since the aftermath of an anti-Muslim riot in 2003, large monasteries have not been allowed to accommodate more than 300 monks.

In contrast to the way it interacted with domestic opposition groups, the junta could not arrest members of overseas pro-democracy groups freely. The government had, however, launched military operations against ethnic insurgent and student armed

forces. As noted above, the government could also take repressive actions against the members of the overseas pro-democracy groups when they came into the country. A former student activist recalled,

I met an activist who was sent back into the country by an overseas pro-democracy group. He allegedly planted some explosives in Yangon. When he was caught by the military intelligence, they beat him up brutally. His brother told me that his interlocutors put a bag on his head and hit him with a club. When he fell down, he was kicked in his head and abdomen. Many political prisoners experienced some forms of physical torture but I think that those who came from the groups in Thailand received more tortures. Even when the government released a large number of prisoners in 2005, many members of overseas groups were not included.<sup>65</sup>

Although there is no way of knowing the exact number of members of overseas pro-democracy groups who had been detained in government prisons, the public knew that the prison terms given to members of overseas pro-democracy groups ranged from fifteen to seventy years. Serious punishment also went to the people who helped members of overseas groups with their activities inside the country. Although there is no reliable data on the number of people who got into trouble for helping underground agents, there are cases in which many people received long prison terms and lost their jobs for associating themselves with underground antigovernment activists knowingly or unknowingly.

The government also undertook smear campaigns against pro-democracy groups through the state media. Hundreds of anti-Daw Suu and anti-NLD articles published in government newspapers referred to the leader of the NLD as "a lackey of imperialists," "she who did not care about the purity of her own race," "she who married a man from the race whose people masterminded the assassination

of her father," "she who did not understand and appreciate the goodwill of military leaders," "she who did not genuinely care for the interests of the country," etc. The junta amplified its anti-Daw Su campaign when the grande dame and other NLD leaders began calling on Western governments to impose economic sanctions on the country and to exert more pressure on the junta. Senior military officers including the chairman and vice chairman of the military council referred to overseas pro-democracy groups as sources of many of the political, economic and social problems the country has been facing. Government newspapers have published several hundred news articles describing members of overseas pro-democracy groups as terrorists, rapists, power mongers, naïve lackeys of neo-colonists, anarchists, absconders etc. TV Myanmar also aired several teleplays describing how naïve, innocent students who joined the antigovernment groups in border areas were raped and tortured by selfish, exploitative villains who pretended to be democratic activists. When a series of explosions took place in Yangon in late 2005, the government held the ABSDF, the FTUB, and the NCUB accountable and formally labeled them as terrorist organizations. The government media also accused the 1988-generation student leaders of trying to destabilize the country when the latter did not stay away from political activities and political parties.<sup>66</sup>

The junta's smear campaigns proved to be quite ineffective. Of the 290 participants of a survey conducted between 2004 and 2006, only 9 percent said they took the government's propaganda against pro-democracy groups seriously; 35 percent considered that there was some truth in the government's criticism; the rest said that they did not take what they learned from articles in government newspapers seriously. 91 percent of the readers said these articles did not affect their attitude towards pro-democracy activists.

It is also important to note that the government did not, however, always resort

to repression. It also tried to drain NLD through the offer of assistance to members on the condition that they retire from politics. A former Central Executive Committee member who has since retired from politics related to the author,

When I was released from prison, an intelligence officer instructed me to turn to him for help should I require assistance. He hinted that the government was willing to help people like me so long as we were no longer involved with the opposition groups. Soon after I gained liberty, I wrote an article. The censorship board refused to issue clearance to my article. Perplexed, I contacted this intelligence officer. He apologized and told me that he would solve the problem. A few hours later, I learned that my article was to be published. The censorship board instructed the magazine that my article must be published. The instruction sounded that the magazine editor would be penalized if he did not publish my article. The intelligence officer later called to apologize and assured that I would not encounter any similar problems in the future.<sup>67</sup>

Not every former NLD member solicited help from intelligence officers. Five ex-political prisoners told the author that their credentials as political activists were seriously undermined by their resignation from the NLD. They then said that they did not want to further undermine their credentials by being associated with military intelligence officers. However, they admitted that some of their former comrades did try to get assistance from intelligence officers.

The government also launched a large-scale campaign to win the support of influential political monks by reconstructing and renovating religious buildings and temples; they made generous donations to influential monks, and created new titles for them. As the titles came with regular allowances and large donations, many monks were eager to have titles conferred on them by the government. Senior monks were also provided with excellent medical care.

Similarly, the junta gave very grand and imposing funeral ceremonies for influential political monks. The explicit military courtship of the *sangha* has seen such significant increase in the local televised coverage of donation ceremonies, that it is often commented that one only sees green and yellow on television—green military uniforms and yellow monks' robes. The junta's overtures have thus improved the government's relations with several prominent monks. Since the middle of 1990s, many former activist monks were also found to have joined the divisional and township *sangha* councils. Some Burma watchers and local critics of the government have concluded that the junta's tactic has transformed the initial widespread resentment of monks against the government to appreciative acceptance of the military government as a principal patron. A Burmese politician bluntly noted: "Many monks cannot resist the bribes given to them by the government. While people are suffering, they are leading a luxurious life."<sup>68</sup> There were definitely monks who supported the government mainly due to the large donations they received from government officials. As noted by a well-respected monk: "Monks have yet to attain the level of disinterest in earthly pleasures. Many monks would succumb to them. Some, however, are better than others in controlling themselves. I have heard monks declaring that they wanted the government's titles. Many are also prepared to accept large donations from the government. Not all monks live by the rules and regulations adopted by Buddha."<sup>69</sup>

The reason why many monks shifted their position with regard to the government, however, was not simply because they coveted the government's donations. A prominent Buddhist monk said in my interview with him that it was in the interests of the monks studying under his supervision that he disengaged himself from antigovernment activities.<sup>70</sup> He said that when he was imprisoned, there was no one who took care of the monastery and his pupils.<sup>71</sup>

His students were encountering many problems and the entire monastery was in disarray.<sup>72</sup> He said that he did not want his student monks to go through the same experience again.<sup>73</sup> Fifteen other prominent monks also said that they had to be on good terms with the government, for they wanted to work freely for the propagation of Buddhism. In so doing, they said they needed the government's support. Seven monks said they tried to be on good terms with government officials, especially intelligence officers, for they wanted to prevent Burma from becoming a Muslim country.

In an attempt to win the hearts and minds of students, the government also announced that it did not "harbor any grudge against students."<sup>74</sup> Two weeks after it took control of the country, the junta issued an announcement signed by the then Deputy Commander-in-Chief, General Than Shwe, that "requested teachers and parents to prevent their children and students from joining the groups operating in insurgent controlled areas."<sup>75</sup> The government also called for students who fled to border areas to come back to the country. With the assistance of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, the then Commander-in-Chief of the Thai army, the government opened a reception center in Tak, Thailand and 27 centers inside the country. More than 2000 students reportedly came back to the country.<sup>76</sup> The government reportedly also offered some economic assistance to some returning students, especially the ones who were willing to provide the government with the information about student organizations along the border. Most returnees who stopped participating in political activities were allowed to go on with their lives freely. However, some returnees who joined the NLD or some other political parties were later arrested. Many of them, however, were released after they promised that they would stop all their political activities. Those who refused to make the promise were reportedly detained for five to ten years. Some of the returnees, after realizing that they could not

do much inside the country, went back to the border areas. While the government praised itself for being able to bring several run away students, many opposition members claimed that the government's attempt to nip the overseas pro-democracy movement in bud was an utter failure. The fact that the strength of the ABSDF was about ten thousand until the early 1990s indicated that the government did not manage to weaken the movement, let alone uproot it.

The junta's repression, neutralization and incentive offering strategies had both negative and positive impacts on the pro-democracy movement. Many scholars of social movements have asserted that repression could sometimes "lead to social movement mobilization," for "repressive events that are perceived as unjust have the potential to generate enormous public outrage against those seen as responsible."<sup>77</sup> However, as Gurr and others have noted, the intermediate level of repression is more likely to give rise to social movements than harsh high level of repression.<sup>78</sup> As can be seen above, the military government's harsh, high level of repression against pro-democracy groups did have some intended results. An NLD local leader confirmed that while they still supported the party, a large number of members had left the party for they could no longer bear the constraints imposed on them by the government. It was partly because of the government's repression that pro-democracy groups could not organize protests in the country.

However, not all constraints had a negative impact on the movement. As Jeff Goodwin and others have argued, while decreasing the possibility of non-violent protests, high levels of repression could give rise to violent protests.<sup>79</sup> In response to the government's indiscriminate repression, many pro-democracy activists joined the armed struggle in border in the 1990s. More than 20 former ABSDF members confirmed that they and many of their comrades decided to leave the country mainly because the government's

harsh repression did not allow them to engage in any form of protest without running the risk of being arrested. It is therefore not preposterous to note that the government's harsh repression helped student leaders create one of the biggest student armies in the world. The government's repression of the pro-democracy movement also provided the pro-democracy groups with the ammunition it needed to develop an effective "injustice frame," (underscoring "the seriousness and injustice of a social condition" or redefining "as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable") in lobbying Western governments and international organizations to take punitive actions against the military government.<sup>80</sup> Also, many pro-democracy activists gained moral legitimacy to be leaders after they were detained by the government. A veteran political activist noted, "this government had produced many heroes. Many little known political activists became world renowned political activists only after they were arrested by the government."<sup>81</sup> Being criticized by the government media is not a bad thing for pro-democracy activists either. As the public has been unhappy with the regime, a large majority of the populace often believes the opposite of what the government media reported. A political activist is more likely to get into trouble if he is praised in the government media. When FBC leader Zar Ni's criticism of western economic sanctions was quoted in a government newspaper, many critics of his used it as an indicator that he had sold his soul to the government. The government's incentive offering activities also had only limited negative impact on pro-democracy movement. To begin with, the government did not have sufficient resources to bribe many members of pro-democracy groups. Only a small fraction of the people the government tried to bribe, agreed to become collaborators of the government.

### **The Long Tenure of the Movement, the Survival Issue and Pro-Democracy Groups**

The long tenure of the movement has had significant negative impact on pro-democracy groups. It is not easy for activists to endure hardships inflicted over an extended period. Many student leaders are no longer the young student leaders they used to be. Most of them are now between 30 and 60 years of age. Many have families to take care of. Hence, when the US and other Western countries started offering political asylum to members of the exile groups, many chose to leave the movement. The same argument can be made for domestic opposition groups and activists. Many NLD members and other opposition activists retired from antigovernment activities as they and their family members could no longer bear the hardships inflicted on them by the long tenure of the movement. Another problem with this is that with the passage of time, resources dwindle and it becomes increasingly difficult for movement organizations to stay afloat. Needless to say, they need large amounts of money to provide their members with basic needs.

Much as it was relatively easy for the organizations to receive financial assistance in the early stages of the movement, it became more and more problematic to secure funding over time. As it was very difficult to obtain financial assistance for its armed struggle, the ABSDF had to suspend all of its military operations against the government forces. Most exile groups, therefore, have to engage themselves in activities that enhance their chances of obtaining funding from foundations in the West. In other words, they have to do more of what they think funding agencies want of them, than what they believe they ought to be doing. When the organization of capacity-building workshops helped them secure funding, many organizations including the ABSDF began to organize them. Since the organization of these workshops became an end in itself, many workshop organizers ended up investing more effort in it, than in the training of members of pro-democracy groups. All 25 leading members of the respective groups interviewed noted that the

capacity-building workshops had not been of very much use to the exile groups. The main problem is that most workshop participants were the same. A Karen leader remarked, "I don't understand why funding agencies want to waste money on these useless workshops. The training offered is not very useful for people from this area. Foreign funding agencies asked organizations here to do what they liked to do back home and the organizations here just had to comply since they needed the money."<sup>82</sup>

A regular participant of workshops noted that he could understand the frustration of the Karen leader. He said that although he learned a lot about political science from the first two workshops, he did not learn anything new from the subsequent workshops as previously covered topics were repeated. Since exile groups had to compete with each other for funding, the issue of securing funds gave rise to unnecessary rivalry among various exile groups. An activist noted, "The organizations which did not receive any funding became jealous of those which succeeded in getting it. This happens all the time. Then, out of jealousy, the losers will badmouth the winners and undermine their willingness and ability to work together. As for those that received funding, they are reluctant about sharing their information with activists from other organizations. It is a sad thing that they would rather share their information with foreign funders but not with their fellow activists."<sup>83</sup> To be sure, it is not that the need to please funding agencies has always prevented exile groups from doing what they wanted to do or doing what they should have done. In many cases, their agenda is actually in line with the objectives of the funding agencies. For instance, the AAPP and the FTIB basically went ahead with their own agenda which—in the first place—matched the requirements of the funding agencies.

### **The Host Area-Inflicted Constraints and Exile Pro-Democracy Groups**

Exile activists, however, are directly subjected to the constraints inflicted on them by their host areas. Because most pro-democracy activists were ethnically Burman, ethnic insurgent groups did not trust them. Some former members of ethnic insurgent groups whom I interviewed noted that they did not trust pro-democracy activists because there could be government spies among them. Some also remarked,

most students would go back to Burma when the country gained democracy. Since democracy did not always guarantee minority rights, we [minority insurgent groups] will have to continue our fight against the government until we achieve our goals. We have been fighting against many Burmese governments for several years without the help of these students. I am not sure they would help us when their goals were achieved. Many students seem to believe that Burmans are superior to us. So, you cannot blame us for not having complete trust in them.<sup>84</sup>

A leading activist also recalled that the lack of trust between pro-democracy activists and members of ethnic insurgent groups had caused the detention and execution of many innocent pro-democracy activists by ethnic insurgent groups on charges of espionage.<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, when ethnic insurgent groups made ceasefires with the government, the ABSDF could no longer operate in their areas. After the Burmese Communist Party-affiliated ethnic armed groups made a ceasefire with the government several student activists who were taking refuge in that areas were detained by the government. The ceasefire groups, for their part, did not want students to operate in their areas, for they did not want to upset the government. When the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) made ceasefire with the government, ABSDF members there had to move to the Karen controlled areas. Once the ceasefire agreements came into effect, the government

could easily enter those areas and drive its members out. When the government took control of most of the major camps controlled by the Mon and Karen insurgent groups, many members of the ABSDF and other border based pro-democracy groups had to move into Thailand. As it was not easy to make a living in Thailand, many activists and their families had to become refugees. As the Thai government restricted the movement of refugees, activists could no longer be actively involved in political activities once they joined the refugee camps inside Thailand.

The neighboring countries' policies towards the Burmese junta also shaped the political opportunities and constraints for overseas pro-democracy organizations. China's support of the military government ever since it seized control of the country means that pro-democracy groups could do little in the areas controlled by China. After it actively sought to be on good terms with the Burmese military government, the Indian government toned down its support for Burmese pro-democracy movements. Although Burmese pro-democracy activists could still operate in India, they no longer received any palpable assistance from the Indian government.

For a long time, the Thai government used the ethnic insurgent groups' controlled area as a buffer zone from Burma. However, its antipathy towards the influx of Burmese student refugees into Thailand and initial uncertainty in dealing with them soon gave way to genuine fears of racial, social, and economic problems for its country. Also, both the Thai government officials and business people wanted to take advantage of the opening of the economy by the military government. Moreover, some Thai government officials appeared to have reasoned that if they supported the overseas Burmese pro-democracy groups, the junta might not want to do business with them. Apparently because of these factors, the Thai government complied with the Burmese military government's request to open a camp in a



Thai provincial city to take back the people who had fled to the border areas in the wake of the crackdown on the Four-Eights democratic movement. Despite this apparent cooperation, it should be noted that Thai policy towards Burma and its pro-democracy organizations is inconsistent as it largely depended upon the stance of the party in power. When Democratic Party members dominated the government, Thailand was generally more sympathetic towards the pro-democracy movements. Whenever the relations between the two countries were particularly strained, the Burmese government would close their border with Thailand. In turn, this constituted losses of billions of bahts for Thai businesspeople. Therefore, partly out of economic necessity, Thaksin's changed Thai policy towards Burma after his party took control of the government. Thaksin chose to engage strategically with Burma and sought to improve relations with the Burmese government by restricting the activities of Burmese pro-democracy groups on the Thai soil. He also compelled insurgent groups along the Thai-Burma border to make ceasefires with the military government. It is no coincidence that since late 2001, Thai immigration and security officials have reportedly and allegedly hassled more Burmese political activists. For instance, an ABSDF leading member Moothee Zun was detained by Thai immigration officers at the Chiang Mai airport for carrying a fake Burmese passport in the early 2001. It is a known fact that many Burmese political activists in Thailand hold fake Burmese passports. However, while all 45 political activists I interviewed unanimously said that the immigration officers never gave them any problem whenever there were problems between the Thai and Burmese governments, they did reveal that extraordinary caution had to be exercised whenever the two countries were on good terms. To be sure, it is not that exile groups could not do anything inside Thailand any more. With the assistance of local Thai intelligence officers, many activists

could avoid the harassment of local police officials and still manage to engage in political activities. However, many activists who did not know any Thai officials had to be more careful whenever they went out. Many of them stopped participating actively in the movement. The leaders of the Thai military government that took control of the country in September 2006 has yet to clearly lay out its Burma policy clearly. Accordingly, it is still too early to know how the recent change of government in Thailand will affect the exile pro-democracy movement.

### **Self-inflicted constraints and Pro-Democracy Groups**

Many social movements are hampered by internal problems of social movement organizations and the mistakes of movement activists. The Burmese pro-democracy movement is no exception. A major problem with many Burmese pro-democracy organizations is that there is no unity within or between various pro-democracy groups and organizations. This is not to suggest that all successful social movements must be united. However, the 1992 Thai pro-democracy protests indicated that other things being equal, united social movements are more likely to be successful than the disunited ones. Scholars and political activists wrote about the importance of unity among political activists and opposition groups that were fighting against a strong authoritarian regime. Scholars of the Cuban pro-democracy movement argued that in spite of millions of dollars of financial aid and technical assistance from the U.S. government, infightings in the Cuban pro-democracy movement had prevented Cuban exile groups from achieving anything from their anti-Castro activities. In terms of the degree of disunity, the Burmese pro-democracy movement was not very different from the Cuban pro-democracy movement. In describing the state of Cuban exile groups, a Cuban writer noted, "A popular joke in Miami in the 1960s said that if you put two Cubans in a room with a political problem to solve, they

would come up with three organizations”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, a Burmese scholar-cum-activist noted in his critique of the state of the Burmese pro-democracy movement in 2005, “...if we put two Myanmar in a cell they will form three political parties....”<sup>87</sup> Like their Cuban counterparts, Burmese activists understood the importance of unity within the movement. Several leading political activists including Daw Suu both explicitly and implicitly noted that the movement must be united before it could bring down the military regime which was stronger and more ruthless than pro-democracy groups. Many pro-democracy activists tried to establish unity in the movement. Regardless of such attempts, the split in the pro-democracy movement not only lingered but also got worse over time.

As noted above, there were disputes between various groups, even within the NLD. Although they all expressed their support for Daw Suu, members of the intelligentsia and ex-commander groups could often not work with each other. To make matter worse, many NLD youth members also thought that ex-commanders and politicians were taking advantage of them. They thought that since they initiated the pro-democracy movement, they should also be given important positions in the party.<sup>88</sup> They all, however, accepted Daw Suu’s decision whenever they had problems. Problems arose whenever Daw Suu was not around. Members of different groups in the NLD often found it hard to work with each other. Many members of the intelligentsia were unhappy with the fact that most leading NLD members arrested by the government belonged to their group. They appeared to have suspected that some members of the ex-commander group might have leaked the information about the activities of their group to the military intelligence.<sup>89</sup> That’s why many intelligentsia quit the party when the party’s caretaker leadership was taken over by ex-commanders when Daw Suu was placed under house arrest. Many members of the NLD youth wing also had problems with ex-commanders. They

thought that ex-commanders were too old and indecisive to lead the party.<sup>90</sup> When some young NLD members tried to organize small protests on their own initiative, the caretaker leaders expelled them from the party. A former leading member of the NLD noted, “These old uncles are keeping the party barely alive. The party is still alive mainly because Ma Suu is still alive and people love and trust her. If the party had not been led by Ma Suu, it would have been broken apart since long time ago.”<sup>91</sup> As Daw Suu spent most of the first half of the 2000s under house arrest, the frustration many NLD members had with their caretaker leadership had gotten worse over time.

There were also serious factional disputes within and between exile pro-democracy groups. This condition can be understood in light of the underground movement during the socialist period. As mentioned earlier, during the socialist period, most antigovernment organizations had to carry out their activities in a discrete manner. As a result, not trusting others became a cultural norm for antigovernment activists in Burma. Before the 1988 demonstration broke out, several study groups organized sporadic student protests in Yangon; some of these study groups later emerged as leading student organizations. All student leaders appeared to believe that they each deserved to be leaders of the movement. A prominent leader of the Four-Eights Movement, noted, “There were many groups that were trying to organize antigovernment activities. But we did not know each others’ existence. Whenever we organized some antigovernment activities, we thought we were the only group doing it. We did not consider the possibility that other groups might also be doing the same thing. As we were young and immature, we all wanted all the credits.”<sup>92</sup> Not surprisingly, this led to a factional struggle between two main student organizations, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) and All Myanmar Federation of Student Unions (AMFSU), in Yangon during the Four-Eights Movement. The rivalry between these two organizations

lingered even after the ABSDF was formed with members of these two organizations as its leaders.

In my interview with him, the first chairman of ABSDF Tun Aung Kyaw frustratingly noted the factional politics within the ABSDF,

All these people from the All Burma Federation of Student Unions led by Min Ko Naing and All Myanmar Federation of Student Unions led by Min Zeya groups thought that their group should control the ABSDF. Many ABSDF members were of the opinion that I should stay chairman of the organization. Despite this, people from the Min Ko Naing group were disparaging towards my secretary general, Than Win, for he opposed Min Ko Naing. Leaders of other small groups also paid more attention to consolidating their own positions in their respective groups than promoting the interests of their entire group. Most exile groups allocated the essential resources [money, medicine, arms] they had access to mainly to their own groups. The groups that were well-connected with funding agencies or rich donors ate good food, wore better uniforms and received better medical care.<sup>93</sup>

In 1990, a leading member of the Min Ko Naing's All Burma Federation of Student Unions, Moethee Zun joined the ABSDF and was elected as chairman of the organization at the second congress of the ABSDF held in the same year. As could be anticipated, this new election did not bring an end to the factional politics in the ABSDF. The new secretary general of the ABSDF, Naing Aung, a medical doctor who fled to the border area from a small Mon town, Mudon, emerged as a rival to the new chairman. Although he did not belong to any major groups, it was unsurprising to note that he won the support of the Min Zeya group at the congress. By the end of the congress, the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups emerged as the two rival groups within the ABSDF. When students from the Naing Aung group expressed desires to study at foreign universities, Moethee Zun

reportedly denied them permission with the 1970s Burmese communists' argument that the revolution was their university and armed struggle, their lives. In the face of such denial, many students who wanted to study decided to leave the organization. In 1991, the Naing Aung group proposed to hold an election for the entire committee. When the Moethee Zun group rejected the idea, the argument over the matter escalated and the organization split into two. Thus, between 1991-92, there were two ABSDF organizations operating along the Thai-Burma border. Through the good office of some old student activists, the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups decided to re-merge their respective organizations in 1996. Upon their reunification, a new election was held and Naing Aung was elected the chairman. However, in spite of the organization's apparent reunification, the Naing Aung and Moethee Zun groups continued to function like separate groups within ABSDF. In 2001, Naing Aung was expelled from the ABSDF for involving with a married woman. Although Moethee Zun became a de facto leader of the organization, he was soon replaced at the new election after he was exiled by the Thai government to the United States.

The tension between members of the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups spread literally to the entire movement. Even the KNU, the NLD (LA), and the NCUB were divided into pro-Moethee Zun and pro-Naing Aung groups. Pro-Naing Aung KNU units did not allow members of the Moethee Zun groups to go through the area they controlled. Similarly, pro-Moethee Zun KNU units refused to work with members of the pro-Naing Aung groups. A member of the DPNS also noted that it became difficult for him and his fellow DPNS members to socialize with members of the Naing Aung group as Moethee Zun was a former leader of the DPNS. He said that some members of the Naing Aung group spread a rumor that the DPNS was a communist organization. He then noted, "KNU leaders did not like communists. They could kill us if they believed we were

really communists. We know many of the people who spread the rumors very well. Out of their anger for Moethee Zun, they tried to put us into trouble.”<sup>94</sup> After they left the ABSDF, many members of the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups joined other exile groups. That is, the factional struggle from the ABSDF spread to other exile organizations. A leading member of the Moethee Zun group noted that “even though half a decade has passed since we left the ABSDF, our problems lingered. Many people from these two groups still could not trust each other. What happened in the ABSDF in the 1990s has had long term and deep impact on the entire movement.”<sup>95</sup> This condition has made it very difficult for exile groups to come up with a unified movement.

The magnitude of the problem engendered by personal rivalries among pro-democracy activists is discernible in that instead of working together to find a solution for their problems, many leaders of various exile organizations sought to assassinate each other’s characters. For instance, Naing Aung, the former chairman of the ABSDF, was admitted to the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard. However, he was unable to study there because he was blackmailed by some rival ABSDF members. When he was the chairman of the organization, the ABSDF was accused of involvement in a massacre in Northern Burma. Despite the fact that he was at the Thai-Burma border at that time and was several hundred miles away from the area where the massacre happened, Harvard cancelled his admission on the receipt of a poison-pen letter from some former members of his organization. In another case, an exiled activist sought revenge against his former leader who expelled him from an organization by siding with the latter’s opponent in an ethic-related court case. The activist lied to the court under oath that his former leader was mentally ill.

The factional struggle within and between exile groups seriously undermined the effectiveness of individual pro-democracy

groups and the movement. As leaders tried to consolidate their position within their own organizations by appointing only their trusted people to important positions in the organizations, cronyism became the bedrock of many pro-democracy groups. As a result, although many exile groups have introduced formal procedures to elect executive committees of the organizations and the code of conduct which the executive members were required to abide by, they mostly functioned more like entourages of some powerful political activists.

A similar problem was present in the NLD as well. Currently, the NLD resembles a haphazard congregation under the guidance of a charismatic leader rather than a properly institutionalized political party. The group effectively functioned only in the presence of its leader. The NLD is currently in a critical state and needs urgent reform. Its old caretaker leadership has done little more than keeping the party alive on a drip. Its members take no initiative in formulating and pushing ahead with resolute policies that are badly needed should the party aspire to reform and rearm itself with a more distinct strategy. This means that reforms may only be instituted after consultation with Daw Suu. The party defers to her on all things big and small; her view is to be ascertained prior to any decision. These former military commanders resemble inept caretakers, incapable of the least action without Daw Suu.

The fact that the NLD without Daw Suu did not function well can be seen in the failure of the NLD caretaker leaders to manage the party effectively. Right after the elections, General Khin Nyunt reiterated the army’s pre-election announcement at a press conference that the winning party would have to convene the National Convention and draw up a constitution prior to its ratification in a referendum and a further election so as to form a new government. The NLD’s caretaker leadership accepted these terms. The central executive committee then declared that the party would aim to finish drafting the

constitution within the year. In the meantime, the military would govern the country. Once the constitution was ready, the NLD would call for the constituent assembly to be instituted so that it could form a new government. However, many NLD members from local areas were disgruntled with this decision, as they wanted to adhere to the ultimatum.<sup>96</sup> Due to this, the NLD was split by an internal disagreement. The more radical proponents attempted to form an alternative parliament, but were arrested before they could put their plan into action. Two former leading NLD members noted that if Daw Suu had been with the party at that time, things could have been under control.<sup>97</sup>

The treatment of Daw Suu as a democracy goddess by the entire pro-democracy movement has also had some unintended effect on the movement. Out of their reverence for Daw Suu, many activists became very protective of her and started labeling those who, they thought, questioned her policies as enemies of the “pro-democracy revolution” or apologists of the military regime. For instance, when the FEC leader Zar Ni remarked that the military government would not have any dialogue with Daw Suu and that pro-democracy organizations should consider alternative leadership and alternative approaches, many activists accused him of being a power monger who wanted to take over Daw Suu’s place. This situation has given rise to a cultural practice that no one in the movement must challenge Daw Suu and her policies. The problem here is that when she is placed under house arrest, nobody knows for sure her positions on the ongoing developments in the country. Activists have to base their actions on her past remarks. Even those who thought that her remarks were made for different contexts, they dared not question them. A political activist noted, “Criticizing Daw Suu or doing things she would not approve of is a taboo for pro-democracy activists. If you did it, your political career would be over. I do not agree with her all the time but I am not going to talk about it

publicly. People worship her, so you cannot do anything that people think she will not approve of. If you did it, your enemies would be happy as this would give them necessary ammunition to assassinate your character.”<sup>98</sup>

Pro-democracy groups often failed to come up with comprehensive and concrete strategies to deal with the military government. A good example of this is the NLD’s lack of contingency planning in dealing with major political issues. This is discernible in the way NLD leaders dealt with the military junta in the wake of the election in 1990. Ignoring the advice given by a group of veteran politicians that it should try to find a way to work with the regime, the NLD, led by the members of the intelligentsia group, issued an ultimatum to the military government. The ultimatum, which was known as the Gandhi Declaration, stated that the junta should surrender power to the NLD by the end of September 1990. A member of the former military commander group, Major Chit Khine, reportedly disapproved of this ultimatum because the party did not have a contingency plan in the event of a failure. The members of the intelligentsia group ignored this warning, leading veteran politicians to conclude that after winning the election, NLD leaders were too conceited to see the reality of the situation. A former NLD leader noted in remorseful manner:

We initially thought that U Chit Khine was very cowardly. But in retrospect, I think he was more farsighted than most of us there. When we could not strike back at the government’s refusal to comply with our demand, our enemy would just conclude that it did not have to heed our future demands. We went on making demands without having a backup plan as to what we should do should the junta not give in to our demands. Back then, many of us considered that we were staging a revolution. We should have understood that we were also playing power politics. Perhaps, we were prepared for a revolution but we were not the best prepared for politics.<sup>99</sup>

Old uncles, however, made similar mistakes repeatedly. A former political activist noted, "These old uncles do not seem to know what they should do. They keep issuing ultimatums. I don't know what they were thinking. They should not issue ultimatums unless they could do something when the government did not comply with their demands. They are making themselves look like a bunch of imbeciles."<sup>100</sup>

Most exile groups also lacked contingency plans. Since their inception, most exile pro-democracy groups made getting Western countries to impose sanctions on the military junta their priority. None had a clear strategy as to what they should or would do if the junta were to withstand the punitive actions of the Western countries. When the government cracked down on the underground political activities, exile groups did not retaliate with any new strategy either. They only pursued in blaming the government's brutality for their inability to organize protests within the country without making sufficient effort to create new underground cell groups in Burma. They could organize protests only when their old networks existed. As such, when the government uncovered and did away with most of their network groups, their potential for action within the country became neutralized. The success of the Burma Communist Party's underground activities in the 1970s and 1980s shows that it is possible to recruit underground cells regardless of a repressive regime. In containing and quelling political opposition, the previous military-dominated socialist regime was no less repressive than the current military junta. The lack of strategic planning on the part of the exile groups to create underground cells inside the country brought about one more setback to the movement. Since the situation in which the BCP organized underground cells is different from the current political and social contexts, exile pro-democracy groups

need to come up with new strategies adapted to the new parameters of the game.

Since the inception, pro-democracy groups have been idealistic and many of the demands they made on the military government were based on moral values and international norms. In dealing with military leaders, pro-democracy should also try to understand the mindset of military leaders. It is futile preaching to hardheaded military leaders who want to keep themselves in power at all costs. It will not enhance the prospects for dialogue. While placing emphasis on moral values, the message must be framed in such way to convince them that it is in their interest to dialogue with the opposition. Rightly or wrongly, military leaders do have their own values and certainly will not be eager to listen to moralistic arguments made by the opposition. Neither are they likely to comply with demands made on the basis of moralistic values which they do not endorse. Most pro-democracy groups remained quite idealistic and the few activists who called for pro-democratic groups to be more pragmatic noted that their proposals were not well received by their colleagues.

In calling for dialogues, pro-democracy groups should make clear what they could give in return. Until recently, pro-democracy groups including the NLD placed emphasis mainly on what they wanted from the military government. To be sure, the military government never made what they could give to pro-democracy group clear either. Both sides became disappointed with each other when they did not get what they had hoped for. It can be said that it was partly due to their frustration with each other that both parties adopted hard-line positions against each other in due course. For pro-democracy groups, the political deadlock remained unresolved solely because of the military junta's refusal to honor the election of 1990. As for the military junta, pro-democracy activists, especially Daw Suu, were the biggest mischief-makers in the country. If Daw Suu and pro-democracy groups had called for the

lifting of economic sanctions, the Depayin incident might not have taken place. Similarly, if the military leaders had given concessions to the NLD, pro-democracy groups might not have taken a confrontational approach. Both parties did not find a way to work with each other.

The aforementioned problems with the pro-democracy groups seriously undermined their ability to keep the movement together, to exploit the opening opportunities and to find a way to overcome the barriers they encountered. The prevalence of cronyism in pro-democracy organizations and the failure of leading activists to resolve their personal differences in a peaceful manner had given rise to the exodus of many members from various pro-democracy groups. As they became less and less trusted to the members who belonged to neutral or rival groups, cronyism became the bedrock of many pro-democracy organizations. A retired activist noted,

Our leaders were very authoritarian. In a way, they are not very different from the military leaders. They did not take criticism well. Even though we were supposed to be fighting against corruption and cronyism, they were nicer to their sycophants. They allocated more resources to their cronies too. If they did not like you, they would not listen to you; even if the advice you were giving was a constructive one, they would not listen to you. Until there is a change in leadership, the movement will remain weak. I ceased active participation in the movement mainly because I could no longer understand my leaders. They undermined the unity of the organization. As the time passed on, things got worse; we became less trusting and more frustrated; leaders became more corrupt; the movement became more and more disunited."<sup>101</sup>

Some former NLD members noted that they left the party because they could not work with ex-military commanders. Also, some ex-military commanders noted that they left the party because they could not work

with Daw Suu, NLD members, and NLD youth members. A former member of the ex-military commander noted, "I tried to do everything I could for the party and Daw Suu. Daw Suu and the people around her, especially NLD youth members were very arrogant. I am old enough to be their father. I am a retired colonel. But I felt that they wanted me to be subservient to them."<sup>102</sup> A former leading NLD youth member also recalled,

the factional struggle in the party was quite bad. If it was not for Daw Suu, the party could have been broken into different groups even before the election. The ex-commander and intelligentsia groups thought that they should lead the party and the youths should follow their instructions. They wanted to use us as errant boys. Since we started the movement, we were then quite arrogant too. We said to them that we were there not to pay homage to elderly people but to engage in political activities. We wanted to play a leading role in the party. Ma Suu sided with us, so we became leaders of the youth committee as well as central committee members. We, NLD youths, controlled Ma Suu's daily schedule. When senior members we did not like wanted to see Ma Suu, we just told them that she was not available. We were young, immature and did not think about how our immature act might affect the party. In retrospect, I could say that those things seriously affected the unity of the party.<sup>103</sup>

The feuds within and between pro-democracy groups also have a negative impact on the government's perception of them. A government officer noted that the government did not have to worry about exile groups very much as they were very divided.<sup>104</sup> A leading activist also noted frustratingly, "I am not sure we were prepared to talk to the government even if senior military officers invited us to come and talk to us. We are very divided. We don't have a common strategy. We have tried to undermine each other. I am worried that we might be fighting against each other in front of

military officers.”<sup>105</sup> The NLD’s hollow ultimatum appeared to have had similar effect on the government impression of its leaders. When the NLD issued the ultimatum in February 2006 that the government must reply its call for the holding of the parliament by May, 2006, a government officer I interviewed shrugged it off by saying that it was merely one of the hollow ultimatums they usually issued. He said, “we don’t care about all these statements and ultimatums issued by the NLD. People don’t take it seriously. Even other opposition groups don’t take it seriously. Why should we take it seriously? We all kept saying that we should amend our mistakes and problems but we did not really try to fix our problems. Things just got worse over time.”<sup>106</sup> The NLD and other pro-democracy groups will need to be taken seriously by their enemy before they can have any meaningful dialogue with it.

The prevalence of the culture of insecurity and the low stock of social capital in the movement also prevented many pro-democracy activists from exploiting the opening of some opportunities. Many activists feared that their rivals might try to assassinate their characters if they accidentally did something which ran counter to the policies endorsed by Daw Suu or something which shed some positive light on the activities of the junta. As a result, they became exceedingly rigid in their evaluation of alternative strategies to deal with the military junta. Taking a hard-line position against the military government has been the movement’s classic stance; any statement out of line with this diametrically confrontational attitude would be interpreted as sympathetic to the junta and thus considered traitorous. In the late 1990s, the military government invited the chairman of the NLD, Aung Shwe, to discuss the country’s political situation. He declined because he did not want to engage in any talk without Daw Suu. Some NLD members felt that the NLD leadership should have taken up the government’s offer. Others went as far as to say that they would continue to fight for

Daw Suu’s release from house arrest while negotiating for probable political change with the military. They would not gain anything by refusing the offer to enter into discussion with the military.

A similar explanation can be made for the reason why pro-democracy groups failed to exploit the fierce factional struggle between the intelligence corps and the army. In an attempt to consolidate his position, Intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt tried to reach out to pro-democracy groups. Messages were passed to pro-democracy leaders through trusted diplomats and intermediaries. Some associates of the outgoing Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt, also informed certain governments in the West through mediators that there were people in the government who understood the need for political changes within the country. They in turn asked for more understanding and support in bringing about changes. Some sources also revealed that General Khin Nyunt and his associates planned to form an interim government in collaboration with ex-intelligence officers. They also planned to share power with the opposition, especially the NLD, if they could successfully stage the coup. Some sources showed that some within the NLD did know of the relatively liberal position of General Khin Nyunt but did not initiate any action as mutual trust was not forthcoming. Not surprisingly, both Daw Suu and her colleagues treated the upper echelons of the military government as unitary. They dealt with them en bloc and conceived all interaction with the military officers as if they were dealing with a homogeneous entity. Five leading activists who were contacted by military intelligence noted that they were interested in dealing with the military intelligence. However, since the position of movement was very rigid, four of them said they were not free to discuss it, let alone to act on it. Only Zar Ni, the founder of the FBC, accepted the invitation to go to Yangon and talked to intelligence officer. Most political activists stopped associating with him after he



came back from Yangon. Although the junta hardly missed the least opportunity to undermine the NLD and other pro-democracy groups, Daw Suu and her colleagues failed to reach out to the officers who accepted in principle that political reforms had to be undertaken for the sake of the country's future. Only after Khin Nyunt and his associates were fired by the hardline military officers, many activists expressed their regret for failing to work with them. The pro-democracy movement could have been in a more favorable position should groups find a way to exploit the factional struggles amongst the senior military officers. A prominent activist noted that the period between late 1990s and early 2000s was the best time for pro-democracy groups to penetrate into the military government.

We failed to exploit the biggest opportunity we had in the last 18 years. Some of us tried to place wedge between army and military officers by spreading rumors through their wives. We looked up telephone directories and called the houses at the time they could not be home. We then said to their wives some made up stories that intelligence officers were tried to blackmail their husbands. Even though we talked about split the military at meetings, we did not do anything more than that. It was our failure to exploit the opportunity. We only have ourselves to blame.<sup>107</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As Huntington and others have noted, a political transition in an authoritarian country is more likely when the opposition is stronger than the regime. Burmese pro-democracy groups understood this and engaged in the activities that were designed to undermine the regime. As discussed above, while keeping the movement in the international limelight for almost two decades, pro-democracy groups successfully undermined the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime both domestically and internationally. At the same time, the economic sanctions imposed by Western

countries seriously undermined the regime's ability to legitimize itself. However, although it was not financially as strong as it used to be, the Burmese military junta did not look like an organization that was on the verge of collapse. While keeping itself in power, the junta managed to contain the activities of domestic pro-democracy groups within the narrow legal space by imposing several legal constraints and severely punishing those who broke its rules. Although the junta was not very strict about enforcing many economic rules, it systematically and carefully enforced the rules for its political opponents. Domestic pro-democracy groups did not come up with a comprehensive strategy as to how to deal with a stronger enemy. As a result, the pro-democracy movement in the country became less and less vibrant over time.

The government's forceful repression of domestic pro-democracy groups led many young people to flee the country and join exile pro-democracy groups. However, the constraints imposed on them by their host areas, the international system and their international problems had undermined exile groups' ability to consolidate their positions vis-à-vis the junta. Because of factional struggles, many pro-democracy activists gave priority to the interest of their group (sub-groups within SMOs) to the overall interest of the movement. In other words, the movement failed to develop a strong collective identity. This situation in turn has contributed to the lack of trust within and between pro-democracy groups. While the movement became very rigid, many pro-democracy activists refused to work with each other. Many leading activists then came to adopt the negative practices that pro-democracy activists associated with the regime such as cronyism, authoritarian behaviors, and character assassination. To make matter worse, like their comrades operating in the country, exile groups did not come up with a comprehensive strategy other than calling for Western countries to take more punitive actions against the junta. As a result, pro-

democracy groups failed to exploit multiple opportunities that could have worked to their advantage; they did not find a way to overcome the constraints encountered.

As for the Burmese military leaders, they seem burdened with few worries about the future. They went ahead with drafting a constitution that would perpetuate the military's leading role in Burmese politics. To their credit, pro-democracy groups did manage to sustain the movement for almost two decades and it is very unlikely that the movement will dissipate in the near future. However, most of their internal problems remained unresolved. That is why many people noted that Burma has been cursed with both a bad government and a weak and ineffective opposition. It is worth noting that a few leading activists have recently begun to speak out about both their past mistakes and the problems gnawing away at the entire pro-democracy movement. It will be nonetheless difficult for the exile groups to find a way out of the political deadlock so long as each pursues ideological rigidity and remains intolerant of alternative methods to resolving the situation. In other words, without a paradigm shift, many political activists will find that they themselves are their biggest enemies.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Guardian Daily, July 24, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> There are about 17 Burmese political news website. The most prominent ones are [www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org); <http://burmatoday.net>; [www.mizzima.com](http://www.mizzima.com); Democracy for Burma Mailing List ([Democracy\\_forBurma@yahoo.com.au](mailto:Democracy_forBurma@yahoo.com.au)). The detail list of all Burmese political news websites is available at <http://uk.geocities.com/mandalay1337/bnet.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The government has published hundred of articles about its plan to establish disciplined democracy in Burma. To mention but a few, they are *si-kan-pyi-wa-taw-de-mo-ca-ray-si-nin-let-rye-sin-saung-pa-myar* (Disciplined Democracy and Selected Articles) (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 1998); *a-myo-tha-naing-gyan-ye-lan-kyaung-ma-thway-fee-nay-taw-N-L-D-nin-a-char-saung-pa-myar* (The NLD that deviated from the route of national politics and other articles) (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 2000); *Daw Suu Nld Party and Our Ray of Hope and Selected Articles* (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 2003); *a-myo-tha-nyee-lar-gyan-ma-thee-naing-gyan-taw-thit-si-tho* (From National Convention to the new national state) (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Aung Moe San, “a-myo-tha-thint-myat-si-lon-ye-de-mo-cracy-ye-shay-shu-taw-a-myo-tha-nyi-lar-gyan” (The National Convention that is moving forward to national reconciliation and democracy), in *a-myo-tha-nyi-lar-gyan-ma-the-naing-gyan-daw-thit-si-tho* (From the national convention to the new union) (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 2004), pp. 61-66.

<sup>5</sup> Kanbawza Win, “Blueprint for Burma,” *Burma Digest* (September 26, 2006), <http://burmadigest.wordpress.com/2006/09/26/blue-print-for-burma/> (Assessed on December 21, 2006); Saw Kapi, *Beyond the Politics of Condemnation: Rethinking Burma's Political Impasse*, <http://karenforkaren.blogspot.com/> (November 25, 2006); <http://mizzima.win.aplus.net/mizzima/archives/nf/2006/May/02-May1-2006-3.htm> (October 30, 2006); Zarni, “Myanmar/Burma in 2006 and beyond,” A paper presented at the ASEAN Update, Singapore, January 5, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Doug McAdam, “Culture and Social Movements,” in Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston and Joseph R. Gusfield, eds., *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on a section from the author’s earlier article, “Burma: Skirting the Regime,” Muthiah Alaccapa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 398–405.

<sup>8</sup> Moksha Yitri” The Crisis in Burma: Back from the Heart of Darkness,” *Asian Survey* 29(6) June, p. 543.

<sup>9</sup> Guardian Daily, November 8, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Guardian, July 24, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, June 8, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, October 7, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, November 12, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> *The Working People’s Daily*, July 27, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, September 12, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, August 19, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Interviews, 1998, 2004, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews, 1999, 2004, 2005, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Hereafter she will be referred to as Daw Suu.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews, 2004, 2006. I also personally witnessed some protestors in Mandalay shouting “Victory’ on that day.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews, 2004, 2005, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> The Thirty Comrades was a group of young nationalist Burmese led by Aung San which received military training from Japanese before they came back and formed the Burma Independence Army to fight against the British.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews, October-November 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews, 1999, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> <http://206.225.87.155/live/shan/resources/state/SNLD/snld.htm>. (November 12, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> The Union National Democracy Party, *phyti-pon-ka-de-lo-ba* (This is what happened!), (UNDP: Yangon, 1989), p. 12.

- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview, February 12, 2006.
- <sup>30</sup> BBC: Pilger on Daw Suu's Standoff, July 28, 1998.  
[www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199807/msg00709.html](http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199807/msg00709.html) (December 2, 2006).
- <sup>31</sup> [www.yuyu.net/burmanet2-l/archive/0359.html](http://www.yuyu.net/burmanet2-l/archive/0359.html) (Assessed on November 21, 2006).
- <sup>32</sup> [http://www.ncgub.net/NLD\\_Statements/NLDSta200602012\\_B.htm](http://www.ncgub.net/NLD_Statements/NLDSta200602012_B.htm). (October 23, 2006).
- <sup>33</sup> Brig. General Khin Nyunt, *Special Press Conference held on 9-9-89* (Yangon: News and Periodical Enterprise, 1989), p. 12.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview, June 21, 2005.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview, April 29, 2005.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview, July 14, 2006.
- <sup>37</sup> [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/gashc3877.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/gashc3877.doc.htm) (December 1, 2006).
- <sup>38</sup> Interview, May 12, 2005.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview, May 29, 2006.
- <sup>40</sup> Interview, March 12, 1999.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview, October 7, 2006.
- <sup>42</sup> David Halon, "Whatever happened to the ABSDF?" [www.irrawaddy.org/art/2002-1/01art03.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/art/2002-1/01art03.html). (October 9, 2006).
- <sup>43</sup> Interviews, 2003-2006.
- <sup>44</sup> Htun Aung Gyaw, "U Turn by NCGUB or it is only a Stunt made by Bo Hla Tint?" a short essay circulated via the Democracy for Burma mailing list.
- <sup>45</sup> In 2005, however, there were some massive explosions in Yangon, killing and wounding a large number of people. The government readily accused some overseas pro-democracy organizations of masterminding the incidents. Although many activists suspected former members of outgoing prime minister Khin Nyunt's intelligence corps, some activists quietly thought that a overseas pro-democracy organization might have something to do with it. However, since there was insufficient evidence to support the rumors, the incidents were deemed mainly as terrorist acts in response to the mismanagement of the government.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview, November 21, 2006.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview, June 25, 2006
- <sup>48</sup> David I. Steinberg, "Burma: Feel-Good US Sanctions Wrongheaded," *Yale Global*, 19 May 2004, p. 1.
- <sup>49</sup> Nyi Nyi Lwin, "Economic and Military Cooperation between China and Burma," September 2006, [www.narinjara.com/Reports/BReport.ASP](http://www.narinjara.com/Reports/BReport.ASP), (December 20, 2006).
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "India presses Burma over insurgents," *Asia Times*, September 20, 2006, [www.yuyu.net/burmanet2-l/archive/1238.html](http://www.yuyu.net/burmanet2-l/archive/1238.html), (December 20, 2006).
- <sup>52</sup> Ashild Kolas and Stein Tonnesson, "Burma and its Neighbors: The Geopolitics of Gas" *Austral Policy Forum*, August 2006, p. 10.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview, a retired diplomat, July 14, 2006.
- <sup>54</sup> John Quigley, "Burma holds EU ASEAN relations back," *EurAsia Bulletin*, Vol7, No. 10 & 11, October-November 2003, pp. 1-2.
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### ***Funding Support***

This program is funded by a generous grant from The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., with additional support from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, and the East-West Center.

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