Drowning

Letter from Rangoon

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August 18, 2008

Soldiers about to close off access to Rangoon's Sule Pagoda, during the protests of September, 2007. Increasingly, dissidents are questioning the utility of direct confrontation with the government.

Photograph by Christian Holst

When night falls in Rangoon, the city's spectacular decay—patches of black mold devouring the yellowed walls of colonial buildings, trees growing wildly into crumbling third-story terraces—nearly disappears from view. The tea shops fill up, locals crowd the bookstalls on Pansodan Road, and the city, which seems furtive and depressed by day, becomes a communal stage. In the Chinatown district, two men in an alley crank out schoolbooks with a hand-operated printing press. At a sidewalk fish market, women sell shrimp, scallops, and squid by candlelight, while two teen-agers nearby strum guitars. Further east, along the Rangoon River, in the old residential quarter of Pazundaung, the wooden houses are open to the street, like storefronts, revealing an old woman sitting on a couch, a living-room shrine strewn with votive candles, and two men laughing as they listen to a radio.

One such evening in June, I had dinner at an outdoor restaurant north of downtown with a young man I'll call Myat Min. He grew up in a working-class township on the outskirts of Rangoon, the son of a mechanic and a woman who sold spices from Thailand. His father had been trained by British Air Force officers, and in the years

after the 1962 coup, which gave control of the country to the Burmese military, he kept the family radio tuned to the BBC. Each evening, he ate fried noodles, listened to the news in English, and cursed the dictatorship.

Over the decades, the Burmese government has subjected its citizens to epic misrule, systematically destroying every institution of society except the Army, whose leaders have made staying in power their overriding goal. The streets of Rangoon and Mandalay are monitored by the secret police and by a group of armed thugs known as Swan Arr Shin—the Masters of Force. Dissidents are routinely tortured. The generals' irrational economic policies have reduced one of Asia's richest countries, once the world's leading exporter of rice, to penury. Burma's gross domestic product per capita is now less than half that of its neighbor Cambodia. Economic sanctions—a form of protest against the government's human-rights abuses—have made the country even poorer.

Myat Min was not quite thirty when we met, with a dark, high-cheekboned face, but he had the manner of a much older, eccentric man who had seen too much of life and was too vital to be self-effacing, even if his repressive society demanded it. He had an unusually loud voice by Burmese standards, which drew looks in public, and a laugh that often couldn't stop. The American expatriates in Rangoon called him Mr. Intensity. He wore only *longyis*, the Burmese sarong; he didn't own any pants. "I hate modern life," he said.

In 1995, when he was sixteen, Myat Min noticed a collection of stories by W. Somerset Maugham in a bookstall on Pansodan Road. He rented it (few Burmese can afford to buy books) and read the stories with such strong identification that he began calling himself Somerset. He moved on to Dickens, learning not just to read English but to speak it, sometimes with oddly Victorian cadences. I asked him why these British writers appealed to him. "All of the characters are me," he said, with a boisterous laugh. "Neither a British nor an American young man living in the twenty-first century can understand a Dickens as well as I can! I am living in a Dickensian atmosphere. Our country is at least one or two centuries behind the Western world. My neighborhood—bleak, poor, with small domestic industries, children playing in the street, parents fighting with each other, some with great debt, everyone dirty—that is Dickens. I am more equipped to understand Dickens than modern novels. I don't know what is air-conditioning, what is subway, what is fingerprint exam."

In 1988, when Myat Min was ten, Rangoon and other Burmese cities filled with millions of demonstrators calling for an end to military rule. It was a revolutionary moment, and by far the most serious challenge to the reign of the generals; the protest led by monks last September is the only event that comes close. Myat Min's older brothers disappeared from home for several months to join the uprising, and his father went looking for them every day. At the height of the demonstrations, Myat Min sneaked out of his house. He saw a mob of people, some of whom were carrying spikes on which the severed heads of informers—burned charcoal black—had been impaled. "Democracy!" the people shouted.

“I became interested in politics because of those scenes,” Myat Min told me. At home, his father said, “Aung San Suu Kyi is the new leader of our country. American troops will come liberate us.” But Suu Kyi—the daughter of the general who led Burma to independence, in 1948, and who became an accidental heroine to the protesters in 1988—was soon placed under house arrest, on the shore of Inya Lake, in the middle of the city. She has for the most part remained there ever since, in an isolation as profound as her country’s.

Myat Min decided to pursue his passion for English literature at Rangoon University; he dreamed of a life immersed in ideas, “like walking through the forest in the dead of night.” But by 1996, the year he enrolled, the university had almost ceased to exist. To prevent students from gathering in protest, the government repeatedly closed the main campus and began busing undergraduates to makeshift campuses outside the capital. The semester dwindled to ten days in the classroom, with assignments and exams handled through the mail. In order to maintain the illusion of a successful system, the government continued to pass large numbers of students, even though their base of knowledge was shrinking precipitately. Higher education in Burma, once the training ground of a skilled civil service, was destroyed.

Myat Min found himself at a miserable campus in the satellite township of Dagon. “I met no like-minded students and teachers,” he said. “I wanted a library with good books—there was none.” A few months into his first year, after more anti-government protests, the university was closed indefinitely. In August, 1998, the government suddenly announced that students would sit for exams in the very classes that had been terminated two years earlier. Students began to demonstrate, but this time their initial demands were modest, with slogans like “Postpone exams” and “Provide distance students with hostels.”

Myat Min decided to protest his farcical education. “No student at exams was as furious as I was,” he said. “I was angry at everyone. I would kick a dog, even.” He brought the autobiography of Thomas Jefferson to class, hoping to be punished. “But the teachers were O.K. with it,” he said. “I was very angry with that O.K.” In his Burmese-literature class, he didn’t bother reading the professor’s exam questions, and wrote an anti-government essay instead. Still, nothing happened. The next day, he sat down in English class and ripped his exam book to pieces. Everyone in the room was terrified. A teacher approached his chair, told Myat Min that he had to complete the test, and gave him a new exam book. He tore it up as well. Then he wrote on the shredded paper, in English, “Down with the regime” and “I’m a nonconformist.” Only fifteen minutes had gone by, but Myat Min had nothing more to say. He left the classroom and went out into the street, where he started distributing anti-government pamphlets. Two weeks later, military-intelligence officers came to his house.

During his interrogation, Myat Min was kicked and beaten. He was sent to Burma’s most notorious prison, Insein, north of Rangoon, near the airport. He showed me a short account he later wrote of the months before his “trial”: “Sometimes I ate cooked rice with a strong bad smell, and the curry was a blend of green roots, a spoonful of

saffron powder, and a good amount of water. After two or three months of living on such food, my tongue and stomach started wriggling in a search for their usual stimuli, so much so that I sometimes felt like chewing my own thigh."

In January, 1999, Myat Min and several friends were tried and sentenced en masse by a judge who refused to allow any of them to speak. Myat Min received twenty-one years—seven for illegal printing, seven for distributing the pamphlets, and seven for anti-government activities. He was twenty years old.

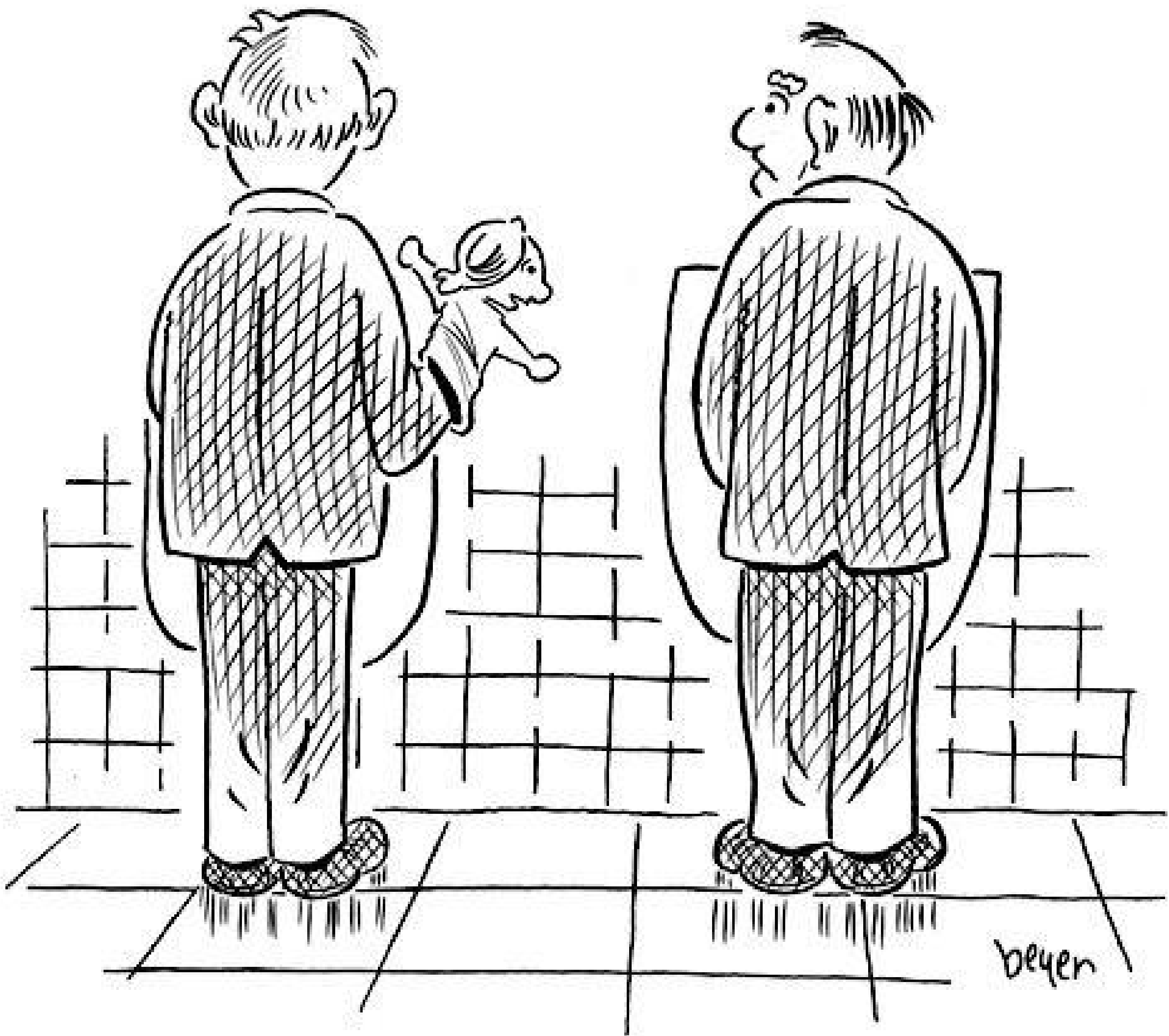
In Burma's military-intelligence lockups, political detainees are given repeated beatings, placed in stress positions, and made to stand in water for days on end. In Insein, the torture takes a different form: extreme isolation, no sunlight, inedible food, no writing materials. (I was told that a political prisoner found with a pen was punished more severely than a prisoner hiding a knife.) When Myat Min was there, prisoners had to wear cotton hoods with cutout eyeholes any time they left their cell, in order to prevent communication between inmates. A friend of Myat Min's was caught trying to teach himself Chinese characters by writing on a piece of plastic with a nail; his ankles were shackled together for two weeks.

Reading was banned at Insein until 1999, when the International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed to make prison visits. After that, the regime gave inmates access to Buddhist writings, then to government newspapers, Burmese magazines, and, finally, English books. In the early years, Myat Min used a piece of red brick to write the names of novels and novelists on his cell floor. With a nail or shard of iron, he inscribed on plastic bags stories that he remembered, including dialogue, and passed them to his friends, who read the texts against the light. He retold the story of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, whom he had read about in *Time* and found fascinating because of his hatred of modernity. After government newspapers were permitted, he followed the *New Light of Myanmar's* critical coverage of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, in 2003. Reading between the lines, he predicted, to his own delight, the rapid fall of Saddam's regime, charting the Americans' progress with elaborate maps.

Myat Min was freed from prison on July 6, 2005. He spoke of his seven years in a cell with unsettling equanimity. "The years I spent in prison were, by far, the most efficient and productive time of my life," he said. "Outside, we waste so many hours, so many days, yet we are not satisfied with how we spend our time. In prison, I feel I have complete control of my life."

On a quiet street near downtown Rangoon, in a neighborhood of elegantly faded colonial buildings, is a gated compound that is known as the American Center—a cultural outpost of the State Department. The James Baldwin Library and the Ella Fitzgerald Auditorium are open to any Burmese citizen willing to brave the police spies who haunt the area. Across the street, a security camera on the wall of a school is pointed at the center's front gate. No one seems to know if it actually works.

When I visited the Baldwin Library, which has twenty-two thousand members and thirteen thousand volumes, young Burmese were sitting on every available piece of furniture. For all their isolation and lack of analytical training, the citizens of Burma



"Word around the office is that I give everyone the creeps."

are stupendous readers. The bulletin board at the American Center library was covered with notes requesting books: biographies of Churchill, Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale," Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine." One note said, "Thank you very much for new books of Berryman, Papa, and Donald Hall. I'd like to request more books of Samuel Beckett and Hermann Hesse."

Three years ago, a thirty-six-year-old American named Thomas Pierce arrived in Rangoon to take charge of the American Center. Working with another official, Kim Penland, Pierce bought thousands of new books, tripled library membership, and started an English class for monks, a political-discussion class, a training workshop for journalists, and a literature book club. Another group composed a Burmese Wikipedia entry about the country. A debate club attracted surprisingly animated audiences for subversive propositions like "Democracy is the best form of government."

The American Center brought together Burmese of different ages and backgrounds in a way that levelled their society's normally rigid hierarchies. Former political prisoners from the 1988 demonstrations—the '88 Generation—discussed Machiavelli with twenty-something hip-hop fans. Politicos from Aung San Suu Kyi's party and respectable businessmen sat down with members of ethnic minorities from the provinces. Senior monks learned English verbs alongside junior monks. Political activists attended seminars on human rights and on strategic communications. Pierce and Penland encouraged the students who were reading Montesquieu and Havel to make connections with their own political predicament. In a country where the law forbids unauthorized meetings of more than five people, none of this could have happened anywhere outside the gates of the Center.

Dozens of political prisoners were released in 2005. Finding themselves unemployable and shunned by friends, many found their way to the center. They were welcomed with offers of scholarship classes. One of the former prisoners was Myat Min.

"I came out of prison not with plans but with dreams," he said. "One dream was to become a reporter." He worked as an intern at a Rangoon weekly, but his colleagues were nervous about having a former political prisoner in their midst, and he left. Barred from pursuing a degree in a Burmese university, he enrolled in courses at the American Center, including an Internet-based program with an American university, studying Latin to better understand Shakespeare and early English literature.

Myat Min still had an excitable demeanor, but he had emerged from prison with a more philosophical view, rooted in Buddhism, about the possibilities of politics in Burma. "I started soul-searching," he said. "I shouldn't have been angry that much. Freedom of expression became less important to me than freedom from anger, freedom from destruction, freedom from repentance, freedom from dilemmas. I wanted a peaceful and strong state of mind. As long as my mind is weak, I cannot do anything. I found values more important than any political ideology."

Myat Min and many other activists in his generation began to reconsider the wisdom of a head-on confrontation with a ruthless regime. But they wanted to stay in Burma, and so they began to think about changing their country in a more indirect way,

beginning with their own lives—with the simple daily struggle not to abandon thought and passion, even in the face of a government that tried to smother its people. That struggle took many forms, some as apparently banal as producing a play or working to help poor children. The American Center became the focal point of these desires, and when two events in the past year shook the country—the monks' demonstrations, in September, and the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, in May—young Burmese responded in ways that, in the long term, may pose a serious threat to the rule of the generals.

In 1987, I backpacked through Burma on a one-week visa, the maximum time allowed. I had never seen a place so untouched by the West; even Pepsi was illegal. The country was ruled by General Ne Win, who had led the 1962 coup and subsequently imposed on Burma an isolation nearly as extreme and self-destructive as North Korea's. He governed through force, paranoia, and superstition: a few weeks before my visit, Ne Win, advised by his astrologer that the number nine was auspicious, abolished all Burmese banknotes of twenty-five, thirty-five, and seventy-five kyats, replacing them with two new denominations—forty-five and ninety—that are divisible by nine and whose numerals add up to nine. Countless Burmese lost their life savings. Yet there were no major protests. In the ancient Buddhist city of Pagan, on the Upper Irrawaddy River, the manager of a guesthouse where I stayed quietly grumbled that the government didn't care if its people were ruined. My guide around Rangoon invited me to lunch at his house and he made the same muted complaint. I left agreeing with a common observation about Burma: its people were, perhaps, too gentle to rebel.

The next year, after months of small student-led demonstrations and arrests, at eight minutes past eight o'clock on the morning of August 8, 1988—numerology also holds sway over the regime's opponents—Burmese of all backgrounds took to the streets to protest the military dictatorship. As many as three thousand people were killed before the Army imposed order. Ne Win was replaced by a new group of generals, who named their junta the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The *SLORC* held elections in 1990; Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party won overwhelmingly, but the junta ignored the results and continued to rule as before.

Some things changed. In 1989, Burma became Myanmar and Rangoon became Yangon, and the junta is now called the State Peace and Development Council, led by Senior General Than Shwe. Luxury hotels have gone up in downtown Rangoon; there's a new terminal at the airport; and, in Mandalay, Chinese-built shopping centers have replaced entire neighborhoods. Over the past few years—at an estimated cost thus far of four billion dollars, and with the use of forced child labor—the regime has constructed a new capital, Naypyidaw, in the hot flatlands in the country's center. But since 1988, or even 1962, Burma has remained remarkably static, while its neighbors China, India, and Thailand have raced ahead.

Even its opposition politics seems frozen in time. The monks' demonstrations last September, and the violent repression by armed troops, looked like a small-scale version of the 1988 uprising, in the same rainwashed streets. Suu Kyi—"the Lady," in the almost universal indirect address—remains the country's iconic dissident figure, and her party

is paralyzed as it awaits her endlessly deferred release. In its lassitude, Burma seems to be under a magic spell that only some external force can break.

During the two crises of the past year, Burmese listened to foreign news on shortwave radios and wondered if the world was about to come to their rescue. After the cyclone, the U.S.S. Essex and other Navy ships, which had been conducting joint exercises with the Thai military, floated offshore in the Andaman Sea while American officials tried to negotiate the unloading of vital relief equipment, such as heavy-lift helicopters and water-purification machines. Reports of the ships' proximity gave a lot of people in the devastated Irrawaddy Delta the hope that an armed intervention was at hand. In the end, the regime refused to allow the Essex to unload its cargo.

"I cook everything with an alternative energy source, so it may take a while."

One night in Rangoon, I had beers with a famous artist whose work is banned by the regime. He told the story of a friend in Mandalay who became pregnant and developed a serious case of swollen feet. She was taken to the hospital, where a doctor kept bringing in medical students to examine her, without ever telling her what could

be done. “When the U.N. comes here, someone always wants to see me,” the artist said. “They tell me they’re sorry about the situation, to be patient.” These visits, he said, had begun to feel like the examination of his pregnant friend. He suddenly declared, “The only solution is for the U.S. to drop a bomb on Naypyidaw. That’s the only way! Ninety per cent of Burmese would tell you the same thing. The world is very angry at America because of Iraq. If you use one per cent of the money and one per cent of the bombs here, the world will see you in a better way.” It’s a commonly expressed wish in Rangoon: I met a man who had hand-delivered a letter to the American Embassy, where the U.S. keeps a low-level diplomatic presence, petitioning President George W. Bush to “bombard Burma.” No one at the Embassy would accept the letter, and when I advised the man not to expect an American invasion, he looked crushed. “Why?” he pleaded.

In recent years, millions of Burmese have responded to the country’s seemingly incurable condition by fleeing. The poor escape to Thailand, which has up to two million migrant workers from Burma, many employed in conditions of semi-slavery; those with some means move to Singapore, London, or America. The authorities have recently made it easier to get a passport, which has only encouraged the hemorrhaging of the talented and disgruntled, so that potential threats leave the country, the competition for spoils inside is eased, and those who remain are increasingly supported by remittances from abroad. The endgame seems to be a regime virtually without citizens.

It’s not clear why the junta has such an unshakable hold on power. There is no personality cult in Burma; I saw only one publicly displayed picture of Than Shwe, in the front hall of the run-down and nearly deserted National Museum. Nor does the state justify itself with relentless propaganda. Under Ne Win, the country’s official ideology was a virulently nativist philosophy known as the Burmese Way to Socialism, which led to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Indian merchants after 1962 and anti-Chinese riots in 1967, and a disastrous economic policy of sweeping nationalization and closed borders. After Ne Win’s fall, the junta adopted Chinese-style authoritarian capitalism, but Burma never achieved economic growth—in part because of foreign sanctions, but also because the generals insist on a cut of any new business. (According to Transparency International, Burma is the second most corrupt country in the world, after Somalia.)

Most of Burma’s top government posts are held by military officers, many of whom have a frighteningly weak grasp of governance. After a senior general went to Singapore and heard that all schools there had access to the Internet, he announced that Burmese schools would also be wired—never mind that most classrooms lacked books and paper. A Rangoon school was quickly fitted with computers and modems; the general visited, attended by the state media, and the next day everything was removed. During a dam opening attended by important officials, the river failed to flow, and Burmese upstream were ordered to gather buckets and pour in additional water.

Civil servants survive by protecting senior leaders from bad news. In an end-of-mission report, Charles Petrie, who was the chief United Nations official in Rangoon

until November, called this system of denial "mutually strategic ignorance" and blamed it for "a number of disastrous economic and social policies." Following September's demonstrations, Petrie delivered remarks urging the regime to heed the monks' protest and address the growing poverty. Ten days later, Petrie and other foreign officials were summoned to Naypyidaw. The minister of planning, a hard-liner named Soe Tha, gave a long speech that attempted to rebut Petrie's remarks, using the U.N.'s own statistics. "Some of it was really funny," Petrie recalls. "He said, for example, 'The U.N. states that a third of the children under five are malnourished. That's absolutely not true. The real figure is 31.2 per cent. The U.N. states that three-quarters of an average family's income is used on food. That's actually not true. It's 68.7 per cent.' He was using our statistics to say there was no poverty—that everything was fine." After the speech, Petrie was handed a letter informing him of his expulsion.

When I asked a Burmese journalist to describe the regime's philosophy, he suggested the word *sit-padaytharit*, or "military feudalism." The generals regard the population as unruly children incapable of taking responsibility for themselves; they believe that they alone can prevent Burma from dissolving. Since independence, Burma has contended with various ideological and ethnic insurgencies. At first, the chief threat to the state came from the Communist Party, which collapsed in 1989. But regional wars fought by the central government against armies of the Karen, Shan, Kachin, and other minorities raged on, largely out of international view, creating hundreds of thousands of refugees along Burma's borders and destroying thousands of hill villages. Mass killings, rapes, and forced labor have been widely documented by Human Rights Watch. Most senior members of the junta are veterans of these wars.

In recent years, the regime has signed cease-fire agreements with most of its antagonists, allowing ethnic leaders to exploit resources such as timber, opium, and gems. The truces are the regime's one notable achievement, but the political grievances that inspired the fighting have not been resolved, and the regime remains psychologically at war. Thant Myint-U, a former U.N. official who is the grandson of the U.N. Secretary-General U Thant, frequently travels to Burma, and he has met with senior government officials there. (He is also the author of "The River of Lost Footsteps," a recent history of modern Burma.) He told me, "For the Army leadership, the country is essentially a huge counter-insurgency battlefield." When a rural school is built, he said, the purpose is not to educate local children but to win the loyalty of people in the area, in the manner of a military hearts-and-minds campaign.

National unity and the threat from foreign and domestic agents of instability are the dominant themes of Burma's official literature. Next to my hotel in Rangoon, there was a hulking brick colonial railroad building that now garrisons a detachment of undernourished-looking soldiers. Under a banyan tree, in one corner of the grounds, at the intersection of two major streets, stood a red-and-white billboard that announced, in English, "People's Desire: Oppose Those Relying on External Elements, Acting as Stooges, Holding Negative Views. Oppose Those Trying to Jeopardize Stability of the State and Progress of the Nation. Oppose Foreign Nations Interfering in Internal Affairs

of the State. Crush All Internal and External Destructive Elements as the Common Enemy." The sign was blown down in May by Cyclone Nargis, and no one bothered to put it back up. Its exhortation seemed to lack conviction. The Burmese regime has somehow preserved the mechanics of totalitarianism—the censorship board, the secret police, the armed civilian thugs, the concentration of vast wealth in a few corrupt hands, the official xenophobia, the atmosphere of distrust—without the ideological vigor.

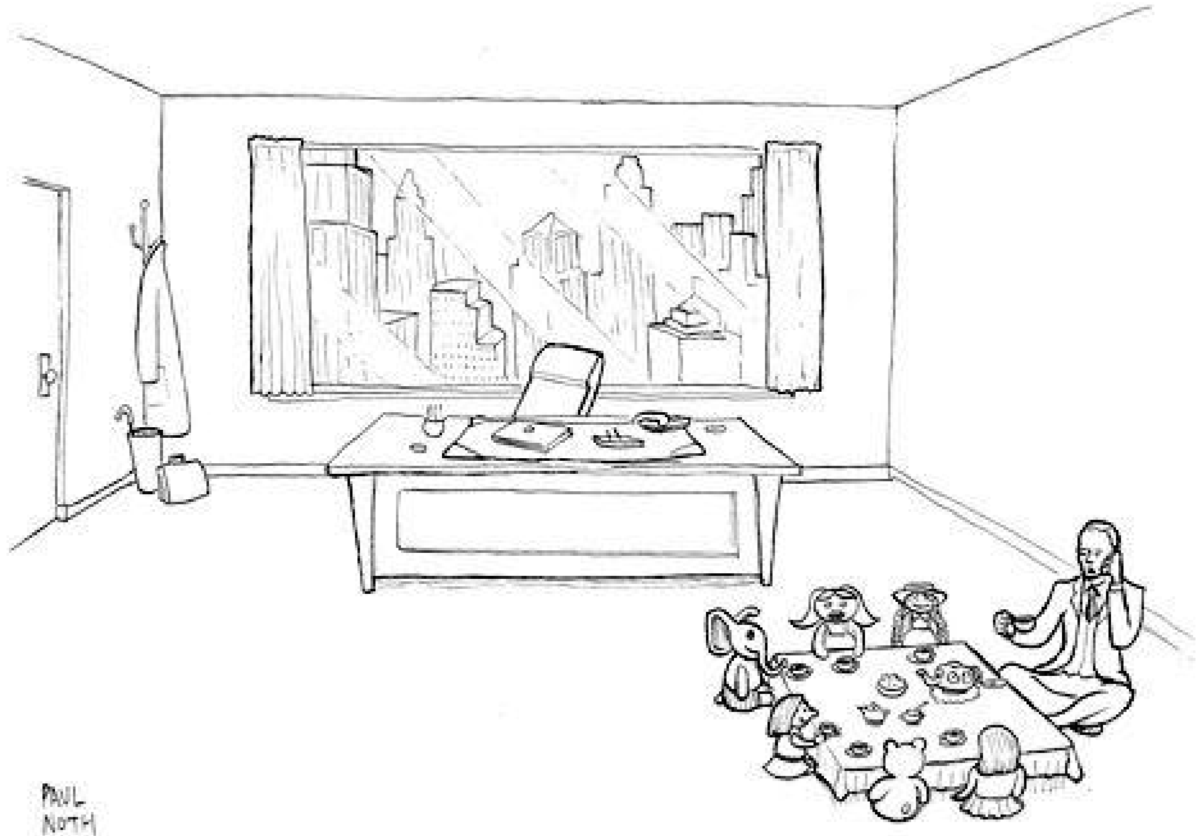
Analysts of the regime say that Than Shwe, who is seventy-five and thought to be ill, believes himself to be the reincarnation of a Burmese king. This may explain why he named the new capital Naypyidaw—"Home of Kings." In 2005, Than Shwe announced a three-year plan to replace its forty thousand barrels of daily oil imports with home-grown biodiesel produced from the jatropha plant. (Many Burmese believe that Than Shwe hoped that growing jatropha would mystically undermine the opposition, because the Burmese name for the plant sounds like "Suu Kyi" in reverse.) Seven million acres of farmland were to be converted into jatropha plantations. Families were encouraged to grow the plant in their fields. Farmers were forced to abandon other crops, such as rice, which contributed to fears of food shortages after the cyclone. The jatropha frenzy left the country with unharvested fields, plants growing wild, and children rushed to the hospital after eating the plant, which is toxic.

Some experts explain the durability of the military regime by citing Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced by most Burmese, and which emphasizes individual salvation. Christina Fink, the author of "Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule," told me, "There are certain cultural practices that help maintain the regime. Burmese society is a hierarchical society, where obedience to authority is taught in the family, in religious institutions, in educational institutions." Fink pointed out that education in Burma was based on rote memorization, and she had found that "if you ask Burmese students to paraphrase something they cannot do it." Kit Young, an American musician who lived for many years in Rangoon, and who founded a music school there, told me that the Burmese word for deference is *anade*, which involves an unwillingness to make people feel uncomfortable. "You skirt, you go around things," she said.

I once asked a teacher in Rangoon, a woman whose refined manners did not conceal her hatred of the regime, why attempts to destabilize the government through targeted attacks were so rare. "We can blame the religion, and we can blame the live-and-let-live attitude of the Burmese," she said. "Even people like me, unless we go out of the country from time to time to refresh our minds, we become conditioned to the suppression. We are fearful without knowing we are fearful, and we are submissive without knowing we are submissive."

Perhaps the most convincing explanation for the persistence of the junta was given by a Burmese economics professor to a local journalist I met. "Other regimes are interdependent with the people," the professor said. "Here the government isn't dependent on the people, and the people aren't dependent on the government. When there's no electricity or water, you get it yourself." In other words, the regime has endured be-

cause it is not distracted by an effort to provide good government. Myat Min told me that this is why I saw so few security men on the streets of Rangoon: crushing the life out of the population is their only task, and so they have learned to do it with supreme efficiency.



"I don't have that in front of me right now."

Even in a country of small people, Thar Gyi, as I'll call him, was a wisp of a man, with sleek eyeglasses, tousled hair, and wrists the size of an American third grader's. One day in February, we sat at a table on the grounds of the American Center, under an umbrella that shielded us from the tropical sun. In a calm voice that barely rose above a whisper, Thar Gyi told me about his passion—contemporary theatre, which is practically nonexistent in Burma.

In 1998, when he was twenty, he was arrested for participating in a student demonstration on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi's party. The next year, he received a seven-year sentence. Confined to Insein prison, Thar Gyi fell into despair when he met dissidents who had been incarcerated multiple times. "I meet some people, older people. They're just telling their old stories, the political history of our country, and I feel sorry for them," he said. "They want to help their community, but they only sit in their cell,

telling the old stories. I got a new idea from them. My idea is that I want to do something outside prison, so I can help other people. Maybe I'm a results-oriented person, and in prison we don't get results. That's labor lost."

Thar Gyi's sentence was reduced, and he was released in 2002. (He called himself lucky.) He came out of prison with two strong desires: not to end up back in prison or in exile, like so many other activists, and to teach the arts to young people. With the help of an English teacher at the American Center named Phillip Howse, he worked on a series of theatrical productions. He stage-managed a performance of "Romeo and Juliet" at a night club that later burned down. In 2006, he helped direct a production of the musical "Rent," at the American Center. The show's portrait of New York during the *AIDS* crisis still felt current in Rangoon, where the disease is rampant. To underscore this connection, Thar Gyi handed out twenty free tickets to Burmese youths infected with H.I.V.

On his own, he staged a production of Sartre's "No Exit." He had borrowed a copy of the play from the American Center. "The title caught my attention," he said. "Sometimes my brain is blocked by something, and I can't get through that block and find the answer. That is a human theme." One afternoon, "No Exit" was performed, in English, in a cramped and sweltering apartment; the windows were covered to block out the sunlight. The state requires all group events to be vetted and cleared by the authorities—not only to stop the flow of unsanctioned ideas but also to prevent people from gathering in one place. Thar Gyi told the neighborhood authorities that English-language classes were being held at the apartment.

"No Exit" was embraced by its audience, and there were several additional performances. Thar Gyi's production had highlighted the similarities between Sartre's claustrophobic scenario, with characters trapped by forces beyond their control, and the suffocated existence of the average young Burmese growing up in a tiny Rangoon apartment.

Through theatre, Thar Gyi hoped to encourage young Burmese to develop their talents and transcend inertia and helplessness. He no longer wanted to focus on displacing the regime, and he even found the American Center's more political activities misguided. "American people say that political changes will change the conditions in our country," Thar Gyi said. "That's true. But I think we need to develop our own capacities. We are not ready for democracy. We don't have any good platform, good foundation, to get those changes." He spoke of the garbage that often blocked the drains, flooding the streets of Rangoon. Residents complained that the city was dirty, he said. "Where does that garbage come from? People throw it recklessly. When there was a flood, people said that is the responsibility of Yangon City Development Committee. It was their fault!" Thar Gyi's whisper gave his voice a strange urgency. "But you can't just say, 'You should take the responsibility!' That's why I want to use the arts. I want to teach people critical thinking."

The tradition of reading groups in Burma goes back to the nineteen-twenties, when the Burma Book Club was established by a British anthropologist named John S. Fur-

nivall. Under Burma's successive dictatorships, these clubs have met in secret, serving as forums for political discussion among groups of trusted friends. Ideas tend to reach Burma piecemeal twenty or thirty years after they've had their moment elsewhere. After the protests of 1988, intellectuals turned away from Marxism and embraced the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, Orwell's anti-totalitarian fictions, and Kafka. Recently, fragments from Jacques Derrida and the post-structuralists have begun to be championed in Rangoon as the latest model for the dismantling of tyranny.

In early 2007, a book club began meeting on Saturday afternoons at the American Center. The group's leaders were in their thirties and forties; many had become acquainted in prison. Each of them brought into the club one or two Burmese in their twenties who had no political experience. At its height, the club had forty members. Its purpose was to reach across the gap between the '88 Generation, which had been locked away for so many years, and younger people, for whom, as one woman in the club put it, the events of 1988 were "a fairy tale."

Over time, about ten of the younger students dropped out, after intelligence officers spoke to them and their university teachers. The leaders assumed that the club had been infiltrated by at least one government spy, and so they reserved the most sensitive topics—about Burmese politics and opposition strategy—for conversations outside the classroom.

One of the leaders was a writer in her late thirties, who asked to be identified as Hnin Se. "We didn't expect that much from these young people," she told me in Rangoon. "But the topics they raised were surprising. Some raised the question 'Why is this nation different from the rest of the world?' They knew the answer. They asked the question because they couldn't control their feelings." One of the students' favorite books was "Heroes Without Capes"—a Burmese collection of profiles of ordinary people who, in small ways, defied the authorities in order to improve the world immediately around them.

Hnin Se is tall and slender, with black hair flowing down her back; she cuts it short during times of crisis. She maintains the outward calm that is typical of the Burmese, but once, when I asked how the rule of the generals could ever end, she hissed, "Kill them all." She grew up in a fishing village in the Irrawaddy Delta. Her mother was a teacher and her father owned an ice factory; he took to drink and left the family, but not before encouraging his daughter's artistic temperament. By the age of six, Hnin Se had read "Gone with the Wind" in Burmese. At fourteen, she was sent to Rangoon to continue her education, and for years she picked up dried fish and rice sent by her mother to the Rangoon jetty and sold them in Aung San Market to support the family. She was in her third year at Rangoon University, and just beginning to write fiction, when the events of August, 1988, took place. She saw police driving students into Inya Lake—where many drowned—and beating and shooting others who tried to escape. "As a nineteen-year-old girl, I might not have any knowledge about democracy," she said, "but I had the sense to distinguish right from wrong." In 1991, she distributed poems protesting the government's refusal to let Aung San Suu Kyi, who had won the

Nobel Peace Prize, travel to Oslo. Hnin Se was arrested and sent to Insein. When she first laid eyes on the prison, she smiled. "I was already a writer, and I thought this would be a new experience," she said.

For the crime of opening her cell window, Hnin Se spent her early imprisonment on death row, in a block with condemned women. They had to remain silent during the day, but at night they talked through six-inch holes in their cell doors and sang Burmese popular songs. The women developed a deep solidarity, and Hnin Se made several close friends in prison, two of whom later joined the book club.

She was released in a general amnesty in 1992, and spent the next several years on the run, sometimes forced to sell dried fish and rice again. It was also the most prolific period of her life, and she became noted for her short stories. But the novel that she really wanted to write—about the political evolution of a Burmese girl—eluded her. She married, had two children, and moved into a narrow two-story house of wood and brick in eastern Rangoon, filled with books: Katharine Graham's "Personal History"; André Maurois's "The Art of Living," translated into English; and Burmese translations of Mahfouz and García Márquez. Instead of resuming political activity, she threw herself into work on behalf of the Burmese poor. It was a way for her to engage in social change without risking a return to Insein.

"Not tonight. The furniture is sentient again."

On a hazy Sunday morning in February, at the beginning of the hot season, we drove out of Rangoon, across the wide, sluggish Hlaing River, into a marshy landscape dotted with low-slung industrial buildings. Just off the highway, down a dirt road lined with banana trees and palm groves, was a village of five hundred families. Next to a muddy lily pond stood a monastery—two stories, with a rusted metal pagoda-style roof and walls of reclaimed boards and woven thatch. In these cramped quarters, monks ran a school for three hundred students, including sixty orphans. Hnin Se and four friends from her book club were helping to support the school, and had raised about a thousand dollars.

The junior monks and novices slept on planks on the lower level, in a sort of glorified crawl space. Upstairs, children were scattered across the floor, learning lessons. At lunchtime, young monks served rice, beans, and fish paste from huge cooking pots. The abbot received us on the floor of his little office, which was also his bedroom; piles of red-brown robes had been neatly folded before a golden Buddha. Hnin Se knelt before the abbot, brought her hands together, and bowed her head to the floor. The abbot was forty-six years old and from central Burma, the heartland of the *sangha*, or monkhood.

Hnin Se and the abbot spoke to me about the challenges of funding the school. “It’s very difficult to feed everyone in this compound,” she said. “So we pool the money from donations in a bank and get some interest.”

“We need at least fifty dollars a day,” the abbot said. This paid for two meatless meals daily. Ordinarily, monks live off alms, which they collect as they walk in a line through local neighborhoods, their begging bowls held out. But poverty has grown so deep and food prices so high that people can’t spare enough to feed the monks; many Burmese eat only once a day. At the same time, with fees for government schools out of reach, families increasingly bring their children to monasteries for a free education. The *sangha* is Burma’s safety net, but every year the monks have to do more with less.

The abbot was locked in a struggle with local authorities who were conspiring to sell the monastery’s land to factory owners across the highway. (Three hundred families from the village had already been displaced.) Every day, it seemed, there was a confrontation between the monks and the authorities. There was nothing passively transcendent about the monks I met in Burma. Their bare shoulders and biceps revealing robust physiques, they often reminded me of labor organizers or political strategists. When a company man showed up one morning to measure a piece of the land, a young monk came out to meet him, quarrelled, and punched him in the jaw.

“They want us to smile, we have to smile,” the abbot said of the government. “They want us to cry, we have to cry. We are living with our body but with their soul.” I asked him about the attitude of soldiers, most of whom are Buddhists, toward monks. “They’re from another planet,” he said. “They fear their commanders more than they fear punishment in the next life.”

A visitor arrived: a matronly woman from Rangoon with oversized glasses had come to pray, as she did every Sunday. Seeing us, she bowed obsequiously. The abbot told

me that she was a member of the regime's civilian mass movement, and that she was sent to keep an eye on him.

As Hnin Se and I left the monastery, four men in green *longyis* stood by and watched us. Something as small as a group of friends taking on a charitable project was irregular enough to arouse suspicion, and a foreigner meant nothing but trouble. We drove away without looking back.

The leaders of the '88 Generation who were released from prison in 2004 and 2005 waited a year or more before attempting any public actions. They then made the kind of simple, earnest gestures that give the Burmese democratic opposition its air of moral depth and political naïveté. There was the Open Heart Campaign, in which citizens wrote letters to Than Shwe describing their hardships. Then, there were White Sundays, when activists dressed in the color of purity and visited the families of political prisoners still behind bars. None of the '88 leaders seemed to have a long-term vision, but the formal opposition party, the National League for Democracy, was moribund—waiting patiently for Suu Kyi to release statements—and someone had to fill the void.

Last August, the regime abruptly announced that fuel subsidies would be eliminated, thereby doubling the price of bus fare in Rangoon. In spite of Burma's nearly three billion dollars in annual natural-gas sales, the national budget had critical shortfalls. The policy change forced thousands of people to walk instead of taking the bus. On August 19th, ten members of the '88 Generation held an emergency meeting and decided to test the junta. Their goal was to force a dialogue between the government and Suu Kyi. (An activist who attended the meeting told me, "Asking for regime change isn't very practical.") Later that day, a small group of activists entered the streets of Rangoon and, in solidarity with the working poor, began to walk—no signs, no chanting, no colors. Even so, the regime pounced. On August 21st, a dozen leaders of the new movement were arrested. (They are once again serving long sentences in Insein, often in solitary confinement.) The rest went into hiding. The moment of protest, now leaderless, appeared to be over.

Then, on September 5th, in the town of Pakokku, twenty miles up the Irrawaddy River from the magnificent medieval temples of Pagan, several hundred monks took to the streets chanting the *metta sutta*, the Buddhist scripture that urges a universal extension of kindness: "As a mother would risk her life / To protect her child, her only child, / Even so should one cultivate a limitless heart / With regard to all beings." It was clearly a continuation of the aborted August movement.

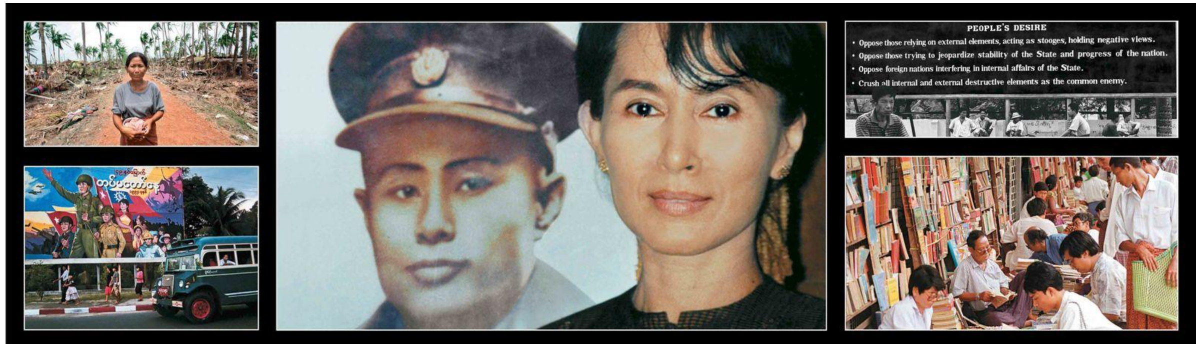
Monks have been politicized throughout modern Burmese history. The *sangha* led demonstrations against British rule and has played a part in every eruption of protest since 1962. "When Burmese people suffer, normally they don't dare to speak out," a monk who later fled to the Thai border town of Mae Sot said. "So we express their suffering for them." Thousands of townspeople in Pakokku cheered the monks, until the security forces moved in, firing over the monks' heads and tying some of them to utility poles and beating them with rifles. News of this violence—shocking in a country where monks are revered—spread quickly.

On September 9th, in Mandalay, half a dozen leaders from the most activist monasteries gathered in secret. They communicated in code, by mobile phone. ("Let's meet where we had tea together the last time.") At the meeting, they formed the All Burma Monks Alliance, an illegal act—monks, like all Burmese, are forbidden to form non-sanctioned organizations. The Alliance made four demands of the regime: apologize for the incident in Pakokku; lower commodity prices; release all political prisoners, including Suu Kyi; begin a dialogue with the opposition. The regime had nine days, until September 18th, to respond. The monk in Mae Sot, who attended the meeting, recalls, "I said, 'September 18th is good,' because the military took back power that day in 1988." He also pointed out the numerological significance of a deadline nine days after September 9th: 9+9+2+0+0+7=27. "The generals are superstitious. I knew they would go through these calculations."

The monks were aware that their demands would not be met—certainly, an apology from the generals was unimaginable. The list was strategic: the regime would look intransigent, allowing the monks to ratchet up the pressure. In general, the monks I interviewed were far more unsentimental in their political calculations than students and artists were; they thought like dedicated organizers who understood just how long and hard the battle would be. The monk in Mae Sot, who had the handshake of a stevedore, seemed to suggest even that the monks knew that lethal force was inevitable, and could work to their advantage. When I asked him whether he had studied the experiences of Gandhi and King, he smiled. "There was a movement earlier than them," he said. "And that is the teachings of Buddha."

September 18th came, with no response from the government. The monks began making peaceful marches to holy sites in Rangoon and Mandalay, with Burmese and foreign journalists contacted in advance to document the protests. (According to the monk in Mae Sot, there was a high-level meeting after each day's demonstration focussing on next-day planning and media outreach.) At first, the Alliance barred laypeople from joining the demonstrations, in order to preserve the spiritual character of the movement, but the entreaties of the public eventually compelled the monks to let them participate, in the form of human chains, lining either side of the monks' single-file columns. On September 21st, the demonstrations were formally opened to all. The next day, a group of monks in Rangoon walked down University Avenue, along Inya Lake, and cowed the police who stood at the barricades on the road to Aung San Suu Kyi's house. The Lady herself was at the front gate, with tears in her eyes. Pictures and news of the encounter were transmitted by local journalists to international outlets and to publications run by Burmese in exile; these stories were soon posted on Web sites accessible to people inside Burma. The effect of this media boomerang was to send tens of thousands more Burmese into the streets.

Among them were members of Hnin Se's book group and other students from the American Center. Hnin Se was out of the country at the time, but she learned, with pride, that four of her students, while protesting, had raised the flag of the banned All



Devastation after Cyclone Nargis and a military mural in Rangoon; the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi with a picture of her father, the independence hero Aung San; a propaganda billboard and one of Rangoon's many bookstalls.
Photography by (Top left): Corbis; (Bottom Left): Steve McCurry / Magnum (Middle): National League for Democracy / Corbis; (Top Right): manon ott; (Bottom Right): Charles Dharapak / AP

Burma Student Union, which depicted a fighting peacock. They called themselves the 2007 Student Union.

Throughout the uprising, the American Center was a crucial point of contact, where monks, youths, and '88ers could exchange messages that were otherwise too dangerous to transmit. Monks and students who had never encountered the might of the state got on the phone with veteran '88ers, and received tactical advice.

The September protests were led by a core of monks, but in downtown Rangoon the swelling crowds were essentially leaderless. A thirty-year-old blogger in Rangoon explained to me that this "decentralized" movement stood a better chance of surviving than the '88 version. "The brain of this government cannot understand postmodernism," he said. "In September, the trend of the demonstration was just like postmodernism, because it started everywhere. There's no main direction. When the government tried to arrest the leader of the demonstration, they could not find him or her."

Yet the September protests ended up conforming to the narrative structure of all the others. On September 25th and 26th, the soldiers of the 66th and 77th Light Infantry Divisions arrived in Rangoon, and began shooting monks and unarmed civilians. A lanky, guitar-loving sixteen-year-old boy was swept up in the protests and found himself outside a high school in the district of Tamwe. There he saw soldiers and militiamen shoot a monk in the head and drive an Army truck into a group of students carrying the peacock flag. The prospect of killing monks made some members of the regime pause. In Mandalay, it is widely believed, the regional commander cut a deal with the monks' leaders; no shots were fired. Burma's ruling council of ten generals was reportedly divided on whether to use force. Those in favor of violence won out, seven to three.

Two days into the crackdown, in which unknown numbers were killed—Burmese I spoke with claimed several dozen—the protests fizzled out. Thousands of people were arrested, monasteries were raided, and student leaders were rounded up. Among Hnin Se's students, three were jailed (one with a head injury so severe that he still hasn't recovered) and a fourth escaped to Thailand.

The American Center was one of the government's main targets. Most of the book group's leaders were arrested. The debate club stopped meeting, and the political-discussion class was disbanded.

On December 3rd, at the Ministry of Information in Naypyidaw, Khin Yi, the head of the Burmese police force, spoke at a press conference and presented the regime's version of the September events—the speech was headlined "Myanmar Government Really Desires Democracy." By then, enough arrested activists had been tortured, revealing the names of other participants, and a coherent story could be assembled. The government's facts were at least partly true: money had come from foreign organizations (George Soros's Open Society Institute, which has given almost forty million dollars to the Burmese democracy movement since 1994, was named several times); training had been provided in Rangoon at the American Center, as well as in Mae Sot; monks and students who had met in prison had become the leaders of a new wave of opposition whose ultimate goal was regime change. These facts were filtered through an outraged paranoia that could name names but had no grasp of motives. The police chief maintained that "bogus monks" and other subversives had been directed from abroad to act "under the pretext of the increase of fuel prices" and "disrupt law and order, and destabilize the peace and tranquillity of the State."

Thar Gyi, the theatre director, did not join the September protests. "I analyze that situation," he said five months later. "I'm not a professor of political science, but I have some experience, and I look at things and say, 'This is not an endgame.'"

Myat Min joined the marchers, and, although they were largely peaceful, he was disturbed by what he saw. "Many people were in a state of rage, hysteria—throwing bottles. Very few people realize the power of silence. Silence is harder to crush. We were expecting a few leaders who, like Gandhi, can meet their death very calmly. We didn't see that, and we were very disappointed." A friend of his from prison said, "The only one like that is Aung San Suu Kyi," and he added that the September events "had a very good form, but less content." The monks, they said, had chanted the *metta sutta* without genuine loving-kindness. There was still anger in their hearts. I told Myat Min and his friend that they had come out of prison with extremely high standards for politics. They didn't deny it.

For the past two decades, American policy toward Burma has been to isolate the regime through sanctions. This policy has been pursued as a moral response to a deplorable government, without much regard for its effectiveness. In Washington, Burma is an afterthought: a handful of senators pay attention to the issue, and a handful of advocates have their ear. A Western diplomat in Rangoon told me, "American foreign policy has been outsourced to the exiles and their patrons on the Hill. There's a lack

of interest at the State Department in Burma." The diplomat added, "Sanctions are a joke—they're just a pressure release. The generals don't care what the rest of the world thinks about them, because they don't think about the rest of the world. What they care about is their financial and physical security."

Win Min, an analyst of the Burmese military who lives in Thailand, told me, "Burmese military officers say that they have three cards to play in the international community: China, India, and *ASEAN*"—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "They say they don't need to worry as long as they have these cards." China and India have been competing for contracts to explore offshore oil and gas, and to build a gas pipeline across Burma. Thailand, a member of *ASEAN*, buys most of Burma's gas and other commodities.

These economic relationships have always trumped moral concerns. Last September, after the world saw pictures of monks and civilians being shot in Rangoon, China, which sells arms to the regime, issued the mildest expression of concern, then tried to prevent the U.N. Security Council from even discussing Burma. India said nothing, and at the height of the crackdown its petroleum minister signed a gas contract in Naypyidaw. *ASEAN*, which admitted Burma as a member in 1997, officially deplored the violence. Two months later, Ibrahim Gambari, of Nigeria, the U.N. envoy to Burma, was scheduled to give a briefing at an *ASEAN* meeting in Singapore on the prospect of talks between the Burmese government and Aung San Suu Kyi. At a dinner two nights earlier, the Burmese Prime Minister, Thein Sein, announced to his *ASEAN* counterparts that Burma would walk out if Gambari was allowed to speak. The briefing was cancelled.

Burma is one of those countries, like Zimbabwe and Sudan, whose brutal rulers have successfully defied Washington and managed to make America seem impotent in its self-righteousness. The occupation of Iraq has been a boon to the Burmese generals. The idea, popular in the nineteen-nineties, that the world may intervene in countries whose governments show no regard for human life is now seen as reflecting Western arrogance; China's approach of tolerating human-rights abuses in the name of stability and non-interference has become the standard. While the West stays out of Burma, Chinese businessmen are making huge investments in Mandalay, pulling the country's economy toward the Chinese border. Rather than being a throwback to a more benighted age, Burma might be a picture of the geopolitical future.

The American policy of isolating Burma is largely considered a failure. But, if reforming the regime is the goal, the alternative policy—economic engagement, along the lines of Burma's neighbors—has also failed. Every year, the junta grows stronger while the country sinks deeper into poverty. A Burmese journalist explained, "The regime here, unlike regimes elsewhere, is trying to *prevent* the formation of a middle class." Sean Turnell, an economist and a Burma expert at Macquarie University, in Sydney, said, "The biggest sanction on Burma is the regime: no investment, no property law, no rule of law, restrictions on exports and imports, corruption off the dial." He pointed out that Burma's sale of natural gas is recorded at the official exchange rate of

six Burmese kyats per dollar, whereas the real rate is more like twelve hundred kyats. These clandestine profits are sent offshore or hoarded in Naypyidaw. "It's like a spouse not declaring his income and making the family starve, even though he's earning a Wall Street salary," Turnell said. According to Thiha Saw, the editor of a business magazine in Rangoon, there has been no public budget in Burma since 2000.

"It's my youth, and I don't have to enjoy it if I don't want to."

The hope—and it isn't much more than that—of critics of American policy is that a new generation of military officers will come to power with the understanding that government by plunder has hit diminishing returns. Thant Myint-U said that the pragmatists among Burma's leaders-in-waiting will be helped if international pressure eases. "If there's one thing that's fuelled Burma's many problems over the last half century, it's been its isolation. If outside economic relationships are reduced to a few oil companies, Chinese logging companies, and twelve U.N. agencies, it's easy for the generals to play games. If we're talking about thousands of individual business relationships, even

if it leads to a certain amount of corruption, you'll have a much more open political space." But Win Min argues that only a combination of international pressure and engagement can bring about reform. "In the history of the Burmese military, pragmatists have never got the upper hand," he said.

Even the staunchest opponents of the regime—such as Maureen Aung-Thwin, of the Open Society Institute's Burma project, which funds civic and political activities inside and outside Burma—acknowledge that the military will have to play a role in any transition to democracy. Having strangled civil society, hollowed out the bureaucracy, and locked up the political opposition, the Army can rightly claim to be the only institution capable of running things. The junta held a referendum in May on a new constitution that mandates elections in 2010 and a central role for the military in future governments. (The referendum passed; open criticism of the plan was punishable by twenty years in prison.) The opposition is deeply divided on whether or not to go along with this "road map." In general, I found dissidents inside the country more willing than the political opposition in exile to accept the inevitable compromises through which they might escape a life under the generals' cruel delusions. They don't want foreigners to boycott Burma; they long for contact with the world. At the same time, they are less likely than outsiders to be gulled by the regime's feints toward openness. "In historical terms, fifty years is not a long period," a journalist in Rangoon said. "So we may not get to enjoy democracy in our lifetimes. But my son or grandson—I'm sure of that."

On April 29th, the Burmese government announced that rain showers, with winds of forty-five miles an hour, were approaching the southern coast, from the Bay of Bengal. The population never learned what was coming until Nargis, a Category 4 cyclone, made landfall on May 2nd, with winds three times as strong. Nargis raged all night, and the storm surge drowned much of the Irrawaddy Delta in twelve feet of water. Whole villages vanished. Families tried to survive by climbing palm trees in the darkness and holding on until the morning; afterward, the corpses of parents and children were found with their wrists lashed to one another. At least a hundred and thirty thousand people died, making Nargis the worst natural disaster in Burma's history.

In Rangoon, a computer programmer watched the storm from the seventh floor of a building in Chinatown that swayed in the wind. Satellite dishes and water tanks flew off rooftops; boats blew back and forth across the river. In the morning, he went out with his son and found a city that had lost most of its great old trees. For the next two or three days, there was scarcely any government presence on the streets. Citizens were trying to remove the trees blocking the roads with handsaws. No news was coming in from the devastated delta. It was as if the government had ceased to exist.

"I realized we must do this ourselves," the programmer said. His cell phone was still working, and he called friends in Upper Burma, asking them to send down bags of rice. By the fifth day, he and his friends in Rangoon had organized themselves into an emergency-relief team, bringing supplies to refugees who had gathered in makeshift camps at schools and monasteries. At one site, the first evidence of civil authority

appeared in the form of two policemen, who demanded to know what the programmer and his friends were doing. A monk shouted at the officers, "This is the job you should be doing!" The policemen backed away before the refugees could turn into a mob.

The night of the storm, a wave of water entered Hnin Se's small house and destroyed her books. She had written in an essay that she let herself cry only when she was outside the country. This time, she could not contain her despair.

The next morning, she ventured out and met people who had lost their entire houses. "I realized their situation was worse than mine," she said. "And I wanted to help." A friend from the delta arrived to tell her that he had lost eight nephews and nieces. A week after the storm, Hnin Se and her husband managed to reach the delta. She saw fifteen corpses—floating in rivers, sprawled on the banks, flung into flooded rice paddies. Somehow, being amid the destruction made her feel strong again, because at least she was doing something.

I returned to Burma a month after the storm. Rangoon looked emptier and far less green, as if the ravenous urban decay had consumed whole buildings and trees. In the park around Shwedagon Pagoda, trunks and branches had been cut and stacked like firewood; the root systems, torn out of the earth, were too massive to move, and lay in agonized poses. But the Burmese had a feverish sense of purpose. Everyone I had met on my first trip was collecting relief supplies for the delta, with no thought of returning to normal routine. They barely had time to sleep, and many of them fell ill after taking arduous trips south, amid monsoon rains. Hnin Se was leading a group of friends to the delta twice a week. The students at Kit Young's music school were running convoys of trucks to the delta; in one refugee center, children had drawn pictures of the night when the world seemed to be ending. Thar Gyi was living in the delta town of Labutta, organizing theatre games for cyclone orphans who were numb—except when it rained and they were terrified.

Myat Min and two friends from prison also made trips to the delta, then realized that there were refugees around Rangoon who were getting no help. In an e-mail, Myat Min wrote an account of one visit to refugees in Hlaing Tharyar, across the river from the city. "We really wanted to buy them bamboos and plastic sheets," he said. "But we did not do that, believing many of them who are eager to start small businesses would resell those materials at a lower price." Instead, Myat Min and his friends donated food and clothing, including a hundred dresses. He went on, "Before we left, we made some secret cash donations."

A Burmese journalist, speaking of the students, told me, "The American Center opened their eyes." Then, he said, Nargis set them in motion. Several years ago, foreign-aid workers debated whether, after four decades of dictatorship, anything like civil society still existed in Burma. The question was answered by Nargis. When I arrived, the government was harassing the volunteer convoys and throwing bureaucratic obstacles in front of foreign-aid workers. The World Food Program was haggling with the authorities to bring in ten helicopters scavenged from places like Uganda and Ukraine. American and French warships were idling offshore with relief equipment, while the

government tried to figure out if they were preparing to invade. Nothing was working except the artists' associations, the small businesses, the hiking clubs, the student groups, and the networks of friends that are barely allowed to exist in Burma.

"They have become a movement," Thiha Saw, the magazine editor, said. "They are writers, comedians, engineers, doctors, small groups—but they become like activists."

It was only a matter of time before the junta recognized the emerging threat. In June, the government arrested seven members of a group that was collecting rotting corpses around the delta and giving them proper burials. During my visit, a famous comedian named Zaganar was arrested after trying to send footage from the delta to the exile media. (I had tried to interview Zaganar on my first trip, but I arrived early at the restaurant where we were to meet and caught the cleaning staff wiretapping the room; our lunch had to be cancelled.)

One morning in mid-June, I drove east of Rangoon with Myat Min and his friends to visit a refugee encampment. After we crossed the Bago River, a group of three policemen stopped us at a roadside checkpoint and demanded that we turn around. "Insurgent area," one of the officers explained cheerfully. Myat Min had a hard time suppressing a laugh. "They don't want foreign eyes in the affected areas," he said.

We then drove to another camp, on the west side of Rangoon, near the monastery that Hnin Se helped support. In a drenching rain, we found forty-seven families living along a muddy path under blue tarps donated by the Red Cross. The husbands were away at jobs in a dye factory; the wives crouched on bamboo slats with their children, who appeared ill and listless. One woman laughed when I asked if they had enough to eat.

"Regime change can happen in many ways besides mass revolution," Myat Min said later. He said that after the September events and the cyclone Burmese society was unravelling. "We will see more chaos than organized struggle against the regime," he said. "But I also sense the end of the regime is getting nearer and nearer."

Six weeks after the storm, the Burmese government and international-aid groups were still negotiating the rules under which relief workers could operate in the delta. On the whiteboard at the Save the Children office in Rangoon, a chart that tracked travel requests noted in numerous cases "Lost in D.S.W.!"—the Department of Social Welfare. An aid official, fuming, said to me, "We're trying to uphold pure humanitarian standards—that's a concept the generals don't recognize. We're always trying to control the idiocy of their actions, because it always gets interpreted negatively outside and has a major impact on people's willingness to help."

After the storm, senior American military officers tried to persuade their Burmese counterparts to allow them to unload relief supplies. Admiral Timothy J. Keating, of the U.S. Pacific Command, met Vice-Admiral Soe Thein, the chief of the Burmese Navy, at the old Rangoon airport terminal. According to a Burmese man who attended the meeting, Soe Thein said to Keating, the commander of all American forces in the Pacific, "Everything is O.K. You're just a little late." This was on May 12th, when most survivors in the delta had not yet received any help. Keating proposed that a Burmese

"We divided it up so I do everything right and he does everything wrong."

officer ride along on American helicopter relief flights, but Soe Thein brushed away the offer. When an American civilian pressed him about the condition of refugees, he gathered his maps and said, “This meeting is over.”

Hnin Se, whose hair was now cut short, had made ten trips to the Delta, bringing rice and clothing to remote villages that had received almost no help. She was suffering from exhaustion. The authorities were telling groups like hers to hand over their supplies. Unauthorized foreigners were being sent back to Rangoon and, in a few cases, expelled from the country, but Hnin Se offered to take me to the delta.

We left Rangoon in a pre-dawn rain. Hnin Se, wearing jeans and a head scarf, had somehow commandeered what seemed to be a rusted-out city bus. Inside were eighteen young Burmese, of whom she was the clear leader—two booksellers, a goldsmith, a photocopy attendant, a former soldier, a graduate student reading “Colonial Policy and Practice,” by John S. Furnivall, the founder of the Burma Book Club. The bus rattled and bounced through mud and rain down to the delta, with a hundred fifty-kilo sacks of rice ballasting the rear. We hit a police checkpoint, and Hnin Se gestured for me to disappear under the hood of my windbreaker. But it was early Sunday morning, the search was cursory, and we were waved on after being given a flyer that said, essentially, “Do Not Feed the Cyclone Victims.”

At mid-morning, we arrived in a town called Kun Chan Kone and boarded a fifty-foot boat—home to a fishing family who had lost their house in the storm. As we sailed down the Toe River, a mile-wide branch of the Irrawaddy, Hnin Se’s friends gazed at the palm-lined shore, where there had once been village after village. There appeared to be nothing left.

The Irrawaddy Delta is a labyrinth of waterways that wind toward the Bay of Bengal; many are almost impossible to navigate. For hours, we drifted slowly in fog and drizzle along narrow channels, the overhanging branches of damaged trees scraping the deck. On either side of us, paddies were flooded and, although the monsoon rice season was nearing its height, there was little sign of planting or plowing. The bones of drowned water buffalo gleamed as white as the storks in the tall grass, and twice we saw human remains on the riverbank.

At noon, we reached the first village, at the bend of a stream. Dozens of villagers gathered at the little jetty, the women and girls wearing on their cheeks and foreheads *thanaka*—a yellow powder that is both a sunscreen and a cosmetic. As we disembarked, a village leader with a megaphone called men and boys to come offload sixty-four bags of rice. Almost two hundred villagers had died. Most of the fourteen hundred survivors were living in makeshift hovels, with families doubled up.

Hnin Se led the way along a path to the monastery, a collapsed ruin of century-and-a-half-old timber. The abbot received us in his pagoda. This was how the supplies were distributed—not through the local authorities, whom no one trusted, but through the monks. The government’s contribution to the village thus far consisted of thirty-five blankets, fifteen bags of rice, and five tarps. Here and throughout the delta, the private effort was keeping people fed.

We sat on the floor of the monks' quarters and were given a lunch that seemed, in these circumstances, much too grand. One of the women who served us was a thirty-year-old whose house had been out in the fields, and so she and her family had been mercilessly exposed when the wall of water came. She had clung to a tree for a day and a night while, one after another, her husband and four of her children were carried away. A two-year-old daughter who had been staying with the woman's sister was all that was left of her family. "We didn't suffer alone," she said. "All of us, together, suffered. That's how we can survive."

By the time we returned to the pagoda, the rain was coming down in torrents. The world beyond the village had disappeared. Hnin Se had told me that, through her relief work in the delta, she had learned how few of her countrymen knew that they had any rights, even the right to complain. The Burmese people were even further from being free than she had imagined. But at least one thing was achieved. Beyond Rangoon, the violence of the September events had been only a rumor among the vast numbers of poor people; the criminal aftermath of the cyclone was something that they saw for themselves. "When I was younger, I hoped and waited for outside help to come to our country and liberate it," she said. "Now I realize that we have to rely on ourselves."

A crowd of women and children had gathered outside the pagoda, clutching plastic bags. Two men in Hnin Se's group opened the sacks of rice and poured their contents onto a sheltered walkway outside the pagoda, making a great white mound. A young monk stood with a megaphone and called out the name of each of the three hundred and eighty-five surviving families. There were far too many people to take cover beneath the shelter, and the villagers stood in the rain, shivering under umbrellas, pieces of plastic, and straw hats, waiting for their turn to step forward and receive three scoops of rice and a piece of clothing from Hnin Se.

The Ted K Archive

George Packer
Drowning
Letter from Rangoon
August 18, 2008

Published in the print edition of The New Yorker, the August 25, 2008 issue, with the headline "Drowning." <newyorker.com/magazine/2008/08/25/drowning>
"Reading was banned at Insein until 1999, ... he inscribed on plastic bags stories that he remembered, including dialogue, and passed them to his friends, who read the texts against the light. He retold the story of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, whom he had read about in Time and found fascinating because of his hatred of modernity."
George Packer was a staff writer at The New Yorker from 2003 to 2018, and is the author of several books, including "The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America."

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