

I. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The regime's use of mass arrests, murder, torture, and imprisonment has failed to extinguish our desire for the freedom that was stolen from us. We have taken their best punch. Now it is the generals who must fear the consequences of their actions. We adhere to nonviolence, but our spine is made of steel. There is no turning back. It matters little if my life or the lives of colleagues should be sacrificed on this journey. Others will fill our sandals, and more will join and follow.

—BUDDHIST MONK AND PROTEST LEADER U GAMBIRA, NOVEMBER 2007.

I'm being watched all the time. I am considered an organizer. Between noon and 2 p.m. I am allowed to go out of the monastery. But then I'm followed. I had to shake off my tail to come to this meeting today. I'm not afraid, not for myself. I'm not afraid to tell foreign journalists what happened. And I'm prepared to march again when the opportunity arises. We don't want this junta. And that's what everyone at my monastery thinks as well.

—BUDDHIST MONK, U MANITA, BURMA, JULY 2008.

[S]omething was achieved [in September 2007]. A whole new generation of monks has been politicized. We're educating them. We're still boycotting the military. We are not accepting gifts and offerings from them. One of the reasons why the regime will fall is globalization. No country can be isolated like before. Look at Indonesia, that regime fell. Now it's a democracy. We want the UN's Security Council to take up the Burma issue, that the UN investigates what really happened.... But China and Russia can use their veto. Please tell the world what's happening in our country!

—BUDDHIST MONK U IGARA, BURMA, JULY 2008.



Morning prayers at a monastery on the outskirts of Mandalay.
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THE RESISTANCE OF THE MONKS

Buddhism and Activism in Burma



A monk collects alms in a suburb of Mandalay.
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Since the Burmese army’s brutal military crackdown on Buddhist monks and other peaceful protestors in September 2007, a constant refrain has been, “What happened to the monks?”

This report attempts to answer that question. It tells the story of many among hundreds of monks who were arrested and beaten, and the more than 250 monks and nuns who remain in prison today, often with decades remaining on their sentences. It tells the story of large numbers of monks who left their monasteries, returning to their villages or seeking refuge in other countries. And it tells the story of monks who remained, many of whom live under constant surveillance.



Burmese nuns pray before eating lunch at a monastery in Mandalay.
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A monk walks past a propaganda billboard in central Mandalay. Signs like this one are common in every city, town, and village, and usually written in Burmese.

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Nearly all share the conviction that a time will soon come when Burmese monks again will be called on to serve as a public voice of conscience.

Many of the stories are sad or disturbing, but they exemplify the behavior of Burma's military government as it clings to power through violence, fear, and repression.

What happened to a monk named Ashin Pannassiri provides a stark illustration. At the age of 18, he joined the *Sangha*, or monkhood, Burma's most revered institution. Ten years later he was being kicked and beaten in custody by Special Branch police for his involvement in demonstrations against military rule in September 2007. "When I could not endure any more torture, I head-butted the table in front of me, trying to knock myself unconscious," he told Human Rights Watch. "A police officer sitting beside me held me and said, "Please don't do like that, my reverend. We are acting under the command of higher authority."



Ashin Pannassiri was later transferred to an isolated labor camp near Burma's western border with India. "There, I was chained on both legs and, like the other prisoners, had to break stones and dig ditches. I and about 140 other prisoners worked seven days a week, from dawn to dusk, without any break."

After weeks of hard labor his interrogators returned to ask him more questions. "It seems that they had got some information about me from monks and other activists who

had been arrested and interrogated. I was beaten again; they punched me in my chest and head. I was interrogated from nine in the morning to six in the evening, and I was not allowed to eat or drink anything. I realized that I would be killed if they took me to another place." The now 28-year-old monk managed to escape from the camp, and walked through the jungle and mountains to India, where Human Rights Watch interviewed him and where he still resides.

Ashin Pannassiri's ordeal exemplifies the Burmese military government's repression of members of the Buddhist monkhood who dared to take to the streets in 2007. In September of that year, thousands of crimson-robed monks began marching in Burma's former capital and largest city, calling on the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to address declining living standards for an already poor population and begin a genuine dialogue with the country's political opposition. In the end, weeks of gradually growing demonstrations were violently dispersed by security forces, a crackdown transmitted across the world's television screens thanks to internet and cell phone technology. Hundreds of monks and nuns were arrested, detained, interrogated, and tortured. Many more were ordered or threatened to disrobe by the authorities and sent back to their home villages.

In one sense, this was nothing new. Burmese monks have played an important role at many critical historical junctures and, in response, the authorities have often cracked down hard. Monks have long been seen as a political and social threat to military rule in particular and, since 1962, successive military governments have gone to great lengths to sideline the *Sangha* from the country's political life.

In another sense, however, the protests and the government response were unprecedented. The events of September 2007 were the worst ever assault on the *Sangha*, worse than anything that happened to the *Sangha* during the British colonial period, the 1962-1988 military-led avowedly socialist regime, or crackdowns on political activities in 1988, 1990, 1996, and 2003. The crackdown on monks in 2007 meant that the government lost whatever shred of legitimacy it may have had in the eyes of many, if not most, Burmese. These events also discredited the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the official leadership body of the *Sangha*, which lined up in support of the military government.

It is unclear how the monks will react in the future to continued repression. The crackdown, massive prison sentences for many monks and nuns, the exile of many, and the constant surveillance of many of those remaining suggest that political activism by monks could be sharply curtailed. Ahead of the second anniversary of the 2007 crackdown, surveillance of monasteries and intimidation and restrictions on movements of monks has increased to deter any repeat of the 2007 demonstrations.



Nuns collect alms on the streets of Rangoon.
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A Buddhist monk who had three toes shot off during the September 2007 crackdown, recently had one leg amputated after it became infected. August 22, 2009.

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Yet, given Burma's history, it is unlikely that the challenge from the *Sangha* is over. As one monk defiantly told Human Rights Watch:

We don't have any organization any more. We have no way of keeping in touch with each other. Before, both monks and laymen could communicate with each other. Now everything is crushed. We have no contact. Many have disappeared, or they have been arrested, or moved to other monasteries outside Rangoon. We can just wait and see. We are still not accepting offerings from the military. We're waiting to go out and protest again.

Burma's Buddhist clergy is huge. Of a population of 54 million, there are an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 monks in approximately 45,000 registered monasteries. There are no

official figures of the number of nuns, though estimates suggest 50,000. More than 90 percent of people living in Burma are Buddhist, with the remainder mostly Christian and Muslim. Not many aspects of everyday life in Burma are untouched by Buddhism or the *Sangha's* role in providing spiritual guidance and pivotal social mediation. Monks, far from the common Western view of being almost otherworldly, depend on community support for their day-to-day survival. In a symbiotic relationship, the *Sangha* provides spiritual guidance and comfort and maintains safe spaces for worship and basic social services, while the lay people around them provide material support and funding.

The clergy has often been at the forefront of social protest movements. Under British colonialism, monks were key leaders in agitating for independence and calling for political, educational, and social reforms by representing the broader population against capricious foreign rule. In particular, the "shoe question" in the early twentieth century was a spark for anti-British activities. In Buddhist pagodas it is a serious affront to wear shoes of any kind, etiquette that British soldiers and officials refused to observe. This issue became the focus for a host of other grievances that colonialism



generated. In particular, monks were appalled that the forcible exile of Burma's monarchy had also removed their key agent of patronage: Burmese kings bestowed money, titles, land, and pagodas on the *Sangha* in return for religious legitimacy, a celestial endorsement. The British had broken a centuries-old link between church and state, making average people the monks' only source of support.

Following Burma's independence in 1948, the monks were once again courted by politicians. The democracy period in Burma between 1948-1962 was also marked by attempts by elites to turn the *Sangha* to the service of the state, and in one ill-fated move the democratically elected prime minister U Nu tried to make Buddhism the state religion. Successive military regimes since 1962 have attempted to control and co-opt Buddhism and the loyalty of the monks to their own political and security agendas by bestowing religious titles and extending financial support and patronage, so that monks will be compliant and neutral. Attempts by politicians and other leaders to use the patronage of the *Sangha* for political gain have been a tactic of successive elites, including opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

U Rakhine Tun, a Buddhist monk, shows a scar from a severe wound on the back of his head that serves as a reminder of the beating he received by riot police during the September 2007 protests. August 22, 2009.

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Monks were at the forefront of major anti-government demonstrations in 1974, 1988, and in 2007. U Pannacara, a 27-year-old monk, explained to Human Rights Watch why monks get involved in political, not just spiritual, acts:

Traditionally, we monks are not supposed to be politically active. The military has ruled our country for more than 40 years, and they don't care about the welfare of the people, they care only for themselves and their relatives, and how to remain in power forever. That was why the people rose up against them. There are three powerful groups in Burma: the *sit-tha* (sons of war), that's the military, the *kyaung-tha* (sons of the school), the students, and the *paya-tha* (sons of the Buddha). That's us, the monks.

U Eitthariya, a Buddhist monk, was one of the organizers of the September 2007 demonstrations in Burma. He explained to Human Rights Watch his decision to become more politically active:

There are two main reasons. Most of the Sangha have families, so they see the social problems. All monks have feelings for their families, and we didn't have an opportunity to express this. Low living standards of the people affect the monks because we depend on the people to support us. Especially in Pakokku and Mandalay, there are lots of monks who cannot be supported. Everyone knows the justice system doesn't work and that you need money and contacts with the authorities. This makes the economic hardships even worse. Secondly, there was bloodshed against the monks in Pakokku. Even under the British we were not treated like this.

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THE 2007 CRACKDOWN

The September 2007 protests were sparked by the violent beating of a monk by local officials in the northern town of Pakokku, following a small march by monks protesting poor living standards. This incident, although isolated, shocked

many Burmese and was the catalyst for a sweeping, nationwide movement. An underground monk organization formed, based on longstanding semi-political activities many monks were engaged in: literary clubs, English language classes, occasional anti-government activities.



Monks take part in a protest against military rule in Rangoon on September 22, 2007.

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towns. While Rangoon was the focus, the “saffron revolution” was not just an ethnic Burman affair. Ethnic Shan monks and monks from Arakan State in Burma’s west, now and traditionally some of the best organized and perhaps politically most active in the country, also participated. Many monks also marched in the Mon State capital of Moulmein.

The military government tried to paint the protests as being fuelled by “bogus monks” supported by exiled pro-democracy activists in Thailand and elsewhere. But Human Rights Watch’s research shows that although such exile support existed, the 2007 protests were the result of spontaneous local reactions to longstanding grievances. Many monks interviewed by Human Rights Watch stated unequivocally that their involvement in the demonstrations was motivated by widespread public frustration over declining living standards and denial of basic freedoms. Anger had long simmered due to close government monitoring of neighborhoods, workplaces, and monasteries for signs of dissent. Standards of education, health care, and basic services had declined dramatically over the preceding several years and corruption was rampant.

The government’s violent responses to the demonstrations indicate how seriously the SPDC took the threat to its rule. Monks were publicly beaten, shot, and violently arrested around iconic sites of worship such as the Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon. The security forces raided monasteries at night, dragging away hundreds of monks to abusive interrogations and arbitrary detention. The leaders of the ABMA were either arrested, fled the country, or went underground.

The government’s crackdown on the monks continues to this day, with oppressive surveillance, continued arrests of monks suspected of involvement in political activities, and many monks undergoing secret and unfair trials and receiving draconian sentences. In late 2008, the authorities sentenced scores of monks and nuns to long prison terms for their involvement in the 2007 demonstrations. Many monks who were arrested in the raid on Rangoon’s Artharwaddy Monastic School in September 2007 received sentences with hard labor. A leader of the ABMA, 28-year-old U Gambira, was arrested in November 2007 after several weeks in hiding from the authorities. In November 2008, he was sentenced to 68 years in prison for a range of offenses related to unlawful association and forming illegal organizations (later reduced to 63 years). By August 2009, 237 monks remained in Burmese prisons, as well as several nuns arrested in connection with the 2007 demonstrations.

The All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) was created and on September 9, 2007, issued a warning to the military government to start listening to the people or soldiers and officers would face religious excommunication. The SPDC’s failure to respond to the ABMA’s demands by the deadline of September 18 led to monks joining popular street protests that had spread that month in Rangoon and several smaller

CYCLONE NARGIS

On May 2, 2008, Burma was struck by its worst natural disaster in modern history. Cyclone Nargis tore into Burma's Irrawaddy Delta, the country's rice bowl and the home of millions of people—mostly small farmers. No one knows exactly how many people died, but many estimates claim nearly 150,000 people perished. According to a joint assessment by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the UN, and the Burmese government, some 2.4 million people were severely affected by the cyclone, out of an estimated 7.4 million living in the affected townships.

The official response by the SPDC was to control, for its own purposes, all domestic and international efforts to send relief aid to the affected areas of the Irrawaddy Delta and around Rangoon. Foreign supplies were delayed, and relief goods on US, British, and French warships off the coast of Burma were refused. When UN and multilateral aid supplies arrived in Burma the security services tried to control their distribution.

Buddhist monks were prominent in trying to fill the vacuum in the government's response at the local level. In the near absence of government services, Burmese civil society scrambled to help, either as private donors, family networks, religious organizations, or as Burmese employees of international agencies. Buddhist monks provided crucial logistical guidance for the distribution of aid supplies and offered monasteries and pagodas as shelter for survivors (often the sturdy monasteries were the only buildings left standing in devastated villages).

The monks proved once again the pivotal role they play in Burmese society. A byproduct of their response was the enhancement of their reputation in comparison to that of the military and SPDC-controlled civil society organizations, which were either nowhere to be seen or busy pursuing their own agendas. Gradually, the SPDC asserted control over the haphazard efforts and started to take credit for the relief operation, sidelining the religious networks, Burmese civil society organizations, and local and international relief agencies that did most of the work. As in the past, the monks had responded admirably to a crisis, only to be pushed aside by the military.

Many monks were forced to curtail or conceal their relief activities. Some of the monks, such as U Eitthariya, who had been involved in the 2007 demonstrations, attracted the attention of the authorities and were forced to flee to neighboring countries. The repression that intensified against the *Sangha* following the crackdown continued in the aftermath of the cyclone, as all community activities by monks were seen as political challenges by the SPDC. Health and education activities in some monasteries were forced to close if the military junta perceived them as being too closely linked to opposition figures. The monks were once again forced to show fealty to the ruling generals or remain silent and inactive.





A small group of Burmese aid workers deliver a kilogram of rice and cooking oil to each family in a village on the eastern Irrawaddy delta coast. The aid was supplied by private Burmese donors.
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A monk at a monastery on the outskirts of Mandalay waits to collect alms donated by a family from Mandalay.

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MONKS AND THE FUTURE OF BURMA

There are limits to what a monks' movement can achieve in Burma. Monks can be catalysts for change, but they cannot be the leaders of a pro-democracy movement. Their religious vows and the nature of the *Sangha* do not allow it. The long-term impact of the monks' challenging the authoritarian state may well be the symbolism of members of Burma's most revered institution being violently crushed by the military. These are images the people of Burma will never forget. They have also had a major impact on perceptions of the Burmese military government around the world. That the monks were trying to impress upon the generals that people throughout the country were suffering from declining living standards, repression of fundamental freedoms, and political marginalization made their protests even more powerful. The socially active *Sangha* succeeded in raising the stakes of Burma's political deadlock by clearly stating their opposition to military rule, and in increasing international awareness to a level not achieved by anyone other than Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The junta's mishandling of the Cyclone Nargis disaster exacerbated the already grave situation in the country. While the "shoe issue" marked the beginning of the end of colonial rule in Burma, it remains to be seen what impact the events of 2007-2008 will have on Burma's future. If they spell the beginning of the end of military rule in Burma, history will show that monks were at the forefront of that long awaited change.



A family donates food to the 2300 monks who study and live at a monastery on the outskirts of Mandalay.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BURMA

- **Respect freedom of religion for all religious communities in Burma.**
- **Immediately exonerate and release all monks and nuns arbitrarily detained or sentenced to prison for engaging in peaceful political activities, including those arrested for their involvement in the 2007 pro-democracy demonstrations.**
- **Punish those responsible for torture and ill-treatment of monks in custody and members of the security services who used excessive force during the 2007 demonstrations and in raids on monasteries.**
- **Rescind the ban on independent monastic organizations such as the ABMA and other social welfare and education associations organized by the *Sangha*.**
- **Ensure freedom of movement, assembly, and of expression for members of religious orders throughout Burma.**
- **Grant voting rights to members of religious orders before the 2010 elections.**
- **Encourage monks to participate in civil society work without having to go through government authority, and encourage monasteries to continue to be active in local development initiatives.**

TO CONCERNED STATES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- **Pressure the Burmese military government to respect fundamental freedoms for members of religious orders in Burma.**
- **Make the release of all political prisoners, including Buddhist monks and nuns, a precondition to any official political, diplomatic, or trade meeting with Burmese government officials.**
- **Support stronger measures in the United Nations Security Council to ensure religious freedom and basic freedoms of Burmese citizens ahead of planned elections in 2010.**



Burma