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Burma's opposition movement: A house divided

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There were always divisions within Myanmar's opposition, which was always a very diverse and broad-based movement. However, during 2008, it was increasingly obvious that these rifts were becoming worse. Not only were there personality clashes and differences over specific policies, but even the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and her advocacy of 'active pacifism' were being questioned. These developments could only weaken the opposition and work to the advantage of the military regime.

Burma's opposition movement has always been strong, but never united. After 20 years of struggle, with no sign that the military government is weakening, the fissures in the movement seem to be more pronounced and the divisions more obvious. This could have far-reaching consequences.

Burmese politics has long been known for its fissiparous tendencies. Institutional structures and processes have been weak. Ideological, ethnic and religious loyalties have been strong. Parties and pressure groups have formed around key personalities, rather than durable policy platforms. Patron–client relationships have been the norm, including in the armed forces. And power has been seen as an absolute, making political contests zero-sum games. All this has led to factionalism and instability. Such traits can also be found in the opposition movement.

After Burma's armed forces crushed the 1988 prodemocracy uprising and took back direct political power, the opposition movement divided into two broad camps. One was made up largely of students and other activists who fled to Burma's rugged border areas and formed armed insurgent groups. They forged loose alliances with ethnic guerrillas and dedicated themselves to the violent overthrow of the military regime. Some political exiles even advocated a campaign of terrorist attacks inside Burma.

Most prodemocracy campaigners, however, sought a peaceful transfer of power. Even after the regime ignored the results of the 1990 elections and clamped down hard on dissident groups, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD continued to advocate a negotiated solution to Burma's political crisis. Others, like the 88 Generation Students Group, have staged peaceful protests against the regime's human rights abuses and economic mismanagement.¹ With foreign help, exiled groups in Thailand have provided training courses in the techniques of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance.

Within these two broad camps there have been deep divisions. In 1992, for example, the militant All Burma Students' Democratic Front split into two. In 1996, one faction executed 15 of its own members, who were accused of being government spies but were more likely the victims of an internal power struggle.² Outside Burma, the opposition movement fragmented into numerous groups, holding a wide range of views. Since 1988, there have been public disagreements over critical issues like the merits of a dialogue with the regime, the impact of foreign aid and the efficacy of economic sanctions.

The NLD has not escaped internal tensions. For example, in 1997 and again in 1999, the party expelled a number of Members of Parliament (MPs) (elected in 1990) for being 'lackeys of the regime'. Contrary to Aung San Suu Kyi's views at the time, they had advocated more broad-ranging discussions with the military government.³ Also, many younger members of the party have been frustrated with the cautious approach

1 'Profile: 88 Generation Students', *BBC News*, 22 August 2007, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6958363.stm.

2 David O'Hanlon, 'Whatever Happened to the ABSDF?', *The Irrawaddy*, 8 April 2004, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=37&cpage=1 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=37].

3 Simon Ingram, 'Burma's Opposition Shows Split', *BBC News*, 3 May 1999, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/334020.stm.

of the NLD's elderly Executive Committee. Last October, more than 100 NLD youth leaders resigned in protest over their exclusion from the party's decision-making processes.⁴

It is to be expected that, after 20 years in the political wilderness and faced with continuing repression in Burma, there will be personality clashes and squabbles over policy issues. Also, some in the opposition movement have held unrealistic expectations about the extent to which developments within Burma can be influenced by external actors. However, there are now deep rifts between some anti-regime groups, an intense competition for recognition and resources and bitter recriminations over policies and practices. Over the past year, these and other problems seem to have become more pronounced, and potentially more damaging.

After the regime crushed the 'Saffron Revolution' in September 2007, many young Burmese questioned the effectiveness of Aung San Suu Kyi's 'active pacifism' and called for bolder measures. Some Buddhist monks even asked the international community for weapons to defend themselves against the security forces.⁵ There was another important development last August, when a prominent activist group formally requested the UN Secretary-General to declare Burma's seat in the General Assembly vacant. This submission was not coordinated with other opposition groups, however, and there was disagreement over which group should inherit Burma's UN seat if it became available.

Even Aung San Suu Kyi has not been immune to criticism. Last month, a leading British newspaper accused her of a lack of leadership.⁶ Several Burmese activists were cited as saying that she was too inflexible in her approach to political reform and had failed to give adequate direction, both to the NLD and to the broader opposition movement. Given that she has been under house arrest since 2003 and not allowed any visitors, it is difficult to see what more she could have done. But her strong personal views and highly principled stand against the regime have been viewed by some Burmese (and others) as obstacles to progress.

4 Saw Yan Naing, 'Former Youth Members Urge NLD to Prepare for 2010', *The Irrawaddy*, 17 October 2008, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=14468 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=14468].

5 'Monks with Guns? Burma's Younger Activists Get Bolder', *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 September 2008, www.csmonitor.com/2008/0919/p01s01-wosc.html.

6 Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, 'Not Such A Hero After All', *The Guardian*, [London], 11 November 2008 [Correction and clarification published as 'Can Aung San Suu Kyi Lead While Captive?', 2 December 2008], www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/11/burma-aung-san-suu-kyi.

For 20 years, opposition parties and activist groups have kept alive the hopes of many Burmese. Despite numerous challenges, both inside and outside the country, they have not only survived but also won considerable support. All such campaigns attract a wide range of interest groups, with different goals and priorities. And constructive debate over strategies and tactics is both useful and healthy. Burma's opposition movement does itself no favours, however, by public displays of disharmony, inflexibility and intolerance. At best, they are distractions from the main game. At worst, they raise doubts about the movement itself.

Internecine disputes also help the regime to justify continued military rule. For the armed forces claim that only they have the sense of common purpose, internal discipline and staying power needed to keep Burma stable, united and independent. Having introduced a new constitution last May, the regime now plans to create a military-dominated parliament in 2010, as the centrepiece of its 'discipline-flourishing democracy'. Divisions within and between Burma's many opposition groups can only make that process easier.

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