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Burma's 'superstitious' leaders

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To a greater or lesser extent, most people in Myanmar, including the country's military leaders, put their faith in superstitions, magic and the occult. However, it would be a mistake simply to blame such beliefs for the regime's more bizarre and apparently self-defeating policies and practices. Allowances must always be made for 'irrational actors', but, seen from the generals' point of view, their decisions usually make sense.

Whenever critics of Burma's military government run out of explanations for the regime's apparently self-defeating policies, they tend to fall back on the fact that regime leader Senior General Than Shwe is very superstitious. He has been accused of making decisions not on the basis of rational calculations, but on the advice of astrologers, numerologists and magicians.

There is probably some truth to such claims. However, they can also reflect weak analysis and a failure to delve more deeply into the government's mindset. Indeed, some of these stories seem designed simply to promote anti-regime sentiment by exciting cultural and religious biases in Western countries.

Burma is predominantly Theravada Buddhist, which is a tolerant philosophy that easily accommodates older animist traditions as well as esoteric schools such as astrology and numerology. It is not unusual for statues of mythical beings to be found alongside Buddha images in

Burma, and pagodas are often encircled by guardian animals representing the days of the week. Most Burmese have an astrological chart drawn up at birth and many consult fortune tellers to guide their daily lives. Natural phenomena such as earthquakes and cyclones, or the collapse of a pagoda, are interpreted as omens or signs of celestial disfavour.

For centuries, such beliefs have been deeply embedded in Burmese society and have influenced attitudes and behaviour at almost every level.¹

All Burma's modern rulers have consulted soothsayers and propitiated supernatural forces. For example, the country's independence from Britain on 4 January 1948 was formally declared at 4:20 am—the time considered most favourable by local astrologers. In 1961, prime minister U Nu ordered the construction of 60,000 sand pagodas all over Burma to avert impending dangers and bring peace to the war-ravaged country. The government's instructions for the construction and consecration of the pagodas were based on the auspicious number nine.

After seizing power in 1962, General Ne Win relied heavily on astrologers and numerologists for policy advice. The decision in 1970 for Burma to change from driving on the left-hand side of the road to the right-hand side was reportedly taken because the general's astrologer felt that Burma had moved too far to the left in political terms. In 1987, Ne Win introduced 45-kyat and 90-kyat currency notes, as the face values added up to nine—his lucky number. It was said that he walked backwards over bridges to ward off evil spirits and bathed in dolphins' blood to extend his life to the age of 90.

Many of the military officers who have exercised power since the abortive 1988 prodemocracy uprising have personal astrologers. Like most Burmese, they believe that personal names and dates of birth carry special significance and, being equated with particular planets, can influence events on Earth. The generals are also known to practise *yadaya*, a mystical technique for manipulating the results of astrology or portents. Such beliefs have reportedly influenced a number of important military appointments and policy decisions over the past 20 years.

1 Joseph A. Allchin, 'Numbers of the Beast: The Politics of Superstition', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 31 March 2009, english.dvb.no/news.php?id=2401 [site discontinued].

Than Shwe is reputed to be even more superstitious than his predecessors. For example, the decision to build a new capital in Naypyidaw and the precise time in 2005 for the government's transfer from Rangoon were reportedly based on advice from his astrologers.² Other decisions (such as the 65-year prison sentences given to some dissidents last year) are said to deliberately reflect 11—Than Shwe's lucky number.³ He has also been accused of engaging in occult practices, including human sacrifices and cannibalistic rites, to consolidate his rule over Burma.

Anti-regime activists, too, have used magic to pursue political ends. For example, in 2007, one Thailand-based group launched a global 'panties for peace' campaign, in which supporters were encouraged to send women's underwear to Burmese embassies, in the hope that contact with such garments would weaken the regime's *hpoun*, or spiritual power.⁴ The generals may indeed subscribe to this belief. It is rumoured that, before a foreign envoy visits Burma, an article of female underwear or a piece of a pregnant woman's sarong is hidden in the ceiling of the visitor's hotel suite, to weaken their *hpoun* and thus their negotiating position.

These days, Burma is awash with such stories. In themselves, they are no basis for serious analysis. They are important, however, in that they tap into popular belief systems, and this gives them considerable currency in Burma. The official Board of Astrologers, created by Ne Win to advise on the timing of major state events, is now used to help manage local soothsayers. This reflects the military regime's awareness of the influence exercised by such figures, their ability to sway public sentiment and their potential to encourage social unrest through pronouncements unfavourable to the regime.

Burma is not alone in having leaders who observe such practices. Indira Gandhi secretly consulted astrologers. Indonesian presidents Sukarno and Suharto both allowed superstitions to influence the nature and timing of certain policy decisions. Current Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa recently declared his belief in astrology. Other Asian cultures

2 Richard C. Paddock, 'Abrupt Relocation of Burma Capital Linked to Astrology', *Boston Globe*, 1 January 2006, www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2006/01/01/abrupt_relocation_of_burma_capital_linked_to_astrology/.

3 Aung Zaw, 'Than Shwe, Voodoo and the Number 11', *The Irrawaddy*, 25 December 2008, www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=14844 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=14844].

4 Martin Hodgson, 'Activists Send Female Underwear to Burmese Embassies', *The Guardian*, [London], 19 October 2007, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/19/burma.martinhodgson.

give an important place to esoteric belief systems, including the occult. Even in resolutely secular commercial centres like Singapore and Hong Kong, lucky numbers are highly prized and *feng shui* plays an important part in urban planning.

Nor are such beliefs confined to Asia. Western leaders as diverse as Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Charles de Gaulle, François Mitterrand and Leonid Brezhnev were all known to have consulted astrologers.⁵ In 1988, it was revealed that US president Ronald Reagan was superstitious and allowed his daily schedule to be dictated by his wife's personal astrologer.

Arguably, astrology, numerology and magic are as valid as faith-based belief systems as sources of political guidance and inspiration. In the Western news media, however, these practices are usually cited as evidence of the ignorance and irrationality of Burma's leaders and, by implication, their unfitness to rule. Ironically, even Burmese activists—themselves imbued with many traditional beliefs—have emphasised such characteristics to garner support from Western constituencies, such as conservative Christians in the US.

In such reports, democratically elected U Nu tends to be described simply as quixotic or eccentric. Burma's military leaders, however, are painted in much harsher colours. It is implied that their attachment to 'primitive' and 'dangerous' superstitions has been a major factor in the country's ruin, and thus the terrible plight of the Burmese people. The generals are implicitly contrasted with refined, Oxford-educated and devoutly Buddhist opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is not known to share her compatriots' belief in such matters.⁶

In any study of political culture and the behaviour of national leaders, some allowance must be made for 'irrational actors' and idiosyncratic decisions made by powerful individuals like Than Shwe.⁷ His personal beliefs and those of other generals—not to forget key opposition figures—need to

5 Ben Macintyre, 'I Foresee a Troubled Future for Burmese Generals', *The Times Online*, [London], 28 September 2007, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/ben_macintyre/article2547120.ece [page discontinued].

6 Sudha Ramachandran and Swe Win, 'Instant Karma in Myanmar', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 18 June 2009, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/KF18Ae02.html [page discontinued].

7 Andrew Marshall, 'The Soldier and The State', *TIME*, 19 October 2009, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1929130,00.html [page discontinued] [now at andrewmarshall.com/articles/reporting-for-time-on-burmese-dictator-than-shwe/].

be considered in analyses of contemporary Burma. However, they are certainly not the whole story. The regime's foreign and domestic policies are dictated by a wide range of complex factors, many of which would be familiar to other governments.

The superstitions of Burma's leaders will doubtless continue to provoke public comment. However, greater foreign influence in Naypyidaw will depend on an understanding of all the elements that make up the regime's worldview and prompt its policy settings, not just one.

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