

## Second thoughts on the civil unrest in Burma

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*The brutal suppression of demonstrations in Myanmar in March 2015 was a cause for widespread concern and resulted in demands for foreign assistance to the MPF to be suspended. However, the picture was not as black and white as portrayed in the news media and on activist websites. In any case, a strong argument could be made that these events argued for more help to the police force, not less.*

Now that the dust has settled on last month's civil unrest in Burma, it is worth pausing to reflect on the protests and official responses to see whether any important factors have escaped public attention. I am also prompted to do so because the conventional narrative does not completely match what I heard in Rangoon at the time.

To briefly summarise recent events, in January, protesters began marching from major provincial cities to Rangoon, demanding changes to the National Education Law, which was passed by parliament last September. Protests were also held in other parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> Among the protesters' demands were a greater devolution of power to universities, the freedom to form student unions and mother-tongue language instruction in ethnic minority areas.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Updates: National Education Law—Student Protests', *Burma Partnership*, [www.burma-partnership.org/updates-national-education-law-student-protest/](http://www.burma-partnership.org/updates-national-education-law-student-protest/).

On 5 March, up to 150 protesters outside Rangoon City Hall were forcibly dispersed by the MPF.<sup>2</sup> The police were assisted by civilian ‘auxiliaries’ wearing armbands proclaiming them to be ‘on duty’.<sup>3</sup> Several protesters were reported injured and eight were arrested. The following day, about 200 protesters at Letpadan, 140 kilometres north of Rangoon, attempted to overcome a police blockade and resume their march on the city. Five people were arrested.

On 10 March, after negotiations with the authorities, the protesters at Letpadan were given permission to continue their journey to Rangoon under certain conditions. Some protesters refused to accept the agreed terms, however, and began dismantling police barricades. This sparked violent action by MPF security battalions, which were assisted by local Bago region members of the MPF.<sup>4</sup> Officials later said 127 people had been detained.

These events have been portrayed by most journalists and activists in stark, dualistic terms as clashes between peaceful, idealistic students and brutal, hardline police—reminiscent of the bloody confrontations under the former military regime. On this basis, calls have been made for the EU to suspend its MPF training program and for all other international contacts with Naypyidaw to be reviewed.

Clearly, the authorities at both the regional and the national levels could have handled the protests much better, and the MPF’s brutal behaviour at Letpadan was inexcusable. The strong responses from foreign governments and human rights groups<sup>5</sup> to the two incidents were understandable and justified.<sup>6</sup>

2 ‘Police Crack Down on Student Protesters in Rangoon’, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2015, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/police-crack-down-on-student-protestors-in-rangoon.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/police-crack-down-on-student-protestors-in-rangoon.html).

3 ‘Plainclothes Vigilantes Make a Comeback in Rangoon’, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2015, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/plainclothes-vigilantes-make-a-comeback-in-rangoon.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/plainclothes-vigilantes-make-a-comeback-in-rangoon.html).

4 ‘Myanmar Riot Police Beat Student Protesters with Batons’, *BBC News*, 10 March 2015, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31812028](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31812028).

5 Colin Hinshelwood, ‘International Voices Decry Police Crackdown on Students’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 9 March 2015, [www.dvb.no/news/international-voices-decry-police-crackdown-on-students-burma-myanmar/49066](http://www.dvb.no/news/international-voices-decry-police-crackdown-on-students-burma-myanmar/49066) [page discontinued] [now at [images.dvb.no/news/international-voices-decry-police-crackdown-on-students-burma-myanmar/49066](http://images.dvb.no/news/international-voices-decry-police-crackdown-on-students-burma-myanmar/49066)].

6 David Stout, ‘Washington Condemns Burma’s Violent Student Crackdown’, *TIME*, 11 March 2015, [time.com/3740141/burma-crackdown-student-protests-letpadan/](http://time.com/3740141/burma-crackdown-student-protests-letpadan/).

Speaking to well-informed observers in Rangoon at the time, however, I was given a more nuanced account of events. Among the points made to me were the following:

- The protesters have invariably been labelled ‘students’. This implies not only a direct and justifiable interest in educational reform, but also a status and respectability deriving from student participation in Burma’s past pro-independence and prodemocracy struggles. Not all the protesters, however, were in fact students. Also, as the government has claimed, some probably had wider political goals in mind, such as regime change.<sup>7</sup>
- Most people to whom I spoke last month believed that, prior to the incidents in Rangoon and Letpadan, Naypyidaw had made a number of unexpected concessions to the protesters. Some of their demands had already been incorporated into the education law. Others (such as the allocation of 20 per cent of the annual budget to education) were seen as unrealistic by a parliamentary committee that included members of the opposition parties.
- The MPF units at Letpadan initially adopted a cautious and conciliatory approach. For example, at one stage, female police officers were deployed in an apparent attempt to present a friendly official face and to reduce the likelihood of violence.<sup>8</sup> It was only after five days of negotiations, when some protesters tired of what they saw as police obstructionism and openly began to challenge the police blockade, that the security battalions were sent in.

None of my interlocutors in Burma last month tried to excuse the MPF’s violent tactics. Clearly, excessive force was used at Letpadan in what was described by one onlooker as ‘a complete breakdown of police discipline’.<sup>9</sup>

7 Min Zin, ‘Burma Takes a Big Step Backwards’, *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2015, [foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/12/burma-takes-a-big-step-backwards/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/12/burma-takes-a-big-step-backwards/).

8 Yen Snaing, ‘Authorities in Letpadan Block Student Protest March’, *The Irrawaddy*, 2 March 2015, [www.irrawaddy.org/multimedia-burma/authorities-letpadan-block-student-protest-march.html/nggallery/page/8](http://www.irrawaddy.org/multimedia-burma/authorities-letpadan-block-student-protest-march.html/nggallery/page/8) [page discontinued].

9 ‘Scenes of Indiscriminate Violence in Letpadan as Police Attack Ambulance Workers, Students, Reporter’, *The Irrawaddy*, 10 March 2015, [www.irrawaddy.org/photo/scenes-of-indiscriminate-violence-in-letpadan-as-police-attack-ambulance-workers-students-reporter.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/photo/scenes-of-indiscriminate-violence-in-letpadan-as-police-attack-ambulance-workers-students-reporter.html) [page discontinued] [now at [www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/scenes-of-indiscriminate-violence-in-letpadan-as-police-attack-ambulance-workers-students-reporter.html](http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/scenes-of-indiscriminate-violence-in-letpadan-as-police-attack-ambulance-workers-students-reporter.html)].

Yet, as was also pointed out to me, on 10 March, some officers—probably from the Bago region MPF—attempted to curb the behaviour of the security battalions and even tried to protect protesters and bystanders.

Those actions highlight an aspect of the disturbances that has not been addressed in the news media—namely, that the uncompromising attitude of the security battalions was not representative of the entire MPF. Indeed, one senior police officer told me that many in the force were shocked and disappointed by events. They regretted what had occurred and recognised the damage the Letpadan incident in particular could do to the MPF's reform program and its attempts to regain public confidence.

Another issue that seems to have divided the MPF last month was the recruitment of civilian 'auxiliaries' to 'assist' the police in Rangoon. These untrained, poorly led and ill-disciplined 'vigilantes'—usually local unemployed youths—publicly undercut the authority of the MPF. Who actually directs such groups during an incident is unclear, but for the police, they make the management of civil unrest more problematic.

Another point of discussion last month was the extent to which the harsh response to the protests was instigated by the authorities in Rangoon, Bago or Naypyidaw. The security battalions are a national asset, but it does not necessarily follow that the notoriously hardline home affairs minister ordered violent tactics to be used. The recruitment of the civilian 'auxiliaries', for example, was by Rangoon ward officials, on orders from the region's chief minister.

It is also noteworthy that the security battalions deployed in Rangoon and Letpadan do not appear to have received any training in crowd management from the EU. The violent tactics employed by them are therefore hardly an indictment of the international training program. In any case, the EU has to date only undertaken to train 4,000 police—a small proportion of the estimated 12,500 in Police Security Command. Also, as it has no operational control over these forces, the EU cannot be held responsible for any of their actions.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Andrew D. Kasper and Lawi Weng, 'EU Says Police Training "Still Needed" After Crackdowns Draw Criticism', *The Irrawaddy*, 11 March 2015, [www.irrawaddy.org/burma/eu-says-police-training-still-needed-after-crackdowns-draw-criticism.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/eu-says-police-training-still-needed-after-crackdowns-draw-criticism.html).

Despite this, the security battalions' behaviour has prompted calls from activist groups and others for a cancellation of the EU training program. It has also cast a shadow over the efforts of others—notably, the UNODC—to help reform Burma's police force.<sup>11</sup> How the MPF can be encouraged to raise its standards when the very elements dedicated to helping it reach those goals are withdrawn is not clear. If anything, recent developments argue for even closer engagement by the international community.

When incidents of this sort occur in Burma, it is often difficult to work out precisely what happened, and why. Even harder to discern is the thinking behind some of the decisions taken—on both sides. As is so often the case, the picture is more complicated than it first appears and any responses need to be considered with this in mind.

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11 'Burma Crackdown on Students: EU, UK & USA Have Questions to Answer', *Burma Campaign UK*, 11 March 2015, [burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-crackdown-on-students-eu-uk-usa-have-questions-to-answer/](http://burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-crackdown-on-students-eu-uk-usa-have-questions-to-answer/).

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