

The Burmese Way to Oppression

By WILLIAM OVERHOLT

Among Western students of Asia, there is a proletariat, the professors who visit their countries for a few weeks each summer if the Ford Foundation smiles; a middle class, the Foreign Service officers who stay for a two-year tour; and an elite, the long-term expatriates who study a society for years. Within this elite, those who study Burma have the most esoteric subject, and those who gain first-hand knowledge by sneaking illegally across the border are the cream. Bertil Lintner, who has lived in Asia for 15 years, has put in more illegal cross-border Burma time than anyone else.

Mr. Lintner is a journalist, and his book, "Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy," is a bit sensationalist. But an unfortunate title cannot disguise a carefully researched and persuasive work. In addition to his narrative of contemporary events, focused on the upheaval of the past two years, Mr. Lintner provides a detailed chronology and a historical perspective on Burmese politics since the 1930s.

Mr. Lintner shows how nearly three decades of repression and impoverishment of a previously rich country led to the mass demonstrations—up to a million people—and violent crackdown in 1988. He piles fact upon fact, interview upon interview, to document the ruthlessness of the struggle in 1987–89 between the "Burmese Way to Socialism" and democratic forces.

The brutality of the Burmese struggle surpasses anything Asia has seen in recent times, except for the Cambodian holocaust. The multiple massacres of students in Rangoon in August 1988 (3,000 killed) and September 1988 (1,000 killed) and scores of smaller killings throughout the country far outweigh in numbers the recent tragedy in China.

In the late summer of 1988, the Burmese army massacred hospital workers who, distressed over the slaughtered students, put up a sign requesting the army to stop shooting people. It burned down a village where fleeing students stopped for shelter. It gunned down isolated groups of protesting monks and 13- and 14-year-old girls.

The same tactics have been standard procedure against the rural hill tribes, who are waging a dozen different campaigns against the government. In the cities, when the army needed money, it simply forced ordinary citizens to make "donations" and extracted large sums from them whenever they sought to withdraw their money from their bank accounts.



Bookshelf

"Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy"
by Bertil Lintner

For its political convenience, the government has repeatedly demonetized the currency, depriving the citizenry of accumulated savings. Faced with student discontent in 1962, it slaughtered students and dynamited the Student Union; in 1988, it slaughtered even more and closed all schools for a year.

This is Chinese-style repression with none of China's partially redeeming features: no economic progress; no great wave of students studying abroad; no opening to the world's press; no domestic media airing of policy debates; no denunciations of official corruption; no party secretary general pressing for and reconciliation (China had two); and no great debate over political reform.

Despite the promise of free and fair democratic elections in May 1990, the current Burmese regime seems just like its predecessor. The army fired on peaceful crowds as recently as June 21; gatherings of more than five people are forbidden; and the two most prominent urban opposition leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi and Tin U, were placed under house arrest last month.

The Western world should be sobered by the contrast between the overwhelming emotional and policy reaction to Tiananmen Square and the far more subdued reaction to the carnage in Burma. Wuerkaixi is lionized; Bo Mya, the conservative, austere Baptist leader of the rural opposition Democratic Alliance of Burma, goes ignored. The U.S. won't even speak with him.

To be sure, the West has condemned both China and Burma, but the policy toward China comes from the gut and has real consequences; diplomacy toward Burma seems ritualized and ineffectual. The inconsistency is ironic because the West has little leverage over China. In Burma, however, the regime is so fragile and the combined rural and urban democratic forces potentially so strong, that the West could shift the balance overnight. For starters, the U.S. should persuade Thailand to re-open its border to hill tribe trade and press the Thai army to cease its de facto alliance with the Burmese.

The difference, of course, is that the Tiananmen Square massacre was on television; news out of Burma comes from scattered newspaper and magazine articles. When millions were dying in China's Cultural Revolution, the West, deprived of television coverage, romanticized China and conducted a diplomatic rapprochement with it. Today, Burma, a far smaller country, can slaughter far more people than China but avoid serious pressure by sealing itself off.

The problem of developing consistent policy in a populist democracy has been understood since de Tocqueville. It has been greatly exacerbated by television populism. Moreover, in the absence of a television spectacular like the Philippine revolution, diplomats seem unable to transcend the inertia of past ties. For the time being, therefore, Third World dictatorships can be confident that, in dealing with the West, consistent, overwhelming repression (as in Burma and Cultural Revolution China) doesn't carry much of a penalty.

In the meantime, a bit of balance can be brought to media-driven democracy by the efforts of courageous, persistent journalists. Mr. Lintner may not be completely successful until he smuggles himself into Rangoon with a television camera, but in the meantime he has done a great public service and deserves a wide audience.

Mr. Overholt has been a student of Asian development for 26 years and recently completed a study of Burma.