

## **India must speak up, now**

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The massive pro-democracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks and nuns in Burma, which have unleashed a vicious crackdown by the military junta, remind us of the demonstrations in Lhasa in 1987, when hundreds of monks took to the streets to beg for more freedom. The Tibetans were then ruthlessly suppressed by the Chinese People's Armed Police. Ironically, both Tibetans and Burmese aspiring for freedom are led by Nobel peace laureates who see conciliation and compromise as the basis of any sustainable solution to their respective problems. In both cases, on the other side of the fence are totalitarian regimes: In Tibet, Communist China; in Burma, a hated junta supported by Beijing for economic, strategic and other reasons. The increase in the price of petroleum products announced on August 15 by Burma's ruling Generals drastically aggravated the precarious existence of people in this predominantly Buddhist nation. One can understand the people's anger: In one go, there was a 500 per cent increase in the prices of petrol, diesel and cooking gas. This has had a

snowball effect on the prices of other essential commodities and services, particularly the cost of public transport and common food items.

The first round of demonstrations in August were thinly attended for the simple reason that most people were -- and remain -- too afraid to join any kind of mass protest. One former student who participated in the 1988 movement for democracy in Burma and subsequently spent four years in prison, told a journalist: "In 1988, people put their faith in the students, there was much bloodshed, people sacrificed lives, but nothing happened. This time, people are watching cautiously. There's a lot of risk involved... they're thinking, will our sacrifices go to waste this time as well?"

As Burmese troops use repressive measures to put down this week's rising, especially in Rangoon, it would be useful to recall what happened in 1988. That year, a courageous woman, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Gen Aung San, hero of Burma's freedom struggle, had returned to her country. A few months after her arrival in Rangoon, the old military dictator, Gen Ne Win, resigned, triggering a pro-democracy students' movement. Soon millions of Burmese joined the demand for democracy. The movement met a violent end on August 8 (8-8-88) when thousands of demonstrators were massacred by the Army. According to some estimates, as many as 3,500 pro-democracy demonstrators were shot dead.

The time of reckoning had come for Aung San Suu Kyi. On August 26, 1988, addressing a million-strong gathering at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, she said, "I cannot, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that is going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for national independence." She thus came

to head the National League for Democracy (NLD) opposed to the junta.

The following months saw her criss-crossing Burma and addressing hundreds of meetings. The junta grew more and more nervous and finally, on July 20, 1989, arrested her, though she had just cancelled a mammoth rally on the occasion of Martyr's Day (which marks Gen Aung San's assassination). The Army had threatened to shoot at the crowd. From that day she has spent most of her time in jail or in confinement (or 'protective custody' as the junta describes it).

The violent manner in which the junta has been dealing with Aung San Suu Kyi and popular dissent against military rule explains why the monks have taken to the streets: They have nothing to lose.

History apart, we also need to look at the reasons why the agony of the gentle people of Burma has continued for so long. One of the reasons is the strong support for the junta from China and, to a certain extent, India. It is not that pressure has not been put on the junta to mend its ways. Since Burma is a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the other member-states of ASEAN have been, for a long time, embarrassed by the junta's behaviour. Two years ago, Malaysia's Parliament had even tried to put pressure on ASEAN to bar Burma from the chairmanship of the group due to its poor human rights record, its failure to recognise the results of the 1990 elections, and the continuation of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention. The US and EU had threatened to boycott ASEAN meetings if Burma's Generals were to chair them. The crisis was solved when the junta voluntarily withdrew from assuming the chairmanship.

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had also put his foot down. In his report, 'Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar', for the UN Commission on Human Rights, he had called upon "China, India and

ASEAN member-states to encourage Myanmar's authorities to accelerate the pace of their political, economic and socio-humanitarian reform".

But to ask China to encourage democracy has no meaning. Recent reports from Beijing show that Chinese analysts have attributed the present mess in Iraq to the fact that the US forced a Western-style democracy on the nation. The Bush Administration has goofed up, but one cannot ascribe its failure to the 'democratic process'. It, however, shows Beijing's mindset.

It has been repeatedly pointed out by analysts that as long as China and India do not take a strong stand in favour of democracy in Burma, nothing will move in that country. The difficulty in adopting a tough stand lies in the competition between the two Asian giants for securing their energy needs. Burma has huge reserves of gas: This determines 'national interest'.

Since 1988, China has provided largescale economic assistance to Burma's junta. China has built essential infrastructure, which in turn serves its own strategic interests. Recently, Burma's Generals have allowed China to construct a gas pipeline from Arakan to Yunnan Province which is crucial to Beijing's development plans.

In March 2006, Mr APJ Abdul Kalam, then President, visited Burma, but he forgot to pronounce the word so cherished by India's founding fathers, "democracy", or even to ask for Aung San Suu Kyi's liberty. Gas was -- and is -- deemed more important by New Delhi. The main purpose of his visit was to sign a deal allowing India to tap Burma's gas reserves. A few months earlier, during an ASEAN meeting, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had shyly suggested: "We are in favour of national reconciliation and Aung San Suu Kyi should be set free. But it is not my purpose to advise them (the Generals)."

Is it in India's interest to continue to remain silent? The people of Burma have spoken. Is New Delhi ready to support the voice of democracy in Burma?