



When Buddhist monks, messengers of peace and harmony, noted for their serenity and tranquility take to the streets to protest against the rulers, it says a lot about the latter and their doings.

However, this has been the pattern in recent times in two leading Buddhist countries in Asia. Myanmar, which under the British was known as Burma has seen mass protests by Buddhist monks last year, resulting in the arrival of a not so successful UN envoy who at times, even failed to gain an audience with the most powerful man in the land. The situation looks rather calm in spite of the problems remaining unresolved. The ruling junta has come up with a draft constitution in order to take the country towards its own brand of democracy.

The proposed constitution has its own particular features and preconditions. Of

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vast significance are two striking features, namely, that the military should have a strong presence in the legislature, some twenty five per cent of its members, and more importantly the new parliament or whatever one calls it, cannot find a place for a leader who, in 1990, was voted into power by the people by an overwhelming majority. It is not a case of the parliament building lacking space for this strange person, but the powers that be do not want her to contest in the elections. They have discovered a major defect in their rival, that she was at one time married to a foreigner. Apparently, her dead husband is still hauling the ruling junta.

Aung San Suukyi, the daughter of a leading political figure in the country, is debarred from contesting. The reason is obvious. The rulers are aware of her

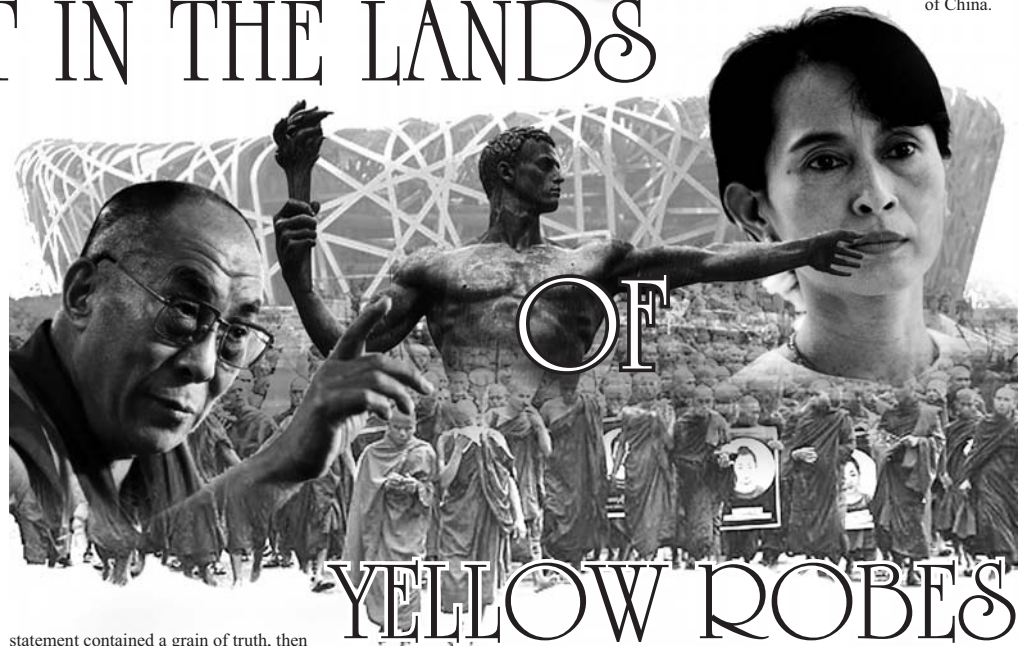
popularity, and do not want to take the risk of losing the coming election. That is the brand of democracy they want to usher into the country. What is so ridiculous is that Myanmar's immediate neighbor, India, with a large Hindu population, almost elected a foreigner who is a Catholic, as their Prime Minister, at the last general election. Only her magnanimous gesture in handing over the job to Man Mohan Singh, prevented her becoming the first foreign -born P.M. of India.

I met a Sri Lankan friend recently, who took a lot of trouble to convince me that what is taking place in Myanmar is an organized attempt by the West to bring Aung San Suukyi to power. He made it clear to me that it was not only a Western move, that it was a Christian move as well. I did not take much notice of his suspicions, until very recently I read an article by a respected Sri Lankan monk now living overseas, in which it was specifically stated that there is a move by some monks to bring into power a leader without a popular base in the country. If that

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Buddhist monks killed would be in thousands. There had been a number of uprisings in Tibet after the Chinese occupation. They were ruthlessly suppressed. The last main revolt was in 1989. The most recent uprising seems to have been planned to coincide with the international relay of the Olympic torch, in order to gather sufficient world attention and opposition. And it has worked very well. So much so that the newly elected president of France went to the extent of canvassing support among his EU colleagues for a boycott of the forthcoming opening of the Olympic games. That would not reflect well on the host country, which has been at pains to picture a truly democratic country with a good human rights record.

From the very beginning, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd has spoke against a boycott. But he has not minced words in voicing his opinion on what he expects the Chinese government to do. He has expressed his views on this both in and out of China.



statement contained a grain of truth, then there cannot be any reason for the junta to bar her from contesting.

That brings us to another issue. There were hundreds of protesters in London, Paris, San Francisco, Thailand, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan when the Olympic torch was taken around their cities. Australia and Thailand were particularly careful in preventing the ugly scenes that occurred in other places.

What has to be pointed out in this connection is the fact that apart from Thailand, all the other countries referred to cannot be called Buddhist. Does that mean that protests on behalf of Tibet were also engineered by Christians of the West? One has to remember that it was these very countries that staged the largest rallies against the US invasion of Iraq. They were not shouting in favor of Christians; They were venting their anger against the illegal invasion of an Islamic country. If the argument about pro-Christian West in the case of Tibet does not hold water, how can the same argument be made in the case of Myanmar?

The Tibetan issue has been worrying the democratic world ever since its spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, was forced to leave

the country in 1959. The history of Tibet after Dalai Lama's departure does not present a very pretty picture.

China's official position is that Tibet has been part of the country since the thirteenth century. In fact, the conflict cannot be about sovereignty, because Dalai Lama himself has expressed his position clearly on the issue, that he does not seek independence for his land. He wants the country to enjoy an autonomous status under Chinese rule. The Chinese authorities on the other hand are a bigger problem. They do not want the spiritual head of Tibet to exercise so much authority over their subjects. They cannot come to terms with the fact that Tibetans venerate their spiritual leader as if he were a divine being. That has been the traditional pattern in the country over the centuries. This is something the Chinese authorities are trying to overcome. That means the destruction of temples and their system of relating to the vast majority of devoted Buddhists who throng the temples.

It has been estimated that more than 600 Buddhist monasteries were destroyed, and only 12 survived. The number

He stated categorically that China ought to talk to the Dalai Lama or his representatives and resolve the issue peacefully.

The news emanating from Dalai Lama as this is being written is that a delegation from him will be leaving for China in the coming days. What we hear from Myanmar right now is that the rulers are planning to conduct a referendum on their newly minted constitution on the 10th of May. The results of the referendum can perhaps be predicted, for whatever the people say, the junta will carry on regardless. That leaves little room for any change. The UN and the world at large will have to hope and pray.

As for the outcome of the proposed or hoped for talks between Chinese authorities and Dalai Lama's representatives, it is any one's guess. Are the Chinese genuinely interested in solving the problem? Or are they playing for time just to get over the Olympic impasse?

Counterpoint

by The Defector