

Pictures for reflection: Burma



When defiance becomes a duty

Burma is a predominantly Buddhist country, and the monkhood is central to its culture and social life. Monks have played an important role within the society and have often been leaders of social change. Particularly at moments when things become unbearable for the majority of people, the monks may take action.

Since the August 15 price hikes in Burma, as ordinary citizens have taken to the streets in protest so too have they been joined by growing numbers of monks. On September 5 and 6 an incident of violence against monks at Pakokku, in Magwe Division, caused them to issue ultimatums that the military regime apologise and afford redress, or face the consequences.



One of the greatest legacies that Gautama Buddha left to the ascetics who followed his path was the requirement that they obtain their food and other needs in the form of alms from the people. The giving and receiving of alms is thus a profound act of adherence to his teachings and among the most meritorious of acts. Only under the most compelling moral circumstances will a monk refuse the alms that have been offered, as to do so is to refuse to acknowledge the

alms-giver as a part of the religious community. It amounts to an act of excommunication.

However, the view of monks in Burma today is that such an extraordinary moment has arrived. On September 17, 18 and 19, in response to the failure of the regime to apologise thousands took to the streets of cities and towns around the country, including Rangoon, Mandalay, Pegu, Sittwe, Kale, Pakokku, Kyaukpadaung, Tharrawaddy, Aunglan and Chauk.

In a number of places they held special ceremonies in accordance with the disciplinary code of the Buddhist order, the Vinaya, to reject as a matter of moral and religious duty any offer of donations from the military or its supporters, or to preach before them. The decision of the monks to formally boycott the regime not only reveals the profound moral stance taken by the participants

but also throws a sharp light onto the scale of crisis in authority that the military is now facing in Burma. It is captured in the recitation of those present at one ceremony on September 18, in Rangoon

"Reverend clergy, may you listen to my words. The violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings [military leaders] - the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury - have killed a monk at Pakokku, and also arrested reverend clergymen by trussing them up with rope. They beat and tortured, verbally abused and threatened them. The clergy who are replete with the Four Attributes [worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts and salutation] must boycott the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless soldier kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. The clergy also must refuse donations (of four types) and preaching. This is to inform, advise and propose.

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[Silence]

"The clergy boycotts the violent, mean, cruel, ruthless, pitiless kings, the great thieves who live by stealing from the national treasury. The clergy hereby also refuses donations and preaching."

These monks have taken up the boycott as an ethical obligation. There is no way back for them now. The challenge for everyone outside the country is to understand the great significance of this action, and respond appropriately.