

# Monks play key role in Burma

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THE Buddhist clergy has played a unique role in Burma's unprecedented popular revolt, with monks fighting in the streets while their seniors have links to the state and urge talks, analysts in Bangkok say.

Monks in the rust-red robes characteristic of the Burmese monkhood have led demonstrations in cities such as the former royal capital of Mandalay.

They also now run rebel administrations throughout the nation in towns almost all built around hill-top, golden-spired pagodas, after two months of mass protests for a change from single-party rule to democracy.

The monks in Burma, which is 85 per cent Buddhist and a centre of the fundamentalist Theravada sect, also often act as judges for an-

Text by Michael Adler of Agence France Presse  
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gry crowds seeking beheadings of suspected military agents for allegedly poisoning water supplies.

Meanwhile, the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) has tried to legitimise its shaky hold on power by reporting on state radio consultations with the official clergy, the state Sangha Maha Nayaka Council.

This council issued a statement this week urging negotiations between the military junta of armed forces commander General Saw Maung, which seized power last Sunday, and demonstrators who refuse his offer to pass to a democratic multiparty system through

junta-run elections, state radio said monitored in Bangkok.

"The leaders of both sides are profoundly requested to show a sense of patriotism and meet face-to-face for talks, and then to discuss with flexibility on ways to implement democracy," the Sangha Council said.

Burma expert Bertil Lintner said the council comprised what "most Buddhist monks would call puppets."

Peter Skilling, another Bangkok-based Burma watcher, said: "I find it hard to believe the council would come out with an independent statement."

Lintner, a journalist who has travelled extensively in Burma, said the council was organised along BSPP party lines.

He said the underside of the Buddhist clergy, officially registered as 100,000 monks in the nation of 39 million people, was that in monasteries built like fortresses monks hide student leaders of the pro-democracy uprising.

"Students with monks have formed the core of the resistance, he added, estimating the number of pro-regime monks as at no more than one per cent.

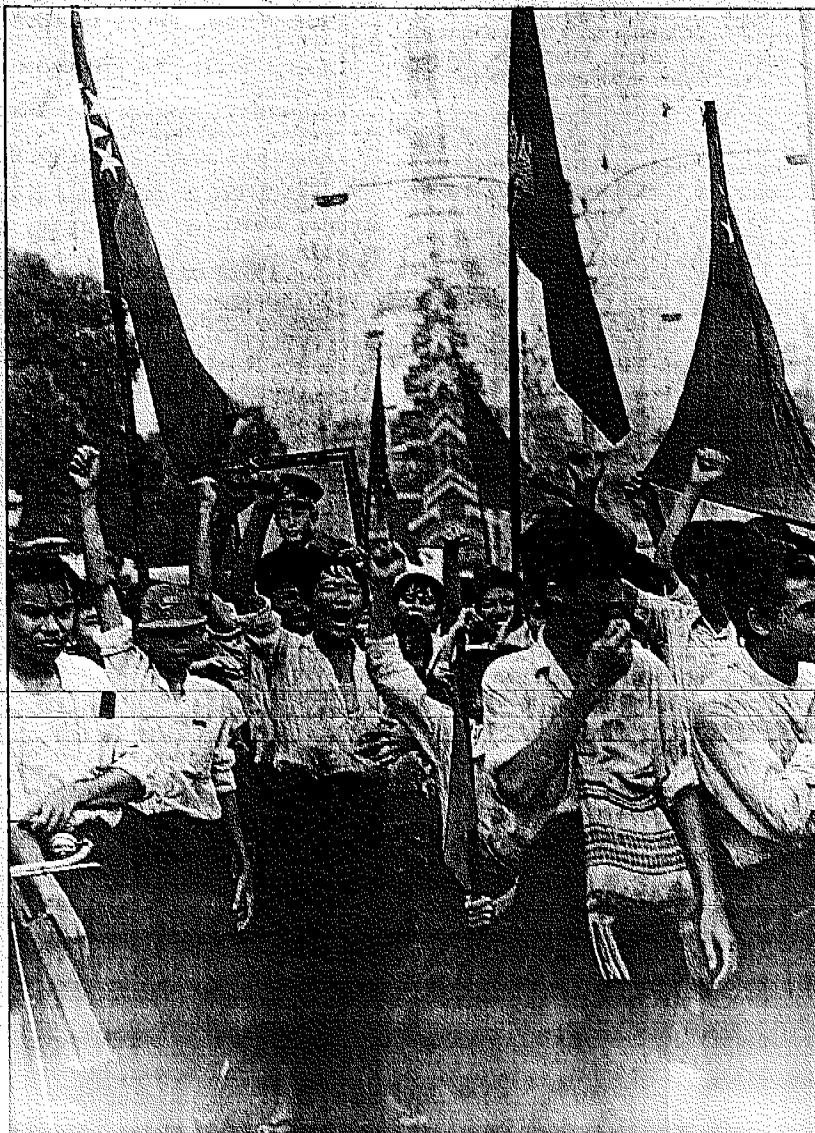
Authorities have been unable to catch student leaders since they work from hideouts in monasteries, even making their banners and flags there.

Burmese dissident Zaw Wai said in Bangkok that the state Sangha Maha Nakaya Council had almost "disintegrated" since August, parallel to the BSPP's loss of local administrations nationwide.

Although shooting of monks was perceived as an outrage, troops opened fire on monks during a recent crackdown on protests and again from August 8-12 when 1,000 people reportedly died as troops moved against demonstrations nationwide.

Zaw Wai said Burmese revered monks as "friends of the family and father confessor all rolled into one" and viewed shootings of monks as sacrilegious.

Burma's monks have a recent tradition of militancy, begun by U Ottama who learnt civil disobedience from Mahatma Gandhi in India before he returned home in the 1920's to help fight British Colonialism.



Burmese students carrying a photo of Aung San, late war hero and father of opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi.

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