

The Irrawaddy Online Edition

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Letting Go of the Tiger's Tail

Have you ever caught hold of a tiger's tail? If not, Burmese generals can report what it's like—they've probably had some experiences to share with you.

Burma's Gen Ne Win, who staged a military coup in 1962, once caught hold of a tiger's tail and never let it go.

The general, who introduced the "Burmese way to Socialism" and self-imposed isolation to the country, soon realized the failure of his nationalization policy.

In 1965, three years after the coup, he famously told journalists and officials: "It was like having caught hold of a tiger's tail." Then he added: "But there was nothing else to do but hang on to it."

Today, the tiger is reawakening as the monks march out of their monasteries and members of the everyday public join them in the streets in what is looking like a repetition of the 1988 uprising.

But, the demonstrations this time are different to those of 1988. They started simply enough when members of the 88 Generation Students group staged a march in Rangoon on August 19. Predictably, the generals cracked down again, arresting and imprisoning more than 400 activists.

But, the 88 Generation Students leaders' demonstration touched a public nerve. They had stood up for everyday citizens, outraged over the sudden, steep hikes in fuel and commodity prices. The generals made a serious political blunder, and when 13 of the group's leaders were manhandled, imprisoned and some were reportedly tortured more fuel was added to the fire.

Enter the monks, who for years had remained silent in their monasteries. When they took to the streets, and were also subsequently manhandled and brutally beaten in Pakokku on September 5, the brutality of the authorities infuriated the Sangha who demanded an apology from the regime only to be met by silence.

What has happened since is a casebook study on street-politics, which some observers say indicates a controlling strategy behind the present demonstrations. Over the past week, the monks have sent clear signals to the outside world and to the people of Burma.

First, they marched to religious pagodas not to public buildings, thereby claiming the highest moral ground and making it harder for the military to intervene.

Second, they marched to the Chinese Embassy where they paused to chant the "*Metta Sutta*," the Buddha's words on loving kindness, thereby sending a signal to those who support the junta.

Third, they marched to the home of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who appeared before them, symbolically uniting with the monks.

And now the monks have asked the students and public "to join hands."

A new tiger had been unleashed, one that will be harder for the junta to control.

Now the tiger's tail is being held by junta leader Snr Gen Than Shwe and his cronies. If they fail through

fear to let go of it they'll probably see history repeating itself.

The wave of protests led by thousands of monks has shaken a once confident regime that hijacked Burma's political legitimacy and took control of the country at gunpoint. Burma is clearly a political time bomb that can explode anytime.

The regime has lost all public confidence in its own plan to bring stability to the country through the mechanism of the National Convention tasked with drafting guidelines for a new constitution.

The determined monks' peaceful marches have stolen the regime's show and injected new energy into the fragile opposition movement.

What about the international community, however?

We continue to see selfish, opportunist and ill-informed neighbors who are quick to exploit Burma's resources but reluctant to support moves towards political change and democracy.

The UN and the West continue to adopt a policy of "closely watching" events in Burma. UN special envoys continue to fly in and out of Burma with no tangible results. By mixing small doses of good news with a bounty of bad they are only doing the Burmese people a disservice by equating one with the other.

The monks, activists and their supporters are the true heroes in the current stage of Burmese history.

They are also realists, understanding full well that there is no easy shortcut or quick fix to cure Burma's ills. Yet they also know best how to confront the regime and solve the country's problems.

They know Burma cannot afford to lose many more years. Their message to the generals is: let go of the tiger's tail.

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Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 23

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Selected article: *Letting Go of the Tiger's Tail*, pages 2-3

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Brainstorm

This article is called *Letting Go of the Tiger's Tail*. It is about Burma.

What about Burma do you think this article might be about? What would it be like to hold on to a tiger's tail? Do you think someone is *really* holding a tiger's tail? What do you think the tiger might represent? Who might be "holding the tiger's tail"?

Activity 2 Metaphors

What is metaphor?

Metaphor is the use of figurative (not literal) language often to connect two different subjects. Using metaphor helps to create a picture in our minds.

"Holding the tiger's tail" is a metaphor.

"Love is a rose" is also an example of a metaphor.

Match the underlined metaphors with their meaning.

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|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Kyaw Kyaw <u>was a rock</u> through his illness. | a. it is long and lots happens |
| 2. <u>Words are bullets</u> , they should be used carefully. | b. very sweet, sounding beautiful |
| 3. <u>Life is a journey</u> . | c. a positive thing |
| 4. <u>Her voice was music</u> . | d. he was very strong |
| 5. She was a <u>light in a sea of darkness</u> for him. | e. they can hurt (or even 'kill' us) |

Activity 3

In the classroom what metaphors can we come up with for teacher, student and school?

Some possibilities:

A teacher is (or is like) a: farmer, actor, encyclopedia.....

A student is (or is like) a: hunter, detective, soldier.....

A school is (or is like) a : home, party, prison.....

Write metaphors about words/topics such as:

Husband, wife, friend, life, country, money, job, health, love...

B. Activities during reading

Activity 4 Match the vocabulary

a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.

b) Match these words or phrases with their definitions.

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|---------------|---|
| 1. blunder | a. unwilling/hesitant |
| 2. manhandled | b. to make very angry/to enrage |
| 3. brutality | c. close supporters (often political) |
| 4. infuriated | d. to take control of by force/to steal from |
| 5. unleashed | e. real; able to be touched |
| 6. cronies | f. a stupid or careless mistake |
| 7. hijacked | g. the quality of being cruel, harsh, or ruthless |
| 8. legitimacy | h. to handle roughly |
| 9. reluctant | i. backed/supported by law |
| 10. tangible | j. to release/ to set loose/set free |

Activity 5 Gap-fill

Fill the gaps with the words from exercise b.

1. I really did not want to go to the party that night. I was quite _____ to go.
2. The Burmese generals have angered the world by treating the monks with such _____.
3. What I like about cooking something is that you have something to eat when you are finished. The result is _____; you can see and taste it.
4. The Prime Minister gave all the best jobs to his _____. He felt that it was a good reward for the support that they had given him during his election campaign.
5. The military in Burma _____ the monks—they used too much force to try and get them to stop the protests.
6. He _____ the government—he just took over with no election.
7. She was _____ that her neighbor made so much noise every night—even after she had asked him nicely to please be more quiet.
8. I made a big _____ when I called my girlfriend by the wrong name last night!
9. When the government treated the monks so harshly it _____ a huge amount of public anger.
10. The current government in Burma has no _____ -the generals are not the rightful leaders there.

Activity 6 Phrases in context

Choose the word or phrase that means the same as the underlined phrase from the article.

1."and self-imposed isolation to the country"... (Paragraph 2)
 - a. a mathematical formula
 - b. thinking only of oneself
 - c. going on a holiday
 - d. voluntarily choosing to be alone; to be separate

2. “The students’ leaders’ demonstration touched a public nerve.” (Paragraph 6)
 - a. To hit someone in front of many people
 - b. To cause an emotional reaction among many people
 - c. To be ill
 - d. To make someone feel embarrassed

3. “They had stood up for everyday citizens” (Paragraph 6)
 - a. special furniture
 - b. not been on time
 - c. supported
 - d. been very tired

4. “What happened since is a casebook study...” (Paragraph 8)
 - a. school subjects
 - b. classic example
 - c. backpack
 - d. difficult test

5. “the monks have sent clear signals to the outside world” (Paragraph 8)
 - a. easily seen messages
 - b. traffic lights that work well
 - c. many letters
 - d. close friends

Activity 7 Comprehension

a) Answer these questions. Write a short answer.

1. What group started the demonstrations in Rangoon on August 19th?
2. How many activists were arrested in Rangoon on August 19th?
3. What happened in Pakokku on September 5th?
4. What is the “Metta Sutta”?
5. Who is currently “holding the tiger’s tail”?

b) Answer these questions. Write a longer answer.

1. What are the three “signals” the monks sent to the outside world?
2. What were the reasons the monks choose to perform those 3 actions?
3. What are Burma’s neighbors currently doing about the crisis in Burma?
4. What policy has the UN and the West adopted towards the situation in Burma?
5. What have been some effects of the monks leading the protests in Burma?

Activity 8 Timeline (Leading up to the current demonstrations)

In pairs, read through the article. Make a list of the sequence of the events that show what has taken place in Burma from 1962 to the present situation.

C. Activities after reading

Activity 9 **Diary**

Imagine that you were a protester on the streets of Burma sometime in the days from August 19th to October 10th. Write a diary about one day of your life in during those days. What did you see? Hear? Touch? Smell? Think? Feel?

Activity 10 **Solutions from inside Burma. Suggestions to the International Community.**

Imagine that you are community leaders who have been involved in the protests in Burma. In groups make a list of ideas for continuing the protest movement in spite of the current crackdown.

What other kinds of initiatives would you suggest to the international community? What kinds of things could you suggest as strategies to the international community? What do you feel have been the positive and negative factors about their response to the uprising?

Activity 11 **Letter to the media**

In pairs, write a letter to an international newspaper. What would you tell people about the current situation in Burma?

Activity 12 **Poster**

You are activists working to make the world aware of the current events in Burma. Your task is to design a poster that will tell the world what is going on. You can use words and/or pictures.