

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 29

To accompany the **August 2008** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Where is the End Game Strategy?* pages 38-39

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion

The title of this article is ‘Where is the End Game Strategy? An activist-turned-journalist draws a lesson from the events of 1988’.

End game strategy means ‘bringing the situation to a conclusion’. What do you think the article is about?

Activity 2 Brainstorm

Make a list of words that come to your mind when you think about the 1988 uprising in Burma.

B. Activities during reading

Activity 3 Guess the meanings

GROUP 1: read paragraphs 1-7

GROUP 2: read paragraphs 8-14

GROUP 3: read paragraphs 15-21

GROUP 4: read paragraphs 22-28

Underline 5 words you don’t know. Can you guess their meaning without looking in the dictionary? Now look them up and check if your guess was correct.

Now read the rest of the article.

Activity 4 Match the vocabulary

Match the words in the box with their definitions.

activist (<i>n</i>)	aftermath (<i>n</i>)	complacency (<i>n</i>)	counter-offensive (<i>n</i>)	crackdown (<i>n</i>)	
deadlock (<i>n</i>)	demonstrators (<i>n</i>)	distinguish (<i>vn</i>)	evade (<i>v</i>)	hardliners (<i>n</i>)	
inclusive (<i>adj</i>)	intransigent (<i>adj</i>)	mobilize (<i>vn</i>)	negotiate (<i>v</i>)	prolong (<i>v</i>)	
reconciliation (<i>n</i>)	reschedule (<i>v</i>)	strategy (<i>n</i>)	transition (<i>n</i>)	vacuum (<i>n</i>)	vow

1. not prepared to compromise
2. too much satisfaction with a situation
3. an attack, in response to an attack by your opposition
4. bringing opposing sides to agreement after a conflict
5. actions by authorities to stop something
6. to move to a different date
7. the period that follows a bad event

8. empty space
9. a situation in which two sides can't reach an agreement
10. tell the difference between
11. avoid
12. the most authoritarian members of government
13. a person who is trying to make social or political change
14. involving everybody
15. to organize people to do something
16. to discuss something until all sides agree
17. promise
18. to make something last a longer time
19. a plan to work towards a goal
20. people who come out on the streets to show their political opinions, a public protest
21. change, usually political

Activity 5 Phrases in context

Match the phrase with the most appropriate definition.

1. reached their highest peak *(paragraph 7)*
 - a. To be at its strongest point
 - b. To be at its weakest point
 - c. To be most successful
 - d. To climb the highest mountain

2. rally behind *(paragraph 8)*
 - a. To support someone
 - b. To demonstrate against something
 - c. To get in line behind someone
 - d. To hold a meeting

3. failed to seize *(paragraph 12)*
 - a. Arrested someone
 - b. Grabbed something very quickly
 - c. Did not take the opportunity
 - d. Did not succeed

4. in the thick *(paragraph 15)*
 - a. To be in a very deep jungle
 - b. Not part of something
 - c. Somebody who is very fat
 - d. Right in the middle of something

5. swelled the numbers *(paragraph 21)*
 - a. Made the numbers bigger
 - b. Made the numbers smaller
 - c. Stopped people from coming
 - d. Too many people came

Activity 6 True or false?

Look at the following statements about the text. Are they true or false? If they are false, provide a correct statement.

1. In 1988, opposition leaders in Burma had a very good plan of how to take over power and return democracy to Burma.
2. In September 1988, the former Prime Minister U Nu tried to form a government, and Aung San Suu Kyi supported him.
3. In 1988 General Saw Maung promised to hold free elections.
4. The longer the protests lasted, the more excited the people became.

5. A few hundred people were killed in the 1988 uprising.
6. The protests in 2007 repeated the mistakes of the protests of 1988.
7. The UN sent a special envoy to Burma in the aftermath of the 2007 demonstrations

Activity 7 Main idea

Which sentence below best describes the main idea of the article?

- a. During 1988 the military government of Burma became very worried. They decided to hold the party congress a few days earlier than planned, they also decided to hold multi-party elections because they were trying to stop U Nu from taking over the government.
- b. When the author of the article was 14, he participated in the 1988 uprising. He was very shocked to see people shot and killed around him. This is why he decided to keep fighting for democracy in Burma.
- c. Both the popular uprising of 1988 and the protests of 2007 did not help return democracy to Burma. The main reason for this is that the opposition leadership did not have a very clear plan of how to use these popular protests to take over the power from the military regime.
- d. The principles of justice are what matters most for political victory. As long as you stand by your principles and truth is on your side, you will be able to accomplish political transition.

Activity 8 Restate the sentence

Match the sentences that have the same meaning.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Despite popular support for the cause and the rule of an unpopular, corrupt regime, the struggle has failed to achieve its professed goal.</p> | <p>a. Burmese opposition does not have a clear plan how to use popular support to bring down the military regime. This is what happened again last September – a lot of people came out to demonstrate, but there was no specific plan how to turn a demonstration into a political transition.</p> |
| <p>2. Today, I still believe the Burmese opposition has no ‘end game’ strategy. The lack of such a scenario was shown again in last September’s demonstrations.</p> | <p>b. The opposition did not find a political solution in time. This gave the government an opportunity to become aggressive. After being inactive for more than a month, in the second half of September, the government troops suddenly attacked and opened fire on the protesters.</p> |
| <p>3. Again, the opposition failed to seize on this promise as a strategic opportunity. There was a general call for an interim government and the political situation reached deadlock.</p> | <p>c. A lot of people in Burma supported the uprising and did not like the government, nevertheless, the uprising did not bring democracy to Burma.</p> |
| <p>4. The opposition’s failure to break the political deadlock gave the hardliners within the ruling body time and cause to shift from their indecisive wait-and-see approach to a swift crackdown on the protests. The military then staged a coup on September 18.</p> | <p>d. The government promised elections, but the opposition did not manage to use this promise to take over power. Many people asked for a temporary government and there was no outcome.</p> |

Activity 9 Answer the questions

- a. Find three things the opposition leadership failed to do in 1988.
- b. What is the main problem with the opposition movement in Burma according to Min Zin?
- c. What are the similarities between the 1988 uprising and the 2007 protests according to the author of the article?

C. Activities after reading

Activity 10 Discussion

In a group, discuss:

1. The author of the article says: “History has shown that in politics, it is not enough to have truth and justice on your side. Complacency about being on the ‘right’ side accomplishes little without a sound strategy for achieving concrete goals.” What does he mean?
2. Do you agree with Min Zin’s claim that it is important to ‘learn from history, not copy’? Why? Why not?
3. What is involved in developing a strategy? How can you develop a strategy?

Activity 11 Roleplay

Imagine that you are a group of politicians trying to bring democracy to Burma. Have a meeting to develop a strategy for returning democracy to Burma. Remember to learn from history, not repeat its mistakes!

GUEST COLUMN

Where's the 'End Game' Strategy?

By MIN ZIN

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An activist-turned-journalist draws a lesson from the events of 1988

TWENTY years have now passed since Burma started its struggle for democracy—famously known as the “8-8-88 Movement,” a nation-wide uprising calling for the removal of military dictatorship and the restoration of democratic government. 1



Min Zin is a Burmese journalist in exile. He participated in the 1988 uprising and spent nine years in hiding.

Despite popular support for the cause and the rule of an unpopular, corrupt regime, the struggle has failed to achieve its professed goal. 2

It would be a great service and a true expression of gratitude to those who sacrificed their lives and who continue struggling against brutal dictatorship if only we could review the weakness of the movement and contribute to its victory. 3

The required attitude for looking at history with a critical assessment is to learn from, but not copy, it. Most activists, however, view the “four eights movement” as the only model for victory and continue to vow that the uprising will be repeated. 4

Sadly, this is just nostalgia, not strategy. 5

One of the central reasons for the failure of the mass uprising was that the opposition could not provide the strategic leadership to finish the “end game.” 6

When the street protests reached their highest peak in late August through September 18, the government mechanism became defunct. The opposition leadership, however, failed to take charge of the emerging power vacuum. The opposition leaders did not unify themselves to create or seize the opportunity for either regime change or a negotiated transition of power. 7

When former Prime Minister U Nu attempted to form a parallel government on September 9, 1988 and contacted diplomatic missions in Rangoon to seek recognition by foreign governments, the other opposition leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, failed to rally behind him. 8

The ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party was, nevertheless, well aware of the gravity of the challenge. 9

A special party congress, originally planned for September 12, was immediately rescheduled and 10

held on September 10 instead. The authorities decided to hold a general election under a multi-party system within three months as a clear demonstration of their counter-offensive against U Nu's strategic move.

Military commanders were allowed to relinquish their party duties. In a television address on September 12, military chief Gen Saw Maung promised to help hold free and fair multi-party elections. It was a bold political offensive by the government. 11

Again, the opposition failed to seize on this promise as a strategic opportunity. There was a general call for an interim government and the political situation reached deadlock. 12

The prolonged street protests resulted in public fatigue and frustration, as well as violent confrontations with the authorities and their "spies and informants." 13

The opposition's failure to break the political deadlock gave the hardliners within the ruling body time and cause to shift from their indecisive wait-and-see approach to a swift crackdown on the protests. The military then staged a coup on September 18. 14

When the troops started firing on protesters that night, I was with hundreds of fellow high school students in Rangoon, staging a hunger strike. In the following days, I found myself in the thick of the shooting and saw students killed before my eyes. According to independent estimates, at least 10,000 people were killed in August and September 1988. 15

In the aftermath of the crackdown, I felt awed and shocked. I tried to reflect hard on what had happened. We stood for the principles of truth and justice and the whole population supported us. So what had happened to us? 16

It was the question of a 14-year-old high school student who had joined the democracy movement because of moral indignation at injustice and human rights abuses. 17

As time passed, especially during the nine years I was on the run, evading arrest, I came to resolve my confusion and to realize that principle alone doesn't guarantee political victory. Political activists need to understand what distinguishes those who succeed by standing on principle from those who fail. Then they have to think about the importance of strategy. 18

In an article for *The Irrawaddy* in April 2000, I wrote: "History has shown that in politics, it is not enough to have truth and justice on your side if you hope to realize your vision of the future. Complacency about being on the 'right' side accomplishes little without a sound strategy for achieving concrete goals." 19

Today, I still believe the Burmese opposition has no "end game" strategy. The lack of such a scenario was shown again in last September's demonstrations. 20

Thousands of Buddhist monks led protest marches in several major cities, chanting loving- 21

kindness (metta sutta) verses and praying for the peace of the country. Students and members of the general public swelled the numbers of protesters to as many as 200,000 in Rangoon alone.

The movement called for national reconciliation, but its overtures couldn't reach Naypyidaw, either directly or indirectly (through third parties, such as the UN or China). 22

The voices of protest were heard only through the Burmese media in exile, where opposition leaders gave rhetorical interviews and public statements. 23

Instead of playing a role in bridging the gap between the junta and the demonstrators, the opposition National League for Democracy joined the street protests. The UN finally acted, sending special envoy Ibrahim Gambari to Burma, but not before many lives had been lost. 24

Burma's opposition leadership has always been keen to mobilize mass movements but has failed to achieve any intended result whenever the protests reached their peak. It confuses the means (the mass movements) with the ends (victory) itself. 25

From the "four eights movement" to last year's "Saffron Revolution," Burma's opposition has failed to learn from the mass mobilizations and continues to repeat them. 26

Mass movements are, of course, sine qua non for Burma's transition as long as the intransigent regime refuses to initiate inclusive political reform. Public pressure alone can challenge the status quo. 27

Whether or not these public movements can lead to a genuine political transition, however, depends on an effective opposition "end game" strategy. This could be one of the key lessons the opposition has to learn in this 20th anniversary of the "8-8-88 Movement." 28

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