

This is a transcription of an episode of The Veto Cast, a podcast of 6 episodes that explores the effects of the veto power of the UN Security Council. The Veto Cast is part of the Stop Illegitimate Vetoes campaign.



Episode 4: Have you heard about Burma? - released august 18th 2015

Narrator, Laila Mendy: A sea of people covering the streets, thousands of people in motion, protesting. Protesting against an intolerable situation, protesting against oppression. Chant is repeated, over and over: “our cause, our cause”. A line of red in the centre of the march. The monks have taken to the streets with the people, marching in their red robes with their beggar bowls turned upside-down, a statement that they will not accept gifts from the government. Hope is in the air. A protest like this hasn’t been seen for almost twenty years. Onlookers from the high-risers cheer them on as they pass. A woman starts to cry while clapping her hands. The march moves ever on. Will this finally be the change that so many have longed for? Is there perhaps another way?

Mya Lay Thin is a Burmese woman who has lived in Sweden since 2006. The Veto Cast interviewed Mya Lay to understand her experiences with Burma, leading up to the saffron revolution.

Mya Lay Thin: I got in contact with people in Rangoon during the time that the monk’s protest had been going on and people came outside to the streets and got together on the streets and there had been crowds clapping for the monks. And then, I was, at the time, in front of the computer. We didn’t have Facebook at that time, or something like that. We had contact with each other, my friends in Rangoon and I, via the Gmail. I remember that we were chatting in Gmail chatting to ask each other “what is happening”? “what are you doing?”, and when I wrote “what are you doing”, it was the September protest going on, and my friend answered that he’s not going out, he’s staying at home because it is not safe to go outside when there are crack-downs, when there are people shouting and people who are beaten because they are together with the monks. So, they have afraid to go out, even... and some days later the curfew is in charge, it is announced that “you people cannot go out”. So there has

been instability in the city and my friends say I can hear people shouting, I can hear the crowds, and I'm just home, and I'm not going out so. I can still feel, even though I'm in Sweden, that, I can feel their worries, I can feel that my friends are worrying and that they feel instability during the monk protest.

Narrator: The year is 2007, and it's the beginning of the Saffron Revolution – a new struggle for democracy in Burma has just begun. There had been a growing unease in Burma since the previous year. Economic growth was almost stagnant. The military junta that controlled the country focused their national investments on the military, instead of infrastructure. The economic divide between the hard-pressed population and the military population was obvious.

High-ranking army Generals lived in luxury and abundance while a third of the population's children were chronically mal nourished. Burma is still ranked among the twenty poorest countries in the world. Government spending on education and health care is one of the lowest worldwide.

At the end of 2006, prices of basic commodities, such as eggs and rice, increased by 30-40 percent, which made an intolerable situation even harder. A small protest took place in April of 2007 in Yangon. About ten people carrying placards and chanting slogans, demanded lower prices and improved conditions for health and education. The protest ended peacefully, but plain-clothed police were later seen restraining eight of the protestors.

The military junta has a history of cracking down hard on protests and out-spoken critique. In 1988 at least 3000 protestors were killed and several thousands more were imprisoned and tortured. With that in the collective mind, the population was hesitant to voice their discontent. In August 2007, the government decided to remove subsidies on the sale price for fuel. This made the prices skyrocket in less than a week. Diesel and petrol increased by 60 to 100 percent. The cost of natural gas, which was used for buses, increased by as much as 500 percent. This increase affected other areas, rising food prices as well. The situation couldn't hold any longer. Despite the threat of being beaten, imprisoned, tortured or even killed, people took to the streets in protest.

The initial demonstrations of August 2007 were shut down harshly by the government when the protests were small. It appeared that the protests would end here, but then the monks started marching alongside protestors – a surprising development, as monks don't usually take political stance. They acted, they said, for the sake of the suffering population.

The monks are highly revered in Burma and are sometimes referred to as the conscience of the Burmese people. The atmosphere changed and the crowds of protestors grew bigger. With the monks marching and a growing population of protestors, the government was stuck with how to act. On the 24th of September, the protest in Yangon had grown to between 30,000 and 100,000 people. It was the biggest anti-government protest in 20 years. The government threatened harsh counter-measures.

On the 26th of September, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed, as well as a ban on any gathering over five people. The military tried to confine the monks to their pagoda in Yangon by a barricade of trucks. It did not succeed. 5000 monks made it to the streets to protest. The violence escalated when government troops started raiding the monasteries, arresting monks. The protests continued. The government's situation grew more desperate, reports claim that soldiers began to shoot at students, marching near a high school in Yangon, hitting school children in the process. On the 28th, the protests were ongoing. The government troops began beating protestors and shooting at the crowds. The troops reportedly targeted journalists and people carrying cameras. A Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, was killed. A video recording shows him being shot at close range by a soldier, while still clutching his camera. This slowed down protests, prompting people to flee the country. The protests grew smaller, and eventually abated.

The number of people arrested and killed during the Saffron Revolution is still unknown. The government has held back information. We can assume that there are probably a lot of violent incidents that haven't been reported. The information on incidents that have is likewise hard to compile. The official state media in Burma reported the number of detained people at 2100. International media sources, however, estimate 6000. The official death toll from the Burmese government is

thirteen killed. The UN Human Council believes it to be 31. Other reports are even higher. The Democratic Voice of Burma uses a list of names of those killed – 131 people. A UK newspaper reported on the 1st of October that thousands of student protestors, and hundreds of monks, had been killed, and their bodies discarded in the jungle. These reports were based on information given by a defected army Colonel. So there are many different stories and statistics on the actual events.

During 2006 the US tried to spotlight the situation in Burma. With the UK, they drafted a resolution in January of 2007. The resolution called for the government of Burma to offer unhindered access to humanitarian organisations, it called for the government to cooperate with the International Labour Organizations, to engage in political dialogue with all political parties and to release all political prisoners detained in the country, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The resolution secured the nine votes necessary, however two of the three votes against were from the delegates of China and Russia. This activated the veto. The resolution never passed. This was the first time since 1989 that a double veto had been cast in the Security Council.

Members of the Council had the opportunity to speak before and after the vote. There was also a representative from Burma present for the duration of the discussion. The Chinese and Russian delegate argued for their use of the veto based on two issues. One: that Burma did not pose a threat to peace and security in the region, and two: that the international [internal, eds. remark] affairs of the state had no place in the Security Council. Instead the matter should have been handled by other, more appropriate, UN bodies, such as the Human Rights Council.

The second argument is highly interesting in this case, since it touches upon the principles of sovereignty. The principle of sovereignty is one of the most fundamental concepts for a state. It includes the right to govern without outside interference. Hans Corell, Swedish lawyer and diplomat, former Under-Secretary for Legal Affairs, and the Legal Council of the United Nations.

Hans Corell: Well, I mean, sovereignty is definitely a concept in the UN Charter. The Charter says that the organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its members. That's from article two, the first paragraph. And, so it must be. But

the question is: what does sovereignty mean? And there is a very important provision in the seventh paragraph of article two, which says that the principle of sovereignty, or not, sort of, meddling into the internal affairs of other states, that does not apply, it does not prejudice the application of enforcement of measures under Chapter seven of the UN Charters. And this is where the Security Council makes decisions. So, this is a very, very important principle. There is another principle that was adopted by the General Assembly in 1993 when we come to human rights. Then the General Assembly said that to criticize another state, for not respecting human rights, is not considered to, shall we say, meddle with the internal affair of another state. You are entitled to make that criticism. But, otherwise, the sovereignty has to be there, but it has to be, shall we say, applied under the law. And the law is very clear here when we come to the rule of law and human rights that no state has the right to abuse its own population, or abuse the population of another country. Sovereignty in the sense that was used in the Peace of Westphalia back in 1648 is a different concept from a modern sovereignty concept. In those days, the sovereignty was for the sovereign, for the Head of State. But today, sovereignty should be exercised in the interest of the people of a state. When the Council deals with other states than their own states, then, I think that they should be very, very, very careful and I could think of very few situations when a veto would actually be legitimate. I think that what the Council should do is to apply the fine criteria that Gareth Evans and his committee presented back in 2004, and among those criteria, I mean it should be legitimate and it should be the last step etcetera, etcetera. But, the fifth element is the most important in this reasoning, namely that, if they do intervene, using force, they don't create a situation that is worse than if they had not intervened. And I think if the Council analyses the situation openly and actually explain to people around the world why they intervened, or, in another case, why they did not intervene, then people would understand.

Narrator: The political situation in Burma is different today from eight years ago. The military junta has released some of its power. Elections were held in 2010 and 2012, in which the former General and acting Prime Minister, Thein Sein, was elected President. Sein has vowed to move Burma towards a more democratic society. Numerous political prisoners have been released after pressure from the international community, among them, Aung San Suu Kyi. She was elected into parliament in 2012. Still, doubts and questions remain. Burma faces ongoing tensions between

ethnic groups and, though, on the surface changes appear to have occurred, many of the old power elite remain in control. Mya Lay again.

Mya: I think the change that has taken place in Burma, it only reflects a few people within the upper social class, and the poor people are still being poor and getting worse... you can just take example of the student crack down. So, it is the same situation, it is the same incident. What I see is the same incident, the same solution, the same method, that they are facing when any kind of protest is coming up. The method is only violence or force. What I see from my point of view is that, I'm living outside the country, but I can see from the outside that it is the same situation, the same thing happening as in 2007. It is very hard to say that you move forward because after 2007 it had been, some hope, it had been hoped among the people of Burma that, yeah, this is change, this is change. And 2007 passed. 2010, the so-called democratic election took place. After the election people were hoping for change and right now the same thing happened. So I think they say they are going forward but actually we are going backwards. So it is very hard to say that we are going forward. If were going forward then the crackdown wouldn't be happening, the students wouldn't be beaten or arrested. This is why I'm saying that we are going backwards. Because there has been good news coming from Burma that democratisation is taking place and we are going to be a free country, but what this March student's protest shows is that we are not going to the democracy as we have been saying for two or three years. That's why I'm saying we are going backward."

Mya Lay Thin: "And I mean if the government say that this is the true democracy then it won't be any news that this crackdown is taking place, if the government actually say that this is the true democracy, there should be peaceful discussions, there should be peaceful solution, then this incidents. Yeah, I can say, this is the wrong picture in the birth of democracy in Myanmar.

Narrator: You have listened to The Veto Cast, a podcast of six episodes that explores the effects of the veto power of the United Nations Security Council. The Veto Cast is part of the Stop Illegitimate Vetoes campaign, which is committed to changing the way the Security Council's veto is used. The Veto Cast is a co-production by the Stop Illegitimate Vetoes Organization and Uppsala Student Radio 98,0. Project Manager for The Veto Cast was Joanna Hellström, production and audio editing by Simon

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Hanna Wernerson: It is our world, and the global challenges are everyone's concern. For peace and prosperity, we need an efficient UN.

Daniel Kjellén: For more information, visit our web page at www.stopillegitimatevetoes.org and our Facebook page.