

Government by Slorc

Junta's latest crackdown draws a strong backlash

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

When Burma's ruling junta decided to crack down on the country's revitalized democracy movement, it probably didn't anticipate the response. True to its old ways, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, as the military regime is known, began arresting delegates to a Rangoon conference that the opposition National League for Democracy had scheduled for May 26-29. Scores of people were detained, and the official media published vitriolic attacks on the NLD's secretary-general, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, calling her a "sorceress" and a "snake" hungry for power.

But this time, the heavy-handed approach proved counterproductive. On May 25, soon after the arrests began, record crowds showed up for the weekly Saturday speech Suu Kyi delivers outside her home on University Avenue. Meanwhile, governments across the world condemned Slorc's actions, NLD sympathizers marched in Japan and in other countries, and the United States moved ever closer to tightening economic sanctions (see story on opposite page).

So the first round went to Suu Kyi and the NLD. But can they translate a moral victory into political concessions from Slorc? Given the junta's traditional intransigence, probably not.

For starters, the regime has zero tolerance for people who challenge its very existence. The NLD meeting itself was timed as a reminder of the regime's dubious right to power: It coincided with the sixth anniversary of the general election in which the NLD captured 392 of parliament's 485 seats—only to be denied a chance at government. Of the 258 delegates Slorc arrested, 238 were MPs-elect. All had converged on Rangoon to demand that Slorc recognize the results of the 1990 vote. (By the time the meeting actually convened, its 300-odd participants included only 17 original delegates.)

"It was a direct challenge to the very legitimacy of the present military-led government," says a Rangoon-based analyst. "And that's non-negotiable as far as Slorc is concerned."

If so, Slorc and popular senti-

ment are on sharply divergent paths. Despite official warnings to stay away, more than 5,000 people showed up to hear Suu Kyi on May 25. That's twice the crowd she has attracted on most weeks since her release from house arrest in July last year.

"I had not planned to come here today," a 65-year-old woman in the crowd told Reuters news agency. "But since I heard the government was trying to prevent their meeting I purposely made sure I came." Said another: "Nobody likes this military government. They are very bad."

Foreign governments seem to agree. In Washington, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns lambasted the arrests as "yet another in a long series of outrageous and oppressive measures against democrats."

In Tokyo, Japanese Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda called on his visiting Burmese counterpart, Ohn Gyaw, for the immediate release of all those detained. In Geneva, the Burmese representative to the United Nations, U Aye, was summoned by Joe Ayala-Lasso, high commissioner for human rights, who expressed his "profound concern" over the arrests.



The 'sorceress' in Slorc's nightmare.

The European Union prepared a response, and Canberra went as far as awarding Suu Kyi the Order of Australia, its highest honour. Given the new Australian government's recent conciliatory attitude toward Slorc, that seems a significant move. Even Thailand, which rarely comments on internal developments in Burma, said through Foreign Ministry spokesman Surapong Jayanama that it was "concerned about the ongoing arrests, which we consider counterproductive to the democratization and reconciliation process."

Says a Rangoon-based Western diplomat: "Never before have so many countries come out to criticise the Burmese government's action in such strong terms. This is unprecedented."

But is Slorc listening? In Bangkok, a Burmese embassy spokesman insisted that "there have been no arrests, only questioning . . . We are trying to stop any disturbances. The government will take every responsible measure to prevent the country from plunging into chaos."

Burmese state radio and TV continued to praise the present regime and broadcast news about the necessity of "annihilating all destructive elements." There was no indication of willingness even to talk to the opposition.

Slorc may monopolize power, but the crisis in Rangoon has nevertheless revealed how vulnerable is Burma's fragile economy to changes in the political climate.

As the arrests began, the value of the Burmese kyat tumbled on the blackmarket, where the exchange-rate jumped to 135 to the U.S. dollar from 120. The price of a *pyi*, a small basket of rice, surged to 70 kyats from 40.

Even without unrest, the cost of living continues to rise in Burma's urban areas, which could be another reason more people are showing up for Suu Kyi's Saturday rallies. "People who work for foreign companies and are being paid in U.S. dollars used to be able to live quite comfortably," says a recent visitor to Rangoon. "But even they now complain that it's becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet."

Despite domestic and international contempt for Slorc, its record shows little inclination for compromise. And Slorc has the means to defend itself: a 300,000-strong military machine that it has never hesitated to use against the opposition. Says a former Asian ambassador to Burma: "Nothing will change as long as the military remains united—and there is no indication that it won't."