Holding Fire

Cooler heads prevail in Rangoon protests

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

Eight years ago, a group of students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology got into a fight with some locals over what music to play in a teashop. The argument turned into a brawl. The police reacted by dragging the students away and beating them up. Student demonstrations against police brutality the next day soon developed into a nationwide anti-government uprising.

In October this year, RIT students once again had a quarrel with some local people in a restaurant in Sawbwagyigong, north of Rangoon. The incident caused another confrontation with the police—and once again the students' protests quickly became political, leading to large street demonstrations in early December.

On both occasions, pent-up frustration with Burma's authoritarian regime needed just a small spark to light a bigger fire. But history never repeats itself in exactly the same way. Indeed, the difference between the events of 1988 and the recent demonstrations in Rangoon is striking, says a Burmese source who witnessed both. Besides the fact that the recent disturbances have not led to as widespread a conflagration as in 1988, both the students and the authorities have also been more cautious.

The students are more restrained now, says a Burmese exile in Bangkok, "because they are divided between those who raise political demands and those who want to depoliticize the whole thing." The latter group, he adds, "just want the right to set up an independent student union to safeguard their rights."

On the other hand, eye-witnesses to the demonstrations, which seem to have reached their peak on the night of December 6, assert that the initial response of the authorities was also controlled. When the two sides confronted each other at a major intersection in Rangoon, says an observer, "the students shouted to the police: 'We want human rights and we're Burmese like you, don't attack us!,' whereupon the police actually retreated."

The 4,000-strong crowd dwindled as the evening went on, says a Westerner who observed the demonstrations. By midnight only a core group of 150 students remained. University teachers were then brought in to persuade the students to go home. "It was only when that failed that the riot police moved in to break up the demonstration, using water cannons," the eyewitness said.

Still, say sources in Rangoon, the demonstrations prove that Burma's internal political situation remains volatile. Says one: "People are fed up with the government's intransigence and they are frustrated with the ongoing political stalemate. They want to see a dialogue between the government and the opposition, but as yet there's no sign of that."

Will the latest outbursts change the generals' attitude towards the opposition and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi? Not likely. Says a Burmese dissident living abroad: "What the army fears the most is a split within its ranks. Any dialogue with Suu Kyi would legitimize the opposition in the eyes of the military—and that could mean the end of their precious unity. For that reason, they won't talk to her." ■



MATTHEW PENNINGTON/AP

Testing the junta: Students protest in Rangoon.