

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE CASE STUDY OF THE 88 GENERATION STUDENTS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter intends to study a civil society organization which seeks democratization by social movements inside the country. It will study how the organization exists, functions and diminishes in the military-ruled Burma. The study is also concerned with the relationship between the regime and a civic organization which focuses on democratization. The study will use the 88 Generation Students as a case study of a social movement organization in Burma. The 88 Generation Students is a social movement organization because it tries to mobilize people to stand up for their human rights and democracy on a national level. The main arguments of this chapter is that the Burmese government allows some space for social movement organizations when the activities are small and on a community level, but it has no tolerance for national-level social movements. The findings in this chapter show the limitation of the government's tolerance for such organizations. This chapter will first look at how the 88 Generation Students were formed, what their objectives are and how they view the political problems of the country. In addition, it will explore the activities of the 88 Generation Students during 2005, 2006 and 2007 and how the government has responded to these activities. Finally, it will analyze the strengths, weaknesses of the organization.

#### **History of the 88 Generation Students**

The 88 Generation student group was formed in 2005 by former political students who were released from prisons in 2004. It is an informal organization and no organizational structure. The organization is not registered as an NGO or a political party. It is a group of people comprising a generation of students who were active in the 1988

pro-democracy uprising, 1996, 1998 university student demonstrations and later on demonstrations.

According to Thar Lay, an 88 Generation Student, objectives of the group is as follows:

1. To start a movement to protest the military dictatorship of Burma and the government convened 'National Convention'.
2. To protest the unjust laws and regulations enforced in Burma.
3. To set free all political prisoners and human rights activists, including the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
4. To end ethnic conflict in Burma and establish peace recognized by the international community.

(Thar Lay ,Personal communication, October, 2007)

#### The beginning of the 88 Generation Students

In 1988, there were the nation wide demonstrations against General Ne Win's military government. . Many university students were actively involved during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. The military crushed the 1988 movement and later sentenced around 1,000 student activists to prison for various anti-state crimes. After 15 years, in 2004-05, most of the students who lived for a long imprisonment since 1988 were released. After they were released, they met with government officials, NLD members, other parties and ethnic groups to find ways for national reconciliation and democratization. Later, they formed as a group of "88 Generation Students". This means not only to students who took part in the 1988 pro-democracy nationwide uprising but also those who have been involved in the struggle for freedom and democracy since then. According to that definition, there can be thousands of the 88 Generation Students members. But there are only over a hundred who are actively working under the title.

The 88 Generation is an entirely new civil society organization in Burma. At the time of the 88 Generations arose, the pro-democracy NLD political party could do little more than its survival. Back in 1988, the NLD led a mass movement, and it won a landslide victory in the May 1990 election. But the government failed to implement the result of the election. After years of military harassment of its members, the NLD is now weaker and fail to get people participation in its activities. In that situation, the 88 Generation has suddenly become a force which tries to get people participation. However, the 88 Generation group has no organizational structure since members are working around the prominent students without a definite task. The two prominent leaders of the 88 Generation Students are Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi. Min Ko Naing had been arrested by Burma's military intelligence in March 1989 for his role as the president of ABSFU in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. He spent nearly 16 years in solitary confinement before his release in November 24, 2004. Min Ko Naing is the second largest popular leader for democracy after Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. Ko Ko Gyi also was imprisoned in 1990 and released in December 2005 for his role as vice president in ABSFU.

#### The aim and strategy of the 88 Generation Students

The aim of 88 generation students is to restore democracy in the country and get national reconciliation between the government and opposition party and ethnic groups. Unlike the NLD, the 88 Generation is not a political party which is trying for state power. It is a good point that the government cannot accuse the group of chasing the political power like it usually accused of NLD.

The strategy of the 88 Generation Students is different from time to time. At the beginning the strategy is to raise political awareness by mobilizing people to express their desire through political participation in local level campaigns. Later they use demonstrations as a means of pressuring the government to make desired changes in

politics. As a softer strategy, the 88 Students tried to do the signature campaign, white campaign, the open heart campaigns and policy advocacy to the government, NLD and UN. The campaigns were designed to be able to participate by all people. They tried to choose a method that the people could follow without punishment from the government. Myo Zaw, an 88 generation student said that

“We believe that if all people claimed their needs together to the government, the government would have agreed to negotiate with the NLD and the political system would have changed to something better”.  
(Myo Zaw ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

Through people’s participation to change the Burmese political system, the 88 Generation Students tried to promote democracy at the grassroots level finding new democratic space. They tried to raise the ‘voice of the people’ to be expressed and talking into account government policy and practice. By advocating people’s participating and empowerment in the political reform movement, the 88 Generation Students tried to get an opportunity for ordinary citizens to participate in the political arena thereby bring about a democracy in Burma. However, the 88 Generation Students later use more radical strategy which is to confront the government by public protests. The following paragraphs will search how far the activities of 88 Generation Students can develop and the extent of democratic space that they got under the current political system. To see how far the 88 Generation could go, the author will identify the activities of the 88 Generation Students.

### **Searching for democratic space**

#### **Signature campaign: the first activity of the 88 generation students**

As the first search for democratic space, the 88 Generation Students tried to get their freedom of speech in the country. They announced a statement in the country calling for humanitarian aid in Burma and asked the government to remove the restrictions on

international aid agencies. The statement was supported by many parties and organizations from local and abroad. However, the government had no desire to accept the statement and responded it by detaining temporary to five leaders of the 88 Generation Students. The background story of the statement is as follow.

In 2005, the Global Fund, which was aim to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in Burma, announced to withdraw their US\$ 98m program, giving the reason that the government imposed many restrictions and created an impossibly difficult environment to work in. According to Global Fund, Burma is the second most-affected country in terms of HIV/AIDS in Southeast Asia, behind Thailand, and has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis worldwide. About 71 percent of the population is at risk for malaria (Irrawaddy, 15 October,2006).

Because of this humanitarian crisis, the 88 Students group called for the international community to continue providing humanitarian aid to Burma and to remove the government restrictions on international aid agencies. Min Ko Naing, the group leader, said, "the crisis of health and education in Burma is in an alarming stage and effective measures should be taken immediately, only international cooperation and humanitarian aid will resolve the problems effectively" (DVB,2 January,2006).

Soe Tun, one of the 88 Generation Student leaders, highlighted the need for an impartial, transparent and accurate process and he argues that

"Burma is one of the poorest Asian countries and it needs aid from the international community, especially in the areas of health and education. So, our group called for the government and oppositions to work together to meet Burma's humanitarian needs. We want to urge the government to provide a suitable and effective environment for social workers". (Soe Tun, Personal communication, August, 2007)

Because of these activities which openly challenged the ruling government, the group's most prominent leaders were detained temporary after the statement was



announced. Five prominent students who lead the group, Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Htay Kywe, Min Zeya and Pyone Cho were detained temporary by the regime on 27 September 2006. According to Ko Ko Gyi, they were asked to write their view on the Burmese politics and the role of NLD. Then they had to sign a pledge stating that they know of Edict 5/96 which is in connection with the regime's National Convention. Edict 5/96 mentioned that it is illegal to interfere the National Conventional. The government warned them that the activities of the 88 Generation Students are going against the drawing of National Constitution and they can be arrested for their activities. Myo Zaw, an 88 generation student said that

“We hoped the government would response positively to the call for joint action as it would help both the people of Burma and the ruling junta as the purpose is not for the regime change but the national cause.” (Myo Zaw ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

By looking at this event, it shows that freedom of expression for political cause is very limited especially when the expression is against the political agenda of the government. Although some leaders were detained, the activities of the 88 Generation Students continue. The rest of the 88 Generation Students tried to respond the government's action by doing the signature campaign in which many people can participate without punishment from the government.

#### Signature Campaign: the biggest campaign for democratization in Burma

The first big national level campaign is the Signature Campaign. The 88 Generation students asked for signatures in local and abroad, to release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi. In a few months, the 88 students got over 535,000 signatures. Mya Aye, a leader of the 88 Generation student said that

“The campaign had been joined not only ordinary people and political activists, but also the pro-junta USDA and local authority members. In some regions, even soldiers signed their names in the petition demanding the release of all political

prisoners and the start of a political dialogue for national reconciliation, but they were told not to give the name of their battalion” (Mya Aye ,Personal communication, August, 2007).

That campaign showed what the 88 Generation Students could achieve a small participation of people to go to democratization of the country. One of the 88 Generation students, Mya Aye said that copies of the signatures, accompanied by a letter, will be sent officially to the ruling military government, and the UN organizations. He also insisted the campaign was a success even though nothing extraordinary happened during it as the people from all walks of life bravely came forward and gave their signatures despite the difficulties, harassments and threats of arrest from the authorities. Mya Aye said,

“You cannot say that it is not successful by looking at in a negative way. The reason is, if we want to get a place we have to go it step by step. You can’t take just one large step. Therefore, if we are to assess it, we will be stepping towards our desired destination by peaceful means and by using the path which could be followed by the public within the legal boundary,” (Mya Aye ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

When asked why the public had signed bravely, leaving their fears, Mya Aye said that the main reasons are economic and social dire situations. People realized that under the current system there would be no human security for them (Mya Aye, Personal communication, August, 2007)

All in all, this campaign used a democratic space in which people can participate to claims what they want. The campaign was totally peaceful and helped to initiate the public into politics again. The campaign is a good example of how the 88-Generation Students tried to get the people to move step by step to democratization. Ko Bo Kyi, joint secretary of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma, a human rights group operating along the Thai-Burmese border which campaigns for the release of the country’s political prisoners, said

“The 88 Generation Students took a big risk in this signature campaign, and two leaders were detained for five months after it began. They took many steps to inform the public before getting signatures. The announcements were made by word of mouth, over telephone and through reports that appeared in the international media. They want people to get involved in shaping their future by taking part; to do something other than talking (DVB,4 August,2007).”

The 88-Generation hoped that the signature campaign calling for political dialogue would mobilize the public without exceeding what the junta can tolerate. “People are more courageous than ever.” said Kyaw Min Yu, one of the campaign’s organizers, describing the sign petition as a way to test people’s courage and to test the campaign for democracy.

“We are trying to seek how people can participate politically at the lowest level,” Kyaw Min Yu said, explaining that signing a petition is one political act people believe won’t get them in trouble with the authorities.”(Kyaw Min Yu ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

In addition, the campaign has brought a unity among political parties, the public and those interested in politics. The 88 Generation Students’ made the following statement at the end of signature campaign.

1. The signature campaign (petition) expresses the desire of 88 Generation Students and the public. Started on 2 October 2006 and ended successfully on 23 October 2006 with the cooperation of the public, and, within a short space of time, many signatures expressing the desire were collected.
2. We the 88 Generation Students want to express our respect and pride for monks, students and the whole bravely put their signatures expressing their true desire despite the difficulties, problems and harassments. We especially want to record our respect and pride for Ko Win Ko from Yethabya Village in Hteintaw Monyo township who was arrested arbitrarily with trumped up charges while transporting petitions/signatures and the villagers.



3. In order to respect and acknowledge the desire of the public, we seriously call for the release of all political prisoners including U Tin Oo, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Win Tin, U Khun Tun Oo and ethnic national leaders, leaders of 88 Generation Students Min Ko Naing, Min Zeya, Ko Ko Gyi, Ko Pyone Cho and Ko Htay Kywe who have been working for the substantiation of national reconciliation and democracy which are the aims of the petition (DVB,24 October,2006).

Finally, the government released all 88 Generation leaders who were arrested in September, 2006. This was a remarkable success of the campaign since the government agreed to release all the 88 Generation Students.

#### Making voice through foreign media

After the signature campaign, the 88 generation group is stronger than before and becomes the most active civil society organization which stands for human rights and democracy. As activities, the 88 Generation students made some personal communications with foreign-based radio stations broadcasting in Burmese: BBC, VOA, Democratic Voice of Burma, and Radio Free Asia. In an personal communication, Min Ko Naing said "In solving Burma's political problems, no one person, no organization could do it unilaterally. We want to ask the government to build the right environment in which every party and all democratic forces could take part in solving the national crisis, such as education, health and so on (DVB,2 January,2006). These personal communications tried to encourage Burmese people to try for human rights, justice, democracy and reconciliation.

The 88 Generation Students also announced that they welcomed a report which called for the UN Security Council to act in Burma. It is a 70-page long report, entitled "A Threat to Peace" commissioned by former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The report lists deteriorations in political, social and economic situations of Burma under the rule of the country's military junta, section by section.

The report concludes: "the situation in Burma constitutes 'a threat to peace', thereby a binding Security Council intervention is a necessary international and multilateral vehicle to restore the peace, promote national reconciliation, and facilitate a return to democratic rule in Burma" (BBC,6 December,2006).

#### White Expression Campaign as softer strategy

As another action campaign, the group did the White Expression campaign by encouraging people to wear white clothes. The campaign aimed to show people support for five of the groups leaders, who had been detained in September 2006. White Expression is an integral part of the Signature Campaign. When asked a civilian living in the down town area of Yangon, he said he noticed many people who wore white shirts on that day. Nyan Win, spoke person of the National League of Democracy, Burma's main opposition political group, said that

"I have not been carefully observing the difference between the ways people dressed but significantly I can see many people are in white dresses since then" (DVB,24 September,2006).

However, the government did not take any action on this campaign. One of the reasons can be that the government was busy with the re-convening of the long-stalled National Convention at that time. Since the government did not change any of its position, the 88 Generation Students decided to use more democratic space by doing another campaign called "Open Heart".

#### Open Heart Campaign as softer strategy

On January 4, Burma's Independence Day, the 88 Generation network launched another campaign called "Open Heart". It is a letter-writing campaign encouraging Burmese citizens across the country to write about their everyday complaints and

grievances with military rule. The organizers have said that they will send these letters to SPDC chairman Senior General Than Shwe and the UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon.

Ko Ko Gyi, one of the leader of the 88 Generation students said,

“The aim of the campaign was to encourage the people to exercise freedom of expression, which is their basic right. We had seen the people become increasingly aware after launching the campaign. Some people wrote their opinions on paper and hung them on the fence of their homes. We had received a huge amount of letters from across the country and can draw the whole picture of the Burmese people’s desires.( Ko Ko Gyi, Personal communication, August, 2007)

Students from 88 generation group traveled to some cities to encourage people to write letters to military leader Than Shwe expressing their grievances with the military’s administration. One of the group’s leaders, known as Kyaw Min Yu said,

“The Open Heart Campaign aimed to encourage Burmese people voice their dissatisfaction with military rule. We will never be free from suffering unless the world can hear our cry. Our group’s aim is to have the Burmese military authorities hear the feelings of the people.”( Kyaw Min Yu ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

Prayer Campaign as softer strategy

In August 2006, the 88 generation students carried out a prayer campaign within the existed democratic space. Leaders of the 88 Generation Students organized 200 people in the midst of tight security at Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon. People prayed for an hour peacefully and nobody was arrested in that campaign. Kyaw Min Yu, campaign leader, said that

“This campaign was meant for the release of political prisoners including Burmese democracy icon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, recently detained student leaders, long term ethnic political prisoners and recent flood victims in Burma.” (Kyaw Min Yu ,Personal communication, August, 2007)

On June 4, 2007, the 88 Generation Students sent letters to urged China and Russia to help promote national reconciliation and a democratic political transition in Burma. In the letter, the 88 Generation student mentioned about the veto decision of Chinese and Russian presidents Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin on the US-backed United Nations Security Council resolution on Burma. The statement mentions that

“By rejecting [the resolution on Burma], China and Russia have lost themselves an opportunity to cooperate with UN’s work regulations on Burma issues in constructive ways. And with this support of China and Russia, Burma’s ruling State Peace and Development Council has been able stand up against the international community”(DVB,5 June,2007).

Myo Zaw, an 88 Generation Student, said that

“The SPDC is increasing their efforts to arrest, threaten and attack peaceful democracy activists in the country. China and Russia need to help find solutions to Burma’s many political and social problems. Their decision to veto the resolution means that they are now responsible for finding other ways to solve the situation in Burma.” (Myo Zaw,Personal communication, August, 2007)

### **2007 social movements**

On August 15, the government, which holds a monopoly on fuel sales, doubled the price for diesel from 1,500 Kyats to 3,000 Kyats per gallon, and raised the price of gasoline (petrol) to 2,500 Kyats. The price of a 65-liter canister of natural gas was raised from 500 to 2500 Kyats. The government made these increases without any public announcement and most people only found out about them when they were asked to pay double their usual bus fare. Many bus services were suspended and hundreds of commuters could be seen lining up at bus stops.

On August 19, the 88 Generation Students decided to make a peaceful march with 400 protesters in Yangon. While the immediate issue was the price hikes, the protest was

a reflection of people's anger on the rule of the military-led SPDC. Thar Lay, an 88 Generation Student and involved in the protest, said that

“We did this protest to reflect the hardships of our people who are facing difficulties due to the government's fuel-price hike.” (Thar Lay , Personal communication, August, 2007)

However, the government did not tolerate this kind of protest long. At the same night of the protest, the entire leadership of the 88 Generation Students and several other activists were arrested.

Nevertheless, the protest did not stop easily. The rest of the 88 Generation Students carried out more demonstrations in Yangon, and tried to wide spread to other parts of the country even though authorities arrested Min Ko Naing and a dozen of student leaders. On September 5, the protests reached a turning point when over 100 Buddhist monks holding signs denouncing the price hikes marched in Pakokku, a religious center located close to the city of Mandalay. The monks were cheered on by thousands of civilians who later joined with the monks.

However, the government intervened brutally, firing gunshots over the heads of the monks and beating monks and protesters. Radio Free Asia broadcasted that one monk died from the beatings, and two monks had been tied to a lamppost and publicly beaten in Pakokku. It caused revulsion and anger in a deeply religious society and the news widespread throughout the country. The next day, an angry mob surrounded government and religious affairs officials during a visit to a leading monastery, burning the cars of the government delegation.

In response to the violence against monks in Pakokku, some monks formed All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA) demanded an immediate apology from the SPDC, a reduction in prices, the release of all political prisoner including opposition leader Daw



Aung San Suu Kyi, and a dialogue between the SPDC and the political opposition. Monks throughout Burma responded to the ABMA's call and began daily marches. The next day, an estimated 20,000 protesters, including some 3000 monks, marched in Yangon. A day later, September 24, the Yangon protests exploded in size, to an estimated 80,000 people, including around 30,000 monks.

Many political groups joined the marches. Well-known public figures such as the comedian Zargana and the movie star Kyaw Thu publicly offered alms to the marching monks to demonstrate support for their cause. Other marches took place in 25 cities across Burma. On the evening of September 24, the minister of religious affairs appeared on state television to denounce the protests as the work of "internal and external destructionists". On the night of September 25, the SPDC announced a nighttime curfew and began arresting some prominent figures who had supported the protesters, like the comedian Zarganar.

On September 26, the government gave permission to police to shoot the protesters. The first serious attacks against the protesters took place when riot police attacked monks at the main Shwedagon Pagoda. According to several eye witnesses, the riot police beat one monk to death. During the night of September 26-27, the security forces raided monasteries throughout Yangon. The most violent raid took place at the Nwe Kyar Yan Monastery, where the security forces detained some 100 monks. On September 27, a clash took place around the Sule Pagoda as soldiers, riot police, and the Swan Arr Shin dispersed a large crowd of protesters. A Japanese video-journalist, Kenji Nagai, was shot and killed, and eye witnesses saw another man and a woman also shot and likely killed. In the evening, soldiers shot dead a student holding the "Fighting Peacock" flag of the 88 Generation student at the Pansodan overpass.

Although thousands of people continued to try and organize protests on September 28 and 29, the SPDC managed to retake control of the streets by deploying

thousands of troops, riot police and militia members. As the crackdown on the streets proceeded, the security forces also began raiding monasteries in Yangon and other cities involved in the protests, detaining thousands of monks and close down monasteries. In November 2007, The state-controlled press claims that only 2,836 persons were detained and only 91 remain in detention, but the actual number of detained persons was much greater. The SPDC failed to account for hundreds of persons who have “disappeared” without trace since the protests.

In fact, the government has disliked about politicized monks who have deep respect among the population. However, since the early 1990s, the military government has effectively controlled the Buddhist governing religious bodies by retiring, replacing and relocating potential dissident monks.

But the recent monk-inspired demonstrations and the military’s violent responses seemed to be a critical moment. In the unprecedented move, police and security forces were deployed outside the monasteries in the key Buddhist cities of Mandalay, Pakkoku and Yangon to prevent the monks from staging further protests.

#### **Government’s mixed reaction on softer political campaigns**

Since the military crushed a pro-democracy movement in 1988, killing hundreds and imprisoning thousands, the government hardly tolerates any kinds of political activities. So, the signature campaign is a rare protest against the repressive government. At the beginning, the government has totally tolerated the massive, but peaceful, expressions of dissent by singing the petition. However, when the campaign got momentum, the government accused the student leaders of cheating the public into signing the petition. Naing Lin, an independent observer said that

“Such a mixed response stems from the SPDC’s awareness that 88-Generation has no political agenda and also its own curiosity about the level of support the student group has. The SPDC was using this moment to test the ground.”

(Naing Lin ,Personal communication, October, 2007)

However, Win Ko, a National League for Democracy member, was arrested on October 2006 with 400 petition signatures in his possession. He was convicted of obstructing the work of a government official who had questioned him about the signatures, and he was sentenced to two years imprisonment. The authorities said he was imprisoned for possessing illegal lottery vouchers, although fellow democracy campaigners believe it was because he collected 480 signatures for the petition. But the government denied arresting anyone over the signature campaign. Khin Yee, the police chief said,

“If we want to arrest, not only Win Ko, we can arrest whoever participate in it. But we let them go” (New Light of Myanmar,2 November,2006).

Information Minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan said at a press conference,

“If their movement harms the peace and tranquility of the state and leads towards unrest in the country, we will take action- not only prevention, but detention and questioning” (New Light of Myanmar, 2 November,2006).

The government dismissed the petition and also accused 88 Generation Students of faking the signatures. National police Chief Brigadier General Khin Yee said, “there were 54 million people in the country. It cannot be said the 530,000 represents the desire of all the people.” He added that no action had yet been taken against the activists. “We have been watching for the sake of peace and tranquility. But we have to take action if non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public and religious organizations complain to us about their movement,” he said (New Light of Myanmar, 2 November,2006).

Thus, the government has reacted the dissent activities by allowing at the first stage and arresting some activists when more people become participated.

### **The government's brutal reaction on 2007 movements**

The state-run New Light of Myanmar said that 2007 social movement activists were arrested because their protests against increases in gas prices were a serious threat to the stability of the state.

The newspaper reported that

“...their agitation to cause civil unrest was aimed at undermining peace and security of the state and disrupting the ongoing national Convention. It also amounted to breaking the law guarding against acts undermining the efforts to successfully carry out peaceful transfer of State power and facilitate the proceedings of the National Convention” (New Light of Myanmar, 2 November,2006).

As a strategy, the government used pro-government people to break up the crowds first and stopped journalists from reporting events. When USDA and Swan Arr Shin failed to control the crowds, the police were asked to crack down the public violently. These people are known to be a part of a pro-government group such as USDA and Swan Arr Shin. The government also intends USDA to show popular support for their policy and expect to change USDA into a full-fledged political party with the SPDC's promised transition to democracy. USDA already attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy in May 2003, and many of her National League for Democracy supporters were killed in the violent attack.

Now the USDA's new special security force, known as the Swan Arrshin, is at the forefront of countering the protests. Ko Ko, a civilian who experienced the protests in Yangon, said that

“The members of Swan Arrshin have been especially trained in crowd control and the violent suppression of protests.” (Ko Ko, Personal communication, October,2007)

Many former criminals recently released from prison have been recruited as Swan Arrshin members according to a diplomat in Yangon. He said at least 600 convicted

criminals were released from Yangon's notorious Insein Prison and recruited into the Swan Arrshin ( a diplomat, personal communication, October,2007). U Wai Pon La, a senior monk from Mandalay said that

“It is the use of these thugs which had particularly upset the Buddhist monks. Fighting Buddhist civilians against other Buddhist civilians disturbed social harmony. The government should not ignore this event, let alone promote it.” (U Wai Pon La ,Personal communication, November,2007)

Thus, the government has no tolerance on protests and systematically cracked down on protesters.

### **Opportunities and Threat of the 88 Generation Students**

The opportunities and threats of the 88 Generation Students depends on the powerful position of the SPDC, its political agenda, lack of strong civil society, and participation of people in politics and the weak of pro-democracy groups in the country.

#### **The powerful position of the government**

The current military government in Burma is as strong as it has been at any time in the country's history. It controls all public aspects of the country's political life and important parts of the private sector economy. It has formed a well-organized military intelligence, needed to ensure the continuity of the military rule. Media is totally controlled by the government and not allowed to mention political news. The SPDC shows its determination to hold on to power by continuing its seven-step political road map.

Most of the ethnic insurgents are not fighting the SPDC forces anymore. So, the government has fewer threats since most of them have had to give up their arms. These groups are significantly weaker and somewhat more demoralized than ever before. The



government has made promises to ethnic groups and allowed them to play a role in drafting a new Constitution at the National Convention. As a result the government is gaining political profit by letting the ethnic group attend the National Convention and increasing the legitimacy of the new Constitution.

Although there is popular discontent of the SPDC, no political force can threaten their power. The main political opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), tries to mount a challenge to the legitimacy of the military regime and will remain an irritant to it. But the NLD's points of leverage inside the country for weakening the SPDC's grip on power are few, and it is difficult to be optimistic about it achieving change in the near term. Furthermore, there is general opinion that the NLD are becoming less and less representative of the people and their continuing inaction is weakening people's support.

The SPDC's tactic of arresting and detaining the leadership of opposition groups is proving to be highly successful, leaving them without any guidance or strategy, unable to agree on any course of action and therefore becoming impotent and passive.

Internationally, the SPDC is in a strong position. China is a major ally of the SPDC. China has been selling military equipments in large amount. ASEAN countries and India have been expanding relations with it while Burma has been denied military sales and economic aid from most developed countries. Economic sanctions by the US and EU still continue to register the moral and political unacceptability of the regime but the effects of sanctions and other forms of international isolation cannot undermine the regime's strength.

The power of the current military regime in Burma has been strengthened in the nineteen years of its existence. The government is stronger by massive expansion and modernization of the armed forces. It uses 40 percent of its budget for military expense. It

can also establish a territorial military structure throughout the country. It has built a strong and organized secret police and military intelligence in which people are afraid of. It also uses violence and repression systematically by forming government sponsored organizations and militias among the public, and uses them to control any dissent as demonstrated in the most recent pro-democracy protests. It has also had unprecedented political and military successes against the country's long-running insurgencies.

Thus, the power of the regime is invulnerable for the time being. The political scene in Burma is dominated by the military although the military does not have legitimacy or the genuine popular support of the people. In that kind of situation, social movement organizations like 88 Generation Students have very few opportunities to carry out political campaigns.

#### The road map of the SPDC as political agenda against democracy

The political view of the SPDC leaders has several dimensions. Their political view is based on nationalism, independence and self-reliance. They see themselves as the last and only defenders of the country's national unity. Their personal security depends on profit from the national economy and state enterprises, and a continuation of the authoritarian rule. Political strategies to bring about a transfer of power to a civilian and democratic government will not succeed unless they try to address all these levels of motivation within the military leadership.

The political agenda of the SPDC is totally different from what the 88 Generation Students asked for. In 2007, the SPDC completed step three of the seven step road-map. The seven steps are (1) reconvening the National Convention (2) implementation of a process to allow the emergence of a "genuine and disciplined democratic system" (3) draft a new constitution (4) adopt a constitution through a national referendum (5) hold free and fair elections (6) convene elected bodies and (7) create government organs

instituted by the legislative body (Moe, 2007). Step 3 was completed on October 18, 2007 but it is unclear what the government undertook step 2. Many diplomats say the SPDC moved from step 1 to step 3.

Some had hoped that the road map could have offered a space for a mechanism of national reconciliation involving opposition, civil society and the military. Indeed, stability, a single force, army unity, opposition to outside influence and a step-by-step approach to transition are the political agenda of the SPDC. The agenda is driven by an exaggerated fear of external interference in Burma, including a possible invasion by the United States and a great distrust of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi and all non-Burman groups. In the eyes of the SPDC, from its Chairman, Senior General Than Shwe, the aim of those opposing the SPDC, including the NLD, is to undermine the National Convention, to separate the Union and to realize the 1990 election results. All ethnic groups are regarded as wanting separation and independence, or at least federation—a dirty word for the military—and therefore should be treated with a firm hand militarily. Than Shwe instructed his government to focus on ‘union spirit’ and avoid the regional or ethnic diversity. This reflects his tactic of responding to proposals of the 88 Generation Students by broadly ignoring and over-riding them, rather than negotiation with NLD and ethnic groups that could address the political problems.

#### The weaker positions of NLD and opposition groups in bringing democracy

All the organized opposition groups including NLD and ethnic groups remain weak, harassed, divided and suffering from lack of effective leadership and experience of how to approach negotiations and build consensus. Their main objective is survival, as parties, groups or individuals. They have failed to come up with ideas that might have awakened the interest of the SPDC leadership in working with them, by addressing their key concerns, such as a continued role for the military, or their personal security. Furthermore their constant holding on the past, including the 1990 elections, rather than

focusing on the SPDC's road-map agenda, has further entrenched the SPDC view that there is no point in dealing with them.

Seeing opposition groups as part of a Western conspiracy, the SPDC tried to marginalize the NLD and the 88 Generation Students. There is always a threat that NLD party will be deregistered if the party operates more actively. NLD members in the districts are being systematically forced to resign and publicly criticize the party or face harassment in their daily lives, and even imprisonment on criminal charges. People, INGOs and LINGOs avoid contact with NLD in order to avoid punishment by the SPDC of stopping their activities and projects.

The majority of the population, while privately opposed to continued military rule, remains focused only on the daily struggle to survive. Meanwhile, the ceasefire with the Karen National Union (KNU) has been put under pressure by increased fighting between the SPDC and the KNU's second and third brigades in the Toungoo area, and widespread human rights abuses against civilians forced to flee the fighting. Major operations are likely to continue against the Shan State Army (South). Other ethnic armed groups with cease-fire agreements with the SPDC are under increasing pressure to disarm, and their economic and political activities are being constrained if they do not do so. There is no sign that the SPDC and the ethnic groups will be able to bridge the gap between the latter's call for federalism and the former's hatred of it.

The willingness of the people to participate and follow

The numbers of people who participate in social movements have fallen down after 1988 uprising. In 1988 uprising, over one million people in Yangon protested against the government while the population was around two million in Yangon. In 2007, around 80,000 people (some estimate around 100,000 people) came out the streets and joined the protests. However, people participation is not as much as 1988 while the population in 2007 is over five millions in Yangon. So, majority of people still do not

participate in social movements. Although people are hungry for change, they don't want to sacrifice their lives and follow any political ideology. They are quite aware that they cannot afford to devote themselves solely to the changeover to another political system which has no guarantee for economic prosperity. They see very well the power of market economy that is finding its feet in the country, however slowly.

Another reason that people do not participate in social movements is that the massive imbalance between the costs and the outcomes by participating in politics. People experienced for forty years of unsuccessful social movements in Burma and the punishment of the government has been extremely high. The police have special authority to conduct searches and make arrests at will and detain people for extended periods without charging them. The government can arrest people under the Emergency Act of 1950, which allows for indefinite detention. Bail is commonly offered in criminal cases, but it is not allowed for political related cases. The government regularly refused detainees the right to consult a lawyer, denies them or their families the right to select independent legal representation, or forces them to use government appointed lawyers. The worst of all, the sentences for political cases range from 7 years minimum to over 100 years. Thus people have too much to lose by following social movements instigated by the 88 Generation Students.

### **Strength and Weakness of the 88 Generation Students**

One of the greatest strengths of the 88 Generation students is their ability to mobilize and inspire the people to participate in politics even though the government tries to restrict all areas to move. For example, the 88 Generation Students could get a national level of people participation in the signature campaign in which over 500,000 signed the petition for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners. Other strengths of the 88 Generation students include, good reputation and strong name recognition. Min Ko Naing, leader of the 88 Generation, is the second most famous pro democracy figure after Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma and he has charismatic authority



among people. Other 88 Generation Students are also well-known for their courage, sacrifice and integrity. In addition, the group has moral authority among the public as former longtime political prisoners and gained trust from ethnic groups which is important for national reconciliation. The 88 Generation also receives a lot of international support and had access to international media in which they can speak freely. They also have great influence on the younger generation students. The biggest success of the 88 Generation Students is that they managed to generate a high level of public support in the country and raised a huge political awareness of all generations and created a political spirit in the country.

The weakest point of 88 Generation Students is in the leadership role. Sincerity, sacrifice and commitment are not sufficient for good leadership. There are many other qualities people need to be equipped with if they are to lead with effectiveness. Among those qualities is the ability to craft planning with a strategy. In the 88 Generation group, there are two key leaders; one is Min Ko Naing and the other is Ko Ko Gyi. Ko Ko Gyi is widely regarded as politically savvy while Min Ko Naing is more influential in the group. According to a personal communication with one 88 Generation Student leader, there was a debate in the group about the strategy. Min Ko Naing wanted to remain true to the group's roots and pursue a more revolutionary path for which they are famous and loved. While Ko Ko Gyi pushed for the sustainability of the group by using softer strategy such as campaigns and transforming the group to a more moderate and independent political organization in the future. It is the author's opinion that the 88 Generation students made some strategic mistakes by going so quickly. The 88 Generation could be a more independent organization and could make some negotiation with the government, if they had not chosen to work very closely with NLD. The 88 Generation also fully supported NLD's political trend, which hold 1990 election result as a political leverage. That made the government to become more aggressive over the 88 Generation Students and it ended all personal communications between SPDC and the 88 Generation Student leaders. Indeed, the SPDC Generals wanted the students to keep away from NLD and stop

confrontation to them. They want them to stay neutral, not to side with the NLD party. This can be illustrated by an account from one 88 Generation student. The military intelligence unit (26) picked up students from their homes and took them to the unit office. They were given a speech by the military Colonel San Pwint. He said,

“Sons! Stay away from politics. Tell me, what do you want? What do you want to do? Do not come between us (the military and the NLD party). It is our fight not yours, stay away from NLD party, it is between them (NLD) and us. We have to crush them in the near future. You all have to understand that”( Myo Zaw, Personal communication, 2005)

This was a clear message and a strategic plan was laid out by the military regime. However, the 88 Generation Students chose a strategy to confront the military government without well preparation which led to the failure of 2007 social movements. Denouncing publicly the SPDC’s road-map agenda has further entrenched the SPDC view that there is no point in dealing with the 88 Generation Students. The 88 Generation Students underestimated the responses of the government and used a strategy which is not coordinate with the time. Furthermore, the 88 Generation Students seem to contradict in what they claimed and operated. In personal communication with 88 Generation Students, they said they were following softer political approach in which people can follow without danger but become mobilized. In previous personal communication, Mya Aye said that

“If we want to get a place we have to go it step by step. You can’t take just one large step. Therefore, if we are to assess it, we will be stepping towards our desired destination by peaceful means and by using the path which could be followed by the public within the legal boundary,” (Mya Aye, personal communication, 2007)

However, the 88 Generation Students change to the radical strategy which aims to political change by mass mobilizations such as 2007 protests in which majority of people find it hard to follow.

The 88 Generation Students would not have been arrested so quickly, if they had not taken to the street. If the 88 Generation leaders had not all been arrested, they could continue to exploit public space to work towards democratic reform, national reconciliation and mobilization people and gathering force through political campaigns. As an alternative strategy, the 88 Generation could choose to maintain their status quo and transform into a political party in the future election that the government is planning to hold after finishing the constitution at the National Convention. With their reputation in the country, the 88 Generation has a great chance to win some seats in the parliament. Then the 88 Generation Students could create more democratic space and would be able to do more for democratization.

It was a great tragedy that all 88 Generation Student leaders were arrested and many people were killed in 2007 social movements. Although the 88 Generation Students still exist, all the previous movements of the 88 Generation have been stopped.

### **Conclusion**

By examining the activities of the 88 Generation students, one can find that the 88 Generation students played a leading political role in the country. Through their campaigns, the 88 Generation Students have been able to mobilize many people and raise political awareness among new generations. They used democratic space to confront the government's political power and bad governance in order to support democratization process. They challenged the government's wrong policies and fought for human rights and democracy in the country. Their basic principle is to realize the democracy and human rights in the country. Based on this principle, they tried to organize people to protest against the government for their rights. They also tried to pressure the government

to change their one-sided constitution by various campaigns. When the campaigns were small, the government showed mixed responses on the campaigns. But when the movement of the 88 generation students gained momentum, the government brutally cracked down the 88 Generation students by arresting the leaders and beating up supporters. Finally, the movements of the 88 Generation have ended with bloodshed and imprisonments.

Based on the above evidence we can argue that the 88 Generation Students got wider democratic space for small political campaigns but there was less democratic space for social movements. The 88 Generation Students got a chance to carry out a number of awareness raising campaigns when their activities were on a smaller scale. In fact, the decisive factor whether the government allows the democratic space contested by the 88 Generation Students is the intensity of their movements. Some 88 Generation's activities which are at the local level like prayer campaign, white expression campaign could be done without being arrested and little harassment.

The 88 Generation Students have been able to use democratic space for their political campaigns which have aimed to raise democratic awareness and mobilize people for political participation. Some examples of these campaigns are signature campaigns, white expression and prayer campaigns. These campaigns have managed to mobilize thousands of people to participate. The democratic space used by the 88 Generation students the campaigns is not the space allowed by the government to public before. The government has already tried to limit all the available democratic space by ending freedom of speech, and freedom of association. In addition, the government tried to limit the democratic space by forming USDA and detaining political activists and the 88 Generation Students leaders. So the democratic space the 88 Generation used for its campaigns is the negotiated space created by themselves for the purpose of the democratization process. In addition the 88 Generation Students initiated 2007 social movements in which over 80,000 people joined and it was the biggest movements since

the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. The space for social movements is definitely not the space allowed by the government. It was the democratic space initiated by the 88 Generation Students to become the democratic social force by the participation of people. Since the 88 Generation Students politicize the public space for the purpose of democracy we can conclude that the 88 Generation Students created democratic space in the country.