

RANGOON — In downtown Rangoon, less than two weeks before the Nov. 7 election, life appears much as usual. People lounge and relax in roadside tea-shops, children run and play among vehicles and the detritus of roadworks, monks – and nuns, in miraculously clean, pink tunics with tan shoulder robes and brown umbrellas – make alms rounds through the streets, barefoot and impassive amidst noise, rain or traffic. Rangoon is a colourful, if shambolic city, alive with a human warmth and vibrancy that rarely betrays the discontent beneath its vital surface.



Yet cracks do show, as much in the difficulties of daily life as in the spoken admissions of people from all walks of life. While the shaky infrastructure of much of Rangoon is little different from that of a city in neighboring India (Patna or Kolkata for example), other less obvious constraints of communication and movement belie a much deeper malaise conditioning much of life.

My guesthouse proprietor is required to report to the local police registry office with details of all his current guests, sometimes more than once a day, recording any knowledge of their movements and activities. This is ironic, considering many areas of the country are off-limits to travelers, and even non-Burmese ethnic nationalities alike, so that both visitors and locals are unable to travel as freely as the expectation that they do so might allow.

Perhaps the best evidence of unreasonable control, however, comes in the area of online communications, where even mainstream e-mail sites require overseas server providers in order to allow for a few snatched moments of web access, usually at the cost of a lengthy process of proxy transfer.

Sometimes there is no access at all, and then the extent of Burma's isolation from the world beyond comes clear, with a chill of recognition: much could happen here that could go unknown by both local and international news providers, or only until it might be too late.

In my short time here, without eliciting any discussion of the election, I've been taken into confidence by many people eking out a living—tea-shop owners, guesthouse workers, booksellers, taxi-drivers and beggars. Many have made it clear that they hold little faith in the coming election. Others, especially younger educated people, try to preserve some optimism that a reasonably democratic procedure might begin to institute the reforms they expect is their due in voting at all.

Few have made it clear to me that a boycott of the election is the only course to follow, and while emphasizing their fidelity to Aung San Suu Kyi and the now heavily compromised former National League for Democracy, they profess her political power to be at an all-time minimum, and her career effectively closed. Yet they say this with a wistfulness that makes it very clear that while her political currency appears to have passed its peak, their personal faith in and love for who she is and what she means to their national identity is as undying as ever.

Younger people I have spoken to look to the 88 Generation Students movement as most likely to hold some kind of legitimacy in the democratic cause, at least one with some political negotiating power, even as they are certain the Union Solidarity and Development Party will win the election outright and that current Prime Minister Thein Sein will become the new leader of Burma under its auspices.

It is hard to disagree with them, and everything seems to be confirming it by the day. Yet even this morning an apparent show of protest by some monks near the Shwedagon Pagoda, and the arrest of two of them, challenges that foregone conclusion. In this election anything could happen, and the coming days possibly hold more radical surprises in store.

Trading English books with an elderly bookseller, speaking through his two remaining betel-stained teeth, nothing was mentioned of the election until I was about to take leave of him. Then he cannily grinned and said, "And you don't know anything about the election, do you?" I quickly grinned back and agreed, saying, "Nothing at all! In fact, I've forgotten about it! What is it?"

He slapped his knees and burst into laughter, two friends joining in, all of us laughing in a happy defiance. A nearby police official looked askance at us, but we kept on laughing. There was a feeling that no matter who might be observing, the local people preserve an integrity and conviction intact precisely through such defiance, however passing.

The irony also was that the book I'd exchanged with the old bookseller was a collection of short stories by Yevgeny Zamyatin, a great Russian writer repeatedly persecuted by Stalin's Soviet regime, his life often threatened, until he finally died in exile in Paris, obscure and largely unknown to the Russian reading public of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods. Yet his writing lives on, read now in English in Rangoon.

The old man shook my hand and thanked me and said he looked forward to reading the stories, brilliant parables of freedom set in unlikely places and fragile human solidarities, just as it is in Burma today. The best of the human spirit survives and triumphs here in ways that Snr-Gen Than Shwe and his minions seem deadened to, so great already is their loss.

On the way one night to the Shwedagon Pagoda to see the full-moon festival there, my taxi driver (slightly drunk) told me almost as soon as I was inside how much he loved “Daw Suu Kyi.” By the time we arrived at the glittering golden stupa there were tears in his eyes, and he was reluctant to accept my payment for the ride. Such is the warmth and faith of many of the Burmese people I have met here in only a short time.

The overriding conclusion that can't be avoided is that such a people deserve much more than the disrespect and humiliation the ruling regime mete out to them again and again in so many forms of curtailment of basic rights of expression, assembly, freedom of association and self-determination.

Life appears here to be business as usual, but deep beneath the surface a pride and strength of spirit speaks out loud, saying that the subjugation of fundamental freedom can only go so far, beyond which point everything will be risked to secure its eventual triumph.

Perhaps this is the one thing the ruling regime has failed to master against the people, the one thing it will finally be unable to withstand. Whatever the outcome on Nov. 7, the quest for genuine freedom isn't over, and the election might only be its prelude.