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CLOSELY-WATCHED CLASSES



Burmese students march in a prodemocracy demonstration, 1988.

IT WAS THE NIGHTMARE OF Stalinism, and not his youthful stint as a policeman in colonial Burma, that inspired George Orwell to write *1984*. But Big Brother now rules that country anyway, and his latest form of thought control is a security operation designed to squelch even the most fleeting political ideas at Burma's universities, which reopened last fall after a four-year-long, on-again, off-again shutdown.

Under the universities' Emergency Security Program, professors just back from refresher courses at re-education camps are being herded into teams to monitor student opposition, and moles from Burmese military intelligence are infiltrating classes. Crush All Destructive Elements, proclaims a giant red signboard at the entrance to Yangon (formerly Rangoon) University. The State Law and Order Restoration Council, which goes by the appropri-

ately Orwellian acronym of SLORC, will brook no challenge to its rule.

Yangon University, in particular, has long been a center of political resistance. In the 1930s it was the base for nationalistic students opposing British imperialism. In 1962 students massed against a coup that brought military strongman General Ne Win to power; Ne Win responded by blowing up the Rangoon University student center. In the spring of 1988 Rangoon University was the launching point for huge prodemocracy protests that swept the country. Students not only led the demonstrations—which were triggered by a riot at a tea shop near the university and a police massacre that followed—they also rallied the country behind Burma's most famous political dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. The daughter of national hero Aung San,

who led the fight for Burmese emancipation, Suu Kyi is herself a student; she returned from her doctoral studies in England to nurse her dying mother at the family house bordering the university. But unable to tolerate what she called "a situation of ugliness unmatched since Burma won

rebels fighting on the border. Many of those who remained behind were imprisoned, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who has lived under house arrest in her Rangoon bungalow since July 1990. Since then Burma—or Myanmar, as it now calls itself—has become one of the most isolated and

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In Myanmar, professors just back from refresher courses at re-education camps must team up to monitor students.

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her independence," Suu Kyi became the leader of her country's political opposition.

Prodemocracy forces compelled General Ne Win to resign and extracted a promise from the government that elections would be held in 1990. Students and professors were swept up into a cultural awakening that launched more than ninety newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. But the gains were short-lived. In September 1988, the generals of SLORC—clearly acting on Ne Win's behalf—took over the country. Ahead of their counterparts at Beijing's Tiananmen Square by some nine months, the generals ordered a bloody crackdown. Soldiers fired directly into crowds, killing, by some estimates, thousands of protestors. Several thousand activists either fled to sanctuary in Thailand or joined groups of ethnic

repressive places on earth. As Pol Pot's regime did in Kampuchea, SLORC has forcibly relocated more than a million people; dragooned at least a million more to build roads, railways, and military encampments; and made refugees out of as many as 600,000 members of ethnic minorities targeted by counterinsurgency campaigns. All government employees—including university professors—must undergo mandatory ideological indoctrination, and an elaborate network of informers run by the secret police is now said to number as many as one of out of every five Burmese.

During the three years that Myanmar's universities were closed, professors had to show up for work every day in order to draw their pay. The universities opened briefly in the fall of 1991, but closed again when students mounted a demonstration to celebrate Aung San

Field Notes

Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize in December. According to witnesses, the military poured ~~into~~ the Yangon

drain of the country's most qualified professors to Japan, Australia, and the United States. Maung

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Eight out of the fifteen students in Maung Maung's chemistry class were probably SLORC moles.
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campus via specially widened roads, ringed the grounds almost shoulder to shoulder, and arrested more than 900 protestors.

Repression in the universities has prompted a brain

Maung, a chemistry professor for twenty-six years at Yangon University, is a typical example. He recently left to find a job—any job—in Tokyo, driven away by his twenty-one-dollars-a-month

pay and by constant surveillance. In one of Maung's 1991 classes, he told an *Asiaweek* reporter, eight out of the fifteen students were probably SLORC moles.

This semester's reopening of the university is part of an effort to offset international pressure with the appearance of reform. In the past six months, SLORC has announced an end to hostilities against rebels, released some political prisoners, and allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to receive visits from family members.

But Burma-watchers say SLORC would indulge in such image-burnishing only if it knew its opponents to

be cowed—and many Burmese say that is in fact what has happened. "With me, SLORC has gotten what it wants," one university student told a *New York Times* reporter last spring. "I do not worry about politics now. All I want to do is go to school and finish my degree."

And if university campuses turn out not to be as peaceful as the generals might like, SLORC won't be caught out. "They are not going to ease up," says another Burmese exile, Mya Maung, now a professor of finance at Boston College. "Any sign of trouble and they'll close down once again."—*William McGowan*