Report

"We have to try": Mounting pressure in election preparations and responses from the Mon State community

Introduction

Between December 2009 and early January 2010, South-East Command Major General That Naing Win issued a series of orders to local and regional Burmese government administrators in Mon State, mandating that their offices begin lobbying the residents of the areas under their administrative control for political support, in preparation for the 2010 election. These orders coincided with a rapid increase in human rights abuses targeting the citizens of Mon State. The most common instances of these abuses, forced militia trainings, extortion of election funds, forced rice donations, land confiscations and mandatory summer rice paddy cultivation, have been continuously documented by HURFOM in its November and December 2009 reports. This month's continued documentation of abuses by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) forces has painted a stark portrait of pre-election efforts by the military government, that are directly intended to ensure it will maintain its grip on state power after the supposed transition to a civilian government post-election.

This month, HURFOM continues its series of reports documenting effects of SPDC preparations for the coming 2010 election. Previously published information pertaining to pre-election human rights violations, along with updates in Thanbyuzayat township, serve as a backdrop for a discussion of the methods by which the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has begun to increase its control over the voting population of Mon State. HURFOM then addresses the three-pronged approach by the Burmese government to maintaining control of the voting population in Mon State: census-gathering of village and township population levels, identification checking and travel restrictions, and checks placed on monastic communities.

In response to the SPDC's ongoing campaign, HURFOM hopes in this report to highlight the actual responses from Mon state villagers to increases in government pressure. As noted in the Karen Human Rights Group's 2008 report "Village Agency", rural communities are often over looked as agents of political action or thought in the state. However HURFOM hopes to highlight that by providing individual accounts from a diverse array of dissenting voices, including monks, TPDC chairmen, truck drivers, and government staff members, this report will reveal a clear and strong community response, regarding their perceptions of and reactions to these growing efforts to undercut any real democratic process.

Background

The human rights violations that HURFOM documented in the months of November and December 2009 pertaining to SPDC preparations for the 2010 election have persisted into the first month of 2010. Here, HURFOM includes a short update on reports of increasingly intense pre-election abuse in Mon State.

Starting in early December 2009, Military Operations Management Command No. 19 in Thanbyuzayat Township forced between 10 and 30 residents from each village in its controlled area to act as "observers" for the military government. These individuals were forced to complete military training, and then were ordered to act as unofficial spies for the Burmese government in their villages, motoring each settlement for anti-military election sentiment.

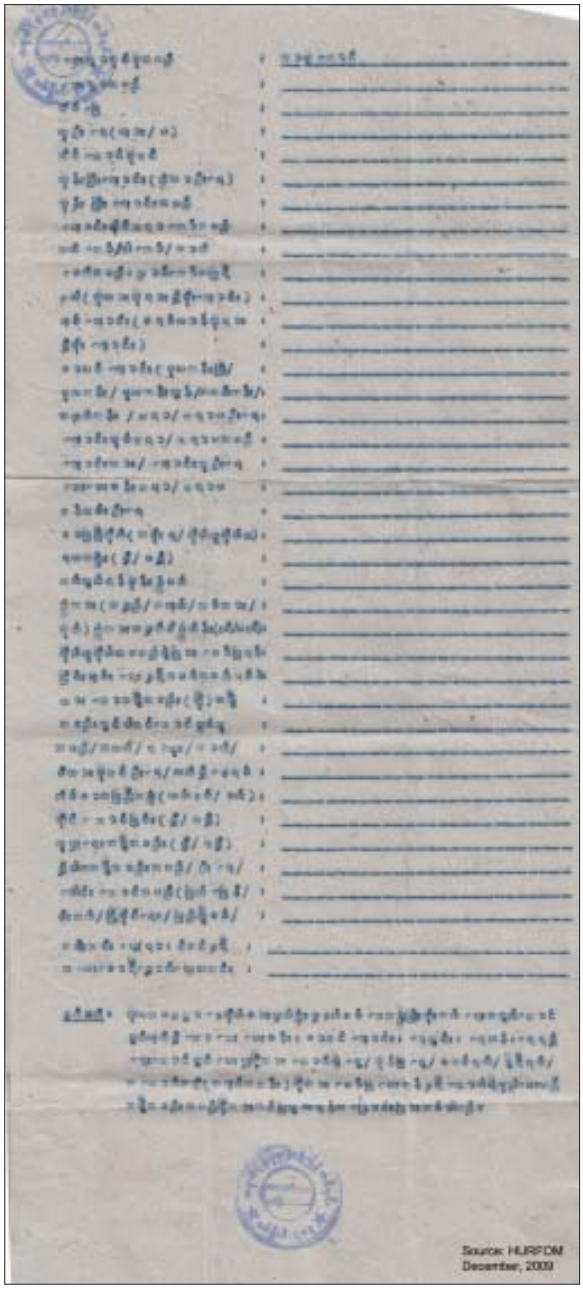
The other residents of these Thanbyuzayat villages were forced to support the individuals selected to be "observers" during their military training. The majority of the villages in the area under MOMC No. 19's control contain an average of 2,000 villagers each, and during the 2 weeks of militia training, each household in the area was required to contribute between 3,000 and 5,000 kyat to pay for food, uniforms, and other supplies. HURFOM's reporters also learned that village headmen have used the battalion's presence in the area as an opportunity for self-gain; many village headmen used the military training taxes as an opportunity

Methodology

For this report, HURFOM field reporters gathered interviews from Ye, Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships in Mon State. Due to increased security risks as government has mounted pressure on communities, reporters relied largely on networks of their own individual contacts for information; many of these individuals within the reporter's network were responsible for gaining contacts and conducting interviews with village leaders and government staff members. While these accounts are gathered based on opportunity as they occurred to reporters and their network, HURFOM believes these interviews provide a fair account of personal opinion amongst villagers within the townships targeted, and areas within which SPDC forces have conducted 2010 election preparations and perpetrated abuses in relation the election.

Census-gathering

Continuing since October 2009, the SPDC has carried out an aggressive and detailed form of census taking, targeting different elements of civilian communities throughout Mon state. This campaign to gather information about the state's civilian population has transformed over the past four months, as efforts by the SPDC towards securing community support have evolved.



An original copy of SPDC's census form is seen, collected from eastern Ye Township, Mon

According to HURFOM's field reporters, near the close of 2009, the Burmese government issued identification cards to Burmese citizens not yet in possession of identification. The government's Department of Immigration, in conjunction with the Burmese military, lead the issuance of identification cards, and then conducted censuses of the voting population in each village in Mon State, which were ordered to be concluded by the 31st of December. Such measures will provide the Burmese government with exact figures of expected voter turnouts in these regions.

In first week of December 2009, The Burmese military government ordered the local administrators in Ye and Thanbyuzayat Townships to conduct censuses in the areas under their control, as a means of establishing the numbers of potential voters before the upcoming 2010 elections. The orders were issued directly to local battalions, Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) chairmen and Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) chairmen. The village chairmen were ordered to initiate the censuses in their individual villages. The SPDC first demanded village names, and then asked about the number of households located in each village, and the total population of each village.

According to a Ye Township resident, the census was conducted by a number of battalions based in both northern and southern Ye Township. These battalions include Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 587, based in Kon Du Village; LIB No. 299, based in Marn Aung village, LIB No. 586 based in Myo Daw Oo village, and LIB No. 343 base in Aru Taung village. The battalions themselves registered identification numbers and tallied the number of residents in each village, also counting the numbers of villagers currently employed abroad. The remaining sections of the census demanded political and economic information that many township members felt exceeded the

boundaries of a normal census, raising suspicions that the SPDC planned to use this information to manipulate voter populations during its 2010 election campaign.

U Khin Yee, a 45 year old villager and member of the Ye Township TPDC, detailed the questions included in the document for HURFOM's reporter:

> The census they [the government] gave us was very detailed. It also included [questions on] religious leaders and staff who live in monasteries, churches, and mosques in the area. Other [details collected] are: the number of government staff in the area, the amount of property they own, and what organization they are working for in the area. The census form also asked for the amount of ceasefire-group members who are based in the area. They also wanted to know the number of clinics, libraries, small bridges, and large bridges that have been funded by the area's budget [taxes]. I think, they will try to use this information in their election campaign."

U Myo Thet, a 64 year old retired high school teacher from Ye Township, explained to HURFOM's reporter how he believes the censuses collected of government staff information will allow the SPDC to manipulate its voter levels:

> The local government collected lists of the retired people in Ye Township. There are around 15 individuals who collected the census list. This group included members of Infantry Battalion (IB) no. 61, Military Operation Management Command (MOMC) No. 19, advanced trainers for the government's civil service, and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). I heard they would collect lists of all the retired government staff in Ye Town. The local authorities would not directly say that the list was for the 2010 elections. They claimed that they wanted to know the voters list in the area. As for me, I will vote properly for party that I believe in. I want the party that I prefer to get power and win in the election. I could not accept a government who forced the population to vote for them and intimated the residents into supporting them in their election. If I believe that a party is not appropriate for the residents, and I do not agree with their ideas or systems, I will not vote for them. It is my decision. We must have freedom to vote [as we wish], and justice in our election. Now, the way they are collecting the retired government staff lists is a way of preparing them [the staff] to vote for the government's party. I think, by collecting the retired staff lists, the government will change our votes so that we vote for their controlling party. It's an unacceptable idea."

Movement Restriction Against Civilians During the Pre-election Period

In a step beyond previous efforts to pressure civilian communities in to support of the SPDC in the coming election, military forces have now been documented actively restricting civilian movement. Restriction of movement is an abuse commonly practiced in brown and black 'free fire' areas where SPDC forces still face resistance from insurgent groups. The implementation of this tactic in relation the control of non-threatening civilian communities is an exceptional indicator of the SPDC's increased focus on pre-election preparations.

A Mon State policeman is on duty at a public ceremony, in Mudon Township, Mon State.

According to HURFOM's field reporter, in the beginning of January 2010 the military government in Naypyidaw ordered Brigadier General That Naing Win, chairman of the South East Command (SEC), to ensure that all Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) and Infantry Battalions (IB) in Mon State be ready to maintain security in preparation for the 2010 election. Among the security measures demanded by the Burmese government was the implementation of rigorous checkpoints, and increased travel restrictions on travelers moving around rural areas, or between rural area and urban sites.

Resultantly, since the start of January 2010, the residents of southern Mon State have encountered a

in travel restrictions and identification checkpoints. According to HURFOM's reporters, travel has become especially difficult for individuals from neighboring states and divisions, as government authorities have been ordered to subject outsiders to particularly intense questioning and identity checks. Individuals traveling between townships in Mon State itself have also experienced travel restrictions.

Kon Aye, a 29 year-old resident of Aru Taung village in Ye Township, told HURFOM's reporter that he feels that the travel restrictions in his region are an attempt to limit awareness of the human rights abuses occurring in Ye Township's "black areas":

> In my opinion, the authorities in the township do not want people from other states and divisions to come into this area because they do not want news spread in other states and divisions about what they have done in this area. In the last few months, the local authorities have collected the numbers of people in different villages, including the villages of Aru Taung, Marn Aung, Kyaung Yaw, Kon Du, Myo Daw Oo and Hangan. The authorities were trying to get the number of people in each village in preparation for the election.

HURFOM's field reporters also learned that during the second week of January 2010, the government authorities in Moulmein, and those at checkpoints along the Thanbyuzayat to Moulmein highway, began particularly intense traveler investigations, checking identification cards and searching baggage. According to reports, the severity of these checks is only increasing.

Targeting of Monastic Communities:

While traditionally seen as the religious and moral compass of the nation, the monastic population of Burma has come under increasing scrutiny and outright pressure from the SPDC. The nation's monk community curries significant respect from civilian groups, is wide spread, well organized, and fosters a high degree of education, and is for these reasons seen as a threat to the continued domination of the junta in Burmese politics.

Buddhist Monks collecting alms are closely monitored by police, at the begining of January in Mudon, Mon State.

As the SPDC's 2010 election preparations have evolved, increasing amounts of military pressure have been placed on Mon state's monastic communities. Members of monasteries throughout Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, and Mudon townships reported increases in questioning, identification checks, and movement surveillance to HURFOM's field reporters.

According to a monk in Kon Du Village in Ye Township, LIB No. 587 commander Than Win not only gathered a census of the number of people in his village but also gathered the identification numbers of monks living in the area, despite the fact that monastic communities are not permitted to participate in the voting process. Reportedly, this commander also asked monks in the region to inform him when monks from neighboring villages arrived at the monastery. Than Win reportedly demanded that the Kon Du monastic community to also contact him immediately, should they hear rumors of other monks being involved in anti-election movements.

A 29 year-old monk from Kon Du temple described the investigation of his monastery by LIB No. 587's commander. The process included specific orders from the commander regarding appropriate monastic pre-election behavior:

> The battalion commander came and questioned the abbot in the temple every week. Some weeks he came two three or times and questioned the abbot. It seen to be he came and checked the list of the monks' visitors in my temple. Every temple in Ye township was in the same situation. The battalion commander also warned the abbot not to get involved in movements against the election If other monks get involved, we have to tell him about it. If someone gets involved in movements against the election, they must face severe punishment.

According to HURFOM's field reporter, military checkpoints at Thanbyuzayat, Mudon and Phaung Sein have placed particularly intense focus on students and monks, given the role both groups played in the 1988 and 2007 protests. Traveling students and monks who talked to HURFOM's reporters claimed that the rigorous treatment they faced at checkpoints made them extremely uncomfortable, and many feared being accused of inciting anti-government sentiment and being forced to pay bribes. Travelers reported that checkpoint authorities led rigorous baggage and personal searches, and held long, threatening interrogation sessions.

Particularly intense travel restrictions began in the northern and central areas of Mon State after an anti-government movement called the "no 2010 campaign" took place over New Years. Participants all over Mon State graffitied the words "No 2010" on various roads and buildings throughout the region; the protest prompted a state-wide frenzy among Burmese military forces based in Mon State. According to inside sources in the Thanbyuzayat monastic community, on January 7th, a monk heavily involved in the Mon Literacy and Culture Association was arrested in Thanbyuzayat in conjunction with the " No 2010" campaign. Security maintains extremely tight for travelers throughout Mon State, and travelers report that they now must show identification at every checkpoint.

Community responses to SPDC manipulation

Despite the upsurge in security measures designed to ensure the SPDC's retention of power after the 2010 election, a large contingent of Mon State civilians, government workers, and monks interviewed by HURFOM's reporters continue to voice their own opposing political beliefs and desires. Many of the sources who spoke with HURFOM's field reporters used the opportunity to share their disapproval of the Burmese government.

HURFOM hopes to highlight that these interviews are an important indicator of community members' retention of their own political agency and will, despite the Burmese government's widespread efforts at coercion and repression of their capacity to act. Though unable to physically carry out openly confrontational forms of political resistance, these interviews illustrate a firm understanding and clear set of ideals and principles on which Mon State community members intend to act, regardless of SPDC repression.

A VPDC chairman (name and location concealed for security purposes), who attended a Township-level administrative meeting in his district on December 2nd and 3rd, 2009, expressed to HURFOM his extreme reluctance to implement the Burmese government's orders given to tactical commander, battalion commanders, and TPDC officials:

> The authorities commanded us to work a certain way. First, they ordered us to campaign for the government. They do not care if I and the residents are interested or not, the resident must be forced to vote for the government's party. Voters are their [the government's] target, if they don't vote they are the government's enemy. They force us to continue forcing the residents [to support the Burmese military government]. They know that if we [village leaders] force our residents then we will get into conflicts with our people. Second, they ordered us to force the residents to vote for them by forcing them and intimating them. Not only this meeting did they order this, but also in a meeting we attended before. They ordered the same thing. This way [forced participation] means that people will lose their freedom of expression through voting.

Just as government officials seemed increasingly reluctant to participate in the invasive pre-election procedures demanded by the SPDC, so too did civilian sources interviewed by HURFOM. Many Mon State citizens indicated that they had begun to chafe at the increasingly stringent movement restrictions implemented by the SPDC.

According to a Mon State truck driver, who regularly drives from Ye to Moulmein on the Moulmein to Ye highway, in the past travelers were not required to stop at every checkpoint along the route. Following the events of the "No 2010" protest, this truck driver complained to HURFOM that travelers must not only show their cards at every checkpoint, they also must walk through the stations. Truck drivers making the trip between Rangoon and Tavoy report even higher rates of checkpoints, and rates of travelers along road have steadily declined, as travelers grow more discouraged by the length of time it takes to make a journey along Mon State's major highways. Drivers reported that they must pay increasingly high bribes to get through checkpoints; the truck driver interviewed by HURFOM complained that between checkpoints and the cost of gas, he is left totally devoid of income.

A TPDC member (name concealed for security purposes) detailed some of the preparations already made by the Burmese government for its pre-election campaign:

> As for me, I had been attending meetings every single week. Most the government orders are directly from Naypyidaw to the State's or District's Administrative Department. In the meetings, they mainly focus on how to get every department involved in 2010 election. In our Township, the MOMC will role for the security in coming election. As you know, the Election Commission (EC) has not declared the election laws yet. We also don't know about the policies for forming a political party, or a constituency. In contrast, the military battalions have been providing fireman and militia trainings in the local areas. In addition, they have also educated the USDA about the election and what they can do in election. After they finish what they have do to prepare for their party, the election laws will be declared. I heard they would declare them in March. After that campaign, the government will start forcing and intimating people to vote for them.

According HURFOM's field reporters, the Burmese immigration department began compiling lists of both retired and currently employed government staff, and their family members, in Ye, Thanbyuzayat, and Mudon Townships, in early January 2010. Three of HURFOM's field reporters interviewed 20 retired government personnel, and 8 currently employed government staff members throughout the three Townships.

Overwhelmingly the government staff members interviewed by HURFOM's reporters offered dissenting opinions on the election preparations. A former land surveyor named U Soe Thar, aged 62 from Ye Town, said:

> This election must be the transition from a military government to a democratic government. For over 40 to 50 years, our population has been struggling under the military government's control. Now is one of the opportunities that have been appearing throughout our history, to reform our country's political system. If we vote for the military government, we can't change and reform the security and country situation. It's our opportunity to select our future leader. Even though I was a government staff, I must be vote for the party that I believe in.

U Thin, a 62 year-old retired government staff member from Mudon Township gave his explanation for the Burmese government's delay in announcing electoral law:

> My perception is clear. Certainly the government will lie in their election processes to continue holding on to their power. It is an unfair action that they also have not declared the election laws yet. They know that if they declare them late, other parties will not have time for their campaigns. Now they [the Burmese government] are already prepared for the pre-election process.

A Thanbyuzayat education staff member, who insisted that his name be withheld for security purposes, pointed to the role of the 2008 constitutional referendum in the SPDC's control of the country:

> As for my opinion, if the National League for Democracy (NLD) does not participate in the election, the election will not make sense. It's not fair, the government has been starting its campaign, giving trainings and educating their key members to be ready for the election. They [the government] have already registered their retired employees on their voter lists. And then, the most important thing is the election laws. They have not come out yet. So, we can see that it will not be a fair election. They must play by the rules to win if the election happens. I think our country will not be freed from the military's control again. In the 2008 constitution, we can review that the military government already takes 25% [of seats in parliament] in the administrative system. Furthermore, if there should be a revolution in parliament, the Ministry of defense can lead a military coup. It was clearly described in the 2008 constitution that every

Information on HURFOM and Invitation for Feedbacks from Readers

Dear Readers,

Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995, by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- Monitoring the human rights situation in Mon territory and other areas in southern Burma

- Protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma,

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletters. If publication is delayed it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newletter. Please email or mail a name and address to:

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With regards,

Director
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

department in the government, such as administrative systems, judges, and the law are controlled by the military. It' a question of who can accept this idea. As for me, if the election happens, I will vote for the political party that I prefer.

HURFOM's field reporters interviewed 10 educators and former students living throughout Mon State, in the townships of Ye, Thanbyuzayat, and Mudon. Many of the individuals interviewed were united in the opinion that without a proper understanding of the electoral process, and a thorough education on the nation's political system, many Burmese citizens would be swayed by the SPDC's pre-election efforts.

Mehm Paing Chan, a 28 year- old graduate with a B.A in law, from Thanbyuzayat Township pointed to the importance of both education and free will in the 2010 electoral process:

> The election is the top priority in the country, it's life for our country. It's a time that we give a good leader and political party the opportunity to have a power in the country. I mean that we will give our future to the party that we believe in. If we don't know the background of the government's party, we will vote for them. That is similar to you killing yourself. Now we do not see that the government is preparing for the election like they would in a democratic system. All of their [the government's] history is just abuse from their guns and their power. We saw in the 2008 constitutional referendum, how the government forced the residents to vote for its constitution. Nothing from our free wills was included in the constitution. We knew the constitution was not fair, but they forced us to agree with their constitution. If this time they force us to vote for their party again, we will have lost twice.

An educator and member of the National League for Democracy in Thanbyuzayat Town told HURFOM's reporter that he believes the government's delay in announcing election laws is a ploy to keep both the Burmese people, and the international world, uneducated about Burma's political situation:

> We can't just say that the election will be in 2010. Before the election period, we should educate the population and provide knowledge about issues that are related to the election. Also, the election laws should appear very early, and there should be freedom to form political parties. The government should also give opportunities to other parties to use the radio and television for their own campaigns. Now, the election laws have not appeared yet. The population does not have any idea what the election is about. Also, other political parties have not started their campaigns yet. I think, the government did not give much time to other political parties for their campaigns. As a result, the population will get less knowledge and less experience with other parties. So, the entire body of these uneducated votes is just for the military government's party. In addition, the government will force people to vote and finally they will point guns to the people's heads to get their votes. The resident will be afraid and they certainly will vote

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for the military. This is the government's strategy for the coming election. We have to try to educate the residents. And monitor what kind of human rights abuses will be caused by the coming election. We need to express to the international community that it needs to know that the government is abusing human rights in their election process. It's necessary that the international community know that the election will not be fair and free.

The words "No 2010" seen on the Moulmein to Tavoy motor road at the beginning of January, 2010.

Conclusion

The climate in which HURFOM continues to publish this series of reports on SPDC election preparations is one of increasing tension, as all forms of Burmese civil society find themselves under the ever-increasing influence of government pressure. After exploring what these abuses against civilian communities entail during the previous 2 months, this report has explored 3 primary invasive techniques designed to limit Mon States communities' capacity for active political participation.

Census gathering, with the issuing of identification cards, continues to be a baseline effort by administrative bodies to gather detailed information on communities prior to promulgating the election law. These censuses infringe on the rights to privacy of the civilians in Mon state. By restricting the movements of civilian groups, SPDC authorities are targeting one of the most basic elements of personal freedom – the right to move freely from one place to another. By targeting monks, the spiritual keys to Mon State communities, the SPDC hopes to curtail an entity possessing the potential to catalyze real political resistance.

However, civilian response to the current series of preparatory measures highlight a heartening reaction in which Mon State's residents are able to retain their own personal sense of agency. In particular, given the significance the SPDC has assigned to controlling Mon State's civilian population, community voice and the potential of divergent political opinion is perceived by the Burmese government as a very real threat. Thus, HURFOM hopes to underline that even in the midst of ongoing abuses, the retention of personal agency and opinion carries a great potential for action amongst Mon State citizens, into a period of increasing uncertainty as the 2010 election approaches.

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