

By Jan Knippers Black

RANGOON, BURMA

**W**HEN BURMESE PRESIDENT MAUNG Maung Kha pledged on August 24 to schedule a referendum on restoring multiparty democracy here, he closed one chapter in the saga of Burma's popular uprising of 1988. Throngs danced in the streets as troops withdrew from the city center, the curfew was lifted and martial law was revoked.

Maung Maung further pledged that if the referendum favored a multiparty system, general elections would be held as soon as possible. No top government officials would be candidates, he claimed. And should the military-based Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) object to the democratization plan, the party's new civilian leadership would resign.

Perhaps the message was not entirely clear to the security forces, or perhaps they did not feel inclined to follow the president's lead. On August 25-26 guards at the Insein Prison on the outskirts of Rangoon opened fire on protesting inmates, who were mostly political prisoners. State-run Rangoon radio reported that 500 of the prisoners had escaped, 4,806 (of a prison population of some 10,000) had been released, 106 wounded and 57 killed. Other sources reported that about 1,000 prisoners had been shot to death.

Burmese dissidents, however, seemed to take the president at his word. On August 28 about 50,000 people attended a coming-out party at Rangoon University for the All Burma Students Union, which brought together organizations that had operated underground for several years. But it is not yet clear whether hardliners of the military and the ruling party have played their last card. The political crisis now moves to a new phase, yet it is far from over.

# Burma: unclear future for land in fast-forward

**Power plays:** A province of British India until World War II, Burma enjoyed only 14 years of democracy before succumbing to a tenacious dictatorship in 1962. Members of the same coterie of rebels who supported the Japanese invasion in 1942—believing the Japanese to be liberators—then supported the British three years later as they expelled

## ASIA

the Japanese and established the first government of independent Burma in 1948. At its founding the new government was a multiparty parliamentary democracy. But civilian rule eroded over the years and the military, called upon to suppress separatist movements among ethnic minorities around the fringes of the national territory, grew bolder.

In 1962 armed forces commander Gen. Ne Win, who had been accused of brutally suppressing minority tribes, turned on his erstwhile colleague Prime Minister U Nu and deposed him. Ne Win founded a new party, the BSPP, and outlawed all others. But his main power base was the increasingly privileged military.

Ethnic minorities, in some cases led by warlords and funded by opium and heroin trafficking, have over the years engaged in sporadic fighting with the forces of the central government. The anti-government campaign was joined early on by the country's educational and religious institutions. Students and Buddhist monks were prominent among those who resisted Ne Win's *coup d'état* 26 years ago and as a consequence suffered scores of casualties. Grievances mounted when Ne Win's troops burned down the student union building and outlawed student organizations shortly after the coup.

The riots that erupted in March at the national university in Rangoon left some 300 dead and added hundreds more to the list of political prisoners the students had sought to free.

Anti-government rioting, led by university students, broke out again in June, and Rangoon remained under curfew until the end of the month. The university remained closed in July, and it appeared that the rebellion had been effectively suppressed once again. But faculty sources reported that the students had actually won the latest showdown. The government had yielded to many of their demands, including calls for the release of political prisoners. Even some of those within the government supported the unrest. A professor who also holds a responsible government position told *In These Times* her co-workers in the ministry do not hold her under suspicion because of her university connection. On the contrary, she said, they are all in sympathy with the students.

Nor is contempt for the government limited to the urban middle class; it draws upon a wellspring of frustration that has no apparent class or regional bounds. In the small town that is present-day Pagan, where 5,000 Buddhist temples rise from the plain in silent tribute to an ancient civilization, a horse carriage driver can recite in some detail and with barely suppressed anger the recent history of government atrocities against the op-

position.

**A day in the country:** A July train ride in the Burmese countryside demonstrated the contradictions of this ancient land in crisis. Even on the eve of a massive uprising, the rhythm of life along the Irrawaddy River seemed not to have changed much since it was immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "Mandalay." On the 14-hour journey by train from Rangoon to Mandalay, the antique "upper class" coach, utterly devoid of shock absorbers, was cooled by ceiling fans and inhabited by extended families of spiders, mice and other tropical fauna. Two senior monks, barefoot and draped in simple saffron robes, were accompanied by younger monks or novices who attended to their elders' needs and prostrated themselves fully—touching their foreheads to the filthy floor of the coach—before withdrawing.

Across the aisle sat a slender, middle-aged man in uniform. He, too, had an entourage of servants—mostly enlisted men. One of his orderlies lowered the heavy metal window beside him at the beginning of the trip, even though the heat was oppressive. The monks referred to him deferentially as "the general."

While the monks chewed on their betel nut in detached tranquility and other passengers gazed through open windows at people and oxen at work in flooded rice paddies, the general appeared to be meditating or praying for hours on end with clasped hands,

closed eyes and furrowed brow. Finally he stirred and an orderly laid out for him a multicourse meal, kept hot in a portable container.

The general then began to notice his fellow passengers and even graciously offered some of his tea. During the rest of the trip, before he alighted to a heel-clicking military welcome at Meiktila, he often stretched to peer out of the windows ahead of and behind his own. He did not, however, raise the metal sheet that shielded him from assassination or other untoward attention.

The episode began to make sense when one of his attendants confided that he was the commander of the People's Police Force (PPF) in Rangoon. The next day a newspaper reported that Rangoon's police commander had been demoted and transferred. His superior, the director-general of the PPF, had been fired and other officers were reprimanded in connection with an incident that had occurred during the student riots of last March.

Burma's official news agency that day conceded for the first time that 41 detainees had died in police custody. They had been squeezed into a single police van, along with 30 others who survived, and left for two hours after police, using tear gas, broke up

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a demonstration. An official inquiry found that they died of tear-gas inhalation and suffocation. It was hard to imagine that the man on the train—frail, contemplative, even gen-

### URGENT HUMANITARIAN APPEAL!

In an appeal to the international human rights community, 12 of the 2800 Palestinian prisoners held without charges or trial in the "Ansar III" prison camp in the Negev Desert have sent out a signed petition seeking urgent assistance to secure adequate water, food, medical care, family contacts and access to legal counsel. These prisoners are held 28 to a tent and, as punishment, are often forced to sit in the blazing sun or placed in metallic containers for hours on end in temperatures reaching 120 degrees. This prison should be closed now.

We urge you to write or telegram:

Ambassador Moshe Arad  
Embassy of Israel  
3514 International Dr., NW  
Washington, DC 20008

Itzhak Rabin  
Ministry of Defense  
W. Jerusalem, Israel

Please send a copy of your letter to:

ADC -- Ansar III Project  
4201 Conn. Ave., N.W.,  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20008



Burma has enjoyed only 14 years of democracy in recent history.

Dorothy Friesen, Synapses





Despite reports in the Western press, Burma suffers shortages only in imported goods that middle classes everywhere find essential.

teel—was the villain of that piece, but in Burma many things are not as they appear.

**The real story:** The grim portrait that emerged a couple of weeks later when the country caught the international media spotlight—that of a land with a rigid military dictatorship, a tightly controlled socialist economy and a population languishing in poverty—failed to capture the ironies and eccentricities of the uprising and its setting. Burma certainly lacks most of the appurtenances of the modern world. Even the traces of 18th-century technology left by the British constitute an awkward overlay on a way of life that belongs to earlier centuries. But the country's heartland is exuberantly green and fertile. And compared, for example, to the harsh poverty of neighboring India or Bangladesh, Burma's slow-paced, unpolluted towns and villages seem pleasant—almost idyllic—and the people healthy and animated.

Reports filed in Bangkok attributed much of the popular unrest to acute shortages. In fact, the only serious shortages were of the imported goods that middle classes everywhere find essential. But the inflation, deriving from a sinking currency and a thriving black market, is very real.

As of late July the dollar's value on the black market was six times the official exchange rate. Those who deal in money and other illegal goods and services show little concern about being apprehended. Far from the kind of "tight ship" one might expect of a socialist-military regime, business in Burma, legal or otherwise, borders on anarchy. Government employees do not seem to take official regulations very seriously. In fact, they often volunteer advice on how to circumvent them. And illegal operations were profitably "protected" by public officials on the take.

Tourists are not allowed to travel overland by bus or taxi unless they have made special arrangements with the official agency, Tourist Burma. So drivers of unauthorized taxis peel off bribes at security checkpoints to uniformed officials who show no hint of embarrassment about the transaction.

It almost seems to work, but a government so cravenly corrupted cannot hope to enjoy legitimacy. And what little authority it retains has been squandered by its heavy-handed and unimaginative response to opposition. Even so, on the part of such a graceful and gentle-spirited people, an uprising

as massive and unrelenting as that of August 1988 still seems incongruous.

**Origins of the uprising:** Security forces kept a low profile for most of July. But on July 22 heavily armed troops lined Rangoon's major thoroughfares in preparation for a congress of the ruling party that was called to consider economic and political reforms. At that meeting Gen. Ne Win, 77 years old, stunned his compatriots and the world by announcing that he was resigning as chairman of the party. (He had earlier stepped down from the presidency, but without relinquishing authority.) Furthermore, he assumed indirect responsibility for "the tragic events of March and June" and suggested staging a referendum on scrapping the single-party system and adopting a multiparty form of government.

But to the assembled leaders that must have sounded like "partycide." They selected

as Ne Win's successor the man most likely to hold the line against democratization, retired Gen. Sein Lwin, BSPP joint secretary. As the man responsible for riot police and internal security since the *coup d'etat* of 1962, his selection virtually guaranteed that the students, monks and other opposition groups would return to the streets.

Sein Lwin pledged to open up the economy, easing restrictions on trade and foreign investment. The tone of international media coverage suggested that the West was prepared to accept him. But the Burmese were not.

On July 30 Sein Lwin's government detained 10 people, including the outspoken and highly respected dissident, Gen. Aung Gyi and Burmese Associated Press correspondent Sein Win. On August 3 thousands of young people took to the streets, and the government declared martial law. Over the next

eight days the crowds in the streets of Rangoon and other Burmese cities continued to swell, from thousands to tens of thousands, despite a government policy of firing real bullets point-blank at the demonstrators. The government has since acknowledged 112 civilian deaths in those clashes. Yet non-governmental sources generally believe that more than 1,000 were killed.

Along with civilian insurrection there were rumors of mutiny within the security forces. When it became unclear whether civilians were seizing weapons from police stations and military bases or whether police and troops were distributing weapons to civilians, the government began to retreat.

On August 12 Gen. Sein Lwin resigned from the presidency and the chairmanship of the party. Party delegates met again on August 19 and this time chose a civilian leader for the first time in 26 years. The new president and party leader, Maung Maung, who served as prime minister before the shake-up that accompanied Ne Win's resignation, is considered a "moderate." Nevertheless, a few thousand demonstrators continued to gather on the street in front of the Rangoon General Hospital on subsequent days, and a general strike on August 22 once again brought tens of thousands into the streets to demand an opening for multiparty democracy. By August the strike had spread to Mandalay and other cities, and the tens of thousands had become hundreds of thousands.

Serene, timeless Burma is now on fast-forward, and whatever the short-term options and scenarios, they most likely will not include stability. The upheaval in Burma may well represent the wave of the near future for much of Asia, as hard-working, long-suffering, politically marginalized peoples develop a keener sense not only of their vulnerabilities, but of their potential as well. □

**Jan Knippers Black** is a research professor of public administration at the University of New Mexico. She recently returned from Burma.

## Burma in revolt—U.S. misses the boat

By Andrew Sullivan

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**B**OTCHED U.S. POLICY TOWARD INDEPENDENT Burma began early. In 1953 the Burmese government terminated all U.S. aid because of U.S. assistance to Kuomintang rebels operating in Burmese territory. Since then the record has been little better. An Agency for International Development program to Burma supplies a paltry \$7 million worth of medical aid and technology to make cooking oil. The only substantial aid is for anti-narcotics programs in the Golden Triangle area. The U.S. has been supplying Rangoon with single-engine Thrust aircraft and the herbicide 2,4-D (which has been linked to cancer in two recent studies). The spraying has occurred in rebel ethnic areas, wiping out both the opium crop and food for the inhabitants. Several deaths have been reported in the region linked to 2,4-D. Refugees from Burmese hill tribes have recently been fleeing into Thailand.

As to U.S. contact with opposition groups, there has been virtually none in recent years, although the State Department hints it is developing contacts now. Over the last month, public statements of support for the democratic uprising have also been remarkably weak. In early August department spokeswoman Phyllis Oakley managed the follow-

ing defense of the killing of an estimated 1,500 civilians by soldiers: "We deplore the shooting of unarmed demonstrators and believe that non-lethal means should be employed to deal with such demonstrations." The department has not filed a protest over the killings.

In marked contrast with its Central American policy, the Reagan administration has also taken an extremely skeptical attitude to the ethnic insurgents in the north and east of the country who are fighting Rangoon for the political pluralism they enjoyed before 1962. Washington believes the groups are too mired in narcotics-trafficking to be trusted. (Never mind U.S. connections with drug-trafficking rebel groups in Central America.)

Washington also holds that the groups are not interested in much beyond controlling their own populations. Such skepticism has some basis: as with most guerrilla organizations, there are mixed motives and dubious means involved. But that a stronger ethnic resistance would increase pressure on Rangoon for moves toward greater pluralism has long been indisputable. As it is, Rangoon has long pursued a vicious military campaign against the ethnic rebels. Amnesty International last fall cited numerous human rights abuses in the campaign, including forced

labor, mass killings and rape.

Even when the groups united last September in a specifically pro-democratic alliance, their Washington representatives were given 10 minutes with a State Department official. No aid has yet been given, nor will it be. In fact, in the 2,4-D herbicide program, Washington may actually be strengthening Rangoon's hand.

Nor are there any plans for a major statement of support for the domestic uprising from a senior member of the administration. Reports in the *Washington Post* that there were U.S. plans to air-drop food supplies to demonstrators if the impasse continued were subsequently denied. According to a Burmese opposition member in exile, Washington has changed its tune in recent days: "They talk to us a little more civilly nowadays. A man from the State Department said, 'We cannot either support or oppose you, but we need to know what you're doing.' I'm not sure what that means." It means simply that, as far as the Reagan administration is concerned, there are movements for democracy and movements for democracy. And to the State Department, some are more moving than others. □

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