

BURMA WATCH

What is going on in Burma? This question was addressed by U.P. political science professor Dr. Francisco Nemenzo in a lecture-discussion sponsored by the Third World Studies Center on 28 September 1988 at the Center's library. However, he cautioned the audience that he is not a specialist on Burma largely because of the difficulty in obtaining information about the country. Nevertheless, he shared his views as a Filipino observer.

The recent wave of demonstrations began in March 1988. It was triggered by the government's demonetization of 80 percent of the kyats (Burma's currency) in circulation without compensating the holders of the old money in September 1987. The demonstrations were directed against the Ne Win military dictatorship which has been in power since March 1962. It was the first major challenge against the dictatorship since the students' protests in 1962.

As the students were joined by Buddhist monks, lawyers, medical staff, dockworkers, film stars, and other sectors in a struggle to end Ne Win's dictatorship, Gen. Ne Win "retired" as head of the government and chairman of the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party on 23 July 1988. He appointed as the country's president and party leader Brig. Gen. Sein Lwein who was known for his notoriety, hence, the massacre of demonstrators at Swedagon Pagoda, Burma's most holy temple, on 28 July. Failing to respond to the protests, Sein Lwein resigned with only 17 days in power.

Ne Win, who still put himself in power, appointed Yale-educated jurist Maung Maung to replace Sein Lwein. The new appointee proposed the holding of a referendum to amend the Ne Win constitution to provide for a multi-party system and general elections. The oppositionists, always suspicious of the dictatorship, rejected both proposals and continued with their mass actions.

Maung Maung's failure angered Ne Win so he had him "overthrown" in a coup led by defense minister Gen. Saw Maung on 18 September. Saw Maung immediately ordered the violent dispersal of all anti-government demonstrations resulting in the killing of more than a thousand demonstrators. This stopped the mass actions but it forced the opposition to go underground. Student militants have established connections with the clandestine National Democratic Front, a conservative united front of ethnic rebel groups fighting the government since 1948.

Burmese students have a tradition of militancy. In fact, Ne Win, U Nu (the prime minister deposed by Ne Win in 1962), and the legendary Aung San would trace the origins of their political involvement to the time when as students of the Rangoon College (now University of Rangoon) in the 1930s they founded the anti-colonial group Dobama Asi-Ayone and called themselves the Thakins.

During the Japanese period, most of the Thakins collaborated with the Japanese who gave them military training and positions in the puppet Ba Maw government. As the war neared its end, however, Aung San and the Burma National Army which he commanded turned against the Japanese. When the British returned after the war they confronted the

provisional national government of Aung San. As negotiations were going on between the British and the Burmese nationalist leaders, Aung San was assassinated. U Nu replaced the murdered nationalist.

Under U Nu Burma fell apart. The different ethnic groups (Karens, Chins, Shans, Kachins and the Arakanese) and the Red Flag and White Flag communists revolted. The ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League split. Pressured, U Nu invited Gen. Ne Win to take over in 1958 and to supervise general elections. U Nu was reelected in 1960 but was deposed in a coup led by Gen. Ne Win in March 1962.

Once in power Ne Win established the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) as the sole legal political party. Actually, the BSPP was and remains a military clique. Some 90 percent of the military belongs to the party and its leaders were former generals.

The Ne Win dictatorship implemented a policy of autarchy. It declared Burma a socialist state although it was actually a military-controlled capitalist state; the labor movement was a mere rubber stamp of the dictatorship. Capitalizing on the Buddhist aversion to material goods, Ne Win tried to justify the economic disaster brought about by his regime's unpopular policies.

Aside from the students and the ethnic rebels, the anti-dictatorship forces include Burmese exiles in Thailand and the U.S., the Buddhist clergy (the sangha), and the reformists within the military. The communists have been marginalized.

Who are the leaders of the opposition? From the military, there are Tin Oo, a former chief of staff and defense minister dismissed in 1976, and Aung Gyi, former Vice-Chairman of Ne Win's Revolutionary Council who was arrested on 30 July. Among the civilians were

Aung San Suu Kyi, the late Aung San's daughter who has just returned after several years of living in England; U Nu, the aging former prime minister deposed by Ne Win in 1962; and Min Ko Naing, the 26-year-old student leader.

Events in Burma have not gone unheard by the United States. Thus, U.S. Rep. Stephen Solarz talked with both the government and the opposition. The U.S. was instrumental in persuading Maung Maung to call for elections and in reactivating U Nu. It has encouraged the military reformists to pressure the government and is eyeing Aung San Suu Kyi as Burma's Cory Aquino. In any case, the Americans have nothing to fear for the opposition is clearly anti-socialist (although the opposition does not really understand the real meaning of socialism).

What is likely to happen in Burma? Former military officers Tin Oo and Aung Gyi and civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi have formed the National Democratic United League and have agreed to participate in government-sponsored elections though they have very little chances of winning given the monopoly of power by the Burma Socialist Program Party (renamed the National Unity Party).

On the other hand, the students may wage armed struggle against the government in alliance with the ethnic rebels. Given strong Burmese nationalism, this may well be a long drawn-out war. There is also the danger that the ethnic warlords might become the new capitalists of Burma after they take over.

A coup led by young military officers is a distinct possibility. Although these officers, if they succeed, may call for general elections and hand power to the civilians, they would also be encouraged to make another Ne Win and establish a new military dictatorship.

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