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The Staying Power of the Burmese Military Regime

by

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The Enigma of Military Power in Burma

Between 1962 and 1974, there were 64 military takeovers throughout the world, most of them entailing the overthrow of civilian governments. Only two of these takeover military governments remain today: Libya, where Col. Mohammar Khadaffy seized power in 1969, and Burma, where the military overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister U Nu in 1962 and has been in power under various guises ever since.

The survival of successive military regimes in Burma is one of the enigmas of Southeast Asian politics. The key to this puzzle is the understanding that Burma is no “ordinary” military dictatorship, and it cannot be compared to Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan or other countries in the region that have also had spells of military rule.

When the army first seized power in Burma in 1962, it not only took control over the government, but it also assumed control over Burma’s economic institutions. Branded the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” the takeover meant that almost all private property was confiscated and handed over to a number of military-run state corporations. The old mercantile elite, largely of Indian and Chinese ethnic origin, left the country, and so did many of Burma’s intellectuals. Prior to the 1962 coup, Burma had had one of the highest living standards in Southeast Asia and a fairly well-educated population. After the coup, the military subsequently became Burma’s new and only elite.

The Burmese military establishment also developed into a state-within-a-state, a society in which army personnel, their families and dependents enjoy a position far more privileged than their counterparts ever had in, for instance, Thailand and Indonesia. In both of these countries, some

degree of pluralism has always been accepted, even during the darkest years of military dictatorship.

The Burmese Way to Socialism was abolished after the 1988 uprising, perhaps in an attempt to appease the international community, which had condemned the carnage in Rangoon. However, this may also have occurred because the military realized that they could make more money in a free-market economy. For example, private enterprise and foreign investment were permitted after the bloody events of 1988, when at least 3,000 protesters were gunned down, but, in essence, the Burmese Way to Capitalism remains a military-dominated economy. There are few major enterprises that are not directly or indirectly controlled by the military or by businessmen affiliated with the military, such as the powerful 44-year-old tycoon Tay Za, who is close to junta leader Gen. Than Shwe and his family. His Htoo Trading Company was one of two main contractors that built Burma's new administrative capital, Naypyidaw. The other was the Asia World Group, which is headed by Tun Myint Naing, or Steven Law, the son of Lo Hsing-han, who, in the 1970s, was branded by US authorities as the King of Opium in Burma's sector of the Golden Triangle. The military's own company, the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings (UMEH) controls or supervises all vital economic activity, and the money goes directly into the pockets of the generals, not the government's ministries.

In Burma, there are special schools and hospitals for the military and their dependents. They live in secluded, subsidized housing and shop for goods that are not available in ordinary stores. An army pass assured the holder of a seat on a train or an airplane, and a policeman would never dare to report him or her for violating traffic rules. The military's only civilian support base is the Union Solidarity and Development Association, USDA,

which was formed in 1992. It claims to have 21 million members, but that is mainly because membership is compulsory for civil servants and ordinary citizens are forced to join. But like the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) which ruled Burma until the 1988 uprising, it is a colossus on feet of clay, which, in the wake of current events, is likely to collapse, as the BSPP did two decades ago.

But nothing is going to change fundamentally as long as the military remains united, and there have so far been no credible reports of splits within the military. Given the abuse of power, their privileges and the atrocities they have committed, the Burmese military has everything to lose and nothing to gain from allowing more openness and transparency, and they have shown on numerous occasions that they are prepared to gun down their own people to protect their absolute hold on power.

Foreign-based opposition groups – and foreign governments as well – like to talk about “dialogue” and “national reconciliation,” but these are no more than popular buzzwords with little relevance inside Burma, where the military talks to no one but itself. A Rangoon-based Western diplomat once put it to me quite bluntly: “They fear that if they don’t hang together, they’ll hang separately.”

The fear of retribution is so strong that when, after the 1990 general election – which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won with a landslide – Kyi Maung, the acting head of the party, said in an interview with the now defunct Hong Kong magazine *Asiaweek* that, “Here in Burma we do not need any Nuremberg trials,” he was promptly arrested.¹ The very mention of Nuremberg scared the generals.

The fact that the military remains in power reflects the failure of both the “softer” approach of Burma’s neighbors and partners in the Association

of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – and economic and political pressures from the West, which include trade sanctions and travel bans to Europe for the ruling generals and their associates.

A younger generation of army officers, who see the need to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement, is probably the only hope. For now, however, no one is aware of any “young Turks” lurking in the wings. If change is going to come to Burma, however, it will be because of action taken by such younger army officers rather than the demonstrations of monks or students. Such protests can, at the most, influence sections of the army to realize that there is no future in supporting the present regime. Still, only time will tell if this is going to happen.

Burma’s Military Intelligence Apparatus: The Main Pillar of the State

The rise of military power in Burma began shortly after independence from Britain on 4 January 1948. Communist as well as ethnic rebel armies rose in rebellion against Rangoon, and, in the northeast, remnants of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Chinese forces retreated across the border after being defeated by Mao Zedong’s communists. At independence, the Burmese army was only 15,000 strong, plus militias. But by 1955, because of the civil war, the ranks of the army had increased to 40,000, and it was already involved in businesses such as shipping, banking and publishing. When the emerging state-within-a-state gobbled up the state in 1962, there were 104,200 men in all three services. These numbers rose to 140,000 in 1976, 160,000 in 1985, and, at the time of the 1988 uprising, 180,000 in the army and nearly 200,000 in all three services.

Today, the strength of the three services is estimated at 400,000, and they are much better equipped than at any time in modern Burma's history, mainly due to massive procurement of arms from China, and, more recently, North Korea. The latest expansion comes at a time when the ruling military has managed to strike cease-fire agreements with most of the country's rebel groups, so, during the past decade, there has been very little fighting in Burma's traditionally volatile frontier areas. The enemy now is the population at large.

The rise of the Burmese army as a political and economic force began under Gen. Ne Win, Commander-in-Chief from 1949 to 1972, and mastermind behind the 1962 coup. He resigned as president in 1981, but remained chairman of the BSPP until 1988. He died in 2002, and left behind a legacy of repression and dictatorial rule, which the Burmese military has been unable – and unwilling – to relinquish.

Ne Win also built up one of Asia's most ruthless as well as efficient secret police forces, the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), which was known throughout Burma down to the lowliest non-English speaking peasant as "MI" (*em-eye*). Even if executions of political opponents was the exception rather than the rule, anyone suspected of having contacts with opponents of the regime was likely to be arrested and tortured while in jail. The MIS also had its own prison and torture centre, the infamous *Yay Kyi Aing* ("Clearwater Pond") near Rangoon's Mingaladon airport.

The MIS kept a watchful eye not only on the country's ordinary citizens, but especially on army officers with liberal ideas – which apart from rotations, corruption and institutionalized brutality contributed to the remarkable cohesiveness of Burma's armed forces – and on the many politicized Burmese exiles living in Britain, West Germany, Thailand,

Australia and the USA. Among the Burmese community abroad, no one was ever sure who was an informer or not; for many years, mutual suspicion neutralized them as a political force.

The origin of MIS and its methods can be traced back to the Japanese occupation of Burma 1942–45. Before the Japanese invasion in 1942, Japan trained, armed and equipped Aung San, the father of the now incarcerated pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's and in the 1940s leader of the legendary "Thirty Comrades," who became the core of the Burma Independence Army and of whom Ne Win also a member. Burma was granted nominal independence in 1942. But, as Donald Seekins, a professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Meiji University in Okinawa emphasize, because of Tokyo's policy self-sufficiency in its occupied Asian territories, the large numbers of Japanese soldiers in Burma – 300,000 – essentially lived off the land. The Japanese secret police, the *Kempetai*, conducted a reign of terror, which was so harsh that even the head of the pro-Japanese puppet government, Dr. Ba Maw, had to intercede with the highest military commanders to curb the worst excesses. In the end, Aung San and his Burmese nationalists turned against the Japanese, and allied themselves with Britain, the former colonial power, on 27 March 1945 – a date that is still celebrated officially as Armed Forces Day.

Seekins also argues that Japan behind a number of other, more unsavory legacies, including brutal counter-insurgency tactics: "There are more than superficial resemblances between the *Tatmadaw's* [the Burmese military] 'Four Cuts' policy against ethnic minority rebels (to...deprive rebels of recruits, funding, supplies and information) and the Japanese army's *sanko seisaku* or 'three all' policy in China ('kill all; burn all; destroy all')."2

It is no coincidence that Ne Win – the architect of the Four Cuts policy – was trained by the *Kempetai* and other sections of Japan’s security forces, as were many of the ministers who later served in his post 1962 BSPP governments. Among them were Maung Maung Kha, Burma’s prime minister from 1877–1988, and Dr. Maung Maung, president for a few weeks in 1988.

Lt. Col. James McAndrew of the US military states in his study of Burma’s military intelligence apparatus: “Chosen for both ‘guerrilla tactics and clandestine activities’ and ‘special’ leadership training was the future dictator and longtime strongman, Ne Win. Significantly, this curriculum included intelligence training provided by *Kempetai*, the brutal Japanese Military Police and counterintelligence organization. Being selected for training by the *Kempetai* is more than noteworthy in hindsight, and it must be viewed as an important early demonstration to Ne Win that maintaining coercive intelligence and counterintelligence organizations were essential to maintaining authoritarian rule.”³

Ne Win’s intelligence chief for many years was his devoted subordinate Brig.-Gen. Tin U – not to be confused with NLD Chairman Tin U, a retired general and former army chief. “MI” Tin U was trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the Pacific island of Saipan in the 1950s and, by 1961, he had become Ne Win’s aide-de camp and was almost regarded as Ne Win’s adopted son. At the time, Rodney Tasker characterized Tin U in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: “He and his MIS colleagues were men of the world compared with other more shortsighted, dogmatic figures in the Burmese leadership. They were able to travel abroad, talk freely to foreigners and generally look beyond the rigid confines of the

corrupt regime...although known to be ruthless, he built up a reputation as a gregarious, open-minded, charismatic figure – a direct contrast to some of his mole-like colleagues in the leadership.”⁴

But then, in May 1983, the Burmese government suddenly, and totally unexpectedly, announced that Tin U had been “permitted to resign” along with the Home and Religious Affairs minister and also a former intelligence chief, Col. Bo Ni. They had been purged ostensibly because their wives were corrupt – a charge that could be brought against any army officer in Burma. Tin U and Bo NI were subsequently jailed – and the entire MIS apparatus purged as well.

The reason behind the move, however, remained a matter for conjecture. It was suggested at the time that the urbane MIS people had become too powerful for comfort and almost managed to establish another state-within-a-state – which threatened Ne Win’s inner circle of hand-picked, less-than-intelligent yes-men.

Whatever the reason behind the purge, it had immediate effects on the security situation in the country. On 9 October 1983, 21 people, including four visiting South Korean cabinet ministers, were killed in a powerful explosion in Rangoon. Three North Korean military officers were behind the atrocity. One of them was killed in a shoot-out with Burmese security forces, while the other two were captured alive. One of the bombers remain in Rangoon’s Insein Jail while the other was executed in 1985.

Observers at the time believe that the incident would never have taken place if Tin U had still been in charge; it clearly indicated that the military intelligence apparatus was no longer what is used to be. A new intelligence chief, Khin Nyunt, was appointed in 1984. His Directorate of the Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI) soon became almost as efficient as the old

outfit. Khin Nyunt in many ways also resembled Tin U; he was fairly young, relatively bright and he could be exceedingly ruthless whenever this was considered expedient by the old strongman, Ne Win.

Table: Names used by Burma’s military intelligence:

Name	Dates
Military Intelligence Service (MIS)	Late 1940s–late 1960s
Directorate of the Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI)	Late-1960s–2001
Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI)	2001–2004
Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security (OCMAS)	2004–present

Source: Lt. Col. James McAndrew, op. cit.

The 1988 Uprising and its Aftermath

Less than four years after Khin Nyunt began rebuilding Burma’s shattered military intelligence apparatus, Burma faced the largest civil unrest in its history. Across the country, millions of people marched against the BSPP regime and for a return to the democracy that the country had enjoyed prior to the 1962 coup. Any regime anywhere would have collapsed under the pressure of an entire population rising up against tyranny. Such was not the case with Burma’s military-dominated regime, however. Thousands of people were gunned down in the streets of Rangoon and elsewhere as the military stepped in, not to overthrow the government but to shore up a

regime overwhelmed with popular protest.

However, abandonment of the Burmese Way to Socialism was not the only outcome of the events of August and September 1988; the old one-party system under the BSPP was abolished, and several opposition figures were allowed to set up their own political parties. The most powerful of them was the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by former army chief Tin U and Aung San Suu Kyi.

At the same time, the DDSI was expanded. Nine new units were established by 1991, bringing the total to 23. MI also operated 19 detention centers, seven of them of Rangoon, of which Yay Kyi Aing was the most notorious. Undercover DDSI agents covered every movement of the NLD's leaders and other opponents of the regime. When, in July 1989, the opposition proved to be too strong for comfort for the regime, the DDSI launched a massive crackdown on all pro-democracy forces. Aung San Suu Kyi and Tin U were placed under house arrest while scores of others were detained in Insein Jail, Yay Kyi Aing and other detention centers.

With almost all prominent pro-democracy leaders in jail or under house arrest, the junta that had been formed in September 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), probably thought it was safe to hold the elections that it had promised after crushing the demonstrations the year before. On 27 May 1990, elections were held – and the NLD won a landslide victory, capturing 392 of the seats in the 485-seat National Assembly. The military-backed National Unity Party (NUP, formerly the BSPP) managed to secure only 10 seats. The rest went to various ethnically-based pro-democracy parties, which were loosely allied with the NLD but still wanted to emphasize their ethnic identities, such as the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD).

The popularly assembly was never convened, however. Instead, a 700-strong Constituent Assembly – of whom only about 100 had been elected in 1990 and the rest hand-picked by the military authorities – was formed to draft a new constitution for the country.

This was a complete reversal of the promises the SLORC had made before the election. On 31 May 1989 – a year before the election – the SLORC had even promulgated a “Pyithu Hluttaw Election law”, which was published in the state-run newspaper the *Working People’s Daily* on 1 June. A Pyithu Hluttaw in Burmese is a “people’s assembly,” i.e. a parliament. According to the 1974 Constitution, “The Pyithu Hluttaw is the highest Organ of state power. It exercises the sovereign powers of the State on behalf of the people.” The Pyithu Hluttaw that was elected in 1990 had the same number of seats as the one that was abolished in 1988. The only difference was that several political parties, not only one as before, could contest those seats.

Drafting a new constitution was not an issue the government raised before the election, even if SLORC’s then chairman, Gen. Saw Maung, on a couple of occasions had mentioned the need for a new charter. But he had also said: “We have spoken on the matter of State power. As soon as the election is held, form a government according to law and then take power. An election has to be held to bring forth a government. That is our responsibility. But the actual work of forming a legal government after the election is not the duty of the *Tatmadaw* [the armed forces]. We are saying it very clearly and candidly right now.”⁵

He had also lashed out against the pro-democracy movement for raising the issue of a constitution before the people went to the polls. In a speech on 10 May – two weeks prior to the election – he stated: “A dignitary

who once was an Attorney-General talked about the importance of the constitution. As our current aim is to hold the election as scheduled we cannot as yet concern ourselves with the constitution as mentioned by that person. Furthermore, it is not our concern. A new constitution can be drafted. An old constitution can also be used after some amendments.”⁶

“That person” was former Attorney-General U Hla Aung, who was close to the NLD and, at the time, researching constitutional issues for the pro-democracy movement. I met him in Rangoon in May 1989, and he was quite dismayed at the reluctance of the military to discuss the constitution. I also met Col. Ye Htut of the SLORC’s information committee, who told me that “as soon as the elections are over, we will return to the barracks.” When I asked him what the military would do if the NLD won, and he replied: “Then we will hand over power to them and return to the barracks.”

The problem, of course, was that they had not expected the NLD to win, so the rules had to be changed. That a constituent assembly, not a parliament, had been elected was first stated by then intelligence chief Khin Nyunt in a speech on 27 July, 1989 – two months after the election. A constituent assembly in Burmese is not a Pyithu Hluttaw but a *thaing pyi pyu hluttaw*, as in the *Myanma naing-ngan thaing pyi pyu hluttaw*, which drafted Burma’s first, 1947, constitution. That term was never used before the May 1990 election.

In the end, the elected assembly turned out to be not even a *thaing pyi pyu hluttaw*. About 100 of the 485 MPs elect were to sit in a “National Convention” together with 600 other, non-elected representatives who had been hand-picked by the military. No Burmese citizen expected that to happen when they went to the polls in May 1990.

Today, 19 years after the election, Aung San Suu Kyi and Tin U

remain under house arrest, and nearly the entire, original leadership of the NLD is either dead, in prison or have simply given up all political activity. Most young NLD activists have been imprisoned, cowed into submission, or have fled the country. Only a handful of elderly spokespersons remain, and none of them have the strength and charisma to carry the party forward. That serves the interests of the junta, since the “new-look” NLD would appear to the outside world not to be a viable alternative.

The Rise of the Union Solidarity Development Association, USDA

With Suu Kyi under house arrest, and the NLD reduced to a gathering of geriatrics, it appears that the organized struggle for democracy has been effectively strangled. Meanwhile, Than Shwe and the State Peace and Development Council (the new name of the junta since November 1997) continued to strengthen their new mass organization and main pillar of support, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, the USDA

Apart from its “Three National Causes” – “the non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty” – the USDA has also articulated in its own inimitable phraseology a “Four-Point People’s Desire: “oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges or holding negative views; oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the State and progress of the nation; oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State; and crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.”⁷

The USDA became the vehicle for the SPDC’s recreation of civil society while suppressing all other alternative possibilities, especially in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. It established offices at national,

district, township and about one in four ward or village levels.⁸ By 1997, the USDA claimed to have 7.51 million members, which rose to 10 million in 1998, and 22.8 million in 2005, or nearly half the population of Burma.⁹ In the early 2000s, its mass rallies are attended by up to 100,000 people, all proclaiming their allegiance to the new “State of Myanmar,” and the National Convention which then was drawing up the country’s new constitution, which was eventually “accepted” by more than 90 per cent of the voters in a farcical “referendum,” which was held in May 2008.

In recent years, the USDA has also assumed a paramilitary role in society. Official media has described it as “a reserve force for national defense,” which has trained “2,395 new generation air youths and 2,614 new generation naval youths.”¹⁰ And Than Shwe himself, the senior patron of the USDA, had stressed already in 1996 at an “Executive Advanced Management Course” organized by the USDA:

The trainees constitute not only the hard core force of the USDA, but also the sole national force which will always join hands with the *tatmadaw* to serve national and public interests. Hence...they should be morally and physically strong with sharp national defence qualities. Therefore...the trainees will be taught military parade, military tactics, and the use of weapons.¹¹

Basic military training has become part of the USDA’s policy of mass mobilization, and it has also formed its own militia forces, especially in ethnic minority areas. These have taken on names such as “the Anti-Foreign Invasion Force,” “the State Defense Force,” and “the People’s Strength Organization.” As early as 1997, army chief and deputy SPDC chairman, Gen. Maung Aye, referred to the USDA as an “auxiliary national defense force,” thus acknowledging its security role in the country.¹²

With the sacking of intelligence chief Khin Nyunt in 2004 (see below) and purging of all his associates, the USDA has also assumed an intelligence function. According to a report on the USDA compiled by the Thailand-based Network for Democracy and Development:

The SPDC has met with USDA central executive committee members and other loyal members to train them as intelligence officers, forming intelligence teams in each township. One intelligence team in Mon State adopted responsibilities which included watching the NLD as well as other members of the opposition. All information collected was expected to be reported directly to the USDA general headquarters.¹³

The same report stated that, in December 2005, a USDA meeting was held in which members were instructed to “watch all army and police forces including staffs from various departments within the township” and report to the headquarters.¹⁴ In other words, USDA members are being used not only to watch the opposition, but to monitor the actions of the regime’s other institutions.

Consequently, according to Dutch Burma expert Gustaaf Houtman, a culture of violence and intimidation has come to surround this new, mighty mass organization, which is “designed in particular to frighten and deter NLD members, their supporters and residents in their neighborhood. With an active USDA the regime hopes that NLD political activity will be curtailed, once NLD visitors or NLD elements are known to automatically attract USDA ‘volunteers’ intent on wreaking havoc to disrupt proceedings.”¹⁵

While Suu Kyi was still able to give interviews to foreign reporters, she told American journalists Leslie Kean and Dennis Bernstein:

The USDA is increasingly becoming a branch of the local authorities. On Burmese New Year's Day [1997] the USDA people were sent over to my house to physically break up the NLD...a fish-releasing ceremony. In another incident, members of the USDA, most of them students, were instructed to throw tomatoes at me at the anniversary of the death of Burma's first democratic prime minister [U Nu]...Sadly many students are members of the USDA because they're forced to be, partly through threats. In some schools, they are threatened that if they don't become a member of the USDA, they will not be allowed to take their examination, or they will not be given good grades. I received a letter from a teacher who said that in her school those who want to go to their classes reserved for the best students have become members of the USDA, so students must join for their own survival.¹⁶

And, Suu Kyi warned, the USDA was not to be dismissed as just another farcical invention by the junta:

The world community must realize that the USDA is not an innocent social-welfare organization, as it claims to be, but an organization being used by the authorities as a gang of thugs. Their operations resemble those of the Nazi Brown Shirts. The [junta] sent people from a so-called welfare organization to beat up people taking part in a non-violent, religious ceremony. I must say that that amounts to something very, very close to what the Brown Shirts used to do in Germany.¹⁷

Suu Kyi herself became the target of USDA violence in Depayin in May 2003, which also led to a renewed spell of house arrest. But given the coercion involved in recruiting members for the USDA, it is questionable whether its foundations are any stronger than the erstwhile BSPP. The difference is that the USDA, unlike the BSPP, is not the only legally

permitted political organization in the country. One of the stated objectives of the USDA, which was outlined in a secret document in 2004, is “narrowing and eliminating the activities of opposition forces...[and to] diminish and ruin the opposition parties’ capacity economically.”¹⁸

Unlike the BSPP, the USDA has also carved out a role for itself in the Burmese economy, enabling the SPDC to control and manipulate the new, ostensibly free-market oriented economy that was introduced after the upheavals of 1988. The USDA’s main business front is the Myangonmyint Company, and it also controls the local gem market and the military-run investment firm Myanmar Economic Holdings. In 1995, the USDA obtained control over the Panlong Yadana and Theingyi markets in Rangoon, and it runs bus and train lines and car rental services, it collects taxes and is involved in housing and real estate, fishing, paddy cultivation, rice milling, transportation of cement and construction materials, supply of water, and it imports cars, motorcycles and spare parts into the country free of tariffs.¹⁹

Furthermore, the USDA has reached out to parties and organizations in other parts of Asia, claiming to represent “the people of Myanmar.” In 2000, the Communist Party of China – China being a close ally of the SPDC – invited Gen. Win Myint to Beijing not in his role as one of the top generals in the junta, but in his capacity as USDA vice president. Four years later, the Chinese communists invited 84 political parties, including the USDA, from thirty-five countries to the “Third All Asian Parties Forum” held in Beijing. Members of the USDA have participated in an International Youth Development Exchange Program in Tokyo, and in January 2006 representatives of the organization attended the Third Asia Pacific Regional Cuba Solidarity Conference in India. And when Malaysian foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar visited Burma in March 2006 as an envoy for the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Asean, he met with officials from the USDA, but not with anyone from the NLD or other opposition parties.²⁰

In Burma today, it is almost impossible for any citizen to survive and prosper without being a member of the USDA. But the SPDC's and USDA's emphasis is given to the youth in "what it may regard as a longterm approach to ensuring its continuing role into the next generation," to quote US Burma expert David Steinberg, who also stresses that the USDA will remain important "only insofar as the military have an active role in governance. After all, the youth movements of the BSPP were ephemeral as well."²¹

Asia Times Online commented in June 2006:

The reality is that the popularity of Suu Kyi – and the National League for Democracy she founded – still widely outpaces the ruling junta's, whose illegitimate rule has run the economy into the ground and placed the country's democratic hopes behind bars. Across the country, Suu Kyi is affectionately referred to simply as "the Lady."²²

But the military, supported by the USDA, is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future, and there is precious little Suu Kyi, despite her popularity, can do about it from her home on Rangoon's University Avenue, cut off as she is from her supporters and isolated from the rest of the world. But she has nevertheless remained a symbol of defiance and moral strength, and as such attracted sympathy and support not only inside Burma but from all over the world.

Burma after the Fall of General Khin Nyunt

27 March, Burma's Armed Forces Day, is meant to commemorate the day in 1945 when the Burmese nationalists, led by Aung San, shifted sides, joined the Allied powers and took up arms against their former patron and benefactor, the Imperial Japanese Army. It used to be a day when army units marched down the streets of Rangoon chanting martial anthems and being garlanded by crowds of cheering well-wishers. After the 1988 massacres, however, military parades were held in secluded areas, away from a now potentially outraged public, but still in Rangoon.

Then came Armed Forces Day 2006, and it was celebrated in an entirely different manner. Forgotten was the anti-fascist struggle in the past – and, even more importantly, the 61st Armed Forces Day was held at a vast, new parade ground in the new capital Naypyidaw near the old town of Pyinmana, which it is gradually absorbing. Only foreign defense attachés, not civilian diplomats, were invited, and they witnessed an amazing spectacle in the new “Capital of a King” – King Than Shwe, the leader of the ruling State Law and Development Council, SPDC, and Burma's new undisputed strongman following a series of unexpected purges in late 2004. The military intelligence chief at the time, Khin Nyunt, who was also prime minister, was ousted and arrested, along with up to 3,500 intelligence personnel countrywide, including some 300 senior officers.²³

Khin Nyunt's fall from grace followed the death of his mentor, Gen. Ne Win, in December 2002. The old general had been placed under house arrest earlier that year, allegedly because of the corrupt behavior of his daughter, Sanda Win, her husband Aye Zaw Win — and the couple's three unruly grandsons, who had terrorized private businessmen in Rangoon with demands for bribes and “protection money.” But few doubted that the move against Ne Win and his family came as preparation for the post-Ne Win era;

to make sure that Khin Nyunt's influence would be limited. The dictator, who had ruled with an iron fist for several decades, was cremated near his home in Rangoon. The funeral was attended by a handful of family members and about 20 plainclothes military officers, none especially high-ranking.

Khin Nyunt's ouster was not, as some reports in the foreign media at the time suggested, a power struggle between the "pragmatic" intelligence chief and "hardliners" around Gen. Than Shwe and his deputy, Gen. Maung Aye. According to the press reports, Khin Nyunt favored a dialogue with long detained Suu Kyi and those opposed to it. Khin Nyunt had, after all, met her when she was under house arrest. Khin Nyunt may also have been smoother in his dealings with foreigners, but his dreaded military intelligence service, the DDSI, was the junta's primary instrument of repression against Suu Kyi's pro-democracy movement. During the August-September 1988 uprising, he had carried out Ne Win's orders, cracked down on the protesters, and had student activists imprisoned, tortured and even killed.

A more plausible explanation for the purge was that Khin Nyunt and his DDSI had accumulated significant wealth through involvement in a wide range of commercial enterprises. They were building up a state within a state — like the old "MI" Tin U had done in the 1970s — and not sharing their riches with the rest of the military elite. And Than Shwe did not want to have any potential rivals around him; Khin Nyunt clearly had political ambitions. He was a man not to be trusted.

Immediately following the ousting of Khin Nyunt, his latest intelligence outfit, the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI), was dissolved and an entirely new organization established: the Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security (OCMAS), which was placed under more

direct military control. Details of the new military intelligence apparatus remain sketchy, but it is not believed to be as efficient as its predecessors. Some observers even argue that the regime's inability to prevent the emergence of a massive anti-regime movement in September 2007 would not have been possible, if Khin Nyunt and his men had remained in charge of security.

Be that as it may, but Burmese military politics has always been murky, full of infighting and rivalries. As soon as one particular officer has become too rich and powerful, he is ousted. The only exceptions are Ne Win, who ruled from 1962 to 1988, and the present junta leader, Than Shwe, who has made himself almost the monarch of the country.

And Than Shwe's path forward – and, indeed, his vision for his country – became clear on 27 March 2006 in Naypyidaw. Addressing a crowd of 12,000 soldiers, he said: “Our Tatmadaw should be a worthy heir to the traditions of the capable tatmadaws established by noble kings Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya.”²⁴ None of them had fought in the Second World War, when the modern Burmese army was founded, but Anawratha had in 1044 AD founded the First Burmese Empire and established a new capital at the temple city of Pagan on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, southwest of today's Mandalay. He conquered Thaton, the capital of the Mon – major rivals of the Burmans for control of the central plains – and expanded his empire down to the Andaman Sea.

Bayinnaung was Burma's most celebrated warrior king. He reigned from 1551 to 1581 and conquered territories north of Pagan, parts of the Shan plateau in the east, and pushed as far east as Chiang Mai in today's northern Thailand and Vientiane in Laos. He was the most prominent ruler of the Second Burmese Empire and ruled from Pegu in the central plains.

Alaungpaya reigned in the 18th century and was the first king of the Konbaung Dynasty, or the third and last of the Burmese Empires.

Alaungpaya also fought the Mon, and his successor, Hsinbyushin, sacked the Thai capital of Ayutthaya in 1767, a deed for which the Thais have never forgiven the Burmese. But the Konbaung kings were defeated by the British in the three Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-1826, and 1885, and the country became a British colony. In 1885, Thibaw, the last king of Burma, was led away by the British in front of a mourning and wailing crowd who had come to take farewell of the last monarch of an independent Burmese state. He was sent, with his once-powerful wife, Supayalat, and their children into exile in Ratanagiri in India, where he died in 1916.

On the Naypyidaw parade ground stand newly erected larger-than-life statues of the three warrior kings, whom Than Shwe sees as his role models – and he has also formed not only a new capital but a new Burmese state, the State of Myanmar, a unitary state which is fundamentally different in nature from Aung San's concept of "unity in diversity", federalism and some kind of parliamentary democracy. In "Myanmar" everybody is a "Myanmar", and subjects of the new King in Nay Pyi Daw. There are no portraits of Aung San in Naypyidaw.

Some have argued that moving the country's capital was nothing unusual in an international context. Many countries have established purpose-built capitals away from major population centers, like Australia did when its government moved to the new city of Canberra in 1927 – halfway between Sydney and Melbourne – or when, in the 1960s, Brazil built Brasilia, a new futuristic capital in the middle of the jungle far away from Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. In more recent times, 1999, Nigeria moved its capital to Abuja, a minor central town, from Lagos. In 1983, the small

village of Yamoussoukro in central Ivory Coast was made the new capital, replacing Abidjan, one of West Africa's most bustling cities and commercial centers. Yamoussoukro had been chosen for only one reason: it was the home village of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the then dictator of the Ivory Coast. Millions of dollars were spent on transforming Yamoussoukro into a new city, but it soon became the butt of jokes.

But Naypyidaw is no joke, nor is it comparable to Canberra or Brasilia. The construction of Burma's new capital was carried out in secret, and government officials were given only very short notice that they had to move. In November 2005, the Thailand-based *Irrawaddy* magazine reported: "Diplomats, UN agencies and observers in Rangoon were dumbfounded to see hundreds of Chinese-made army trucks carrying officials, civilians and office supplies head north out of the capital. Neighboring countries, Rangoon's diplomatic community and UN offices wanted to know how they were going to keep in touch with Burma's new centre of government. 'Don't worry,' they were told. 'You can reach us by fax'."²⁵

According to one eyewitness:

The area around Naypyidaw was depopulated in order to seal the huge compound off from the outside world. Entire villages disappeared from the map, their inhabitants driven off land their families had farmed for centuries. Hundreds – perhaps thousands – joined Burma's abused army of "internally displaced persons." Able-bodied villagers, however, were "enlisted" to help build the new capital.²⁶

Apart from the parade ground with statues of the Three Kings, Naypyidaw, now has a brand-new airstrip, a hospital, hotels – some reputedly 5-star-ones

– military mansions and a new command centre, government offices, and bunkers. Trucks that carried bricks, timber and cement to Naypyidaw bore the logos of Burma’s biggest construction companies, Htoo Trading and Asia World.²⁷ But in May 2006, intelligence agencies in Thailand intercepted a message from Naypyidaw confirming the arrival of a group of North Korean tunneling experts at the site. Naypyidaw is at the foothills of Burma’s eastern mountains, and it was becoming clear that the most sensitive military installations in the new capital would be relocated underground.²⁸

The junta’s apparent fear of a preemptive US invasion by sea or air strikes was seen by some at the time as a major motivation for the junta’s decision to move the capital to what they perceived to be a safer, central mountainous location away from the coast. After all, the US government had publicly linked Burma together with other rogue regimes and referred to it as an “outpost of tyranny.”²⁹

The *Irrawaddy* gave a more plausible explanation. The Burmese generals are less worried about a US invasion than they are an attack by their own people: “Rangoon has never been a safe place for the paranoid generals. In 1989, when opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi mobilized the people in the streets again, the regime declared Rangoon a war zone and assigned army officers and soldiers to deal with demonstrators.”³⁰

Demonstrations, or any form of protest, are much less likely to take place in heavily-fortified and secluded Naypyidaw, which also remains off-limits to most outsiders. It represented a safe place from where the country could be ruled without interference from “internal and external destructive elements,” which is what the junta calls its domestic and foreign critics and opponents.

Military research centers, a new airport as well as luxury private

mansions for army officers, and especially family members who do not want to live in dreary Naypyidaw, have also been built in Pyin Oo Lwin, more commonly known as Maymyo, a former British hill station east of Mandalay, where the air is fresher than and the scenery greener than in the dusty, grey central plains around Pyinmana.

At Naypyidaw, Than Shwe has founded his own royal city and founded the Fourth Burmese Empire in the spirit of Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya. This is a far cry from the promises the junta gave when it assumed power on September 18, 1988: “The Defense Forces have no desire to hold on to power for a prolonged period.”³¹ Elections would be held and power handed over to the party that would win those elections. As “proof” of the temporary nature, the junta appointed only a small, nine-member caretaker cabinet.

More than twenty years later, the military is not only in power, but Than Shwe and his generals have reinvented the notion of what kind of state Burma is, or should be. And in this new State, there is no place for Aung San Suu Kyi or the National League for Democracy, the NLD. They belong to Rangoon and the past; Than Shwe, the military — and Naypyidaw — symbolize for them the future of the New Royal State of Myanmar. The Armed Forces Day celebrations in 2006 were the ultimate proof of the military’s desire to rule the country the way they believe is right, and to decide the destiny of its people.

The creation of a new national concept for Burma began when, on 27 May 1989, the official name of the country was changed to “Myanmar.” “Burma”, for reasons which are historically absolutely incorrect, was termed a “colonial name,” and therefore had to be abandoned. But historical accuracy was not an issue for the generals. A Cultural Revolution had begun,

and a military-appointed commission was appointed to rewrite Burmese history to suit the new power-holders.

It was not only the country that was given a new, official name (although it has always been *myanma naingngan* or *bama pyi* in Burmese) and Rangoon became “Yangon”; even more offensive were name changes in the ethnic minority areas, especially in Shan State. Pang Tara, Kengtung, Lai-Hka, Hsenwi and Hsipaw – place names that have a meaning in Shan – have been renamed Pindaya, Kyaington, Laycha, Theinli and Thibaw, which sound Burmese but have no meaning in any language.³²

Houtman calls this development the “Myanmafication of Burma,” which he describes as a move away from the original idea of a federation – agreed by Aung San and the leaders of the ethnic minorities at the Panglong conference in February 1947 – to the new “Myanmar” identity propagated by the junta.³³

Whither Burma?

Given the odds she is up against, there is precious little pro-democracy leader Suu Kyi can do during her occasional meetings with UN officials – her only appearance outside her compound in Rangoon – other than merely to appeal to the international community to put pressure on the SPDC to be less repressive. Thus far, this has clearly not helped much either.

A host of UN envoys have visited Burma over the past two decades. The first “independent expert” the UN sent to the country to “study” violations of human rights was Sadako Ogata, a Japanese professor who later went on to become the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The report she submitted to the UN’s Commission of Human

Rights on 27 December 1990 was unusually bland. General elections had been held in May, resulting in a landslide victory for Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and Ogata concluded in her report that "it is not in dispute that it will be the task of the elected representatives of the Pyithu Hluttaw (National Assembly) to draft a new constitution, on the basis of which a new government will be formed. At present, however...it is not clear when the Hluttaw will be convened for that purpose." The Hluttaw was, of course, never convened.

Then, in 1992, the UN appointed another Japanese academic, Yozo Yokota "special rapporteur on the situation of human rights" in Burma – a step higher than an "independent expert." He compiled some critical reports, but resigned in 1996, according to a statement by a UN spokesman at the time, "because of planned career changes in Tokyo" as well as "frustration at the lack of logistical support from human rights staff in Geneva", where the Human Rights Commission is based. His successor Rajsoomer Lallah, a former chief justice of Mauritius, was not even allowed by the Burmese government to visit the country during the four years as he served as special human rights rapporteur. According to Jose Diaz, then spokesman for the UN Commission for Human Rights, Lallah had "expressed frustration...with the little change that he has seen in the country he follows."

Lallah was succeeded by Paulo Pinheiro, a Brazilian law expert, who, in the beginning was quite upbeat about his work. He believed he was free to talk to political prisoners without interference from the authorities, but his rather positive reports were severely criticized by NLD spokesman U Lwin. However, Pinheiro changed his tune completely – when, in March 2003, he discovered a microphone beneath the table at which he was interviewing a prisoner in Rangoon's infamous Insein Jail. He immediately left the country

in disgust, and was not allowed back until now. In the meantime, he has become a vocal critic of the Burmese regime.

Then there were the special envoys, sent not by the UN's Human Rights Commission but by the Secretary General. Peruvian diplomat Alvar De Soto made six fruitless visits to Burma between February 1995 and October 1999. He was succeeded in 2000 by Razali Ismail, a Malaysian diplomat, who also began his mission by believing that he could persuade the Burmese generals to be more cooperative with the opposition inside the country and the international community. In November 2001, Razali said he was "hopeful that some significant progress could be made in the near future". The following year, he was instrumental in securing the release from house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, which prompted him to say: "I am delighted for her and the country...we have to give them time. Don't expect things to happen immediately. I think there is a commitment on the part of the military to make the transition" (to civilian rule).³⁴

But nothing did change, and, in May 2003, Aung San Suu Kyi was locked up again after government thugs had attacked her and her entourage at Depayin, when she was nearly killed and put back under house arrest. Razali quit his post in January 2006 after being refused entry to Burma for nearly two years. By then, it had also become clear that his mission to Burma had not been entirely altruistic. Apart from being a Malaysian government civil servant, he is also in private business as the chairman and thirty percent stockowner of IRIS Technologies, a company that, during one of his visits, managed to secure a contract with the Burmese government for high-tech passports with biometric features. A conflict of interest? Not according to the UN, which came to his rescue by saying that his kind of part-time contract with the world organization did not "carry any restrictions

on business activities.”

Because of the lack of transparency and accountability, and the absence of any investigative and critical media, Burma provides, in fact, plenty of opportunities for corruption and private business deals even for some UN officials and diplomats who are based there, such as the smuggling of antiques in diplomatic and UN bags, and the sale of duty free goods on the black market.

Razali’s successor as special envoy, the Nigerian diplomat Ibrahim Gambari, seems to continue the tradition of upbeat UN officials who, in the end, achieve nothing of any importance for the people of Myanmar. Kyaw Zwa Moe, a Burmese writer with the Chiang Mai-based publication *Irrawaddy*, wrote in a recent article that Burma “now is a diplomatic graveyard.” When the smoke has cleared, it is always business as usual in Burma – and yet another UN envoy or rapporteur may come, full of optimism at first, then frustrated at the lack of progress. At any rate, they can become richer because of striking lucrative business deals.

Gambari should be held under even closer scrutiny than his predecessors in the UN system. He has a long record of cooperating with various military dictatorships in Nigeria, and, speaking to the UN on 4 December 1995, he defended the execution of Ken Saro-Wiva, a renowned Nigerian author, television producer, and environmentalist who had been hanged on 10 November along with eight other leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The NGO had been leading a non-violent campaign against environmental damage associated with the operations of several multinational oil companies. According to Gambari, Ken Saro-Wiva had been executed in “accordance with the law” and further stated that “the law and the violation of human rights must be

differentiated.”³⁵

The other approach, the policy of “constructive engagement” pursued by Burma’s partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, has proven equally fruitless. Burma was admitted into Asean in July 1997, but has snubbed its partners by going back on promises of political reforms, and, in the process, become a burden for the bloc and an obstacle in its relations with the United States and the European Union.

Change would have to come from within the only institution that really matters in the country: its armed forces. Min Zaw Oo, a Burmese researcher, has analyzed various possible scenarios, which could lead to state failure in Burma, and, therefore, political change by voluntary means, or a UN intervention which would lead to such change.³⁶

According to the first scenario, socio-economic erosions could lead to another uprising, similar to that of 1988 – or the monk-led demonstrations in September 2007. “If there is another uprising in Burma, the most pivotal change will depend on how the military responds to the crisis.” A popular uprising could divide the armed forces, but that could also lead to Burma’s breaking up into different sectors controlled by different factions of the army or, in plain speak, civil war.

The second of Min Zaw Oo’s scenarios is no uprising but infighting within the armed forces. The purge of Khin Nyunt and his intelligence faction in 2004 showed that there are serious divisions even within the military establishment. Khin Nyunt’s fall from grace did not lead to serious infighting, but rivalry between Than Shwe and his deputy, Gen. Maung Aye, could well be such a catalyst for change. But it would most certainly be bloody, and could also lead to civil war. In May 2005, a series of near-simultaneous explosions rocked shopping centers and supermarkets in

Rangoon, wounding more than a dozen people. The authorities were quick to blame the blasts on “Thai-based terrorists,” but these would hardly have the means to infiltrate the then capital. More likely, it could have been the work of disgruntled, former MI officers who had been purged along with Khin Nyunt, or the junta itself, which needed an excuse to crack down on real or imaginary opponents to its rule.³⁷ Despite rigid military rule and control, Burma is far from a stable country. Chaos and internecine strife could easily break out any time.

The third scenario is “the emergence of a reformist faction in the military that decides to cooperate with the civilian opposition to foster a political transition while the other significant forces resist any change in the status quo.” But, as Min Zaw Oo also points out, the civilian opposition does not have adequate capacity to fill the power vacuum that such a split in the military would produce, and to form, alone, a new government. And any state failure in Burma would have regional repercussions as its neighbors would be affected by an even bigger flow of refugees, drugs and weapons than is the case today.

State failure could also encourage the insurgents, who now have cease-fire agreements with the government, to go their own ways, perhaps even declare independence from Naypyidaw. A Yugoslavia-style scenario is not unthinkable, and would also have disastrous consequences for the region. Politicians and statesmen in the region would rather see Suu Kyi focus on these problems rather than a “revolution of the spirit,” and mixing politics with Buddhist practices and concepts such as *vipassana* and *metta*, as she has increasingly been doing over the past decade.

Suu Kyi may be a heroine in the West, but *realpolitik* dominates the thinking of Burma’s immediate neighbors. After the 1988 uprising, India

almost openly supported the pro-democracy movement, partly because of then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's old friendship with Suu Kyi. But as the influence of India's traditional rivals, China and Pakistan, grew in Burma – and it was becoming obvious that the pro-democracy movement was not going to assume power anytime soon – New Delhi began to improve ties with the junta.

In February 2001, Jaswant Singh, then India's foreign minister, visited Burma to discuss avenues for closer cooperation. This was preceded by two visits to India by SPDC vice chairman Gen. Maung Aye in 2000 and followed by the first-ever visit to Burma by an Indian president. In March 2006, Abdul Kalam paid a four-day visit to Rangoon and highlighted the importance India placed on promoting closer connections with Burma.

While India had been cultivating ties with the pro-democracy movement, China had become an important ally of the Burmese government. This began already when on 6 August 1988 the two countries signed a bilateral border-trade agreement. By then the days of Mao Zedong's support to the CPB was well and truly over, and Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism was guiding Chinese foreign policy. This agreement was the first of its kind that hitherto isolated Burma had entered into with a neighbor. It was especially significant because it was signed at a time when Burma was in turmoil: two days later, the countrywide uprising broke out.

But the Chinese, renowned for their ability to plan far ahead, had expressed their intentions, almost unnoticed, in an article in the official weekly Beijing Review as early as 2 September 1985. Titled "Opening to the Southwest: An Expert Opinion," the article, which was written by the former vice-minister of communications, Pan Qi, outlined the possibilities of finding an outlet for trade from China's landlocked provinces of Yunnan,

Sichuan and Guizhou, through Burma, to the Indian Ocean. It mentioned the Burmese railheads of Myitkyina and Lashio in the north and northeast, and the Irrawaddy River as possible conduits for the export of goods from those provinces – but omitted that all relevant border areas, at that time, were not under Burmese central government control.

All that changed when the rank and file of the insurgent Communist Party of Burma rose in mutiny in March-April 1989 and drove the old Maoist leadership into exile in China. The once powerful CPB split up into four different, regional armies based on ethnic lines. But instead of continuing to fight, they reached cease-fire agreements with the government. Soon, other Chinese-border based insurgents followed suit. The Sino-Burmese border was open for trade.

By late 1991, Chinese experts were assisting in a series of infrastructure projects to spruce up Burma's poorly maintained roads and railways. Border trade was booming – and China emerged as Burma's most important source of military hardware. Additional military equipment was provided by Pakistan, which also has helped Burma modernize its defense industries. The total value of Chinese arms deliveries to Burma is not known, but intelligence sources estimate it to be about US\$1.4 billion. Deliveries include fighter, ground attack and transport aircraft, tanks and armored personnel carriers, naval vessels, a variety of towed and self-propelled artillery, surface-to-air missiles, trucks and infantry equipment.

India, feeling that Chinese allies – Pakistan and Burma – were closing in on it in the west as well as the east, and wary of China's growing influence in Burma, dropped its support for the pro-democracy movement and began to woo the country away from its new backers in Beijing. Democracy and human rights were not part of the equation. Consequently,

neither China nor India – Burma’s two most powerful neighbors – would like to see another round of upheavals in Burma. Dealing with the “devil you know,” the present government, is far easier than banking on a democratic administration which may or may not assume power sometime in the future.

Nothing seemed to be able to shake the government in power — not even a cyclone known as Nargis which, in May 2008, devastated the Irrawaddy delta in May 2008, Burma’s rice bowl and home to millions of farmers. At least 130 000 people were killed and 2.4 million made homeless or affected in other ways. It was the worst natural disaster in Asia since the December 2004 tsunami. More than 40 per cent of those affected were children—in a region where young people already suffered from malnutrition. Drinking water was in short supply as most sources had been contaminated by decomposing corpses. Entire villages were wiped out with hardly a building standing—except for the Buddhist temples, usually built from stronger material than ordinary, wooden houses. Crops were destroyed by saltwater seeping into the fields, which may have a devastating long-term impact on the country’s food supply.

The world wanted to rush to assist the victims—but the country’s military government responded by retreating into its shell and turning down offers of help. The US amphibious assault ship *USS Essex* was moored off Burma’s southern coast, while the French naval ship *Le Mistral* waited in the same waters. Tens of thousands of gallons of drinking water, ambulances, heavy trucks and medical teams could have reached Burma within an hour by helicopter and landing craft from the *USS Essex*. *Le Mistral* carried a cargo of 1,000 tons of food, enough to feed at least 100,000 people for two weeks, as well as thousands of shelters for the homeless.

Having waited for weeks, they eventually had to leave when the Burmese government refused to let them bring their goods ashore. Private Burmese citizens who had organized relief efforts were arrested, and the people told to fend for themselves. The official newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, assured its readers that hunger could not be a problem, since farmers can gather water clover or “go out with lamps at night and catch plump frogs.” And to show that the government was on top of the situation, planning minister Soe Tha stated in a truly Orwellian manner that “665,271 ducks, 56,163 cows and 1,614,502 chickens have been lost in the storm — along with 35,051 acres of fish ponds and 22,200 metric tons of beef.”

Only after severe pressure from the international community, including the United Nations and Burma’s neighbors and fellow members in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, did the regime allow some aid to reach the victims. But all efforts were strictly supervised by the country’s military authorities, and the movement of aid workers severely restricted.

The world was flabbergasted. How could any regime do this to its own people? It was a natural disaster with no one to blame, and the aid that was offered came with no strings attached. But from the junta’s perspective, it made some obscene sense. If foreign troops — which should have overseen the distribution of supplies — had entered Burma, their presence could have emboldened the country’s citizens to launch yet another uprising against the regime. Ordinary Burmese were already angered because of a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in September 2007. If anti-government activists thought they could count on foreign protection — even if the foreign troops were in Burma on a purely humanitarian mission — they could have taken to the streets again. Hence,

troops from foreign countries that have criticized the regime and expressed support for Burma's pro-democracy movement had to be kept out at all cost, no matter how much food and medicine they could have supplied.

The September 2007 movement was the most massive, popular manifestation against the regime since the 1988 uprising. Tens of thousands of monks led demonstrations in the old capital Rangoon and some other towns and cities across the country. Thousands of ordinary Burmese from all walks of life joined the marches, calling for an end to military rule. It all began when the government without warning raised fuel prices in August of that year. The Buddhist clergy joined the protests when troops fired warning shots and used tear gas to disperse a demonstration led by monks in Pakokku, a town in the central Burmese plains.

The military responded in the same way as it always had: by sending in the troops. Soldiers and riot police clubbed and teargassed protesters — and opened fire on monks and demonstrators. A Japanese photographer was among those killed in the streets of Rangoon in September. The regime's official figures put the death toll at ten people. However, up to 200 are believed to have been killed during the crackdown.

The US government, one of the junta's fiercest critics, almost immediately slapped sanctions on Burmese government officials and their business cronies. Among them was the powerful, 44-year-old tycoon Tay Za, who is close to junta leader Gen. Than Shwe and his family — and who picked up most of the bill for the general's daughter's lavish wedding in June 2006. His Htoo Trading Company was one the main contractors that built Naypyidaw. Tay Za also has his own airline, Air Bagan, which was sanctioned by the US government along with Htoo Trading in Burma and its subsidiaries in Singapore.

Tay Za has never been associated with the drug trade — unlike Tun Myint Naing, or Steven Law, the son of Lo Hsing-han, who also was in charge of catering for Than Shwe’s daughter’s wedding. His company, Asia World, was added to the US sanctions list on 25 February 2008. According to an announcement by the US Department of the Treasury, “Lo Hsing-han, known as the ‘Godfather of Heroin’, has been one of the world’s key heroin traffickers dating back to the early 1970s...Steven Law joined his father’s drug empire in the 1990s and has since become one of the wealthiest individuals in Burma.” On the same day, President George W. Bush commented on the decision to sanction the Lo family and their companies: “The Department of the Treasury has applied financial sanctions against Steven Law, a regime crony also suspected of drug trafficking activities, and his financial network.”

The Asia World group of companies includes Asia World Port Management, which is in charge of a terminal at Rangoon’s new deepwater port at Thilawa. Its branch specializing in construction was the other main contractor that built Naypyidaw. Asia World has also built a US\$33 million toll highway from Lashio to the Chinese border, and has been involved in the renovation of Rangoon’s international airport. Lo’s companies also have a subsidiary in Singapore, Golden Aaron Pte Ltd, which was on the list of companies that the US treasury department sanctioned.

Two of Burma’s biggest conglomerates — Htoo Trading and Asia World — seemed doomed. But Cyclone Nargis came to the rescue. The Burmese government did not want any aid for the victims, but at a donors’ conference in Rangoon in May 2008, it asked the international community for US\$11.7 billion dollars for “reconstruction” of the delta. It had already entrusted the task to some regime-friendly enterprises — among them Htoo

Trading and Asia World. Tay Za's company would undertake reconstruction work in Kyngyungone Township under the direction of Brig.-Gen. Hlun Thi while Asia World was awarded a contract to rebuild destroyed houses, government buildings and schools in Bogalay and other parts of the delta. The Lo family enterprise would be working there under the guidance of forestry minister Brig.-Gen. Thein Aung.

It is highly unlikely that the Burmese government will get billions of dollars in aid, especially with its choice of contractors. But it shows how little the government in Naypyidaw cares about international opinion, whether because of its handling of a natural disaster, or its complicity in the drug trade. And in the midst of this enormous human tragedy, the government went ahead with its referendum to approve the new constitution. Now, the next step, the authorities say, will be to hold elections in 2010. But no serious observer believes those elections will be more than the farcical show at the 2008 referendum.

In other words, Burma's future looks bleak. Its neighbors do not want to rock the status quo at the same time as the military is showing no signs of being interested in any kind of national reconciliation, or even talks with the pro-democracy movement. If there indeed is a reform-minded faction within the armed forces, as Min Zaw Oo suggests, it must be keeping an extremely low profile. On the other hand, Suu Kyi and the NLD have proven unable to bring the democratic movement any nearer its stated goals. Nor has it tried to reach out to any elements of the armed forces, or explain its policies to Burma's neighbors.

But time is running out for Burma. Economically, the country is a total wreck, although income from exports of gas and oil has made some high-ranking army officers rich, and it remains socially backwards. Since

1988, universities and colleges have been closed more than they have been open, and thousands of the country's brightest talents have left the country to look for a brighter future abroad. More than 100,000 people from the Karen, Mon and Karenni minorities live in squalid refugee camps in Thailand. Drug abuse is rampant, especially in the border areas, and the HIV epidemic is out of control, probably more severe than in any Southeast Asian country.

According to the World Health Organization, WHO, an estimated one in 29 adults in Burma is living with HIV infections and some 48,000 died from AIDS in the year 2000 alone. Malaria causes even more deaths, with over 700,000 cases reported in 2004. Dengue fever, tuberculosis and other diseases are also widespread, and little is done about it. While the Burmese government is spending most of its budget on the military, only \$22,000 was spent on a national AIDS control program in 2004. Burma allocates in total only 3 % of its budget to health and 8% to education, while the military gets at least 50%.³⁸

Until recently, the largest chunk of disease control came from international donors – but, in August 2005, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, the largest funder in Burma for HIV/AIDS control, withdrew because of new restrictions laid down by the military government, which made it impossible for foreign health workers to operate in the country.³⁹ However, some donor countries — among them the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway — have banded together to set up a new entity called the “Three D (diseases) Fund,” and are channeling health support through the UN system and some NGOs to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria (“the three diseases”). It not clear how effective this program has been, and the donors are more or less at the mercy of Burma's military authorities. Sweden, for instance, halted its previous support for cross-border aid from Thailand so as not to annoy the

generals in Nayyidaw.

Arguing that Burma's health crisis and unsettled political situation pose a threat to regional security, the United States began to push for bringing the Burma issue before the UN's Security Council — which could be a way forward — but met with stiff resistance against such a move from permanent members China and Russia. Japan, which is not a permanent member but sits on the Security Council, has also argued that the UN should not intervene in what is considered “an internal Burmese affair” with no relevance to regional security. More precisely, Japan — like India — does not want to antagonize the Burmese government, which they believe would drive it even further into the hand of the Chinese.

In September 2006, the Security Council finally agreed to a “discuss” the Burma issue, but it is unlikely that any resolution will be passed, or firm action taken against the generals in Rangoon. The political stalemate is thus likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Burma is a country where everything seems to have gone wrong, and little can be done about it. Suu Kyi may be “Asia's Mandela,” but, as one observer commented wryly, she may also be as old as he was before she experiences freedom again. The situation in Burma seems hopeless with the SPDC firmly entrenched in power and the NLD paralyzed as a political movement.

The only real hope lies with the emerging “88 Generation,” i.e. people who were young and idealistic activist during the 1988 uprising and now have become a bit older, wiser and more experienced. The most prominent among them is Min Ko Naing, a prominent student leader who was arrested in March 1989 — and released only in November 2005, after nearly 16 years in solitary confinement. In 1988 he was a 26-year old zoology student addressing crowds of tens of thousands in Rangoon.

When he was released he was 42, and he looked old and haggard – but his fighting spirit had not been quelled. “The people of Burma must have the courage to say no to injustice and yes to the truth,” he said at a meeting of the newly formed “88-Generation Students’ Group” in Rangoon in August 2006. “They must also work to correct their own wrongdoing that hurts society.”

Many countries in Asia have certain “generations” that fought for democracy, and sacrificed much of their lives for it. In South Korea, the term “386 generation” was coined in the 1990s to describe those who then were in their thirties, attended university and fought for democracy in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. Today many of them are university lecturers, lawyers, newspaper columnists, and some and even been government ministers. They are a new liberal elite that is admired by the public at large because of their past sacrifices.

In Thailand, people speak of the “1970s generation,” men and women who took to the streets in October 1973 and managed to force that country’s then military government, led by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, into exile. Three years later, Thanom and some of his associates returned to Thailand – which caused a new wave of student-led protests. These, however, were crushed by the military, and thousands of students, teachers and labor activists took to the jungle where they joined the insurgent Communist Party of Thailand. But they were hardly communists, and, before long, fell out with the diehard CPT leadership.

Following a general amnesty in 1980, almost all of them returned to Bangkok and other cities, where they too became prominent political and literary figures. To have been with the CPT in the jungle in the 1970s bears no stigma; on the contrary, they are respected because they endured

hardships and continued to fight for what they believed in.

Although Min Ko Naing and several of his comrades are back in jail after a sweep of arrests in the aftermath of the brutal crackdown on the September 2007 monk-led movement, Burma nevertheless now has its “88 generation,” and it is coming of age. Those who have not been re-arrested are not only meeting in teashops, many have become journalists and writers. Burma’s has five daily newspapers which are published by the government, but — contrary to what is generally assumed in the outside world — the majority of the country’s journals and magazines are privately owned, although publishing licenses are more easily obtained by those with strong connections to the government.

Still, Burma today has nearly 400 newspapers, journals and magazines, and the number is growing steadily – in November 2005 the government issued 15 new publishing licenses. These publications may operate under some of the most restrictive laws and regulations in the world, but they are nevertheless becoming bolder and more outspoken in their reporting. In fact, the media in Burma has become one of the few dynamic sectors in a society that remains mostly stagnant.

Local journalists and editors often state that their main motivation for getting into the profession is “public service” and a desire “to do something for the country”. Many are interested in politics and development, and find that journalism – despite all the constraints placed upon writers of all kinds – is one of the few professions that allows them to play a role in current events in a constructive fashion. Many took part in the 1988 uprising and remain faithful to their democratic ideals. If any political or social force is going to play an important role in Burma’s future and carry the political development forward, it is not the increasingly geriatric NLD, but men and women of this

new 88 generation.

The government realized their political potential at an early stage — or more than a year before the events of September 2007 – and then reacted in its own inimitable way. On 27 September 2006 it was learned that Min Ko Naing had been arrested along two other former political prisoners, Ko Ko Gyi and Ko Htay Kywe. Each had spent 15 years in the Burmese military's notorious prisons, but they had not given up hope for a better future for Burma.

Their arrest turned out to be counterproductive, because the 88 generation is a generation, not a political party. On 2 October, their comrades who had not been jailed started an unprecedented, nation-wide signature campaign. People put their names under demands for freedom for Burma's political prisoners and they could also in a few words express their grievances and desires. When the campaign ended on 23 October, 535,580 signatures had been collected all over the country. The results were sent to the UN headquarters in New York.

At the same time, the 88 generation urged citizens across the country to participate in a "Multiple Religious Prayer" to be held in Buddhist and Hindu temples, Christian Churches and Muslim Mosques. People flocked to the holy sites, dressed in white, the symbol of the sacrifices of Burma's many martyrs. The government was no doubt taken aback by this massive, but entirely peaceful, expression of dissent. A few more people were arrested, but then there were no more repressive measures.

The 88 generation now is a force to be reckoned with, although it has no proper leadership or organization and many of its leaders languish in jails all over the country. They also see Aung San Suu Kyi as their leader: "She is the one person that can bring about reconciliation and lead us into a new,

democratic future,” one of the activists told the foreign reporter who interviewed them in September 2005.

Given recent arrests and the SPDC’s strict restrictions on freedom of association and assembly, the 88 Generation may not morph into a full-blown political movement any time soon. But therein lies, perhaps, the nascent movement’s strength: the military has shown that it is easy to squash a political party and detain its leaders, but it will be considerably more difficult to crush an entire generation.

Recognizing the threat posed to the regime by the 88 Generation, most of its leaders – including Min Ko Naing – were arrested as soon as people began marching in the streets in August 2007 to protest against rising fuel prices. The monks carried on the movement and turned in into a massive manifestation against the regime. But, as we have seen, that movement was crushed as well – further underscoring the argument that nothing will change as long as the military remains united.

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