

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Bangkok  
October, 1988"An Idea Plus a Bayonet:"  
Burmese Students Seek Arms

My second attempt to enter Burma, this time through the back door on the southern Thai border, was halted by a sudden high fever. Thus, this report on the Burmese student movement comes to you after a quinine-induced haze.

In the aftermath of the bloody September 18 coup by Gen. Saw Maung, well over 3,000 students have fled Rangoon and other cities for the Thai border, seeking arms and refuge. Student leaders on the Thai-Burmese border say that peaceful protests alone, especially the type advocated by the elderly opposition leaders in Rangoon, are doomed to fail. One soft-spoken student said of the opposition leaders in Rangoon, "They have ideas but no guns. Revolution equals an idea plus a bayonet."

Maung Maung Thein, a stocky Rangoon University student, led 74 other students out of Rangoon on September 7, eleven days before the coup. Convinced that armed struggle was the only way to overthrow the regime, they traveled over 700 miles down the Burmese coast by passenger bus, boat, and on foot. Sometimes they moved at night to avoid Army checkpoints. But this was during the heady days before the coup when one opposition leader, Aung Gyi, predicted that the government would fall in a matter of weeks. Crowds of people welcomed the students, presenting them with rice and curry. As one student described it, "They were clapping. Some of the women called us their sons. They saw that we would get the victory." In Moulmein, more students joined them, along with at least one government infiltrator. Two days before the coup, they reached Kaw Thaung (Victoria Point), a sleepy town on the southernmost tip of Burma that was then half controlled by the students and half controlled by the Army. On the day of the coup the Army took over all of Kaw Thaung and the students, now numbering 107, crossed the river to the Thai province of Ranong.

According to student leaders, approximately 1,000 students stay in camps in Ranong province, some of which are under the control of Thai officials. A string of camps stretches along the Thai-Burmese border with about 1,500 students in the Three Pagoda Pass area, 3,000 students opposite Mae Sot district in territory controlled by ethnic Karen rebels, and about 1,300 students near Mae Hong Son province.

The student groups both inside Burma and those on the border change names and reorganize frequently, following the tradition of Burmese political groupings to factionalize. This description of the students' organizations is based on talks only with students from the border.

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The writer wishes to remain anonymous.

The main student group inside Burma is the All Burma Federation of Students' Unions, led by the well-known Min Ko Naing (Conqueror of the king) and Moe Thi Zo. The ABFSU was founded on August 28 to formally unite the various student groups that had been coordinating months of protests. The ABFSU is committed, in general, to peaceful protests. According to students in Bangkok, Min Ko Naing and another student have formed political parties, giving them the option to participate in the elections scheduled for next year.

The All Burma Democratic Students' Front is the umbrella group for the students on the Thai border. It is led by Maung Maung Kyaw, who split with Min Ko Naing's larger faction over the question of armed struggle. Maung Maung Kyaw left Rangoon on August 4 to secure arms for his group as well as international support for the student movement as a whole. Despite the tactical differences between the groups, students say the two approaches are complimentary. The leadership of the ABSDF, which left Rangoon before the September 18 coup, appears committed to armed struggle while the thousands of students who fled to the border after the coup may be less so. The main task of the ABSDF said Thaung Win, a likeable leader, is to forge greater unity among all the student groups along the border. In public statements, leaders of the ABSDF emphasize their need for humanitarian aid--food, clothes, and medicines.

Affiliated with the ABSDF is the National Liberation Party, an underground group that is explicitly meant to become an army of students and workers. San Tun, a shrewd 37 year-old activist from Moulmein, heads the group and many student leaders such as Maung Maung Kyaw and Thaung Win sit on its executive committee. Both the ABSDF and the NLP have recently reshuffled their leadership to rectify internal problems.

Students flit between the border camps and Bangkok in their efforts to unify the student groups on the border and garner international humanitarian assistance. It is not an easy task. Distance and the influence of ethnic insurgents pull the groups in different directions. The passport-less students also have to avoid Burmese Embassy spies and the Thai police.

In keeping with Thailand's proclaimed policy of non-intervention in Rangoon's affairs, the Thai authorities, who have an extensive phone tapping system, wink at the students as long as they keep a low profile. Two weeks ago, Thaung Win inadvertently crossed the line when he delivered a moderately worded speech before a rock concert/political rally of 5,000 students organized by a leftist Thai student's group. Unbeknownst to Thaung Win, the Thai student leader who followed him went too far in criticizing Thai Army Commander Gen. Chawalit Yongchaiyudh.

The Thai police arrested Thaung Win and Maung Maung Kyaw on the morning of the day that Thaung Win was to introduce me to Maung Maung Kyaw. I learned of the arrest around noon, but took a bus to their apartment anyway to see if the Thai-Burmese family that had hosted them was all right. On a crowded bus I bumped into San Tun, who was visibly worried and wearing designer bifocals as a disguise. Thaung Win and Maung Maung

Kyaw have since been deported to Kaw Thauang. Thai deportation policy is relatively benign: students are deported at the point where they allegedly crossed into Thailand, which is often outside Rangoon's control.

Thauang Win and almost all of the student leaders whom I talked with in Ranong and Bangkok have relatively little faith in the four major opposition leaders--Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung Gyi, U Nu, and Tin U. Said one student, who asked that his name not be used, "If we believed in their ability we would stay in Rangoon." Another student said of Aung San Suu Kyi, the 43-year-old daughter of independence hero Aung San, "We admire Aung San. We love Aung San. Therefore we love his daughter. But we don't know about her record. We don't know what she can do." A third student added: "Her husband is a foreigner [British] and she doesn't know enough about politics."

Regarding Brig. Gen. Aung Gyi, age 70, Ne Win's former lieutenant turned critic who was instrumental in sparking the protests, one student said, "He's not bad, he is a successful businessman. But I wonder if it is due to his real ability." Yet, another student said, "He bombed the student union [after Ne Win's coup]. That's why the students don't like him."

One student praised the 81-year-old U NU, the devoutly Buddhist Prime Minister who was overthrown by Ne Win, as "a leader in religion and a leader in politics." But many students fault U Nu for not resolving the separatist struggle of Burma's ethnic minorities. As for Tin U, former Defense Minister under Ne Win, one student called him "a good leader for the Burmese Army only, not for the nation." But another added, "He was Ne Win's partner."

Student leaders also see little use in contesting the elections that Gen. Saw Maung has promised to hold sometime after January. Maung Maung Thein said that the opposition "cannot win because Saw Maung will not hold a real election. He will lie like Marcos." Most students do not view the elections, however rigged, as a process by which they can mobilize more support against the government as was done in the Philippines.

Many older Burmese in Bangkok respect the students' decision to carry on through armed struggle but have qualms. One highly-regarded opposition leader says he is "very concerned" that by taking up arms, the protest movement will "lose the Gandhian element." He also believes that it is "dangerous" for the students to receive arms and training from the insurgents, primarily the Karen National Union (KNU). This gives the Army the "excuse" that it is continuing to protect the ethnic Burman majority from the armed minorities.

Recently, two persons--a close relative of U Nu's and a former Defense Minister under U Nu--quietly arrived in Bangkok to meet with student leaders to caution them against taking up arms. It's not as though the students are about to receive massive amounts of weaponry. According to Thai and Burmese sources, students have approached the Thai military for arms and the U.S. Embassy for some form of assistance to no apparent

result. Some students have undergone limited training with KNU fighters and a handful participated as observers in recent KNU victories. But the KNU itself is short of arms. The relationship between the students and the Karens is an uneasy one. Although most of the students stay in camps in KNU controlled areas, the traditional prejudices of the ethnic Burman students persist. Several students told me that after the brief riots in September 1987, a group of some 50 students headed for the KNU camps seeking arms. The students claim that KNU officials gave the students the responsibility of organizing villagers, and when they failed, the KNU executed them. Whether true or not, the rumor indicates the depth of mistrust.

With massive street protests in Rangoon blocked by de facto martial law, and poorly armed and trained students no match for the experienced and tough Burmese Army, the position of Ne Win's men in government seems secure over the next several months. The real hard-liners in the government--Sanda Win, Ne Win's daughter, and Lt. Gen. Than Shwe, Army Chief--are consolidating their power against Armed Forces Chief Gen. Saw Maung, who is seen as somewhat softer and weak-willed. Yet there is one possible, although unlikely, scenario for change in the near future. The following is speculation and should be taken as such.

Earlier this year, after the student riots in March, Thai Army Commander Gen. Chawalit led a delegation of over 100 Thai generals to Rangoon. Gen. Chawalit, who has assumed a prominent role in foreign policy, purportedly went to work out joint Thai-Burmese economic ventures. Generals Chawalit and Saw Maung reportedly became fast friends and a secure telephone line has been secretly established between the two. Bangkok would probably like to see a new government in Rangoon, preferably one headed by a free market-oriented military man. But more importantly, Bangkok wants to prevent a civil war with elements of the Burmese Army pitted against students and minority insurgents. The solution may be an alliance between Gen. Saw Maung, who appears to be on the outs, and Brigadier Aung Gyi, Ne Win's former associate turned successful businessman and opposition leader.

Although Gen. Saw Maung ostensibly led the coup on September 18, it is believed that Sanda Win and Lt. Gen. Than Shwe were the real movers behind the scenes. It is rumored that Gen. Saw Maung has resisted their efforts to have Aung Gyi and the other opposition leaders arrested. It has been reported that Gen. Saw Maung provided Aung Gyi with fuel for trips up-country to organize the opposition. Suppose that in an election, Gen. Saw Maung blocked ballot snatching by Sanda Win and Lt. Gen. Than Shwe, and a new government was somehow ushered in. A possible government would be headed by Aung Gyi and would include the other three opposition figures with Gen. Saw Maung remaining as Chief of Staff. But one problem with this scenario is that it ignores what is perhaps Burma's most important group--the students and their deep hatred of the man in whose name the troops opened fire once again. All this is speculation.