

Civilians and Soldiers in Burma

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The relinquishment of high political office by Burma's General Ne Win in April, 1960 has generally been regarded as unique among the experiences of the several newly independent lands in which power has been seized by the military. A soldier administration which had replaced the government of Premier U Nu eighteen months earlier turned over the reins of state to this very same Nu. In doing so, it clearly gave the civilian politicians a second chance to try their hand at giving Burma effective government.

Throughout most of the first decade of Burma's regained independence, the Army generally acquiesced in most of the non-military decisions made by the politicians, partly because it was preoccupied with fighting various kinds of insurrectionists, but in part also because its leadership and the leading political figures were old revolutionary comrades who liked and trusted one another.

The bonds, however, began to wear thin towards the end of the first decade of self-rule, as various of the lesser figures of the preindependence period began to assume greater political importance. Colonel Maung Maung, number three man in the Ne Win administration, put it this way: "When the Second World War was over and we had obtained our independence, the cream of the resistance movement stayed with the Burma Army, and most of the rest became politicians. It was irksome to find that those who could not hold their own in the Army came in time to be our political superiors."¹

Colonel Maung Maung did not mean, of course, such leaders as Nu, Ba Swe, and Kyaw Nyein, but he apparently did mean the several "Bo"'s, or "captains," of the resistance years against the Japanese who came to occupy positions of importance in the pre-

Ne Win government: Bo Min Gaung, Bo Hmu Aung, and others.

The background of Burma's top Army leadership, while similar to that of the civilian politicians, contrasts markedly with the bulk of the officer group. Recruitment in recent years has been mainly from the ranks of the college graduates, and there is an ever-larger body of officers who represent professional soldiers who never were political agitators. It is within the ranks of these men that there has probably been the greatest amount of dissatisfaction with the results of rule by the civilian politicians.

The role of the Army in Burmese life, almost from the start of the postindependence period, has been more than the maintenance of external defense or of internal security. The Army as a group has been called upon consistently to perform various nonmilitary functions. Many of the highest decisions of state, moreover, were cleared with the top military leadership, including all of Premier Nu's various overtures to the Communists (and other rebels) to end their fight against the government.²

There is considerable evidence that General Ne Win had serious doubts about the wisdom of too heavy involvement on the Army's part in nonmilitary functions, however. On several occasions he called for continued recognition of the principle of civilian supremacy in Burmese government, and he also cautioned the military against taking sides in the struggle for power among contending political groups. On the whole, their Commander-in-Chief's words were heeded by the military until the summer of 1958.

In the previous spring the party that had regained independence for the country, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, split into two approximately equal factions.³ One was headed by Premier Nu, the other by U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, who were major figures in the government in the first decade of independence. Nu's faction called itself the "Clean" A.F.P.F.L., the Swe-Nyein group the "Stable" A.F.P.F.L. In a parliamentary vote of confidence the "Clean" won by a narrow margin, saved from defeat by the votes of the Communist-oriented National Unity Front.

This Communist backing in the showdown vote cost Nu some prestige in the Army, not because he was regarded as pro-Communist, but because of fears that the Communists would exploit

the situation Nu helped to create by not rejecting their support. The tougher attitude assumed by the Communist rebels subsequent to the A.F.P.F.L. split also caused Army misgivings about Nu. It was the feeling of the Army leadership that Nu, by bringing the split into the open, gave the Communists renewed hopes of victory through exploitation of the differences among the anti-Communist politicians.

The fears of the military leadership mounted in early September when the Army was explicitly labeled public enemy number one at a "Clean" A.F.P.F.L. rally held in the compound of Premier Nu.⁴ Nu disclaimed any knowledge of the charges, made within hearing distance of his working office in the Prime Minister's official residence. But the damage had already been done. Either Nu knew that the charges would be made, or he was not in control of his party (which actually was the case).

The rest of September saw the situation go from bad to worse. A political war—in a literal sense—seemed to be shaping up between the "Clean" and "Stable" factions. Attention of the Nu government was called to large collections of arms known to be in existence in various areas of lower Burma, but the government did not authorize the military to bring these in. Clandestine movement of certain units of the Union Military Police (under "Clean" Minister of Interior Bo Min Gaung) caused the Army leadership to question the purpose behind such action. The factionalism afflicting the politicians also seemed to be spreading to the Army. Moreover, rumors were circulating of a plot to assassinate the top Army leaders. It was in these circumstances that the Army moved to depose Premier Nu.⁵

The Army seizure of power was motivated primarily by two considerations: the steadily deteriorating state of law and order, and the fact that the Army was now the object of attack by some of the non-Communists as well as the Communists.

General Ne Win, however, was a reluctant candidate for the premiership. Content with the power and status of Army commander-in-chief and lacking political ambition, he had to be convinced. This was done by Colonels Aung Gyi and Maung Maung, principal figures on the Army side of the takeover, who realized that they could never move without Ne Win. A virtual ultimatum, accordingly, was given Nu to step down. Nu, however, came

up with a face-saving formula by which he was to resign and ask Ne Win to form a caretaker government to rule for six months and restore law and order before free elections were held. The Army leaders, conscious of the benefits of constitutional procedure, agreed.

From the start it was clear that Premier General Ne Win's was to be more than a caretaker regime. Not only did the General's government move vigorously to restore law and order, but it also made and sought to implement decisions that significantly changed the country's basic economic policies. Greater emphasis was placed on increasing agricultural production and less on industrial development, while a larger role was allocated to private enterprise in various phases of the economy, including the international marketing of rice, Burma's number one export commodity. Politically, the Ne Win government inaugurated a country-wide movement called the National Solidarity Associations for the purpose of inculcating the values of law and order and serving as a check against possible future excesses on the part of the politicians.⁶

U Nu, who had been saved from inglorious ouster from office by the constitutional formula he had devised, regarded the Army's multisided activity as a breach of faith with him. When General Ne Win indicated at the end of six months that it was not yet possible to hold free elections because the country was still disturbed, Nu apparently felt tricked.

Since it regarded Ba Swe and the "Stable" party as a lesser evil, moreover, the Ne Win government clearly favored Nu's opponents. Large numbers of Nu's supporters were arrested (many of them probably for valid reasons), but the attack on followers of Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein was mild in comparison. An effort was also made to link the "Clean" faction with both the above-ground Communist National Unity Front and the Communist insurgents. Forced by circumstances but also aware of the political benefits involved, U Nu accordingly took to attacking the caretaker regime, being the only person brave enough to do so directly and consistently during the period of Army rule.⁷

Although the Army favored the "Stable" over the "Clean" party, its real preference was the election of a sufficiently large number of independents to hold the balance in parliament be-

tween the two factions of the A.F.P.F.L. One of the main undeclared aims of the National Solidarity Association movement was to encourage independents to run for parliament, and representatives of the Army sought to generate popular support for them. Army leaders apparently hoped that such a body of independents, professional men of the sort who served the caretaker regime in various capacities, could be used to influence the results of the legislative process. It was at a time when the military apparently still harbored such expectations that the government announced the holding of elections for the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.

There are several reasons for the Army's permitting the return of the civilians to office. The most important of these probably was the fact that the Ne Win government had fulfilled the main requirement of its caretaker stewardship: the restoration of law and order. There was, in short, no longer the threat to the nation or the Army that had existed in 1958.

Secondly, the Army probably felt in September, 1959, when it announced elections would be held, that it was not in fact turning power back to the same politicians functioning under the same circumstances. U Nu's political stock was at an all-time low at the time of the election announcement, and those who expected that he would again be Burma's premier formed a distinct minority.

Thirdly, Burma's military leaders were clearly aware of the mounting hostility of the populace towards the Army as a consequence of the haste of its reformism and its frequently arbitrary behavior. Ne Win and his colleagues apparently reasoned that an unpopular Army government would serve only the interests of the Communists.

Fourthly, the personality of Ne Win himself was a factor in the Army's departure from office. The frequently offered characterization of Ne Win as lazy and lacking in ambition is an oversimplification and is neither accurate nor fair. The General, more than any other single person, is responsible for the development of the Burmese Army from practically nothing at the height of the insurrections in 1949 to its present status as a highly regarded fighting force and a major factor in keeping independent Burma's national head above water. Ne Win does not possess the

ambition to be prime minister, however. No doubt he was advised by some of his associates to hold off on the return of the civilians to office, but his power and prestige were such that, failing to gain his support, they were forced to go along with him.

Finally, once the decision to allow the civilians to return was made, there was no turning back. The sweep of the municipal elections by U Nu's "Clean" party in late 1959 left no doubt as to the popularity of the former Premier or the lack of popularity of the Army government.

The political situation in Burma following the February, 1960 election and the April return to office of U Nu on the wave of a tremendous expression of the voters' confidence differs considerably from that of the precaretaker period. It is now known that the Army is both willing and able to move against the politicians when it and the country are threatened. The Army also has shown itself capable of giving the nation better government than the politicians in the sense of a government that does things and does them well.⁸ Nu, on the other hand, has returned to power on his own in the face of Army opposition (which was never explicitly stated as such).⁹ In such a situation, what kind of relationship between soldiers and civilians in Burma may be expected in the immediate future?

It is the writer's opinion that U Nu is both sufficiently pleased with the fact of his comeback and possessed of such a desire to avoid conflict, largely for reasons of his particular kind of personality, that he will tend to forget past differences with the Army. He also is intelligent enough to know that he is on trial with the military leadership and will seek to avoid provoking the Army again. The Army, on the other hand, will give Nu and his colleagues a decent trial; they have to in view of public opinion, and Nu knows this.

The main reason why Nu must get along with the military is the fact that Burma's Army is unquestionably the single most important group in the life of his country today. The most obvious aspect of the Army's strength is its preponderant share of the country's military or police force. More than a hundred thousand strong, it is over twice the size of the national police (the present numbers of which exaggerate actual strength in view of the recent incorporation of the undisciplined Special Police

Reserves, which more than doubled the amount of police personnel).¹⁰ Burma's national police is not on the model of the second army maintained formerly by Police Director-General Phao Sriyanon in neighboring Thailand and which was a factor for a while counterbalancing the strength and ambitions of then Army leader Sarit Thanarat. No Burmese government in the foreseeable future could maintain itself without the Army as a check against resurgence of large-scale terrorist activity, and no Burmese government could remain in power if the Army really wanted to topple it.

The Army, however, also is an economic power. Through its Defense Services Institute, it has come to be a major importer of a vast variety of goods ranging from coal to automobiles; it also operates the country's biggest department store, catches and sells fish, and runs a bookstore, restaurants, a bus line, the country's largest automobile service station, and a shoe factory. It is also in the banking, shipping, and construction businesses.¹¹ It has a major influence on private investment too, through its policy of selling out its various holdings after they have been put on an efficient operating basis.¹²

Although none of its officers ran for election in the February, 1960 elections, the Army has by no means gotten completely out of politics. The leadership of the Central Council of the National Solidarity Association movement remains in Army hands,¹³ although these leaders have changed their minds as to the role the N.S.A.'s should play in national life. Their original intention¹⁴ was that the N.S.A.'s should be a mass movement guarding against a return of the bullying excesses of some of the politicians in the precaretaker period, but the mass membership has lost interest in the N.S.A.'s since the return of U Nu to office. The belief that many persons joined the movement during the caretaker era because they felt it expedient to do so appears to be substantiated. The Army leadership now apparently regards the N.S.A. movement as elitist rather than mass and as an educational rather than as an action organization. Although the second role may differ from the Army's anticipations, it is still a political one.

In addition to its military, economic, and political resources, the Army also has a certain strength deriving from the quality

of its personnel, who are generally more highly educated than the politicians and possess greater knowledge and dedication than the civil service. This has resulted in the Army's being called upon to perform various duties that might ordinarily be expected of the civilian administration or political appointees. Some of these duties are of major importance to Burma today. Army Colonel Saw Myint, for example, is head of the Frontier Areas Administration which directly rules large areas of crucial border territory.¹⁵ It is the Army, too, that has been given the very important function of leading in the settlement of vast areas of the country with limited population. Army personnel and their families are sent to Israel to learn the ways of communal life and then return to Burma to help the government settle the more sparsely populated and underdeveloped parts of the country.¹⁶

The Army, in short, is today a much stronger force than it was before the 1958 takeover in terms of economic power, political activity, governmental experience, and probable backing from the small but influential educated Rangoon professional class.

Government in Burma since General Ne Win gave up office has deteriorated, however. Prices are once again soaring, garbage goes uncollected, and the administration appears to have slipped back into its old ways of perpetual buck-passing. Premier Nu, in his dealings with the student leaders demanding a reversal of the caretaker government's educational reforms, has shown himself only too willing to give in even to the pressures of undisciplined youth. The creation of various new advisory commissions gives evidence of a worsening of the problem of locating responsibility within the governmental system. There is every indication that day-to-day government in Burma will drop at least part of the way back to the old standards of inefficiency and possible corruption.

Does this mean the Army will seek to return to high political office? Probably not. General Ne Win and his colleagues put up with a great deal of inefficiency and corruption without intervention in the past, and they did not move when they did because of these considerations. The ever-changing personnel complexion of the Army, however, raises doubts as to how long the present leadership will be representative of the thought of the

second-liners in this regard. There is a certain friendly tolerance of the shortcomings of the politicians on the part of Ne Win, stemming from the old days, but a new generation of professional soldiers is emerging and their answer a few years hence (or even sooner) may be very different from that of the soldier-premier who stepped down from office.

A serious deterioration of law and order, however—renewed attacks on the Army or efforts by the politicians to reduce the power of the Army—would probably bring an even quicker response from the military leadership than the events of September, 1958.

This U Nu presumably realizes. Yet Nu has not always been master in his own house, as witnessed by the Army-baiting “Clean” convention in the Prime Minister’s own compound in September, 1958. Moreover, Nu has shown himself to be a man susceptible to flattery and the provocation of intense suspicion by those interested in using him for their own ends, as illustrated by the way Thakins Tin and Kyaw Dun convinced him that Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein were plotting to kick him upstairs to the presidency in 1957. Ne Win was in attendance at the meeting at which this proposal was advanced (by Burma’s Ambassador to Peiping, who wanted Nu to be a sort of Burmese Mao Tse-tung), and it is possible that this incident, for example, could be used again to stir up resentment on Nu’s part—this time against his Army’s chief. After all, the Army did throw Nu out of power.

Nu based a good part of his comeback campaign on the necessity to restore and further develop democracy in Burma.¹⁷ There is no reason to question the sincerity of his intentions in this respect. The top Army leadership, moreover, gives evidence of ideological attraction to democracy,¹⁸ if the politicians seriously endeavor to make it work. The trouble is that, aside from Nu and a few other politicians and a handful of intellectuals (including important members of the press), there seems to be limited support in the country for democratic government. Most of Nu’s chief political lieutenants today are holdovers from the precaretaker period, and few of them can be realistically described as knowing what democracy is all about. The same can be said about most of those in the camp of the opposition “Stable” A.F.P.F.L.

Ironically, not only would Nu like the Army to have the kind of subordinate role it has in Western democracies, but Ne Win also apparently would like this. Others of the military leadership, however, appear to view the Army more as a vehicle of social and economic change which probably can not be carried out without a large or even exclusive share in political decision-making. The frequently displayed political adroitness of Premier Nu provides hope that he can adequately satisfy the aspirations of the Army in this respect. However, Nu's increasingly traditionalist outlook would seem to suggest a possible problem in intra-elite communications in the future, perhaps the near future, and this could have direct bearing on how long the younger Army modernists tolerate their Premier. In recent years the Army and Nu (and many of the other politicians, too) seem to have been moving in different directions intellectually.¹⁹ Socialism continues to move the civilian politicians (as well as the Army leadership), but the pragmatic Army leaders have already given evidence that they understand better what Socialism is—and is not—than most of the sloganeering politicians. Unless the politicians move closer to the values and attitudes of the world beyond Burma, it is possible that it will matter little whether U Nu is a democrat or not.

The rise to power of Burma's Army in 1958 has its point of similarity—and dissimilarity—with the experiences of other undeveloped nations. The Burmese Army came to power when it appeared to have no alternative in terms of its own or the nation's survival (as it saw the situation). Presumably other armies would do the same, which makes the Burmese action quite typical. But it also seems that this was not the primary reason why Nasser or Kassem or Ayub Khan came to power at the time they did in the way they did—which makes the Burmese situation atypical. Ne Win seems never to have regarded himself as a kind of national messiah as Nasser, Kassem, or even Ayub Khan has. It is very possible, of course, that an Egyptian-Iraqi-Pakistani type of military takeover might have come in time in view of the forces building up in Burma, particularly within the military. The Army, however, was forced to seize power before disappointment and resentment with civilian failings had produced the same degree of response from within the Army ranks. This could have the effect of reducing the possibility of the Army's intervening

again, and it could be an indirect boost to democracy's prospects in Burma.

Because Burma's Army leaders seized political power for the purpose of restoring law and order to save the nation and themselves, theirs would appear to be a rather unique experience. Honest and politically nonambitious, Burma's present military leaders gave up high office when they had fulfilled their mission. It would probably be in vain that those who would understand the next step in Pakistan, Iraq, or the United Arab Republic would look to Burma for suggestions. Indeed, it might well be that both the soldiers and civilians in Burma could look to these countries in anticipation of what still might be their fate in the years to come.

NOTES

1. This statement was made in an interview with the author, April 19, 1960.
2. Various senior officers so stated in conversations with the author in Rangoon in 1959-60.
3. See Frank N. Trager, "The Political Split in Burma," *Far Eastern Survey*, October, 1958, pp. 145-155, and J. S. Furnivall, *The Governance of Modern Burma* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1958), pp. 109-129.
4. U Sein Win, *The Split Story* (Rangoon: The Guardian, Ltd., 1959), p. 75.
5. Nu, of course, does not admit that this is the way things happened—nor do the top Army leaders, who also have an interest in not being publicly depicted as having seized power. Lesser politicians and officers are more frank, however, and their stories check out. For Nu's analysis of the developing situation that produced the change of governments, see "Speech delivered by the Hon'ble U Nu, Prime Minister, to the Conference of Union Youths on October 19," *Burma Weekly Bulletin*, October 23, 1958.
6. See the remarks of Vice Chief of Staff (Navy) Commodore Than Pe before the first conference of the Rangoon Divisional Council of the N.S.A. *The Nation*, November 30, 1959. The accomplishments of the Ne Win government are officially described in *The Nine Months After the Ten Years* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1959) and *Is Trust Vindicated?* (Rangoon: Director of Information, 1960).
7. *The Government of the People* (Rangoon: "Clean" A.F.P.F.L., 1959) is an excellent illustration of U Nu's courageous outspokenness during this period. See also his *Stages of the Battle Against Oppression* (in Burmese) (Rangoon: "Clean" A.F.P.F.L., 1959) and *We Must Defend Democracy* (Rangoon: "Clean" A.F.P.F.L., 1959).
8. For the caretaker administration's own assessment of its record, see *Is Trust Vindicated?*
9. See Richard Butwell and Fred von der Mehden, "The 1960 Election in Burma," *Pacific Affairs*, XXXIII (June, 1960), 144-157.
10. Prior to the incorporation move, Burma's national police numbered more than 17,000. The Government's decision to absorb the S.P.R.'s into the

- regular police would raise the figure to 44,000. *The Guardian* (Rangoon), May 25, 1960.
11. See *New York Times*, September 13, 1960.
 12. There has recently been strong criticism of the D.S.I. by Burmese private businessmen because it allegedly enjoys various advantages in its competition with them (*The Nation*, July 4, 1960). See also Peter Simms, "The Facts Behind the D. S. I.," *The Guardian* (Rangoon), June 26, 1960, and "Burma's Army in Business, the DSI," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (March 17, 1960), pp. 587-589.
 13. Brigadier Aung Gyi is the Central Council's Vice President and Colonel Maung Maung its General Secretary. The Vice President told N.S.A. district officers at a May meeting that the movement represented the foundation of democracy and that the N.S.A.'s should help district administrative officers in the discharge of their duties (*The Guardian* [Rangoon], May 30, 1960).
 14. See Richard Butwell, "The New Political Outlook in Burma," *Far Eastern Survey*, February, 1960, pp. 21-27.
 15. Premier Nu vowed in a press conference, however, that the frontier administration would never "degenerate" into a "military administration" (*The Guardian* [Rangoon], September 10, 1960).
 16. For a description of Burmese Army personnel in Israel for this purpose, see Maung Maung, "Co-op and Communal Villages in Israel," *The Guardian* (Rangoon), June 29, 1960.
 17. See U Nu, *The Pyidaungsu Policy* (Rangoon: "Clean" A.F.P.F.L., 1959).
 18. Brigadier Aung Gyi declared at a mass rally of the N.S.A. in late 1959 that the preservation of democracy should be a main aim of the populace. *The Guardian* (Rangoon), November 2, 1959. See also the official document *Hawkers of Human Hope & We (Ideological Defense)* (Rangoon: Ministry of Defence, 1959).
 19. It is interesting, however, that the Army has used Buddhism, the country's traditional religion, in its ideological struggle with the Communists. Its booklet *Dhamantaraya* (Rangoon: Ministries of Information and Defence, 1959) is a national best-seller.