

# Understanding the Burma's SPDC Generals

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## Objective:

This paper was written to help understand the "Burmese way of Thinking", especially the street-smart raw thinking of the Burmese generals in contrast to western ways of intellectual thinking, analysis and forming ideas and policies based on established political science theories, case studies, logic and facts.

## Introduction

Many Burmese political operatives like to make fun of Burmese generals as uneducated idiots and some intellectuals take pleasure in characterizing them as unsophisticated rednecks of Burma. Older generations of Burmese who took the brunt of oppression in the early days of Ne Win's rule loved to claim that adding 3 Burmese military officials did not add up to 4th grade education and find consolation on all the failures of Ne Win experimentation with Burmese way to Socialism by blaming their lack of education. Ne Win himself was a dropout from the University and was working as a postal clerk before he joined the 30 comrades, the first batch of Burmese trained by Imperial Japanese army with Maj Gen Aung San as its leader during WWII from which the Burma army was formed.

While the Opposition loves to make fun of these generals, many of them do not make any attempts to understand the thinking behind these generals or to study the structure and culture within the armed forces and what changes had been taking place inside Burmese military, and what influences their collective thinking, dynamics and culture. Very few western academics have had a chance to access any documents of the armed forces and even when they were granted access, the military restricted that access only to the time before 1962. Professor Mary Callahan's book *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* did peek into the early formation of the military thinking and the arrogance growing inside the official corps that only military could well serve the country. But military did not allow Professor Mary Callahan or anyone to study them after the period starting from 1962 to present. Naturally, many of the books written were on the military strength and formation but none pay much attention to the actual power structure or dynamics and culture created within closely guarded SPDC generals and their elite commanders.

There are two dangerous mindsets that is at the core of military thinking

- (1) Military officers are superior to civilians
- (2) Only military can save the country from disintegration

The first thinking, that exposes their superiority complex, is an obstacle to any future negotiating talks for the reforms necessary to reintroduce Democracy to Burma. The second thinking justifies military rule in their own minds.

Ruling Burmese military elites are somewhat difficult personalities. They are supremely confident of their superiority over civilians on one hand but at the same time they understand their lack of sophistication at global and economic affairs, exposing their inferiority complex on the other hand. But yet they do not want to loosen an inch of their control over the society. Their strong belief in Astrology and their strong practice and reliance on Ya-da-yar, a Voodoo-like practice to prevent bad instances from happening also complicated their thinking, actions and decisions.

SPDC generals are paranoid about a U.S invasion of Burma. After Iraq invasion, SPDC generals concluded that Rangoon was not safe from sea-borne attack and decided to move their military HQ to Pinyinmanar in central Burma where they could build bunkers in the nearby mountains. But the decision to move six ministries on the 6th day of the month at 6:24 AM ( $24=2+4=6$ ) prematurely was highly suspected of following the trusted astrologer's instructions of Than Shwe. It is widespread knowledge that Ne Win's number was number "9", and Than Shwe's number is "6". This moves to Pinyinmana exhibits the complexities involves in the thinking and decision making process of the military elites.

### The Birth of the Army

Because the Japanese Imperial army founded Burma army from Thirty Comrades who went to Hainan and trained, there was some unconscious residual of fascism right from the start. During and after the struggle for Independence, that many of the young army officers had to report to young politicians who were their comrades during the early independence movement caused considerable resentment. Adding self-righteousness to this resentment some started to think army officers could do better than civilian politicians and deserved more respect and better treatment.

In the initial stage when the Burmese army was evolving from Burma Independence Army (BIA) to Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF), progressive left leaning forces were competing with pro-British army officials or the rightist group within the army. Many Karen officers trained by the British held important positions in the army high command. The leftist or progressive officials plotted to regain control of the army where the Communist officials were led by Bo Zay Ya, the 4th ranking army official and the socialist officers were led by Bo Ne Win, the 5th ranking official among the thirty comrades. After Aung San, Bo Let Yar was 2nd in line. Bo Set Kyar, the 3rd ranking officer, left the army. Bo Let Yar was known to be in the rightist camp.

When the Communist Party went underground to start an armed revolution Bo Zay Ya joined the Communist insurrection along with many officials who were loyal to the Communist party. Of the few

battalions available to the army, half of the 3rd Burma regiment followed its commander, Bo Ye Htut, a communist. Because 2nd in command, Bo Chit Myaing, refused to join the communist rebels, the other half of the regiment decided to stay with the government. Only the 4th Burma regiment under the command of Bo Ne Win became the solid reliable regiment for the army during the civil war. Burma army was only 3000-5000 strong, which was supplemented by UMP (Union Military Police) under Home Ministry and other militia groups played a vital role in winning the civil war.

Right after the civil war, Burma army had to face off the Kuomintang (KMT) Chinese who strayed into Shan State. The young country again had to rely on the army and it played a critical role during the early days of Independence.

### The soul of the current army

Although General Aung San was the founder of Burma army, it was Ne Win who became the leader of the army after the Independence of the country. In addition to being a military officer, General Ne Win was also a very wily and conniving politician. He never showed his ambition and fooled many by pretending to be polite and loyal to the politicians. U Tin Mg Win who was a well-known politician himself was the son of U Win, a protégée of U Nu, who served as an ambassador to U.S. and as a minister in several portfolios. In his book, U Tin Mg Win revealed that when the soldiers came to arrest U Nu at the night of the coup de'tat on March 2nd 1962, Prime Minister U Nu inquired about General Ne Win and went to bed peacefully thinking General Ne Win would take care of his military officers in the morning, if he was informed without suspecting that it was Ne Win himself who had staged the coup. The 1958 caretaker government was the dry run to test the waters for military take over.

After the communist insurrection where many Communist military officials followed loyally their leaders for armed rebellion, many senior military officials close to socialist party were left in high positions in the army, who could counter-check Ne Win. After the 1960 election, Ne Win accused these senior military officials for siding with the Socialists (who lost) during the election and sacked them. Many of the next generation military officials who were handpicked and groomed by Ne Win himself took over the key command posts. So by March of 1962 when he staged the coup de'tat, Ne Win was not only the undisputed leader of the army but there was no one left who was senior and who had enough clout to counter balance him.

### The growing pains

Within a year after the coup Ne Win retired his deputy. He also retired the chiefs of Navy and Air Force and replaced them with much junior officials who had shown absolute loyalty to him. One of the trademarks of Ne Win's rule was his mastering of divide and rule technique. Ne Win never left anyone unchecked. During his rule, the military intelligence chief became very powerful and was referred to as

"one and a half (1 ½)" since the intelligence chief was more powerful than Ne Win's official deputy (number 2). Even then, Ne Win made sure there was a rival by creating a separate intelligence branch, National Intelligence Bureau (NIB) to compete with his military intelligence chief and played between the two. Ne Win had a file on everyone and used it regularly when he wanted to remove the target. Also Ne Win was very tactful in dismantling the political infrastructure within the country. He arrested significant numbers of political leaders and many of the hardcore followers and declared all political parties to be unlawful organizations. He then nationalized all the business enterprises and destroyed the private sector in the economy. After methodically destroying the civil society in Burma, his government became the sole employer and authority for every facet of the economy, leaving only the military as the sole organized institution left in the country. Then he weeded out all the suspected followers of his opposition and took absolute control of the society. After Ne Win put all the opposition leaders under detention for nearly half a decade and destroying the livelihood of the followers of his opposition, when he became comfortable with the situation, he slowly released the opposition leaders.

One thing that Ne Win was very careful was not to overreach to the point of no return for his opposition where the victim may feel compelled to take revenge. Usually after releasing the army officials from detention Ne Win would offer the victims some civilian positions or blame the military intelligence people for their detention. Ne Win was tactful to reduce the threat of the opposition but not to totally destroy it and create absolute bitterness.

So it was an art to survive and reach the ruling level during Ne Win era, where one's ambition was never detected and one's loyalty was never questioned. Ne Win's philosophy was to choose a "good" person over a "smart" person.

#### BSPP Mentality

Ne Win created a Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), rewrote Burma's constitution, staged an election, and changed from military dictatorship to one party Dictatorship in 1974. Following the tradition of many dictators, Ne Win's BSPP won the unopposed election with over 90% of the vote. Most of the members of the Revolution Council became ruling Party Officials and the power was changed from military officials to civilian party officials without a real change in power. Ne Win became the President and many of his military council members became the newly formed Politburo style "National Council" members.

Near the end of BSPP 14 years reign, Ne Win resigned from all position except the Chairman of the BSPP. Following his tradition of divide and rule, there were three major factions fighting for influence within the ruling elites: Kyaw Htin, Aye Ko and Sein Lwin. Kyaw Htin was the former Chief of staff of the Burmese armed forces and Aye Ko was his deputy. Sein Lwin was a notorious butcher who gave the order to shoot the demonstrating students in July 1962. The army blew up the student union occupied by the students

with students inside the building. It was the first bloody suppression followed by many instances during the rule of these Burmese military dictators. All three of them were Non Commissioned Officials (NCO) from Burma rifles # 4 when Ne Win was its commander.

### The trio in power

When the army staged a second coup de'tat to suppress the 1988 uprising in September 1988, General Saw Maung was chief of staff of the Burmese armed forces. General Saw Maung was the protégé of General Kyaw Htin and General Than Shwe was from Aye Ko camp. Saw Maung was a loyal soldier but he was not a politician. He rubbed some elbows when he took actions to tackle corruption without consulting the elders. In those days, chief of staff of the army was just a tool because the real power was in the hands of Ne Win and his cronies. Ne Win had become the father of the Burmese armed forces and there was no one who could match his clout or influence in the army. He had a long shadow over his commanding generals. He was known as A-Phay-Gyi, the "big father" in the army. When the complaint against Saw Maung became stronger, the ruling elders reported to Ne Win and decision was made to remove Saw Maung. Saw Maung was given medication and removed with Ne Win orders. It was later explained that Saw Maung had become unstable and had to be removed. The executor was none other than Khin Nyunt, then the military intelligence chief and trusted aide of Ne Win.

In the tradition of divide and rule policy, Maung Aye was chosen by Than Shwe with the approval of the elders because Maung Aye was the known nemesis of Khin Nyunt.

### Power Structure within the Army

During and after the early resistance days, the Burma army was formed into regiments. When Burma was fighting Kuomintang Chinese, the army started to form Brigades but senior colonels led them. Then in the 60s Burma army started to form light infantry divisions (LID), combining the existing brigades. The first division created was LID 77 and led by Col Tint Shwe. Coincidentally, Khin Nyunt who became the military intelligence chief was Tint Shwe's aide-de- camp. After LID 77, LID 88 was formed and was expanded to 10 LIDs. LIDs were the key offensive divisions that led military offensive or campaigns against main opponents such as Burma Communist party forces in the North and the Karen National Union (KNU) forces. In addition, the Burma army has extra divisions but they are secondary to these LIDs, which are similar to "A" level and "B" level formation of China's People Liberation army.

In current formation, Brigadier generals lead divisions. Above the Division commanders are Regional Commanders with the rank of major generals. Regional commanders acted simultaneously as Governors also. Above the rank of Regional commanders are members of SPDC members where most of them are at the rank of Lt Generals. There are four Operational Bureau chiefs within the SPDC who are supposed to supervise Regional commanders.

So it is no surprise that the selected few who reached the rank of Divisional & Regional commanders and SPDC members are the core of ruling elites who rule the country. And the most important meeting of "Commanders" is held every 4 months (Jan, May, and Sep). Usually, there is a rotation every 3 to 4 years where the generals are promoted. After serving as regional commanders for 3 to 4 years, most of them are assigned to cabinet, sub-cabinet (for Divisional Commanders) and other positions where they were allowed to enrich themselves and later retired to make way for younger generations. During Ne Win era, Ne Win was the only one left at the top while all his lieutenants were removed, recycled or retired. In the same manner only Than Shwe, Mg Aye and Khin Nyunt were left at the top while all other generals are retired or removed after certain years of service. Until Khin Nyunt was removed on October 2004, the trio ruled at head of State Law & Order Council (SLOC), which later was renamed as State Peace & Development Council (SPDC).

#### The Balance of Power & Transition Period

In the Burma army, the selected few who made into command positions in the fighting divisions became the power base for top generals. Other components of the armed forces are pretty much in secondary positions. Ne Win never trusted both Navy and Air Force so he never properly armed these sections of the armed forces. Both Navy and Air Force have significantly grown under SPDC rule but compared to the army they are much less in numbers and influence.

When the 1988 uprising pushed the trio to the top, many of the commanders in key positions were not their selection. Ne Win selected all or most of them from the three power groups surrounding him. So in the early days of State Law and Order Council (SLORC) many of the regional commanders were very powerful. Also among the army officials there was a competition among officials who graduated from Defense Service Academy (DSA), Burma's West Point, and others who joined the army or moved up the ranks thru Officer Training School (OTS). So right below the level of these three ruling generals there was a group of unruly and very powerful generals, namely, Kyaw Ba, Htun Kyi and Tin Oo. Than Shwe was commander-in-chief of Burma armed forces, Mg Aye was deputy commander-in-chief and chief of army. Khin Nyunt was Secretary 1 of SLORC or better known as S1. Tin Oo was S2. All of these Generals moved up the rank from Divisional and Regional commanders except for Khin Nyunt.

Within the Burma armed forces, Military Intelligence is a separate pillar of power and there is an intense competition and hatred among normal infantry officials towards military intelligence officers. During the BSPP era, General Tin Oo (nick name 'bespectacled') who was the second most powerful man after Ne Win was a military intelligence chief who was also Joint Secretary General of BSPP party. General Tin Oo filled most of the governmental and many of the party positions with his trusted aides and he was preparing to take over if and when Ne Win passed away. He became a threat and Ne Win removed him and his followers purged. During this transition within the military intelligence there was a big gap in

efficiency. An assassination attempt on South Korean President by North Korean agents occurred during the South Korean President state visit to Burma. Ne Win was raging mad and asked his subordinates to look for a reliable replacement for military intelligence chief and Khin Nyunt was selected. During the 1988 uprising, it was Khin Nyunt who executed the orders from the old fox Ne Win, who created chaos and division among the civilian opposition and gave the orders for a second military coup.

Among the ruling trio of SLORC generals, Khin Nyunt was Ne Win's eyes and ears as usual and who was carrying the torch by proxy. On his own, due to the competition between infantry officers and military intelligence officers, Khin Nyunt would not have any support but it was the old man Ne Win's clout that propelled him to take a place at the top as S1.

Who is the Fox?

When the military junta had only \$30 million in the foreign reserves, it was Khin Nyunt who gave sanctuary to the notorious drug lords in Rangoon and probably survived on money laundering business. It was also Khin Nyunt who negotiated with the Ethnic rebels for a ceasefire in exchange for limited autonomy and exploitation of natural resources in their territories. It was also Khin Nyunt who dealt with the Chinese for their strong support. Khin Nyunt created an office called Office of Special Services (OSS) where he recruited many intellectuals and smart officers who can speak good English and started PR campaigns to polish the image of the junta and to formulate foreign policy.

In the early 90s' when Daw Suu was being recognized on the global stage and the sanction fever was getting high with the Nobel Peace Prize award winning for the Daw Suu, Khin Nyunt and his gang were working hard to counter the pressure points that were heading towards SPDC. Thailand and Burma had a long history where Burmese kings invaded Thailand whenever they were strong and there was a general mistrust between the two countries. It was a long established policy of Thailand to keep the Ethnic rebels alive along Thai-Burma border to act as buffer zones. Khin Nyunt wooed his powerful military counter parts who were in control of Thai politics with many business concessions. He also worked on powerful leaders of ASEAN and worked hard for ASEAN to adopt the infamous "Constructive Engagement" policy. At the same time, he allowed some Chinese listening posts in the Andaman Sea and scared the Indian generals and used this National Security card with Chinese Threat and started secret talks with the Indian military officers. It took eight years for the Burmese to convince the Indian government through the Indian military and finally Indian government changed their foreign policy towards Burma, in spite the Defense Minister was a strong supporter for Burma Democratic struggle.

Khin Nyunt's policy was to create a strong regional "Triangulation" with strong support from China, India and ASEAN to counter Western sanctions led by United States. In the mean time, Burma even created relationship with South Africa by buying military equipment. Even though United States officials, especially the Congressional leaders, snubbed his military-intelligence-turned-diplomats regularly at

diplomatic functions, Khin Nyunt kept smiling and extended his friendship towards United States. OSS officials befriended some Western & ASEAN academics and intellectuals and invited them regularly to Rangoon and promoted his Constructive Engagement policy.

Khin Nyunt was not only busy engaging in the foreign relations front, he was also instrumental in the early domestic battles to curb the influence and powers of other powerful generals. Potential rival Kyaw Ba and his supporters were at first moved up from powerful regional commander positions to cabinet positions and later removed for corruption. S2 Tin Oo died from helicopter crash. Before, there was a bomb explosion that killed his daughter. Khin Nyunt consolidated his power and acted much like a free agent within SPDC only because he received a strong support from Ne Win. Even though Ne Win was out of day-to-day administration and semi-retired, his clout, influence and image within the Burmese army was significant.

While Khin Nyunt was basically running many of the governmental functions, Mg Aye protected his turf within the army. Basically, Khin Nyunt had free reign within the government functions and Mg Aye ran the day-to-day operation of the army. So what was Than Shwe doing all this time? There was a short story in Burmese where two beavers were fighting for the fish and cunning fox came into their argument and gave the head to one and the tail to the other and he got away with the middle which was best part of the fish. In Burmese, we called this "A-lei-thar-sar" meaning 'eating the middle' or outfoxing the two competitors and running away with the best results. Later, it would become clear that Than Shwe was the fox who gained the most from fierce competition between Mg Aye and Khin Nyunt. These two powerful men genuinely could not stand each other. So when Mg Aye had an edge and was able to replace Khin Nyunt's man from any important position, Than Shwe would fill with his man and the same for the replacement of Mg Aye's men. It took more than a decade for Than Shwe to fill critical positions with his men before he started to exert his power. In the early days of the junta, Than Shwe acted as though he was not hungry for power and lowered his expectation, especially in the eyes of Ne Win. Being able to downgrade one's image and lowered expectation under the watchful eyes of a dictatorship was an art form.

### Downfall of Ne Win

Because the military was fighting for survival from 1988 uprising, Ne Win did not vet properly both with Than Shwe and Mg Aye in their personnel selections. Also there was big gap within the military intelligence apparatus at the time after the removal of Brigadier General Tin Oo (MI chief) and Khin Nyunt was just learning the ropes under the tutelage of Ne Win. Just like Nikita Khrushchev was bitter about Stalin's excesses but dared not speak out during Stalin's time, both Than Shwe and Mg Aye disliked the old man Ne Win within their hearts but dare not speak out. Ne Win outlived not only his contemporaries but also many of his trusted aides. As he grew older he spent more time on Buddhism and meditation and lost touch to some extent with ruling generals.

Ne Win had six kids from his several marriages but he had a habit of picking his favorites. From his previous marriages, Ngwe Soe was his favorite son. Daw Khin May Than was his favorite and most influential wife who died early with cancer. Among the kids he had with Daw Khin May Than, Sandar Win was Ne Win's favorite and most influential daughter. Sandar has 3 sons and two of them were extremely wild and notorious like Qusay and Uday, notorious sons of Saddam Hussein. They also had a gang called "Scorpion" and were getting out of control with the protection from military intelligence. They were becoming a real menace to the ruling military clique. One of the rumors was that the Sandar's second son harassed Mg Aye's only daughter. Provoking Than Shwe hidden grudges against the old man, Mg Aye and Than Shwe plotted against Ne Win.

In 2002, Sandar's husband was arrested along with his sons and a few generals for plotting a coup d'état and they put Ne Win and Sandar under house arrest. Later, the sons and father were sentenced to death and the ruling generals used this as a triumph card to check any officer who still may have some loyalty towards the old man. Khin Nyunt was said to be unaware of the plan and was confronted just before the arrest to join the junta in their plot against Ne Win or be arrested. Khin Nyunt saved his skin by complying with the wish of the other two top generals. Not long after his house arrest, Ne Win, once the dominant dictator who brought this dreadful dictatorship to Burma, passed away--down and out and a broken man. He was buried unceremoniously with only Sandar and a few others present.

#### Downfall of Khin Nyunt

With the death of the old dictator, Khin Nyunt lost his mentor and savoir. With the mishap at Depayin, where government directed thugs attacked DASSK convoy and nearly killed her, there came uproar of protest from every corner of the world. When it became overwhelming, Than Shwe promoted Khin Nyunt to Prime Minister and later announced their 7 steps roadmap for Democracy to cool the anger of the world and to buy time. Khin Nyunt was not involved in the planning of Depayin and when told at the last minute, he objected. Than Shwe overruled him and the man who was in charge was Soe Win who was then S2, the most powerful position after the ruling trio. Soe Win is now Prime Minister.

Only after the death of Ne Win, both Than Shwe and Mg Aye could come out of the shadow of Ne Win, but they are still distrustful of Khin Nyunt. That's why they still kept Sandar (Ne Win's daughter) under house arrest and kept the death sentence of her husband and the kids as an insurance policy.

One of the techniques used by Burmese military for control is reading telexes for orders. Mg Aye read all the orders concerning with the military and Khin Nyunt read all the orders concerning with the government. Because this is a military junta, Regional Commanders are also Governors taking dual responsibilities. In reality they are warlords with absolute power within their region.

As the military intelligence apparatus became larger, it was natural that the vetting process became somewhat loosened. One of the functions of military intelligence was to take charge of immigration and border guards. One of the prime positions for military officials was to get control of the key border stations where they could collect illegal toll (tax) from traders. Since this function falls under Military intelligence many of Khin Nyunt followers became rich fat cats and it was an envy for infantry officers under the control of Mg Aye. There was a military intelligence officer in charge at the border post at Muse, which was a border town with China, who was getting out of hand with corruption. Mg Aye's officers surrounded the city and arrested the corrupted officers and found drugs and other illegal stuff in his possession.

Right under the eyes of the military intelligence, Mg Aye's people had secretly formed counter intelligence groups within the military to keep an eye on the military intelligence personals. The arrest at Muse led to other people and the army brought the corrupted officials back to Mandalay. This incident was a great shock and concern for military intelligence community. To protect themselves, Khin Nyunt ordered his most senior and trusted people for a meeting.

Usually, there was a fierce competition between infantry soldiers and military intelligence people. Khin Nyunt had a reputation for being a workaholic and a smart politician and intellect and had earned respect from some military quarters, namely navy and air force officials. Khin Nyunt was also able to woo some divisional commanders. Copying the techniques from Ne Win, Than Shwe placed Maj Gen Kyaw Win as second in command for military intelligence.

One of the techniques used since Ne Win days was to keep a file on everyone and charge them with corruption and remove them when the men seemed suspicious. Naturally, military intelligence kept the files on everyone. Agriculture minister and ex-Regional commander Myint Aung was removed at the cabinet meeting when Khin Nyunt opened the file and accused him of several corruption cases. Again, another Regional Commander Myint Aung (known as Min Thar Myint Aung) was accused and removed, this time by Lt Gen Win Myint, then S3 (secretary 3 of SPDC). It was known that Myint Aung was a rising star and one of the closet protégé of Maung Aye, and in direct competition with Shwe Mann who was Than Shwe trusted man and whom Than Shwe promoted to be deputy to Mg Aye to keep an eye on his own deputy. So it was a known practiced to accuse someone from these files and it was an open secret of the existence of these personal files. Khin Nyunt ordered his people to prepare the files of his enemies to protect themselves if they are accused of corruption. Military intelligence officials were no doubt thoroughly corrupted but relatively on SPDC generals scale, Khin Nyunt was only mildly corrupted. He was more interested in power than wealth. There are two types of cabinet meetings: regular cabinet meeting and a monthly Combined Cabinet meeting where SPDC members joined the cabinet members.

There are two conflicting reports what happen next. One source says that Mg Aye counter intelligence guys had bugged the military facilities where Khin Nyunt convened the meeting. Khin Nyunt people had

no knowledge of it. Mg Aye people ordered their bugging devices not thru the proper channel thru the government acquisition process but thru their business tycoons. Another source, still sympathetic and loyal to his old boss, says that it was Maj Gen Kyaw Win who exaggerated and reported that many Divisional and Regional Commanders will be affected and can lead to coup de'tat.

In any case, learning of this meeting initiated by Khin Nyunt, Mg Aye and his people went into high gear to plan for the ouster of Khin Nyunt, obviously with Than Shwe consent.

Another reason may be that because Khin Nyunt controlled the government apparatus, Khin Nyunt self promote himself aggressively flooding the newspaper with his photos and stories domestically. Internationally, Khin Nyunt's OSS people and his international supporters of academic, think tanks and government officials has been openly promoting the idea that Khin Nyunt was the solution for Burma in place of DASSK. Khin Nyunt was the darling of ASEAN leaders and some Western diplomats. Every dictator hates when their subordinates attracts so much attention. It is considered as a threat. In addition, Ne Win placed Khin Nyunt at the top so Than Shwe never trusted Khin Nyunt. Normally under dictatorship, intelligence (chief) must only be a tool and could not be a threat or a competition to the ruler.

Khin Nyunt was met at the airport by Myint Shwe, the powerful Rangoon commander and taken to General HQ and Shwe Mann reported about the decision to remove him, asked for his pistol and sent to his house arrest. Before Khin Nyunt was arrested at the airport, troops from LID 11 (responsible for capital security) and Rangoon Command raided, searched and arrested all the key intelligence offices under the Military Intelligence known as Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence, or OCMI. (Before it was known as Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI)).

Later, Than Shwe and Mg Aye disbanded the entire structure of Military Intelligence and placed Major General Myint Shwe, who is also the Commander of Rangoon Command and the trusted aided of Than Shwe to take charge of Intelligence. Myint Swe is rebuilding the Intelligence Service with 15 Lt Colonels under him, but many of the Criminal and other services are now handed back to Police. This is the first time in modern Burmese military history that Infantry officers have Military Intelligence under their complete control. All along, Ne Win appointed these Intelligence officers and had been used frequently to check and put Infantry officers in line. There are indications that Than Shwe and his company did not want Military Intelligence to become a rival institution again, and trying to rebuild with caution. Two ex OCMI officials, ex Maj Gen Kyaw Win and Brig General Kyaw Thein, are now working as Consultants for Lt Gen Myint Swe. With the removal of Khin Nyunt, Ne Win era has officially ended.

New Competition

It has been nearly 16 years that this trio of generals had ruled Burma and Than Shwe skillfully played Mg Aye against Khin Nyunt. Now with Khin Nyunt out of the picture, the struggle is now between the two senior generals. (Than Shwe title is Senior General, which is equivalent to Field Marshall or American 5 stars general and Mg Aye is Vice Senior General)

Soon, it became evident that there is a fierce competition to place each loyal official in key critical positions. Normally, rotation for generals takes place every 3 to 4 years during the most important meeting: Regular Commanders Meeting. In a normal circumstance, divisional commanders will be promoted to Regional commanders and those who do not make it will be promoted to Cabinet and sub-cabinet positions. There was a cabinet shake up after the purge of Khin Nyunt but in a very unusual move, regional commanders were rotated between different regions instead of promoting up for cabinet positions or SPDC member positions. And this indicates that Than Shwe and Mg Aye could not reach a compromise. Myint Shwe is carrying dual responsibilities as intelligence chief and Rangoon Command commander. It is an open secret that there must be a replacement for Rangoon command so Myint Shwe can rebuild the intelligence apparatus. But the 3 most senior and possible replacements are from Mg Aye camp so Than Shwe will not allow the replacement to proceed.

Why is Rangoon command so important?

There are 3 critical positions that any conspirator must win over to stage any coup d'état against Than Shwe. They are:

- (1) Rangoon Commander
- (2) Commander of LID 11 (responsible for Rangoon security)
- (3) Commandant of General HQ

LID 11 is one of the notorious and critical LIDs responsible for the security of the capital. LID 22 was used in suppressing many uprising such as 1988 uprising.

LID 11 Commander is Brigadier General Hla Htay Win who is the trusted aide of Mg Aye. If Rangoon command fell into Mg Aye hands Than Shwe will become very insecure. There is a possibility that Than Shwe will postpone for Rangoon Command replacement until the move of General HQ is completed to Pyinmana.

There are rumors that LID 11 will be moved to the new Capital, Pyinmana for its security. A new Military region was formed, known as "Naypyidaw Region". Nay-pyi-daw means Capital and its new commander is Brig Gen Tin Ngwe, from a new generation who graduated from DSA in 1981 (Intake22). Tin Ngwe is known to be a protégé of General Shwe Mann. If LID 11 is moved to Pyinmana, the next logical move is to move LID 22 for Rangoon security. Also, the newly appointed LID 22 commander was the commander of one of the 4 military regions under Rangoon Command.

Also, a few weeks after the move to Pinyinana, a new Chief of Bureau of Special Operation was created within SPDC with the responsibility over Rangoon division. No one has been appointed yet, but it is assumed that Lt General Myint Swe will join SPDC as a new member taking this newly created post.

At this writing, Mg Aye has an edge of one or two Regional commanders in his camp. Many of the critics in the Opposition camp enjoyed attacking Than Shwe as stupid and Mg Aye as a drunkard because of their hatred for these generals, but many had basically little information on them. Both of them are very rough and tough street-smart guys. They have clearly outmaneuvered the most intelligent and intellectual member, Khin Nyunt, by sticking to their street-smart techniques. When Than Shwe placed Kyaw Win and Shwe Mann as deputies to Khin Nyunt and Mg Aye, none could complain but Mg Aye was able to outsmart Shwe Mann but Khin Nyunt could not.

Day-to-day operation of the Burma armed forces is in Mg Aye hands and one of the key positions is Brigadier General - General Staff (BGGs). Mg Aye gave his instructions and orders thru his BGGs. To check on Mg Aye, Than Shwe created a new post, Joint Chief of Staff, and placed Shwe Mann between Mg Aye and his army commanders. But Mg Aye skillfully bypassed Shwe Mann and gave direct orders to his BGGs. His current BGGs is none other than LID 11 commander Brig Gen Hla Htay Win. Myint Shwe also served in BGGs position before. The Burma army followed the U.S. model, unlike the European model, and did not have a separate career path for General Staff officers but rotate them between G.S. and infantry commanding positions. Than Shwe is no fool. Although he is removed from day-to-day operation of the government and military he is carefully watching and monitoring the dynamics and association of his generals who hold key positions. It is strange, because he is the head of state as the head of SPDC and he is Commander in chief of Burma armed forces and he is also his own Defense Minister, supposed to be serving under his Prime Minister who is his subordinate. This arrangement shows how important who controls the military under military dictatorship.

There is some gap that Than Shwe may have missed and may have affect in the long run.

The most important stage for Burmese military officers whether they may survive and move to the ruling circle is at the Lt Colonel (grade 1) level. This is the level where they have their own command to lead a regiment and learn tactical skills and have a chance to show their ability and valor. It is an unwritten understanding that anyone who wanted to reach the top must have a battle/command experience. One of reasons that infantry officers looked down on military intelligence officers was that they had no battlefield/command experience. Both, generals Tin Oo and Khin Nyunt, two most powerful intelligence chiefs in Burma army history and their top officers had no significant battlefield experience. Both Than Shwe and Mg Aye rose from LIDs commands. (88 and 77 respectively). Shwe Mann received his "Thura" medal fighting the Karens. Thura is similar to either German "Iron Cross" or American "Purple Heart" medals. Vetting and selection is done at Lt. Colonel level. Once they are promoted to Colonel, most of

them went to War College for further training and would be promoted soon and given assignments at Divisional level at the Brigadier general rank. Mg Aye aide-de-comp (who committed suicide) vetted many of his colleagues for Mg Aye. At this mid-level staff, Mg Aye has the edge over Than Shwe. While Mg Aye and Khin Nyunt were competing with each other Than Shwe did not see any urgency and surrounded himself with many of his loyal generals as his staff officials but failed to spread his loyal generals at the command level. When the situation changed suddenly and Than Shwe found himself competing with his deputy, Mg Aye has an advantage of filling the command post positions with his loyal officials. The next round of rotation of generals will be a good indicator which senior general is getting ahead.

Although Than Shwe had reached this pinnacle position by chance and ambition, he had to work hard to consolidate power. He still does not have the same clout as Ne Win did during his rule. That may be the reason why Than Shwe is reluctant to retire from military and rule as a civilian President like Ne Win did.

Than Shwe knows very well that 1990 election legitimacy is the key hurdle for them and this legitimacy is the basic foundation for the existence of National League for Democracy (NLD) and prolonging the hope for DASSK. SPDC leaders know only too well that they could use the playbook of Cambodia Prime Minister Han Sen who won the election under the eyes of UN auspicious because he had both military and the police under his control. Han Sen won the election by intimidation. But then why didn't Than Shwe de-legitimize the 1990 election by holding another election? Because he does not have Ne Win's clout and he has not placed his chosen heir firmly in control. Once he lost the direct control of the army commanders by giving up his military post, Mg Aye could replace him. He will leave his military position only if and only if Mg Aye can be persuaded to become Vice President, leaving the army in Shwe Mann's control.

Manipulating on DASSK weakness

Burma ruling generals have carefully studied DASSK and have found weaknesses that they know they could exploit.

(1) Oxford Idealism

Daw Suu was born in Burma and definitely has strong roots there but her formative years were spent in foreign lands. In the opinion of some, she is basically a westerner when it comes to intellectual thinking. Her father, General Aung San fought his political battles in the trenches in Burma right from his student days and learned about raw Burmese politics, dynamics, and intersection of political ideologies, Buddhism and cultural influences. Most importantly Bo Aung San knew most of all the players and their characters. So General Aung San was very practical and knew how to adapt to changing environment. Daw Suu is a quick learner but she was not rich in experience when she entered politics and the main disadvantage was that she did not know the players beforehand. She was suddenly injected by chance, opportunity and fate into Burmese political scene.

## (2) Savior like Jesus

Like Jesus who died for all the sins of mankind, Daw Suu has the courage to suffer for all but she is somewhat reluctant to sacrifice her followers. Her Oxford idealism seem to influence her and when she adopted "Non Violence" mentality and standing strong on this moral ground, it weakened her ability to confront the generals and to sacrifice her people, especially the young if necessary.

July 19th 1989 was one of the defining moments.

July 19th was Martyr's day for Burma. It was the day General Aung San and his cabinet members were assassinated. Daw Suu called for marching to martyr mausoleum and the army was well prepared for confrontation and there would definitely be bloodshed. But this was just a year after the 1988 uprising and army was still regrouping from the shock they received from 1988 uprising. People were still angry and if the army decided to shoot there would be bloodshed but this confrontation could lead to another uprising and downfall of the generals. Her mother instinct may have influenced her. But for whatever reasons: She called off the march.

This incident was cited when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The difference from General Aung San was that General Aung San was not only ready to sacrifice himself, he was willing to sacrifice his followers, especially the young because it is always the younger generation in every country who bear the brunt for the country when in crises. Many of the best, brightest, and bravest sons of Burma, gave their lives when General Aung San and his colleagues chose armed confrontation with the British and the Japanese for Burma's Independence.

General Eisenhower visited the 82nd airborne division before the night of D Day invasion because he knew 35% of these young Americans would not be coming home. But it was part of the war and in war one cannot avoid sacrifices and dead, especially the young because they were the ones at the front of the battles. If a leader has a strong desire to win, one must send the young to the battlefield. There is no other choice.

Without willing to sacrifice the young, it is very difficult to provoke "CONFRONTATION". The Generals are very aware of this weakness. SPDC generals know how to exploit the good-heartedness of the leader, the lady.

### Time & Space

SPDC generals know the weakness of the Opposition.

SPDC generals know Opposition is based entirely on Daw Suu personality.

So they arrested Daw Suu and arrested other potential leaders and closed the "SPACE", political space entirely. Then they stretched the TIME and now it is 16 years.

After 16 years, Opposition exists only in name and it has no strength to effectively overthrow the generals. If they can stretch another 10 years, Daw Suu will be in her 70s and many of the NLD leaders at the top, known collectively as "UNCLES" will be gone and the Opposition will become somewhat irrelevant. Some sources are saying that current plan for implementing SPDC Discipline Democracy thru National Convention process is 10 to 20 years.

#### 4 CUTS

The British military introduced this 4 cuts system in fighting the Communist guerrillas in Malaysian jungles after WW II. The technique was to encircle the enemy and cut off supplies, support and the people aiding the communists and close the circle slowly. The Burmese army adopted this technique from the British and not only applied it successfully on the Burmese Communists, they perfected and mastered it because they could add ruthlessness to the process.

After applying the military 4 Cuts on the battlefield successfully, Burmese generals are applying the same techniques as Political 4 cuts strategy on the Opposition. This is the same technique that they have applied successfully on Razali Ismail by refusing any requests for an entry to Burma, frustrating the UN envoy until he quit recently.

#### Battle Plans

Like every military, SPDC has written several battle plans and had practiced several war-games scenario for the battle with Opposition.

Burmese generals know very well that they cannot afford another uprising.

They control the population by planting informers and requiring the public to register any visitors to any localities. There are approximately 30,000 informers with nearly 10,000 military intelligence handlers before Khin Nyunt's military intelligence was purged.

SPDC also created Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a grass roots organization to check on Burmese population. According to official accounts there are 22 million members at the USDA organization. Burma's population is only 55 millions. Than Shwe is the patron for USDA.

#### Conclusion

In the Western way of Intellectual thinking there are many gray areas with several shades. Not for the Burmese generals.

They think relatively simply as a soldier. They think simply as "offensive" and "defensive". If they think they are winning, they will bully the opponents and proceed and if they think they are losing they will buy time and negotiate for better battleground. This is the basic thinking of SPDC generals in typical soldier manner.

They are very street smart and because they have been in power for 43 years since 1962 they understand the meaning and effectiveness of "raw power".

Based on their "raw thinking" and utilizing the "raw power" effectively with cunning and ruthlessness, SPDC generals maintain and extend their Military Rule.

But they are not invincible. There are cracks within the Burmese Army. Knowing and understanding them is the first step.

#### Burmese Military Personals in this article

Name Rank & History Status

Aung San Major General

Founder of Burma army. Leader of Thirty Comrades

Father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK) Assassinated

Ne Win General

Leader of the coup in 1962 and father of military dictatorship.

Ruled the country with a strong hand. Finally lost control of the army in 2002 and died under house arrest the next year. Deceased

Than Shwe Senior General

Chairman of ruling SPDC, the Burmese military junta

Commander in chief of Armed Forces In power

Mg Aye Vice Senior General

Deputy Chairman of SPDC

Deputy Commander in chief of Armed Forces

Commander-in-chief of the Army In power

Khin Nyunt General, Former Prime Minister, Chief of Military Intelligence, Secretary (1) of SPDC  
Under house  
Arrest

Shwe Mann General, Joint Chief of staff Member of SPDC. Trusted aide of Than Shwe. Potential  
Successor to Than Shwe  
Considered 3rd in ranking In power

Soe Win General, Prime Minister  
The one who led the Depayin attack on Daw Suu In power

Thein Sein Lt. General, S(1) of SPDC. Also Adjutant General In power

Myint Swe Lt General, Chief of Military Intelligence  
Commander, Rangoon Command  
Trusted aide of Than Shwe In Power

Hla Hay Win Brigadier General  
Brigadier General - General Staff (BGGs)  
Commander, LID 11  
Trusted aide of Mg Aye In power

Kyaw Htin General  
Former Deputy Prime Minister  
Former Joint Secretary General of BSPP  
Former Defense Minister & Commander-in-Chief Deceased

Aye Ko General  
Former Vice President  
Former Secretary General of BSPP  
Former Deputy Commander-in-Chief Deceased

Sein Lwin Brigadier General  
Former President (end of BSPP, 1988 uprising) Deceased

Tin Oo (MI) Brigadier General  
Former Military Intelligence Chief of Ne Win  
Former Joint Secretary General of BSPP  
Purged by Ne Win Deceased

Lt General Myint Aung SLORC member, Adjutant General, Agricultural & Irrigation Minister, Regional  
Commander Deceased

Maj General Myint Aung (Min Thar) South West Regional Commander (protégé of Mg Aye) Retired

Maj Gen Kyaw Win Khin Nyunt Deputy. Deputy Chief, DDSI Retired

Brig Gen Kyaw Thein In charge of Narcotics Division under Khin Nyunt Retired

Bo Let Yar Second in Command to General Aung San (Thirty Comrades)  
Followed U Nu and led PDP in the 70s Killed in the jungles

Bo Set Kyar 3rd ranking in Seniority in Thirty Comrades Deceased

Bo Zay Ya 4th ranking in seniority in the Thirty Comrades

Joined the Communist Insurrection      Deceased

#### STATE PEACE & DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Rank    Name    Position Academy

1	Senior General Than Shwe	Chairman, SPDC	
	Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services		OTS 9
2	Vice Senior General Maung Aye	Vice Chairman, SPDC	
	Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services		
	Commander-in-Chief (Army)		DSA 1
3	General Thura Shweman	Joint Chief of Staff (Army, Navy, Air Force)	DSA 11
4	General Soe Win	Prime Minister	DSA 12
5	Lt General Thein Sein	Secretary (1), SPDC	
	Adjutant General		DSA 9
6	Lt General Ye Myint	Chief of Bureau of Special Operation (1), Kachin, Chin, Sagaing, Magwe, Mandalay	OTS 31
7	Lt General Kyaw Win	Chief of Bureau of Special Operation (2), Kayah, Shan	OTS 30
8	Lt General Khin Mg Than	Chief of Bureau of Special Operation (3) Pegu, Rangoon, Arkan, Irrawady	OTS 31
9	Lt General Mg Bo	Chief of Bureau of Special Operation (4) Karen, Mon, Tanintharyi	OTS 31
10	Lt General Thiha Thura	Tin Aung Myint Oo	Quarter Master General DSA 12
11	Lt General Tin Aye	Chief of Military Ordinance	DSA 9
12	Lt General Aung Htwe	Chief of Armed Forces Training	OTS 29

#### Regional Commanders

	Name	Region	State/Division	HQ	Military Academy
1	Lt General Myint Swe		Rangoon	Rangoon	
	12 Battalions	Mingaladon		DSA 15 (1973)	
2	Maj General Khin Zaw		Central Mandalay	& Magwe	
	17 Battalions	Mandalay		OTS (1975)	
3	Maj General Min Aung Hlaing		Triangle	Shan State (East)	
	28 Battalions	Kentung		DSA 19	
	1977				
4	Maj General Mg Mg Shwe		Coastal	Tanintharyi	
	43 Battalions	Myeik		OTS (1974)	
5	Maj General Ye Myint		Eastern Shan State	(South)	
	42 Battalions	Taunggyi		DSA 15	

(1973)

6 Maj General Khin Mg Myint Western Rakkine  
33 Battalions Aun

OTS (1974)

7 Maj General Ohn Myint Northern Kachin  
33 Battalions Myitkyina DSA 17

(1975)

8 Maj General Myint Hlaing North East Shan State (North)  
30 Battalions Lashio DSA 17

(1975)

9 Maj General Tha Aye North West Sagaing & Chin  
25 Battalions Monywa DSA 16

(1974)

10 Maj General Ko Ko South Bago  
27 Battalions Toungoo DSA 19

(1977)

11 Maj General Soe Naing South East Mon & Karen  
36 Battalions Mawlamyine DSA 17

(1975)

12 Maj General Thura Myint Aung South West Irrawady  
22 Battalions Patheingyi DSA 18

(1976)

13 Brig General Tin Ngwe Naypyidaw Pyinmana DSA 22

(1980)

Note: Naypyidaw Regional Command is a newly formed command.

#### Deputy Regional Commanders

Rangoon Brig General Wai Lwin, DSA 18

Central Brig General Nay Win, DSA 10

Triangle Brig General Wai Linn

Coastal Brig General Hong Ngaing, OTS 58

East Brig General Win Myint

West Brig General Than Tun Aung

North Brig General San Tun

North East Brig General Hla Myint, DSA 17

North West Brig General \*\*

South Brig General \*\*

South West Brig General Tint Swe

South East Brig General / Col Zaw Min (Officiating Brig General)

\*\* Cannot be confirmed yet at this writing.

#### Light Infantry Divisions

	LID	Name	HQ	State / Division
1	LID 11	Brig General Hla Htay Win	Yemon	Yangon/Rangoon
2	LID 22	Brig General / Col Kyaw Swe	Pa-an	Karen
3	LID 33	Brig General Khin Maung Tun	Sagaing	Sagaing
4	LID 44	Brig General Thet Naing Win	Thaton	Mon
5	LID 55	Brig General Thaung Htaik	Kalaw	Shan
6	LID 66	Brig General Khin Zaw Oo	Pyay	Bago
7	LID 77	Brig General Win Myint	Bago	Bago
8	LID 88	Brig General/ Col Tun Oo	Magwe	Magwe
9	LID 99	Brig General/ Col Soe Win	Meikhtila	Mandalay
10	LID 101	Brig General/ Col Maung Ohn	Pakaukku	Magwe

#### Ministry of Defense Officials

Position Name Academy/

Training

Navy

Commander-in-Chief (Navy) Vice Admiral Soe Thein DSA 13

Chief-of-Staff (Navy) Commodore Nyan Tun

Commander of Naval Dockyard Command Rear Admiral Paw Tun DSA 1

Commander of Naval Training Command HQ Captain Tin Oo (Navy)

Captain Naval Staff (Navy) Captain Thura Thet Shw (Navy)

Commander of Ayeyawady Naval Region Captain Aye Pe (Navy)

Commander of Taninthayi Naval Region Commodore Win Shein

Air Force

Commander-in-Chief (Air) Lt General Myat Hein DSA 17

Chief-of-Staff (Air)

Chief-of-Staff (Air) (Mechanical) Brig General Ye Chit Pe OTS (RIT)

Colonel General Staff (Air) Colonel Nay Win DSA 22

Colonel General Staff (Air) (Mechanical) Colonel Chan Mg OTS (RIT)

Commander of Myitkyina Air Base Brig General Zaw Tun DSA 22  
Commander of Meiktila Air Base Brig General Khin Mg Tin  
Commander of Mingaladon Air Base Brig General Zin Yaw DSA 19

#### Training

Vice Chief of Armed Forces Training Maj General Aung Kyi OTS  
National Defense College Commandant Maj General Moe Hein DSA 10  
Rector of Defense Service Academy (DSA) Brig General Nyi Tun DSA 20  
Rector of Defense Service Medical Academy Brig General Min Thein DSA 19  
Rector of Defense Service Technical Academy Brig General Win Myint  
Head Master, Officer Training School (OTS) Brig General /Col Zar Ni Win  
Head Master, Staff Collage Brig General Mya Win

#### MOD Officials

Inspector General Maj General Thein Htaik  
Judge Advocate-General Maj General Soe Maung  
Vice Adjutant General Maj General Hla Shwe  
Vice Quarter-Master General Maj General Khin Maung Tun  
Vice Quarter-Master General Maj General Htin Aung Kyaw  
Military Appointment General Maj General Hsan Hsint DSA 15  
HQ Camp Commandant Maj General Hla Aung Thein OTS  
Director, Armored Maj General Khin Mg Tint  
Director, Artillery Maj General Mya Win  
Director, Ordinance Maj General Sein Lin  
Director, Supply Maj General Than Htay  
Director, Signal Maj General Thein Tun  
Director, Garrison Engineering Maj General Tin Tun OTS (RIT)  
Director, Recruit Maj General Tin Ngwe  
Director, Medical Maj General Than Aung OTS

Note : RIT: Rangoon Institute of Technology

Only selected positions are mentioned

Source: New Light of Myanmar, and other publications and Individual sources.

#### Myanmar payback time

Heavy sentences handed down after purge of hundreds of military intelligence officers. Bertil Lintner reports

By Bertil Lintner JDW Special Correspondent, Bangkok

Criminal trials involving hundreds of military intelligence (MI) officers purged last October have begun in Myanmar, with stiff sentences handed down for followers of former prime minister and intelligence chief

General Khin Nyunt. The purge is the most sweeping since 1983, when then intelligence chief Brigadier General Tin Oo was ousted along with his followers. Gen Khin Nyunt then became head of MI and built up the organisation to become the state's most powerful institution.

Domestic intelligence was prioritised in Myanmar following widespread pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988 which almost toppled the regime. By 1991, the number of intelligence companies throughout the country had been bolstered to 23, compared with 17 in 1989 and perhaps as few as 10-12 before 1988. The new intelligence units covered some of the urban areas hit by demonstrations as well as border regions abutting Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand. Signals intelligence capabilities were also considerably expanded and analysts say MI extended its reach to monitor Gen Khin Nyunt's rivals within the armed forces.

The former MI chief came to command what nearly amounted to a parallel government and it is this institution which is now being dismantled. Foreign observers in Yangon say the crackdown involves up to 3,500 personnel countrywide, including some 300 senior officers. The remainder are junior officers, other ranks, informants and other subordinates. The overall figure roughly mirrors the number of prisoners pardoned in the aftermath of Gen Khin Nyunt's ousting on 19 October 2004. Most were petty criminals, but some had been held for political crimes.

Analysts caution against assertions in some media reports that the purge resulted from a power struggle between the "pragmatic" Gen Khin Nyunt and hardliners around the two top leaders of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), junta chairman Senior General Than Shwe and Deputy Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) Vice-Senior General Maung Aye.

These reports contend that Gen Khin Nyunt favoured a dialogue with the leader of Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since May 2003. Gen Than Shwe and Gen Maung Aye were said to be opposed. Analysts argue that Gen Khin Nyunt was smoother in his dealings with foreigners but his MI apparatus was the SPDC's primary instrument of repression against the pro-democracy movement. A more plausible explanation for the split, they say, is that Khin Nyunt and his MI followers had accumulated significant wealth through involvement in a wide range of commercial enterprises. This group, like Brig Gen Tin Oo's circle before it, was building a state within the state and not sharing its wealth with the regular military leadership.

An example of this commercial activity is the involvement of Gen Khin Nyunt's youngest son, Ye Naing Win, in Myanmar's only internet service provider, Bagan Cybertech. This company leased transponder capacity in a multi-million-dollar deal with Shin Satellite Plc, a company controlled by the family of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Other businessmen with MI connections benefited from the cross-border trade with China and Thailand. Some, intelligence sources say, had a hand in the region's lucrative illicit drug trade. Gen Khin Nyunt's whereabouts are unknown, but his son was arrested and Bagan Cybertech taken over by the military. One of the former MI chief's closest associates, Brig Gen Thein Swe, recently received a prison sentence of 152 years.

Brig Gen Thein Swe, an air force officer and former defence attache to Thailand, was involved in a number of businesses with Thai entrepreneurs. His son, Sonny Swe, was deputy chief executive officer of Myanmar Consolidated Media, publisher of the English-language weekly newspaper Myanmar Times. Sonny Swe has reportedly been sentenced to 14 years in prison for violating censorship laws and the Myanmar Times is now effectively controlled by the army.

In another blow to the former MI clique, the government announced on 1 April that operating licences have been withdrawn for Myanmar Mayflower Bank and Asia Wealth Bank. Some observers interpreted this as a move against money-laundering, as both banks have drawn US accusations that they are at least partly controlled by known drug traffickers. More likely, sources say, is that they were shut because of links to the purged MI officers. Depositors will be permitted to reclaim their funds, the government announced, but are required to personally contact the banks. This suggests that funds belonging to people now in custody will be taken over by the state.

Against this backdrop, it is unlikely that the pro-democracy dialogue issue arose when Gen Than Shwe and Gen Maung Aye decided to move against Gen Khin Nyunt. Both the former are following the same political path as did the former MI chief when he was prime minister: the writing of a new constitution by a hand-picked assembly of some elected and mostly non-elected representatives in preparation for some kind of referendum followed by elections to a national assembly firmly under military control.

The purge has, meanwhile, left a vacuum in a country where the internal security apparatus is an important instrument of state control. Currently, the police special branch has seen its power expanded. In the longer term, analysts expect that Gen Maung Aye will build a new MI organisation that should be controlled more directly by the armed forces supreme command.

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