

BURMA

Let's Make a Deal, Says Ne Win

Furtively, the half dozen students rammed a bamboo pole into the ground edging a Rangoon street. A piece of cloth tied to the staff fluttered defiantly. The youngsters prepared to make a speech, but there was no time. A patrolling military truck was trundling towards them. The students swiftly melted into nearby houses and by-lanes. One took refuge in a hardware store, silently watching the troopers bring down the pole and break it into pieces. When a lieutenant asked on-lookers where the demonstrators had gone, nobody seemed to know. In recent weeks, such lightning gatherings by anti-government students have become a frequent occurrence in the capital. Often the young people have only enough time to hoist a pole before the soldiers arrive.

But for many Burmese, whose resentment of the ruling junta has been contained by armed force, even that simple act has become a symbol of protest.

Rangoon's streets have not filled with massive, pro-democracy rallies since the Sept. 18 military coup by Gen. Saw Maung. But though the country has limped towards a semblance of normalcy, Ne Win, the autocrat who ruled for 26 years and is widely considered to be still in control, was said to be seeking a way out. Sources in Rangoon and Bangkok told Asiaweek that Ne Win had held two meetings in early October with ex-premier U Nu, leader of the dissident League for Democracy and Peace (LDP). The purpose, as one source put it: to "discuss in confidence several subjects, including safe passage for himself and his colleagues to a third country."

During the private tête-à-têtes at his luxurious Rangoon villa, the longtime strongman offered to transfer power to an interim government headed by U Nu in return for amnesty for himself and his cronies. Ye Kyaw Thu, secretary-general of the Washington-based Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma, added that he had information that Ne Win wanted U Nu to assume the prime ministership and then install him as president. "Ne Win will then propose elections under a new timetable, resign because of failing health before they are held, and gain some respect before taking leave," explained Ye Kyaw Thu, now in Bangkok. "As things stand now, no foreign country would accept a man of such ill repute."

An LDP official in Rangoon, who

said U Nu was "in seclusion," insisted that no discussions had taken place. In any case, the sources said no agreement was reached. But even if U Nu accepted such terms, experts reckoned it was unlikely that an amnesty for Ne Win and other top leaders would be made public immediately. They said it could unleash rioting in the streets, a situation that would topple an U Nu government. "The military would stage a coup again, and the country would be back to where it was before the transfer," observed a former Burmese politician in Rangoon. A better strategy, he said, would be to let Ne Win leave the country before forming an interim government, and wait several months before officially awarding him amnesty.

Other deals were also reportedly being discussed with

validity of the promised polls. But there seemed to be no dearth of political parties. By last week, 46 organisations had registered with the elections commission. The cacophony of opposition voices has disheartened some Burmese. "They are confused and upset at everybody forming parties and are looking for selfless leaders like [resistance hero] Aung San," explained a Bangkok-based compatriot.

The recent rush to sign up may not be political opportunism alone. Of late, executive committee members of political groupings have been entitled to an extra two gallons of petrol daily, a bonanza in a city of scarcity. Car owners were otherwise given 3-4 gallons per week. For the first time in two months, new fuel supplies are coming from the Syriam refinery, which recently began operating at about half capacity.



Signing up for a political party; (inset) U Nu: An offer of power for amnesty

Photos: Dominic Faulder

U Nu. An Asian diplomat in Rangoon told Asiaweek that the LDP chief had reportedly been approached by officials of the National Unity Party, formerly the Burma Socialist Program Party founded by Ne Win. He said the NUP had offered to merge with the LDP if U Nu guaranteed the safety of about 1,000 core Ne Win supporters. Although the party is widely considered to be under the patronage of the government and Ne Win, the diplomat asserted that "NUP leaders are realising they won't be able to win elections unless they merge with an opposition party." Government-proposed multi-party polls are expected sometime early next year.

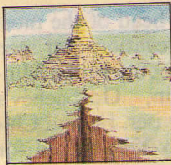
For U Nu, teaming up with the NUP would be a contradictory political move. The LDP leader had vehemently opposed the elections on the grounds that they were sponsored by a ruthless régime. Indeed, most Burmese have little faith in the

Daily life remains a grind. In Rangoon, prices of the staple rice shot up 25% last week and banking was far from normal. It took half a day in a queue to obtain a token to withdraw cash. And because each bank disburses only 400 tokens daily, sometimes it is weeks before citizens can draw out money. Most irritating to many was the ubiquitous presence of rifle-toting soldiers, who often physically and verbally abused civilians. State-run radio reported last week that security forces shot dead two persons, one of them a teenaged demonstrator. The military has also forced some 7,000 people, mainly students and unemployed youth, to work as its paid porters on anti-insurgency patrols. In practice this means walking in the vanguard of the troops through mine fields, and serving as a human shield. The standard payment for porters is 8 kyats (\$1.30) per day, but many never see any wages. ■

LETTERS

Burma Uprising

To the editors of *Asiaweek*



Truckloads of Polish police break up a gathering. Chilean police fire buckshot at demonstrators. Israeli soldiers shoot plastic bullets at West Bank

Arabs. South Korean riot police throw tear gas at students. Yugoslavian police use truncheons to disperse huge crowds.

In Burma, meanwhile, the military minions of Gen. Ne Win order soldiers to open fire with automatic weapons on peaceful demonstrators. The soldiers willingly obey, killing several thousand people all over the country in a matter of days. The street killings, arrests and summary executions continue [INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, September 30]. And the rest of the world looks on.

Ne Win's belief in his invincibility will now have been reinforced and he is bound to become more cruel and aggressive. When historians draw up a list of 20th-century tyrants, his name will surely be high above those of Pol Pot, Idi Amin and Saddam Hussein. In fact, Ne Win's record of barbarism and megalomania beats most other modern-day evildoers'. The Burmese people do not deserve this source of grief.

U KINOUNG

Waramanga, ACT, Australia

■ I have been advised by my brothers in Burma that they have successfully formed a United Friendship Organisation linking Muslims and Buddhist monks. The organisation's leaders wish all Muslim organisations and countries in the world to know that peace now exists in Burma between Buddhists and Muslims. All they need now is moral support.

In the first week of September the All Burma Muslim Maulana Association declared *jihad* [holy war] against the Ne Win socialist government (not against the Burmese Buddhists). After the recent fake coup by Gen. Saw Maung, the Burmese army deliberately assaulted the so-called Bangladeshi Quarter, one of the Muslim areas. Though it announced that eight soldiers died in that assault, the government failed to reveal how many Muslims were killed.

There are about 10 million Mus-

lims in Burma, but in all his reign, there were only nine occasions on which Ne Win let Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca. On each occasion, no more than 150 persons were allowed to go. In 1987 the number was cut to 75. So the number of Burmese *hajis* has grown by only about one thousand — in 26 years.

S.M. ZAFRUDIN

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The U.S. Bases