

TIME

AUSTRALIA



Saw Maung

Khin Nyunt

The Hang-On Gang

They lost an election, but
Burma's generals will not
surrender to democracy

U Ne Win

\$2.75

NEW CALEDONIA FP450

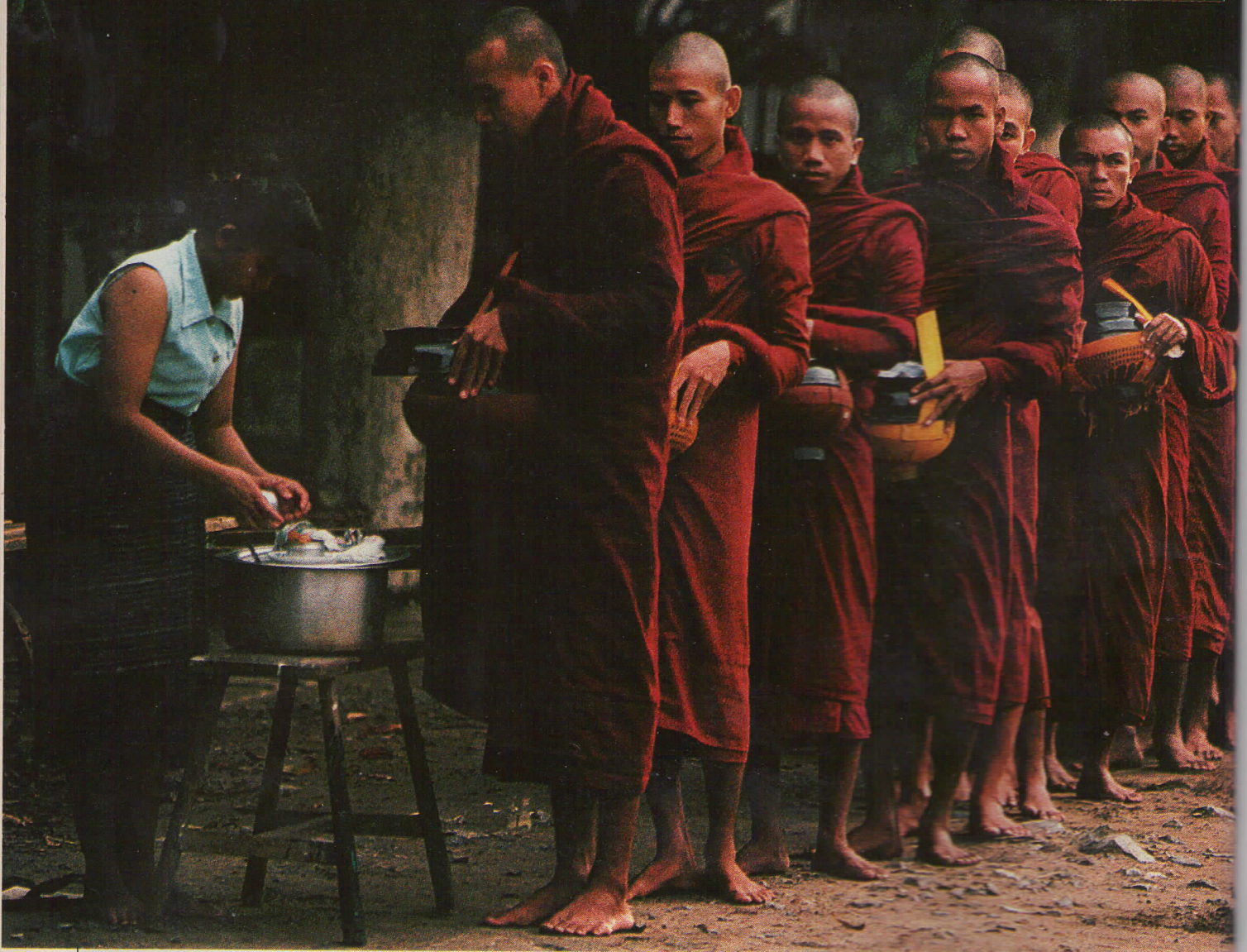
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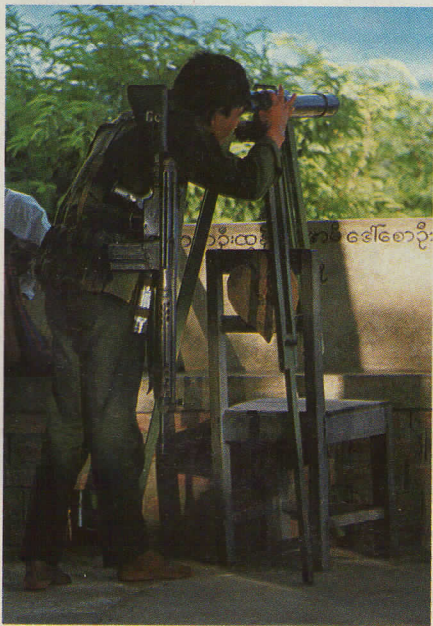


TIME/NOVEMBER 19, 1990

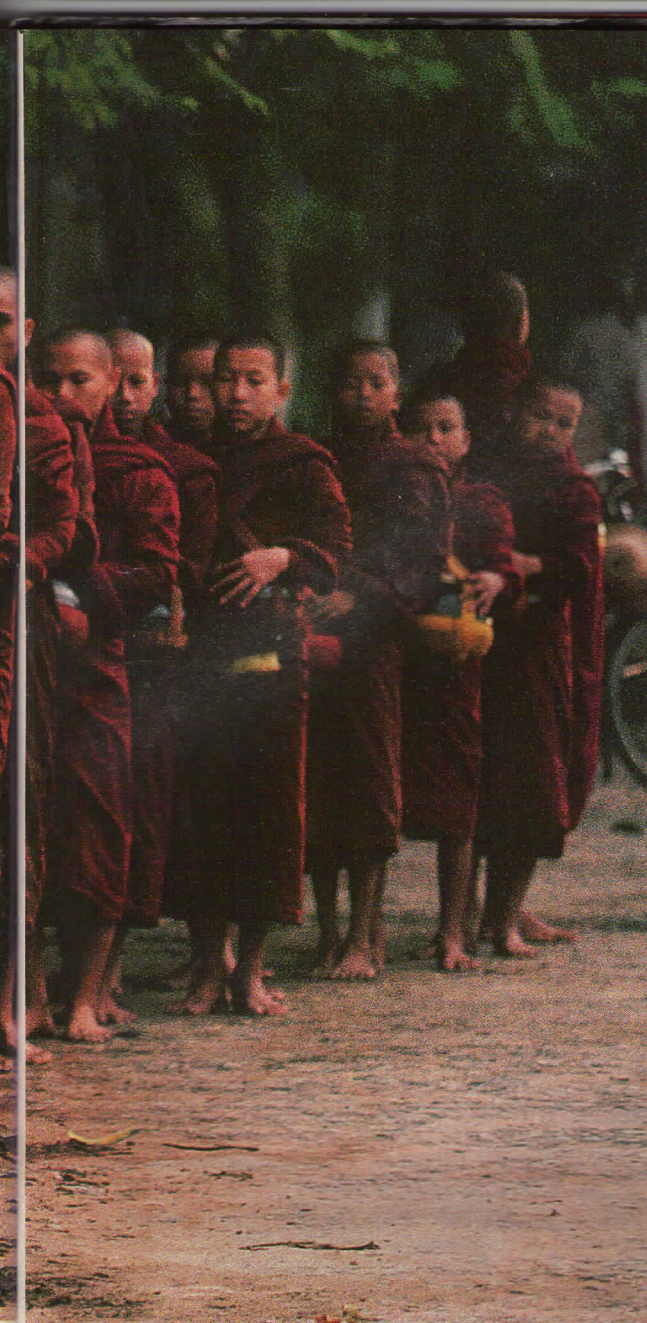
● COVER STORIES

Bullets in Alms Bowls

Burma's junta cracks down on the opposition and on defiant activist monks



A soldier looks down on Mandalay



Monks beg for food near the site of the recent rioting

snapped, as he ushered the foreigners to the gate.

Outside, more troops manned barbed-wire barricades blocking entry to other Buddhist compounds in Mandalay. It was in this city that Buddhist monks, protesting a violent encounter with riot police on the second anniversary of the Aug. 8, 1988, massacre of thousands of students in Rangoon, had refused to minister to the military. "We are under the boot," muttered a trishaw driver as he pedaled past armed soldiers at the entrance to a high school that had been a site of antigovernment protests.

Elsewhere around town, supporters of the National League for Democracy (N.L.D.), the political party that won an upset victory in National Assembly elections staged last May by the military rulers of Burma—now officially known as Myanmar—to pacify the people, whispered that soldiers had broken into party headquarters and carted away stacks of documents. "Our faces smile, but our hearts are angry," said an elderly merchant in the clamorous bazaar, glancing over his shoulder to make sure that no operatives of the dreaded military intelligence service were listening.

Angry enough that at week's end a small band of Burmese students hijacked a Rangoon-bound Thai Airways jetliner and diverted it to Calcutta, where they demanded that the Rangoon regime release imprisoned

dissidents; a few hours later they surrendered to Indian authorities. The hijack underscored the desperation of some of the regime's opponents but could not obviate the fact that after weeks of violence, the junta's stronghold on Burma was intact. Retired strongman U Ne Win remains the source of the regime's authority, though its more visible figures are the erratic Senior General Saw Maung and the military's tireless tactician, Major General Khin Nyunt. Together they hold the country hostage and the opposition in check.

In a sweeping military crackdown that began three weeks ago, an estimated 200 rebel monks, including leaders of the activist Young Monks Association, have been arrested. Hundreds more have slipped out of their monasteries and returned to their homes in the countryside, leaving more obedient superiors to deal with the army.

A simultaneous nationwide offensive by the junta against the N.L.D. has resulted in the arrests of more than 40 leaders, in-

cluding six of the 10 members of the party's central executive committee and 16 of its 392 elected members of parliament. The jailing of the opposition's most effective spokesmen ended all hope that Ne Win and the officers who have run Burma for 28 years might be willing to transfer power or at least coexist with the N.L.D. and its charismatic leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The N.L.D. won the May 1990 elections but were never allowed to govern.

Another likely casualty of the regime's reversion to the paranoia, brutality and isolation of the past, following a brief flirtation with a multiparty political system, is the tenuous open-door economic policy it launched in 1989. To modernize, Burma needs foreign aid and investment. In the wake of the elections, international lending agencies were lining up to welcome Burma into the fold of borrowing nations, and foreign businessmen were checking out the country's new investment laws.

The crackdown has eroded much of that enthusiasm. "No one will loan money to Burma until it sorts out its political situation," says a visiting World Bank official. Moreover, the regime's blatant disregard for international opinion has sparked renewed pressure from international human-rights groups that are lobbying for economic sanctions against Burma. Last week, just as an envoy of the U.N. Committee on Human Rights on a fact-finding mission was receiving a cold welcome in Rangoon, Amnesty International released a 72-page special report accusing the junta of "silencing the democratic movement" through the systematic use of terror and torture.

Burma has operated that way since 1962, when Ne Win seized power from a weak and ineffectual democratic government. For the next 26 years he charted an erratic course toward a bizarre and uniquely Burmese form of socialism that reduced the once prosperous British colony to least-developed-nation status at the very time that many of its Asian neighbors were performing economic miracles. Mounting pressure for change finally led Ne Win to resign as chairman of the Burma Socialist Program party in July 1988.

On Aug. 8, 1988, decades of suppressed rage exploded into a bloody showdown between demonstrators and the military in Rangoon. An estimated 3,000 were killed by the time stability was restored six weeks later, when the armed forces Commander in Chief, General Saw Maung, 62, set himself up as chairman of the State Law-and-Order Restoration Council, which was to govern by fiat until elections could be held.

To the amazement of the regime's critics, the May 1990 balloting was generally considered free and fair. To the stupefaction of the military junta, which had counted on divisions within the opposition to allow the ruling party to retain control over a fractious coalition government, the N.L.D. won an overwhelming majority of the 485 seats. A subsequent silence by the regime

By SANDRA BURTON RANGOON



"This is an area of military detainment," boomed the Burmese army captain. "Please leave. No photos allowed." The admonition was startling because the officer was standing on sacred ground, inside the walls of one of the most prominent Buddhist monasteries in Mandalay, the spiritual heart of Burma. More jarring still for the tourists who had wandered into the Eindawya pagoda to photograph its famous golden Buddha was the sight of dozens of soldiers slouched in the shadows of the porticoed courtyard, their G3 automatic rifles slung over the stone balustrades or leaning against the stucco walls. The 12 troop carriers parked to one side of the gilded central stupa bespoke the number of soldiers encamped in the deeper recesses of the monastery. "You may come back when our security situation is right," the captain

led optimists to believe that it might actually allow Aung San Suu Kyi to form a new government.

But as it turned out, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been under house arrest since July 1989, was never even allowed to take part in ceremonies marking the 44th anniversary of the death of her father, national hero Aung San. In place of its pre-election rhetoric about a quick transfer of power to the majority party, the regime called for a constitutional convention to draw up a new basic law—a process that experts estimated might take several years.

The inevitable clash occurred three months ago on the second anniversary of the Aug. 8 massacre, when a group of students and monks staged an early-morning demonstration in Mandalay. A scuffle broke out, and a monk who attempted to persuade police not to provoke further violence was caught in the cross fire when the security forces stopped shooting into the air and leveled their guns directly at rock-throwing protesters. The monk was hit by a bullet, and 14 other demonstrators suffered serious injuries.

After that, events moved toward last week's showdown between the junta and its opponents. "I asked my people for proof that monks had been shot, and they brought me this," related an N.L.D. supporter, holding up a black lacquer alms bowl with a bullet hole in it. As activist monks in Mandalay and Rangoon rallied behind a boycott whose aim was to force the military to produce a list of casualties, 51 N.L.D. leaders in Mandalay signed a petition calling for an inquiry. As usual, the politicians proved no match for the mili-

DOMINIC FAULDER—BUREAU BANGKOK



Senior General Saw Maung, left, ordered soldiers into the monasteries in Mandalay; Major General Khin Nyunt



CHARLES WORTH—LE PICTURES FOR TIME



tary. The local commander, Brigadier General Tun Kyi, intimidated the signatories into admitting that their evidence was based not on eyewitness accounts but on hearsay, then had the signatories arrested on the grounds that they had spread false information about the army.

The monks turned out to be tougher opponents. They refused to accept offerings of alms from military men and their families who, in the Buddhist tradition, were seeking to earn merit in the next life. The monks also stopped ministering to soldiers, refusing to preside over marriages and funerals. To step up pressure on the monks, the military began stationing troops outside activist monasteries and maintaining surveillance over them with helicopters. The monks responded as best they could by taking up slingshots against army patrols. Soldiers who requested per-

mission to return fire were prohibited from using anything more powerful than their own slingshots. The "slingshot war" soon escalated into a battle of nerves.

A group of young, politically active clerics presented the military with a list of five demands, including one requiring the commander in chief to make a public apology. Although some dissidents were pleased when they saw television footage of General Saw Maung on his knees before a senior monk, others correctly anticipated that he was laying the groundwork for an offensive against the monks.

The attack was carried out in the curiously legalistic manner the junta has employed to give its repressive measures the aura of law. "It's our British colonial heritage," quips an N.L.D. supporter as he chronicles the methodical process reported by the government-controlled *Working People's Daily*. First the paper printed a transcript of Saw Maung's self-serving "supplication" before a group of Buddhist elders. Two days later, the paper published a junta order defining which Buddhist sects were legal and which were not. The following day a second order abolished the illegal groups. Only then did Saw Maung send soldiers to the monasteries in Mandalay "to clean out unlawful organizations."

For the next week the state-controlled media catalogued "unmonkish pursuits" that had allegedly been going on behind monastery walls—as illustrated by stacks of communist propaganda and piles of jewels, playing cards, heroin and lethal weapons that government troops were said to have uncovered. By exhibiting such "evidence" of political activities by certain monks, the junta justified the ensuing arrest of opposition leaders. According to a junta memo that found its way into opposition hands last month, the regime's greatest fear was that the N.L.D. was preparing to set up a "parallel government" that certain Western countries might recognize.

"The political movement that began in 1988 is effectively over now," says an Asian diplomat. The only unanswered question in the minds of regional analysts is how long the military can get away with its systematic suppression of the opposition, whose nonviolent attempts to bring democracy to Burma at one point captured the imagination of much of the outside world. Since Burma is neither an ally of a Western country nor a major debtor nation, the betting in Rangoon is that the generals can survive whatever economic or human-rights sanctions might be imposed by the outside—if any are forthcoming.

One area of vulnerability is the dwindling supply of natural gas, needed to gen-



Pictures of charismatic N.L.D. leader Aung San Suu Kyi: 40 party leaders have been arrested

erate electricity in the southern half of the country. Household voltage is low, and blackouts are common. Although Buddhist shrines are lighted up brightly during festivals, citizens have barely enough power in their homes to read at night. Should the government find it necessary to convert power stations to oil until more natural gas is discovered, it will be unable to pay for the conversion on its own.

International agencies could then extend loans, but they would do so only if the government demonstrated its intention to move toward a true market economy. Burma has balked at that, even at taking such fundamental steps as reducing the 11-fold disparity between official and black-market exchange rates for the kyat.

Most observers believe the regime can keep thumbing its nose at lenders rather than alter its economic and financial system. But it will do so at the cost of seeing Burma fall further behind its dynamic neighbors—and the junta into greater disfavor with its people. Especially disaffected are members of the younger generation, who are growing up in less isolation than their parents and thus know what they are missing. “Burma is the world’s richest basket case,” says a foreign resident of Rangoon. “It is so rich in natural resources that it can be mismanaged and ignore the outside world and still keep going.”

That is scant consolation to people who are living with a 75% inflation rate and a general shrinkage in their buying power that is matched only by the curtailment of intellectual horizons. Universities have been closed since 1988; students who dreamed of careers as lawyers and professors are reduced to finding jobs outside Burma or dealing on the black market.

If many Burmese despise the regime, they also hate their inability to stand up to it effectively. “We are rubbish,” says a student in Mandalay. “Our tradition and our religion prevent us from getting things done,” remarks a well-educated woman in Rangoon. Reflecting on the revolutionary zeal of Vietnamese monks who used self-immolation as a weapon against the Saigon regimes of the 1960s, she stresses the differences. “Our kind of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, does not allow that. For us to commit suicide in this life means 505 suicides in our later lives, and that acts as quite a deterrent.”

Many still seek solace in a universe of nats, or spirits, that predates Buddhism. Even as the monasteries were under siege last week, pilgrims flocked to temples to pray to the Buddha, tuck money into the clothing of the lifesize nat figures and have their fortunes told by astrologers outside the temples. Questioned about Burma’s future, one such astrologer in Mandalay cast a wary glance over his shoulder to see if anyone might be listening. Then he whispered, “Burma is waiting.” ■

“Like an Elephant”

Since the crackdown by the military, the only dissenters who retain a voice are the several thousand students who fled to remote border areas following the suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations and joined ethnic insurgents in their armed struggle against the regime in Rangoon. Last week senior correspondent Sandra Burton and reporter Kim Gooi spoke with Thiri Nyunt, 30, joint general secretary of the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front, on the Thai-Burmese border. Excerpts:

Q. What do you see as the significance of the military raids on Buddhist monasteries?

A. For the past two weeks the monks have been the most avid forces fighting against the military. Actually, these things have nothing to do with the monks, but because they see the people are suffering, they have joined the resistance.

Q. Hasn’t the army effectively silenced the resistance?

A. You cannot say that our revolution is over. The people are like an elephant that has stepped back for an attack. They are waiting for a good chance to fight back.



Thiri Nyunt: “Because [the monks] see the people are suffering, they have joined the resistance”

Q. How much foreign support is your organization receiving?

A. We have not received any weapons from anyone outside, either government or church groups. The [ethnic] minority groups buy their weapons on the black market in the Chinese border areas with money from their own business sources. Students in the border areas receive food from the Burma Coordinating Group, a religious organization, and medical aid from Médecins Sans Frontières. The U.S. Congress has appropriated \$250,000 to help support displaced students who fled Burma in 1988.

Q. What is the relationship between your group and the National League for Democracy?

A. We recognize the elected representatives of the opposition parties, but we don’t say we have connections with them, because that would make it easier for the military to accuse Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of having ties to the insurgents.

Q. Do the two groups hold similar positions on how the ethnic minorities should be integrated into a democratic Burma?

A. The structure of a federation in a future Burma must be determined by a majority of the people. Army propaganda holds that the ethnic people are insurgents whom the military must defeat, but we have come to realize that the reason they are fighting the Burmese army is that they have been denied basic rights. They are not separatists, as the army charges. They will live with us in a genuine federal state.

Q. How do you feel about foreign investors, such as the oil companies that do business with the regime?

A. We don’t want to call those companies bad names. What we want to do is honor the agreements they make now and allow them to continue investing in our country after the military is ousted.

Q. Given the recent events, is Aung San Suu Kyi finished as a leader?

A. We believe in her. The people trust her and know she is brave. The military will not let her leave the country because she would make trouble for them outside. ■

A Mafia of Self-Made Men

With raw muscle and foreign cash, the army tightens its grip



Soldiers venturing down a street in Burma nowadays try to observe a policy of not walking alone. Instead they tend to set forth in bunches that help preserve comradely morale, if not life and limb. In a country that used to look up to its fighting men as heroic liberators, no figure is more despised today than the olive-uniformed, gun-toting enforcer of martial law. Still, the dirty job of maintaining what the generals call law-and-order is not always a dog's life. For soldiers who stick it out, more than ever before a military career in Burma can mean the juiciest fruits this side of heaven.

The country may lack the oil profits of Indonesia, the technical prowess of Taiwan and the can-do commercial genius of booming Thailand just next door. Yet when it comes to dominating a nation and its resources, Rangoon's military-caste is second to none. A regime that has kept its people in a time warp among neighboring success stories has sewn up control more thoroughly than any other soldier caste of Asian leaders. Top-ranking officers like Senior General Saw Maung and Major General Khin Nyunt preside over public life with the visibility of natural rulers, eccentrically pronouncing on politics, history and religion. If Saw Maung says, "I am not a king," as he stressed repeatedly in a recent speech, Burmese could be pardoned for thinking he protested too much.

The kingly perquisites of authority are surely one reason why the junta hangs on. According to foreign analysts, senior officers can expect chauffeured cars, choice housing (colonial-style villas, for instance), expensive food, and benefits enabling them to establish businesses on retirement. Another reason, however, is that the Tatmadaw, the armed forces, has steadily overcome its opponents, a feat managed by doing an about-face and opening long-isolated Burma to trade with the outside world. What had once been a closed shop is now an international auction house, with the proceeds strengthening the auctioneers' hammer blows.

Since seizing power outright two years ago, the junta has put democracy advocates under arrest, demonstrators to rout and frontier rebels on the run. Long content with controlling the Irrawaddy-drained lowlands, the regime this year has extended its writ with surprising success into the insurgent-infested hills. Today the opium-running Burmese Communist Party in the north is virtually defunct, while durable Thai-border insurgencies

like the Karen rebellion have their backs to the wall.

A key has been money—not only de-based kyats run off the printing presses but foreign cash and what it can buy. After strongman U Ne Win retreated into the shadows in mid-1988 and Rangoon discarded its threadbare mask of socialism, the regime made a vice of necessity in welcoming a "market economy." That market has amounted to a clearance sale of natural assets: the timber, gems, fisheries and oil fields that 40 years ago helped win Burma its ranking as one of Asia's most promising economies. Beyond securing the lush life for senior officers, new revenues translate into greater military muscle.



Khin Nyunt leading a march of fellow officers: a Ne Win protégé steps out

Teak-logging concessions have proved especially valuable. Thai entrepreneurs have moved in with trail-cutting machines, which have given government troops easier access to rebel camps. Moreover, the army has fielded up-to-date hardware of its own: locally produced German G3 automatic rifles and, reportedly, Bell helicopters furnished by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency before Washington cut off opium-fighting aid two years ago. Where conscripted porters used to plod like slaves up the forested slopes, U.S.-built choppers now provide logistical lifelines.

The 230,000-man army has other new firepower at its disposal. According to diplomats in the region, it has procured Swedish small arms by way of Singapore, jet fighters from China and, as one Western diplomat reports, 24 helicopters in the past

month from Poland. Says the official: "Money makes the monkey dance, and today hard cash rather than barter is the name of the game. There has been a lot of toing and froing on these arms deals."

For all the new riches, the ordinary soldier's lot remains unenviable—the living conditions crude, the frontier clashes ferocious. Once given a top regional command, however, an officer, even one from a poor village background, can practically write his own ticket. As a Burmese source explains, colonels are free to do "whatever they want in the economies of their region," typically taking hefty cuts from black-market trade.

Outsiders familiar with the Tatmadaw agree that from Saw Maung down, it consists of poorly educated roughnecks. Says retired diplomat Burton Levin, a former U.S. ambassador to Rangoon: "These people are third rate. They were selected by Ne Win because they represented abso-

lutely no threat to him. They were and are his lapdogs."

Some are shrewder than others. While Saw Maung makes long, incoherent speeches about the possibility of "drowning tomorrow" or Jesus Christ's sojourn in Tibet, intelligence chief Khin Nyunt is said to be guiding the junta's policies. Reputedly close to astrology fancier Ne Win and his daughter, Khin Nyunt may have trouble seeing his own future. Since he lacks combat experience, observers in Rangoon doubt he will succeed Saw Maung, a front man described by an Asian analyst as a "lunatic." Whatever happens, the men in olive seem unworried. With their ample supply of arms from abroad, they have less need to fear walking alone.

—By James Walsh.
Reported by Sandra Burton/Rangoon and Kim Gooi/Bangkok