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BURMA

Democracy On the Run

Saw Maung stifles the revolution, for now

Democracy, which has eluded Burma for 26 years, was once again under military detention in that impoverished country last week. General Saw Maung, the hard-line armed forces commander and loyal lieutenant of longtime Burmese strongman Ne Win, seemed to be in firm control. Early last week the general, who was later declared Prime Minister, ousted the month-old civilian government of President Maung Maung, banned all street demonstrations and ordered his troops into battle against protesting students and Buddhist monks. It proved to be no contest.

As thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets last week in defiance of the military takeover, soldiers responded with gunshots. Troops positioned on nearby rooftops fired into a crowd of hundreds who gathered to demonstrate in front of the U.S. embassy in downtown Rangoon, the capital. Some students cut down trees and laid them across streets as barricades, while others tried to respond with slingshots and arrows. But they were no match for the army's automatic weapons.

"They were shooting at anything that moved," said a Western diplomat who witnessed the carnage. "People tried to dash away, but the soldiers just shot them down." In all, some 400 people are believed to have been killed in Rangoon alone during the response to Saw Maung's coup. Even ambulance drivers were fired upon as they went to attend the wounded. "The soldiers will not respect even the doctors," said a medic at Rangoon General Hospital, whose helpers were prevented for several hours from aiding victims at the imposing Sule Pagoda in the city center. "It's shameful," said an outraged Western diplomat. "It's just a small group of people who want to consolidate their power and are willing to shoot down schoolchildren and unarmed demonstrators to do so."

In Washington, U.S. State Department officials called on the Burmese military to "stop shooting at demonstrators." The Reagan Administration also urged

the Saw Maung regime to begin discussions with opposition leaders "on arrangements for an early transition to multiparty democracy which Burmese in overwhelming numbers are demanding." The White House announced late last week that it was cutting off U.S. aid to the Burmese government, though the gesture is largely symbolic: assistance for 1988 totaled only \$12.3 million.

The army takeover came just hours after a trio of opposition leaders declared they were on the verge of victory in efforts to force creation of an interim government that would break the power monopoly of the Burma Socialist Program Party. The three—former Defense Minister Tin Oo, onetime army Brigadier General Aung Gyi and Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a revered Burmese independence leader—said they expected to hear from Maung Maung within days about the interim government. "Only one small thing remains," said Tin Oo, "and that is the transfer of power."

The night before those optimistic remarks, however, an incident took place that may have triggered the coup. A crowd of protesters captured 24 soldiers inside the Ministry of Trade building in central Rangoon, while outside a crowd of tens of thousands, armed with crossbows, spears and knives, taunted troops who encircled the nearby city hall. "If the army shoots, we will kill you," warned some of the demonstrators. "We are not cowards." The captured soldiers escaped unharmed as monks took them to a nearby monastery for protection. But then protesting students swarmed into the trade building and began throwing official papers out of windows and smashing ministry cars along the streets.

So confident were opposition leaders that even after initial reports of the takeover they believed Saw Maung's coup was merely another step toward interim government. The brutal events of the next day quickly destroyed that notion. Outraged, opposition leaders, including former Prime Minister U Nu, condemned



the killings and denounced the new regime for disrupting their negotiations. In statements, they expressed their determination to continue the battle, saying, "We firmly believe that we will have to utilize all methods in the fight for democracy."

For his part, Saw Maung said he would proceed with multiparty elections that had been promised by ex-President Maung Maung as a last concession to the revolutionary tide. "The army has no intention to retain the duties of state power for a long time, in addition to its existing onerous duties," the country's new Prime Minister wrote to the opposition leaders. "We had to step in unavoidably because of the deteriorating general conditions in the country. We promise you that free and fair general elections will be held as soon as peace and tranquillity are restored in the country." Significantly, however, no date was set for the elections, and the opposition leaders said they would refuse to participate in any elections organized by the new regime.

Diplomats and other political analysts continued to suspect that the coup that gave Burma its third government since



Images of upheaval: antigovernment demonstrators in Rangoon vent their indignation; commemoration ceremonies for victims killed in the early days of uprising; opposition leaders U Nu, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Tin Oo; General Saw Maung, now the Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister

Ne Win's resignation was yet another maneuver by the former dictator, allowing him to continue to rule from behind the scenes. In fact, Saw Maung visited Ne Win at his villa on Rangoon's Inya Lake just hours before the takeover. The army commander is also a protégé of the feared General Sein Lwin, who succeeded Ne Win but was himself forced out of office after only 17 days in power. Sein Lwin was followed by Maung Maung, a British- and American-educated lawyer and former adviser to Ne Win, who became the first civilian President since the military seized power in 1962.

Saw Maung soon began to surround himself with the trappings of responsible government. He headed up a nine-member Cabinet, composed mostly of military men, retaining the defense and foreign affairs portfolios for himself. The general urged government department heads to cooperate in holding elections, and conferred with five members of a commission charged with overseeing the vote. Only days earlier, the commissioners had declared their task impossible without opposition support.

As the week drew to a close, the military had torn down the barricades in

Rangoon streets and swept them clean of demonstrators. The main news of organized resistance in the capital came from government reports of attempts to cut telephone cables, and of an armed attack with M-16s and M-79 grenade launchers on a microwave antenna in downtown Rangoon. In Mandalay and other cities, government troops had likewise regained control, while protesting students and monks were fleeing to the countryside.

They had reason to run. In the Rangoon suburb of North Okkalapa, soldiers carrying a list of names took three students from their home. One was released, while the other two were told to turn around and then were summarily executed. Declared Min Ko Naing (a *nom de guerre* meaning "one who ousts the King"), the most influential student leader in Rangoon: "We have stopped using our mouths to protest. We warn the group that calls itself the government to seek its last meal." At week's end opposition leaders formed a

National United Front for Democracy to carry on their struggle.

The next major test will probably come on Oct. 3, when Burma's striking civil servants and other workers must return to their jobs or face dismissal. It will be a cruel choice for many employees, who have been off the job since the beginning of August. Money is scarce, and a student-organized effort to bring rice to the hungry capital has been halted. Nonetheless, opposition leaders predict that people will not return to work. Said Aung

San Suu Kyi: "I don't think it would be possible to fire everyone who does not go back to work. If they did, they would not be able to get the government to run again." Besides, she argued, "you can't keep a whole country down just by force of arms." For the moment at least, Saw Maung appeared to disagree.

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Face of protest