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ASIA/PACIFIC: Burma's oppressive regime plays at democracy

If there is a potential for harm, Rangoon always seems more than willing to realize it. Large segments of the population are moved into malaria-infested regions. Dissent is quashed. Even with elections on the way, Ne Win's reign is likely to remain a no-win situation for the Burmese.

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BURMA

The Ne Win Situation

With elections just ahead, the country's rulers once again prove themselves masters of oppression and brutality

PETER CHARLESWORTH—B. PICTURES

By HOWARD G. CHUA-EOAN

Though his pseudonym, Ne Win, means "Sun of Glory," the absolute ruler of Burma might be better described as a shadow, concealed and unknowable. Other inconsistencies also endure. In spite of rumors of ill health for nearly 20 years, the officially retired Ne Win, who claims to be 78 but may be older, is still the most powerful man in the country. The aggrandizing epithets that are his by law, including Bogyoke (Great General), are whispered in fear by ordinary people who are wary of attracting the attention of military-intelligence agents. When official praise is uttered, Ne Win is elevated—without a trace of sarcasm—to a pantheon that includes North Korea's Kim Il Sung and Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh. Cruelly consistent with the contradictions, 26 years of the Sun of Glory have melted the core of the nation that has long called itself the Land of Gold.

Burma, which renamed itself Myanmar last June, has been ravaged by the Ne Win regime. In Rangoon diplomats can barely keep their scathing opinions of the regime to themselves. It is virtually impossible to find any who do not have harsh assessments. Says a senior Western diplomat: "In all my years I have never served in a place that was governed by such uneducated, brutal people. They despise businessmen and intellectuals. They have no knowledge of economics. They think that they and they alone have the necessary patriotism and competence to run the country. And they are almost totally servile to Ne Win."

If there is a potential for harm, the Burmese government always seems more than willing to realize it. The capital, which is now called Yangon, meaning "End of Strife," was the horrific scene of a massacre of more than 3,000 pro-democracy demonstrators by Ne Win's crack infantry troops in September 1988. In a report released two weeks ago, Amnesty International accused Burma of operating 19 torture centers and routinely brutalizing political opponents with beatings and electroshock and by rubbing salt into open wounds and forcing prisoners to crawl over broken glass. Diplomatic sources in Bangkok estimate the number of political prisoners at anywhere from 5,000 to 8,000.

In preparation for the show elections to be held at the end of next week, bureaucrats have accomplished a crude gerrymandering of the country. Instead of redrawing election districts, they have moved whole populations, distributing much of the opposition's urban power base among various malaria-infested backwaters. The entire campaign has been waged in the name of "beautifying" Burma's cities. Few if any of the 50,000 relocated families—perhaps 200,000 people out of the coun-

Cleaning the capital: a beautification program that gerrymanders the populace





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Man to watch: General Khin Nyunt Show of force: soldier in Rangoon



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One of many official banners: Does a slogan a day keep the dissidents at bay?



SAMIRIO TUCCI

Rebels under siege: Karen guerrillas look out for the army

try's 40 million—have been given time to build adequate quarters. The housing problem is complicated by the onset of the rainy season, which makes construction and obtaining provisions still more difficult. Food supplies are low, and there are reports of malnutrition. Furthermore, the uprooted people are not sure where they are to vote on May 27, or if they will be allowed to vote at all.

Would-be foreign observers of the election process are actively discouraged. "With only a few weeks to go, we have a three-monkey election," says a senior European diplomat. "See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing." According to the envoy, the relocate-and-vote strategy is the government's way of pursuing a double goal: convincing the rest of the world of the legitimacy of the elections, and signaling to the Burmese that the military's power is supreme and that no challenges to its authority will be tolerated.

While all orders are believed to emanate from Ne Win, the ostensible ruling body is a military junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The army, the Tatmadaw, has always played an important role in Burmese life. Five times in the past 50 years, the Tatmadaw has seized power. In its own eyes, the army, under the mythic leadership of Aung San—

the first modern Bogyoke—liberated Burma from British rule. It was the army that saved Rangoon from superior rebel forces of the Karen minority in 1950. Under Ne Win, the army has assumed power three times: it formed a caretaker government in 1958, staged a bloodless coup in 1962, and in September 1988, after overcoming divisions within itself, crushed a summer of pro-democratic discontent by replacing a civilian government with the S.L.O.R.C.

Nominally, the most important member of the junta is the Prime Minister, a post held by General Saw Maung. Rangoon-based diplomats say, however, that Saw Maung is a mere figurehead. His inept speeches have earned him almost universal derision, even among soldiers. Instead the man to watch is S.L.O.R.C.'s first secretary and Ne Win's protégé, Brigadier General Khin Nyunt, who is believed to be in his late 40s. Though he ranks 23rd out of 24 on the national protocol list, Khin Nyunt is believed to be the dictator's chief mouthpiece. In addition, he is the head of the powerful Military Intelligence.

While political parties are technically allowed to campaign, diplomats say there is neither freedom of speech nor freedom of assembly. Only the National Unity Par-

ty, a direct descendant of the moribund Burma Socialist Program Party, which was dominated by Ne Win and the military, has been able to hold rallies in Rangoon. In any event, the opposition would probably be unable to take advantage of a relaxation of restrictions. The three main anti-government parties are in disarray. Says another Western diplomat in Rangoon: "The opposition is uniformly ineffective, inept and cowed." The three parties have been unable to regroup since last July, when the army detained Aung San Suu Kyi, the charismatic daughter of the national hero Aung San. In January she was barred from running for office.

The military has also been vague about the precise purpose of the elections. While people will be voting for local parliamentary representatives, those who are elected may subsequently be empowered to write a new constitution. The junta, which has taken pains to portray itself as a temporary ruling body, has said it will not step down until a revised constitution has been prepared. If it grants the newly elected representatives the right to rewrite the charter, the two or three years that would be needed to produce the new document might give the military enough time to gain a permanent and legal hammerlock on power.

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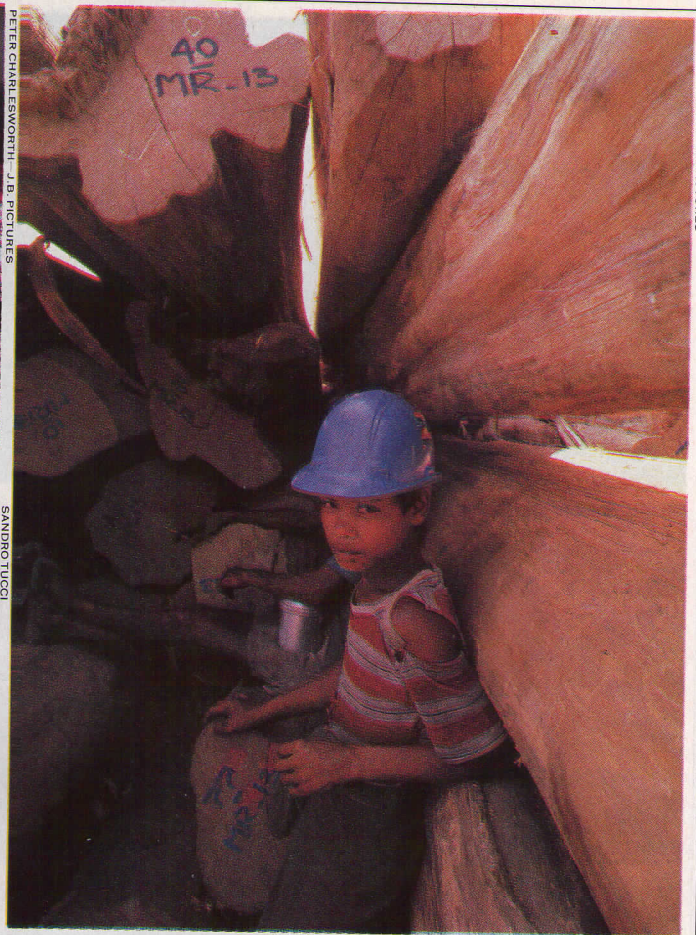
Burning heroin: but suspicions of complicity with drug lords endure

PETER CHARLES WORTH—J.B. PICTURES



Slaves of the Tatmadaw: escapees from the army's labor pool

SANDRO TUCCI



In the pagoda-filled capital, a youth sits huddled among teak logs

CHARLES WORTH—J.B. PICTURES

fective in covering its political bases, it remains inept in managing the economy. Says a Western diplomat: "The military has no understanding of economic reform. The generals think it means the removal of some controls. There has not been a penny of basic investment since 1988." To finance its projects, including urban "beautification" and relocation, the central government simply prints money. This practice has led to hoarding, to shortages and inevitably to inflation, estimated at about 60% by the International Monetary Fund. Some diplomats suspect that cash-strapped Rangoon may even be harvesting opium on its own and collaborating with regional drug lords to raise funds, despite warnings from Washington. "This government isn't going to do anything about drugs," says a concerned diplomat in Rangoon. "It's too busy occupying its own country, and it doesn't care what the U.S. thinks."

While India, Japan and the U.S. have enforced trade sanctions against Burma since the 1988 massacre, the regime has strengthened its links with Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea, luring them with get-rich-quick schemes that exploit Burma's natural resources. Rangoon has earned as much as \$200 million in this way. Nowhere is that collaboration more fruitful for the government than in its relations with Thailand. For Bangkok, which banned domestic logging in 1989, Burma

has become the key source of lumber. Military cooperation between the two countries has been encouraged by lucrative logging concessions granted by Burma to firms associated with the Thai armed forces.

While Bangkok still refuses to deport Burmese university students who have fled across the frontier into its territory, the Royal Thai Army has stood by quietly, for the most part, as Burma has pursued an increasingly successful campaign against the 40-year-old rebellions in the border area involving such minority groups as the Karen, the Mon and the Shan. Six Karen bases have fallen since the current offensive began early last year. Occasionally, Burmese troops have entered Thai territory in order to attack rebel strongholds from the rear. Says Saw Bathin, secretary-general of the Karen National Union: "If the Burmese army had not been able to use Thai territory from which to launch its attacks, it would never have been able to take our bases." Karen rebels say Burmese bombers have used Thai airspace for launching assaults on rebel positions.

The main Karen base is located at Manerplaw, less than 100 meters from the Thai border. To reach it, however, Rangoon must overcome land mines and ter-

rain problems to root out the entrenched ethnic rebels and their dissident student allies. In moving ammunition to the border, the Rangoon regime sometimes commandeers civilian Thai logging trucks.

Nor does it hesitate to use slave labor. Says Kin Mong Twe, a Burmese tailor who was forced to become a jungle porter for the army: "They chained us together so we could not escape. We had to walk in front of the soldiers. Those who couldn't walk or sometimes stumbled were kicked and beaten. The old people were beaten badly. We walked from sunrise to sundown for 30 days before we came near to the Thai border. Many were shot trying to get away." The tailor escaped and joined the Karen rebels after being momentarily unchained so that he could fetch water from a stream. Says Lieut. Colonel Lawadi, commander of the 20th brigade of the Karen National Army: "The aim of the Burmese offensive is to secure the government's timber exports so that it can get more money to prop itself up and buy guns to kill Karen."

With the rebels in trouble and the cities under martial rule, the Ne Win regime seems impervious to outside political pressure. Most military experts expect the Karen headquarters at Manerplaw to fall soon. Even with elections on the way, Ne Win's reign is likely to remain a no-win situation for the Burmese. —**Reported by Kim Gooi/Manerplaw and William Stewart/Bangkok**