



Penguin Books

Aung San and bride Khin Kyi, 1942: New questions on who was behind the death of the pre-Independence leader

## THE NATIONS

BURMA

# Shadow of a Hero

*An Unsolved Murder Continues to Haunt Strongman Ne Win*



*How long do national heroes last? Not long in this country. I do not give myself more than another eighteen months of life.*

**Aung San, eighteen months and six days before his assassination**

On July 19 Burma will commemorate Martyrs' Day. Stone-faced military commanders will lay wreaths on the tomb of Aung San and observe a moment of silence in tribute to the man who led the way to Independence. For most Burmese, the death of Aung San in 1947 removed

the one figure who might have built a strong and prosperous nation. For the army rulers, it was the act that eventually made them masters of an impoverished nation. For many others, it is one of the great unsolved mysteries in Asian politics.

One man may know more about it than anyone else alive. Retired general and shadow strongman Ne Win, 82, gained much from the deaths of Aung San and six of his ministers. "He must have perceived Aung San's removal with glee, as his main contender for supreme power had been done away with," writes former Burmese naval officer Kin Oung, who now lives in exile in Australia. His recently published

book *Who Killed Aung San?* does not directly implicate Ne Win in the machine-gun murders. But it sheds new light on the crime and on the life of the wily general who still rules behind the scenes.

Ne Win was a member of Aung San's Thirty Comrades, the group that formed the Burma Independence Army. At Independence in 1948, U Nu became prime minister and Ne Win was named deputy army chief of staff. He got the top military post the next year. The general deposed the premier in 1962. By the time Ne Win stepped down in 1988, he had turned his resource-rich nation into one of the world's poorest. He resigned to defuse

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widespread pro-democracy demonstrations, which the military stamped out in a bloody crackdown. But the junta now in power still takes orders from him. And Aung San continues to haunt Ne Win. Today, the hopes of Burma's opposition are kept alive by the martyr's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest in Rangoon since 1989.

Aung San's political rival U Saw and five others were hanged for the 1947 murders. Author Kin Oung does not dispute that U Saw masterminded the plot. It was, he writes, a classic case of *thoke-thin-ye*, removing opponents "by complete elimination." In killing Burma's leader, U Saw had hoped to be asked to form a government of his own. Kin Oung, whose father led the team that arrested U Saw, adds new details to the story. A year before the assassinations, he writes, Ne Win and fellow general Aung Gyi had ordered an attack on U Saw.

The aim was not to kill him but to provoke a response against Aung San. Kin Oung says the generals told two men to dress as members of Aung San's militia. U Saw suffered eye injuries in the attack. The Bangkok-based group Burma Rights Movement for Action floated a similar theory last year. Kin Oung also says Burma's British governor first identified the gunmen as members of Ne Win's 4th Burma Rifles. But for some unknown reason, the governor's



Ne Win: No one played the game better

Izumiya Tatsuro

telegram to London was never produced in the trial.

According to ethnic Karen rebels, there were other plotters. In 1986 the group's newsletter said hardliners opposed to Aung San's plan to make major concessions to Burma's ethnic minorities might have been involved. Former junta chief

Saw Maung may have been referring to them in a rambling speech in 1990. "Once there were two people who felt they were not happy with the way Gen. Aung San was doing things and asked Gen. Ne Win to take his place after removing Gen. Aung San," he said. "Those people are still alive today."

"Based on circumstantial evidence and numerous loose ends," Kin Oung concludes, "it is reasonable to assume that U Saw was not alone." But the other conspirators may never be definitely identified. Two investigators died in 1948. They were still on the trail even after the trial ended. Tin Tut, the fourth-highest ranking military leader, perished in a bomb attack soon after he resigned as U Nu's foreign minister. Rangoon police superintendent Colin Tooke died of acute paralysis, but his colleagues suspect he was murdered. Someone broke into his secret files on the case.

Ne Win survives. No one has played the game of *thoke-thin-ye* better than he. When he became military chief the general sacked or shunted aside many competent officers, including the army commander and his deputy, Tun Hla Oung, Kin Oung's father. Ne Win moved quickly to consolidate his power through the 4th Burma Rifles, which had held off offensives by the now-defunct Burma Communist Party and Karen rebels in 1948. "The soldiers under him loved him," says a former general and member in the 1970s of the Revolutionary Council, the junta Ne Win formed after his 1962 coup. One whose

ALLIANCES

The China Connection



The takeover of the sleepy southern Burmese fishing village of Bo Taung began quietly. A unit of heavily armed soldiers set up camp atop a nearby mountain last year. Among the group were six plainclothes men who were rumored to be Chinese military experts supervising construction of a radar and possibly a missile station. Then in January, Bo Taung residents were

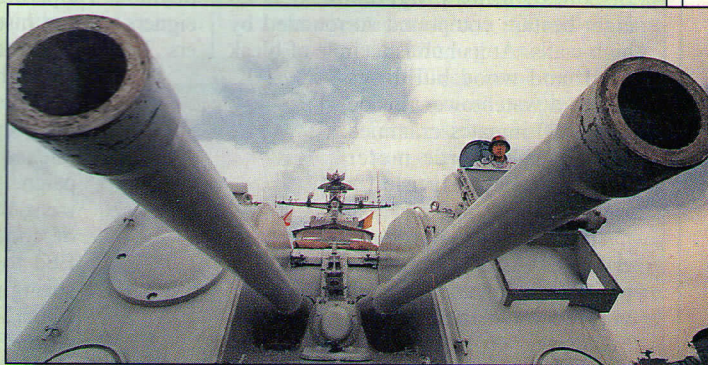
relocated from their 500 homes and the village was taken over by two artillery regiments.

Earlier there were reports that Chinese technicians were developing radar and naval facilities off the Irrawaddy river delta and farther south on Coco Island facing the Indian Ocean. Historically, the Burmese have been wary of Han domination. But these days, the internationally isolated Rangoon junta has no closer political ally than China.

Cooperation between Rangoon and Beijing is not limited to military aid. Burma's northern border was opened to free trade in 1988. Since then, Chinese merchandise has poured in. A U.N. Development Program report last year said cheap con-

sumer goods from China have undermined domestic Burmese manufacturing.

The increased trade has been accompanied by a wave of Chinese immigration. In Mandalay and Rangoon, Burmese-language schools catering to ethnic Chinese are thriving. But as Burma opens to its huge neighbor there are signs of local resentment. In April, a bomb reportedly went off outside the Chinese embassy in Rangoon.



Xinhua

Chinese guided missile destroyer: Local resentment



Ira Chaplain

On the chain gang: Torture is routine

## OUTRAGES

# Inside Burma's Nightmare Jail



"It's like a dark fortress in hell," says a former school lecturer. He spent nine years at Insein, Burma's notorious maximum-security prison, for allegedly triggering student unrest in 1963.

Ethnic Karen writer Maung Sin Kye, 59, remembers the cold concrete floors. "That was the worst part," he recalls. "I shivered at night and couldn't sleep." Hla Phay, 55, is haunted by the screams. Says he: "From nearby cells I often heard the cries of inmates losing their senses after torture sessions." Now in exile in Bangkok, he publishes an anti-Rangoon newsletter.

Located 16 km north of the capital, Insein is Burma's nightmare. It is an eight-hectare compound surrounded by high walls. At its hub is a circle of bleak brick and wood buildings facing a watchtower. Inside are 8,000 inmates crammed into two-by-three-meter cells and kept alive on a meager diet of rice and fish paste. Many are hardened criminals. A fair number are political prisoners. They are singled out for the worst treatment.

Those lucky enough to be released say torture is

routine. Maung Sin Kye, known throughout Burma by his pen-name Mahn Nyunt Maung, survived three stints in the prison. He describes a special cell where Military Intelligence agents force people to walk on bare knees over crushed bricks. Fierce Alsatian dogs would snap at them from behind. Other tortures include dripping water over a prisoner's head for a prolonged period and burning genitals with a lighted cigarette.

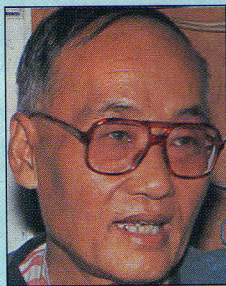
At least five political prisoners died in recent years. In 1991 retired naval commander and writer Maung Thaw Ka died in a Rangoon hospital three days after being removed from Insein. Former student leader Tin Maung Win reportedly perished two years ago after long rounds of torture. The first prominent victim was

Sao Shwe Thaike, an ethnic Shan and Burma's first president. Jailed after strongman Ne Win took power in 1962, Sao Shwe Thaike died of heart failure in Insein.

The most common cause of death, though, is dysentery. The next killer is paralysis, which strikes mainly elderly prisoners who have to sleep on the cold floor. Prominent oppositionist Tin U is suffering from rheumatism. A key leader of the National League for Democracy, he has reportedly been given a cell to himself. Win Tin, another NLD leader in Insein, has a bad case of gastric ulcers. Their lives are in danger unless they receive proper medical attention.

**M**aung Sin Kye was freed along with hundreds of others when Burma lifted martial law last year. He was arrested in 1991 after rebuking the army for the killing of Karens in the Irrawaddy Delta. In March former U.S. congressmen Robert Legget and Seymour Halpern became the first foreigners to meet Insein's political prisoners. They said the jail was in better condition than some in America.

It doesn't impress Maung Sin Kye, who calls his release "part of a PR campaign." Today, he says, "citizens live in an atmosphere of constant fear." He has fled to the Karen guerilla stronghold near the border with Thailand. Says the writer: "I couldn't face the possibility of going to Insein again." ■



Geoffrey Klaverkamp

Maung Sin Kye

love turned sour was Gen. Aung Gyi, who was once Ne Win's deputy chief of staff but broke with him in 1963 and resigned. It was Aung Gyi's critical letters to Ne Win that fuelled unrest in 1988. Recently Aung Gyi was jailed, supposedly for business fraud.

It was largely Ne Win's cunning that kept him in power. "He never fought a battle in his life but he excelled as a strategist," says the former general. And he never sacked someone he felt had gone against him. Ne Win would first promote him and then "through the years discover what the man had been doing from his exposed position."

Ne Win was so good at deception that U Nu never suspected him of planning a coup. After the PM was arrested, U Nu is said to have told his secretary: "I don't know who's in charge, but I hope and pray that no harm has been done to Gen. Ne Win." Respected for his honesty and straightforward ways, Aung San never fully trusted Ne Win. He passed him over in choosing his army chief of staff in 1943.

**N**e Win has not been seen in public for more than a year. "He's still around," says a foreign observer in Rangoon. "He's robust for his age, alive and kicking." Ne Win's former colleague on the Revolutionary Council says the old man regularly visits members of the military junta. And his much-feared protegee and current intelligence chief Lt.-Gen. Khin Nyunt calls on him to discuss urgent policies. Says Win Khet, an exiled leader of the opposition party National League for Democracy: "Today's leaders all owe their positions to Ne Win."

The NLD had won the junta-sponsored parliamentary election in 1990, but the regime refuses to let it form a government. Many party leaders have been jailed. The group's moral beacon, 48-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, cannot leave the confines of her villa, which faces Ne Win's home across the Inya Lake. Her fight is keeping her father's legacy vividly alive. Ne Win is said to be obsessed with the fear that Aung San will forever overshadow his place in history.

Ne Win has become preoccupied with mortality. He ordered the ornate Maha Wizaya built in 1987. Burmese believe constructing Buddhist temples will earn them merit in the after-life. What happens after Ne Win goes? One expected result is a power struggle between Khin Nyunt and Than Shwe, the junta's premier. The post of army commander vacated by Than Shwe last year has been filled by Lt.-Gen. Maung Aye. His appointment is seen as a check on Khin Nyunt's power. Even after Ne Win's death, it seems, the deadly game of thoke-thin-ye will still be played. ■