

BURMA

Student Dissent

One year ago, a petty dispute over the playing of a cassette tape in a Rangoon tea-shop flared into a violent conflict between students and residents. When police moved in, one student, Maung Phone Maw, was killed. Riots ensued as the unrest exploded into widespread anti-government protests. Throughout a summer of discontent, the students spear-headed pro-democracy strikes and rallies. But when Gen. Saw Maung seized power in September, thousands of them fled the cit-

“Conqueror of Kings”) and Moe The Zun (“Heavy Rains”), is dismayed by the NLD’s political methods. The student leaders view Suu Kyi’s recent series of up-country tours as designed to enhance her personal popularity rather than to project true leadership and present a viable and constructive political platform. Moe The Zun has written an eight-page critique of Suu Kyi’s performance, which he labels “constructive criticism.”

The students want the political parties to back their demand for an interim government to be installed to draw up a new constitution before elections are held. Many feel the parties’ preoccupation with election preparations is a capitulation to the Saw Maung régime. They object to the military holding elections without a constitution, believing the polls would not be free and fair. In January, Saw Maung told Asia-week that a new constitution would be drawn up “after the new government comes into power.”

In apparently going along with this, the political parties have disappointed the students. They recall that last summer many of their number sacrificed their lives in demonstrations whose goal was the “destruction of the one-party system” and the “formation of an interim government.” The first part has been achieved, say the students, but not the second. As well, they want the opposition to forcefully condemn the régime for political and economic suppression, military “arrogance,” and distortions in the media. Said Min Ko Naing recently in an underground leaflet: “We will carry on our shoulders those oppositionists who provide correct leadership.”

Last week, amid heavy troop movements in Rangoon, students commemorated the March 13 anniversary of Maung Phone Maw’s death. The event, using an outdoor platform and public-address system within the Rangoon Institute of Technology compound, attracted about 3,000 students as well as prominent oppositionists, including Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD colleague Tin U. In speeches, students recalled the sacrifices of their colleagues last year. Militants and moderates had earlier clashed over the form of the service, and the military was clearly worried. Some students were reportedly detained outside the compound. However, uniformed troops stayed away from the service and the event remained peaceful.

with the forces of globalisation. If you give up all you have, you become a mere fake. If you justify inefficiency for the sake of clinging to everything you have, you become a failure.” The trick, it seems, is for Asians to find their own time to stop and smell the roses.

Our Letters pages are open to all points of view. This has not been obvious in the case of correspondence concerning events in Burma. Since August last year we have published more than 50 letters from Burmese in and outside Burma. Only one reader expressed opinions that could not be described as anti-government — hardly a pleasing record for a magazine that takes pride in being a forum for all kinds of opinions, popular or otherwise.

Have we been ignoring letters defending the régime? Of course not. It’s just that we haven’t gotten any — until last week, that is, when we received six. All were postmarked March 1 and were sent by registered mail from Rangoon. Two are dated February 25. One of those is signed AUNG ZEY YA of Cantonment Park; we had better not mention the name on the other one because the writer requests anonymity. Another is dated February 26 and is signed by YE HTOON NAING of Signal Pagoda Road. Three are dated February 28. One of these is signed by PHO WAZI of Shwedagon Pagoda Road, another by MIN AUNG THAW of Zoological Garden, and the third by SAW YAN PAING, who gives as his address Rangoon Railway Station.

The six letters appear to have emerged from the same typewriter (quite a good one, too), and their authors evidently enjoy access to any number of foreign publications. Though ordinarily they would be immediate candidates for the authenticity confirmation inquiry familiar to many of our readers, on this occasion our routine checking procedures seemed . . . well, unnecessary. On the other hand, you may find it useful to know the tenor of the first letters we have ever received expressing support for the government in Rangoon. So here is Aung Zey Ya’s letter, in part:

“U Khin Oung of Australia [ALMANAC, February 17] called the government’s takeover a ‘mock coup.’ Well! For ordinary, honest and law-abiding folks like us, it was a timely coup. What do members of the phony Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma know what actually occurred? They did not suffer the acute anxiety and fear that we did daily during the lawlessness and violence that followed on the heels of the demonstrations for democracy. If it had not been for General Saw Maung and his group of stalwart servicemen we would be dead or at the very least destitute by now.”



Moe The Zun (centre): “Constructive criticism”

ies to avoid recrimination. It was left to the fledgling political parties to press the campaign for democratic elections.

Among the opposition leaders who attracted strong student backing was Aung San Suu Kyi, 43, daughter of Independence hero Gen. Aung San and now general secretary of the front-running National League for Democracy (NLD). Lately, however, the students have almost completely severed their links with the NLD. Although many say they remain sympathetic to the party, most have allied themselves with any of six multi-party coalitions that have emerged. These now group more than 100 of the 233 registered parties.

The All Burma Federation of Student Unions, led clandestinely by “Min Ko Naing” (a *nom de guerre* meaning

