

BURMA

At the Edge of Anarchy

The government agrees to elections, but mass protests continue

Column upon column, they clogged the streets of Rangoon, cheering and clapping, chanting and waving flags. As the numbers swelled into the hundreds of thousands, representatives from almost all walks of Burmese life could be identified among the waves of protesters who marched 20 abreast through the capital. Roman Catholic priests and white-robed nuns paraded behind a banner proclaiming JESUS LOVES DEMOCRACY. Government employees brandished a MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS sign, while retired military men proudly unfurled a banner reading ASSOCIATION OF FORMER COMMANDERS AND OLD COMRADES. From self-identified housewives to state factory

26 years of one-party domination. The B.S.P.P. said general elections would be held and that multiple parties would participate. But the government set no date for the balloting and continued to refuse to meet the main demand of the burgeoning opposition forces, that it relinquish power.

The announcement was a clear acknowledgment by the government that its position was untenable. Originally the party delegates had been scheduled to meet on Sept. 12, but the scale of continuing demonstrations forced the issue. The B.S.P.P. met secretly, behind barbed wire and surrounded by loyal government troops. A large section of Rangoon was closed to traffic while the meeting took place. But

clique. The same kind of insurgent spirit has gained the upper hand in most of the rest of the country.

The boldest individual challenge to the beleaguered government last week came from an unexpected source: former Prime Minister U Nu, 81. Toppled from power in 1962 by General Ne Win, who ruled Burma for the next 26 years until resigning last July, U Nu asserted, "Though I have been robbed of my power, I am still the legitimate Prime Minister." In a remarkable display of Burmese-style audacity, U Nu named a government that restored former President Mahn Win Maung to his earlier post, and designated Tin Oo, a retired general and leading opposition figure, as Defense Minister.

It seemed unlikely that other opposition leaders would quietly cede Burma's future to the former Prime Minister. In fact, Tin Oo quickly resigned from U Nu's



Cry for "Dee-mah-cra-see!": antigovernment demonstrators, some brandishing national flags, march in the capital last week

Soldiers and housewives, priests and students were demanding that the government of President Maung Maung step aside.

workers and students, they were all there to demand "Dee-mah-cra-see!"

Orderly and friendly yet adamant and determined, the people of Burma pressed their demand for the three-week-old government of President Maung Maung to step down and open a path to a free, democratic state. Finally the regime began to buckle under the pressure. At an extraordinary session on Saturday, the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party gave way—at least, partway—to the popular clamor and declared an apparent end to the country's

elsewhere in the capital the rallies continued. At one point, in an extraordinary display, the entire Rangoon police force marched in support of the demonstrators.

Previously, Maung Maung and the party faithful had agreed only to discuss a referendum on one-party rule. If they hope their latest concession will buy some time, they are almost certain to be disappointed. In the wake of the election announcement, loudspeaker trucks raced through the streets, calling for new demonstrations to bring down the ruling

shadow cabinet. And his failure to name two other popular opposition figures, retired Brigadier General Aung Gyi and Aung San Suu Kyi, promised to scuttle the effort. Aung Gyi, who won wide support for his challenges to the defunct Ne Win government, called U Nu's action "preposterous."

Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a national hero who was assassinated before Burma's 1948 independence, told TIME that "U Nu is a possibility" to head an interim government. But she savors

comparisons of herself with the heroine of Filipino People Power, Corazon Aquino. When asked if she was willing to head a government, Aung San Suu Kyi coolly responded, in crisp Oxford tones, "If I thought it necessary, I would."

More threatening for the government, there is evidence of growing disarray within the military. Late last week 200 uniformed members of the air force, most of them sergeants and privates, defected to the antigovernment opposition, holding up in dormitories at Rangoon University. The number of defections may be larger: cheering soldiers and students were seen riding together in trucks through the streets of Rangoon.

It remained unclear which way the country's 20 or so generals would tilt. "There are signs of disagreement within the army, mainly in the lower echelons, with the majors and lieutenant colonels," says General Tin Oo. "The upper echelons are not yet ready."

In the meantime, the people of Burma are daily chipping away at the government's credibility. Rumors sweeping through the capital charge that officials, in cahoots with military intelligence, have been trying to poison Rangoon's water supply. Following last Thursday's demonstra-



Insurgent spirit: an old man joins the fray in Rangoon

tion, thousands of people gathered near the city center to watch the beating and beheading of three people who were said to have been caught poisoning local water pots. In devoutly Buddhist Burma, providing water for passersby is a way to gain spiritual merit. To defile that water, as the onlookers believed the government had done, is deeply repugnant. Whether government officials actually gave such orders, says a Western diplomat, "the most important thing is the perception that the

government has tried dirty tricks."

Burmese citizens charge that officials have offered Rangoon's criminal element up to \$800 for the head of a protesting monk or a student demonstrator. While there is no proof that the offer was ever made, young thugs paid a midnight visit to the suburb of South Okkalapa last week and killed 13 monks and students. In a retaliatory strike a few hours later, monks and students overwhelmed and beheaded the trespassers.

Many Burmese also believe the government, seeking a pretext to send in the army, instigated the violent looting that rocked Rangoon last Wednesday. Before the lawlessness had gained momentum, the government announced by radio that looters would be shot on sight.

The tensions compelled citizens to mount vigilante patrols, defending their neighborhoods with swords, axes, iron pipes and bows and arrows.

With the situation on the edge of anarchy, several countries, including the U.S. and the Soviet Union, evacuated dependents of embassy employees last week. What happens next may depend on the military. "Don't leave," a senior military figure advised at week's end. "The next few days should be interesting."

—By Jill Smolowe.

Reported by William Stewart/Rangoon