Burma's Dear Leader

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MANDALAY, Burma

On a hot, dry afternoon this March, as I drove out of Mandalay, central Burma's largest city, toward the nearby hills, I got an immediate sense of the importance of Buddhism to everyday life here. Crumbling pagodas overrun with vines lined the road, their statues worn smooth by years of worshipers touching the faces.

As I wove past water buffalo and dilapidated ox carts, children and young adults flagged me down, rattling aging silver bowls for me to stuff with wads of kyat, the Burmese currency, to be used to restore these treasures.

But one pagoda didn't need any charity. A gleaming white structure swept spotless by a horde of workers, the modern pagoda was built by Burma's military regime as a supposed testament to its benevolence -- and, locals told me, in honor of the nation's ruler, Gen. Than Shwe.

One thousand years ago, Burma's monarchs also built pagodas and other religious structures -- more than 4,000 of them, in the central Bagan plains -- to demonstrate the power of the throne, to earn merit for their next life and perhaps to atone for some of their sins in this one.

Today, pagoda-mad Than Shwe is acting more and more like one of those classic monarchs. Ten years ago, Burma was an authoritarian nation, but it lacked the strange personality cult of totalitarian states such as North Korea and Turkmenistan. At the time, Than Shwe was just one of three generals heading the ruling Burmese junta and, diplomats told me, was considered the most dimwitted of the three. He had given few speeches -- just windy discussions of agriculture, supposedly a personal interest.

But the dimwit has proven masterful; over the past five years, Than Shwe, 73, has pushed out rivals and consolidated power. Despite his shellacked hair, wide jowls and thick glasses, he has turned himself into an object of Dear Leader-like adoration. And his already isolated government has become more bizarre, even moving its entire capital in recent months to a remote jungle redoubt called Pyinmana.

Burma's metamorphosis into a more North Korea-esque state began in 2003. After holding pro-democracy opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest on and off for more than a decade, the junta freed her in 2002, supposedly at the prodding of the most liberal of the three generals, Khin Nyunt. Optimism reigned, and Suu Kyi traveled throughout Burma announcing "a new dawn for the country."

Then Than Shwe stepped in. Suspicious of Suu Kyi, paranoid about the outside world and allegedly fearful of his own people, the senior general cut short any Burmese spring. In May 2003, thugs attacked Suu Kyi's convoy on a rural road, leaving 70 or more people dead; the U.S. State Department has publicly said that there is credible evidence that Lt. Gen. Soe Win, a close associate of Than Shwe, masterminded the massacre. Than Shwe has since held Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Than Shwe then turned on his partners. In October 2004, he had Khin Nyunt arrested and imprisoned many of his allies at Insein, a gulag that one former prisoner called the "darkest hellhole in Burma," which is saying something in a nation with some of the worst jails on Earth. Than Shwe replaced Khin Nyunt with Soe Win.

The xenophobic Than Shwe has closed local publications and started pushing out the small number of international organizations in Rangoon. The Burmese regime essentially evicted the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Swiss-based peace and reconciliation group with a long history in Rangoon. "Every NGO in Rangoon now is worried," one expatriate in the capital told me, noting that nongovernmental organizations also are being told they must funnel budgets through the state.

At the same time, the senior general has begun acting like a king. The general's relatives now refer to each other by royal titles, according to Burma analyst Aung Zaw; on a visit to India, Than Shwe reportedly required that people sit on the floor beneath him, in tribute to his self-appointed royal status. According to Bangkok-based Burma analyst Larry Jagan, the general has built a palatial residence complete with pillars coated in jade and Italian slate costing millions of dollars. When Than Shwe became dissatisfied with the Italian slate, he had it pulled out and replaced with even more expensive Chinese marble.

Like Burmese monarchs of old, Than Shwe also has embarked on a pagoda-building spree. The state-run press lauds each new monument by printing Pravda-esque encomiums and running photos of Than Shwe receiving blessings from monks. As Jagan notes, the government produced a film in which the face of a famous 11th-century Burmese king, who fashioned a glorious empire, morphs into the face of Than Shwe.

As Than Shwe travels the country, he stops in villages to issue so-called "necessary instructions" to peasants and officials on such subjects as construction and oil drilling, about which he knows nothing. When he arrives, the general often is greeted by rallies organized by the Union Solidarity Development Association, a government-linked national mass movement resembling fascist brownshirts.

Nightly television broadcasts are centered around Than Shwe: Than Shwe giving alms to monks; Than Shwe welcoming foreign visitors; Than Shwe blessing crops, as if he had the power to bring rain. Some observers say broadcasts feature Than Shwe with his grandson, to perpetuate the idea of a dynasty in the making.

This personalization of rule has made the regime more paranoid and unpredictable. When a bomb exploded in Rangoon last year, the regime blamed it on democracy activists and unnamed foreign powers -- i.e., the CIA. When the International Labor Organization criticized Burma, the country threatened to pull out of the organization. Than Shwe's regime has expressed a desire to obtain nuclear technology, which it could potentially finance from sales of newly discovered petroleum deposits. The government has also developed a closer relationship with North Korea.

Than Shwe reportedly makes almost every decision alone, including the choice to move the government from Rangoon to Pyinmana, 250 miles north, partly because he may view Pyinmana as safer from foreign invasion, and perhaps partly because ancient Burmese kings built capitals to leave their imprint on the country.

Though Rangoon had served as the capital for a century, Than Shwe ordered a vast complex built in Pyinmana, complete with bunkers, tunnels, his palace and extensive protections -- just in case the CIA attacks.

Then one morning last November -- at a time Burmese believe to be chosen by a court astrologer -- the regime started moving civil servants and military officials to Pyinmana in massive truck convoys laden with furniture. By March, dozens of construction companies were furiously building there, and Burmese exile groups were claiming that the government had forced people out of their homes to make way for the construction.

The regime refuses to release much information about the heavily guarded complex. Burma's information minister told reporters that Pyinmana "has quick access to all parts of the country" and thus would be easy to get in and out of, even though it previously had no real airport. "It's insane," one diplomat told me. "Are we going to have to move our entire embassy to that place?"

Than Shwe's bizarre approach seems to be working for him. The domestic intelligence apparatus, consisting of thousands of informers, helps him keep control, and in Rangoon each night I noticed far more police and military checkpoints than I'd seen during previous trips. Since 1990, the size of the military has more than doubled. Though the United States has imposed sanctions on Burma, the regime has discovered new sources of revenue: Asian nations -- in particular, China -- have expanded their trade with Rangoon, and foreign firms have found sizable new gas reserves in Burma.

The personalization of rule has proved disastrous for average Burmese. A nation rich in resources has fallen to among the poorest in Southeast Asia, with health indicators equivalent to those of sub-Saharan Africa. (The government claims implausibly high growth rates of some 13 percent.) In years of traveling to Burma, I have never seen the

population more desperate than this March. Beggars crowd Rangoon's sidewalks at night, or sleep in slag piles underneath half-finished construction sites.

In the late '90s, it seemed possible that Burma, one of Asia's most culturally rich nations, would enjoy a tourism mini-boom. The temples of Bagan, dotted across a plain, have survived for nearly a millennium. The region outside Mandalay contains ruins of ancient capitals of Burmese kingdoms and hill stations that resemble British resorts. Even chaotic Rangoon boasts a wealth of crumbling but still magisterial colonial architecture. But the country gets fewer than a million visitors per year. The gleaming Mandalay airport sits empty, a lone staffer wandering its cavernous halls.

There are signs that other nations are beginning to take notice. In December, the U.N. Security Council agreed to hold a briefing and discussion of the situation in Burma. And Beijing does not desire instability on its borders -- which could increase the flood of illegal exports and migrants into China. During a recent visit by Than Shwe to Beijing, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao expressed concern about the flow of drugs from Burma into China, an unusual amount of criticism of another country for any Chinese leader.

The last evening of my recent trip to Rangoon, I dined with a prominent figure in Burma's publishing scene, who has managed to dodge new censorship regulations and continue printing his books. As we strolled back to my hotel, stepping over bodies slumped on the streets for the night, he admitted that even his patience is nearing its end.

"Some of my friends moved to [Thailand] in 1990," he told me. "I thought my work was here." He paused.

"I need a plan to get out of here."

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