

August 27, 2005
New York Times

Burmese Power Struggle May Be Heating Up, or Not

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

BANGKOK, Aug. 26 - Wishful thinking, said U Aung Zaw, an émigré journalist from [Myanmar](#), who has seen it all before, many times.

Rumors of a coup among the generals who rule that closed and repressive country flared briefly this week and then died away just as suddenly.

Like rumors in the past, they seemed plausible. Things have been so bad for so long in the country once known as Burma that people have been saying for years that something has to change.

Moreover, things have recently been getting worse for the generals. But it remains as unclear as almost everything else in Myanmar whether a change in leadership would mean a change of any sort in policy.

Last month, Myanmar was forced to give up its turn to take the rotating chairmanship in 2006 of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to avoid a [United States](#) boycott of some of the meetings, a humiliation for the Burmese leaders.

The longstanding military government is more isolated and ostracized than ever from political and economic contacts with the outside world, and it continues to share a mutual fear and distrust with its people.

Major aid groups have begun withdrawing funds or warning of cutbacks as the government tightens restrictions on their operations. And for the past year, since one of the ruling troika was arrested - along with the entire military intelligence empire he controlled - experts on Myanmar say there has been an atmosphere of uncertainty and resentment among many military and civilian officials.

The wholesale removal of the country's spy apparatus has left the government further isolated from the population and blind in the face of developments that have included a rash of bombings earlier this year.

"So I put this all together and say there could have been some background to the rumor," said Josef Silverstein, an expert on Myanmar at Rutgers University. "And if not, Burma right now is at a point where it is probably ripe for some kind of change."

The rumor pitted the remaining two members of the ruling group against each other. The gossip was that the No. 2 man, Gen. Maung Aye, who commands the army, had seized power from the

junta's longtime leader, Gen. Than Shwe, 73.

"Than Shwe is now 18 years governing the country and remains deeply unloved by the majority of the population," said Aung Zaw, who edits Irrawaddy Magazine, an émigré journal based in Thailand. "That's amazing."

The question was whether having a new man at the top would make much difference in a country that has been isolated from the world since a military coup in 1962, and whose ruling junta has harshly suppressed political opposition since seizing power in 1988 and annulling an election it lost in 1990.

"That's the \$64,000 question," said Debbie Stothard, coordinator of Altsean-Burma, a regional human rights group. "Will Than Shwe - if and when he is succeeded - will he be replaced by someone more pragmatic and disposed to dialogue with the opposition?"

There has been no apparent voice for a more modulated approach toward the opposition since Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, the prime minister and head of military intelligence, was arrested in October on corruption charges. As tough as the rest of them, he had nevertheless appeared to advocate something a bit more creative than simply locking up the leader of the nation's democratic forces, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and whose party won the 1990 election. She was released from house arrest for a year before being physically attacked and confined again to her home in May 2003, for the third time in 14 years.

But that does not mean there are no other advocates for change within the ossified leadership structure that has pursued few new initiatives as the country has sunk deeper into poverty and isolation over the last two decades.

"We are not going to see the true colors of people until they come into power," said Ms. Stothard. "Obviously there are people in the regime who are more business-minded and pragmatic. But you can't be open about having a moderate position. Any general who says, 'I like dialogue' is basically someone who has a death wish."

Curiously, General Khin Nyunt appears to be not entirely excluded from possible future developments in Myanmar. He was sentenced last month to 44 years in prison, but the sentence was suspended and he is believed to be under house arrest now.

His corruption conviction may seem a rather audacious charge coming from a government that many analysts say is itself thoroughly corrupt. It is unclear whether his removal was the result of a pure power struggle or differences over policy. His lenient treatment could be a sign that he still has influential supporters within the leadership.

Meanwhile, the men in power continue to play on what seems a one-stringed instrument. Whenever they are faced with criticism from abroad they retreat into talk of democracy, boasting of a constitutional convention that has been held, off and on, since the early 1990's.

"The longest constitution-drafting convention in any country in the world," Mr. Aung Zaw calls

it.

And in the face of what they clearly see as a threatening world, these generals educated in jungle warfare appear to be retreating, literally, into plans for a bunker.

According to some reports by the news media and analysts, they are spending tens of millions of dollars to move the military headquarters from the capital, Yangon, 360 miles north to Pyinmana.

"They've started building mansions, compounds, underground tunnels, bunkers - all kinds of weird things," Mr. Aung Zaw said.

No one is quite sure what the complex is for. Some say it is a defensive position in case of an American invasion feared by the generals. Others say that like many of the policies of Myanmar's rulers over the years, it is being built at the direction of astrologers.

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company