



Burma's first and last democratically elected prime minister, U Nu, who has taken a key role in the campaign for democracy. Picture by Thomas Thomson. EP880907

Ne Win dumped by independence heroes

Rangoon (Reuters) — Legendary military heroes of Burma's independence struggle, linked to former President Ne Win by a 47-year-old blood oath, yesterday publicly abandoned him to side with an uprising against the system he created.

Bo Ye Htut and eight other survivors of the "30 Comrades" who founded the Burmese Army and wrested independence from Britain called on soldiers to back the uprising, which is demanding the resignation of the socialist government and the founding of a multi-party democracy.

"This must shock Ne Win because they abandoned him right then and there," said Win Htain, an aide to opposition leader General Tin Oo, who joined the ageing veterans at a rally of 3,000 people at a Buddhist pagoda in Rangoon.

Ne Win and the 30 Comrades were led by Aung San, the venerated hero of resistance against British colonial rule.

Military loyalty, focused on Ne Win, has been crucial to the survival of the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which took power in Burma after a 1962 coup.

Opposition leaders and Western diplomats said yesterday the army was clearly wavering.

Win Htain said he personally knew 17 officers from the 77th Light Infantry Division who had deserted, and said hundreds more would "join the people's side" once they were sure there would be no repercussions for their families.

Ne Win, who gave up the BSPP chairmanship in July after months of bloody protest, is widely believed to continue to be the real boss of the party.

The repudiation of the system Ne Win built, "the Burmese road to socialism", came from comrades in arms who drank blood with him in late 1941 to seal an oath to "always unite, whatever the cause".

"This is very significant in determining military support," Win Htain said. Bo Ye Htut told the rally, "Aung San founded the army to support the people, not a single party."

On Monday a proclamation was issued in the name of officers and senior enlisted men of the elite 502 Air Force Group endorsing opposition calls for abolition of BSPP rule and the setting up of an

interim government to supervise free elections and multi-party government, Win Htain said.

It said officers would not carry out unlawful orders to suppress dissent with force.

Tin Oo, 62, a popular former defence minister sacked by Ne Win in 1976, believed the document to be authentic, Win Htain said.

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