

# Uprising forces Rangoon to study art of compromise

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BURMA'S authoritarian rulers, who governed every aspect of citizens' lives for 26 years, are being forced by a popular uprising to explore the art of political compromise.

Hundreds of delegates to Saturday's emergency congress of the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party — staged to offer a compromise to a rebelling populace — were holed up in the parliament building, surrounded by barbed-wire barricades and soldiers carrying bared bayonets.

They ate army food because catering workers refused to feed them and slept on the floor on mattresses requisitioned by the army from the old colonial Strand Hotel.

How they came to be there, why they hold on to power in the face of almost universal disdain and whether or not their bid for compromise works, is the history of a generation of Burmese.

The BSPP was formed in 1963 to legitimise the rule of Ne Win, who had overthrown the mercurial U Nu in a military coup a year earlier.

The party's manifesto was designed to cover every aspect of Burmese life. It brought together Marxism, Buddhism, isolationism and militarism and called them the "Burmese road to socialism".

"The party's ideology includes everything," a

veteran analyst of Burmese affairs told Reuter. "In fact it is nothing. The 'Burmese road to socialism' is just a tool for keeping power in the hands of Ne Win and a few soldiers."

Each facet of the ideology was used to maintain the military men in power.

In the name of Buddhism, the party closed dance halls and other places where teenagers gathered.

In the name of Marxism, it put all economic activity, from oil refiner-

interviewer last week:

"Our new economic system...is extremely backward...and managed by individually inept people who do not know what to do and, thereby, bringing all of us down to the level of beggars."

He said there were many participants in the 1962 coup who wanted Burma to be a democracy with a largely free economy and a free press.

"But Ne Win had wanted the government to control everything," he said.

Ne Win retained power until this year through an

by Kevin Cooney

ies to beauty parlours, under state control.

In the name of isolationism, the party cut references to Burma out of foreign publications, censored mail from abroad and prevented citizens from travelling to other countries.

In the name of militarism, it provided privileged lives to senior officers and gave state jobs to retired soldiers, who now make up as many as 70 per cent of all civil servants.

The results for the country were ruinous. Burma, once the world's leading rice exporter, became barely able to feed itself.

General Aung Gyi, now a leading opposition leader but once Ne Win's number two, told a radio

elaborate network of spies.

"The only thing the BSPP has been able to run successfully in all its years power has been the secret police," a diplomat in Rangoon said.

Citizens were compelled to report the passage of any stranger down their street.

Burmese became suspicious of everyone they met. Poor, politically repressed, intellectually stifled, they rose in revolt this year.

They drove Ne Win from office, though he is still believed to be the true leader of the BSPP.

When his successor, Sein Lwin, had troops fire into crowds, killing 3,000 in Rangoon alone, the revolt continued. Sein Lwin was forced in turn to step down.

"The simple truth is that people are just prepared to die rather than go on living as they have been living," said the analyst.

"What the party has been doing over the past two weeks is marking the cards, preparing to shuffle and then to deal and then to arrange the bidding," said a Rangoon diplomat of the BSPP's election plan.

Another diplomat, contacted by telephone, said Burmese were arguing that any party announcement would mean nothing "until they make a final admission of defeat and go".

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