

# Burma military the key to change

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BURMA's tough military, which has propped up the ruling party for 26 years, is now the key to a struggle to overthrow the system, diplomats and Burmese analysts told United Press International.

After a burst of repression last month, the army has essentially stayed on the sidelines, the subject of intense pressure from both the ruling party and those fighting for political change.

"The military is doing very little and that has to be positive," said a Burmese analyst in Rangoon. "I don't think even the army can stop the people now, but it could make the struggle very bloody."

Both Burmese and diplomatic analysts admit it is difficult to assess the inner loyalties and workings of the army from the outside.

Since the 1940s when the army under national hero Gen Aung San led the fight for independence from Britain, the military has played a crucial role in Burmese political life.

Led by Gen Ne Win, the army overthrew the elected government in 1962 and began an insular experiment in socialist, authoritarian government.

Over the years the one-party government paid the military back with material privilege and political power.

The ranks of the ruling party were filled with retired military officers and more than 60 per cent of the civil service was made up of former servicemen from the 200,000-man military.

Ne Win's former unit, the 4th Burma Rifles, was the source for almost all of the country's top leaders even though many of them were poorly educated and inept.

When Ne Win, 77, stepped down in July it was Sein Lwin, a tough, retired brigadier who served in the 4th Burma Rifles, who took over. Sein Lwin decided force was the answer to political dissent. The army's 22nd Light Infantry Division opened fire on unarmed protesters in Rangoon.

The official radio reported that 112 bodies were brought to government hospitals from the shooting, but diplomats estimate that about 1,000 people were killed.

The harsh action did not stop the demonstra-

tions. It was Sein Lwin who was forced from power and the protests grew.

Now the government, under President Maung Maung, has tried a carrot and stick approach, but it is unclear whether the military stick will follow orders to open fire again.

Maung Maung offered multi-party elections but warned that "the time has now arrived to restore law and order."

He said the government was determined to retake government offices occupied by protesters and noted that "verbally ordering outsiders away... will not be sufficient."

But since his threat the military has made no move to back up his tough words.

"There are increasing signs that the military is beginning to waver, but despite all the rumours, no major units have gone over — the commanders still appear to be loyal," said a Western diplomat watching developments in the military.

## DEFLECT

Last week about 400 uniformed troops, mostly from the air force and the navy, marched through the streets of Rangoon to the cheers of the crowds.

Last week Defence Minister and military Chief-of-Staff Gen Saw Maung went on nationwide radio to try to deflect some of the pressure.

"Please do not engage in organisational efforts, persuasions, enticements and allegations to disintegrate the defence forces," he said.

The radio said troops were to shoot anyone caught spreading rumours that the air force and navy were preparing to bombard Ne Win's house and key government buildings.

Analysts said the army, battle-hardened and disciplined from years of battle against ethnic insurgencies, may well obey such orders.

The 22nd Light Infantry Division remains in Rangoon, but other units,

such as the elite 77th Light Infantry Division are camped nearby and may not be so willing to open fire.

The opposition forces have some powerful emotional weapons on their side.

Protest leader Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, has repeatedly invoked her father's name as the founder of the armed forces.

"My father Gen Aung San created the Burmese army under extremely difficult circumstances, so unity must be maintained within the army," she said in one of her first public speeches.

She urged "unity between the people and the army."

Demonstrators repeatedly chanted "The defence forces will be the people's defence forces."

Among the key anti-government leaders are Brig Aung Gyi, who helped bring Ne Win to power, and Gen Tin Oo, who was defence minister and chief-of-staff until Ne Win sacked him in 1976.

Both are believed to retain some influence in the military and they appealed to the army to defend the people, not the government.

"Today, it has become very difficult for the defence forces personnel to kill the people, because, by tradition they have fought against fascism and imperialism," Aung Gyi told the British Broadcasting Corp recently.

"Whatever the leaders may want to do, judging from the events of recent days, I think the defence forces will join the side of the people," he said.

Burmese sources said that military commanders have met several times to consider their position and they continue to believe that the government can withstand the pressure.

"The top ranks still appear to be loyal to Ne Win. Even if they eventually join the people they will insist on decent treatment for the old man," one source said.

The government has taken special measures to ensure that the troops received their salaries despite a strike at the banks.

Government radio assured troops that 600 million kyats (about \$100 million) was withdrawn to pay "salary and allowances to members of the defence forces."

Army troops have systematically emptied government warehouses, stockpiling food and fuel in their well-guarded encampments.

"The army cannot be allowed to go hungry even if the people starve," one Burmese said.

But the disintegration of civilian government control in many areas of the country means that the government is unlikely to be able to replenish its supplies from the rice harvest due to begin next month.

"The military has seen the civilian apparatus built up over 26 years swept away in a few weeks and that must give it cause for thought," a senior diplomat said. "A lot depends on what they decide."

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