

Saw Maung — Ne Win loyalist and hardliner

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GENERAL Saw Maung, who seized power in Burma yesterday, is regarded as a hardliner who has loyally taken his orders from strongman Ne Win during most of his own 39-year army career.

Citing mounting chaos in Burma, Saw Maung set up a "Peace Restoration Committee" with himself as chairman; abolished most organs of state; and imposed a curfew on the capital. But he promised multi-party general elections when order was restored.

Analysts had never ruled out the possibility of a coup by the 186,000-strong armed forces, the only well-organised group left in the country. But events also appeared to be moving towards a compromise between opposition leaders and the entrenched old guard.

Although few details about Saw Maung are known outside or within Burma, he is widely regarded as close to both Ne Win and the ruthless, toppled President Sein Lwin. Many Western diplomats in Rangoon believe both men remain the key power brokers in Burma, despite their official resignations.

Saw Maung, 59, was named defence minister last July 27 in Sein Lwin's government, which subsequently ordered troops to gun down demonstrators. Faced by massive, countrywide demonstrations, Sein Lwin resigned on August 12, while Saw Maung remained both defence minister and head of the armed forces.

His close association with Sein Lwin — described by opponents as

"the most hated man in Burma" — could ignite the already tense situation. Immediately after the coup announcement, thousands of people took to the streets, erecting barricades and calling for weapons.

Saw Maung was also criticised earlier by key opposition figure Aung Gyi for bypassing the prescribed chain-of-command when he ordered the 44th Light Infantry Division into Rangoon last March to brutally put down student-led demonstrations.

"He lacks the intellectual gifts of his predecessors at that post and, therefore, is seen as easily manipulated by the two top leaders," wrote Burma expert Bertil Lintner in a recent issue of the Hong Kong-based newsmagazine *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Orders from the top men — Ne Win and Sein Lwin — are normally executed by Saw Maung's deputy, Maj Gen Than Shwe, who Lintner described as "a ruthless field commander who is more feared than respected by his subordinates."

Than Shwe was listed in the No. 2 position on the 19-member Peace

Restoration Committee.

According to official records, Saw Maung was born in Mandalay and studied at a high school in that former royal capital.

He joined the army in 1949, a year after Burma gained independence from Great Britain. Although he was not of Ne Win's generation, which had fought first against the British and then the Japanese in World War II, Saw Maung appeared to have gained the general's favour.

By 1967, five years after Ne Win staged his military coup against a democratically elected government, Saw Maung became a battalion commander with the rank of major. Between 1975 to 1976 he headed the 99th Light Infantry Division, which was tasked with fighting communist insurgents and ethnic minority Kachin rebels in remote frontier areas.

An alleged coup attempt by some military officers against Ne Win in 1976 saw a major purge of army ranks. "Those who stayed on and did well had to prove their loyalty," notes Josef Silverstein, a Burma scholar at Rutgers University in the United States.

Saw Maung was rewarded in 1976 with the South-west Command, one of nine regional military commands in Burma. He held the position until 1981 when he became the adjutant general.

Two years later he was named army commander, or the vice chief of staff for the army in Burmese terminology, and deputy defence minister. He was promoted to chief of staff, or armed forces commander, in 1985. — AP

Siddhi: Burma events confusing

FOREIGN Minister Siddhi Savetalla said last night the Thai Foreign Ministry is closely monitoring the situation in Burma.

Since the situation there was confusing and little reliable news was trickling out of Burma, he was not in a position to present any views, he said.

However, he noted that the Foreign Ministry was in regular contact with the Thai Embassy in Rangoon.

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