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Burma coup seen as a Ne Win charade

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BURMESE citizens and Western diplomats in Rangoon say Sunday's military takeover is a phoney coup which has almost certainly been orchestrated by former leader Ne Win.

by Joseph de Rienzo of Reuters

They said it appeared a desperate bid to crush a revolution for democracy after a generation of repression and economic misrule and could even lead to civil war.

The organisation for building law and order in the state, made up of 19 top military officers, abolished the state administration and judiciary, banned gatherings of five or more people and slapped a curfew on the nation from dusk to dawn.

"In order to halt the deteriorating conditions on all sides all over the country and for the sake of the interests of the people, the defence forces have assumed all power in the state," said an order signed by army chief Saw Maung, once a Ne Win aide.

Ne Win groomed the army as the backbone of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) he created one year after seizing power in a 1962 coup that ended multi-party rule. Army killings of thousands of civilians in early August ignited full-fledged revolt against the BSPP.

"It's not a coup — how can you stage a coup if you're running the damn place already?" said one Rangoon-based Western ambassador contacted by telephone.

Although Ne Win resigned as chief of the BSPP in late July he is widely believed to still hold ultimate authority in the BSPP and the army.

"It is generally assumed by all sophisticated Burmese that Ne Win is still in the driver's seat," the ambassador said. Asked if the takeover was instigated by Ne Win, the envoy said: "Everything else is."

Another Western ambassador said Ne Win's direction of the takeover was obvious and added most of the officers named to the military ruling group were probably not party to the decision.

Continued massive protests and strikes were inevitable unless the increasingly hollow apparatus loyal to Ne Win is committed to the slaughter of civilians, several Burmese said.

"Unless they are ready

to resort to a massive use of force (the army) cannot crush the revolt. If they are, then the opposition will go underground and rise up again," a Western military attache said.

"These are Buddhists. They are not afraid of death," he added. He said if the army splits over support for Ne Win or the popular uprising it could lead to civil war.

Fired by anger over a generation of repression, plummeting standards of living and atrocities by riot police in March and June, Buddhist monks and students led the population to revolt.

They forced the BSPP into a protracted shedding of powers, privilege and leaders in the face of growing clamour for freedoms.

In July the party announced relaxation of state economic controls and the retirement of Ne Win as BSPP chief. He warned as he stepped down the army would use force to quell disorder.

His successor and security chief Sein Lwin dangled the prospect of freer border trade and internal commerce, then cracked down by ordering troops to fire on demonstrators. Three thousand were killed in Rangoon alone from August 8 to 12, according to doctors' estimates.

Within 18 days Sein Lwin was replaced by Maung Maung, reviled by Burmese as a stooge of Ne Win, while monks, stu-

dents and people from all walks of life proceeded to oust BSPP officials from major towns and virtually all public offices in the capital.

Almost daily demonstrations followed to demand the resignation of the BSPP government, formation of an independent interim administration and fair and free elections. A national strike to press the demand has paralysed the economy.

Last week the BSPP conceded that multi-party elections would be held within three months, but under BSPP auspices which were rejected by the opposition.

It also severed the armed forces and the civil service from the party.

A senior Western diplomat in Rangoon said he was surprised by the military takeover coming so late in the day.