

Last gasp or end of democracy for the Burmese?

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BURMA'S military, the nation's most potent institution for more than a quarter-century, has again resorted to force after seeing its power eroded by mass demonstrations and calls for full democracy.

Amidst a still-chaotic situation, diplomats and other analysts are trying to determine whether Sunday's military coup was the last gasp of an old guard that has tried both compromise and killing to cling to power — or whether the death knell for democracy has sounded.

The military takeover, headed by hard-line Defence Minister General Saw Maung, was preceded by weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations, strikes and lawlessness. It was followed yesterday by troops gunning down largely unarmed protesters, something they have been ordered to do several times over the past year.

Thus far, indications are that the 186,000-strong military — a disciplined and privileged force — has held together despite some earlier defections from the lower ranks. Other institutions have crumbled, including the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party, to which the military had been intimately linked for decades.

The opposition, with its half-dozen prominent figures, was able to mount massive, nationwide protests and win over much

by Denis Gray
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of the civil service, but could not deliver the knockout punch to 26 years of authoritarian rule.

Some say only substantial defections from the military or the elimination of shadowy strongman Ne Win — via violence or exile — could swing the pendulum back into the opposition camp.

"Predictably, the demonstrators who thought they were close to achieving the capitulation of the government and setting up an interim government are not accepting the military regime," one Rangoon-based diplomat said.

"I don't think they can stick the genie back in the bottle after the past month-and-a-half. I believe the people will rise up again, and this time they will be angrier," said Josef Silverstein, an American Burma specialist. But he predicted a tragic and bloody denouement.

Silverstein and other analysts believe that despite his official resignation on June 23, Ne Win still continues to manipulate events: first by sending in hardliner Sein Lwin to quell student-led demonstrations, then trying a moderate line with civilian Maung Maung and most recently opting again for the iron fist.

The 77-year-old Ne Win is largely responsible

for the army's dominant role, and since staging a military coup in 1962 has proved a cunning, secretive and often ruthless autocrat.

"Ne Win is very much in command and determined to ride it out, he sees himself as a kind of god who can do all this to Burma," Silverstein asserted.

However, Japanese Burma expert Minoru Kiryu believes events in recent weeks have not followed any "Ne Win scenario" and the coup was not staged at his behest, since the new authorities have abolished the very state organisations Ne Win had built up.

Whether the military will attempt to restore the former authoritarian government structure and shore up the faltering 2.2-million-member party also remains a question mark.

Saw Maung has promised elections under a multi-party system at some time in the future. And before the coup, the government announced military personnel could no longer belong to the BSPP or any other political parties.

One knowledgeable Western observer here said several kinds of military coups could have been possible: to save the BSPP, to stake out an independent position for the military or to side with the protesters.

"The way it seems to have been done is to try to safeguard the regime," the analyst said.



ABOVE: Marchers from all strata of the Burmese society demonstrate against 26 years of authoritarian rule in Rangoon earlier this month. The military moved this weekend to reassert control, which has triggered fighting between protesters and troops.

BELOW: Buddhist monks carry flags and placards as they demonstrate against the Rangoon government recently. — AP

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