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Opposition leaders have historical ties with military

BURMA's top three opposition leaders have united in a political party to oppose the military regime, yet all three have historical ties to the military from different eras.

And all have ties, direct or indirect with retired strongman Gen Ne Win — the man they are now trying to dislodge from his seat of power behind the scenes.

Retired Brig Gen Aung Gyi, 70, named as chairman of the newly-formed League for Democracy Party, served in the army nearly from its inception in World War II.

Aung San Suu Kyi, 43, who became the secretary general of the party, is the daughter of Gen Aung San, the founder of the army and still revered as the country's top national hero.

Party Vice President Gen Tin Oo, 62, was defence minister and military chief of staff until 1976 when he was suspected of involvement in an anti-government plot.

Aung Gyi served under Ne Win when the independence-minded Burmese military switched sides in World War II to join the Allies in expelling the Japanese army from Burma.

After independence from Britain in 1948 he was a key aide to Ne Win, by then the commander of the 4th Burma Rifles — the unit that produced most of the senior officers who rose in rank on the strength of their loyalty to Ne Win.

When Ne Win seized power in a military coup in 1962 Aung Gyi was beside him, number two man in the ruling military council, and the

by Brig Gen Sein Lwin, another graduate from the 4th Burma Rifles.

One of Sein Lwin's first acts was to order the arrest of Aung Gyi and his close associates, mostly retired military men.

Weeks of demonstrations forced the resignation of Sein Lwin within 17 days and Aung Gyi was released.

The day of his release he and Aung San Suu Kyi attracted crowds of about 800,000 to hear their calls for a disciplined struggle for democracy.

"He is a very good speaker, almost a demagogue," said one analyst. "He seems to have good political instincts. It has been obvious that he was campaigning for a leadership role."

Some students radicalized by the deaths of hundreds of their fellow demonstrators, however, are suspicious of Aung Gyi's conciliatory words for the military.

The students find Aung San Suu Kyi more attractive, who is one of the leaders very much by accident.

Suu Kyi was brought to Britain soon after the assassination of her father. There she was raised and married a British scholar who specialized in studies of Tibet.

But when the disturbances began escalating into a mass movement Suu Kyi was visiting her ailing mother, Khin Kyi, in Rangoon.

The lean, articulate Suu Kyi, herself a scholar at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, stepped in to

apparent successor to the tough ruler. But within a year they had a falling out, apparently over economic policy.

Aung Gyi, although a socialist himself at that time, felt Ne Win had come under the influence of doctrinaire Marxists. Banks and most enterprises were nationalized.

Aung Gyi's opposition to the autocratic Ne Win soon landed him in jail.

Released in the mid-60s Aung Gyi became a private businessman, successfully establishing a string of tea shops in the capital.

Associates said Aung Gyi's opposition to the government was sparked anew by a trip for medical treatment that allowed him to see the tremendous development in Thailand and Singapore, countries once far more backward than Burma.

He began writing a series of open letters to his old comrade Ne Win, exposing economic failures and human rights abuses.

"The country has plunged to the bottom politically, economically and socially," Aung Gyi wrote to Ne Win in a letter that became available throughout Rangoon. "The moral decay is the most deplorable."

He detailed torture and killing by riot police in disturbances in March and June.

The letters were reproduced and circulated widely.

When Ne Win resigned to accept "indirect responsibility" for the problems he was replaced by

provide a recognizable leader for the huge protests.

Listeners said her speaking style was reminiscent of the charismatic father she hardly knew.

She was accused, however, of having two senior advisers who were reputedly close to the Communist Party of Burma.

But Suu Kyi moved to distance herself from the men and has moved in concert with her more senior allies.

Like them she has emphasized her connections to the military.

"I have a great attachment to our armed forces — nurtured and fostered by my father," she told an interviewer.

Analysts, however, credit Tin Oo with the most influence in the armed forces.

Tin Oo, like Aung Gyi, was once tipped as the likely successor to Ne Win.

As military chief and defence minister, Tin Oo was regarded as popular and intelligent.

But in 1976 Ne Win's secret police uncovered a plot to depose him that involved one of Tin Oo's staff. Tin Oo himself was accused of failing to report the plot and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The sentence was reduced and the general took to the study of law on his release.

"Tin Oo seems to have maintained some of his contacts in the military," a diplomat said, "but it's hard to tell how much influence he still has."

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