

**WILL THE FAILED COUP ATTEMPT DERAIL THE ONGOING NATIONAL  
RECONCILIATION AND POLITICAL TRANSITION IN MYANMAR?**

Maung Aung Myoe<sup>1</sup>

March 2002

On 7 March 2002, news came out from Myanmar that the government had arrested the son-in-law, U Aye Zaw Win, and three grandsons, Aye Ne Win, Kyaw Ne Win, and Zwe Ne Win, of U Ne Win, who ruled the country between 1962 and 1988. Many people believed that U Ne Win (or General Ne Win) continued to yield and exercise influence among top military commanders who formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later transformed into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 1997, after the military takeover in September 1988. Some analysts interpreted the event of 7 March as an indication of 'the end of the Ne Win era'. Two days later, on 9 March, at a special conference, Major General Kyaw Win, Vice-Chief of Defence Services Intelligence, explained that the four were arrested in connection with a coup attempt. Additional information on the event was given at special press conferences on 12 and 18 March.

According to the information provided by Major General Kyaw Win, the coup plotters had planned to win over some military commanders and to use their troops to overpower and disarm security forces at the residences of the top three regime leaders – Senior General Than Shwe (Chairman of the SPDC and Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar Armed Forces), General Maung Aye (Vice Chairman of the SPDC and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar Armed Forces cum Commander-in-Chief of Army) and Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt (Secretary-1 of the SPDC and Chief of Defence Services Intelligence Bureau). Their plan had been to bring them before U Ne Win, where they are would be coerced in his presence to 'transfer state power to enable the formation of a new government with members who would acknowledge U Ne Win's authority'. This was in the event that the ringleader, Aye Zaw Win, was unable to get Senior General Than Shwe to agree to their demands for changes.<sup>2</sup> Major General Kyaw Win explained that "they (the plotters) did not seem to have the intention to be the government but wanted to form a new government with military leaders who would owe allegiance to U Ne Win".<sup>3</sup> Although Major General Kyaw Win later confirmed that Daw Khin Sandar Win, the favorite daughter of U Ne Win, had been involved in the plot, no arrest has been ordered yet.

Was U Ne Win involved in the coup plan? Major General Kyaw Win refused to say whether U Ne Win was personally involved in the plot. However, given the haphazard and unprofessional manner in which the coup was planned and executed, it is safe to conclude that U Ne Win could not have been behind the plot.<sup>4</sup> Having masterminded previous military coups in Myanmar, U Ne Win could have done a much better job.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Aung Myoe is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He was from the University of Mandalay, Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> Special Press Conference (12 March 2002), New Light of Myanmar (13 March 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Asian Wall Street Journal (13 March 2002)

<sup>4</sup> It was reported that the plan was to appoint a regional commander to the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (at the expense of eleven regional commanders and a dozen senior commanders at the

How will U Ne Win react to the situation? At present his favorite daughter, Daw Khin Sandar Win, along with himself, are under house arrest. His grandsons and his son-in-law are under arrest and will be charged with political, economic and social crimes. Daw Khin Sandar Win could also be charged as a co-conspirator at least if not as a ringleader. Perhaps, U Ne Win "could control, reduce and forget these sufferings through meditation", as he explained to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew during his private visit to Singapore in 1997,<sup>5</sup> and through realization of the law of impermanent nature. Being the person who built, cherished and safeguarded the unity within the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces), even at the expense of sacrificing his own protégés like Brigadier General Tin Oo (known as MI Tin Oo), U Ne Win would find it hard to believe that his own family was involved in "causing antagonism and division within the Tatmadaw".<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, U Ne Win's *ana* (authority) and *awza* (influence) have been waning. His *phon* (glory) has been in decline and his *hnaloneye* (moral courage) and *letyoneye* (physical courage) have long been forgotten among new batches of military commanders. Now, it appears that his *Kamma* (fortune) has been down even without the possibility of *Yedaya* (reversal). However, it is the *kyezu* (gratitude) owed to him among the top leaders of the SLORC/SPDC that keeps him happy and protected. It appears that, in late August and early September 1988, a few weeks before the military takeover, senior commanders of the time reached a decision and made a commitment not to make 'the guardians of the Tatmadaw' unhappy, among other things. Probably for that reason, the Myanmar authorities were quite tolerant towards the social and economic crimes committed by U Ne Win's family.

U Ne Win's grandsons, Kyaw Ne Win and Zwe Ne Win in particular, had a bad reputation and were known as leaders of the notorious gang, 'Scorpions'. "They always moved around day and night in a gang and there were many fights with other youths, by misusing the reflected glory (*Ashein-Ahwar*) of their grandfather and pressuring some members of security forces to commit physical abuse just to satisfy a personal grudge", Major General Kyaw Win explained.<sup>7</sup> There is also an unconfirmed report that, at one stage, one of the grandsons even rode a motorcycle to block General Maung Aye's motorcade. In terms of bad business practice, Kyaw Ne Win engaged in unauthorized sales of 1092 GSM mobile phones for 627.68 million kyats, through another company. Although it could take action against them, since telecommunication is considered an important facility and serious security matter in Myanmar, the government resolved the issue by simply asking Kyaw Ne Win to reimburse the money. The three grandsons also owned a company that was involved in the illegal import of motor vehicles. For years, Myanmar authorities had turned a blind eye to these social and economic crimes committed by U Ne Win's family members. But it appears that when they cross the line and become a threat to the political stability and unity of the Tatmadaw, the government is quite prepared to take action regardless of who they are. Major General Kyaw Win made it clear that since "these moves (coup plots) were destined to break up unity within the Tatmadaw and cause disintegration of the Tatmadaw, and to thwart the stability, peace and development of the State, the authorities had taken them (plotters) into custody and were

---

Ministry of Defence). Moreover, an appointment with a regional commander to discuss the coup plan was reportedly arranged at a restaurant.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2000), p. 363.

<sup>6</sup> Special Press Conferences (9 March 2002 & 12 March 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Press Conference (12 March 2002)

initiating legal action as necessary".<sup>8</sup> The authorities found 59 communication devices, 72 walkie-talkies, 6 satellite phones, 27 rubber batons, two mine detectors, and uniforms, including badges and flashes, within the premises of the plotters.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for the coup attempt, as explained by Major General Kyaw Win, was the loss of business opportunities resulting from the government's priority given to ethnic organizations, and by political and economic changes made by the regime. The family had become increasingly bitter and often complained about government policies, but it was their bad business practices that tarnished their name and deprived them of business opportunities. With regard to the failed coup attempt, Secretary-1 reportedly commented (at the opening ceremony of the Course in Diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) that "we are very much disturbed by an untoward incident aimed at undermining our cherished goals and disintegration of the armed forces".<sup>10</sup>

In connection with the coup attempt, three high-ranking military officials and one senior police official were put under investigation. The four are Commander-in-Chief (Air Force), Major General Myint Swe (officiating lieutenant general); Commander of Coastal Region Command, Major General Aye Kyway; Commander of Triangle Region Command, Brigadier General Chit Than (officiating major general); and Director-General of Myanmar Police Force, Police Major General Soe Win. Although diplomatic sources reported that these four officials had been sacked, Major General Kyaw Win revealed that investigations have yet to determine whether they were actually involved in the plot while he declined to identify the military commander who had immediately reported the plot and conspiracy on the same day he was approached by the plotter. Initially, there was also a rumour about the sacking of the Chief of Staff (Navy), Rear Admiral Soe Thein. This appears to be incorrect. There are also some unconfirmed reports that Brigadier General Ohn Myint, Minister for Mine, had been dismissed, that Brigadier General Maung Maung Swe, Commander of Northern Command, had been under investigation,<sup>11</sup> and that senior military commanders from Coastal Region Command area had been arrested.<sup>12</sup> Since the investigation is still underway, it is difficult to determine the extent of these commanders' involvement in the alleged coup plot. It is also quite likely that a number of people will be sacked or charged under the legal clause of 'intentionally withholding information'.<sup>13</sup> It was reported that over a hundred people are under interrogation.

While investigations continue, many questions remain to be answered. Did the military commanders really plan to throw their weight behind U Ne Win just to restore the family fortune, power and influence of an ailing statesman? Many people are doubtful about this. Did they try to exploit the grudges of the U Ne Win family to initiate their own

---

<sup>8</sup> Special Press Conference (9 March 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Special Press Conferences (12 & 18 March 2002). It is important to note that these telecommunication devices are usually regarded as G-control materials in Myanmar, only to be used with authorization from the General Staff Office.

<sup>10</sup> New Light of Myanmar (13 March 2002)

<sup>11</sup> DVB Broadcast (1330 GMT, 13 March 2002). It also reported that some officers from Air Force were detained in connection with the coup attempt.

<sup>12</sup> DVB Broadcast (1430 GMT, 13 March 2002). The DVB reported that three MOC (Military Operation Command) commanders, namely Colonel Htein Win (MOC-8), Colonel Khin Maung Yin (MOC-13), Colonel Tin Maung Tun (MOC-20) and three TOC (Tactical Operation Command) commanders, namely Colonel Soe Thet, Colonel Kyaw Swa and Colonel Khin Win, were arrested.

<sup>13</sup> The problem with this clause is that one finds it difficult to assess whether the information the accused gets is right or wrong or credible.

reform agenda, out of dissatisfaction and frustration with the present leadership? Without the active support and participation of commanders at the Ministry of Defence or War Office level, this seems unlikely. Many observers were surprised by the fact that commanders allegedly involved in the plot were from far-flung areas. Indeed, most of the regional commanders and MOC (Military Operation Command) commanders, including those who are reportedly under arrest or investigation, are pretty new in their respective command positions, and therefore unlikely within this short period of time to have been able to influence and mobilize their officers and men for this dangerous move, however well intended.

Despite this incident, the national reconciliation process in Myanmar will continue. Some analysts saw the coup attempt as an indication of "a split within the military government, which would have major implications for the on-going dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi".<sup>14</sup> However, the government spokesman gave assurance that the dialogue would not be affected by this recent development. There are several clear indications that the government is firmly committed to national reconciliation and political transition in Myanmar. It appears that some form of consensus has been reached and broad guidelines for political transition has been agreed upon particularly among the top three leaders of the SPDC, namely Senior General Than Shwe, General Maung Aye and Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt.

Since October 2000, the Myanmar government has engaged in secret dialogues with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi regarding national reconciliation and possible political transition in Myanmar. The government spokesman assured that though "the ongoing process (of national reconciliation and dialogue) might seem to be slow to some, but it is a steady and sure process where success is imminent".<sup>15</sup> It appears that Major General Kyaw Win and Colonel Than Tun form a link between the SPDC leaders and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In fact, Major General Kyaw Win was reported in Asiaweek to be the dealmaker.<sup>16</sup> It was also reported that Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt maintains a regular fortnightly contact with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>17</sup> A recent report even stated that Senior General Than Shwe met her on 22 January 2002 and that the meeting lasted for more than a couple of hours.<sup>18</sup>

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, appointed Malaysian-born diplomat, Mr. Razali Ismail, as his special envoy to Myanmar to 'facilitate' the process. Razali made six visits to Myanmar and planned to go back again in March 2002, but he postponed it at the request of the Myanmar government. One report attributed to Razali after his visit in August 2001, stated that he thought it would take two to four years for civilian rule to be restored in Myanmar.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, with confidence, at the end of his last visit to Yangon in November 2001, Razali issued a statement that he was "hopeful that some significant progress could be achieved in the near future in the talks" and that he was pleased that "all parties remained committed to the process of national reconciliation and democracy".<sup>20</sup> In addition, he expressed hope that he might see "a clear guide-map by

---

<sup>14</sup> The Straits Time (13 March 2002)

<sup>15</sup> The Myanmar Times, Vol. 6, No. 103 (18-24 February 2002)

<sup>16</sup> Asiaweek (25 May 2001)

<sup>17</sup> Bangkok Post (6 September 2001)

<sup>18</sup> CNN News (31 January 2002)

<sup>19</sup> The Straits Time (22 November 2001)

<sup>20</sup> The Myanmar Times, Vol. 5, No. 93 (10-16 December 2001)

2002".<sup>21</sup> During his sixth visit to Yangon, Razali reportedly inquired about the progress of the dialogue and had pressed the SPDC leadership to come up with a timetable and some tangible result. He was told that preparations were underway. Moreover, when Senior General Than Shwe reportedly told Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, at the ASEAN summit in Brunei in November 2001, that the military leadership "does not care what kind of position Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would hold in the course of democratization", it was interpreted that the SPDC had significantly softened its position on the political dialogue and she might have a future in politics.<sup>22</sup>

Within the SPDC regime and government, after the death of Secretary-2, Lieutenant General Tin Oo, in February 2001; the sacking of Secretary-3, Lieutenant General Win Myint, and Deputy Prime Minister cum Minister of Military Affairs, Lieutenant General Tin Hla; and the resignation of two deputy prime ministers and three ministers; the SPDC decided not to appoint new secretaries, new deputy prime ministers and new ministers. Instead, some ministers were assigned to concurrently hold two ministries. While some analysts think that the sacking of the two powerful figures was to improve the business climate, others think that it was a clean-out of hardliners unhappy with the possibility of compromises with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the ongoing dialogue.<sup>23</sup> However, there was no indication that these two generals were capable of enforcing their will on the top leadership.

Within the Tatmadaw itself, preparations are underway for leadership transition and a smooth transfer of command. Although rumours have floated around in Yangon for sometime, about new military positions (such as bureaus of special operations and bureau of air defence), many people were surprised by the new positions, which allowed all regional commanders with SPDC membership to take up the rank of lieutenant general and positions within the Ministry of Defence in Yangon. The most important position created so far would be the position held by Major General Thura Shwe Man. The position is known in Myanmar as '*Tatmadaw Nhyinaing Kutkaeyehmu (Kyi, Yay, Lay)*', which can be loosely translated as either 'Joint Chief of Staff (Army, Navy, Air)' or 'Chief Executive Officer (Army, Navy, Air)'. Since the Commanders-in-Chief of the Navy and the Air Force both report to Major General Thura Shwe Man, the latter is commonly referred to among the rank-and-file as '*Du-Choke-Athit* (new Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces)' or '*Ta-Choke* (Third Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces)'. General Maung Aye is reportedly beginning to transfer some of his responsibilities to Major General Thura Shwe Man. Some knowledgeable observers on the Myanmar military believe that Major General Thura Shwe Man will become Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces as well as minister for Defence in the future. More importantly, he appears to have the support and confidence of both senior and junior commanders.<sup>24</sup> He is known for his good leadership, both in command and in staff positions. The new command arrangement suggests that the present military leadership is planning a smooth leadership transition within the Tatmadaw. Moreover, as it appears that the future Commander-in Chief (Navy), Rear Admiral Soe Thein (replacing the present Commander-

---

<sup>21</sup> The Star (Malaysia, 29 November 2001)

<sup>22</sup> Asia Week (16 November 2001)

<sup>23</sup> The Straits Times (22 November 2001)

<sup>24</sup> For example, in early February 2002, soon after he came back from a tour in Sagaing Division, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt donated a computer set to the primary school in Major General Thura Shwe Man's native village (Myawaddy Television). Moreover, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt reportedly told senior civil servants to look into and fulfill the needs of Major General Thura Shwe Man's native village.

in-Chief, Vice Admiral Kyi Min, who is about to retire) and Commander-in-Chief (Air Force), Major General Myint Swe, (now reportedly being sacked) were classmates of Major General Thura Shwe Man, the present leadership is also serious about organizational unity within the Tatmadaw. Assigning commands to comrades from the same intake (DSA-11) would prevent inter-service rivalry. Even though Major General Myint Swe is being replaced by the present Chief-of-Staff (Air), Colonel Myat Hein (DSA-17), there is no indication that the Tatmadaw will suffer from organizational disunity.

Looking at domestic political developments, since June 2001, the government has allowed the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to reopen its branch offices in townships. Within six months, 13 branches were reopened in the Yangon division alone. Many more branch offices will be reopened in various parts of the country. In August 2001, the government lifted restrictions on the movement of U Aung Shwe and U Tin Oo, two leaders of the NLD, as part of confidence-building measures.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, many prisoners were released from jail although many still remain inside.

Behind-the-scene persuasion (or pressure) also plays an important role in the national reconciliation process in Myanmar. In this respect, one should examine the importance of the China factor. During his four-day visit to Myanmar, which was in December 2001, at the invitation of Senior General Than Shwe, Chinese President Jiang Zemin supposedly gave friendly and timely advice to Myanmar leaders that Myanmar should implement a political system suitable for the country. His advice included the need for the Myanmar government to fulfill its promise of implementing a multi-party democratic system.

In recent years, it appears that the PRC (People's Republic of China) has begun to see Myanmar more as a liability than asset. To some observers, Myanmar's over-reliance on the PRC for political and economic (developmental) support would have led the Chinese leadership to view Myanmar as a dependent ally. On the other hand, the Myanmar leadership would also probably feel that they are being neglected. Although the early 1990s witnessed high-level state visits from the PRC, such as those by General Secretary of the State Council Luo Gan in January 1991, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in February 1993 and Premier Li Peng in December 1994, the later half of the 1990s, especially after 1997, failed to cultivate a closer relationship. While Premier Zhu Rongji made trips to most of South and Southeast Asian countries, he did not pay a visit to Myanmar. Only when the Myanmar government began to develop warmer relations with India, that the PRC began to give more serious attention to Myanmar, sending Vice-President Hu Jintao in July and then President Jiang Zemin in December 2001. However, there also seems to be some concerns among the PRC leadership, in connection with its association with Myanmar. As the PRC leadership is fully aware of the fact that further tightening of sanctions by the West, especially by the US, on Myanmar would be against the interest of the PRC, it began to persuade and to press the Myanmar government to move on with political reform and transition.

It also appears that the Myanmar government also takes friendly advice from Malaysian statesman Mahathir Mohamad seriously. Observers in Myanmar believe that

---

<sup>25</sup> The Myanmar Times (Vol. 2, No. 24, 31 August – 6 September 2001)

the sacking of two top generals in late 2001 was closely related to complaints made by the Malaysian Prime Minister to his counterpart during the latter's visit to Malaysia in September. Prime Minister Mahathir reportedly told Senior General Than Shwe to clean up the economic house of Myanmar and to create a better business climate for investment. Some analysts also believed that the Malaysian Prime Minister appeared to have given friendly advice to Senior General Than Shwe on the need to go ahead with promised political transition and democratization. ASEAN as a whole has also played an important part in this process of national reconciliation. It appears that ASEAN's steadfast support of Myanmar in the face of western criticism and sanctions have eventually made the Myanmar leaders feel *ah-nar-hmu* (guilty). It seems that the Myanmar government no longer wants itself to be a continuing embarrassment to ASEAN, of which it is a member since 1997. It is most likely that, in a way of showing its appreciation to ASEAN, the Myanmar leadership is committed to national reconciliation process and political transition in Myanmar.

There are some reports that Myanmar is heading towards economic and social disaster. Skyrocketing prices of consumer products, the scarcity of some essentials, such as cooking oil,<sup>26</sup> and the chronic shortage of foreign exchange reserve in Myanmar lead some analysts to predict that major social unrest is on the way. However, there are others who argue that if the regime does not care for economic development, it can go back to its autarkic economic policy and remain in power through an effective use of instrument of violence and suppression, since Myanmar is still self-sufficient in staple food. But they believe that it will not be the course of action the present regime will take and that "their love of the nation" would prevent them from going backward and leaving "the nation at the beck and call of others".<sup>27</sup> In this context, the Myanmar government will continue to engage in dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and to proceed with national reconciliation and political transition.

There are also some other factors that are conducive to the process of national reconciliation in Myanmar. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi appears to understand the rules of the game and try to play by the rules. She complies with the regime's request for secrecy. She does not reveal any information and the content of the meetings to anyone. Although she receives a number of foreign delegations and special representatives, she keeps a tight lip on her dialogues with the regime. She has managed to convince the SPDC regime that she is acting on her own and is not receiving instructions from foreign powers. In the past, the regime used to see her close association with diplomats and delegations from the western countries as evidence of her being a tool of the west. Moreover, in recent years, major western governments, including the European Union (EU), had softened their criticisms of the Myanmar government considerably. In fact, there is less pressure and no more lectures from the west, which were usually seen by the Myanmar government as foreign interference in its internal affairs. This sets a favourable condition for the regime leaders to proceed with the national reconciliation process. This is a welcomed change. Previously, western pressure usually elicited negative reactions from the Myanmar leadership that suffered from a strong siege mentality. Japan also welcomed the progress of the national reconciliation process in Myanmar and rewarded the government by resuming developmental assistance. This will further serve to encourage the Myanmar government to speed up the process.

---

<sup>26</sup> In major cities, there are long queues for state-subsidized cooking oil and other essential products such as soap bars.

<sup>27</sup> Senior General Than Shwe's address at the USDA Special Meeting on 19 February 2002.

Thus, in conclusion, the recent failed coup attempt would not affect the ongoing dialogue, national reconciliation and political transition in Myanmar. Moreover, the failed coup attempt would also facilitate the process since the regime no longer needs to take the welfare and security of the U Ne Win family into consideration. Once again, the military leadership sent a clear signal that any attempt to bring antagonism and disintegration within the armed forces will not be tolerated and it will take all necessary measures to ensure that the Tatmadaw remain united.