

## Baby steps as Burma's opposition finds its feet

- Elizabeth Hughes in Rangoon
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a phone stall in Rangoon. The Burmese opposition wants an end to trade sanctions, saying they hurt the middle class and the poor but not the ruling generals

Source: Supplied

**BURMA'S largest official opposition party, the National Democratic Force, is housed in a slightly tatty beige building in suburban Rangoon.**

The narrow street seems deceptively quiet and peaceful, but lurking informers keep Burma's noxious military regime informed of comings and goings from the NDF office, and military intelligence officers regularly turn up to demand information about who has been visiting.

The party's founder, Khin Maung Swe, smilingly shrugs off the menace, preferring to concentrate on the painfully slow transformation of Burma's military regime into something a little less monolithically brutal.

"It seems to be the same, but there is some difference," he tells *Inquirer*. "There is some movement in this country. Sovereign power is not with one man any more. Now we have a so-called civilian government."

Now 68, the democracy advocate was once a confidant of the much-hounded Aung San Suu Kyi and a stalwart of her

National League for Democracy.

He won a seat for the NLD in the 1990 elections, but the party's landslide victory was simply ignored by the generals. He was then imprisoned in various squalid and windowless cells for 17 years for treasonous activities such as trying to pass information about Burma to foreigners, including UN officials.

A splinter group of the NLD, the National Democratic Force broke away when it became clear that neither Suu Kyi nor the NLD would take part in last year's much-derided elections.

Now, after 50 years of military rule, Burma's new national parliament is in session. Although circumscribed and overwhelmingly dominated by soldiers and members of the proxy military party, it has given democrats a forum of sorts. Opposition politicians, including those in the NDF, have been hard at work on questions and motions that might make the cut in the national and regional legislatures.

Khin Maung Swe says NDF plans include economic reforms to pensions and land ownership laws and the like, which may win support from the military-proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party, and, more daringly, a competition bill to outlaw the monopolies run by the generals and their cronies and an amnesty for Burma's thousands of political prisoners and exiles.

"It would be an amnesty for political prisoners without any conditions," he says, adding that the motion was unlikely to win any support. "They will leave it behind, they do not dare to touch that kind of question."

There is also political movement in rural Burma. Some measure of power has necessarily been decentralised to the regional parliaments and some ethnic minorities, such as the Shan and the Mon, have representatives in Burma's assemblies.

One aid worker says the regional parliaments may be the best hope of real change; far from the main hubs, out of the line of fire, under real pressure from the populace. "It's baby steps," she says. "But at least it's moving."

Meanwhile, Senior General Than Shwe, who has run Burma since 1992, has tried to ensure a trouble-free retirement by hammering out a broad distribution of power rather than handing the reins to a single man who could turn against him.

Analysts from the International Crisis Group, which recently published a report on Burma, believe the nation can do better being governed by a clique rather than by one autocratic and capricious ruler. And new President Thein Sein is known to be less of a hardliner than many of his colleagues.

On the economic front, too, some limited change is creeping over Burma's horizon. The nation has a great deal of natural wealth, including vast reserves of natural gas, yet it remains one of the poorest nations in Asia.

But under the new constitution it seems that technocrats may finally have some say over the economy, and the opposition parties are pushing for change.

"In 10 years we will have a better condition than now," Khin Maung Swe says with a tired smile. "In 10 years we can hope for political democracy. If we want to solve the political problem, we first have to solve the economic problem."

The privatisation of state assets is also under way.

No doubt opaque and corrupt, this privatisation push could lead nevertheless to more efficient business operations.

Sean Turnell, a Macquarie University economist who has written widely on Burma, says the sell-off, largely to cronies, mostly has been behind closed doors. Only some lesser spoils, such as cinemas, have been advertised.

Until recently, a Toyota wagon, well past its prime with 450,000km on the clock, was worth about \$US50,000 in Burma. And, until recently, this aid worker's car miraculously gained rather than lost value as it aged.

Car prices have been artificially inflated by import quotas and restricted licences (the ruling military regime has instituted a system of car owners' licences). But during the past four or so months car prices have fallen by half, largely in expectation of increased import quotas and owners' licences

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Tay Za and Zaw Zaw, two of the generals' more notorious cronies, have been granted import licences (although their size remains unclear), along with Burma's 11 professional soccer clubs, perhaps as a sort of subsidy.

Like other opposition parties in Burma, and various global organisations such as the Cato Institute and the International Crisis Group, the NDF wants the West's trade and investment sanctions against Burma binned.

Australia imposes sanctions that target only the regime and its cronies, but broader sanctions, imposed by the European Union, the US and others, forbid investment and trade in certain fields.

But Burmese party leaders say Western investment is needed to bolster Burma's moribund economy and provide a moral example. Suu Kyi has yet to come up with a firm position on sanctions, although she has said she would welcome independent tourists and ethical investment. According to Phone Win, chief of a Burmese aid organisation and a failed independent candidate in last year's elections, Burma needs Western investment to promote ethical standards of operation.

"We try to promote responsible investment," he says. "This is not the time to argue about sanctions. I would like to have more and more investment. It should be good for the people, good for the environment, good for the sustainable development of the country." Change is in the air, he adds, with a broad smile.

Businesses are already sniffing around, and Rangoon's hotels are full of entrepreneurs and executives on feasibility trips.

"Sanctions are hurting the middle class and poor people much more than the generals. Generals always have room at the top; they can have a fake passport, they can have anything."

But Turnell says financial sanctions shouldn't be abandoned. The Burmese military regime is an "enormous kleptocracy" and extraordinary amounts of money are spirited offshore.

"At the moment only the generals and their cronies can access the international financial system, so the bans hurt only them," he says, while noting that sanctions don't seem to have affected the generals much.

"I think nothing has worked, actually. What we've got in Burma is a regime that really cares very little for international opinion and cares little for international development. It's an authoritarian regime, but it doesn't have the developmental mindset of, say, Vietnam or China."

The people of Burma have become inured to corruption, intemperate crackdowns, crumbling infrastructure, regular blackouts and poverty.

The military regime still has 2200 political prisoners locked away in dismal jail cells. It still tortures dissidents and wages war on ordinary people who happen to be living in one of the conflict zones, such as Karen state on the border with Thailand. The generals and their cronies live in luxury and their children dance the night away at nightclubs (such as the ritzy Gingki Kids club in Rangoon, known as "Crony Kids" to many expatriates).

At the same time, hunger stalks the dry central zone of Burma and children in the conflict districts have a one in five chance of dying before age five.

The nation's latest budget appears to have been formalised without recourse to parliament, and it is geared to the generals: 23.6 per cent, about \$2 billion, of the funds have been earmarked for defence. By way of contrast, the health sector will get about 1.3 per cent, roughly \$110 million.

But, rather than plan a violent overthrow, opposition politicians are prepared to wait. "We've been waiting for 20 years," Khin Maung Swe says.

"We have to be patient for another 10 years. We no longer have the military regime. There's more space."