

Quashing the Rumors

That Burma, the land of a thousand generals, would be shaken by the death of a lieutenant colonel is perhaps unthinkable, not unless that officer happens to be Bo Win Tun, the personal assistant to Vice Senior General Maung Aye.

The news about the death of the personal aide to the second most powerful man in the Burmese Defense Services invoked interest at first. Then came wild rumors about how Bo Win Tun lost his life protecting Maung Aye during an assassination attempt. There were also whispers that Bo Win Tun committed suicide at the War Office. But since Bo Win Tun was given a formal military burial at the Mingaladon Cemetery and his obituary described him as having died "while performing his duties" suicide was ruled out as the cause of his death. Questions remain.

While rumors of Bo Win Tun were circulating, another story even more ominous was sweeping Rangoon and concerns the extended absence of Prime Minister Lt Gen Soe Win and General Thura Shwe Mann from the state media. This coupled with Bo Win Tun's death generated speculations of an imminent shake-up and a power struggle within the military junta.

To quash these rumors, Rangoon television news program of 28 January showed Chief of the Defense Services Senior General Than Shwe, Vice Senior General Maung Aye, Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council Lt Gen Thein Sein, and Lt Gen Soe Win at a meeting with ethnic nationality students.

The *New Light of Myanmar* also carried photographs of the top leaders but Soe Win was seen seated with other ministers and officials while Lt Gen Thein Sein was shown sitting next to Maung Aye (*below*).



Given the fact that Thein Sein was Soe Win's deputy when the latter was SPDC Secretary-1 before being appointed as the prime minister to replace the dismissed General Khin Nyunt, the seating arrangements suggest Thein Sein is now the favorite of the top generals.

The *New Light of Myanmar* on 2 February again showed all the top generals together at a meeting with the Thai Supreme Commander Chaisit Shinawatra in Rangoon.



Soe Win & Officials

Rangoon Media Behavior

Although there is little doubt that rivalry between the generals started the rumor mill running, the change in the behavior of the media in recent months also played more than a significant role in generating speculations about the "power struggle" within the SPDC.

Burma being a country where all important news is kept in the dark and all media sources are controlled by the state, any change in the way the media behaves is quickly interpreted as politically significant.

Prior to the dismissal of Prime Minister Gen Khin Nyunt and his intelligence officers, the state-run media in Burma primarily focused its coverage on the activities of the former prime minister and those of the other top generals. This was followed by the reportage on activities of the Bureau of Special Operations commanders and regional commanders.

The media coverage has now changed, perhaps under orders from the top generals who did not want individual leaders to be the only newsmakers. The top generals continue to hog the headlines whenever their names appear in the news but the coverage now focuses more on the activities of Cabinet ministers and regional commanders with the Bureau of Special Operations commanders appearing in the news only on certain occasions.

This means that for Burma watchers the new media coverage trend must also be taken into account when considering the status of leaders who occasionally disappear from public view. Prime Minister Lt Gen Soe Win and that of General Shwe Mann went missing from the state-run media for a few weeks. Shwe Mann and Soe Win went missing from the media three and two weeks in January, respectively, until they reappeared a few days ago.

Bureau of Special Operations Commanders

Bureau of Special Operations Commanders Lt Gen Ye Myint, Lt Gen Aung Htwe, Lt Gen Khin Maung Than, and Lt Gen Maung Bo, who had once disappeared from the state media following the dismissal of the intelligence officers under Gen Khin Nyunt, are now back in the media highlights although less frequently than before.

Information Committee

Meanwhile, the generals have re-formed the Information Committee as of 30 December last year with Information Minister Brig Gen Kyaw San as chairman. The committee has members from the Directorate of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare, the Research Department of the Office of the Army Commander in Chief, the Bureau of Special Investigation, the Police Force, and the Office of the Military Security Affairs, among others.

Judging from the press conference held on 1 February, the committee still needs to do a lot of work as far as information about democratic organizations outside the country are concerned. All it could come up were speculations and outright lies and groundless accusations.

Convention without Representatives of the People

The press conference by the junta's Information Committee made it known that the National League for Democracy (NLD), the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, and the Shan State Kokang Democratic Party will not be invited to the "National Convention" that the SPDC will be holding on 17 February because the three parties did not join the convention when it was held last year.

The three parties won 416 Parliamentary seats out of 485 at stake in the 1990 elections.
