

Death of a hero: The U Thant disturbances in Burma, December 1974

Andrew Selth

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Research Paper

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'Death of a hero: The U Thant disturbances in Burma, December 1974'

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Preface to the Third Edition

In January 1974, I was posted as Third Secretary to the Australian Embassy in Rangoon, then the administrative capital of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma.¹ In those days, the usual length of such assignments was two years but, at my request, mine was extended by eight months. I returned to Australia in August 1976. During my time in Burma, the country and its people made an indelible impression on me and have remained abiding interests ever since. Casting my mind back to those early days, I have many strong memories, but one episode in particular stands out. That is the protests which took place in Rangoon in December 1974, after the return to Burma of the remains of U Thant, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) from 1961 to 1971, and Burma's most respected international statesman.

Before U Thant's casket arrived back in Rangoon, there was considerable discussion among the resident diplomatic community about how it should respond to these developments. Uppermost in the minds of most ambassadors and representatives of international NGOs in the country was the possible reaction of the leader of Burma's military-dominated government, former General Ne Win.² It was widely believed that he had always resented U Thant's personal and professional closeness to former Prime Minister U Nu, who Ne Win had overthrown in a coup in March 1962. It was also the accepted wisdom that Ne Win later became envious of the UN Secretary-General's international status and reputation. This apparently made most diplomats in Rangoon wary of doing anything that might provoke the wrath of the notoriously volatile president.

As protocol demanded, the three resident UN representatives went out to Mingaladon Airport to meet the casket, when it arrived on a Burma Airways Corporation plane provided by the government.³ However, of the national representatives based in Rangoon, only the Australian ambassador, Garry Woodard, was prepared to risk official disfavour and join them. Woodard judged that if there was any temporary unpleasantness it would be contained by the good bilateral relationship that existed between Australia and Burma, which had been confirmed by the reciprocal visits of the Australian prime minister and the Burmese president earlier that year.⁴

I was too junior an officer to play any part in these events. However, after U Thant's coffin was seized by students and Buddhist monks on Thursday 5 December 1974, and taken back to the campus of the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University (RASU), I was anxious to learn more. On the Saturday evening, without informing any of my colleagues, I made my way to the campus, where I was welcomed by the students guarding the university gates. They invited me inside and directed me to a large gathering then being held in the RASU Convocation Hall. My limited grasp of the Burmese language made it difficult for me to understand everything being said, but the atmosphere in the hall was electric. Everyone around me, young and old, were full of hope. They felt that they were at a critical turning point in the history of modern Burma. I was asked by many of those present to tell the outside world that they would no longer be denied a democratic government.

I could not help being infected by their optimism, such was the atmosphere in the Convocation Hall that night. However, I also felt that the students and their many supporters had underestimated Ne Win's determination to hold on to power, and the support that he still commanded among the security forces. And so it proved. After the RASU campus was stormed by army and police units in the early hours of 11 December, and protesters filled the streets, martial law was declared in Rangoon. Troops and armoured vehicles were deployed throughout the city. The first indication the Australian embassy had of this development was the sight (and sound) of two of the Burma Army's vintage Comet tanks rumbling down Strand Road.

The civil unrest and martial law regulations (including a night-time curfew) made travel around Rangoon difficult.⁵ However, for both personal and professional reasons, I was keen to know what was happening. Walking around the city centre that week, I witnessed a squad of armed and obviously battle-hardened soldiers stopping a bus and ordering several young men to get off. They were then made to kneel on the footpath while the soldiers cut their long hair with bayonets. I can still remember the look I was given by one of the boys being assaulted. At the same time, the Australian Defence Attache and his assistant were being driven around Rangoon, taking the measure of the city, when they suddenly found themselves caught between a large group of protesters and a

military road block. When the soldiers started firing at the protesters, they did not need to tell the embassy driver to leave the scene!

Shocked by all these developments, I was determined to record what I had seen, and felt. I wrote a detailed account of my visit to the RASU campus and sent it under cover of a short explanatory memo to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra. This was not only to inform my government of what was happening but also to ensure that, somewhere, my eye-witness account was put on the official record. That document, a copy of which I kept in my personal files, later helped me write the research paper which follows. Before tackling that project, however, I spoke to some of my former colleagues in the embassy, who had their own memories of those eventful days. In this regard, Garry Woodard's recollections, and wider reflections on the U Thant episode, were very helpful in putting my experiences into a broader historical and political context. He shared my view that the so-called 'U Thant disturbances' needed to be recorded, and that record made public.⁶

The monograph that follows was first published by the Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations (CSAAR), at Griffith University, in April 1989.⁷ It did not meet the CSAAR's usual criteria for occasional papers, as it had little directly to do with Australia's relations with the region. However, it was felt sufficiently important and topical by Dr Don McMillan, the Centre's Director at the time, for an exception to be made. Only six months earlier, there had been a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in Burma, followed in September 1988 by the installation of a new military regime (albeit still under Ne Win's influence). Indeed, such was the level of popular interest in developments in Burma that stocks of my paper soon ran out. After he took over as Director of the CSAAR, Professor Russell Trood arranged for another print run. The paper was re-released to the public (with only minor editorial changes) as a second edition in May 1993. At no stage, however, was the paper produced in soft copy.

The CSAAR monograph was well received. Not long after it appeared a member of U Thant's immediate family made contact and encouraged me to expand it into a full length book. Unfortunately, I was heavily committed to other projects at the time, and could not do so. I was also conscious of the difficulty of conducting the research required for an in-depth study, given the state of affairs in Burma at the time. The paper also attracted the attention of the Burmese expatriate community. Copies were requested by activist organisations based in the United States, Thailand and India. At the same time, the paper was serialised by the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (Australia) (CRDB), a Sydney-based organization with ties to the exiled National Coalition government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).⁸ The CSAAR paper was reproduced in the CRDB (Australia)'s bi-monthly *News and Views* in five parts. The first part was published in November 1993, and the last part appeared in the July-August 1994 issue.⁹

The CSAAR paper received a number of favourable reviews. In December 1989, for example, it was mentioned in a review article written by noted Burma-watcher Bertil Lintner for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.¹⁰ The following year, there was a short review of the paper by Professor Josef Silverstein in the journal *Pacific Affairs*, and a more comprehensive overview by the Australian academic Ron May appeared in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*.¹¹ The paper also received an honourable mention in an address given by former ambassador Garry Woodard to the Sydney Institute on 13 September 1989, entitled 'Burma: The Struggle for Democracy'.¹² All four reviewers noted the dearth of reliable information available about contemporary developments in Burma, and about the 1974 U Thant disturbances in particular.

Since the re-issue of the CSAAR paper in 1993, interest in it has remained high. Indeed, following a number of important developments in Burma over the past several years, requests to the Griffith Asia Institute (the latest incarnation of the CSAAR at Griffith University) for copies of the paper have increased.¹³ It has also been cited in a range of publications concerned with political developments in Burma, particularly the periodic protests made by elements of Burmese society opposed to military rule. For example, following the 2007 civil unrest dubbed the 'Saffron Revolution', the paper was quoted at length in the Human Rights Watch report *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*.¹⁴ Most researchers, however, found it difficult to gain access to a hard copy of the CSAAR paper. It is to meet this demand that a third edition is now being issued and posted online.

After the military crackdown of December 1974, a number of exiled dissidents wrote personal accounts of the tumultuous events of that month.¹⁵ These circulated among activist groups, and a few were published in dissident journals.¹⁶ However, the strict censorship regulations enforced at the time, and the ever-present threat of arrest,

made it difficult for such works to be distributed inside Burma. This is no longer the case. In recent years, several accounts of the U Thant disturbances, in both Burmese and English, have been released.¹⁷ Most have been written by participants who, no longer faced with harsh restrictions on their freedom of speech, or fearful of the consequences for family members inside Burma, felt able to produce their memoirs. One notable English-language contribution was by U Thant's son-in-law, Tyn Myint U.¹⁸ In 2014, a collection of rare photographs taken during the disturbances was posted online by the *Myanmar Times*.¹⁹

In addition, several scholarly works have examined Burma's politics at the time of U Thant's funeral. For example, Mya Maung interviewed a number of student protesters for his book *The Burma Road to Poverty*.²⁰ Thant Myint U wrote at length about this period in *The River of Lost Footsteps*.²¹ Donald Seekins included an account of the disturbances in his 2011 study of modern Rangoon.²² Robert Taylor's comprehensive biography of Ne Win looked closely at the General's reaction to the return of U Thant's remains to Burma.²³ All these publications have provided valuable information and added fresh perspectives. In some places, they have corrected the historical record. To get the full picture of U Thant's funeral and the related civil unrest, my CSAAR paper should be read in conjunction with these and other works. It is also worth recording that the paper has been checked for accuracy by a senior Burmese official with excellent access to the inner circles of Ne Win's government.

After the formation of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1988, and the appointment of U Lwin to the party's senior leadership, a copy of my CSAAR paper was passed to him through an intermediary, and his opinion of it sought. Following Burma's independence in 1948, U Lwin was a senior officer in the *Tatmadaw* (armed forces). In 1959, he was appointed Burma's Defence Attache in Washington DC. Following Ne Win's military coup in 1962, he became a member of the ruling Revolutionary Council. Along with Ne Win and 19 other officers, he resigned from the armed forces in 1972 but remained in high office. He served as Burma's Minister for Planning and Finance, Deputy Prime Minister and as a Member of the State Council. He retired from government service in 1980. U Lwin died in 2011. He was a member of Cabinet in 1974, however, when U Thant's funeral took place, and was thus in a good position to know why Ne Win acted as he did.

U Lwin told my contact that the CSAAR paper was accurate, as far as it went. However, it lacked one key insight into the episode. According to U Lwin, Cabinet raised with Ne Win the question of whether or not there should be a state funeral for U Thant after the return of his remains. Although they did not voice their opinions, this was considered appropriate by some of the ministers present. In response, however, Ne Win simply grunted and left the room. His lack of any guidance on the matter left the Cabinet in a quandary. Rather than do something that might upset the 'Old Man', a decision was taken not to do anything. That is why no government representatives went to the airport to meet the casket when it arrived from New York.²⁴ It also helps account for the low-key official effort to honour the deceased statesman. According to my contact, U Lwin felt that the disrespect initially shown towards U Thant was more a case of neglect, rather than deliberate policy.

The version of the paper that follows has been slightly edited and a few minor corrections have been made, but no attempt has been made to update it, or to allow for the lapse in time since its initial publication by the CSAAR in 1989. It is true to the original, with two exceptions. The first is this preface, which is aimed at letting readers know the background to the paper's authorship and why it is being reissued. The second, and most significant, difference is that it now carries a foreword by Dr Thant Myint U. He is a respected historian, writer, past Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and was advisor to the president of Burma from 2011 to 2016. He has served as well on several United Nations peacekeeping operations and is the founder and chairman of the Yangon Heritage Trust. Dr Thant Myint U is also U Thant's grandson, and has direct experience of the events described in the paper, as recounted in his book *The River of Lost Footsteps*.

I am very grateful to Thant Myint U for making a contribution to this project, and to former ambassador Garry Woodard for his encouragement and advice over many years of Burma-watching. I should also like to express my appreciation to the Director and staff of the Griffith Asia Institute for making the online version of my paper possible. It should be noted that I took full responsibility for the contents of the paper in 1989, which was published without any official input or endorsement. That remains the case.

Preface Notes

- 1 The official names of the city and the country were changed to Yangon and the Union of Myanmar in 1989. In this paper, the old names have been retained for editorial reasons. The seat of government was transferred to the newly-built capital of Naypyidaw in November 2005.
- 2 Ne Win resigned from the armed forces on 20 April 1972, but continued to be known by his military rank.
- 3 The three UN agencies with resident representatives in Rangoon in 1974 were the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- 4 Personal communication with Garry Woodard, 28 January 2018. Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam made a four-day official visit to Burma in January 1974. President Ne Win made a return visit to Australia from 27 May to 4 June 1974.
- 5 After martial law was declared on 12 December 1974, the Protocol Division of the Burmese Foreign Ministry advised all diplomatic missions in Rangoon that no receptions, dinners or private parties were to be held, and that travel by diplomatic staff should be restricted to 'normal duties'. Missions were also warned that the curfew would be strictly enforced.
- 6 The euphemism 'disturbances' was first used in an article written by 'our staff reporter' entitled 'Help given for U Thant's funeral recounted, course of events related', *The Guardian* (Rangoon), 10 December 1974.
- 7 Andrew Selth, *Death of a Hero: The U Thant Disturbances in Burma, December 1974*, Australia-Asia Papers No.49 (Brisbane: Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, Griffith University, April 1989).
- 8 The NCGUB was based in Washington DC, under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi's exiled first cousin, 'Prime Minister', U Sein Win.
- 9 Andrew Selth, *Death of a Hero: The U Thant Disturbances in Burma, December 1974*, serialised by the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (Australia), West Ryde, in *News and Views*, Vol.5, No.6, November/December 1993; Vol.6, No.1, January-February 1994; Vol.6, No.2, March-April 1994; Vol.6, No.3, May-June 1994; and Vol.6, No.4, July-August 1994.
- 10 Bertil Lintner, 'Burmese days of rage', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 December 1989, pp.84-6.
- 11 Josef Silverstein, 'Briefly Noted', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.63, No.1, Spring 1990, pp.133-4; and Ron May, 'Analysing recent events in Burma', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.44, No.3, 1990, pp.291-4.
- 12 Garry Woodard, 'Burma: The Struggle for Democracy', *The Sydney Papers*, Spring/Summer 1989, pp.51-60.
- 13 The CSAAR was replaced by the Griffith Asia Pacific Research Institute (GAPRI) in 2001. This in turn became the Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) in 2006.
- 14 Bertil Lintner, et al, *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), p.24.
- 15 See, for example, 'General Ne Win Should Resign', *The Burma Bulletin*, Vol.3, No.1, January 1975. Also, in the years following the events of December 1974, a collection of first-hand accounts was compiled by a group of Burmese exiles. However, the book was never formally published. A typescript copy was given to the author by the Canadian philatelist (and editor of *The Burma Peacock*) Alan Meech, in November 2003. It originally came from the library of James Barrington who, from 1950 to 1955, was Burma's ambassador to the United States and Permanent Representative at the United Nations. Barrington was Burma's ambassador to Canada from 1963 to 1970 and spent his last days in exile there.
- 16 See, for example, an article published by U Kyaw Win, which was based on 'unimpeachable information smuggled out of Burma'. Kyaw Win, 'Burial with Honour', *News and Views*, Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Burma (Australia), West Ryde, Vol.5, No.4, July-August 1993.
- 17 See, for example, Hla Oo, '1974 U Thant uprising – a first hand account', *New Mandala*, 23 July 2008, at <http://www.newmandala.org/1974-u-thant-uprising-a-first-hand-account/>
- 18 Tyn Myint U, 'The Last Days of U Thant', *Mizzima News*, 6 July 2014, at <http://archive-3.mizzima.com/opinion/features/item/11682-the-last-days-of-u-thant/11682-the-last-days-of-u-thant>

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- 19 Htein Win, 'Forty years on, fresh images emerge of U Thant's funeral', *The Myanmar Times*, 15 December 2014, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/12558-forty-years-on-fresh-images-emerge-of-u-thant-s-funeral.html>.
- 20 Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp.411–60.
- 21 Thant Myint U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp.310–16.
- 22 D.M. Seekins, *State and Society in Modern Rangoon* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.127–32.
- 23 Robert H. Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), pp.432–6.
- 24 According to some accounts, including Wikipedia's online entry for U Thant, the Deputy Minister for Education, U Aung Tun, also went to the airport, for which he was reportedly dismissed. This does not appear to be accurate. He did lose his job, but probably for other reasons. See note 39 below.

Foreword



by

Thant Myint U

U Thant died when I was eight years old. He was my maternal grandfather, and until that day we had lived together, with my grandmother, parents, and younger sisters, first at the UN Secretary-General's official residence in New York City, and then in Harrison, a small suburb about 40 minutes north of the city by car. I remember him well, coming home in a dark overcoat and fedora, carrying a briefcase, writing in his carpeted book-lined study, with a framed photograph of Mahatma Gandhi at his spinning wheel on the wall, swimming in our pool, sometimes with me, watching the evening news or the 1970s sitcom "All in the Family" on a clunky TV in his bedroom. I remember too seeing the *New York Times* with the headline "U Thant Dead of Cancer at 65".

There was no question that U Thant would be buried in Burma and after an official ceremony at the UN, his remains were flown to Rangoon, accompanied by my parents, the UN's chief of protocol Sinan Korle, and me. The decision to include me was my grandmother's idea: I had never been 'home' before and she thought this might be as good an opportunity as any.

The next few weeks remain vivid in my mind: stepping off the plane from a leafy autumn in New York to the dank heat and smells of Burma, the crowds in their *longyis*, the cavernous rooms and uninspiring room service at the Inya Lake Hotel, the whispers amongst adults about goings-on, the meetings with newly met relatives to discuss how best to respond to what even a child could understand was an unexpected and unnerving situation.

I wasn't there when U Thant's remains were actually seized. I went once to the university with my parents during the days his body was there. I never discussed at any length what happened with them or interviewed them or other relatives on their recollections. Though I'm an historian, my work until recently had been focused on the 18-19th centuries.

And so I read with great interest Andrew Selth's monograph *Death of A Hero*. It is the only comprehensive English language account of what happened in December 1974 and has well stood the test of time. Since 2011, Burmese historians and those involved in the disturbances have been far freer to discuss and write what happened, but nothing that has emerged has challenged Andrew Selth's account and analysis. It is an excellent exploration of the actual events and an insightful look of what they meant for modern Burmese history.

1974 was a turning point. The military-dominated government was then a dozen years old and considering alternative futures. It had just set up a new constitutional system, one ultimately under the thumb of the army and its undisputed leader General Ne Win, but one that still could have gone in different directions. The 1974 U Thant disturbances shook the foundations of this new system's legitimacy, at least in the eyes of the urban elite and middle classes, and fuelled an international image of Burma as one under a particularly despotic regime.

The U Thant disturbances have also taken on a mythic significance, as a precursor to the bigger 1988 uprising, as part of a long story setting democrats against tyranny. The truth is far more complex, and it's important therefore to have a dispassionate account, as this one is, as part of a needed and critical re-examination of Burma's recent past.

They were as well an interesting intersection of global and local dynamics. U Thant in the 1960s was a global figure, unconnected to Burmese politics. His funeral took on significance because of his work on global issues,

from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, but was then shaped by the internal politics of the then Rangoon elites and their university-age children.

I was very pleased to learn that this important work was now being re-published, with a new preface by the author. At this critical moment in Burma's politics, with issues of war and peace, transformational economic change, fast-moving relations with China, and a still fragile transition from isolation and democracy, it's absolutely vital that people in Burma take a hard look at their recent history and see more clearly the events that have led to these particular junctures. Foreign governments and those outside attempting to influence or assist Burma today would also do well to better understand Burmese history, at least to do no harm, at best to help finally set the country on a better track.

I am sure the re-publication of *Death of A Hero* will inspire new research and new thinking on this pivotal moment in Burmese history.

1. Introduction

The widespread anti-government demonstrations in Burma before the army re-exerted its control on 18 September 1988 constituted the worst outbreak of domestic political violence since the 1962 military coup, in which General Ne Win seized power. The only other time that the government had been forced to declare martial law was in 1974, when students and Buddhist monks abducted the body of the former United Nations Secretary-General, U Thant.¹

While there are a number of important differences between the 1974 and 1988 disturbances, there are also a number of striking parallels. On both occasions, the Burmese government's insensitivity to popular feeling sparked off demonstrations which quickly grew beyond its immediate control. Led mainly by tertiary students, the unrest was supported on both occasions by monks (*pongyis*) and members of the public. The banned Rangoon University Students Union was resurrected as a symbol of, and organisational focus for, intense anti-government feeling. In 1974 and 1988 the army and riot police were called in to restore order. In both cases, albeit to differing degrees, the security forces were under the control of the hated Sein Lwin, also held responsible for a massacre of university students in 1962.

The initial causes of the unrest in each case were quite specific – the shabby treatment given to U Thant's remains by the Ne Win regime in 1974 and Sein Lwin's appointment to the Presidency in 1988. In both cases, however, the demands of the demonstrators quickly expanded to encompass the same widespread and deeply felt popular grievances. Not surprisingly, given Burma's consistent decline since 1962, they concentrated on improved living conditions and a return to democratic government. When senior United Nations (UN) official Tyn Myint U called in 1988 for the abolition of one-party rule in Burma and economic growth aimed at satisfying people's basic needs, he could have been echoing the activists who abducted his father-in-law's body 14 years earlier.²

The U Thant disturbances now tend to be forgotten, or dismissed as a mere footnote in Burmese history. Robert Taylor's recent study of *The State of Burma*,³ for example, barely gives them a mention and other authors accord them similar treatment. Also, many published accounts of the events in December 1974 contain numerous errors of fact and interpretation. In the wider sweep of Burmese history this lack of careful scrutiny is perhaps understandable, but the abduction of Thant's body and subsequent riots can be seen as an important episode in contemporary Burmese political development. An understanding of events in 1974 can better inform observers about the latest series of violent demonstrations in Rangoon and the manifest failure of the Burmese Way to Socialism. They also have a wider interest, U Thant's long tenure at the head of the United Nations giving him an international reputation. The seizure of Thant's body has even been cited as an example of domestic terrorism, which has implications for states now trying to combat that particular problem.

2. The Setting

When Burma was granted independence from Great Britain in January 1948 the position of Prime Minister fell to U Nu. Although a sincere and deeply religious man, Nu was in some respects quite unsuited to deal with the combination of military, political, social and economic problems which faced the new Union.⁴ The armed forces made significant progress against ideological and ethnic rebels but the internal political environment continued to deteriorate. Splits developed in the major parties, usually around particular personalities or cliques, and effective government became increasingly difficult. In 1958 Nu invited General Ne Win, the army Chief of Staff, temporarily to take over the premiership. It was hoped that a period of military control would permit measures against so-called economic insurgents, re-establish law and order and prepare the country for national elections.⁵ To a large extent, these aims were met. As Josef Silverstein has pointed out, however, 'the methods of the caretaker government were direct and sometimes severe; they produced results but did not gain popularity'.⁶

Although it was originally intended that Ne Win would hold office for only six months, the elections were not held until February 1960. Nu's party (the so-called 'Clean' faction of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, or AFPFL) easily won office again, partly because of his promise to make Buddhism the state religion. The election result, however, produced an even more fractured political scene than before. The army had favoured Nu's rivals in the more pragmatic 'Stable' AFPFL. The favour shown to Buddhism had antagonised some of the (largely Christian) minority groups. A number of regional parties emerged which, with ethnic insurgencies growing in the Shan and Kachin states, led Nu's government to propose greater regional autonomy, including for the Arakan and Mon peoples. In addition, the leaders of Shan State were considering their legal, if impractical, option of leaving the Union. There were also disagreements over the economy, in particular the plan to nationalise major importing firms. All these developments were of growing concern to the armed forces, which saw a slide back into the confused and ineffective civilian government which had preceded its 18-month period of caretaker rule.

Early in the morning of 2 March 1962 General Ne Win and the armed forces seized power in an almost bloodless coup. Citing 'threats to national unity', they dismissed parliament and installed a 'Revolutionary Council' of 17 military officers dedicated to the pursuit of a specifically Burmese way to socialism. Nu, the Chief Justice, many Shan princes and other prominent figures were imprisoned. Over the next two years the constitution was suspended, all the old political parties were banned and the courts reconstituted. Freedom of movement was curtailed and restrictions placed on contacts with foreigners. Burma's vigorous free press was closed. Most significant sectors of commerce and industry were nationalised. Ne Win's xenophobia, socialist policies and the harsh treatment given to foreigners also led to a mass exodus of Indians and Chinese, which in turn further undermined the country's economic and bureaucratic infrastructure.

In July 1962 the new regime formed the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) as a cadre party.⁷ Later, in an attempt to mobilise workers and peasants in favour of the government, People's Councils were formed around the country as sub-units of the BSPP. The Party subsequently enlarged its membership and took steps to become a mass organisation, but remained dominated by members of the armed forces. Also, between 1962 and 1970, some 2,000 senior civil servants were forced to retire and were replaced by military officers or their civilian supporters. In 1972, Ne Win and 20 of his senior commanders retired from the army to become civilian members of the government. The Revolutionary Council was reorganised as a Cabinet with Ne Win as Prime Minister and 14 others as members. Thus, almost all key posts in the government, bureaucracy, corporations and cooperatives came to be held by members of the BSPP.⁸ To further consolidate the Party's hold over the country, the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) created a formidable network of informers. Two groups singled out for particular attention by the regime were the students and the *sangha*, or Buddhist 'monkhood'.

Students had been a strong political force in Burma since the nationalist struggles of the 1920s and 1930s. The geographical focus of much of this unrest was the campus of Rangoon University, and in particular the Rangoon University Student Union (RUSU). The RUSU was formed in 1926 with a new building of its own in

the university grounds. Initially dominated by more conservative students aligned with the university Administration, the Union later fell under the influence of vocal nationalists like Aung San, M.A. Raschid and Nu. When Aung San and Nu were expelled from the university in 1936 for their political activities, a national strike followed. Largely as a result, the 'Student Union' became a nation-wide movement and a powerful political force. The young men who had captured student leadership in 1935 and led the revolt against the authorities the following year successfully retained their hold on the student imagination.⁹ A number joined organisations like the *Dobama Asiayone* ('We Burmans' Society) and attempted to continue their nationalist agitation in the formal political arena. It was a tradition which was continued by the students at the country's tertiary institutions after Burma received its independence from the British in 1948.

The student unions initially protested against the 1962 coup but, curiously, did not take much decisive action against it. By the end of March all major student organisations had endorsed the new military regime.¹⁰ When Rangoon University students returned to classes that May, however, they were greeted with new, stringent hostel regulations. Violence soon erupted. On 7 July troops of the 4th Burma Rifles, commanded by Sein Lwin, were called to break up a demonstration of about 2,000 students, who were protesting against the increased restrictions imposed upon them. When they refused to disperse the order was given to open fire. Official figures put the casualties at 15 civilians dead and 27 wounded, but unofficial accounts put the number of deaths alone at over 100.¹¹ The following day the Rangoon University Student Union building, headquarters of student protest for over a quarter of a century, was dynamited and levelled by bulldozers. Student leaders in the building at the time disappeared.¹² Another arrested by the security forces was subsequently executed. The Union itself was banned.

While these actions effectively silenced the students for a period, it did not end their opposition to the Ne Win regime. Nor did the destruction of the old Student Union building end its importance to student activists. The site became a symbolic focus of protest against the military regime and, later, the one-party government of the Burma Socialist Program Party. In the years that followed, the students built a monument there with a height of 7 feet 7 inches and a base of 62 inches, denoting the date the students were killed (7-7-62). This monument met the same fate as the original Union building. Makeshift huts were also erected. These too were destroyed. By the 1970s there was something of a lull in student activity, but the authorities continued to keep a very close eye on the country's tertiary campuses, where it was estimated about 20 per cent of the student body were agents of the MIS.¹³ Whenever there appeared any likelihood of trouble, all universities, colleges and teaching institutes were closed.

Like the students, the Burmese *sangha* had played a significant role in the anti-colonial campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s. Religious, cultural and purely political factors became intertwined to produce a potent force against the British. Activist *pongyis* like U Ottama and U Wisara were considered martyrs to the nationalist cause.¹⁴ Through various Buddhist associations, the monks also commanded the means to quickly mobilise large numbers of people around the country. Religious centres like the Shwedagon Pagoda in central Rangoon and, to a lesser extent, the Mahamuni (or Arakan) Pagoda in Mandalay were the sites of many protests. Even after Burma regained its independence, the Buddhist hierarchy exercised considerable political influence and during the 1960 national elections many monks actively campaigned for the return of the Nu government.¹⁵

When Ne Win seized power, the Revolutionary Council 'eschewed religion as a basis for legitimacy'¹⁶ and immediately took steps to control the Buddhist hierarchy. The Council claimed that Nu's emphasis on religion had politicised the *sangha* and distracted it from its purely religious functions. State support for Buddhism ceased. The army was also concerned that opposition could emerge through the monkhood, which was not only highly respected by the public but also enjoyed a number of special privileges under the law. In 1964, when political parties other than the BSPP were banned, all Buddhist organisations were ordered to refrain from political activities. A move to register them, however, was abandoned after a monk immolated himself in protest. Further attempts to bring the *sangha* under control were equally unsuccessful. In 1965, for example, 92 monks were imprisoned when another effort was made to register them. The only other large-scale involvement of Buddhist monks in overt political activity occurred in 1974, over U Thant's funeral.

The year 1974 marked an important stage in Burma's political and economic development. That year, a new constitution was promulgated which, on the surface at least, introduced a number of major changes. Between

January and February elections were held for 451 members of the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, or People's Assembly. State power was formally handed over to the new body on 2 March, the anniversary of the coup which had brought Ne Win to power. Later that month the Assembly elected a Council of State, which was accorded wide powers. Ne Win stepped down as Prime Minister and was immediately returned as the Council's first Chairman (and thus the country's President). The remainder of his old Cabinet took positions either in the State Council or in the new Council of Ministers. Thus, while the Assembly ostensibly became the sole source of government authority, it was little more than an adjunct to the BSPP, which continued to exercise total control over political life in the country. As Arumugam has observed:

In essence, therefore, the adoption of the new constitution merely legitimized the consolidation of military power through the government's political arm – the BSPP.¹⁷

At the same time, the BSPP was enshrined in law as Burma's only legal party.

Also, by 1974 dire necessity had forced the government to revise its unrealistic and ideologically bound economic policies. In the 12 years since the coup, the Burmese gross domestic product had only increased 42.1 per cent. Despite increased production, rice exports had consistently declined, reducing the level of foreign exchange available for crucial imports. Manufacturing had stagnated and was crippled by shortages of raw materials and spare parts. In addition, the cost of living had increased significantly. The consumer price index for Rangoon, for example, had grown 54 per cent in the two years from April 1972 to April 1974.¹⁸ Private trading in rice had been banned in 1963 but, because of the government's failure to offer a realistic purchase price, it managed to secure only 18 per cent of the (record) 1973–74 rice crop. This was insufficient for internal distribution through the state cooperatives and the official ration had to be reduced.¹⁹ The government distribution system was in any case chronically inefficient and riddled with corruption. Basic commodities could still be obtained through the burgeoning black market, but at much higher prices. In addition, new wage scales were improperly implemented, further exacerbating economic hardships for the average worker, particularly in the cities.²⁰

Faced with these and other pressing economic problems, the government had been forced to compromise some of its socialist principles and adopt a more positive attitude to foreign assistance. In 1972 it turned to the World Bank and in 1973 joined the Asian Development Bank. An Aid Burma Consultative Group was later formed and large loans obtained for forestry, industrial, transport and agricultural projects.²¹ The relatively pragmatic Minister for Planning and Finance, U Lwin, was given clearance to begin negotiations with a consortium of foreign oil companies. By mid-1974 service contracts had been awarded for four off-shore blocks and several more were being discussed. All restrictions on private paddy trading were lifted in August but reimposed in November 1974, when the government redoubled its efforts to implement a state purchasing program. Perhaps most importantly, the price offered to farmers was increased in an effort to raise the stocks of rice available to the cooperatives and for export. Ministers toured the countryside to encourage greater participation in the government's paddy purchasing system.

None of these measures, however, managed to improve the country's parlous economic position, which continued to fuel popular dissatisfaction with the Ne Win regime. In May and early June 1974 there was a rash of workers' strikes over high prices and chronic food shortages. Some of the protesters also carried placards calling for the restoration of U Nu's parliament. Violence broke out in Rangoon when attempts were made to arrest the strike leaders and to seize hostages among the workers. The army was called in to stop the rioting, which they did with brutal efficiency. Twenty-two people were reported killed and 73 wounded, including 13 policemen.²² Order was restored on 8 June but public gatherings were banned and all educational institutions were closed to prevent further unrest. The public anger aroused by the savage response to these disturbances was soon aggravated by revelations that large quantities of undistributed food, clothing and medicines were rotting in government stockpiles. In addition, widespread floods that August severely reduced the rice harvest, leading to further food shortages and price increases. As the end of 1974 approached, feelings against Ne Win and the government were running high.

3. The Secretary-General

U Thant was born on 22 January 1909 in the Burmese delta town of Pantanaw, where his father was a prosperous rice miller. Educated at Pantanaw National High School and University College, Rangoon, Thant became a teacher at his old school, rising in 1931 to the position of headmaster. In 1942 he was made Secretary of Burma's Education Reorganisation Board but later turned his hand to journalism. A thoughtful and devout man, he tried to apply Buddhist teachings to his life and work at all levels. In an article published in 1946 he wrote:

The permanent greatness of Burma could be built only on sound morality and Buddha's ethical principles. The enemy is not across our frontiers, but in the degeneration of ourselves. We must help democracy progress through our children to rediscover ethico-religious standards and a basis for a truly national education.²³

In 1947, he accepted the position of Press Director and the following year became Director of Burma's broadcasting services.

While at Pantanaw Thant had befriended, and acted as intermediary in the marriage of, a fellow teacher named Nu. After the latter became Prime Minister in 1948, Thant was persuaded to become Secretary of the Ministry of Information, a position he held until 1957. From 1953 he also acted as Secretary for Projects in the Office of the Prime Minister and accompanied Nu on many of his official visits overseas. Thant also represented Burma at the seventh session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1952. In 1957, he was appointed Burma's Permanent Representative to the UN, where one of his first tasks was to act as Chairman of the Organisation's Congo Conciliation Commission.

After Dag Hammarskjöld's death in a plane crash in Africa in 1961, Thant unexpectedly became the Acting UN Secretary-General. As the Head of the Burmese Delegation and an avowed neutralist in the widening East-West split, he was seen by all sides as an acceptable compromise choice. In November 1962 he was elected to a five-year term as Secretary-General by a unanimous vote in both the Security Council and the General Assembly. He chose, however, to have his term made retroactive to 3 November 1961, the day he succeeded Hammarskjöld. Although Thant had no wish to serve a second term, and publicly stated many times that no-one should serve more than one, he was persuaded in 1966 (mainly by the US Representative) to stand again.²⁴ Thant later wrote that he approached every task as Secretary-General mindful of his Buddhist upbringing:

I was trained to be tolerant of everything except intolerance. I was brought up not only to develop the spirit of tolerance, but also to cherish moral and spiritual qualities, especially modesty, humility, compassion, and, most important, to attain a certain degree of equilibrium.²⁵

Inevitably, perhaps, this sense of inner peace was constantly threatened by the complex demands of his position. When failing health finally forced him to step down in December 1971 Thant told his colleagues: 'I feel a great sense of relief, bordering on liberation'.²⁶

The ten years of Thant's rather reluctant stewardship of the UN was a turbulent period of dramatic changes and increasing international tensions. Under him, the dispute over Netherlands New Guinea was settled in 1962. In October that year he played an important part in easing the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union over the stationing of missiles in Cuba. He further increased the prestige of the UN when, in January 1963, he helped end the long secession of Katanga Province from the Republic of the Congo. Under him the UN helped bring about a ceasefire in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. Thant also worked tirelessly to end the continuing conflict in Vietnam. At the end of his period of tenure he achieved a cherished aim when the People's Republic of China was accepted into the UN as a full member.

Described as both courtly and tough-minded, Thant's bluntness and strictly neutral position on many issues sometimes caused frictions. During a visit to Moscow in 1961, for example, he said in a recorded radio statement that if the Soviet people knew the truth about the situation in the Congo they would tell their leaders they were wrong. The speech was broadcast abroad, but censored within the Soviet Union. Nor did the West escape his rather candid observations. In 1967, during a visit to Washington, Thant suggested that the American public would force President Lyndon Johnson to change his approach to Vietnam, if they knew the truth about the situation there. Thant's harsh and repeated attacks on the United States' Vietnam policy were often contrasted unfavourably with his apparent reluctance to criticise the Soviet Union, particularly after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. His critics also blamed him for the withdrawal of the UN Emergency Force from Sinai and Gaza in May 1967, just before the Six Day War, and pointed to the hotly contested removal of two Nationalist Chinese newsmen from the UN building in December 1971.²⁷

Thant's second term was in some ways unimpressive, but his 'quiet and unspectacular prodding',²⁸ and a deep sense of personal commitment, helped to ensure the survival of the UN Organisation at a particularly difficult time. Also, as one of his obituarists later observed:

His rare quality in this age of violence was that there was no malice in his character. He had strong convictions and expressed them freely with little regard to cost: if he recorded a few successes, he had to admit to many failures. But one thing that cannot be said of him was that he was an 'operator' – a manipulator of men and ideas.²⁹

If only for this, he was bound to emerge from his difficult and sometimes controversial period as Secretary-General with the wide respect of the international community. U Thant's length of tenure at the UN has only been equalled by his successor, Kurt Waldheim. He is still the only Asian ever to have held the office of Secretary-General.

Had Thant been in Rangoon at the time of the 1962 military coup, he would doubtless have been arrested and imprisoned along with Nu and other influential Burmese figures. Thant escaped this fate and as Secretary-General made brief visits to Burma in 1964 and 1967, when he was preoccupied with efforts to find a solution to the Vietnam War.³⁰ Ne Win later made it clear, however, that he was not welcome back in Burma. Not only was Thant a close associate of the ousted Nu, but Ne Win also held a grudge against him for permitting Nu (after his exile from Burma in 1969) to address a meeting of the United Nations Press Correspondents Association.³¹ Thant visited Burma again in 1971, accompanied by two senior UN aides, under the impression that he had received an oral invitation from the Foreign Minister to do so. When no official notice was taken of him after two days, however, he left. Incredible though it may seem, some well-informed Burmese claimed that at the time Thant feared for his own safety.

After retiring from the UN, Thant elected to remain in New York. In 1972 he was made a Senior Fellow at the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs and commenced his diplomatic memoirs.³² In the same year he was awarded the UN Peace Medal. On 25 November 1974, aged 65, he died of complications arising from cancer. His UN flag-draped coffin lay in state in the public hall of the General Assembly, where thousands of diplomats, officials and visitors from all parts of the world quietly filed past to pay their last respects. On 1 December 1974, at his family's request, Thant's body was returned to Rangoon for burial. Accompanying it in the Burma Airways Corporation plane provided for the purpose were Thant's daughter Aye Aye, her family, and the United Nations Chief of Protocol, Sinan Korle.

4. The Abduction

Although U Thant was the most famous Burmese of his time, honoured by the international community for his contribution to the cause of world peace, President Ne Win refused to accord him any special treatment, decreeing that the body could not be interred with other revered Burmese near the Shwedagon Pagoda, in central Rangoon.³³ Ne Win even refused to allow any government recognition of his arrival in Burma. No honour guard or official Burmese representative met the casket at Mingaladon Airport when it arrived that Sunday afternoon. Apart from Thant's relatives and local UN representatives, the only people to do so were the Australian Ambassador to Burma, Garry Woodward,³⁴ and U Nyun, the recently retired Secretary-General of ESCAP³⁵ in Bangkok. Ambassador Korle was visibly shocked to find that the only transport provided for Thant's remains was a small open buckboard, all the local UNDP³⁶ office could hire for the occasion. Korle returned to New York after only two days 'a sadly disillusioned man, having received no mark of government recognition except to have his luggage searched twice by the ubiquitous Burmese Military Intelligence Service'.³⁷

It was soon evident, however, that in adopting this approach to the death of his old political rival Ne Win had badly misread public feeling. As the casket was driven slowly along a pre-arranged route from the airport, followed as a mark of respect by the official cars of UN officials and the Australian ambassador, increasing numbers of people lined the road 'in silent reverence and, one felt, abject humiliation'.³⁸ Thousands more awaited the arrival of the casket at the old Kyaikkasan racecourse grounds, where it was laid on a specially built pandal (or pavilion). The UN representatives then laid a wreath and opened a condolence book. Over the next four days, as Thant's body lay in state, large crowds of mourners demonstrated the high regard in which the former diplomat and UN official was still held.

The manner in which Thant's body had been received by the Burmese government was also the cause of considerable disquiet throughout the country. These feelings were reinforced on 2 December by rumours that the Deputy Minister for Education, Aung Tin, had been dismissed from office for daring to suggest to a Cabinet meeting that all schools and colleges be closed on the day of the funeral, as a mark of respect.³⁹ People returning from the Kyaikkasan grounds also reported being unable to see any wreaths from the Ne Win government. There were, however, a number with such cryptic signatures as '17 necessarily anonymous public servants'. One secondary school openly identified a wreath it sent, apparently prompting an immediate investigation of its headmaster by the MIS. Aung Tin sent a floral tribute from 'the ex-Deputy Minister of Education'.

On 3 December, members of the Rangoon diplomatic corps were invited to attend an unofficial UN ceremony at the Kyaikkasan grounds, and all flags on UN buildings in Burma were flown at half-mast. The same day, a number of student leaders met to discuss recent developments and to decide how they might respond. By this time they had learnt that the government planned to bury Thant in Kyanndaw Cemetery, a relatively insignificant site near a leper colony. Outraged by the disrespect implied by such a decision, it appears the students secretly sought and obtained permission from Thant's family to take the body away. Here the story becomes a little confused, but one version has it that the students then asked the government to provide 25 buses to take their representatives to the old racecourse. This request was refused.⁴⁰ Another version, however, is that the Burmese intelligence services learnt of the plan to steal the body and managed to prevent the students from hiring buses to take them to the funeral, scheduled for 5 December. Whatever the circumstances, the students decided to march to the Kyaikkasan grounds *en masse*.

The march began on Thursday 5 December with engineering and architecture students from the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) on Insein Road, about 10 miles from the Kyaikkasan site. They were joined along the way by students from the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University (RASU), the Rangoon Medical College and the Institute of Education. As they marched they were cheered by onlookers, some of whom joined in the procession. Roadside vendors reportedly gave away food, and old people lined the streets to offer the students water and fruit. Some even donated money. Significantly, the march was also supported by many *pongyis*.

When the marchers arrived at the Kyaikkasan grounds their numbers had grown considerably. In all, about 50,000 people were there for the funeral ceremonies.⁴¹ At about 3:00 pm, just as the official funeral procession was about to start, a group of monks carried the coffin from the pandal and handed it over to the students present, who put it on the roof of a truck carrying floral tributes.⁴² A gilded umbrella was fixed at either end of the vehicle, and a plate of green coconuts and bananas placed at the head of the casket.⁴³ The students reportedly announced through loudspeakers that they wished to ensure a fitting interment for Thant and criticised the government's failure to do so.⁴⁴ The casket was then taken on a slow and noisy 10 mile drive to the RASU campus where, at around 6:00 pm, it was installed on a makeshift dais in the university's Convocation Hall.⁴⁵ The students demanded that the government find an appropriate burial site and construct a mausoleum befitting such a distinguished figure. That evening, as a large crowd gathered on the campus, left-wing students temporarily took control and publicly made violent attacks on Ne Win and his government.

The following day, 6 December, more moderate students managed to reassert control and redirected the purpose of the protest to the more limited question of a fitting interment for Thant's body. The *pongyis*, who had earlier withdrawn from the university campus, then returned. Indeed, in recognition of Thant's dedication to Buddhism, a mass movement of *pongyis* to Rangoon began from all over the country.⁴⁶ The government quickly imposed travel restrictions, however, and to a large extent this movement was checked. Also, the country's universities, tertiary institutes, colleges and schools were officially closed. All students were instructed to return to their homes and arrangements were made by the Transport and Communications Ministry for them to receive priority on public transport.

On the morning of Saturday 7 December, Ne Win backed down and agreed to the student demands. Belatedly acknowledging the popular mood, the government (through the Rangoon Division City Development Committee) proposed a new burial site and mausoleum in Cantonment Park, at the foot of the Shwedagon Pagoda. It was also announced in the local press that no official action would be taken to hinder a funeral procession from the campus to the new site, arranged for noon the following day.⁴⁷ The students rejected this offer, however, and sought a personal guarantee from Ne Win that no reprisals would be taken against any of those who had participated in the demonstrations.⁴⁸ Buoyed by growing public support, the students also decided to build a mausoleum of their own in the university grounds.⁴⁹ A letter to the UN, requesting its help, was passed to the United States Embassy for forwarding to New York. Other messages were sent to the Dean of the Rangoon diplomatic corps and the senior UN representative in Burma. Both were reportedly asked to intercede with the Ne Win government on the students' behalf.

The place chosen by the protesters for their mausoleum was the site of the old Student Union Building. Architecture students hastily drew up plans and volunteers began working around the clock under the supervision of engineering students from RIT. Construction materials were readily available on campus, where an extension to the university library was being built. When it was finished, the mausoleum was made largely of brick, about 7 foot long and 6 foot high. Behind it the students also built a tall bamboo screen, some 25 feet high, on which were hung large paintings of Thant and the UN insignia. Above the mausoleum itself was a placard in English reading 'U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations'. Flanking the structure were three flags, all at half mast. In the centre was a United Nations flag, obtained from the local office of the United Nations Development Program.⁵⁰ Apparently the students felt this flag would not only proclaim their high motives to the world, but also protect them from the authorities. On either side of the UN banner stood a multicoloured Buddhist flag and the flag of the banned Students Union.

At 11:00 am on Sunday 8 December, ironically the anniversary of the first student boycott against the British colonialists in 1920, Thant's UN flag-draped coffin was taken from the Convocation Hall. In a long procession of *pongyis* and students, it was slowly conveyed down Chancellor Road to the new burial site, where it was placed on a specially erected dais, surmounted by golden umbrellas. While long lines of mourners shuffled past, a vote was taken to go ahead with plans for the burial. U Thant's family, which had been invited to attend, were given the opportunity to pay their last respects.⁵¹ The students observed one minute's silence, then raised the coffin over their heads for the mourners to see, amidst cheers and shouts of 'victory, victory'.⁵² Thant's body was then entombed in the brick mausoleum.

During this period, the main gates of the university compound had been locked and other entrances barricaded with trestles and pieces of furniture. Detachments of students and *pongyis* stood guard, many of them wearing masks to prevent identification by the authorities. Entry to the campus was strictly policed in an attempt to keep out security agents, and baggage checks were conducted to prevent people from bringing in cameras or weapons. Anyone found carrying either of these items was immediately set upon and driven away. The high gates and iron picket fences of the RASU compound were also adorned with posters in Burmese and English, stressing the themes of peace and U Thant as an architect of world peace. One in English read, simply, 'Tell our victory to the world', and foreign observers visiting the campus were enjoined to spread word of the protest outside Burma.

From the first day of the abduction, students and monks at the university were overwhelmed with donations of food and money to build a fitting edifice for the former Secretary-General. Some estimates of the sum donated ran as high as 200,000 kyats (US\$42,000). As the protest continued, events on campus became what one senior Western diplomat described as 'the greatest show on earth'. Despite official travel restrictions, thousands of Burmese arrived from places as far away as Mergui in the south and Mandalay to the north. They were of all ages and included a large number of *pongyis*. Sometimes queuing for up to 15 minutes to get through the student security checkpoints, the crowds moved slowly through the main gates, down Chancellor Road past the new mausoleum, to the central quadrangle. There, on the steps of the Convocation Hall and often surrounded by *pongyis*, speakers addressed the throngs sitting on the lawns below them.

The speeches made on the RASU campus between 5 December and 10 December had several themes. Some had a certain entertainment value, the crowds delighting to hear details about the personal life of Ne Win and his former wife never before given wide public currency. Such speeches, however, tended to be the exception to the rule. Most centred on the treatment accorded to Thant's remains, the failings of the Ne Win regime, or wider themes of peace, democracy and freedom.

Mainly in the evenings, one after the other, university students, high school students and *pongyis* delivered increasingly emotional denunciations of the Ne Win regime and its policies. One recurring theme was that the Burmese government was a government of firearms, while Thant was a man of peace. Speakers condemned the government for its failure to accord Thant the respect he deserved and called on the Burmese people to support the mausoleum building project. Chants of 'it's our duty' were taken up and could be heard well beyond the precincts of the campus. Many speeches were directed specifically against the government's economic policies, the lack of food and the poverty of Burma then compared with its relative prosperity under U Nu. Significantly, other popular targets included the new constitution, the new organs of state and corrupt officials. Anti-government songs were sung. Several calls were made for the overthrow of the Ne Win regime, but few speakers elaborated on how this might be achieved. The United Nations was mentioned many times as a body which could rescue the country from its plight but, once again, few people made any concrete proposals as to how it might be done.

As the days passed, these speeches became more strident in tone and more defiant of the authorities. Before they began to speak, many students gave their roll numbers and their subject majors, reportedly saying: 'we are doing this because we are not afraid of the military intelligence'.⁵³ Speakers also challenged the authorities to repeat their past practice of waiting for an opportune time, then taking away student leaders. Even parents joined in, reportedly saying: 'This time we will not tolerate the government soldiers killing our sons and daughters, we will fight to the end'.⁵⁴ One speech to a large crowd on the Saturday night stated 'with the first shot fired in the compound, Ne Win declares war on us to the world'. A chant often taken up was 'unity is our strength', and there were repeated exhortations to stand together so that the army could not use its weapons. As government intervention appeared more imminent, the students also formed 'suicide squads' to guard every entrance to the campus. They were armed only with sticks.

Observers who attended these meetings have stated that even in their lighter moments the sense of solidarity among those present, and the feeling that people were sniffing the winds of freedom, was a stirring sensation. On the night of 10 December, when it was apparent that some counter action was inevitable, moving speeches were made on the theme of liberty or death which left the people gathered on the campus in tears.

5. The Response

The strength of popular support shown for U Thant, and for those who abducted his body, took the government completely by surprise. It was this, in part, which lay behind the offer on 7 December of a mausoleum near the Shwedagon Pagoda, and the (possibly genuine) undertaking not to interfere with the transfer of the body to the new gravesite. When it became clear that the protesters were not susceptible to such persuasion, preparations were begun to recover the body by force and arrest those responsible for its seizure. Initially, troops and police were kept well away from the campus. Between 6 December and 8 December, however, troops were concentrated north of Rangoon in preparation for an armed assault. Three additional battalions were brought in and bivouacked in a disused rubber plantation at Htaukkyan, north of Mingaladon Airport. All police and regular military units in Rangoon (including naval and air force units) were put on full alert. Later, hospital, ambulance and prison staff were placed on standby.

At the same time, the government instituted a concerted propaganda campaign designed to paint those responsible for the abduction as extremist anti-state elements who had defied the wishes of Thant's family. The latter were obliged to lend their names to increasingly sanctimonious denunciations of the protesters, both in the print media and the state-controlled radio. On 10 December this campaign reached a peak, with editorials in the local newspapers referring to the 'terror tactics employed by mobbing groups misled by political exploiters bent on sowing dissent and unrest'.⁵⁵ Claiming that the students and monks on the RASU campus had no public support, the *Working People's Daily* stated that:

It is not done to politicise a person's demise and to make an issue of it for whatever ends one may have in mind. When force is used, as it was, by violently inclined people to delay, disrupt or radically change the funeral arrangements, the whole thing assumes macabre manifestations which are as insulting to the dead man's memory as revolting to the conventions and sensibilities of society.⁵⁶

The papers also published lengthy articles detailing the assistance purportedly given to Thant's family in making arrangements for his funeral. Similar accounts were broadcast over state radio.⁵⁷

While these developments were taking place, the government continued to build the mausoleum near the Shwedagon Pagoda which had been promised to the students earlier that week.⁵⁸ Thant's younger brother, U Khant, was instructed to call a press conference and declare that in abducting Thant's body the students had opposed the wishes of his family.⁵⁹ Khant was later notified that legal action would have to be taken because his brother's body had been buried in an unsanctified plot of ground. Through its Director General of Higher Education, the Education Department then lodged a formal complaint that the students had used the Department's properties without permission, and requested the removal of Thant's remains from the university grounds. Also, the Divisional Engineer claimed that the students had stolen construction materials valued at nearly 20,000 kyats. Together, these charges constituted the formal basis for the action which was being planned by the government.

From the first day of the abduction feelings in senior BSPP circles had been running high. The government, and Ne Win in particular, rightly saw the protest as a direct challenge to their authority. They were also stung by the critical speeches made at the university. The enormous crowds on the campus (at times numbering between 50,000 and 100,000) effectively precluded any decisive action to stop them but, by 9 December, the number of people on the campus had dropped markedly. The following day the Defence Minister was authorised to mount an assault. That afternoon troops set up roadblocks and prevented members of the public from taking food to those camped in the university grounds.

Early on the morning of Wednesday 11 December the government replied to the protesters with a massive display of force. The area around the campus was first saturated with troops. An outer cordon consisting of Ferret armoured cars and armed soldiers secured all streets leading to the university. Foreign residences and the large United States diplomatic compound (Washington Park) in the neighbourhood were secured by troops,

sometimes standing only 5 metres apart, to prevent escaping protesters from seeking asylum. Even the Australian Defence Attaché's house, almost 3 kilometres away, was guarded by three soldiers. An inner cordon, again consisting of armed troops, surrounded the campus itself. Further detachments of troops lined the road to Cantonment Park, where a new grave had been prepared for U Thant. Troops also filled the gardens themselves.

At about 2:00 am, when most of the protesters were asleep, about 1,000 soldiers and 15 platoons of police stormed the university grounds. The main gate was first broken down by a large crane and the riot police moved in, easily overwhelming the young guards. The students and *pongyis* put up a brief struggle, calling through loudspeakers for the security forces to join them in their protest. The inevitable victory for the government, however, came quickly. Pockets of resistance were broken up with tear gas, and baton charges dispersed groups which had rallied and attempted a counter-charge. By 3:00 am, the campus was completely under the control of the security forces. About 2,900 people were rounded up and roughly herded together.⁶⁰ The men, including the monks, were stripped to the waist and made to sit cross-legged on the ground with their hands on their heads. After some initial sorting, they were taken away in police vans and trucks to Insein Jail and the MIS detention centre north of the city. Less than half of those arrested were students.

While this operation was taking place, pneumatic drills were used to break open the makeshift mausoleum. At 4:00 am, Thant's casket was retrieved and escorted under heavy guard to the Cantonment Gardens. The official site, below the Shwedagon Pagoda, was near the tombs of Burma's last queen, Supayalat, and Thakin Kodaw Hmaing.⁶¹ At 6:30 am U Thant's remains were quietly reburied. Only Thant's relatives and representatives of relevant official bodies were permitted to attend the ceremony. The grave was then surrounded by armed soldiers to keep away onlookers and to permit the completion of a new concrete mausoleum.⁶² According to John Cady, 'For weeks thereafter, the marble-paved platform of the Shwe Dagon pagoda was crowded daily with worshippers, who could look down the slope of the pagoda hill on the unmarked but symbolic grave of U Thant'.⁶³

6. The Riots

In one sense, the assault on the RASU campus was a textbook operation, carefully planned and efficiently executed. In maltreating the monks, however, the security forces made a serious miscalculation. The crowds who witnessed the events of that morning were enraged by the disrespect shown to the *pongyis*, and the popular mood rapidly changed. A number of contemporary observers have suggested that it was this more than anything else that inflamed the tempers of the onlookers and led to the first acts of violence against the authorities.

As word spread that the government had recaptured Thant's remains and manhandled those protesters found on the RASU campus, waves of rioting broke out throughout Rangoon. Starting at about 8:30 am with attacks on police stations in nearby Kamayut and Thamaing, angry crowds of 1,000 or more moved through the streets of the capital, from Kemmendine in the west to Pazundaung in the east.⁶⁴ Buses, other vehicles and even a suburban train were set on fire. Several cinemas and markets were smashed. There were numerous reports of looting. The main targets of the crowds, however, were public buildings. Attempts were made to destroy several police stations, and offices of the BSPP were attacked. A particular focus for the crowd's anger was the Ministry of Cooperatives, regarded as the centre of the government's economic mismanagement. The Road Transport Corporation and Housing Board were also attacked. There were several reports that the protesters were cheered on by other people in the streets.⁶⁵

The authorities moved quickly and forcefully to quell the unrest. At 9:30 am the Chairman of the Rangoon Division People's Council invoked Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (Burma's riot act) for one month and formally requested the assistance of the Rangoon Commander in restoring order.⁶⁶ At 4:00 pm a state of emergency was announced and martial law declared throughout Rangoon Division. It was the first time such a measure had been necessary since Burma gained its independence 26 years before. All executive and judicial powers were to be exercised by the Chief of Staff of the Defence Services, Commander of Rangoon Command, Colonel Khin Ohn. Under these arrangements tanks, armoured cars and additional troops immediately moved into the city. A curfew was imposed from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am, and warnings issued that anyone found on the streets during that time would be shot on sight. All public demonstrations, processions and meetings involving five or more people were banned. Mingaladon Airport, universities, schools, markets and some businesses were all closed. Public transport was suspended. Burmese state radio announced that these and other measures had been prompted by 'mob rule which had become widespread'.⁶⁷ An official statement said that 'lawless mobs roamed all over the city, attacking or destroying government offices, markets, police stations and road and railway transports'.⁶⁸

It was also announced on 11 December that special courts would be formed to try those involved in the disturbances. Military Administration Order No. 1 established four tribunals under officers of Lieutenant Colonel rank to 'hold summary trials and mete out punishment of at least three years imprisonment'.⁶⁹ There was to be no right of appeal against the decisions of these tribunals, but applications for revision of the terms could be made within 15 days after judgement had been passed. Decision on revision would be final.

In addition, diplomatic missions in the capital were advised by the Foreign Ministry that all travel by staff members was to be restricted to 'normal duties'. They were not to travel elsewhere. No embassy or member of staff was to hold any parties or official receptions. In the event of an emergency during the curfew hours, a special pass had to be obtained from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs duty officer. It was valid for one journey only. Even then, such passes were not available until the situation in Rangoon 'became less tense'. Notwithstanding the closure of the airport, missions were also asked to advise intending visitors not to come to Burma until the situation had returned to normal.

The army carried out its job with brutal efficiency. Crowds in the city were fired upon without warning and numerous arrests were made. On 11 December order was restored within six hours. A second, lesser, outbreak of violence occurred on the evening of 12 December resulting in further destruction of public property, but

this too was quickly dealt with. The army then launched 'Operation Dragon', to restore law and order and to clean up what was officially described as 'riff-raff', that is, the habitual criminals and large numbers of unemployed and disenchanted youth responsible for the rising urban crime rate over the previous year. It seems clear that many in this category sought to take advantage of the rioting in Rangoon to engage in looting and vandalism, practices which the government was happy to attribute to the protest movement as a whole. The authorities were also quick to draw attention to those young monks with little apparent religious vocation, accusing them of donning yellow robes as a means of avoiding work and living off the charity of the country's many devotees. In addition, the security forces took advantage of the disturbances to clean out the central market, which had long been the refuge of black marketeers.

By 15 December a tense peace had returned to Rangoon. Armed troops with fixed bayonets were stationed at all major intersections and patrolled the city streets. The tanks were withdrawn but armoured vehicles were parked by the central railway station ready for a fresh outbreak of violence. The Rangoon university campus remained sealed off. There were no more protests, however, and over the following week the number of troops openly posted in the streets was reduced.⁷⁰ On 17 December the markets were allowed to reopen, albeit under strict military supervision. The curfew was reduced to the hours of 11:00 pm to 4:00 am, and the provisions of Section 144 were relaxed. The following day state transport services were resumed, also under the wary eye of the army. By 21 December the army had restricted its patrolling to the curfew hours, in trucks. During this week there were also house to house searches as the security forces quietly rounded up demonstrators identified by government agents during the early days of the protests. It is believed that some 2,000 more were taken in for questioning during this period, of whom just over 1,000 were students.

One rather black footnote to this period concerned events which took place in the week after the rioting. Soldiers in central Rangoon began stopping Burmese youths with long hair or bell-bottomed trousers, both viewed as signs of Western decadence and anti-government feeling. The youths were either herded into barber shops and their heads shaved, or else were given crude haircuts by the soldiers with their bayonets. Those with bell-bottomed trousers had them hacked off above the knee. These practices were stopped, however, after only a few days. It was later rumoured that the order had come from the Rangoon Commander, at his own initiative, and the enthusiasm of the combat hardened troops for this task had privately embarrassed their officers.

Elsewhere in the country, the dramatic events in Rangoon had little immediate impact. On 14 December there was a peaceful demonstration by some 400 monks and students in Mandalay, protesting over the government's treatment of U Thant's remains. The group initially requested permission to march through the city, but when this was refused they staged a sit-down protest in the grounds of the Mahamuni Pagoda. There was no violence and the government's response was quite restrained. The demonstration was handled entirely by the police, who were able to persuade some eminent *Sayadaws* to tell the young monks present to return to their monasteries.⁷¹ Over the next week some 445 people were arrested in Mandalay but these were all for various minor protests, and there was no real trouble. Other centres were even quieter. There was a sit-down strike reported in Chauk, a minor disturbance in Magwe and a number of anti-government leaflets were found in Taunggyi. At no stage was the army needed to quell any unrest outside Rangoon.

As always with such episodes in Burma, estimates of casualties during the disturbances vary widely. The government claimed there were relatively few but it had no credibility with the public, which was prepared to believe the worst. There were several stories circulating that a large number of protesters had been killed during the initial assault on the RASU campus, but diplomatic observers in Rangoon at the time were unable to find confirmation of any deaths there.⁷² Official sources stated that 18 people were killed and 74 wounded during the later rioting but, once again, unofficial estimates were much higher.⁷³ A Thai newspaper quoted one Burmese mortician who claimed personally to have examined nearly 50 bodies on the first day.⁷⁴ Steinberg states that 13 were killed and 70 wounded, but also cites rumours of over 1,000 dead, buried in an unmarked mass grave near the Mingaladon military cantonment area.⁷⁵ Student sources have claimed that over 100 of their number were killed in the demonstrations.⁷⁶ Whatever the exact figure, few could argue with a United States Embassy official who told international news agencies that 'The military has been very heavy-handed'. In his estimation the government's casualty count was 'way too low'.⁷⁷

There is similar controversy over the number of protestors arrested. Unofficial estimates run as high as 7,000, including some 500 women and 350 monks.⁷⁸ By 16 December some 3,000 were known to have been released, although with security dossiers held on them their future prospects in Burma would have been bleak. Toward the end of the month official sources were speaking of 196 brought to trial, most of whom were sentenced to between three and five years in jail for destroying public property and participating in riots.⁷⁹ Burmese government statements around this time, however, omitted to mention that between 100 and 200 so-called 'hard-core' protesters, including those known to have given speeches on the RASU campus, had been arrested and charged with treason. Then, as now, this offence carried the death penalty. The fate of those prisoners is still not known.⁸⁰

7. The Assessment

In one important sense, the seizure of U Thant's coffin and its burial on the RASU campus was a popular reaction to the meanness of spirit displayed by Ne Win and his government to a distinguished and highly respected Burmese figure. At a deeper level, however, the seizure was an expression of, and a focus for, a deep-seated personal animosity towards Ne Win, and public dissatisfaction with the one-party rule of the BSPP, with its disastrous economic policies.

Despite all the attempts made by the Burmese government earlier that year to assume the appearance – both internally and internationally – of a constitutional and popularly elected government, the U Thant disturbances demonstrated that, outside the armed forces, the regime could not claim the allegiance of any significant social group. As Steinberg has observed:

The riots indicated that the mass mobilisation systems previously installed by the military and the new constitution had not created the sense of efficacy that the military expected. It was not that they were pro-U Thant, but anti-Ne Win.⁸¹

In particular, the disturbances emphasised the failure of the BSPP's lower level urban cadre. It was the lower organs of the Party which carried much of the responsibility for law and order, yet it was their offices which were attacked. The government survived only because it retained the support of the army, which it was prepared to use to suppress any dissent.

In a 34-page interim report released two months later, the government made it plain that it did not intend to change any of its policies as a result of the disturbances. In an extraordinary session of the Pyithu Hluttaw in February 1975, Home Minister U Ko Ko gave an unusually candid description of events in December 1974, but avoided giving any explanation for the riots. He stated that 10 million kyats (US\$2.1 million) worth of damage had been done and said that the government intended to take an even tougher stand against its opponents in future. To this end the government had enacted a new Law for Protection of the State from Subversive Elements, which gave it even wider powers to prevent protests of the kind seen two months earlier.⁸²

The U Thant disturbances revealed, however, that there was no viable alternative leadership able to replace Ne Win and his supporters. While the students, monks and others were generally able to conduct their initial protest coherently and according to the popular will, they did so in conditions almost of anarchy. According to all reliable reports, the discussions which took place among the protesters that week were largely undirected. Proposals were approved by popular acclamation. At no time does there appear to have been any attempt to establish an alternative government or organised opposition structure. Even the *sangha*, which had a better capacity than most to organise in Burma's controlled society, failed to take advantage of the protest to mount any effective challenge to the government's position. Few natural leaders emerged from among the students and monks, and those that played any significant role were immediately identified and compromised. Once the protest was suppressed, such links as had been established between the students and monks dissolved. Despite some calls for the release of those arrested during the June strikes, there were no real links forged between the students and the workers.

Although Burmese government reports at the time referred to organised, armed resistance cells, and later to students going 'underground', there is no evidence that the protesters received any support from the country's many insurgent groups. It was claimed, for example, that the exiled Nu and his Parliamentary Democracy Party (based on the Thai border) had inspired the disturbances, but no proof of this was ever offered and such involvement is highly unlikely.⁸³ Indeed, it was noteworthy that none of the country's insurgent groups were willing or able to take advantage of the chaos in Rangoon to further their own aims. During the 1988 disturbances, by contrast, Burmese Communist Party rebels and ethnic insurgent groups sought to take advantage of the army's preoccupation with the urban unrest, to recover ground lost earlier along the eastern border and to re-establish themselves in central Burma.

The other aspect of student involvement in the disturbances which struck observers at the time was their inability to assess the likely reaction of the international community. The protesters were quick to welcome foreign observers on the campus and were anxious to have their message heard outside Burma. Because of their isolation from world events, however, the students in particular had a highly idealised view of the United Nations. Their use of the UN flag and appeals to the UN for help were based on the widespread but completely unrealistic expectation that the organisation could, and would, bring its weight to bear on the issue, thus obliging Ne Win and his government to respond sympathetically to student demands. Some protesters almost felt a sense of betrayal when this expected support did not materialise.

The U Thant disturbances also offered observers a number of insights into the Burmese security forces. The early morning assault on the RASU campus, carried out largely by the capital's permanent garrison, was a very well organised and executed military operation. Its scale, however, totally consumed the resources of Rangoon Command. Even members of the Burmese Air Force were called in to guard the route from the university to Insein Jail. The subsequent riots had to be dealt with by frontline troops who, in some cases, were withdrawn directly from operations. While a very blunt instrument for the normally delicate task of civilian crowd control, the troops deployed in Rangoon nevertheless proved themselves to be a coldly loyal and ruthlessly professional force. Despite some rumours to the contrary, they showed no hesitation in confronting students, monks and other member of the public and were quite prepared to fire on demonstrators when so ordered.⁸⁴ Nor was there any suggestion that the Martial Law Administrator would use his extraordinary power to challenge the government.

The police took an active part in quelling the disturbances, but in many ways were merely an adjunct to the army. After the labour riots in June 1974 some concern had been expressed over the efficiency of the riot police, and a number of steps were taken toward improving their capabilities. One measure actively considered by the Burmese government at the time was the establishment of a unit of mounted police, with specially trained horses imported from abroad. It was the riot police, which the authorities always claimed carried no firearms, which spearheaded the assault on the university campus on 11 December. Later attacks on police stations in the capital (which also included police married quarters) were reportedly repulsed with a few casualties, although in some cases shots were fired at the rioters. When it came to confronting the crowds of rioters in the streets, however, the government completely by-passed the civilian police and turned to the armed forces.

A question mark remains over the performance of the Burmese intelligence agencies, in particular the powerful Military Intelligence Service. A number of diplomatic missions in Rangoon at the time knew that a student demonstration of some kind was planned for the Kyaikkasan grounds on 5 December. It is thus likely that the authorities too learnt of student plans, but were powerless to prevent them. Similarly, for all their informers, the MIS failed to anticipate the seizure of the casket, its subsequent burial on the campus, and the massive public support such a move would have. Where the intelligence services perhaps fulfilled their role best of all was in the identification of those who had taken a prominent part in the protests prior to 11 December, so they could be arrested later by the martial law authorities. It was no surprise that after the events of December 1974 even greater attention was paid to the students by the MIS.

The disturbances also underlined the fact that the government's earlier efforts to reduce the prices of basic commodities had met with little success. Following the riots in Rangoon the price of essential foodstuffs rose even further. Rice, already overpriced because of the widespread floods that August, doubled in price. A gallon of petrol rose from US\$3.50 to US\$5.00.⁸⁵ Other prices rose as much as 50 per cent. As a result of the troubles, the doctrinaire socialist Ba Nyein was removed from his position as head of the Cooperatives Ministry. The government also announced a more generous paddy purchase policy and promised more consumer goods at prices half those prevailing on the black market.⁸⁶ Yet, despite these measures, there was still no fundamental reassessment of the BSPP's bankrupt economic policies, which had brought the once prosperous country to its current plight and caused such hardship for its population. Indeed, in their annual Union Day speeches only two months later, Ne Win and other senior officials reiterated the BSPP's continuing commitment to a socialist economy.⁸⁷

The disturbances and their aftermath had international repercussions. The peculiar circumstances of the protest, involving the abduction of the remains of a former UN Secretary-General, ensured that it received reasonably wide publicity outside Burma. Unwelcome attention was drawn to the nature of the Ne Win regime. Considerable efforts had been made by the BSPP over the previous 12 years to develop political structures publicly to legitimise its authoritarian rule. In 1973 and 1974 Ne Win had made a series of goodwill visits to Japan, Southeast Asia, Australasia and the sub-continent to break down Burma's isolation from its neighbours and consolidate bilateral relations. He had also received a number of high level officials from abroad.⁸⁸ By its actions between 1 December and 16 December 1974, however, the nature of Ne Win's military dictatorship was starkly defined. The 1962 coup had been widely condemned, but the Burmese government's image was now irreparably tarnished.

The government's most immediate concern after suppressing internal dissent was fear that a loss of international sympathy would be matched by a reduction in international aid. As one senior diplomat observed at the time, it was unfortunate for the regime that the United Nations, which had easily the largest number of technical assistance personnel in Burma, was so deeply involved in the crisis. UN officials in Rangoon were shocked by the government's approach to the return of U Thant's remains and the disrespect shown to the UN Chief of Protocol, who had accompanied them to Burma. There was considerable private sympathy for the protesters who abducted U Thant's body, as illustrated by the secret loan of a UN flag but, tragically, the protesters expected too much of the organisation and their calls for assistance were in vain. Given Japan's important role as Burma's major aid donor, it was also unfortunate for the regime that a senior journalist from a major Tokyo daily newspaper happened to be in Rangoon during the week of 5–12 December. The *Asahi Shimbun* ran a series of stories that month by 'Special Correspondent Hayashi', which not only described events in Burma, but also commented at length on the country's deeper political and economic ills.⁸⁹

During this period there was also a feeling in Rangoon diplomatic circles that the Burmese government feared the cause of its own students might be taken up by the students of other countries. In this respect, protest in Thailand would be of greatest concern, both as a neighbour and because any damage to the Burmese government's credibility there could set back the trend that year of improving bilateral relations. With ethnic, ideological and 'economic' insurgents sheltering all along the border between the two countries, Burma had much to gain from a closer relationship. Indeed, it was revealed in the Thai press that month that the Thai government had been mediating between the Burmese government and a number of rebellious minority groups, including the Karens and Shans. A high-level Thai delegation led by General Kris Savara was due to visit Burma during mid-December, but due to the internal unrest in Rangoon this visit had to be postponed.⁹⁰ It was later rescheduled for early 1975, but the disturbances almost certainly contributed to the subsequent failure of a negotiated agreement with the insurgents.⁹¹

The bleak future which was forecast for Burma after the U Thant disturbances has since been justified. Both the staff and students of the country's higher-level education institutions were angry and bitter, thus depriving the government of the support it so badly needed from many of the country's intellectual elite. Able civil servants too were so disenchanted with the nature of military rule that the administration became even more inefficient and corrupt. While some attempts were made to improve the economy, more able and broad-minded Ministers like U Lwin and Dr Nyi Nyi (the Minister for Mines) were isolated and later dismissed. Ne Win remained immovable in his determination to impose a highly centralised socialist system on the country and to maintain his own idiosyncratic brand of authoritarian rule. The spiritual and material stagnation that flowed from these policies are now history, and contributed directly to the disturbances which were seen in August and September 1988. Tragically, then as in 1974, the regime refused to acknowledge the legitimate demands of the Burmese people and harshly brushed aside the opportunity to implement a more democratic and viable form of government.

8. The Postscript

In 1980, an American political scientist claimed that the abduction of U Thant's body was an example of how the tactics of a terrorist group in one country could be copied by others elsewhere. In a paper entitled 'The Diffusion of Transnational Terrorism', Edward Heyman wrote that:

As part of their war against the Argentine government, the Montoneros abducted ex-President Pedro Aramburu's corpse from its crypt in October 1974 and threatened to hold on to it until the government met certain political demands. Within weeks, a group of Burmese radicals stole U Thant's body from its resting place to secure their own set of political demands from the Burmese government. This is one example of a terrorist group adopting another's tactics.⁹²

Two years later, two European scholars examining *Violence as Communication* cited the U Thant disturbances in a similar vein, to demonstrate what they called 'media-fostered contagion'. The Aramburu and Thant abductions were added to that of Charlie Chaplin in Switzerland in 1978, when criminals seized the film star's body and asked his family for a large ransom before its return. In the estimation of the authors:

The peculiar nature of the act and the geographical distance between these events suggest that the media were the agent that provided the bodysnatchers with a model, at least in the second incident.⁹³

The 'second incident' referred to was the abduction of U Thant's body in 1974.

These claims are significant not because of their apparent insights into contemporary political violence but because of their errors of fact and interpretation. From all available evidence, including interviews with a number of the participants directly involved, the abduction of U Thant's body was carried out before it was buried, with little apparent planning, by a crowd of diverse and largely apolitical people as a symbolic protest against the Burmese government's perceived meanness of spirit. It only took on strong political overtones later when left-wing students managed to exert their influence and after the widespread public support shown for the activists barricaded on campus prompted them to express the country's wider grievances. Far from being a terrorist action, the abduction was an essentially peaceful act enjoying very wide popular support, probably including that secretly given by Thant's own family.

It is of course possible that some of the student leaders who led the initial seizure may have heard of developments in Argentina, and been inspired to follow the Montoneros' example. Because of the paucity of reliable international news in Burma itself, news broadcasts from the BBC World Service, Radio Australia and the Voice of America have a wide audience there, and various Burmese may have learned of the Aramburu abduction from these sources. The Montoneros' actions do not appear to have been reported in the Burmese press, however, and in the circumstances it is highly unlikely that the actions of 5–10 December were inspired by any outside precedents. They were a purely local reaction to purely local events and the participants, with their ideals and impassioned calls to the United Nations, would have opposed comparisons with political (or criminal) violence of any kind elsewhere.

Note on Sources

This paper is based largely on personal observations and discussions in Burma between January 1974 and August 1976, during which period the author was living in Rangoon. As few of the students, monks, soldiers and officials interviewed then wished to be identified, references have only been given where information has been drawn from specific published sources (see the following bibliography). The author would, however, like to record his debt to Garry Woodard, the Australian Ambassador to Burma between 1973 and 1975, and the late Lieutenant Colonel David Kerr, who was the Australian Defence Attaché in Rangoon at the time of the U Thant disturbances. The relevant articles in the *Asahi Shimbun* were translated by Derek Brown. The opinions expressed in this paper are of course the author's alone.

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Notes

- 1 The word 'U' literally means 'uncle' in the Burmese language, but is generally used as an honorific term.
- 2 Tyn Myint U, 'Free the economy and bring back democracy', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25 August 1988, p.19. In an *Agence France Presse* (AFP) report on this article, Tyn Myint U was described as the husband of Aye Aye, 'whose father is still a revered figure in Burma'. AFP transcript from Hong Kong (in English), 17 August 1988.
- 3 R.H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: Hurst, 1987), p.335 and p.357. To be fair, Taylor's book was a very broad-ranging survey of developments in Burma over many centuries.
- 4 For the background to some of these problems, see the author's 'Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942–1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.20, No.3, July 1986.
- 5 Some have argued that, had Nu not invited him to take control, Ne Win would have done so anyway, and the transfer of power was in effect a 'coup by consent'. See D.I. Steinberg, *Burma's Road Toward Development: Growth and Ideology under Military Rule* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981) pp.14–18.
- 6 Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.28.
- 7 The official translation of the party's name in English used the spelling 'Programme'.
- 8 Raja Segaran Arumugam, 'Burma: A political and economic background', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), p. 42.
- 9 Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920–1940*, Australian National University Monographs on South Asia, No. 4 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980), pp.124 ff.
- 10 Steinberg has suggested that this inaction was because the students' ideological mentor, the left-wing National Unity Front, indicated its support for General Ne Win. See Steinberg, *Burma's Road Toward Development*, p.23.
- 11 *Ibid*, p.25. See also Josef Silverstein and Julian Wohl, 'University students and politics in Burma', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.37, No.1, Spring 1964, p.50.
- 12 As a former Australian Ambassador to Burma noted, this symbolic action remained a live issue, as evidenced by Ne Win's accusation that former colleague and later critic Aung Gyi gave the order. Aung Gyi in turn accused Ne Win, who as a university drop-out did not enjoy the historical association with the building of Aung San or Aung Gyi. See C.G. Woodard 'Burma – The Misery of the Recent Past', unpublished paper, copy held by the author.
- 13 In 1973 there were 238,125 students at tertiary and higher education institutions in Burma, from a population of 28,900,000. *Asian Yearbook 1974* (Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1974), p.104.
- 14 U Ottama was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance movement. He spent most of the period between 1921 and 1929 in British jails, after which he died. U Wisara died in a Rangoon jail in 1929, after a hunger strike.
- 15 See, for example, E.M. Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership*, edited by J.P. Ferguson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp.299 ff.
- 16 Taylor, p.356.
- 17 Arumugam, p.42.
- 18 *Ibid*.
- 19 The government claimed that 1973–74 paddy production reached 413.5 million baskets (one basket is equivalent to 46 lbs.) but its purchases from farmers fell more than 50 million baskets short of its revised target of 125 million baskets. See E.W. Martin, 'The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma: How much change?', *Asian Survey*, Vol.15, No.2, February 1975, p.131.
- 20 See Arumugam, pp.42–5.
- 21 The first meeting of the Aid Burma Consultative Group (also known as the Burma Aid Group), consisting of ten donor countries and multilateral lenders, was held in Tokyo in November 1976.
- 22 J.F. Cady, *The United States and Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.277. Steinberg cites unofficial claims that over 100 were killed in these disturbances. See Steinberg, *Burma's Road Toward Development*, p.73.

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- 23 This passage is taken from 'Respect for the Teacher', *The Burmese Review*, 1946, reproduced in H.G. Trager (ed.), *We the Burmese: Voices from Burma* (New York: Praeger, 1969), pp.125–7.
 - 24 One reason for the United States' anxiety that U Thant stand again may have been the Soviet Union's proposal to replace the Secretary-General's position with a troika of three equal Secretaries General, one each representing the East, the West and the Non-aligned countries. See Thant, *View from the UN* (London: David and Charles, 1978), pp.3–19.
 - 25 *Ibid.* p.20.
 - 26 See U Thant's obituary in *Newsweek*, 9 December 1974, p.88.
 - 27 Thant had no authority to keep UN forces in the Middle East once their removal was requested by Egyptian President Nasser. The removal of the Chinese newsmen was apparently undertaken by Thant to spare Kurt Waldheim any embarrassment on entering office in 1972.
 - 28 Louis Halasz, 'U Thant: The man with no malice', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 December 1974, p.26.
 - 29 *Ibid.*
 - 30 Both North Vietnam and the United States had diplomatic missions in Rangoon, where discussions could be held relatively free from the attentions of the international news media.
 - 31 It was at that press conference that Nu launched his campaign to wrest the government back from the Ne Win regime.
 - 32 These were completed in April 1974, but only published in 1978, after his death. See Thant, *View from the UN*, pp.vii–viii.
 - 33 There is no evidence to support the claim that Thant's family requested he be buried in the Martyrs' Mausoleum alongside Aung San, the father of Burmese independence who was assassinated in 1947. See K.F. Englade, 'Burma pot bubbling ... but not yet boiling over', *Bangkok Post*, 24 December 1974. Nor is it likely that a request was made for Thant to be interred in the Shwedagon Pagoda itself. See 'Body snatchers', *Newsweek*, 23 December 1974, p.35.
 - 34 Although Woodard was not directly criticised by the Burmese government for this action, it was made known to him in other ways that his presence at the airport had not met with its approval. His official farewell call on Ne Win in February 1975, for example, was unusually cool and conducted in spartan surroundings.
 - 35 The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, one of the UN's five regional economic commissions.
 - 36 The United Nations Development Program, the Rangoon Representative of which (Himalaya S. Rana) was the most senior UN official in Burma.
 - 37 Woodard, *op.cit.*
 - 38 *Ibid.* See also 'U Thant's Remains Brought Home', United Nations Information Centre Press Release 74A (137), Rangoon, 1 December 1974.
 - 39 According to the same rumour, this suggestion prompted Ne Win to accuse Aung Tin of being a supporter of the ousted U Nu. Another widespread, and probably inaccurate, rumour circulating at the time was that Aung Tin was dismissed for meeting U Thant's remains at Mingaladon Airport. See Kyar Lay, 'Burma's students – The will to fight on will continue', *Voice of the Nation*, 15 December 1974.
 - 40 *Ibid.*
 - 41 'U Thant's funeral arrangements disrupted', *Working People's Daily*, 6 December 1974. Not surprisingly, a similar figure is given by *The Guardian*. See also 'U Thant buried in hastily built tomb', *Bangkok Post*, 9 December 1974.
 - 42 The *Bangkok Post* of 7 December 1974 put the number of actual demonstrators at 20,000, but this is almost certainly too high. The next day the same newspaper cited the more realistic figure of 6,000. Cady speaks of 'hundreds of students' being involved. See 'Students seize U Thant's coffin', *Bangkok Post*, 7 December 1974; 'KL, Rangoon students maintain pressure', *Bangkok Post*, 8 December 1974; and Cady, p.278.
 - 43 Traditionally, such parasols signify royalty. They can also indicate that the deceased had gained special merit by his devotion or gifts to a monastery or pagoda. The coconuts and bananas were a ritual propitiation of the nats, or guardian spirits, which maintained a place in the largely Buddhist Burmese pantheon.
 - 44 See 'More trouble in Rangoon', *Bangkok Post*, 10 December 1974.

- 45 In fact, the procession arrived at the campus an hour earlier, but had found the hall doors locked. The casket was set up on tables on the lawns outside until a key could be found. See *Working People's Daily*, 6 December 1988.
- 46 Arumugam is incorrect in saying that only 'a few monks' were involved. Arumugam, p.44.
- 47 'U Thant's burial at Cantonment Park', *Working People's Daily*, 8 December 1974.
- 48 Despite reports in the Thai press, citing unspecified diplomatic sources in London, there is no evidence that Ne Win ever agreed to this demand. *Bangkok Post*, 9 December 1974.
- 49 *Time* magazine was incorrect when it reported that a mausoleum had been built before the abduction took place. See 'Body politic', *Time*, 23 December 1974, p.13.
- 50 There is some confusion over the source of this second UN flag. Although Kyar Lay states that it came from the UNDP office, some foreign observers in Rangoon at the time were told that it was secretly lent by the local office of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).
- 51 The local press subsequently published a long letter to Ne Win, purportedly from Thant's family, in which they stated that they had attempted to retrieve the body from the protesters before it was entombed. The letter appealed to the government to protect Thant's remains 'from any damage and destruction'. See 'Family appeals for government action to safeguard U Thant's remains', *Working People's Daily*, 13 December 1974.
- 52 *Bangkok Post*, 9 December 1974.
- 53 Kyar Lay, *op.cit.*
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 Editorial: 'Kyaikkasan and Shwedagon', *The Guardian*, 10 December 1974.
- 56 Editorial: 'Sensibilities of society spurned', *Working People's Daily*, 10 December 1974.
- 57 See, for example, 'Help given for U Thant's funeral recounted, courses of events related', *The Guardian*, 10 December 1974.
- 58 Steinberg probably overstates the case when he says that 'In 1974, when students demonstrated over the proper burial site for U Thant, these disturbances naturally centred on the Shwedagon'. D.I. Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), p.43.
- 59 This claim was made often by the Burmese authorities during this period. While repeated by the international news media, it was not in fact true. U Thant's family, however, were hardly in a position to contradict the Burmese government. See, for example, 'U Khant and brothers meet newsmen', *Working People's Daily*, 9 December 1974.
- 60 *Newsweek* was wide of the mark when it described only 'hundreds of mourners' as having been arrested. *Newsweek*, 23 December 1974.
- 61 Following the British conquest of Upper Burma in 1885, King Thibaw and his queen were exiled to India, where Thibaw died in 1916. In 1919, Supayalat was permitted to return to Rangoon, where she died in 1925. A Buddhist monk and man of letters, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing co-founded the nationalist *Dobama Asiyone*. Revered as a Burmese patriot, he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954 and died in 1964.
- 62 For an accurate and detailed account of these events, see 'U Thant's remains entombed at Cantonment Gardens', *The Guardian*, 12 December 1974.
- 63 Cady, p.278.
- 64 Cady estimates the number of rioters at 20,000, but gives no source for this figure. Cady, p.278.
- 65 Surprisingly, accurate details of these events were published in the local press. See 'Rioters on rampage', *The Guardian*, 12 December 1974.
- 66 The 'Proclamation of Military Administration', 'Military Administration Announcement No. 1' and initial 'Military Administration Orders' were printed in the local press. See *The Guardian*, 12 December 1974.
- 67 'Curfew, martial law in Rangoon', *Bangkok Post*, 12 December 1974.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 *The Guardian*, 12 December 1974.
- 70 They did not, however, immediately leave Rangoon but remained inconspicuously billeted around the city, particularly in the schools, which were still closed.
- 71 See 'Mandalay monks joint protest against Ne Win' (sic), *Bangkok Post*, 15 December 1974. A Sayadaw is a monk of at least 10 years standing, revered for his piety and scholarship.

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- 72 See 'Burma widens riot roundup', *Bangkok Post*, 17 December 1974, and 'Seven misled youths released', *Working People's Daily*, 28 February 1975. Machine-gun fire heard during the early hours of 11 December was later reported (somewhat improbably) to have been test firing at a defence industries range nearby.
- 73 Silverstein, p.143. See also '9 dead in Rangoon riots', *Bangkok Post*, 13 December 1974.
- 74 *Bangkok Post*, 17 December 1974.
- 75 Steinberg, *Burma's Road Toward Development*, p.73.
- 76 Arumugam, p.43.
- 77 *Newsweek*, 23 December 1974. See also *Bangkok Post*, 13 December 1974.
- 78 Cady cites the figure of 'some 1500 or more' arrested, with several score sentenced to 3–5 years in prison. Cady, p.278. See also *Bangkok Post*, 17 December 1974.
- 79 '250 freed in Burma', *Bangkok Post*, 25 December 1974.
- 80 In June 1975, Burmese students joined workers in a new demonstration against the high cost of living. They also demanded the release from prison of those jailed at the time of the U Thant disturbances.
- 81 Steinberg, *Burma's Road Toward Development*, p.73.
- 82 M.C. Tun, 'Taking a harder line with the critics', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 February 1975, p.37.
- 83 See *Bangkok Post*, 25 December 1974.
- 84 Because at least one of the formations brought to Rangoon was (nominally) an ethnic battalion, the story quickly spread that these traditionally tougher troops were deliberately being employed to fire on the demonstrators, who were overwhelmingly ethnic Burmans.
- 85 'Soldiers go on sniping spree', *Bangkok Post*, 16 December 1974.
- 86 Cady, p.278.
- 87 See, for example, 'President's message on Union Day anniversary', *Working People's Daily*, 14 February 1975; and 'Strengthen natl. unity to set up socialist democratic machinery', *The Guardian*, 12 February 1975.
- 88 In 1974, the Prime Ministers of Australia and Malaysia, the President of Indonesia, the Foreign Minister of Thailand and former Prime Minister Tanaka of Japan all visited Burma.
- 89 See, in particular, 'The contradictions of a system erupt – Burma faces a grim future', *Asahi Shimbun*, 14 December 1974.
- 90 See 'Govt backs Burma against rebels', *Bangkok Post*, 10 December 1974.
- 91 It must be said, however, that no arrangement between the Ne Win regime and the insurgents was likely to last. The philosophical differences and lack of trust between them were – and still are – too great.
- 92 The Montoneros had kidnapped and killed Aranburu in 1970 as one of their first major terrorist actions. Edward S Heyman, 'The Diffusion of Transnational Terrorism', in R.H. Schultz and Stephen Sloan (eds), *Responding to the Terrorist Threat: Security and Crisis Management* (New York: Peragmon Press, 1980), p.190.
- 93 These scholars also claim (incorrectly) that Thant's body was removed 'from the crypt'. See A.P. Schmid and J. de Graff, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1982), p.128.