

~~SECRET//NOFORN~~



Archive: [Home](#) | [Weekly](#) | [Monthly](#) | [6 Months](#) | [Yearly](#)

06 October 2008



BURMA

(U) JUNTA UNDETERRED

(b)(3):10 USC 424

UNCLASSIFIED



Image: AFP

(U) **Burmese Leader Gen Than Shwe.** Continuing repressive policies underscore Than Shwe's determination to prevent interference in his plans to form a civilian government overseen by the military.

(U) Last week's 1-year anniversary of the crackdown on monk-led protests has refocused attention on the isolated military regime under Gen Than Shwe. Continuing threats and arrests underscore the junta's determination to repress any opposition as it moves to legitimize its rule through tightly controlled elections in 2010. Although the regime likewise has resisted foreign pressures for reform, the extensive recovery needs from the May cyclone have led to a relaxation of restrictions on outside assistance [redacted] and apparently contributed to an invitation last month for a senior U.S. military visit. Such attitudinal changes by some senior officers suggest a successor regime would want to broaden foreign outreach, but [redacted] fundamental reform will remain highly unlikely while Than Shwe retains his tight grip on power.

(U) Since early last month, [redacted] press have reported tightened security to prevent opposition efforts to commemorate last September's regime crackdown on monk-led protests, which grew out of spiraling economic hardships. Increased riot police presence and preemptive

(U) **Opposition Woes**

(b)(1);Sec. 1.4(c)

(b)(1)1.4(a)

(b)(3):10 USC 424



arrests in Rangoon and other main towns have appeared largely successful in restricting protest activities, although isolated incidents have occurred, according to some press accounts.

> (U) An Indian news service reported a peaceful protest march on 27 September by about 150 Buddhist monks in a western provincial town observing the first anniversary of the Saffron Revolution.

> (S) [redacted] a steady stream of arrests have occurred since last September's crackdown, despite the recent release of roughly 9,000 prisoners—including 9 political detainees—which local critics assess was a conciliatory gesture as the UN General Assembly opened. More than 2,000 political prisoners, including leading democratic figure Aung San Suu Kyi, remain in detention, according to human rights groups.

(b)(1)1.4(c)

(S) Tight controls coincide with the junta's preparations to transition to a military-led civilian government using its self-proclaimed "roadmap to disciplined democracy." Measures range from cosmetic gestures such as the prisoner release to the apparent formation of compliant political parties to dominate parliament following the 2010 election, the fifth of the roadmap's seven steps. Strongman Gen Than Shwe's determined pursuit of this course led the government to hold a scheduled constitutional referendum despite the cyclone disaster. [redacted] widespread coercion and apparent manipulation of the vote count to prevent an election defeat like that in the 1990 landslide victory by prodemocracy parties.

Sec. 1.4(d)

> (S) Underscoring planned suppression of dissent, a regime official told visiting UN special envoy Gambari last month that the junta would "oppose and wipe out those who attempted to jeopardize or harm the constitution."

(b)(1)1.4(d)

[redacted] the junta's dominant political apparatus is seeking to form proxy parties to contest the election, giving the appearance of a multiparty system. An observer with direct access to the regime assessed the 2010 vote would be neither democratic nor transparent, with ruling generals simply taking off their uniforms to assume a civilian role.

(S) Seeking to blunt foreign pressure for reform, the regime tightly managed the latest visit by UN envoy Gambari last month while relying on China and Russia to veto any further UN sanctions. However, the devastating 3 May cyclone eventually compelled the regime to accept the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an aid conduit to deflect Western pressures; regime leaders acquiesced to a series of U.S. military humanitarian flights into Rangoon, apparently satisfied they could monitor the effort. Senior-level disagreements within the hierarchy apparently contributed to easing foreign access, with some senior officers successfully appealing Than Shwe's ordered restrictions, [redacted]

(b)(1)1.4(d)

Although regime motives remain unclear,

[redacted] (b)(1)1.4(c)

[redacted] (b)(3):10 USC 424;(b)(1)1.4(c)

(S) Although the junta's plans remain opaque, Than Shwe shows no sign he will acquiesce to international pressures for democratic openness, including allowing opposition groups genuine representation in the political process. Even though further outbreaks of dissent are likely, Burma's repressed prodemocracy groups probably will remain incapable of mounting a serious challenge. Resigned to this fact, some but not all groups will take part in the 2010 election, hoping the new institutions would be reformed over time. Desire for change among some regime generals raises the potential for eventual reforms with Than Shwe's passing. Nonetheless [redacted] any military successor regime is likely to remain intent on maintaining control and preserving its vested interests.

(b)(1)1.4(d)

(S) With many supporters jailed or under close regime scrutiny, long-repressed Burmese democratic opposition groups lack the freedom and unified posture to mount a serious challenge. Despite continuing regime threats, the 20-year-old National League of Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, remains among the most outspoken of Burma's prodemocracy movements, strongly criticizing the new constitution. Although yet to announce their official position, NLD officials recently confided to U.S. diplomats they most likely will boycott the 2010 elections. Other NLD activists, however, believe they should adopt a more pragmatic approach and cease basing the NLD's political agenda on regime recognition of its 1990 parliamentary election victory. Also hindering NLD effectiveness is generational tension between its geriatric Central Executive Committee—also known as the "Uncles"—and members of its youth movement. The leader of the other major opposition group, the 88 Generation Students, informed Embassy representatives that he also favored engaging in the political process, despite its inherent flaws, because the time for protests alone had passed, but he conceded differences also existed within his own party and among the various ethnic groups.

(U) The Burmese Constitution

(S) The Burmese government publicly unveiled its controversial constitution on 9 April, a month before the 10 May referendum. According to [redacted] reports, the document serves to institutionalize the military's control, containing several notable features:

(b)(1)1.4(d)

- > (S) Although enumerating basic civil liberties, provisions carve out broad exceptions that allow the regime extensive powers of arrest in the interest of preserving stability.
- > (S) Tight restrictions bar many citizens from elective office, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, while at least 25 percent of parliament seats are allotted to the military.
- > (S) The military will retain the authority to intervene to "safeguard" the constitution. The civilian president, serving as head of state, must have a military background.
- > (S) Regional governments will exercise only limited administrative powers granted by the central government.
- > (S) The military through its representation in parliament will be able to bar any