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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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SECRET

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FROM : AMEMBASSY RANGOON

SUBJECT : Recent Developments in Thailand: Can It Happen Here?

REF : Rangoon

SECRET

Summary. Recent political developments in Thailand have been watched intently with one question uppermost in observers' minds: could it happen here? The consensus is that similar student or popular demonstrations leading to the overthrow of or major changes in the regime remain unlikely but not impossible in the long term. The success of Thai students, however, could help make Burmese students forget the lesson they were taught in 1962 when GUB forces mowed them down. End Summary.

The spectacle of student demonstrations leading to the downfall of a military-dominated government naturally has aroused considerable interest in a neighboring country also long ruled by a military regime. The GUB, as always, has remained officially silent on events in Thailand, but wire service reports of developments have been carried in the government controlled press, although by GUB order no photographs were printed. People outside GUB and especially its opponents have also speculated upon the happening with one theme uppermost: could similar events occur in Burma?

At first glance, it appears plausible to suppose that a similar scenario might develop in Rangoon. Burmese students have traditionally been more volatile and their leaders more politically active than Thai students. Dislike and even hatred for the existing regime is widespread and is particularly strongly felt by students. Rising prices, shortages of food and nearly every other basic commodity, and unemployment even among university graduates provide plenty of material for anti-regime feelings to work on. There are over 20,000 university students in Rangoon and at least as many in secondary schools, plus thousands of recent graduates, to be mobilized.

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In July 1962, Rangoon University student demonstrations against the regime, which had seized power four months earlier, were ruthlessly suppressed, leaving at least 50 dead and hundreds of students detained, some for years. Arrests of students have continued from time to time, and on several occasions student mobs (aroused by incidents at athletic or other non-political events) have been effectively dispersed, though without serious bloodshed. It seems clear, therefore, that the present GUB leadership in principle would not shrink from using any amount of force necessary to disperse student (or other) demonstrators.

The expectation of another 1962 is the major deterrent to street movements against the regime - a deterrent which the success of Thai students has probably weakened, however. Moreover, Rangoon 1973 is different from Rangoon 1962. In 1962, the students had exhausted public and governmental patience with years of violence and demonstration, often for trivial or self-serving reasons. The Ne Win regime was new, enjoyed considerable popularity, and could count beyond question on Army support. Today, in contrast, the students would be underdogs appealing to public sympathies and perhaps even to those of the troops who would have to fire on them. They include a fair number both from working-class families and from the families of the regime's own loyal Army and BSPP cadres.

Given the level of public discontent with the regime, there could be no absolute certainty that an order to fire on demonstrating students would be obeyed or that, if it were obeyed and a slaughter ensued, there would not be an uncontrollable outbreak of public fury in support of the students.

Hence the GUB tries to handle students with great circumspection. The police carefully avoid provocations; on-campus indoctrination efforts have been limited; and the GUB normally tries hard to avoid giving the students any serious cause for grievance over living conditions. Moreover, the GUB is devoting enormous amounts of time, effort and money to its current program of building a one-party political system within which politically conscious individuals can participate, albeit within limits strictly defined by the government. This program extends to youth and even down to 5-year-old children who are recruited into the Lanzin Youth League. (A "seminar", including an effectively organized mass rally of 100,000 youth was held in Rangoon Oct. 28-31.) It is doubtful, however, that this tightly controlled political activity provides an adequate safety valve for would-be student politicians who might otherwise take to the streets. The BSPP seems too secretive and too lacking in popular appeal to function as such safety valve.

The likelihood of an outbreak is further reduced by the government's efficient intelligence apparatus which has its agents among the students; by the regime's totalitarian control of the press, radio, contacts with the outside world, and

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even non-political organizations (in sharp contrast to the open if authoritarian Thai regime of Thanom and Praphas); and by divisions between left-wing and right-wing groups which fragment opposition to the GUB.

Another key difference between the Burmese and Thai situations is pointed up by the role of the King in Thailand; his intervention obviously facilitated the transition to a new government responsive to student and popular pressures. There is no corresponding institution in Burma; hence even if popular pressures somehow succeeded in toppling the government it is hard to see what might emerge to take its place. Nevertheless this consideration would not loom large in the minds of any young revolutionaries.

On the other hand, the rumors that General Kris deliberately withheld support from Thanom and Praphas -- whether they are true or false -- may be giving some Burmese commanders food for thought. Army hostility toward leftists in the BSPP is well established, and it is not inconceivable that some Army leaders might perceive an opportunity if a student outbreak were directed against the Party. Even if a student outbreak were not aimed specifically against the Party, some Army officers might see an opportunity to turn it against the Party by allying themselves with the students. Moreover, a sufficiently disturbed and confused situation might provide an opportunity for some Army commander to tip the balance by withholding troops from suppression of students. We have no evidence, however, that any senior officer (most of whom remain strongly loyal to Ne Win) would sponsor any such maneuver, and we doubt that any could do so--except of course Ne Win himself.

One factor which is most difficult to assess is the impact of events in Thailand on the Burmese students themselves. "We need the same thing here:" was the explosive reaction of one Sino-Burmese girl who graduated a few years ago from RASU and who comes from a well-to-do family. Many others may feel the same way ("Burmese people are too passive," said one young graduate regretfully) but would be less open about it, and some have remarked with resignation that the GUB would use massive force to quell any outbreak. The Burmese students have read of the Bangkok events in the Rangoon press and have doubtless taken note. Indeed, a few have reportedly been arrested for circulating leaflets calling on Burmese students to follow the example of their Thai counterparts. Furthermore, the Thai-Burmese border is porous, and the student bush telegraph may be at work in Tenasserim and the Southern Shan State, where young people of both nations are look-alikes and can move across the border for at least a few days at a time by one means or another. Whether the Thai students would seek to convey any such proselytizing message as "You can do it too" seems open to question, but is not impossible.

Asked on October 27 if he thought the experience in Thailand had lessons for Burma, MIS Director Colonel Tin Oo said the factors which led to Thanom and Praphas's trouble do not apply in Burma. Elaborating, he pointed to the fact that promulgation of a new constitution is imminent, that the Ne Win government maintains a dialogue with the students, and to what he termed an absence of corruption among senior Burmese officials.

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We know from conversations with other MIS officials that they are keenly alert to the impact of Thai events on the Burma scene. Another senior officer of the Military Intelligence Service, in discussing the Thai student riot, commented to the Defense Attache that the Thai military did everything wrong. He said that student demonstrations should be allowed to run their course and exhaust themselves if possible. If the students become too destructive and the government considers it necessary to apply force, then an overwhelming display and use of force is necessary. He said that the Thai military used their force in a hit and miss manner, but that if a problem arose in Rangoon the GUB would use concentrated maximum force if the situation so required. But this same officer told the DCM, "As long as we can see the students are dancing, we do not worry."

Conclusion: The Bangkok experience demonstrates that a mysterious, momentous and hardly predictable chain of events can sometimes be set in motion by seemingly relatively insignificant actions of a government or a segment of the populace. Such a development in the very different Burmese environment is not completely impossible, and should remain a factor in our contingency planning. On balance, however, we still consider a serious student or public outbreak unlikely to take place, and even more unlikely to succeed in overthrowing the regime.

MARTIN



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