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## INTRODUCTION

It is both too soon and too late to write a political biography of General Ne Win. Too soon for several reasons: one is that his name still stirs political passions, though not as strongly as two or three decades ago. Another reason is that a number of diplomatic records necessary for a full account are not yet available. Under the thirty-year rule that applies in many archives, most of Ne Win's final decade in power is still under a blanket and this book is weaker for that. Moreover, the Myanmar archives and the archives of other countries crucial for a complete account are partially or totally unavailable. If I had more time, more money, and an even more tolerant publisher, the book would be substantially longer than it is now.

A political biography of General Ne Win is also too late in that many people who might have been interviewed and provided first-hand accounts of events and circumstances are no longer here. The Grim Reaper reached them before I did. Especially, the subject of the volume, General Ne Win, whom I never met, has been gone for more than a decade as I write. He does not have the chance to rebut and refute what I have written about him. However, given his lack of interest in what others said about him, and his unwillingness to encourage a cult of personality around himself, other than in the reflected glory of General Aung San, it is unlikely that he would do so even if he were alive.

A question that readers might ask is why have I bothered to write this book? I do not need to do so as I am under no obligation to a university to drive it up the league tables or a funding council to demonstrate that I deserve my noodles and potatoes.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, reasons which grew out of my academic career. I lived in Myanmar in 1978

and in 1982 for periods of six months each, and visited the country almost every year between 1975 and 1987, the year before Ne Win stepped down from formal office. Though I was unable to travel widely before 1989, and never reached the furthest regions of the country until this century, I did experience a little of what life in socialist Myanmar was like. In many ways, despite the lack of many of the creature comforts which I took for granted in my cosseted American/Australian/British existence when not in Myanmar, I found my life there constantly rewarding and interesting. The pace was slower, the people more friendly, the shortage of goods usually made up for by the black market or local substitutes, and generally I got my research done despite the claims that Myanmar was closed to the world. True, Military Intelligence followed me initially and later set silly traps to expose me as a combined CIA/ASIS/MI5 agent, but it was not hard to have a laugh at what was attempted.

Living in Ne Win's socialist Burma in the second decade of his rule provided me with experiences which I would not otherwise have had. This got me interested in the history of Myanmar nationalism and socialism as revealed in many memoirs and political texts published in the 1930s through the 1970s. It is no wonder that students in Yangon and elsewhere believed in their right and duty to rebel against the government in 1988. They had been provided with a steady diet of revolutionary nationalist literature readily available at any bookshop or private lending library, of which there were many in those days. Whereas today students seem merely to read "how-to-get-rich" manuals, then they and I were studying the efforts of student nationalists to oust the British, rid the country of foreign influence, and establish a socialist paradise.

A memorable experience concerning Ne Win occurred in 1977, on my first trip to Mandalay. In those more relaxed days, before mass tourism and heightened fears about security, one could wander almost anywhere in and around the city unhampered. One day I was strolling in the grounds of the old royal palace, not yet then rebuilt of cold cement rather than the timber which would have provided its warmth. Within the walls there was a small army base, within which one could equally stroll. As I did so, walking towards a dusty car shed containing three or four ancient Mercedes-Benz automobiles covered in bird droppings and dirt, I struck up a conversation with a middle-aged sergeant. I asked him whether General Ne Win ever used those cars. Indicating that he did, I asked whether he had ever met the General. He had and quickly explained that he would do anything for him to the point of death. He told me of the impact of Ne Win on him

personally. Once, in the 1950s, as a young private, he had met Ne Win, who asked him about his domestic circumstances, including his marital status and about his children. Twenty years later, the sergeant had had the task of opening a car door for Ne Win on a visit to Mandalay. As he emerged from the backseat, Ne Win, addressing the sergeant by name, referring to him as *yebaw* (comrade), asked about his wife and children by name. He was flabbergasted at his feat of memory. Such a man had a hold over his army which deserves to be understood in terms other than the theories of despotism that I had been taught in school.

I subsequently heard others speak not only of Ne Win's prodigious memory, but also of his personal touch in human relations. Deferential and polite to the educated, he could be cruel and demanding towards those close to him, particularly in the army. As told later in this book, he physically beat his own men out of rage at their alleged ignorance or slavishness. His personal cook and valet for many years, Raju, told the story about how, when Ne Win got angry with him, he would strike him. Raju said he did not mind because after Ne Win's mood had been restored to equanimity, he often felt sorry for what he had done. Raju would then receive an increase in salary. For every account of Ne Win's brutality, there is a story about his devotion to duty and kindness towards others, often going out of his way to pay respects to his opponents in death or adversity, and revealing a humanity often denied by his critics. His emotions were always near the surface.

The persons with whom I talked most frequently about Ne Win in the 1970s and 1980s were his allies and confidants in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, but then his opponents and political victims in the 1960s and 1970s. I expected these men and women to be angry at him and condemn him in no uncertain terms. A few did, particularly the wives of men whom Ne Win had imprisoned. However, many still retained a degree of respect for his integrity and patriotism, admitting that the economic policies over which he presided were a failure, as he did in the end, but he nonetheless had good intentions for the country. Of course, after 1988, when the anti-military exile community was in full voice, such views were drowned out by louder and more strident, younger voices.

Burmese voices of my age, living throughout Ne Win's socialist revolution, took a broader view of the man and his times, and were found to condemn less than those who fled abroad. One now-retired captain of a boat on the Ayeyawady River told me in the strongest terms how much he admired Ne Win. As this was more than a decade after his fall from power, when

even the then military regime had nothing good to say about the socialist past, I pressed him to explain the grounds for his admiration. With a chuckle, he explained how he admired any man who could, for twenty-six years, alone and unaided, walk backward and never stumble. Whether Ne Win ever saw Clarke Gable, in the film *Honky Tonk*, remark as he backed out of a saloon covering his opponents with his pistol, “This reminds me of the days when we used to do all our walking backwards”,<sup>2</sup> remains among the many questions I cannot answer about Ne Win and his times.

Ne Win was born into a Burma which was a colony that, politically, economically, and militarily, was intimately linked with the British Empire, especially British India. He spent his entire political life attempting to undo the consequences of binding and bending Myanmar to outside interests. His purpose was to restore Myanmar to self-mastery, only to realize that this was an impossible dream in modern conditions. More immediately, he had replaced a multiparty political system and a mixed economy with a single-party political system and a state-run economy, though with a large private sector, only to later admit that to go back after twenty-six years to what he had abolished, was the way forward.

This brings me to another reason for writing this book. Judged even on his own terms, Ne Win would have had to admit his revolution was a failure. Even so, it would be a mistake to argue from that perspective. To quote George MacDonald Fraser, who composed his memoirs, “to illustrate ... the difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’, and to assure a later generation that much modern wisdom, applied in retrospect ... is not to be trusted”. He was writing about the Second World War as a man who had fought in it. If we look at the past through a lens distorted by “myth, revisionist history, fashionable ideas and reactions, social change, and the cinema and television”, then much of the world Ne Win lived in and through seems apparent madness.<sup>3</sup> Our ideas of race, nation, economic justice, and political necessity are not those of our parents and grandparents, nor are they the same as Ne Win’s and those with whom he lived and worked. Of course, basic beliefs in human dignity and the sanctity of life do not change, and Ne Win and his generation share these values with us, though they were displayed in different languages, often which the current generation would find politically incorrect.

Ne Win’s life was lived as European imperialism was dying and new or restored states were emerging in the name of nationalism. War and conflict dominated the twentieth century in Europe and Asia. From the time Ne Win entered politics until he stepped down from formal office and

beyond, he never knew peace. During the Cold War, which dominates this book, he attempted to keep Myanmar, despite its neighbours' machinations on various sides of the Cold War divide, out of their armed conflicts. Regrettable as the deaths of those who died in Myanmar's civil war over the years, perhaps as many as several thousand in the worst years, they were, in comparison to the many millions killed in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos between 1960 and 1980, relatively few. Myanmar, despite its avowal of revolutionary socialism, also avoided the excesses of the Maoist revolution in China or the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union or the bloodbath in Indonesia of 1965. His revolution, in terms of its human toll, was not a bloody revolution. His political opponents died in their own beds or at the hands of other opponents.

That is not to say that the Ne Win era was cost free. Many lives were not only lost but stunted and opportunities for development and enrichment were destroyed. The cosmopolitan life of the privileged few that colonialism had created, and Ne Win had enjoyed himself, and continued to enjoy when abroad, was obliterated. Myanmar "fell behind" in the development race which has come to define political success in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries because of his single-minded pursuit of the Burmese Way to Socialism. However, seen from other perspectives, not shared by his most severe critics, he created a nation which had the resilience from its own resources to withstand more than twenty years of post-Cold War economic sanctions applied by his sometime collaborators at the height of the Cold War. I shall revert to this subject in the Epilogue. For now, to quote Fraser again,

You cannot, you must not, judge the past by the present; you must try to see it in its own terms and values, if you are to have some inkling of it. You may not like what you see, but do not on that account fall into the error of trying to adjust it to suit your own vision of what it ought to have been.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this is a very long book and it raises many questions and issues in the complex politics of twentieth-century Myanmar. The length and detail is justified by the need to detail for the record not only Ne Win's political thought as expressed in his speeches, but also his longstanding and close relations with many other leaders during the Cold War. For the uninitiated, this complexity may seem bewildering. For reference to the background and details to various sections, readers may wish to consult one or more of the standard histories of modern Myanmar. Unfortunately, there are few

such available. I immodestly suggest, if they wish, they might consult the relevant sections of the author's *State in Myanmar* (2009). Throughout the book, I have used both the traditional transliteration of Burmese words and names as commonly found in books published prior to 1989, and the Myanmar Language Commission system published in 1980. By now, most readers will be familiar with both systems.

## Notes

1. As H.L. Mencken wrote, in considering the biographies of President Theodore Roosevelt,

Nearly all our professional historians are poor men holding college posts, and they are ten times more cruelly beset by the ruling politico-plutocratic-social oligarchy than ever the Prussian professors under the Hohenzollerns. Let them diverge in the slightest from the current official doctrine, and they are turned out of their chairs with a ceremony suitable for the expulsion of a drunken valet.

“Roosevelt: An Autopsy”, in *Prejudices: A Selection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 49.

2. Quoted in George MacDonald Fraser, *Quartered Safe Out Here: A Recollection of the War in Burma* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 125.
3. *Ibid.*, p. xix.
4. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.