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Three Pagodas Pass Border Town Under Siege
Kaowao: November 9, 2010

Three Pagodas Pass -- The Three Pagodas Pass border town on the Burma side of the border is still under the control of a combined force of soldiers from the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) contrary to an earlier report that they had retreated from the border town.

Refugees who had returned to Burma this morning have fled the area again after the Burmese Army shelled the border town from nearby on higher ground in the mountains. Many villagers had returned thinking that the DKBA force retreated from the border town after the guns ceased firing last night.

“We have returned to Palaing Japan after they (Burmese Army) launched their offensive of mortar attacks from higher up in the mountains. One child was killed and three villagers were injured. The wounded villagers were admitted to Sangkhlaburi Hospital,” said Nai Blai, who temporarily took shelter together with about 2500 villagers on the Thai side of the border town.

“We are still afraid to go back because they (BA) will continue to shell the town,” said Mi Khaing from the Thai side at the border town.

According to local source, there may be about 4000 refugees who fled to different areas and who require food and water. Some villagers were provided with food by the NGOs and the local Thai authorities.

Tension between the ethnic groups and the Burmese government had been rising after the government’s ultimatum to have the ethnic armies give up their arms to form into a Border Guard Force. About 1000 DKBA soldiers broke away from their main group after rejecting the BGF proposal ahead of the country’s first General Election in 20 years.
About 120 troops from the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 283 and 60 troops from the LIB No. 405 failed to defend the border town after the DKBA breakaway group launched their attack on November 8, 2010. Employees from the government offices and the Burmese Army soldiers retreated to their battalions without a fight to the Karen troops who easily seized 9 arms from the BA. Causalities on both sides are not yet known.

The DKBA troops had entered the border town on November 8th from different directions in the early morning taking over the town by noon.

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**Karen retreat Three Pagodas Pass border town after one night siege**

Kaowao: November 9, 2010

Three Pagodas Pass – A combined force composed of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) have retreated from the border town on the Burma side near to Three Pagodas Pass after a one night siege against the Burmese Army stationed there.

The spokesperson of KNU’s 6th Brigade, Padoh Hte Nay, told a Kaowao reporter that the Karen took control of the border town on Monday and destroyed the Burmese government’s offices in the town.

The military and government offices including the Special Branch (SB), Agriculture, Forestry, and Post and Telegraph Departments were all burned down by the rebel groups on Monday, November 8th, the day after the first General Election in Burma in 20 years.

A Kaowao reporter from the Thai side of the border town reported that about 120 troops from the Burmese Army Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 283 and 60 troops from the LIB No. 405 failed to defend the town and government employees and officers were forced to retreat from the area. The combined forces of the Karen rebels seized 9 arms from the BA.

“The DKBA troops entered the border town from different directions surprised the Burmese government troops who fled the town shortly after. The DKBA troops gained control of the area around noon time,” said Nai Lun, a town resident.

Meanwhile, the DKBA troops attacked the Myawaddy border town in Burma opposite to Maesot, Tak Province. The attack was led by Colonel Saw Lah Pwe (Bo Nha Khan Mwe) of the DKBA Brigade No. 5 who rejected orders to join other DKBA troops who had formed into a Border Guard Force (BGF) under the Burmese Army’s command.

As of November 9th on Tuesday morning, the DKBA troops retreated from the town and many civilians have now started to return home. About 4000 town residents including women and children had crossed over to the Thai side yesterday fearing that the Burmese army troops would return during the night to launch an offensive against the Karen rebels. Local civilians were taking refuge at the Plain Japan village which is under New Mon State Party’s control.

Mi Khaing, a Three Pagodas Pass resident said, “We packed our belongings and crossed the border into Thailand because the Karen soldiers told us to leave for our safety”.

Mi Khaing, a Three Pagodas Pass resident said, “We packed our belongings and crossed the border into Thailand because the Karen soldiers told us to leave for our safety”. 
According to a military observer who lives in Sangkhlaburi, the TPP area is difficult for the BA to reinforce their troops unless they have the air power to back up their ground troops. According to an earlier report, the Karen troops had planned to attack during the General Election in Burma on Sunday, November 7, 2010.

Mon Vote starts with good results in Ye
Kaowao: November 8, 2010

Ye -- In the first democratic election in Burma in 20 years, local observers in Ye Township, southern Burma, say several voters went to polling stations to vote for the All Mon Region Democracy Party, (AMDP).

Voter turnout in Durae, a former stronghold area of the NMSP, was strong. “We were all volunteering and doing our best on Election Day. About 2000 voters came out to vote and the results are very good for the Mon party,” said Nai Lun a community leader of Durae (Duya), Ye Township.

Many showed their joy and pride at being able to choose their community leaders. “It was a rare chance to show our pride so we supported the Mon. The election was free and fair at the local level in Durae. The AMDP gained over (75%), from 1500 of 2000 votes and only about 50 votes were for the USDP and NUP,” said Chan Mon, a young volunteer for the Mon party.

Another villager from Zee Phyu Thaung, a community made up of diverse ethnic groups of Burmese, Tavoyans and Mon, voted for the MDP according to another local source.

However; even though the local community believed that the MDP won the majority in the local polling stations, many fear that the SPDC may change the results.

AMDP candidates in Ye are Nai Myint Swe (Col. Lawee Ong), Dr. Banya Aung Moe and Ms. Mi Myint Myint Than.

“I voted for the Mon even though I am a Burmese because they are from my community and I trust their leadership. We have been under this government for too long and we don’t like them (USDP), this is why I voted for the Mon,” said a local resident in Ye Myo-Thit.

The All Mon Region Democracy Party released a set of partisan songs in the hope of winning over a few Mon constituents in the General Election. The AMDP formerly known as AMRDP contested in Paung, Kyikemaraw, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye, Moumlien, Chaung Sone Kokkareik and Yephyu Townships in southern Burma.

The Mon Party is led by Nai Ngwe Thein, Dr. Min Hla Aung, Nai Saik, Nai Myint Swe, Nai San Tin, Dr. Min Nwe Soe and Dr. Banya Aung Moe. The Union Election Commission (UEC) officially allowed it to form a political party on May 24, 2010.

The AMDP faces obstacle from both sides to win the election because Mon National Democratic Front and New Mon State Party, the two main political Mon parties, strongly oppose the General Election and the SPDC set strong restriction during their campaign.
“Vote for the Mon” - AMRDP Releases Election Campaign Song
Kaowao: October 24, 2010

The All Mon Region Democracy Party has just released a set of partisan songs in the hope of winning over a few Mon constituents in the upcoming General Election scheduled for November 7, 2010.

The campaign album will be distributed all over Mon and Karen State and Tenasserim Division, says popular celebrity, Smile Chan (aka) Jamoi Chan. The music for the songs, a mixed assortment of light and heavy rock, pop, and marching band flute music with percussion, was composed by AMRDP leaders and a host of other Mon singers who told Kaowao that the CD was just recorded in the past two weeks in Yangon for the November 7th General Election and is on its way to Mon State for distribution.

The purpose of the songs is to create a unified spirit of change with most of the words reflecting the Mons struggle for their rights and freedom, says AMRDP Chairman, Nai Ngwe Thein (Janu Mon). Nai Ngwe Thein is a well-known song writer and Nai Kyan Yit (Layeh Hong Mon) is one of the most popular singers in the Mon community.

“It’s fantastic and I am very glad to help my people and the leaders of the AMRDP,” Smile Chan said, ‘Vote for the Mon’ is one of the songs I sing in this album which expresses my dream for the Mon people.”

A host of other famous Mon singers, Layeh Hong Mon, Agga, Eco Tara, Min Thetka, Ms. Jondae Ong and Ms. Pon Dewi are also featured on the album.

The ensemble were disappointed that they couldn’t include the popular Mon singer, Lawee, after they were unable to match his voice to the music with confidence and was replaced by Suriya Marn.

A well-known Burmese singer Orange (Lein Maw Thee), who hails from Kyaikmayaw, also contributed one short ditty in Burmese.

The AMRDP’s Chairman Nai Ngwe Thein expects that about 80 percent of the Mon people who will vote chose the AMRDP because of their promise to create initiatives for social development, democratic and ethnic rights, while reforming the agriculture economy to a more market-orient economy. The Mon Party is led by Nai Ngwe Thein, Dr. Min Hla Aung, Nai Saik, Col. Lawee Ong (aka) Nai Myint Swe, Nai San Tin, Dr. Min Nwe Soe and Dr. Banya Aung Moe. The Union Election Commission (UEC) officially allowed it to form a political party on May 24, 2010.

However, Mon National Democratic Front and New Mon State Party, the two main political Mon parties, strongly oppose the General Election which is to be held next month on the 7th of November, 2010.

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NMSP stands firm on boycotting Burma’s 2010 General Election
Kaowao: October 23, 2010

Sangkhaburi - New Mon State Party released a statement on October 18 affirming their stand on the upcoming General Election which is to be held on the 7th of November.
Released in the Mon and Burmese languages, the NMSP statement says that the elections in Burma promise little change for national reconciliation among the ethnic nationalities who have struggled for their democratic and ethnic rights for almost 50 years since Ne Win’s military coup in 1962 that established Burman majority rule.

The NMSP spokesperson, Nai Hongsar Born Khai, says, “Even though we stand firmly to oppose the election, we will not go against anyone who wants to vote, we respect the rights of individuals.”

The NMSP’s statement says that the 2010 General Elections will not be free and fair because the pro-junta USDP has access to whatever resources the government is willing to offer to ensure a parliamentary majority of votes while restricting the other political groups from campaigning in the country.

The statement reiterates that there will be no international monitoring or election observers present in the country to oversee any irregularities, in order to hold a real free and fair election in the future, it urges the Mon community to boycott this election.

The Mon umbrella organization, Mon Affairs Union (MAU) is also boycotting the elections and issued a statement in early October.

“The election is one sided and it is not free and fair. The SPDC has banned the main political party, the NLD, in the process. They have also restricted international observers and ignored the UN and the international community’s request for election monitoring” said Nai Layeh Rot, Secretary of the MAU.

On October 20, 2010, the Thai Burma border based Mon Youth Progressive Organization (MYPO) also sent out an open letter calling on the people to boycott the election.

“We send this open letter for the youth who use the Internet inside Burma and to the migrant workers in Thailand who will contact their relatives back home urging them not to vote. Our slogan is: ‘Don’t prolong the SPDC regime because of your vote” and “Your rights are not to vote”, said Chairperson of the MYPO, Ms. Ai Sorn to Kaowao.

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AMRDP faces many obstacles in 2010 General Election
Kaowao: September 25, 2010

The All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) has begun its election campaign but faces many barriers in Mon State to hold a regular canvassing program ahead of the General Election scheduled for November 7, 2010, chairman of the party Nai Ngwe Thein said.

“We face many barriers as a political party such as difficulty in visiting some areas, restrictions imposed by the authorities, and a very short time frame to accomplish all of this,” says Thein.

“Even though we face many restrictions from the Election Commission, we are trying our best to reach out to the general public. We are preparing a script for Naypyidaw which will allow us to broadcast to the general public on September 29 and October 18,” he said to a Kaowao reporter.
The government has given the political parties 15 minutes free air time with many restrictions to broadcast their party platform on the radio and Myanmar’s television station (MRTV).

While the government-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and National Unity Party (NUP) are contesting in all constituencies in the ten townships of Mon State, the AMRDP has failed to field candidates in three townships for the upcoming poll: Bee Lin, Kyaik Hto and Thaton, in the northern part of Mon State due to limited time and a lack of human and financial resources.

According to a local source, two government-backed parties are going to contest in the three Mon townships with no opposition candidates. Many people expect that the USDP will take the township seats because its rivals lack the financial and human resources to compete with them.

According to an AMRDP member in Ye Township, the USDP party candidates are announcing that they “are Mon” with the same goals “as the Mon party (AMRDP)” and urge the villagers to vote for them. “They want to confuse the ethnic people to vote for them,” said Mehm Chan Mon, a youth who attended the opening ceremony at the USDP office in Ye Township on August 20, with over a thousand people dressed in their Mon traditional clothes in attendance.

The AMRDP will contest in the following areas: Paung, Kyikemaraw, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, Ye, Moulmien, and Chaung Sone Townships in Mon State; Kokkareik, Karen State; and Yephyu Township, Tanintharyi Division. Another obstacle which has prevented many from running in the Burma election, where the per capita income is about 600 US dollars, was the 550 dollar candidate registration fee (500,000 Kyat), for each of their candidates.

“We still need the funds for the campaign, voter education, and civic education works in the villages. We need to install two polling station representatives for each area in the region. The party is struggling for that even though the voter education workshops have started with eight training teams working in different villages to cover at least 30 participants from each village,” said a party organizer of the AMRDP. “I feel bad we had to drop some constituencies because of limited funds, especially since we could have won easily in these areas. We have had to borrow money from businessmen who trust us,” he added.

In response to some activists and overseas Mon nationalists who are against the election, Dr. Min Nwe Soe, General Secretary of the AMRDP, says the overseas Mon need to understand their difficult position from inside Burma. The AMRDP leaders claim they will work hard for the interests of the entire Mon people inside the parliament if they win the election.

AMRDP's main candidate, Dr. Min Nwe Soe, is a former senior staff of Mon State Health Department, who is to contest in Mudon Township.

The AMRDP has 29 candidates in Mon State, four in Karen State, and one in Taninthayi Division, totaling 34 candidates. Whereas, the government funded party USDP has 42 candidates throughout all of Mon State.

Nai Banyae, a political observer, says even though the AMRDP leaders are well-known among the Mon community, many people are not interested in politics. He says that many of the candidates on both sides of the fence lack political experience. Both the AMRDP and USDA in Mon State have selected candidates who have some influence among the local people in the community.
The AMRDP’s campaign head office is located in Mawlamyine with branch offices in Paung, Chaung Sone, Tarana, Kyaikmarok (Kyaik-ma-yaw), Ye, Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships, they also have an office in Kokbain village in Kokkareik Township, Karen State.

The two main Mon political parties, MNDF and NMSP, are boycotting the election, and the Mon Monk Association has also called on their members to boycott it.

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Mons celebrate Baw Smot Pan: Full-Moon Day Celebration
Lita Davidson, Kaowao: September 24, 2010

The Mons held one of their biggest annual two-day celebrations, Baw Smot Pan, a Mon Buddhist Festival, at their small village, in Ban-Wangka, at Wat Wiweakaram (Wat Mon) in the Three Pagodas Pass area in Sangkhlaburi, in the early morning hours on September 23, 2010, the full-moon day.

About three thousand Mon villagers and a handful of tourists gathered around a large bamboo boat effigy, built every year for this occasion by the locals. The boat is placed in front of the Golden Chedi, a replica of the Mahabodhi stupa of Bodhgaya, India, which was built by the reverend, Pho Luang Uttama and the Mon, twenty-six years ago to house the Buddha relics from Sri Lanka. In the early morning hours on the full-moon day, Mon families come together in front of the Golden Chedi to light candles, pray, chant, and set off lanterns into the sky. On the second day in the morning, the whole community comes together to lift and pull the boat down to Sangkalia Lake from where it is launched off the shore. Men do most of the lifting and the pulling, while the women play music and dance along during the two-hour long procession.

The Mons commemorate the long sea journey of Mon Buddhist monks to Sri Lanka from Thaton in Lower Burma to study the Pali language and Buddhaghosa’s interpretation of the Tripitaka (Pali Canon) in the Theravada tradition in the mid first millennium, after which Theravada Buddhism became more firmly established in Southeast Asia. The expedition dispatched two ships to set sail across the Indian Ocean by the Mon king. After several years, one ship returned, but the other failed to show up. While waiting for the return of the second ship, so the story goes, the king ordered the Mon villagers to construct an effigy of a bamboo boat to be set it off on the Indian Ocean to ensure the boat’s safe return. The monks returned from their long sea journey from across the Indian Ocean to the Mon kingdom in Thaton.

Today the Mon villagers who live in Ban-Wangka continue the tradition as do many Mons in Myanmar today in many Mon villages in Lower Burma, including at the renowned Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, which was founded by the Mon circa sixth century AD. In the early morning dawn, young and old gathered together to chant, pray, and light candles and lanterns, the last of which are launched off into the sky by Mon families. The Mons have a long history in Thailand and Myanmar, who settled in Ban-Wangka over two hundred years ago after their kingdom in Pegu was sacked by the Burmese and driven out from Lower Burma. The Mon refugees arrived from areas in Lower Burma to the Three Pagodas Pass area and subsequently became allies of the Thai, who together drove out the Burmese from Thailand.

The Mons had earlier kingdoms in central Thailand and it is thought that they and other peoples crossed through here (Three Pagodas Pass) into southern Burma on many different occasions for trade, refuge, and war.
Burma: Poverty, lack of opportunity, drive Mon youth to risk life
By Lita Davidson, Kaowao: September 22, 2010

Enn Pine, 28 and Kie Jone, 25, from Karen and Mon State, both work with a Mon Newsgroup called Kaowao located on the Thai-Burma border in the Three Pagodas Pass area in the small border town of Sangkhlaburi in Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand. They along with 23 other staff members comprised of experienced Mon reporters and other Mon and Karen youth together produce radio broadcasts and online news in Mon, Karen, and Burmese languages. They risk their lives crossing the Thai-Burma border to have a chance at gaining work experience and learn English in an environment totally different from the one they left behind in Burma.

Before Kaowao started the radio news service in 2008, very little news was reaching the undeveloped mountainous village communities in the eastern border areas where there are also approximately half million displaced peoples in the jungle who have no access to news about their country. In fact if it wasn’t for the Kaowao radio news service few would know about who was running in the upcoming 2010 General Election in Myanmar scheduled to take place on the 7th of November.

Enn Pine is the staff officer for Kaowao and speaks about her decision to join the newsgroup in Sangkhlaburi. “I want to help the Mon community; many young Mon people are quitting school to support their families in Myanmar,” she explains.

The poor living standard in Burma where it is estimated that 32 percent live below the poverty line and the prospect of making a steady income draw many Mon and Burmese to go to other Asian countries to improve their economic situation. Most go to Thailand and work in the 3 Ds jobs and remit their earnings back home to their home villages.

Pine holds a B. Sc with Honors in Chemistry from Moulmein University and taught mathematics to middle school students for the Mon National Schools. With a government that jails people for years for expressing their political views whether online, privately or publicly, Pine says that many people are afraid of spies and will not openly express their views to anyone. Working with Kaowao in Thailand will provide her with an opportunity to do just that and to gain work experience in areas she’s interested in. Since working with Kaowao she has had the opportunity to train as a webmaster and learn English. “After working with the Mon National School, I was given the opportunity to broaden my work experience,” she explains. A well-known Mon leader, Nai Ngwe Thein, Vice President of the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF), asked her if she wanted to study English in Yangon and offered her a scholarship. She accepted and learned English for one year then decided to work on the border after learning about the work opportunity with Kaowao Newsgroup. “In thinking about my future, I really want to improve my knowledge of society, I hope to go to Australia and study the social sciences in university,” she says smiling with sincerity, and adds, “I also have many (Mon) friends there.”

Another Kaowao staff member, Kie Jone, became involved in politics in 2003 soon after he saw Aung San Suu Kyi in Depayin after her release from 13 years of house arrest. “Her car drove right in front of me, it was really amazing . . . there were so many people and I was the only Mon,” he recalled with enthusiasm on seeing and hearing about the famous democracy icon for the first time. That first encounter with ASSK at 18 drew him into the “underground movement” and the subsequent killings and beatings of ASSK’s supporters in Depayin marked a turning point in his life.
After learning about the political situation in his country and making friends with political activists involved in the underground movement, a grassroots community network of friends and family lead him to the border area at Three Pagodas Pass where he now works as a Burmese language news announcer.

The poor prospect of work opportunities in his native country was another impetus for him to go abroad, he left his studies after two years in university due to financial problems and in talking to this reporter expressed deep frustration on the economy and the quality of the education back home. “Education is very bad in Myanmar,” he says while shaking his head, “Nobody has general knowledge in Myanmar, I want to learn more about the world.”

For those who took part in the 1988 democracy uprising, Burma is used when they speak of their country but Joan and his peers, too young to have taken part in the 1988 uprising, refer to their country as Myanmar. Sitting in the lotus position on the chair he recalls how he became involved with Kaowao and in spite of his Kachin friend being in prison for working with a media group in Mae Sot, he says defiantly, “I am not afraid, even though it’s very dangerous in my country to talk politics,” and adds, “I will be waiting for my friend at the prison entrance when he gets out of jail in two years.”

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Ban-Wangka, an old Mon Buddhist village in Sangkhlaburi
By Lita Davidson and Enn Pine, Kaowao: September 15, 2010

Wat Wiweakaram is located in Ban-Wangka, a little Mon village located in Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi, Thailand (also called Wat Mon). It was built here twenty-six years ago by the Mon after moving from the original location of the old Wangka Mon Village and Three Pagodas Pass which became flooded with the building of the Khao Laem Dam. The temple and the Mon village are well-known among the Thai community in the Three Pagodas Pass area and central Thailand due mainly to the leadership of a Mon Buddhist monk, Reverend Luang Pho Uttama, who passed away in 2006. Reverend Uttama had escaped Burmese persecution after the Second World War in 1949 and established Ban-Wangka.

Reverend Uttama was held in high regard for his compassion in helping the Mon and the other ethnic refugees fleeing Burmese repression. In the 1980s when the town was submerged after the building of the dam, Reverend Uttama had to relocate the village to higher ground. Ban-Wangka can now be reached from Sangkhlaburi on the 400 metre Mon wooden bridge, Saphan Mon, which was built by the Mon and is the longest wooden bridge in Thailand. Sangkhlaburi and Wangka are now fast becoming a popular tourist destination with more resorts being built near the edge of Songkalia Lake.

The 69 Mon monks living in the temple practice Theravada Buddhism, a branch of Buddhism long associated with the Mon people. Their cultural history can be traced back to the establishment of Buddhism in the region over 2,000 years ago. The Three Pagodas Pass area has long been recognized as an ancient trade route and was used by the Mon to escape Burmese persecution on a number of occasions throughout recorded history to the present day. Scientific evidence has shown that they had Buddhist communities in Thailand that date back to the Dvaravati period in the 6th century AD associated with an early port, Nakhon Pathom, among other locations in the Kingdom of Thailand where early Mon inscriptions have been found. They have crossed back and forth through this border area for centuries and had aided the Thai in expelling the Burmese from Thailand in the 18th century.
during the early Rattanakosin Period. For their service to the Kingdom of Thailand, King Rama 1, renovated Wat Klang Na in Bangkok for the Mon monks and renamed it Wat Chanasongkran (which is today located near Khao San Road), which means “Victory of War.”

All Mon monks learn the Buddha’s language, Pali, from which the Mon language is closely connected. Parakchai, 45, from Mon State, southern Burma, has lived in Wat Wiweakaram for 21 years and like most Mon monks who have come to Thailand, enjoy their Buddhist studies and chant Buddhist sermons in the Mon language. “I enjoy living in Thailand, the monk’s life is peaceful,” he said to this reporter. In his free time he teaches reading and writing in the Mon language to Mon children who give back by doing various chores around the temple compound.

Gosaka, 24, from Mon State has lived in Wangka for 3 years and is happy with his life in Thailand, smiling happily, he says. “I really enjoy learning English in my free time.” Speaking English clearly, he is eager to talk about Buddhism saying he is not interested in politics and adds that he likes the temples in Sri Lanka the most, a Buddhist nation which the Mon have had relations with for over a thousand years. Another monk, Pala Wonta, 23, says he likes the Buddha’s teaching and explains the five major principles behind it: not to kill; forbear stealing and lying; and practice a pure mind. The precepts are also related to abstaining from alcohol and sexual misconduct in order to keep your mind free from attachments.

The most important celebrations in the Mon temples occur during the Songkrant Buddhist New Year in mid April held over the 3 days of the full moon. Another popular celebration, Vesak, takes place on the first full moon in May celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. At this time worshippers come together to read and chant Buddhist sayings, and practice meditation and light candles.

Opinion/Analysis

How the Ruling Junta Turns Its Enemy to Become Its Supporters

Since the military junta has announced its election plans there have been many different responses from the public. There are apparently two schools of thought. One sees it as a good opportunity for change within the parliament and even believes that it is a necessary step from a dictatorship to a democratic society. Others, however, see it as just changing the mask, not the content and argue that there is absolutely no chance for change within the kind of this constitution. It is as if some dumb giant is trying to hatch a bird from a stone, no matter how much time and effort he spends on it, a stone is a stone and it never becomes a bird.

If we talk to those leaders who are going to contest in the election, what we find is that no one sees it is as a democratic constitution. Almost every leader strongly criticises the draft constitution and sees it as a tool to legalise the ruling junta as the legitimate government. Most of the candidates have expressed scepticism about whether they can argue for change in the parliament. But amazingly against their better judgement these leaders have decided to contest and the justification for doing so are outlined below.

It is necessary to have an authentic party to represent the public.
Taking whatever you can is better than getting nothing.
Through the parliamentary system you can seek a way for change.
Step ahead of those in parliament who are only in it for themselves.
If nobody contests, the military sympathizers would monopolise all of the seats.
This is a window of opportunity to find a way to break through the political deadlock.
You need to get involved in the election and do what you can for the public.
An election is the necessary step in a transition towards a democratic society.

To consider their thinking requires us to examine the draft constitution thoroughly, but I will skip all the boring details and simply state right out front that the Burmese government is deliberately misleading the public. If one carefully observes the way the military is going about its election proceedings, one will see that this is just what they (SPDC) want the public to believe. Let’s consider the four prime components in any democratic election.

**Free and Fair Election**
**Multi-Parties Involvement**
**Voluntarily Public Participation**
**Voluntarily Public Recognition of the Election Result**

The authorities are determined to ensure a successful vote and so I can say for sure that it will not be a free and fair election. The Burmese ruling junta learned a bitter lesson from the past in the 1990-election when the NLD won in a landslide victory. Today there are no freedoms of speech, assembly, and press for a multi-party participation, the ruling junta would not be fool enough to let it be otherwise. No one in Burma is allowed to express their political beliefs freely. What we can say for sure is that the junta will tactically out manoeuvre these components somehow for a successful election.

The junta is trying to persuade the world that there will be multi-party involvement and voluntary public participation. Among these three obligations, multiparty involvement is the most important of all. If the junta can organise the parties’ involvements successfully the rest would fall into place and go smoothly as planned.

Let us see how the junta is going to organise “Multi-Parties Involvement”. The ruling junta knows from the very beginning that the NLD and the other parties which had contested in the 1990 election would not participate this time around. As a consequence the Burmese population as well as the leaders of democratic countries all over the world would reject their election, thus it would be a big failure for the SPDC. Clearly, they do not want such thing to happen.

They have been determined to turn around world opinion and so desperately need the cooperation of the Burmese population. The main purpose of this election is to legitimate their power as a democratic government, but this is not what the Burmese people want at all. As a result it is absolutely impossible for the ruling junta to expect a voluntarily cooperation from the public without jeopardizing their position. So a direct approach for the public to get involved in the election is impossible. Such a strategy - the straight approach – would also produce disastrous results. To get “Voluntarily Public Cooperation and Participation”, the ruling junta needs a clever tactic.

If the ruling junta gets more parties to contest, it can certainly turn around public opinion. The more parties that contest, the more involved the public would be in supporting them and the better off its illusion will be. A 100 percent turnout in the polls for the junta would translate into a successful election. If by contrast only a handful of parties took part in the election, only a few would turn up at
the polls. As a consequence an unsuccessful election would be a result.

The Burmese military regime needs a diversion of public opinion in casting their votes. Having a diversity of parties, the more likely it would be that the people would vote for their proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). We can estimate how important it is for the ruling junta to get multi-parties involvement.

First and foremost, psychological warfare is needed to obtain its objectives. The ruling junta, through its mouthpieces and agencies, spreads half-truths among the public. Propaganda has been a successful tool as we have seen in the minds of those above who have decided to contest. As an example, let us study the political developments in the Mon community to see how the government has manoeuvred its tricks to turn them into supporters.

From the very beginning the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) has bluntly boycotted this election with the Mon population standing firmly behind them. So to get Mon people’s involvement the ruling junta desperately needs the New Mon State Party (NMSP) rather than the MNDF. It knows that if it can convince the NMSP to take part it can also win the hearts of Mon people. All the Mon, including Mon monks and novices, would certainly follow behind this party. The SPDC has already laid down its strategy and tactics since 1995 when it reached a cease-fire agreement with them.

There are (3) main tactics that the SPDC uses:

Sharing Power Tactic
Coercion Tactic
Psychological Warfare Tactic

According to the first, the SPDC has lured the NMSP into a power sharing deal. For example, if the NMSP takes part in the election it would fully approve for the NMSP’s candidates to win the election. However, it is the junta who selects the NMSP’s representatives in Mon State to manage Mon political affairs, not the people who have no say in choosing their own leaders. The NMSP leaders have roundly rejected these offers and refuse to contest in the election. Above all the NMSP has turned down the order to transform the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), its armed wing, into a Border Guard Force (BGF). The next tactic is what the SPDC has used to its fullest to intimidate the NMSP into going along with its plans. As everyone knows this coercion tactic has had its own shortcomings and I must bow my head to the NMSP’s leaders for their courageous stand against such enormous pressure. The psychological warfare tactic has been thus far been the most successful for a regime bent on holding onto power through all means as observed in those who have bought into the SPDC’s election promises.

Unexpectedly a new party was formed, the All Mon Regions Democratic Party (AMRDP), announced earlier this year to go ahead and contest the election to act as the representative for the Mon people. To my amazement when I learned about their decision amid such intense controversy over the SPDC’s constitution and its electoral process this decision threw me off and makes me wonder.

We all know who is leading the AMRDP. Nai Ngwe Thein was once an education official and as soon as AMRDP announced its decision, the opinions of the Mon people froze. No one has yet said anything against the AMRDP for its decision. This is exactly what is needed for the success of the junta’s election. All mouths who strongly oppose the election are now shut. No longer does anyone criticize the election, but see it as a necessary, unavoidable step towards a democratic society.
At last the SPDC has once again successfully turned its enemy into a willing supporter. All Mon will see that this is their national obligation to cast their votes on Election Day. The leaders of AMRDP will invest great effort in doing everything to get the Mon people involved in the process. In order to get their support, they approach Mon monks and novices who usually have so much influence upon Mon people. Every Mon now is gleefully preparing to take part in the election process. AMRDP is now at the head of the program to mobilize the whole Mon population to get involved in the election.

Thus, I can say for sure that on Election Day our national dress will be worn by all and accompanied by the singing of the Mon national anthem at the booths. In the end since they themselves have voluntarily cast their votes in the election, they unavoidably will have to accept the election results and recognize those who have won the election as their representatives. But in the end it will take much more to guarantee ethnic harmony for the nation, we have a long way to go yet with or without coercion and tricks.

Another trick is the condition that every party must at least have 1000 members within 40 days of registration. Some parties have even claimed they have done so within a few days. This is a trap purposely laid by SPDC to have 1000 members at the core of party who will eventually turn out to be the junta’s organizers who can faithfully mobilize the public. These members most certainly will become an effective catalysis to mobilize the public to cast their vote.

Hopefully our readers see the point. Otherwise, the SPDC itself has to find someone to do all their work and to organize the public to get them to go to the polls without absence. Now the ruling junta has nothing to do but just wait and see whether all these things fall into place. The ruling junta has nothing to worry about when it comes to public participation, just sleeping in their mansions with their families or playing golf, while on their behalf their members will be busy as bees working to get the public’s involvement. The more they can mobilize the people, the more likely their candidate will win the ballot, and they don’t even need to spend a cent! Otherwise, as usual, the ruling junta has to use force or pay off someone with petty offerings of soap, sugar, and toothpaste.

Since they themselves voluntarily cast their votes, how public can deny the result of their votes. As consequence certainly public have to voluntarily accepting and recognising the result of the election. After all SPDC can easily turn its enemies to be its supporters. Eventually without any trouble the ruling junta can reap its objectives; **Multi-Parties Involvement, Voluntarily Public Participation and Voluntarily Public Acceptance and Recognise the Result of Election.** The ruling junta at last proudly can claim that it is a 100 percent “Successful Election”.

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**Readers’ Front**

Dear readers,

We invite comments and suggestions on improvements to the Kaowao newsletter. With your help, we hope that Kaowao News will continue to grow to better serve the needs of those seeking social justice in Burma. And we hope that it will become an important forum for discussion and debate and help
readers to keep abreast of issues and news. We reserve the right to edit and reject articles without prior notification. You can use a pseudonym but we encourage you to include your full name and address.

Regards,

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ABOUT US

Kaowao Newsgroup is committed to social justice, peace, and democracy in Burma. We hope to be able to provide an in-depth analysis that will help to promote lasting change and peace within Burma. Editors, reporters, writers, and overseas volunteers are dedicated members of the Mon activist community based in Thailand.

Our motto is “working together for change and lasting peace.”