



A champion of democracy returns to his motherland

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Nearly 30 years after becoming head of a government-in-exile formed at a jungle base on the border with Thailand, Dr Sein Win has returned to Myanmar.

By NANDA | FRONTIER

AMID THE turbulent and sometimes bloody politics of Myanmar, members of one of the country's most famous families have devoted most or all of their lives to the struggle for freedom, either from colonialism or dictatorship.

One of them, Dr Sein Win, 74, has finally come home.

Sein Win is a nephew of independence hero Bogyoke Aung San and a cousin of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Sein Win's father, U Ba Win, was among the nine men killed in a hail of gunfire when Aung San was assassinated during a meeting of the pre-independence cabinet at the Secretariat in Yangon on July 19, 1947. Ba Win was minister of trade.

Two years after the brutal crushing of the national uprising against military rule in 1988, Sein Win became prime minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). He headed the government-in-exile from its formation near the Thai border in December 1990, until its dissolution on September 14, 2012.

After nearly 30 years in exile, Sein Win returned to his motherland in the second week of August and since then has been receiving a steady stream of journalists and well-wishers at a bungalow in Yangon's outer northeastern South Okkalapa Township. He greets visitors in a longyi and the ochre-coloured *pinni* (handspun jacket) favoured by members of the National League for Democracy, with which the NCGUB was closely aligned during the years of repression after the NLD's landslide victory in the 1990 election that the ruling military junta refused to honour.

A decision by the NLD government on June 8, 2018, to scrap the unlawful association status of the NCGUB paved the way for Sein Win's eventual return home. Until then, NCGUB members faced the threat of arrest and imprisonment under the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Act.

In the aftermath of the 1988 uprising, Sein Win became chairman of the National Democracy Party, an ally of the nascent NLD, and in the 1990 election was elected to represent Pauk Khaung Township in Bago Region, the birthplace of the dictator General Ne Win, whose Burma Socialist Programme Party ruled the country from 1962 until his ouster by the Tatmadaw in September 1988. It was a hard-fought campaign, but Sein Win won with 49.5 percent of the vote.

The refusal of the military junta to recognise the result of the 1990 election and its subsequent relentless persecution of election winning members of the NLD, NDP and other parties led to the decision to form the government-in-exile. The NCGUB was established at the remote headquarters of the Karen National Union at Manerplaw, in Kayin State's Hpapun Township. The government-in-exile was comprised of members of the NLD, representatives of ethnic nationalities, and independents, all of whom won seats in the election.

After the fall of Manerplaw to the Tatmadaw in January 1995, the NCGUB relocated to the United States and established its headquarters at Rockville, Maryland, from where it continued to campaign for the removal of the military junta, although it never attracted as much attention as the NLD and the resolute and charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi.

Sein Win had devoted his life to mathematics before he entered politics. He was a tutor at Rangoon University before being appointed in 1974 to a position at Hamburg University, where he earned a Masters of Science and a PhD. He later lectured at Colombo University in Sri Lanka and Nairobi University in Kenya, which he left in 1984 to return to Burma. On his return, he was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment for visa offences but later worked part time as a lecturer at a worker college in Yangon.

Sein Win told *Frontier* at his home that he badly missed his homeland after going into self-imposed exile in 1990. "But compared to the suffering of the politicians who were brutally suppressed by the junta, my situation was nothing," he said.

As leader of the NCGUB, he sought to enlist the support of the United Nations to put pressure on the junta and he was also involved in establishing the "exile media" radio station, Democratic Voice of Burma, at Oslo in 1992 with the support of the Norwegian government. DVB launched satellite TV broadcasts in 2005 and began shifting operations inside Myanmar in 2012.

As part of its propaganda war against the democratic opposition, the junta's newspapers referred to him as the "expatriate Sein Win", and accused him of responsibility for acts of sabotage within Myanmar.

"I was never involved in sabotage," he told *Frontier*.

In Sein Win's opinion, two events contributed to the junta's decision to withdraw from politics, while preserving a strong role for the military in a "discipline-flourishing" democratic system. The first was a massacre at Depayin in Sagaing Region on May 30, 2003, when junta-backed thugs slaughtered at least 70 NLD members in a failed attempt to kill Aung San Suu Kyi as she toured the country in a multi-vehicle convoy following her release from house arrest earlier that year. The second was the brutal crushing of the monk-led protests in 2007 known as the Saffron Revolution.

Just months after the Depayin massacre, the junta unveiled its seven-step roadmap to democracy. Following the 2007 protests, it quickly completed drafting of the constitution and rigged a referendum to approve the charter the following year.

Although there are some who questioned the achievements of the NCGUB, many have no doubt about Sein Win's efforts to support the struggle for democracy in Myanmar.

"As I see it, he did all that he could," said U David Hla Myint, the winning NLD candidate in Ngapudaw in Ayeyarwady Region in 1990, who was among the scores of party members jailed by the junta for their activism.



Yangon residents cast their votes during the 1990 general election. Dr Sein Win won the seat of Pauk Khaung in Bago Region but went into exile later that year. (AFP)

Since his return to Myanmar, Sein Win has been catching up with former colleagues, including the feisty patron of the NLD, U Tin Oo, 92.

However, Sein Win said he had no intention of becoming directly involved in politics, other than dispensing advice based on his long years of experience.

Another veteran politician, U Thu Wai, 86, who contested the 1990 election and now leads the Democratic Party (Myanmar) and, said he did not understand why Sein Win and other members of the NCGUB had not been assigned roles by the party.

NLD spokesperson Dr Myo Nyunt said the long absence from Sein Win and others from Myanmar was the main reason why they had not been given roles in the party.

“It is not that they have not been given due positions, but just that they were not involved in domestic politics because they were away for so long,” he told *Frontier*.

Myo Nyunt also noted that two members of Sein Win’s National Democracy Party, U Soe Win and U Thein Oo, had been given important roles in the NLD. Soe Win is a member of the party’s economic committee, while Thein Oo is a central executive committee member.

The NCGUB’s decision to dissolve itself in September 2012 followed the NLD’s victories in by-elections in April that year.

A statement issued by Sein Win at the time said the decision followed agreement by the NCGUB that the move would contribute to national reconciliation. Other members of the NCGUB were quoted as saying that they did not want the NCGUB to distract attention from the NLD. It would be almost six years before the NCGUB was taken off the list of unlawful associations.

U Ye Htut, a former member of the State Peace and Development Council who served as information minister in the U Thein Sein government, said the NLD government should be ashamed that it took so long for Sein Win and other members of the NCGUB to be able to return from exile.

Myo Nyunt rejected the criticism, saying the delay was because of the regulations of the ministries of home affairs and foreign affairs, which kept the NCGUB on the unlawful associations list.

Sein Win was three when his father and uncle were assassinated but was unable to pay his respects to the martyrs of July 19, 1947, for more than 30 years because he was black-listed by successive military governments.

Although he had dreamed of a career as a mathematician, he joined the struggle for democracy by choice. For that reason he said he never regarded his years of struggle as a sacrifice, although he is sorry that his family suffered because of his decision.

It was 10 years before his wife and son were allowed to leave Myanmar and follow him to the US, arriving in 2000.

Sein Win says he respects Aung San Suu Kyi because she was able to forgive those who persecuted her and put her under house arrest for a total of 15 years after preventing her from becoming the country's leader when the result of the 1990 election was not honoured.

Asked his opinion of the generals who have ruled the country, he said Ne Win did what he wanted, and his immediate successor after the Tatmadaw seized power in September 1988, General Saw Maung, did not keep his word that the military would return to the barracks after the 1990 election.

The end of Saw Maung, who was ousted as head of the State Law and Order Restoration Council in April 1992 after reportedly suffering a nervous breakdown, was "not good", Sein Win said. He described the head of Military Intelligence, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, whose feared organisation hunted down democracy activists after 1988, as "brutal".

Sein Win said he never thought that Senior General Than Shwe, who succeeded Saw Maung as head of the junta, would retire after the military's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, won the rigged 2010 election that was boycotted by the NLD.

Sein Win says he wants to live quietly for the rest of his life with his wife and enjoy the company of his two sons, other relatives and friends.

The softly-spoken native of Taungdwingyi in Magway Region says that apart from going to the Shwedagon Pagoda with his family, he most wants to visit Pauk Khaung, the constituency he won in 1990.

"I want to visit my constituency, but the result of the 1990 election has to be left in the past," he said.

On August 31 he got his wish, travelling to Pauk Khaung to finally meet again the people who voted him into office. The visit followed a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi on August 29 and a trip to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw the following day.

Sein Win shares with Aung San Suu Kyi the experiences of losing their fathers at a young age and being separated from their families for many years during the struggle against dictatorship.

Sein Win's martyred father has never had the stature of Aung San, he is not as famous as Aung San Suu Kyi, and his home will never be as well known as her lakeside villa at 54 University Avenue. The NCGUB always played a supporting role to the NLD.

Sein Win is comfortable with what he was able to achieve in a life marked by struggle and sacrifice.

"I have no regrets about what I've done in my life," he said.

TOP PHOTO: Dr Sein Win, the former head of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, returned to Myanmar in the second week of August, for the first time in almost 30 years. (Steve Tickner | Frontier)