

## CHAPTER IV

### POWER OF INFORMATION

#### 4.1 Power and Information

During a recent international seminar, a Myanmar journalist made the following assessment: “In Myanmar power is highly centralized with little involvement of the citizens in policy-making. As a consequence, people and media have little information about domestic policies and development decisions.”<sup>1</sup> In a country where power is centralised, information is hardly shared with citizens. Those who have information are powerful: information means power.

In the briefing of 24 October 2004, Thura Shwe Mann explained how Khin Nyunt did not share his information with other generals in the leadership; “Before, some news did not pass through us, they just censored themselves and submitted as they wish”, clearly showing his vexation.<sup>2</sup> It meant that the information collected through Military Intelligence network was centralized in Khin Nyunt’s hand, which other generals perceived as monopoly. Worse, in their view, it was to be used against ‘the regional commanders and brigade commanders’, within the military system.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter deals with the power of Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence from the aspect of information. It analyzes how Khin Nyunt tightly controlled information outflow through domestic and international media. While Khin Nyunt treated the foreign media, especially western media, as an archenemy since the beginning of the establishment of the current government, Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence embarked on campaigns to project a better image of the military government by hiring a PR company in the U.S., and launching the only private weekly journal permitted to

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<sup>1</sup> A Myanmar journalist from *Living Colour Magazine*, Myanmar, made this comment in his assessment for Mekong Media Seminar, held in Bangkok and Chiang Rai, Thailand, 22-26 June 2004, organized by UNESCO, WWF and IUCN.

<sup>2</sup> Thura Shwe Mann’s briefing, 24 October 2004, Yangon, p15

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p6

publish in English Military Intelligence. However, the “better image” was not in conformity with the values of the *Tatmadaw* leadership. This chapter also illustrates how Khin Nyunt became the most high-profiled general in Myanmar and in the process how Military Intelligence overrode the rule of the military government, which ultimately posed a challenge to the leadership of the *Tatmadaw*. (It should be noted that since television and radio stations are much fewer and even more tightly regulated in Myanmar, I will mainly deal with print media in this chapter) <sup>4</sup>

## 4.2 Keeping the Public in the Dark

### 4.2.1 State Newspapers before and after 1988

It is important to recognize that print media in Burma flourished before the establishment of socialism in 1962. There were over 30 daily papers published in the Myanmar, English and Chinese languages. <sup>5</sup> Since the military coup in 1962 and the establishment of the socialism, the media in Myanmar has been under tight control by the governments till present. <sup>6</sup> Under the socialist regime daily papers were shut down and only state-owned newspapers were published. Before 1988 they were *Lote Thar Pyi Thu Nayt Sin* (Working People Daily), *Kye Mon* (The Mirror), *Bo Ta Htaung* (The Vanguard), *Myanmar Alin* ( Myanmar’s Light) and two English papers namely *The Working People Daily* and *The Guardian*. <sup>7</sup>

After 1988, the new military regime continued three newspapers from the socialist time, *Lote Thar Pyi Thu Nayt, Sin, Kye Mon* and *Myanma Alin*. But in 2002, *Lote Thar Pyu Thu Nayt* was terminated to reduce the financial burden on the government budget.

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<sup>4</sup> For reference, currently in Myanmar there are the government-run television, MRTV (since 1980) and MRTV-3 (second channel, provides English service receivable to 126 countries by satellite transmission using Thai satellite Thaicom since 2001), and the military-run Myawady TV since 1995. Radio service Myanma Athan (Myanmar’s Voice) is under MRTV. In Yangon city only there is FM radio service, City FM (since 2002) and two more television stations, MRTV4 (since 2004, joint venture with private foreign capital) and Movie 5 (since 2005), showing only movies.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma*, p205

<sup>6</sup> This is with the exception of the brief window of a month at the time of people’s uprising between August and September 1988. See *The Asia Media Directory*, (ed) Werner von Busch (Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation; Singapore 2004) p136. During the period of August-September 1988, many publications sprouted up in support of people’s uprising. The government newspapers during the period also performed with some degree of freedom. The issue related press is itself interesting and should be further studied.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Information, *Magnificent Myanmar(1988-2003)*, p189

In addition, the government started publishing the English version of *Myanma Alin*, *The New Light of Myanmar* in 1993. Now the total circulation of these government newspapers is around 460,000.<sup>8</sup> Throughout both periods, state newspapers have been owned and published by Ministry of Information and the editors and journalists of the newspapers have been Ministry employees.

#### **4.2.2 No Policy Change from the Socialist Era**

After the military government took the state power in 1988, the role of media in Myanmar remained practically the same as before – to convey the government’s directives and messages to the public. The media was not expected to function to check performance of the government or to raise issues for the authorities to pay attention to. According to a Myanmar journalist who worked under both the socialist era and the current regime and used to travel extensively with Khin Nyunt until early 1990’s, at the first meeting between the military government and the diplomatic corps in 1988 in Yangon, Khin Nyunt told him to prepare the news report “exactly the same way as before (the socialist time)” as far as the domestic media was concerned.<sup>9</sup>

The difference between the socialist era and now was that Khin Nyunt’s responsibility to give out information in order to legitimize the military’s taking power grew bigger. He was given full authority to give out press conferences on the government positions. At the height of the people’s uprising in 1988, journalist Martin Smith observed that it was Khin Nyunt and Sanda Win ( Ne Win’s elder daughter, Major at the time) who were ‘widely credited with running a sophisticated, though often wildly inaccurate, propaganda campaign in the national press.’<sup>10</sup> Khin Nyunt’s approach in disseminating information was simple and direct - by holding his own press conferences and censoring articles regarding his own words and actions before they went for printing. Khin Nyunt held numerous press conferences in earlier years whereby he spoke directly to press. For example, in August 1989, he conducted a six-hour press

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., After 1988, a few more official newspapers started publishing in Yangon and Mandalay, including *Myo Daw (The City)*, established by the Yangon City Development Committee in 1991, *Yadanar Bon (King’s Palace)*, established by Military Production Force (Public Relations) in 1997, and *Mandalay Daily* by the Mandalay City Development Committee. These publications, however, are much smaller scale with daily circulation ranging from 11,000 to 25,000.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with a former journalist, 25 February 2006

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Burma*, 18p



conference detailing his communist conspiracy theory behind the ‘disturbances’ of 1988.<sup>11</sup> One month later, he held another press conference on yet another conspiracy theory, this time blaming foreign journalists as conspirators of those who were involved in the uprising.

#### ***4.2.3 Khin Nyunt’s Censorship***

As for censorship, Khin Nyunt read every draft article regarding his own words or actions, before it went to press. The aforementioned journalist had to submit every draft article to Khin Nyunt first before it was sent to in-take-desk at the headquarters of state newspaper in Yangon. Khin Nyunt edited drafts in great detail. “When Khin Nyunt read a draft article, he either underlined words and sentences or bracket paragraphs if the sentences were long, to indicate that those parts should be deleted. Sometimes he added a few words, but usually it was deletion. Then he signed initials of his name at the corner of every page of article to show that it was with his approval”.<sup>12</sup>

His editing policy was (1) to edit out things that he thought should not be publicized, (2) to remove information when he felt it was not an appropriate time to be publicized. In most cases, he omitted anything sensitive regarding politics or security. (3) Sometimes, he deleted his own harsh criticism against NLD. He did not like words “democracy”. (4) He paid attention to minute details, such as a title. For instance, when he wanted to say something optimistic about Khun Sa,<sup>13</sup> he affixed U (Mr) in front of his name to sound polite.

Overall, the military government’s policy was to minimize information available to public domestically. The aforementioned journalist told another episode when the leadership of SLORC had a meeting with the Election Commission to decide a date for the general election in 1990. As usual practice, he showed Khin Nyunt what he had written as an article for a state newspaper, which only mentioned that the meeting took place but nothing else about the discussion. The journalist asked Khin Nyunt if it was better to add more about the discussion in the meeting because the election was the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 365p

<sup>12</sup> Author’s interview on 25 February 2006

<sup>13</sup> Khun Sa was the leader of once powerful, heavily armed militia, Shan United Army (SUA) and Mong Thai Army, who surrendered to the military government in 1996, now living in Yangon. He was one of many ceasefire negotiation counterparts for Khin Nyunt.

centre of public attention at the time. Khin Nyunt took the draft article and went to ask opinion of Than Shwe, who told Khin Nyunt that there was no need to alter it. The article went for print as it was. The policy of the leadership of the military government was to keep the information available to the public at minimum to ensure there was no room for sharing power.<sup>14</sup>

### 4.3 “Better Image” of Myanmar in International Arena

#### 4.3.1 *Foreign Media as Archenemy*

In comparison with the domestic media, foreign journalists were far more problematic for the military government. Khin Nyunt treated the foreign media – especially western media – as the regime’s enemy from the outset of the current military regime.

On 9 September 1989, Khin Nyunt made a press conference in which he blamed the foreign media for its “blatant interference in the country’s internal affairs during as well as after the disturbances.”<sup>15</sup> The press conference was to reveal his alleged conspiracy theory behind the people’s uprising where the foreign media, according to him, “contributed to fabricated news, rumours and vindictive broadcasts and writings”. Khin Nyunt named the organizations that “broke all norms of international moral conduct and carried out antagonistic activities by various means”. They were “London based *BBC(British Broadcasting Corporation)* , Washington- based *VOA(Voice of America)*, New Delhi-based *AIR (All India Radio)*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Times of London*, *Independent*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Financial Times*, *Bangkok Post* and *Nation* of Thailand, *Washington Post*, Hong Kong based *Asiaweek* and *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Washington based magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, London based *Sunday Times Magazine*. “<sup>16</sup> Basically, that covered most of major English news organizations of the U.S., Britain, India and neighbouring Thailand.

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<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview on 25 February 2006.

<sup>15</sup> The press conference was compiled in a book titled as *The Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions within the Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts Abroad*, published on 23 October 1989 by Ministry of Information.

<sup>16</sup> *The Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions within the Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts Abroad*, 34-35p

Beginning with the massive 1988 uprising and the establishment of the new military government, these news organizations and journalists were Khin Nyunt's archenemy.<sup>17</sup> Khin Nyunt's control of foreign media was simply to limit the issuance of journalist visas to foreign journalist. Apart from the journalists from Chinese official news organization Xinhua, there were no foreign journalists allowed to be stationed in Yangon. When foreign journalists request for entry to the country, it was up to Khin Nyunt to decide whom to let in. All journalists seeking a visa were required to submit a written application to Colonel Hla Min, Deputy Head of External Affairs Department of Military Intelligence. The application, if considered appropriate, was passed on to Information Committee chaired by Khin Nyunt. "Every morning there is a briefing in which a few high ranking officers report important matters to Secretary One. That's when the issue of journalists' application, names and subjects would be presented."<sup>18</sup> When a proposal was turned down, the Military Intelligence office would often keep silent and not even reply.

Once foreign journalists were let in with journalist visa - valid for single entry only and lasted for usually a maximum period of one week - their movements were closely monitored by Military Intelligence agents. After the foreign journalists conducted interviews, the agents would interrogate those people to determine what questions were asked and how they replied. Their surveillance was very strict. Any journalists or foreign visitors who visited NLD's main office were photographed. If a foreign journalist requested to go to a militarily restricted zone where foreigners were normally not allowed to travel, Military Intelligence would provide officers as minders. Military Intelligence HQs would also give its green light to concerned regional command, or concerned ministries, provinces, or villages to notify them about the foreign media's visit. Occasionally, Military Intelligence officers stationed at the regional command would meet and accompany the journalists at the respective destination. In this way, Military Intelligence maintained a tight grip on foreign journalists' movement.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In *The Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions*, Khin Nyunt named some of the foreign journalists with their bio-data and their alleged informers and the list of Myanmar nationals who worked for BBC, VOA and AIR Myanmar Service.

<sup>18</sup> Communication with Military Intelligence junior officer, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Many foreign journalists evaded Military Intelligence control by travelling to the country as tourists.

### *4.3.2 PR Campaign Targeting the West*

Much as the foreign media being the archenemy of the military government, Military Intelligence made efforts to try to win the heart of the West in its struggle to improve the damaged relationship. These efforts were especially visible after the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from the house arrest in May 2002. (The release this time lasted only one year till she and the convoy of NLD and its supporters were attacked by a pro-government mob in Depayin in May 2003) through the official information sent out by Military Intelligence, often attributed to Spokesman of the Government, Col. Hla Min. In the midst of the American war on terror, Military Intelligence often sent out Information Sheet by fax to international news agencies indicating its support for the international efforts to combat terrorism. For example, Information Sheet of 23 August 2002 titled “Government of Myanmar Pledges Cooperation in War on Terror” claimed that the military government “reaffirmed its determination to stand with the United States and the international community on anti-terrorist cooperation” following a news report by American network CNN that Al Qaeda members have been active in Myanmar. Hla Min stressed in the statement, “The Government of Myanmar will investigate this allegation with the utmost urgency, and we will share this information with the United States.”<sup>20</sup>

Military Intelligence also stressed on its cooperation with the United Nations in its efforts to eradicate opium production and other drugs. Dated 28 August 2002, Military Intelligence sent another Information Sheet praising United Nations’ comprehensive opium poppy survey on Myanmar which reported substantial decrease in total crop. Hla Min said, “This survey is a great vindication for us. We urge those who have wrongly accused us to now join with us in our fight to curb opium poppy and heroin production in Myanmar”.<sup>21</sup>

In same year, the military government hired an American lobbyist firm DCI Associates, reportedly paying 340,000 USD for a period of eight months to tout Myanmar’s cooperation on anti-drug, HIV/AIDs and anti-terrorism efforts and in finding the remains of U.S. soldiers from World War II. According to Al Kamen of

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<sup>20</sup> Information Sheet, No. C-2327( I/L), 23 August 2002 issued by Military Intelligence

<sup>21</sup> Information Sheet, No. C-2334 (I/L), 28 August 2002, issued by Military Intelligence

*Washington Post*, it almost bore fruit. “The campaign was on the verge of success—the State Department was about to certify the regime—but the administration backed off amid pressure from the (Capitol) Hill, human rights groups and the media.”<sup>22</sup> It was Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence that were pushing the public relations efforts targeting the Bush administration in hopes for the economic sanction to be lifted, for the better relationship with the West and for the military regime to be accepted in the international community. It is possible that these PR campaigns were perceived as conciliatory to the West by other senior generals of the top leadership of the *Tatmadaw*. All these efforts (and the huge sum of money paid for the PR) were wasted when Aung San Suu Kyi was detained in Depayin and put into a special facility of the notorious Insein prison in May 2003. After the Depayin incident, the U.S. and European Union strengthened the economic sanctions on Myanmar. Military Intelligence put a break on its active campaign to appeal to the U.S.

#### ***4.3.3 Xenophobic Media Policy Continued***

Over the years, did the xenophobic view of Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence against the foreign media change? Had Khin Nyunt take softer approach or become more understanding of foreign media enough to be labelled as a ‘moderate’ as some observers have labelled in later years? The research draws a negative conclusion. The view of Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence of media as a tool to propagate the position of their regime to the world and their xenophobic perceptions of the foreign media persisted until the end. With the global movement towards a borderless information age, the Military Intelligence was poorly equipped to handle the foreign media’s “adverse reporting”, as the cyber activism against the military regime became more active as elaborated in the previous chapter. Recognizing the challenges of media and information control in the information age, Military Intelligence turned to other ASEAN members for advice.

An internal Military Intelligence report produced in 1999 documenting a visit of a senior Military Intelligence official to Malaysia reveals that the intelligence organizations of the two countries met to discuss how they could cooperate to handle

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<sup>22</sup> Centre for Media and Democracy, *Source Watch* access on 2 April 2006 at [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=DCI\\_Group](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=DCI_Group), quoting Washington Post article by Al Kamen.



foreign media.<sup>23</sup> A part of the report details their common position on media: “The mass media, basically speaking, is a tool or form of vehicle utilised by governments, opposition parties, statutory agencies, human rights groups, non-governmental organisations and many others to disseminate ‘their side of the story’ to the general public.” They looked at the western media as a tool through which the western powers impose their will: “the West often attempts to promote and impose its own brand of democracy and system of free market economy on everyone else. Under the impression that it has the best of everything, the West tries to force its political and economic system on the rest of the world, making pariahs and enemies out of ‘renegade’ foreign nations and leaders.”

Both Military Intelligence and their Malaysian counterpart feared that the Internet could be used as a powerful tool for anti-government groups: “Communication through e-mail, cyber-talk and various other on-line programmes has given the Internet user the ability to express an idea without the use of paper. This phenomenon presents certain groups the opportunity to vent their criticisms against certain governments or leaders.”

For the intelligence organizations of both countries, the Internet presented a significant threat. “Adverse reporting” by the conventional electronic and print media (whether local or foreign origin), despite its negative consequences to the “victim”, was less threatening than the frontier-less world of cyberspace. According to the report, traditional media could be neutralised both overtly and covertly by intercepting or prohibiting the entry/ circulation of news items considered “offensive” into the local market. Most of this subversive information would originate from Western journalists or be sponsored by the West, it reported.

The report suggests that both countries agreed that they could assign either a government agency or a private sector company to monitor and scan all e-mail movements and websites identified as “trouble-spots” and that both countries could instruct overseas missions to “identify foreign newspapers or journals that are fond of writing bad things about us” and to “blacklist their names”. (It does not specify what

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<sup>23</sup> The report was compiled in March 1999. Among other talks, the meetings between the representatives of the two intelligence organizations took place on 16 March 1999. The part on ‘how to handle media in the information age’ appears to be compiled by the Malaysian counterpart.

would be the consequence of being blacklisted. In case of Myanmar blacklisting means a denial of entry to the country).

Finally, the report suggests that the respective “political masters and senior government officials should play a more aggressive role in explaining to their respective counterparts and to the world at large the real socio-economic and political situation” in their respective countries. Khin Nyunt and his organization responded to this challenge aggressively by establishing their own media outlets and by countering the cyber-activism on internet as elaborated in the previous chapter.<sup>24</sup>

The report is a clear indication that at the outset of the information technology age, Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence’s stance toward media remained the same as the beginning of their regime - unyielding refusal of giving media any room for different views other than the government’s and their xenophobia toward the international media. There does not seem any sign of ‘moderate’ in their media policy.

#### **4.4 Khin Nyunt, the Most High-Profiled General**

The effect of tightly controlling information through censorship and restricting inflow of foreign journalists into the country by Military Intelligence was that Khin Nyunt had become the most high-profiled general in the *Tatmadaw* on the international press. In early years Khin Nyunt held his own press conferences and took foreign journalists on press tours to border areas where Khin Nyunt had succeeded in making ceasefire agreements with armed ethnic groups. Again, Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence were the gateway for the foreign media. Khin Nyunt was the most written about, and read about general among the *Tatamdaw*.

As described in the previous chapter, Military Intelligence engaged in cyberspace public relations by sending out news articles and official statements daily to internet. By taking out a sample of 131 pieces of information Military Intelligence sent out to a newsgroup by e-mail in the name of Ok Kar (This is presumably a pseudo name, which was most often used by Military Intelligence news-disseminating team on internet) only

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<sup>24</sup> The Military Intelligence’s involvement in the information technology sector had started by this time. (See Chapter three.)

from the last one month between 19 September and 19 October 2004 (the day Khin Nyunt was ousted), Khin Nyunt was mentioned in 54 articles, whereas Than Shwe was mentioned in 19 articles and Maung Aye was mentioned only in 9 stories. Intentionally or not, Khin Nyunt stood out among the senior generals, giving the public an impression that he was highly active, important and powerful general in Myanmar. For journalists, Khin Nyunt was difficult to have access to. However, in comparison to other top generals to whom there was no access, Khin Nyunt was still relatively accessible leader of the military government. This could have well led to a widely-shared image of Khin Nyunt, which was a “moderate” or a “soft-liner”.

The high-profile given to Khin Nyunt could have contributed to another cause of conflict within the *Tatmadaw*, if there had already been rivalry either institutionally or personally. As the *Tatmadaw* stresses importance on obedience to command, anything that might disrupt the order in the hierarchy would be frowned upon.

#### **4.5 Military Intelligence’s Late Start in Publication Business**

##### ***4.5.1 Media expansion in mid 1990’s***

As time progressed in 1990’s, the military government began actively promoting its own views through more media outlets. Numbers of factors prompted the government in this direction; 1) Changes of Chairmen of SLORC: In 1992, Chairman Gen. Saw Maung was replaced by Gen. Than Shwe who was seen more pragmatic than his predecessor, bringing in many reforms were brought, among which, “perhaps the most unexpected of all,” was a unilateral halt to all *Tatmadaw* offensives against armed ethnic minority forces.<sup>25</sup> 2) Establishment of the National Convention: In 1993 the convention started to discuss the basic principles to be used in drafting the new constitution<sup>26</sup> in which NLD representatives were included until 1995. The start was significant for the military because it ensured that the military would maintain political

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Burma* p425

<sup>26</sup> “*National Convention*” handbook, handed to press representative in February, 2005 by Information Ministry. After NLD stopped participating, the National Convention was adjourned in 1996. With the interval of 8 years, it was reconvened again on 17 May 2004 without the participation of NLD and is continuing till now. Next session is likely to be held at the end of 2006.

control in the government, bringing more confidence in the leadership. 3) The regime became more outward looking: It was now hopeful to attract more foreign investment and more tourists to Myanmar (1996 was designated “Visit Myanmar Year”). The regime applied for ASEAN membership in 1996.

As a result, the government relaxed regulations which enabled new private publications to emerge. They were classified as private, but the ownership was either directly or closely linked to the military, i.e., the permit for publication was issued in the name of a military unit or high military personnel and the staff writers were either a mix or purely private citizens. In other words, these private publications were joint ventures of military and civilians. Otherwise it still remained difficult for a purely private entity or individual to receive a publishing permit. The research found that the initial newly emerged private publications were more closely related to Information Ministry or Military Production Service, which belonged to Defence Service under Directorate of Public Relations of the Army and not Military Intelligence.

In 1995, the Information Ministry started a weekly journal called *Nai Ngan Dagar (International News)*, which included news translated from foreign newspapers and magazine.<sup>27</sup> *Hliat Ta Pyat (Snap)*, a weekly journal established in 1996, was published by Col. Tin Than Oo, Chief of Myawady Television and edited by Maj. Mya Than San from Myawady Media Production Force. (Myawady Television was the first and only television managed by the Military Broadcasting Production Unit of the Defence Service, established in 1995.) In 1997, *Yadnar Bon* Newspaper was launched in Mandalay region only, published and edited by Military Media Production Force. Same year, another entertainment news, *Popular Weekly Journal*, was started by a daughter of Secretary 3 of SLORC Brig Gen. Win Myint.

#### ***4.5.2 Military Intelligence’s Late Start***

Military Intelligence’s involvement in direct ownership of publication came later. It was only 1998, Economic Research Unit of Military Intelligence<sup>28</sup> started publishing two economic related journals, *The International Economic Weekly Journal*,

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<sup>27</sup> The information for the recent media’s history presented in this chapter was gathered from a combination of the following sources: *Living Color Magazines* (2001-2004), *Magnificent Myanmar (1988-2003)*, *Myanmar Encyclopedia 2003/2004* and interviews with editors and reporters of the journals in Yangon, December 2005.

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter Two for details of functions of Economic Research Unit.

which carried foreign economic news translated from international newspapers and magazines into Myanmar language, edited by Aung Aye, a former Burma Communist Party member, and *Myanmar Morning Post*, a weekly journal in Chinese language, edited by Aung Win, Honorary Chairman of Myanmar Guandong Chamber of Commerce and Industry.<sup>29</sup>

Since around 2000, the military government unofficially encouraged each department and ministry to generate their own income in the name of Departmental Welfare Programme, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Military Intelligence made headway in establishing private journals since this time. They were published by high-ranking officers from Military Intelligence. In most cases, the publishing license was in the name of Military Intelligence officers, but the investment came from private entities. Thus, the journals were privately owned but controlled by Military Intelligence.

There were several reasons for their involvement in private sector publishing. First, after years of controlling the domestic media, Military Intelligence had good contacts with journalists and editors who were looking to have their own outlets. Second, the media market had significant revenue potential<sup>30</sup>, and presented a potentially lucrative investment opportunity for Military Intelligence officers. Third, by penetrating the private publishing sector, Military Intelligence could closely monitor potential threats to the regime. For example, it was commonly assumed that many of the underground members of the Burma Communist Party were active in media and publishing sector. The following is a list of new private publications established by Military Intelligence after 2000:

- 1) *Interview Journal*, published by Military Intelligence Unit No.7 in 2000. The content focused of pop culture, movie stars, music and literature of Myanmar. Circulation was about 10,000. (Currently still publishing. After Military Intelligence was disbanded, the ownership was transferred to elsewhere)

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<sup>29</sup> Both were terminated when Military Intelligence was disbanded.

<sup>30</sup> In Myanmar the literacy rate is quite high even in comparison with Asian and world standard (Adult literacy rate of 2002 for women is 81%, men 89% whereas Asia women 66%, men 82%, world women 75%, men 86%, according to Earth Trends 2003 accessed on 17 Mar 2006 at [http://earthtrends.wri.org/pdf\\_library/country\\_profiles/pop\\_cou\\_104.pdf](http://earthtrends.wri.org/pdf_library/country_profiles/pop_cou_104.pdf)). Because there had been so few publications, the public had hunger for new publications.

- 2) *Mahar Journal*, formerly *Hliat Ta Pyat(Snap)*, published by Myawady Production Unit. In 2000, it was renamed *Mahar journal*, with the support of Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence, Maj Gen.Kyaw Win who regularly contributed articles. The journal reports on Myanmar artists and movie stars. Circulation was around 3,000. (Currently still running, ownership transferred)
  
- 3) *7 Day*, established in 2002, published by Brig. Gen. Thaung Tun, former Head of Counter Intelligence Department who also acted as liaison officer between the government and Aung San Kyi. 7 Day carried economic information and was considered very successful. Circulation was around 20,000. (Currently publishing, ownership transferred)
  
- 4) *Wun Thar Nu (The Partotic)*, established by National Intelligence Bureau in 2002. (On the journal name of publisher/editor or office address was not printed.) It reported on Myanmar politics, “with negative views toward America and pro-democratic activities”.<sup>31</sup> Circulation was not known. (Terminated when Military Intelligence was disbanded )
  
- 5) *Super*, launched in 2002, as a second journal published by NIB. The content focused on popular culture, entertainment news journal. Circulation not known, but it was considered unpopular in the market.<sup>32</sup> (Currently terminated)
  
- 6) *Mae Shoo Tai (the Torch)*, also established in 2002 by Military Intelligence Unit No. 6. The Editor-in-Chief was Ma Ei, a former cadre of Burma Communist Party who surrendered in 1992. This journal, which focused primarily on sports, ceased publication after several issues. (Currently terminated)

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<sup>31</sup> Author’s interview with an editor of a private publication, in Yangon, February 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Same as above

#### 4.6 *Myanmar Times* – Value Clash with the *Tatmadaw*

In addition to the six publications as described as above, two more publications were launched in 2000 and 2001. They were not published directly by Military Intelligence, however, they were considered symbolic of the power of Military Intelligence at its height. They were the *Myanmar Times*, a weekly English news journal published by Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd. CEO. The editor was Ross Dunkley, an Australian journalist/entrepreneur. The Deputy CEO was U Sonny Swe, the son of Brig Gen. Thein Swe, Head of External Affairs Department of Military Intelligence. Its Myanmar language version was launched in the following year.

##### 4.6.1 *New phenomenon in Myanmar's Domestic Media*

*Myanmar Times* was a new phenomenon in the military-controlled media world in Myanmar where there was a clear division between domestic media which was supposedly working as a mouthpiece of the government and international media which could not even enter the country unless permitted under strict regulation or smuggle themselves in as unaccredited tourists. *Myanmar Times* was both domestic and international. Domestic, because its base was in Yangon; international because it was a joint venture between Myanmar and Australian investment. Among the many publications established since late 1990's, *Myanmar Times* was the only journal permitted to publish in English language. The primary targeted readership was the expatriate community including foreign diplomats, businessmen and visitors and educated and comparatively wealthy Myanmar citizens who worked in foreign embassies, foreign companies or living in exile.

Why the experiment? Journalist Roger Mitton wrote about the thoughts of Military Intelligence senior officers behind the inception of *Myanmar Times* in February 2000, just before its launch; "Thein Swe and Hla Min (then Head and Deputy Head of Exterior Affairs Department of Military Intelligence) have been quietly fuming over the way the nation's flagship paper, the Stalinist *New Light of Myanmar*, undermines their efforts to win greater international acceptance for Yangon's point of view. So they authorized the launch of a new paper, *The Myanmar Times and Business Weekly*, as part of a radical attempt to revamp the regime's image. The move represents a daring and

risky internal power play by that consummate survivor Khin Nyunt. Launching *The Myanmar Times* is flagrantly against the wishes of the hardliners and could come back to scorch him.”<sup>33</sup>

Mitton revealed in this article that *The Myanmar Times* would not ask for a license from the Ministry of Information required for publishing newspaper. Instead, Thein Swe explained to Mitton that “it will be a journal, not a paper”. In a newsletter of 4 February 2000, edited by Hla Min reprinted an article posted on the internet that referred to the *New Light of Myanmar* carrying “articles and cartoons on the NLD [that] are so vicious that people reading them cannot go past the vitriol to get at any grains of truth.” Further, the article states: “The high authority may think it is not necessary, but in the modern world there is a need to give a good impression”.<sup>34</sup> The two high ranking officers, Brig Gen. Thein Swe and Col Hla Min were in charge of international relations. These officers, who became the contact point between the military regime and the outside world, were concerned about making “a good impression”.

*The Myanmar Times* was published by a private company called Myanmar Consolidated Media (MCM). It was a joint venture with a 51/49 split in favour of the Myanmar partners. Thein Swe became the publisher for the paper. The CEO of the company and Editor-in-Chief of the journal was Ross Dunkley, who previously worked as a journalist, editor and publisher in his native Australia, then in 1991 launched the *Vietnam Investment Review* in Vietnam. His deputy CEO was U Sonny Swe, the son of Thein Swe.<sup>35</sup> Sonny Swe’s wife Yamin Htin Aung was also a shareholder of MCM.

In an interview with a French magazine, Dunkley admitted he had persuaded the military regime by appealing to their concerns over making a positive impression. “Your international image is not so good. Times are changing and I think it is in your interests to allow me to set-up here”. Khin Nyunt apparently agreed with him. “In the end I think that General Khin Nyunt who would have given the final approval, realized that there was little downside in allowing a foreigner to be involved in a media

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<sup>33</sup> Roger Mitton, *Asiaweek*, 18 February 2000, Vol. 26 No.6

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Thein Swe was a senior military Intelligence officer (Air Force) and was Brig. Gen. at the time of detention in October 2004. He had been one of the members of the Board of Scrutiny that controlled Military Medias and periodical productions.



partnership here.” Dunkley arranged a special censorship deal in which Military Intelligence would do the censoring instead of Press Scrutiny Board that belonged to Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>36</sup>

#### ***4.6.2 Special Censorship Deal***

In Myanmar, the normal practice for any print media was that their publications had to be censored by the Press Scrutiny Board that comes under Ministry of Home Affairs. But the special censorship deal Dunkley had made with Military Intelligence was to bypass this normal censorship process. According to Steve Finch, who worked at Myanmar Times as business editor, Myanmar Times was the only publication which received the special treatment.<sup>37</sup> Thein Swe, the paper’s publisher, whose son was one of the owners of the newspaper, was in charge of the censorship. It was another example of blatant cronyism of Military Intelligence.

This is how the censorship worked. *Myanmar Times* was published weekly and all the articles were sent to Military Intelligence office by fax in the evening, around 6 or 7 pm at the latest on Friday. If a story was judged too negative for the good image of Myanmar, the censorship would make it appear less negative. Sometimes, a whole story would be taken out. In the English version, it was required to submit all headlines, layout, body of stories and photo captions of the front page, but with the rest of pages, only body of stories. By-lines were not required to be submitted, leading reporters to feel that they were “protected” because Military Intelligence side would not know who wrote the sensitive story. In the business section, weekly about seven or eight stories were reported. Some week no stories were taken out by the censorship, while in other weeks a few would be cut. The paper “usually assumes some would be cut, so they would prepare a few more than actually needed.”<sup>38</sup> What were too sensitive to write in the news? For instance in business section, Finch recalled that “direct mentioning of the word ‘crisis’ of banking crisis would not pass the censorship, but if one writes ‘Deposit went up since February 2003’, readers would know ‘February 2003’ meant banking

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<sup>36</sup> *La vie des medias*, on [http://www.faits-et-projets.com/Birmanie\\_Vie\\_medias\\_GB.htm](http://www.faits-et-projets.com/Birmanie_Vie_medias_GB.htm), accessed on 25 January 2006. Press Scrutiny Board was transferred from Ministry of Information to Ministry of Home Affairs in 1970. After Military Intelligence was disbanded, SPDC established Press Scrutiny and Registration Division back to Ministry of Information in April 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Author’s interview with Steve Finch who worked for *Myanmar Times* (business section) from June 2003 to December 2004, conducted on 21 January 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Finch

crisis.” Inflation was another sensitive issue. At the height of inflation, reporting about it would not pass, but after its peak passed, it was passable to write “inflation was decreasing; indications suggest the rate around 60%, but it is lower than previous.”<sup>39</sup>

There were no clear censorship guidelines, which made it difficult for journalists, especially foreign journalists to understand why some stories would go through censorship and some others not. Social problems such as domestic violence or mental depression were allowed, whereas stories about pierced ears among young men or an incident of stolen shoes of a young couple at Shwedagon Pagoda were not permitted. Other social topics, such as teacher’s caning at school were OK but education for the disabled was not. In the socialite section in which many pictures of people appear, photographs were not permitted of anyone actively involved in politics, inter-racial married couples, Myanmar woman with alcohol in her hand or in revealing clothes, and anyone physically too unattractive. “No explanation was given as a story or a photograph was turned down. It was quite bizarre and difficult sometimes to comprehend their standard of censorship”.<sup>40</sup> But for Military Intelligence, all these were in a bid to project “good image” of the country.

#### ***4.6.3 Posing a Value Threat***

Despite the censorship, *The Myanmar Times* managed to publish “fairly straight coverage of the ongoing talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and members of the ruling junta. On occasion, Suu Kyi’s picture even appeared on the inside pages of the paper,” wrote Lin Neumann in 2002. The *Myanmar Times* was “also the only local paper to have mentioned recent releases of political prisoners and to have noted that the ILO recently accused the Burmese military of using forced labor in rural areas.”<sup>41</sup> It also carried photographs of U.N. Envoy Tan Sri Razali on his visits to Myanmar which would never appear in *New Light of Myanmar*.

Allowing these stories and photographs published only on the *Myanmar Times* was in itself a statement of Military Intelligence. To the western foreign expatriates who subscribe and read the paper, it meant that *Myanmar Times* considered issues such as political talks with Suu Kyi or Razali, or concerns of the international community more

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Finch

<sup>40</sup> Author’s interview with another former foreign reporter for *Myanmar Times*, January 2006

<sup>41</sup> Lin Neumann, *The Survival of Burmese Journalism*; Volume VI, No.1 Winter 2002

seriously than the rest of the official papers. To the local journalists who write for other private papers (many of whom frowned at *Myanmar Times* for its degree of freedom to write), it meant that *Myanmar Times* enjoyed the given prerogative by Military Intelligence. To the rest of the *Tatmadaw* leadership, it was a clear statement that Military Intelligence held values different from the rest of the *Tatmadaw* and that Military Intelligence was not following the official guideline, which usually appears on the *New Light of Myanmar*. By showing visually the different values not in conformity with the rest of the *Tatmadaw*, Military Intelligence posed a value threat to the leadership. It was also possible that the *Myanmar Times* presented the autonomy Military Intelligence enjoyed. *Myanmar Times* was a case for new values clashing with that of the *Tatmadaw* leadership.

*Myanmar Times* was a monopoly by Military Intelligence of an English journal which was doing well financially. The paper's staff and circulation grew. The size of the staff increased from twenty to almost three hundred in 2004, and a new Mandalay office was opened with about forty personnel.<sup>42</sup> Circulation grew to over 10,000 in English and 15,000 in Myanmar language. Because it was the only English weekly newspaper, with foreign journalists reporting in native English language and printed on good quality paper with colorful photographs, it sold well despite the price which was two US dollars per copy. It was expensive for Myanmar general public but not so for the foreign expatriate community when the only other English competitor was the state-owned *New Light of Myanmar*.

There is very little information available on the level of profit generated for the company MCM or for Military Intelligence directly or indirectly. But the fact that the monthly salary for Myanmar national reporter was sixty-two USD to start, whereas editor level received around four hundred USD, *Myanmar Times* was probably generating considerable profit from subscription, sales and advertisement, thus serving Military Intelligence two purposes; strategically by projection of better image of the military regime and the country and commercially by generating profit.

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<sup>42</sup> Dunkley in *La vie des medias*

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Military Intelligence officers such as Thein Swe and Hla Min, who read foreign newspapers and magazines and analyzed the world perceptions of the regime daily, must have been frustrated with the image their own media projected. Thein Swe once admitted that their “reporters are not as well trained as other countries” and that some should be trained to attain international standard.<sup>43</sup> Dunkley had conducted a training course internally, bringing a university lecturer from Australia.<sup>44</sup> Even if their hopes for fostering better-trained journalists were genuine, as long as the rigid military system stays it will not allow journalists to make use of their trained skills fully.

For Khin Nyunt, *Myanmar Times* was a key part of the strategy to rehabilitate the government’s “battered international image”, said Bertil Lintner.<sup>45</sup> The main objective of the paper was to minimize the negative international image. However, by publishing pictures of political figure such as Aung San Suu Kyi or stories which would never appear on other newspapers, Military Intelligence challenged the values of the *Tatamadaw*. Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence generals showed overconfidence to the extent that Military Intelligence overrode the rules within the military, making the *Myanmar Times* an exceptional case that it was not necessary for the paper to go through the normal required procedure of censorship. Thein Swe conducted the censorship of the paper his son owned. Military Intelligence appeared to monopolize the commercial success of the only English newspaper (apart from the state owned *New Light of Myanmar*) that had no other competitors.

Thus, the *Myanmar Times* became the symbol of the “we-can-do-whatever-we-think-is-right” attitude of Military Intelligence. The new set of values, presented by the *Myanmar Times*, was perceived as a threat to the old values of the *Tatmadaw*, which upheld the coherence of the unity and the command structure. The *Tatmadaw* forcefully intervened to crush the threat.

When Khin Nyunt was sacked, the military detained Thein Swe and sentenced him to more than one hundred years in prison in November. The son Sonny Swe was also captured and detained in late November 2004 and received a prison sentence of 14

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<sup>43</sup> Personal communication, Yangon, 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Dunkley, quoted in *International reports: Myanmar 2003*, accessed at <http://www.internationalreports.net/asiapacific/myanmar/2003/yangon.htm> on 5 February 2006

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Lin Neumann’s *The Survival of Burmese Journalism*

years. His charge was reportedly that the *Myanmar Times* circumvented regular scrutiny from the Press Scrutiny Board. The *Myanmar Times* still publishes weekly, but the 51 % shares Sonny Swe had (following his arrest, succeeded by his wife Yamin Htin Aung) were to be sold to another individual reportedly close to the incumbent Information Minister.

The power of information Khin Nyunt and Military Intelligence, thus, became a source of weakness. It challenged the *Tatmadaw* by presenting the views that clashed with the military values. It also made Khin Nyunt the most high-profiled general in the *Tatmadaw*, which domestically did not serve him any good but more likely caused despise or added antagonism against him in the military circle. Senior officials such as Thein Swe were driven for blatant cronyism and lost themselves in the fortune their newly found media business brought in. Their success, again, invited its own demise.