

Myanmar's Color Revolution and Mysterious "Soft Coup" Attempt

Part I

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An unexpected [change of ruling party leadership](#) took place in Myanmar in mid-August after troops were dispatched in a late-night mission to remove Thura U Shwe Mann from the Union Solidarity and Development Party's (USDP) headquarters. The Central Executive Committee was also reshuffled almost immediately afterwards after many of its members were purportedly "allowed to resign". The government, for its part, said that Shwe Mann was "too busy" juggling his dual roles as party chairman and parliamentary speaker, and that he's okay and in full health, but this did nothing to assuage observers who rightfully noted a clear changing of the guard taking place. However, unlike what is being 'reported' in Western media, President Thein Sein's initiative against Shwe Mann wasn't a 'suppression of democracy' ahead of the November elections, but rather a strong response aimed at stultifying the growing soft coup attempt that the former USDP chairman had cooked up with Aung San Suu Kyi.

The first part of the article begins by discussing the soft coup attempt that was supposed to be carried out by Shwe Mann and Suu Kyi, explaining its contours and planned implementation before it was publicly foiled. Afterwards it examines the failed power grab that exposed Shwe Mann's connection to Suu Kyi and prompted the government to initiate the crackdown against him and his military-political supporters. Finally, Part II analyzes the fallout of this event and makes an effort to predict the lasting impact that it'll have on the country, especially in light of the upcoming elections.

Tricking The Power Tandem

Situational Background:

Up until the soft coup plot was exposed, President Thein Sein and USDP chairman Shwe Mann operated as a sort of power tandem in maintaining peace and stability in Myanmar while it edged towards its planned Western-modeled 'democratic transition'. The country's military rulers made a conscientious decision to formally cede power and transition to civilian-led rule in 2011, ending the official control that they had exercised over the state since 1962. However, the onset of Myanmar's first civilian government in nearly half a century didn't change the fact that its institutions were still largely in the hands of the military, whether this was openly recognized or not. For example, 25% of parliamentary seats are automatically allocated to the military per the [new constitution of 2008](#), and since a more than 75% majority parliamentary majority is needed to amend the said document, it means that the military wields de-facto veto power over this process. This legal facet will be important to remember for the subsequent section, which identifies the explicit power play

that Shwe Mann clumsily tried to pull off, but which unwittingly (and obviously, it can be said) alerted authorities to his connection with Suu Kyi.

Power Tandem Contours:

To speak more about the trick that was supposed to be played on the power tandem, Suu Kyi and her external backers knew that there would be no way for them to seize power in Myanmar without a 'man on the inside', namely in the government and/or military itself, who could propel them to the country's greatest heights. Through a series of events that have yet to be chronicled, Suu Kyi's 'inside agent' came to be Shwe Mann, who as it happened to be, as per the power tandem arrangement with Thein Sein (who [announced](#) he wouldn't be seeking a second term), was [predicted](#) to have been the government's preferred candidate for the presidency after November's election. It's necessary at this stage to explain another legal peculiarity of Myanmar's political system, and it's that the president isn't chosen by the people, but by the parliament through a complicated procedure about three months after the general election is held. What this means is that the president's selection is a highly regulated and controlled process largely overseen by the establishment (military) in order to preserve its interests, and it's unlikely that any 'outsider' would ever stand a chance to enter into that circle of power. This is why Shwe Mann's prospective presidential bid was envisioned by Thein Sein to be a shoo-in and the logical progression of the power tandem between them.

Soft Coup Plot:



Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann attends a USDP meeting on August 12, flanked by vice chairs Thura U Aye Myint (left) and U Htay Oo (right). The following morning, U Htay Oo replaced him as acting party leader. Photo: Aung Khant / The Myanmar Times

The fatal flaw in this strategy, though, is that Shwe Mann was co-opted by Suu Kyi and her external patrons without Thein Sein or his government's knowledge, meaning that he would have served as a puppet for their interests instead of a defender of Myanmar's sovereignty and stability as would have been expected of him by the establishment. If the power tandem would have been successfully tricked and exploited to foreign advantage, then the entire state structure would have been radically changed with the advent of Shwe Mann's presidency, who would have then sped through his 'reforms' (and purges) with rapid speed before anyone of significance could properly react to counter him. Should there be any institutional pushback whatsoever, it was expected that Myanmar's 'new friends' in the West would threaten various asymmetrical warfare measures (a reintroduction of sanctions, a Color Revolution against the resistant authorities/military, and/or an exacerbation of secessionist warfare) to scare those forces into backing down from any counter-coup or "anti-democratic" (as the West would label it) attempt against Shwe Mann's power surge, with the result of solidifying his 'leadership' through the suppression/intimidation of any actual competition to it. This soft coup was primed for success and likely could have achieved its ambitious goals in record time, but a greedy power grab by Suu Kyi and her proxies (including Shwe Mann) in late June exposed the conspiratorial mechanisms at play

and precipitated the government crackdown against it.

Get Greedy, Get Caught

The plan concocted between Suu Kyi and Shwe Mann called for the former USDP chairman to go through all the motions of government loyalty in order to be guaranteed the country's top spot, and then once serving as president, to behave as a proxy for Suu Kyi and her "National League of Democracy" (NLD) interests. This secret power tandem between Suu Kyi and Shwe Mann would have superceded the planned one between Shwe Mann and Thein Sein, and up until less than two months ago, it was proceeding at full speed without anyone having caught on. That dramatically changed, however, when Suu Kyi got greedy and decided to test the limits of Myanmar's political process (and the suspicions of the authorities) by having her ally Shwe Mann surprisingly press for constitutional changes that would have allowed her to become president.

The Gambit:

The [proposed amendments](#) in question would have lowered the parliamentary majority needed to change the constitution from 75% to 70%, which essentially would have removed the military's de-facto veto power, and would also have eliminated the constitutional reference to prohibiting a presidential candidate from having foreign spouses (but not the one pertaining to children with foreign citizenship). The latter would still not have allowed Suu Kyi to immediately ascend to the presidency because her two sons still hold British citizenship, but had the first part about lowering the necessary parliamentary majority for amendments passed, then a potential free-for-all could have commenced (either then or after the elections) to have changed the constitution further to accommodate Suu Kyi's specific situation with her children. In fact, if Shwe Mann would have been able to garner the support for the first change, then he would have obviously had the institutional influence to carry through with the second one and so on and so forth.

Big Failure:



Aung San Suu Kyi, Photo by Claude TRUONG-NGOC (CC BY-SA 3.0)

It's not known why Suu Kyi forced Shwe Mann to attempt this ultimately failed gambit, but it could have been that she got personally antsy with her presidential ambitions and prematurely decided to launch her soft coup attempt instead of patiently waiting for Shwe Mann to enter the presidency as previously planned. For whatever reason it transpired, though, it served to lift the cover off her strategic ties with Shwe Mann. Reuters [reported](#) after his dismissal as USDP leader that “[he] angered the military by supporting an attempt in parliament in June to amend the constitution to limit the political role of the armed forces”, and the BBC [wrote](#) that “[he] had been rumoured to be discussing an alliance with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi” prior to that. Suu Kyi’s ‘dirty laundry’ was openly aired out for all to see when she pushed Shwe Mann to support the constitutional changes, since the move confirmed the rumors that he was acting in support of her interests.

Out Of The Closet:

Caught red-handed in light of this exposure, the two conspirators had no choice but to [make their alliance public](#) in the interests of mutual self-preservation, understanding that the fate of one is now intimately interlinked with the other as part of this grand scheme, and that legal repercussions against one will likely lead to the same against the other. At the same time, both sides are hoping that Western capital has become such an important part of the country’s development plan that the government won’t risk having it cut off with the threat of renewed sanctions in response to any forthcoming crackdown against them. The Myanmar government has thus only gone halfway in stopping the soft coup - they exposed it in practice to show the plotters that they’re aware of what’s going on and intend to stop it, but they have yet to call it by its actual name out of fear that doing so will be seen as ‘political repression’ against the ‘opposition’ before the upcoming and [much hyped-about](#) elections. This reluctance puts the government in a very precarious position and creates an opportune environment for destabilizing scenarios to unfold.

[To be continued...](#)

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