stand down to become the civilian president under the new constitution, according to Chinese diplomats. "He wants to be president for life," a senior military source close to him said.

"But even if Than Shwe officially retires he will not give up his power. Instead he'll remain the grey eminence behind the throne, along the lines of the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the years before his death," said the independent Burmese analyst Win Min, who is based in Chiang Mai.

Than Shwe plans to establish a new supreme ruling council -- the State Democracy and Development Council that will oversee the military command and the civilian government. Than Shwe and Maung Aye will head the new body, which is expected to include Thura Shwe Mann and the regional commanders. Under its authority there will be a split between the government and the armed forces. While Thura Shwe Mann will take full control of the army the prime minister, Soe Win, will head the cabinet and the government. He has already become a civilian, losing his position in the armed forces.

Efforts to civilianize the government are already under way. Cabinet members have been forced to leave the armed forces. Military control throughout the country is in the process of being transferred from the command of the armed forces and placed under the authority of the interior and planning ministries.

Local military commanders will have to report to the home ministry. This has already happened at township level and is now being implemented at district level, a senior international aid worker based in Burma told *Forum* on condition of anonymity.

"This is all part of Than Shwe's plans to streamline government administration and strengthen the authority's control over the general population in preparation for a transition to so-called civilian rule, and to win the elections held under the new constitution," said Win Min.

But Than Shwe is aware of the dangers involved. So to prepare for these momentous political changes, Burma's top leader is planning to use his divide and rule strategy to maintain his authority. Power will be divided between the new army chief General Thura Shwe Mann and Prime Minister General Soe Win.

"This is the new generation of military leaders which is being readied to take over power," according to a senior Indian diplomat who deals with Rangoon. But, he warns, this group of generals lacks the manners and intelligence of its superiors.

"These men are uncouth, uneducated and only know how to bark orders," says a former Indian diplomat who has been based in Rangoon previously and knows the new generals well.



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With Than Shwe's succession planning almost complete, the military's control of the country is likely to be strengthened rather than weakened. The next generation of generals is even less likely than its predecessors to give up power. The chances of significant political reform in Burma remain a distant hope. In the meantime, the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is likely to remain under house arrest for the foreseeable future.

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