

Myanmar's army chief set to stand down

LARRY JAGAN

MYANMAR'S army chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing will step down within the next two months and enter the country's political scene, according to informed sources. The current second in charge, Vice General Soe Win will replace him within weeks, according to sources close to the general. The official order was signed earlier this month.

The move will come just as the country prepares for multi-party elections later this year. "Clearly Min Aung Hlaing has political ambitions, and is retiring to enter politics," said Win Htein – a National League for Democracy (NLD) MP and a member of the party's central executive.

The expectation is that the out-going army chief will join the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), formed by his mentor, Senior General Than Shwe. But this is far from certain, the retiring general can still enter politics without being a member of a political party, as nominations for the actual presidential race do not need to be elected MPs.

There has been speculation about the army commander's future plans for some time now, with many believing he was due to retire this year. The compulsory retirement age in the military is 60, but earlier this year he insisted he only reached the retiring age next year. However some sources suggest that Min Aung Hlaing may also be retiring because of health reasons.

Some analysts have suggested that the current top two generals would retire together as their predecessors – Senior General Than Shwe and Vice Senior General Maung Aye – did in March 2011. Reported tension between the two top military commanders fuelled this speculation. Soon after Min Aung Hlaing became commander in chief, he removed three senior army officers – Major General Tun Khan, Divisional Commander of

Yangon, Major General Tin Ngwe of Mandalay Region, and Major General Kyaw Phyto, who was in charge of the Triangular Division – who were known to be close to General Soe Win.

However, any rift between the two top generals will not have been allowed to disturb cohesion, unity and morale within the army. "The interests of the military as a whole always supersedes personal rivalries and divisions," said Sean Turnell, a Myanmar expert at Macquarie University in Australia. "As the institution that sees itself as protecting the interests and security of the whole country, and with considerable collective economic interests, they will always maintain a united front."

Many analysts have been tipping Lieutenant General Myat Htun Oo, who has been rapidly promoted up the ranks in the last couple of years, to succeed Min Aung Hlaing when he retired. He also became head of military intelligence, a crucial position, last year. More recently he has been prominent during the current military campaign against the Kokang, who are ethnically Chinese, in Northern Shan State.

Myat Htun Oo was originally in charge of the military operation in August 2009, which forced the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to flee, with many believing its leader Pheung Kya-shi, also known as Peng Jiasheng, took refuge across the border in China, after first escaping with the help of the Wa rebel army, and split the Kokang rebel group.

During this current offensive though there are reports that hundreds of Myanmar troops have been wounded or killed. Nevertheless this campaign has raised the profile of the army, and fostered a surge of nationalist pride in the Tatmadaw – with thousands of Myanmar people expressing their admiration for the soldiers in the front line on the country's social media. This has also increased Min Aung Hlaing's political power in Naypyidaw. Since the fighting erupted in early

February, Min Aung Hlaing dominates the weekly National Defence and Security Council meetings, according to informed sources, with Thein Sein completely sidelined.

Whatever the debate and divisions within the army, the question of succession has been resolved amicably, and Soe Win will take over as Commander-in-Chief of the military in July. The army's hierarchical nature and the need for institutional stability have prevailed. Myat Htun Oo will have to wait his turn, but as the comedian and former political prisoner, Zaganar put it, "he's still the one to watch."

While it is as yet unclear who will become the deputy army chief, sources close to the military believe it will be Lieutenant General Kyaw Swe, who until he was replaced last year, also ran military intelligence, with Myat Htun Oo likely to become the third highest ranking office in the army. Kyaw Swe is also reportedly close to Soe Win – both are regarded as former General Maung Aye's protégés.

One of Soe Win's key priorities will be to make sure the army maintains its prominent role in the country's politics, including protecting the 25 percent quota of seats the army automatically has in the parliament, under the 2008 constitution. It will be the new commander-in-chief who will appoint these 166 MPs. Under the constitution the military commander also appoints three ministers – Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs – these then will also be selected by Soe Win.

As part of the plan for the future, it is also almost certain that Soe Win will instruct the military MPs in the next parliament to select Min Aung Hlaing as their vice president. The lower house and the upper house also nominate vice presidents, and then at a joint sitting of both houses, including the military MPs, the new president will be selected from the three vice presidential candidates. While Min Aung Hlaing is not expected to get the presidential post this time

round, the army is going to have a powerful say in who finally is voted president.

So now all eyes will be on Soe Win to see if he will differ in any way from his out-going predecessor. Democrat politicians are split on what to expect, but some believe a new face may usher in a new approach. "In comparison to Min Aung Hlaing – who is a tough guy – Soe Win seems open and reasonable," said Win Htein from the NLD.

However Khin Maung Swe, leader of the National Democratic Front believes Soe Win will be even more hard-line than Min Aung Hlaing. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) leader Hkun Htun Oo insisted that the ethnic minority dealings with Soe Win in the past had not been encouraging. While several Kachin MPs on the other hand were more enthusiastic as they felt he was flexible and sincere when he was Northern Commander.

Min Aung Hlaing certainly presents himself as a tough, confident, no nonsense commander. Even to the extent of making his subordinates in his office wear bulletproof vests. Soe Win on the other hand has the reputation of being a loner, concerned about excessive corruption and prepared to consider dialogue as a means to resolve conflicts and tensions.

That would be good news for Aung San Suu Kyi – in terms of negotiating a coalition government after the next elections and proposed constitutional change – and the ethnic minorities, who will still be pushing for political dialogue on Federalism and are likely to still be in the finishing throes of signing a nation ceasefire agreement, when Soe Win takes over as Commander-in-Chief.

"With Soe Win at the helm, it certainly opens up the possibility of discussions," said Win Htein optimistically.

One of Soe Win's key priorities will be to make sure the army maintains its prominent role in the country's politics, including protecting the 25 percent quota of seats the army automatically has in the parliament, under the 2008 constitution.

The writer is a specialist on Myanmar and a former BBC World Service New Editor for the region.

Decoding the #Hashtag

Exploring the role of social media in contemporary activism

NAHELA NOWSHIN

BE it the glorious Language Movement of 1952 or the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, no movement can come about without collective action. Social and/or political activism fuelled with the power of mass campaign helps birth a movement. In the modern world, the very nature of "mass campaign" has changed in a variety of ways. The advent of social media, in fact, has reined in an era of a new breed of activism: digital activism.

Prior to the digital era, print media played a pivotal role in mobilising the masses, especially in terms of nation-building. In his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, eminent scholar Benedict Anderson suggests that print materials like newspapers fostered a sense of cultural belonging among people across a country. Publishers began to print newspapers in the vernacular, making it possible for readers who spoke local dialects to understand one another.

During the Language Movement, for example, Bengali newspapers such as *Ittehad* and *The Daily Azad* played an instrumental role in their advocacy of reinstating Bengali as an official language and mobilising the Bengali people. The Language Movement laid one of the very first foundations of the Bengali national identity and became a forerunner to the Liberation War that birthed an independent Bangladesh. *The Nation*, the weekly Irish newspaper published in the 19th century, is credited for creating the first modern nationalist movement in Ireland. The newspaper was founded by three young men who belonged to Young Ireland – a movement that sought to free Ireland from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. *The Nation* mobilised Irishmen across the country and greatly influenced the development of Irish nationalism.

In the digital era, however, the Internet is the crux of modern movements. The Egyptian Revolution of 2011, for example, began on Facebook. A spontaneous Facebook page dedicated to Khaled Saeed, the young Egyptian man who died in police custody, soon attracted such a large following that it eventually culminated into other demonstrations and the historic rally at Tahrir Square. The critical role played by social media in the Arab Spring – the wave of protests in the Arab world that began with the Tunisian Revolution in late 2010 – as a whole is undeniable.

Whereas print media mobilised masses mainly (but not strictly) around a local and/or national issue, social media made possible for local phenomena to spread around the globe. Mass media communication revolu-



ILLUSTRATION: NAHELA NOWSHIN

tionised the very means of mass mobilisation. Networked media slashed costs and decentralised the modes of information production and distribution. Exchanging information became cheaper and faster.

One no longer needs to belong to a political party or an advocacy group to be part of a movement. A single hashtag, representing a common cause, holds the unprecedented power to unite thousands, if not millions. E-petitions, event planning, crowdfunding and other means of mass campaigning on the digital platform are resourceful tools for mobilisation. One of the most important features of digital media is the ability to transmit unfiltered information. Unlike print media, where content undergoes a rigid editing process, the cyberspace allows for an organic environment for free content sharing and dialogue among global citizens.

Demands of past and contemporary movements aren't

that different. Whether it's the Language Movement of 1952 or the Arab Spring, the fundamental demands are generally social, economic or political in nature. But some differences can be pointed out when it comes to identifying the forces behind the formulation of demands of a certain movement. In the past, associated political parties and leaders of a movement would stipulate their demands. For instance, the Six Point Programme spearheaded by Bangabandhu outlined the six demands put forward by a coalition of political parties to end the exploitation of East Pakistan. Similarly, the Black Panther Party introduced the Ten Point Programme during the Civil Rights Movement, and so on.

But such manifestos are largely missing (although not obsolete) from recent social movements. Why is that? Because in a digital era where it has become much easier to mobilise masses, movements have become increasingly

leaderless and formal organisations are no longer the face of a movement. Manifestos aren't necessary to mobilise support. It's the people who raise different issues which then compete with one another to emerge as the determinants that shape a movement's cause. The Arab Spring is said to have been instigated by a number of things like human rights violations, unemployment, poverty, etc. These concerns were raised by the people themselves. Similarly, the Occupy Movement, 15-M protests in Spain and the Hong Kong protests were largely shaped by the people's demands. So does this mean movements nowadays are more populist in nature? That is a matter of debate.

ISIS' social media campaign is nothing like you've ever seen before. The Al-Qaeda inspired outfit is expanding its web presence with a slick social media strategy to recruit fighters, raise funds and spread (terrifying) propaganda. That's the topic of a study conducted by the Brookings Institution; the study estimates that as of December 2014, there were at least 46,000 Twitter accounts in support of ISIS. The app "Fajr al-Bashaer" sends users news and updates about the group fighting in Iraq and Syria. A ten-page online magazine called *The Islamic State Report*, which one could easily mistake for a professional magazine because of its sophisticated, creative graphics and content, talks about what life would look like in the envisioned Islamic State.

With digital activism, spreading awareness and joining a cause has become easier than ever. But that also means a Facebook group or a Twitter hashtag can just as easily be replaced with another and counter-movements may spring up just as fast. Newsfeeds are constantly being bombarded with new information every minute and people's collective memory has become amnesic. Netizens move on from one cause to another feeling good about themselves about "participating" in a noble cause. Online causes generally gain steam when celebrities or other well-known figures are involved; other more "important" causes may not appear on the public radar at all. Then there is the issue of surveillance and the very real threat to privacy.

There is an ongoing debate about the "success" rate of digital activism, given that success means different things to different people. "Do hashtags translate into actual change?" is the type of question being asked by cyber-pessimists and other critics. But in the meantime, one thing is for certain: digital activism continues to flourish.

The writer is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM
1899 - 1976

SHOULD A SINGLE PERSON BE HURT, ALL HEARTS SHOULD FEEL IT EQUALLY. IF ONE PERSON IS INSULTED, IT IS A SHAME TO ALL MANKIND; AN INSULT TO ALL! TODAY IS THE GRAND UPRISING OF THE AGONY OF UNIVERSAL MAN.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Grace finish
- Seedy area
- Mason's partner
- Bashful
- Extreme
- Stroll
- Tell tales
- Tab
- Muscle connectors
- Floral ring
- Loan shark's practice
- Evergreen trees
- Passport, license, etc.
- Lobbying org.
- "-on First?"
- Model sticker
- Baseball's Cey
- Printing dots
- Concert extras
- Manx, for one
- Latitude
- Bepenitent
- First odd prime
- rich dessert
- Vegas number

DOWN

- Sneaker problem
- Ticket category
- Setting
- Poweraid
- Negative link
- Sky sights
- Arm or leg
- Early source of nourishment
- Flour merchant
- "Gomer Pyle" star
- Sub shops
- One or more
- Clothing
- Almanac bit
- Watched Rover
- Gain by force
- Top dog
- Conk out
- Crude shed
- Grove makeup
- Herd member
- Commentary piece
- Overly

Yesterday's answer

C	A	A	N	T	A	P	E	S
R	O	P	E	S	A	G	A	P
A	R	R	O	W	R	E	G	A
I	T	O	A	M	A	D	E	U
G	A	N	D	H	I	A	L	E
B	E	L	L	S	I	L	T	N
B	O	Y	I	D	O	L	I	V
A	C	E	O	L	I	V	E	R
R	E	B	E	C	C	A	E	L
C	L	A	R	A	N	I	N	E
A	L	L	I	N	E	D	U	C
R	I	L	E	S	S	E	T	S

Request for Concept Notes

Katalyst is a market development project that aims to contribute to increasing the income of poor men and women in rural areas. It does this by facilitating changes in services, inputs and product markets, which in turn increases the competitiveness of farmers and small enterprises. Katalyst is co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the UK Government, and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). It is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh.

Katalyst is looking to finance innovative ideas on the following topic:
DEVELOPMENT AND/OR PROMOTION OF FOOD PRODUCTS MADE OF LOCALLY PRODUCED MAIZE

Katalyst wants to partner with agro processors, producers of food/consumer products with nationwide sales/distribution network and companies that are inclined to diversify their product basket or expand product line by manufacturing food products from maize produced in Bangladesh. Companies that are already producing foods in this manner can come up with ideas for promoting/rebranding these products. In addition, we will encourage the concepts that have the potential to engage maize farmers for realizing the business plan or at least link to higher income for farmers. Details regarding the Request for Concept Notes and the templates for submitting the concept notes are available at:
<http://katalyst.com.bd/procurement-of-services/>

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