

Rocky road to Mandalay

I've been wanting to write about Burma for weeks but those perennial news hogs, the Mideasterners, have been taking up all my time. At last, a moment to reflect about one of the world's oddest and most isolated nations.

The first inkling of change in Burma came to me when I was up on the Thai-Burmese border last spring. A curious event occurred. An entire Burmese city burned to the ground, leaving 45,000 families homeless. It seems there was no fire equipment of any kind other than bucket brigades. Shades of the Middle Ages!

Events like this one, in my experience, often spark political quakes.

These came a few weeks later when massive student demonstrations erupted in Burma's seedy, run-down capital, Rangoon, and in Mandalay where, Kipling tells us, the flying fishes play, which they don't. At least 200 students were gunned down or beaten to death by the army and police. More riots followed, shaking Burma to its creaky foundations.

Last week, Burma's iron-fisted ruler for the past 16 years, Gen. Ne Win, finally resigned—or at least gave up his titular role as leader. No one is really sure if Ne Win has really retired or has simply changed titles.

When Ne Win came to power in 1962 he put the country on the "Burmese road to socialism." This turned out to be a blend of self-isolation, dictatorship, crackpot socialism, anti-modernism and old-fashioned corruption. Thanks to Ne Win, Burma went from being a decent country of modest income to a threadbare basket case, now rated by the UN as one of the world's poorest nations. Think of Ne Win as a sort of inefficient version of North Korea's awful Kim Il Sung.

As if all this weren't bad enough, wretched Burma has been at war for the past 40 years. Like many other Third World nations, Burma's modern borders were drawn by the imperial British.

Stuck inside Burma were a lot of non-Burmese people who hate their neighbors. Include here mountain peoples like the Karens, Chins and

ERIC MARGOLIS



Kachins. Add two feuding communist armies, one pro-Moscow and the other pro-Beijing. Then there is a dizzying collection of assorted tribesmen and local warlords and the bizarre remnants of two Chinese nationalist divisions who have formed their own private drug army. Plus the evil Gen. Khun Sa's Shan State opium army, one of my favorites.

All of these groups have fought the ragtag army of the central government. Sometimes over opium or the right to smuggle teak, other times to set up independent states. Both the Chinese and Christian missionaries have been active in promoting tribal rebellions in Burma's hill states.

Burma's people, most of whom are kindly, gentle Buddhists, deserve a lot better. Sadly, the new head of state, Gen. U Sein Lwin, seems so far like a nasty clone of Ne Win, another head-bashing general who comes from the same military clique that has mismanaged Burma for years.

Too bad, because Burma could be a well-to-do nation. Its mountains and valleys are filled with natural riches, including gold and other unexploited minerals, vast stands of precious hardwoods and fertile land. The astute Japanese have recognized Burma's potential of becoming another economic success story like Thailand. Lots of Japanese investment turned sleepy Thailand into Southeast Asia's new boom town. The same thing could happen in Burma.

Interestingly, Burma is one of the few Asian nations that harbors no lingering ill will toward Japan in spite of having felt the cold fury of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. Quite the contrary. Unlike the many Filipinos or Chinese who still despise Japan, the easy-going Burmese greatly admire and even like the Japanese who, in turn, reciprocate by doing lots to keep Burma's head above water. One Japanese admitted to me, after many sakis, that Burma and, to a lesser degree, Thailand were the only places in Asia where he felt welcome and secure.

If long-suffering Burma could somehow shake off the military leeches who have drained the nation of its wealth and vitality, there is a good chance that with Japanese midwifery it could turn into Asia's new wonder baby. But judging from this week's power shuffle in Rangoon, it's unlikely the country will manage to detour from its current rut on the Burmese road to socialism.

Still, there are powerful new currents in the region. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia may be nearing an end and Vietnam could be breaking out of its isolation.

"For the wind is in the palm trees, and the temple bells they say, Come back you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay." Well, better British soldiers than Burmese, that's for sure.

Punch

