

## Salai Tin Maung Oo, the High Flying Hornbill, Flapping its Wings together with the Fighting Peacocks

*Salai Kipp (Zoram)*

*"... [from Chinland] whose horizons are bathed in mountain dew dotted with rhododendrons among lush greens beneath bright blue skies. There the hornbill proclaims and sings songs of loyalty unity, and peace." - Dagon Taya - [Excerpts from the Universities - Rangoon Chin Magazine 1982-83]*

He is a true Salai, "one who is a courageous son of the soil" and a high-flying hornbill, "who personifies loyalty, unity and peace". He had a political vision for freedom and peace when he entered Rangoon University; a campus turned fierce battleground – Rangoon University, historically known as the bloodiest campus on earth. He held hands with his comrades in unity. They flapped their wings together —they were great fighting peacocks. He raised high the flag of fighting peacocks, the flag of dignity and justice. Relentlessly, he waged battle after battle for liberation of the oppressed. He fought for the dignity of the entire Chin and for the whole country as well. He was a true Salai—a courageous son of the soil. He was Salai Tin Maung Oo. At 4am on June 26, 1976, the Burmese military regime hangs him inside the prison walls of Insein Jail. There is no trial, no defense, just a judge, a sentence, and an execution. Never before had a student leader been executed. It exposed the regime's total lack of rational and will forever stain their history. For the people, a martyr emerged, one who sacrifices his life, his blood, sweat and tears for unity, loyalty and peace. He is and will forever be a role model for generations to come.



"Comrades! They are killing me without letting the people know"

"I shall never kneel down under your military boots" - the last words of Salai Tin Maung Oo"

**Chronicles 1974-75 Academic Year.** A Significant Milestone of the People's Struggle for Freedom Right at the beginning of the academic year the students seemed to be more excited than unusual.

**January 3 1974** The military government promulgates and enforces its "socialist" constitution. In a surprising move, Chin leaders of all ages and positions, including some students, are released. Many of them belong to the Army, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) and the People's Council and some are students. They were jailed for proposing a federal democracy system. Federalists from other ethnic states are released as well.

**June 6 & 7, 1974** Article (9) of the newly "promulgated" constitution states that, "The State safeguards the interests of the working people whose strength is based on peasants and workers." Just six months later, the Worker's General Strike breaks-out to challenge the constitution and Article (9). More than a hundred factories across the country join the strike. The Burma Army responds with gunfire on June 6 & 7 killing workers and students. Some survive the massacre and flee to avoid imprisonment. On the campus of the University in Rangoon, tensions flare among the Chin during the General Secretary election of the Chin Literature and Cultural Committee for the academic year 1974- 75.<sup>1</sup> A little-known Asho/Plains Chin student named, Salai Tin Maung Oo attends the discussion. Dr. Za Hlei Thang,<sup>2</sup> a medical student at that time and a former jail mate who was released along with Salai on January 3, 1974 introduces him at the meeting. Salai Tin Maung Oo gives an impressive and moving speech about the importance of unity, especially during critical times. After a brief discussion, he is unanimously appointed General Secretary of the CLCC. The former Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant, dies in New York. His remain is flown back to Rangoon to be buried there according to his last wish. In a demonstrative move, Salai Tin Maung Oo, along with the fighting peacocks, leads the people's uprising in respect to U Thant. Ne Win's dictatorship is thus challenged and later he retaliates with brute force against the students.

**December 5, 1974:** Hundreds of students march toward Kyaikasan stadium to pay their last respects to U Thant. From a jeep hired by the students of the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT), students receive water and bananas while a loudspeaker blares, "U Thant, respected by all the Burmese people, was the former Secretary General of the United Nations and he was also the Father of World Peace. He will always be respected and remembered by the people of the world," Thousands of people come together to pay their last respects. Among the mourners are Buddhist monks. Ko Kyi Win, Salai Tin Maung Oo and other student leaders announce that U Thant's funeral procession is to be taken over by the students. They demand that the Red Cross leave the pavilion housing the casket. The jeep holding the student leaders drives up to the pavilion. Before proclaiming their

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<sup>1</sup> At that time the **Chairman** of the **Chin Literature and Cultural Committee** was the **Rector** of the **Forestry Department** of the **RASU Mr. Ral Lian Sum** and **Taang Nang Lian Thang** (now CHIN FORUM) was the **Joint General Secretary**.

<sup>2</sup> **Dr. Za Hlei Thang** (now CHIN FORUM) was elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) in 1990 under the ticket of the **Chin National League for Democracy**.

demands, a one-minute silence is held for the fallen students who were massacred by General Ne Win on July 7, 1962. The student leaders declare that it is unacceptable for the government to have ignored their demand that U Thant be honoured with a mausoleum and an official state funeral. The government planned to bury him at Kyandaw cemetery- a cemetery for common people. For this reason U Thant is to be buried by the “people” and his casket is to remain on campus until the government agrees to honour U Thant appropriately. They carry the casket towards the campus, the students, in unison, chant, “To build a mausoleum for U Thant! Our Cause! Our Cause! Down with one-party dictatorship!” The respected son of Burma is brought to the Convocation Hall of the Rangoon Campus. Spontaneously, students, monks and others give anti-government speeches. The speeches continue around the clock. Along the University Avenue Road, makeshift teashops and snack shops are erected in anticipation of a long strike. Students begin constructing a Peace Mausoleum on the site of the former Student Union Building located inside the Rangoon University campus. The building was the historical shrine of Burma’s struggle for freedom and was dynamited by Ne Win’s troops a day after hundreds of striking students were massacred by the military on the July 7, 1962.

**December 8, 1974:** The government does not address the demands of a state funeral, but offers an alternative site for a mausoleum at Cantonment Garden at the foot of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The funeral procession leaves the Convocation Hall and moves down Chancellor Road to the site of the Peace Mausoleum for all to pay their last homage. When it is announced that the funeral committee agrees to the government’s offer of an alternative site for U Thant’s Mausoleum at the Cantonment Garden, loud protests break out from the general masses. They demand that U Thant be laid to rest in the Peace Mausoleum already under construction and not at the Cantonment Garden. The peoples funeral takes place there and construction of the Peace Mausoleum continues with three hundred thousand kyats of donation collected from the masses. The cause gains momentum and members of the Burma Socialist Program Party, the People’s Council, the Burma Army and some military intelligent agents joined the students by secretly sending information from the military and party headquarters to the students in support of their cause. Consequently, about three hundred secret police are arrested by the students.

**December 11, 1974** On December 11 when the Workers are about to join the strike and heighten the momentum the Burma Army raids the Campus at 2:00 am and hundreds of students and monks are massacred; three thousand demonstrators arrested and imprisoned in Insein Jail. U Thant’s casket is confiscated and buried at the Cantonment Garden at dawn beside Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine’s mausoleum. A mausoleum for U Thant is hastily constructed with the donations collected by the students. At the onset of the U Thant’s funeral strike Salai Tin Maung Oo and other student leaders lead the masses in saluting the fallen heroes of the 7th. July 1962. General Ne Win ordered for the destruction of the Student Union Building in 1962 as a warning sign to all his future adversaries. When the U Thant’s funeral Strike came to an end a new building emerges – a mausoleum for U Thant – as a warning sign to the dictators about the people’s power. It has been a significant historical milestone of the People’s Struggle for Freedom.

**1975/76 Academic Year:** The military regime has a ridiculously wrong opinion about the previous year’s students unrest. They think the unrest took place because of low standards

at the University- that students are unhappy with the services and situations surrounding the cafeteria, the lecture halls, and the dormitories. The government decides to send the Education Minister, Dr. Khin Maung Win to visit the Universities of Rangoon and discuss the matters with students.

**June 6, 1975:** Dr. Khin Maung Win visits the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT), known to be one of the most rebellious institutes at that time. His visit to the RIT coincides with the anniversary of massacre of the workers during the previous year. Workers and students were massacred at Sinmalaik Dock Yard and the Thamaing Textile factory on June 6&7, 1974 when the government responded with gun fire against the Workers' General Strike. News spreads among the students that a youth wing of the BSPP of the RIT, the Lanzin Lunge, prepares for a congenial meeting with the minister to discuss student life. The Lanzin Lunge sets the topics and chooses the students to speak at the meeting. It is supposed to be "lively and positive". The meeting is opened at the Sethmu Hall of RIT. Dr. Aung Gyi, the Rector of RIT, the Education Minister, Dr. Khin Maung Win and Dr. Hla Han, a member of the State Council are seated on the stage. The Lanzin Lunge begins its mock discussion. Angered, several students grab the microphones and begin criticising the government. Here are some excerpts:

*"The workers asked for rice, instead you gave them bullets." Ko Thein Lwin – Mechanical Engineering.*

*"Stop dividing the students by forcing us to spy on one another." Ko Soe Yan – Electrical Engineering.*

*"Whenever there is unrest, you send in troops wearing the badge of Chin Battalions to shoot at the demonstrators so people assume it was the Chin that shot at them. This is a cunning attempt to divide the people and sow hatred among them. Please stop such acts immediately." Salai Kipp – Architecture.*

About thirty students vehemently express their distain for the government. That is, BSPP's mock discussion turns a democracy platform for the students to openly criticize the government. The attendees on stage are speechless. Salai Tin Maung Oo, who managed to avoid detention after the U Thant's funeral strike waits for the minister's arrival who is scheduled to visit Thaming College hostels after the RIT meeting. Salai Tin Maung Oo is prepared. He spent a year in hiding, both underground and above ground. With renewed energy and determination he plans to lead a student strike in commemoration of the previous year's massacre of workers. Realizing the possibility of meeting more angry students, the minister cancels his meeting at the Thamiang College. Students from Rangoon Institute of Technology merge with those already gathering at Thamaing College. With the leadership of Salai Tin Maung Oo the students tear down the brick wall dividing the Thamaing Textile factory and Thamaing College. The wall was erected by the military after the previous year's Workers Strike to discourage communication between the workers and the students. Salai Tin Maung Oo leads the students down Insein Road where they camp in the Convocation Hall of Rangoon University. The following days workers and students march to Insein Jail shouting, "Expand Insein Jail, expand Insein Jail," and "We were born to our mothers, but fed by your jail". Insein Jail notoriously houses political prisoners. The demonstrators express that they are not afraid to be detained—they welcome it! Despite

certain torture, political prisoners inside Insein Jail respond by joining the shouting. Gaining momentum, the crowd begins to demand that Insein Jail be opened. Demonstrators plan to continue the following day and camp-out at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Early in the next morning, the army storms the pagoda and rounds up the protestors. One hundred fifty students are arrested and transported in eight military lorries to Insein Jail. The students resume their shouting all the way from the pagoda to the jail. All are brutally beaten upon arrival at Insein.

**March 23, 1976:** The Underground Student Union, Universities – Rangoon plans to commemorate the centenary of the birth of the late Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing by paying homage at his mausoleum at the foot of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing was one of the most revered Burmese writer and patriotic leader during the struggle for Independence from the British colony. Like U Thant, Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine openly disapproved and criticized General Ne Win and his regime. Other underground student organisations prepare to attend as well. The Underground Students Union, Universities – Rangoon is led by the late Ko Ne Win Maw, a great fighting peacock with a great deal of experiences which he has acquired out of his long years of struggle against the military dictatorship. The other members of the Union are mostly former detainees of Insein Jail from U Thant’s funeral strike. They are known as Mosco returnees (Insein Jail was nicknamed Moscow at this time). During the June 1975 underground student movement, they operated under the name of Leftist Students Union. As the Hmaing Centennial approaches, they merge with the group lead by Ko Tin Aye Kyu of RIT, a well known poet and a great fighting peacock. His pen name is Nyo Hmaing Lwin. Students know him as Hmaing Gyi. Ko Tin Aye Kyu had played an active role during the June 6, 1974 Labour Strike, but disappeared afterwards. He was believed to have been killed during the battles at Thamaing. Underground leaflets and poems commemorating Hmaing Gyi are distributed throughout the RIT. To everyone’s surprise and elation, Hmang Gyi suddenly re- emerges. In fact he had taken refuge among the people. On March 23rd at 8:00am, students begin to gather under the portico of the RIT as they were alerted by leaflets and postcards. Among the students chosen to lead the march are Ko Tin Aye Kyu, Ko Than Lin, Ko Win Min Htwe, Ko Tint Aung, Ko Maung Maung (Mandalay), etc. The students are ready for the demonstration. Earlier that morning, newspapers headlined the demonstration. Photos of Salai Tin Maung Oo and Ko Myint Soe, being arrested the previous night appear on the front page. They were coming back from the underground to lead the Hmaing Centennial demonstration. Some students are puzzled; they wonder if the demonstration can take place without their leaders. Ko Than Lin distributes the slogans for the demonstration at the right time. Students get excited and enthusiastic. Ko Tin Aye Kyu reads the slogans and explains that the slogans are to be chanted on their march to Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing’s mausoleum. There are no anti-government slogans and are related to Hmaing Centennial only. It is to be a peaceful demonstration. The students are given the chance to propose different slogans, but all agree to use the distributed ones. Meanwhile at the Rangoon Arts and Science University (RASU), Mai Po Po, the younger sister of Salai Tin Maung Oo mobilises the student group there. Mai Po Po, a high school student, reads the newspaper reports about her brother. She is worried. She goes to the campus in an attempt to organize the demonstration. She tries to persuade the students to join the march to Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing mausoleum. As she is still a young girl, no one takes her seriously. Still they listen

to her curiously. In a dramatical move, she tears off her skirt (tha-mein) and wearing only a pair of white shorts, tells the students to wear her skirt if they are “cowards”. The students now are convinced of her determination and courage and join her. The RIT students arrive and the two student groups combined formed a powerful force. Hand in hand with Ko Tin Aye Kyu and other student leaders, Mai Po Po leads the march to Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing’s mausoleum. After paying their homage, the students return to the RASU campus. Upon arrival at the Convocation Hall, students begin to shout anti-government slogans declaring their opposition to the military dictatorship. At 8:00 pm, the state radio announces the closure of all universities. Ko Tin Aye Kyu, Ko Than Lin and Ko Win Myint are arrested the following morning. Later Mai Po Po and her innocent parents are also arrested. June 26, 1976 (4:00am) inside the walls of Insein Jail a hastily formed military tribunal sentences Salai Tin Maung Oo to death. And as he is hanged his hand written message: “I am proud of you my sister Mai Po Po” remains silently on the wall of the cell where Salai Tin Maung Oo was locked up.

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**Remarks:** *This article is written to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the heroic death of Salai Tin Maung Oo. I salute Salai Tin Maung Oo and all those fallen fighting peacocks that have laid down their lives for the sake of the People’s Struggle for Freedom.*

**Acknowledgements:** *In writing this article, I have attempted all my best to re-collect the events of three decades ago both from my own memory and from available sources. But I was unable to do so as widely as desired. I also tried all my best to be factual but by no means guarantee that it is complete.*

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