

'The Guardian' February 2008

Obituary: Mahn Sha La Phan

Resistance leader of Burma's Karen people, he tried to keep the opposition united

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The Guardian, Monday February 18 2008

In 2000, Mahn Sha La Phan, who has been assassinated aged 64, became general secretary of Burma's most significant insurgent organisation, the Karen National Union (KNU). With the death of its chairman, General Bo Mya, in 2006, Mahn Sha, a man of talent and integrity, had become the most significant figure within the KNU, and its chief ideologue. He was also a leader of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), and other opposition movements. Unlike most leaders of the Christian-dominated KNU, he came from a Buddhist background and was a speaker of the Pwo dialect. His murder is a great setback to the KNU, and for the wider Burmese opposition, whose strained unity he did so much to support.

The KNU went underground in 1949, a year after Burmese independence. Sixty years on, the Burmese civil war is the longest-running such conflict in the world, and the country's ethnic minority populations, such as the Karen, have suffered greatly.

Following the collapse of the Communist party of Burma in 1989, some two dozen of the country's ethnic insurgent organisations agreed ceasefires with the military government, which had seized power in 1962, and, most recently, in September 2007, crushed the popular protests led by Buddhist monks. Mahn Sha was among those KNU leaders who argued that such ceasefire agreements have achieved little, and that any peace deal must involve a comprehensive settlement of the country's political problems, and the freeing of political prisoners, including the democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Mahn Sha was born in Taw Gyaung village, Maubin district, in the Irrawaddy delta. He studied history at Rangoon University, and went underground in the mid-1960s. The young activist was identified with a left-leaning, Karen nationalist faction, before uniting with the KNU in the mid-1970s, and becoming a central committee member in 1984. Always popular with the rank and file, he was for many years treated with some suspicion by the rightwing KNU leadership. When, between 1985 and 1986, he led efforts to unite the fractious ethnic nationalist movement with the then strong communist insurgency, he was rebuked and demoted by Bo Mya.

By the late 1980s Mahn Sha had been reinstated to the leadership. This was a period of optimism in insurgent and opposition circles along the Thailand-Burma border. Between 1988 and 1990, large numbers of university students and other activists fled to "liberated zones" controlled by the KNU and other ethnic insurgent groups, following the brutal suppression of the 1988 "democracy uprising" and the government's failure to recognise the results of the 1990 elections. Mahn Sha was one of the main contact points between the armed ethno-nationalist movement, which promoted federal solutions to the country's political crises, and members of a new generation of democracy activists, who fled from urban areas to join the insurgency in the Karen hills and forests of eastern Burma.

But during the 1990s, the KNU lost control of the remaining "liberated zones", as hundreds of thousands of Karen and other villagers were displaced in the army's brutal but effective counter-insurgency.

The KNU was also racked by several internal disputes, which saw disaffected factions agree separate ceasefires with the military government and a questioning of the relevance of the KNU's alliance with the Burmese opposition in exile. These voices came both from within the KNU, and from the wider Karen community, including those living in government-controlled areas. Nevertheless - demonstrating the Karen qualities of loyalty and steadfastness - Mahn Sha insisted on maintaining the opposition alliance.

Following Bo Mya's death, by 2007 violent inter-Karen factionalism undermined the remaining unity of the nationalist movement. Last month, the son-in-law of ex-KNU faction leader Htein Maung was assassinated - probably by KNU members.

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Mahn Sha was murdered by two gunmen while he was sitting on his veranda in the Thai border town of Mae Sot, home to many Burmese opposition leaders, and traditionally a haven from the fighting in Burma.

He is survived by a son and two daughters, who are active in Karen and Burmese politics.

· Mahn Sha La Phan, politician and freedom fighter, born July 5 1943; died February 14 2008