

Though junta supremo Snr-Gen Than Shwe's plans for his post-election role still remain uncertain after state-run media described him as the commander in chief during the week, observers say at least two ways remain for him to retain control of the country in the next 10 years.



Rangoon's business community suggest that Than Shwe might appoint himself as the next president of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, becoming the constitutional head of state while his loyal generals retain control of the armed forces.

However, military sources in Naypyidaw said whether Than Shwe retires his uniform or not, he will control the armed forces as chairman of the military council, much like the Central Military Commission of China and North Korea.

The state-media's reference to his position as the commander in chief followed a near two-month silence after Lt-Gen Myint Aung was appointed as his successor in the major military reshuffle in late August.

In recent days, state-run newspapers and broadcast media have described Than Shwe as the junta chairman and the commander in chief in reports about visits he made to rehabilitation projects in the Irrawaddy delta hit by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

It was not the first time that the junta media has mentioned the military positions of the two top generals, Than Shwe,77, and his deputy, Vice Snr-Gen Maung Aye,73, since the August military reshuffle.

On Oct.5, The New Light of Myanmar noted the deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services, Maung Aye, separately met outgoing and incoming Chinese and Thai military attachés to Burma in Naypyidaw on Oct.5.

This conflicts with earlier reports from military sources in Naypyidaw that Than Shwe and his deputy signed their retirements from the armed forces when other top generals including junta No.3 Gen Shwe Mann, Secretary-1 Gen Tin Aung Myint Oo and other lieutenant generals were ordered to retire from their military positions in late August.

“At the time, A Ba [“the grandfather” as Than Shwe is commonly called in the military] also signed his retirement,” said a source in Naypyidaw. “So other generals were prepared to retire from their uniforms saying 'even A Ba has decided to take off his uniform.'”

“But A Ba's reversal of his resignation and that of his top deputy has surprised many, who now see the earlier move as a 'pre-emptive strike' to placate potential disgruntlement among military officers in Naypyidaw,” he said.

The state media reports about Than Shwe's and Maung Aye's ranks in October contradicted previous news about their retirement and replacement by loyal generals, Lt-Gen Myint Aung, former adjutant-general, and Lt-Gen Ko Ko, a former chief of Bureau of Special Operations-3.

Sources in Naypyidaw said Myint Aung and Ko Ko are attached to the War Office and remain in waiting to take over their new positions, however.

Military officials in Naypyidaw, meanwhile, speculate that Than Shwe and Maung Aye are retaining their top positions until after the election to preserve unity among senior officers during the period of readjustment after the August reshuffle.

Although Myint Aung and Ko Ko are tipped as successors for the Tatmadaw's top two positions, the state media has not mentioned them since late August.

The most noticeable promotion in the reshuffle is that of Lt-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, the former Bureau of Special Operations-2, who replaced Gen Shwe Mann as joint-chief of staff (Army, Navy, Air Force).

Min Aung Hlaing has been seen accompanying Than Shwe to the Irrawaddy Delta this week as well as on other tours in the country in recent months. He also went with Than Shwe on state visits to India, China and Laos.

Whether Myint Aung or Min Aung Hlaing—both are in their 50s—succeeds Than Shwe to the top slot, both are considered loyal.

How Than Shwe will retain control over Burma's power structure after he resigns from the top post in Burma's military hierarchy remains in question, however.

Some observers suggest that by designating the two young loyal generals to the top ranks, Than Shwe will keep a grip on power for two electoral terms and will not need to reshuffle the military for another 10 years, that is assuming the deputies remain loyal to their master.

Observers express caution about all news and rumors emanating from the military in Burma,

however.

“All is speculation since Burma is a most secretive nation,” said an editor of a private Rangoon journal. “Everything can change at the last minute in an authoritarian state like this.”

“At present, only Snr-Gen Than Shwe knows the future of the leadership in military-ruled Burma,” he said.

[Caption] Than Shwe in Dedaye, the Irrawaddy Delta on Oct. 25 (photo: The New Light of Myanmar)