

Salai Tin Maung Oo - The High Flying Hornbill, Flapping Wings with the Fighting Peacocks.

NOTE: This article is originally written on 26 June 2006 and re-edited as a second version in February 2010. The edited portions are marked in blue.

"...[from Chinland] whose horizons are bathed in mountain dew dotted with rhododendrons among lush greens beneath bright blue skies... let the hornbill proclaim and sing songs of loyalty, unity, and peace."

-Dagon Taya – (Excerpts from the University of 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".

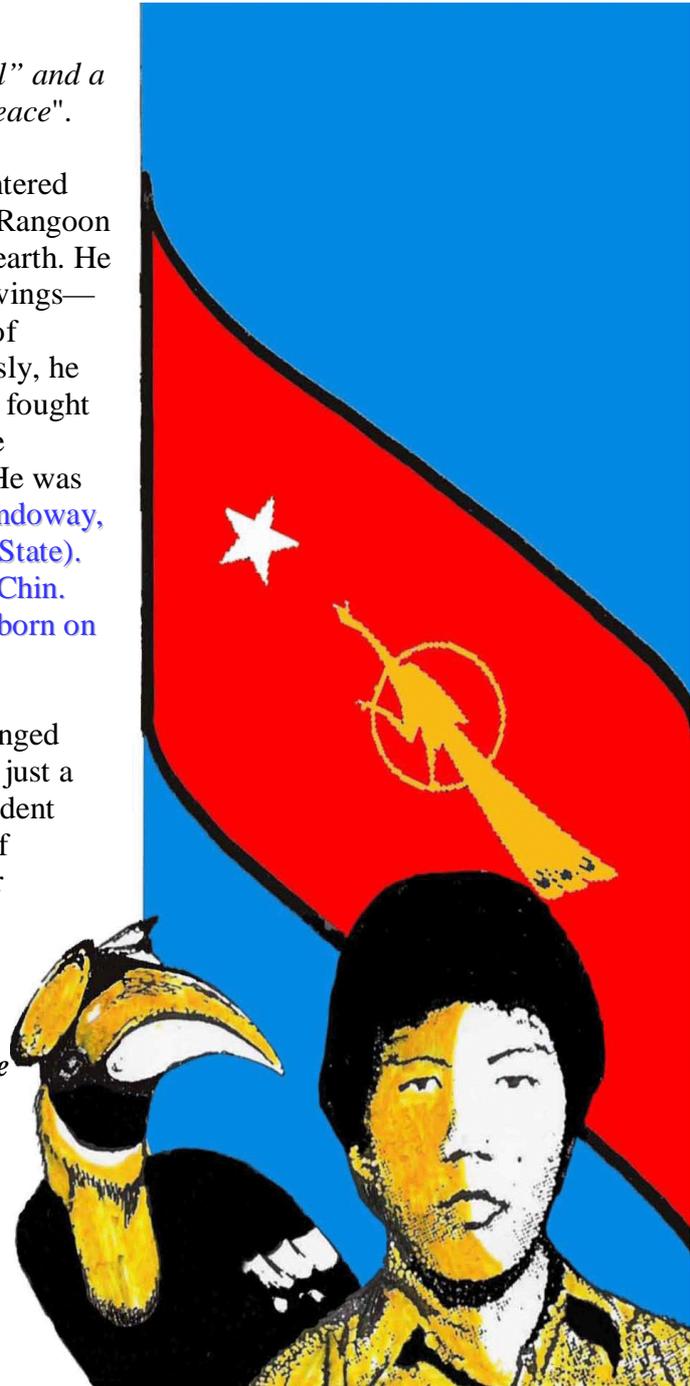
He had a political vision for freedom and peace when he entered Rangoon University; a campus turned fierce battleground. Rangoon University, historically known as the bloodiest campus on earth. He held hands with his comrades in unity. They flapped their wings—they were great fighting peacocks. He raised 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 as well as the whole of the country. He was a true *Salai*-a courageous son of the soil. He was **Salai Tin Maung Oo**. His parents are Salai Hla Din (of Sandoway, Arakan State) and Mai Hnin Myaing (of Toungup, Arakan State). Both are Christians and ethnically belong to Asho (Plains) Chin. Salai Tin Maung Oo is the eldest of eight siblings and was born on 9 November 1951 at Taungoo.

At **4am on June 26, 1976**, the Burmese military regime hanged him inside the prison walls. There was no trial, no defense, just a judge, a sentence, and an execution. Never before had a student leader been executed. It confirmed the regime's total lack of rational and will forever stain their history. For us, a martyr emerged, one who offered his life, his blood, sweat and tears for unity, loyalty and peace. He is and will forever be a role model for the generations to come.

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

„You guys can kill my body but you can never kill my beliefs and what I stood for. I shall never kneel down under your military boots"

- the last words of Salai Tin Maung Oo-



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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 exciting and unusual.

January 3 1974

The military government promulgates and enforces its "socialist" constitution. In a surprising move, Chin leaders of all ages and positions are released. Many belong to the Army, the BSP Party and the People's Council. Some 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 Burmese Army responds with gunfire June 5 -7 killing workers and students. Some survive the massacre and flee to avoid imprisonment.

On the campus of the University in Rangoon, tension flare among the Chin during the General Secretary election of the Chin Literature and Cultural Subcommittee for the academic year 1974-75. A little-known Asho/Plains Chin student named, Salai Tin Maung Oo attends the discussion. Dr. Za Hlei Thang, 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 Secretary¹ of the CLCC. [At that time Salai Tin Maung Oo was studying Zoology at the Rangoon Arts and Science University as a third year student.](#)¹

History creates the strongest leaders in times of need. 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 surrounding the funeral of U Thant. Ne Win's dictatorship regime is 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, 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. Shocking the military regime, 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 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.

December 8, 1974:

The Military government though remains silent on the demands of a state funeral it agrees to a mausoleum to be erected at Cantonment Garden at the foot of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda for U Thant. Nevertheless construction of a Peace Mausoleum is under way on the site of the former Student Union. The Student Union building was dynamited and destroyed in the July 7, 1962 massacre by General Ne Win. The Peace Mausoleum is to be constructed solely from donations. 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 in the campus. But when it is announced that the funeral committee agreed to the government offer of alternative site for the Peace Mausoleum, loud protests breakout from the general masses demanding 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 by the people. 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. Information from the military and party headquarters are secretly sent to the students in support of their cause. As a result the students arrests about three hundred secret police.

December 11, 1974

On December 11 when the Workers were about to join the strike and heighten the momentum the Burma Army raided the Campus at 2:00 am. Hundreds of students and monks are massacred. Three thousand demonstrators are arrested and imprisoned in Insein Jail. U Thant's casket is confiscated and buried at Candoment Garden and honoured with mausoleum constructed with the donations collected from the people. He is buried beside Thakhin Ko Daw Hmine's mausoleum.

After General Ne Win massacre the students on 7 July 1962 he dynamited the Student Union Building, the historical shrine of Burma's struggle for freedom as a warning sign to all his future adversaries. At the beginning of the U Thant's funeral strike Salai Tin Maung Oo and other student leaders lead the people in saluting the fallen heroes of the 7th. July 1962. When the U Thant's funeral Strike came to an end there emerged a new building – 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 is under the wrong impression that the previous year's unrest occurred because of low standards at the University--that students are unhappy with the cafeteria, the lecture halls, and the dormitories. The government decides to send the Education Minister, Dr. Khin Maung Win, who is already visiting the Rangoon Institute of Technology, to visit the University of Rangoon campus.

June 6, 1975:

Dr. Khin Maung Win visits the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). It is one of the most rebellious institutes in the country. He arrives on the anniversary of the Workers' General Strike, which occurred the previous year and resulted in bloodshed. Workers and students were massacred at Sinmalaik Dock Yard and the Thamaing Textile factory June 6-7, 1974.

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. Hal 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 military government. These are some excerpts:

“The workers asked for rice, instead you gave them bullets.” Ko Thei Lwin – Mechanical.

“ Stop dividing the students by forcing us to spy on one another.” Ko Soe Yan – Electrical.

“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 disdain toward the military government. That is, BSPP’s mock discussion turns and becomes a platform for the students to openly criticize the government and demand democracy. The attendees on stage are speechless.

Meanwhile, 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. He is has renewed energy and determination. He plans to lead a student strike in commemoration of the previous year’s massacre. [A Chin student leader Za Hlei Thang \(now a member of Ottawa-based CHIN FORUM \) and a Muslim leader, Ko Maung Maung Lwin were instrumental in hiding Salai Tin Maung Oo from the military secret police. Both of them were Salai Tin Maung Oo’s former jailmates at Insein Prison. Za Hlei Thang and his close family members took care of him while he was moving around Rangoon disguised identity. Ko Maung Maung Lwin acted as his guide during his clandestine trip to Thai-Burma border’s liberated areas. On their way they encounter an identity check by the secret police at Kyon-doe in Karen State \(ca. 40 km from Thai-Burma border\). Suddenly a fight broke out between the government troops and the Karen revolutionary armed groups, which attacked the town. Amidst the skirmish they narrowly escaped arrest. ²](#)

Realizing the possibility of meeting more angry students, the Minister cancels his meeting at the Thamiang College.

In anticipation of a strike, students from Rangoon’s Institute of Technology go to Thamaing College. Salai Tin Maung Oo successfully merges the two student bodies. Together, they tear down the brick wall dividing the Thamaing Textile factory and Thamaing College. The wall was erected after the June 1974 Workers’ Strike by the military to discourage communication between the workers and the students in order to further strikes.

Salai Tin Maung Oo leads the students down Insein Road where they camp in the Convocation Hall of Rangoon University.

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 of to be detained—they welcome it! Despite certain torture, political prisoners inside Insein Jail chorus back the slogan. 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 the next morning, the military army storms the pagoda rounding 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 severely beaten upon arrival at Insein.

March 23, 1976:

The Underground Student Union, Universities – Rangoon plans to commemorate the Centennial of Thakhin Ko Daw Hmaing by paying homage to the writer at his mausoleum at the foot of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Other underground student organisations prepare to attend as well. The Underground Students Union, Universities – Rangoon is lead by the late Ko Ne Win Maw, a great fighting peacock who is experienced in non-violent demonstrations. Joining him are other former detainees of Insein Jail from U Thant's funeral strike. They are known as *Mosco returnees* (Insein Jail was nicknamed Mosco 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. The students know him as Hmaing Gyi. Ko Tin Aye Kyu has an active role during the June 6, 1974 Labour Strike, but disappeared afterwards. It is assumed that he was killed during the battles at Thamaing. Underground leaflets and poems commemorating Hmaing Gyi are distributed throughout the RIT. Astonishingly, Hmaing Gyi re-emerges; he had taken refuge among the people. Everyone is elated.

On March 23rd at 8am, the students begin to gather under the portico of the RIT as informed through distribution of leaflets and postcards. Among the students chosen to lead the march are Ko Tin Aye Kyu, Ko Than Lin, Ko Win Min Htwe (later becomes a famous song writer under the pen name of [Win Min Htwe](#)), Ko Tint Aung, Ko Maung Maung (Mandalay, [he later writes songs for Khin Maung Toe](#)), etc. The students are ready for the demonstration. Earlier that morning, the newspaper 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 its leaders. In response, Ko Than Lin distributes the slogans for the demonstration. The students become active and excited. 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. The slogans relate to Hmaing Centennial and do not attack the government. 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 and Salai Hla Shwe and the younger sister and brother of Salai Tin Maung Oo mobilised the student body. RIT students, lead by Ko Tin Aye Kyu, arrived and the two student bodies combined - creating a powerful force. Mai Po Po, aged 18, is a high school student studying matriculation and her younger brother Salai Hla Shwe, 17, is studying in the 9th. grade. Upon hearing over the radio announcement of the Burma Broadcasting Service about the arrest of Salai Tin Maung Oo on the previous night \(22nd. March\) at 8:00 pm both of them are worried that the planned Hmine Centennial March may not materialize without their brother Salai Tin Maung Oo. So they both enter the campus in the early morning of 23rd. March.](#)

[Actually, the whole family of Salai Tin Maung Oo, including their parents, Mai Po Po, Salai Hla Shwe Salai Mya Din and all other four siblings as young as 5 to 13 years old are taken to the MIS \(7\) based at Ahlon Street for interrogation on 21st. March. The secret police are, at that time, alerted by the information that Salai Tin Maung Oo is already in Rangoon, creeping in from the underground, to lead the planned Hmine Centennial march. The secret police are desperate to know his whereabouts. The](#)

arrested family members of Salai Tin Maung Oo are separated into different interrogation rooms. Mai Po Po and the other adult siblings are locked-up upstairs while the younger children are kept at the ground floor. In the process of brutal interrogations Salai Thant Zin, 11, was slapped so hard that he faints and falls on the floor. The interrogator mercilessly presses Salai Thant Zin's head under his boot. All the other children are so scared and cried at the top of their lungs. In that moment Salai Hla Shwe from upstairs shouted to the interrogators to stop torturing the innocent children and that if they want they can interrogate them – the elder siblings. Late in the night, all of them except their parents are sent back home. Their parents are kept hostage.

On the evening of 22nd. March, when they hear the radio news of the arrest of their brother Salai Tin Maung Oo, they all hold each other and cried bitterly. From that moment, Mai Po Po wiped off her tears and vowed to carry on her brother's unfinished task.

In the early morning of 23 March she sneaks into the campus with her younger brother Salai Hla Shwe in an attempt to organize the demonstration. Upon arriving inside the campus she suddenly blows a whistle to attract the attention of the students. While the students are watching, perplexed, she told them that this campus is a historical place where our elder brothers have been waging ceaseless battles against all tyranny and that today they are all to march to the Hmine Centennial Mausoleum to fight against the dictators until their downfall. When the students join her she is so overjoyed that tears run down her cheeks. 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 homage, the students return to the RASU campus. Upon arrival at the Convocation Hall, the students begin to shout anti-government slogans declaring their opposition against the military dictatorship.

At 8pm, the state radio announces that the government will close all universities. The government further announces on the radio that the march is lead by Mai Po Po, the sister of Salai Tin Maung Oo. Ko Tin Aye Kyu, Ko Than Lin and Ko Win Myint are arrested the following morning. Mai Po Po, Salai Hla Shwe and other students' further attempt to mobilize a peoples uprisings fail and she and her brother are arrested while they attempt to seek asylum at a certain foreign embassy.

June 26, 1976 (4:00am)

Inside the walls of Insein Jail a hastily formed military tribunal sentences Salai Tin Maung Oo to death and hangs him. After Salai Tin Maung Oo's execution, the words, **“I am proud of you my sister Mai Po Po for what you have done”** are discovered written on the wall of his cell.

Salai Kipp (Zoram)

Hamburg, Germany

Revised: 23 March 2010

APPENDIX

Remarks: This article was written to commemorate the 30th 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 memory and from available sources. But I was unable to do so widely as desired. I also tried all my best to be factual but by no means guarantee that it is complete.

Word of thanks: All my thanks goes to **Ko Thein Lwin** (Thailand), **Ko Htay Win** (Germany), **Mang Za Mung** (Australia), **Khup Khan Thang** (USA) **Dr. Za Hlei Thang** (USA) and my mentor **Dr. Koung Nyunt** (New Zealand) who allowed me to peak into their memory banks. My special

thanks also goes to Mai Bianca Mang Khan Cing for painstakingly editing my English. For the illustration, my thanks goes to Khaipi, Cincin, Mary Huai, Hang, Salai Ngun Cung Lian .

Invitation: Any kind of criticism and feedback on this article is heartily welcome. Please contact zoramstream@googlemail.com

FOOTNOTES

1 At that time, 1974-75 academic year, the Chairman of the Chin Literature and Cultural Subcommittee was the Rector of the Forestry Department of the RASU Mr. Ral Lian Sang, Salai Tin Maung Oo was the General Secretary and Taang Nang Lian Thang (now CHIN FORUM) was the Joint General Secretary,

2 Ko Maung Maung Lwin who guides Salai Tin Maunh Oo to the Thai-Burma border-based liberated areas is arrested again for the second time in August 1975. He is sentenced to life imprisonment in Insein Prison. I spent eight months together with him in a cell of Insein Jail during my first detention (December 1972 – January 1974). In one occasion when I visited him in the jail (1977 / 1978) he reveals to me that on the night Salai Tin Maung Oo was hanged to death he has a strange dream in which a fighting peacock is brutally chopped with knives by fish-sellers and upon waking up he is convinced that the military secret police is assassinating „Salai“. Ko Maung Maung Lwin loves and respect Salai Tin Maung Oo so much for his exceptional courage and undaunted determination to fight against the military cliques. Ko Maung Maung Lwin, himself, is released from prison under the General Amnesty of 1980 (under which members of Salai Tin Maung Oo are also released) and I assist him when he left the country in January 1981 for India via Kalay –Tamu road to carry on the struggle for freedom. Later he joined the Karen revolution and set up the Kawthoolei Muslim Liberation Front. On 26 June 1990 he is arrested by the Thai authorities who accused him of smuggling arms and ammunitions. He arrives Britain in 1999 and died in London on 31 July 2005. This part is mentioned here to keep in record that Ko Maung Maung Lwin and his family members play vital roles for Salai Tin Maung Oo's underground activities. My heartfelt thanks goes to Ko Kyaw Zaw @ Hamza (42), the son of Ko Maung Maung Lwin and all other members of Ko Maung Maung Lwin's family for providing me the missing links.

On this re-edited Version: As I first wrote this article in 2006 I have had no contact with Salai Tin Maung Oo family. So, necessary facts and particulars relating to Salai Tin Maung Oo could not be recorded. Even though all possible attempts are made from my part to make a factual record about the roles played by Mai Po Po and Salai Hla Shwe there are weaknesses in my collection of facts and there appears some serious mistakes in my original article. In this reedited version these mistakes are omitted and especially at the end part of the article is properly revised. Nevertheless, the discrepancies are all my sole responsibility and not that of anyone who provide me the information. As regard to other details of Salai Tin Maung Oo family I am informed that the family is in the process of compiling the full story. So, these details and many other historically important details are not mentioned here in this second edition. My heartfelt thanks goes to Mai Po Po, Salai Hla Shwe and all members of Salai Tin Maung Oo for providing invaluable information for me to be able to make the record straight.

A Brief Explanation: After I uploaded the first version of this article on 26 June 2006 in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of our fallen hero, Salai Tin Maung Oo, and his heroic death on www.chinforum.org, questions were raised about my personal relationship with him. Some even wrongly suggested that I was working closely with Salai Tin Maun Oo during those tumultuous years of the mid-1970s. For these reasons I feel that a brief explanation is owed on this matter. Even though I was involved during the anti-military dictatorship student movements of 1972-1976 as a contemporary of Salai Tin Maung Oo, I never had the chance to make personal acquaintance with Salai Tin Maung Oo. As mentioned in the article during the days between December 1972 and January 1974, I shared a cell in Insein Prison with Ko Maung Maung Lwin for eight months. Ko Maung Maung Lwin was later transferred to another ward, where he met Salai Tin Maung Oo. So when we were released I came to know about Salai Tin Maung Oo from my former cellmate Ko Maung Maung Lwin. Many a time Ko Maung Maung Lwin arranged for us to meet each other. From my part as well I attempted to meet Salai Tin Maung Oo at the meetings of the Chin Literature and Cultural Committee and Chin Student-Freshers' Welcome at the Universities.

But for some reason we never met. Later, students' strikes followed one after the other and Salai Tin Maung Oo went underground. That is, although Ko Maung Muang Lwin's efforts as a contact between us, my desire to meet Salai Tin Maung Oo and his expressed interest in also meeting with me was never able to come to fruition during those tumultuous times. No, I did not personally ever have the honor to meet him. Still I then and now, remotely love and respect him enormously.