

8-1-1997

The Man Who Would be King: Thoughts on the Death of Saw Maung

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Recommended Citation

(1997) "The Man Who Would be King: Thoughts on the Death of Saw Maung," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol3/iss1/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Man Who Would be King: Thoughts on the Death of Saw Maung

Author: Editor

Volume: 3

Issue: 1

Date: 1997-08-01

Keywords: Delusions, Diathesis, Personality, Stress

Abstract. This article describes some common psychological pathways resulting in political leaders believing that they are more than they are.

According to a public affairs statement from the government of Myanmar, General Saw Maung has died at age 68. His formal military career was over 40 years long and featured participating in the 1962 coup bringing General Ne Win to power; commanding combat forces against ethnic and other insurgents in frontier areas of what was then Burma; becoming Defense Minister and later formal chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) junta; and then being forced from power, allegedly because of his apparent growing belief and associated comments that he was the reincarnation of an 11th-century Burmese king. (His SLORC colleagues apparently did not share this belief.)

Putting aside the possibility that he was right about being reincarnated as this king, political observers certainly might wonder how such a seemingly tough-minded officer who engaged in a number of brutal campaigns and political crackdowns ended up being divorced from reality in a manner that leads to losing power. (Future IBPP articles may explore methods employed to differentiate delusions from accurate beliefs and also the pathways wherein one ends up being divorced from reality in a manner leading to gaining power or protecting it.)

From a personality theory perspective, the delusion may serve as follows: (1) as the best compromise formation among competing instincts, instinct-fueled complexes, object relations, drives, needs, or structural components of the psyche--the psychodynamic perspective; (2) as the increasingly prepotent cognition resulting from one of many unique conditioning histories--the cognitive-behavioral perspective; (3) as the cognition, script, or narrative best able to facilitate the search and discovery of meaning in one's life and manage acceptance of the inevitability of one's death--the existential perspective; (4) as the essence of an ideal self, one of a number of actual selves, or the disparity between the actual and the ideal constructed in the quest for self-actualization--the humanistic approach; (5) as an adaptive cognition contributing to maximizing the (a) amount of one's genetic material surviving into succeeding generations or (b) various benefits in one's own life including sheer survival--both problematic and crude examples of the evolutionary psychology perspective (cf. Gould (1997) for an effective critique of this last perspective.) There are still other psychological perspectives to "explain" delusions (via mechanical, distal, proximal, teleological, or other causes), especially varieties of biological reductionism positing (1) cerebral lobe and ventricle anomalies, (2) neurotransmitter imbalances, and (3) peculiarities of galvanic skin response, cardiac acceleration/deceleration, and saccadic/antisaccadic eye movements.

All of the above may form a portion of some susceptibility or diathesis that may become activated through contact with social and cultural factors, as well as events that become special through their unusual frequency and intensity--especially at specific stages or phases salient for an individual's development. Or the above five perspectives may interact incrementally, one diathesis becoming effectively the stressor exacerbating another diathesis.

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Unfortunately, especially for the elite, the very political environment--special treatment, deference, the hesitance of others to correct one's erroneous pronouncements or behaviors, and quasi-paranoid vigilance to maintain and increase power--serves as a diathesis and/or stressor skewed towards a possible rendezvous with delusional thinking. This appears to be the case not only in totalitarian and authoritarian governments but in representative democracies as well wherein the elite may fall victim to their own propaganda, to press clippings, and to the skewedness of everyday life.

A rule of thumb? Note that the gods of various religions and myths often take on the transient forms of lowly animals and humans as part of their godliness. They get what they came for and revert back to form. The humans who would be gods often take on more than they can handle. Then they just don't get it. (See Castoriadis, C. (1996.) *The construction of the world in psychosis*. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 83, 929-944; Gillett, G. (1994.) *Insight, delusion, and belief*. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 1, 227-236; Glass, J.M. (1985.) *Delusion: Internal dimensions of political life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Gould, S.J. (June 26, 1997.) *Evolution: The pleasures of pluralism*. *The New York Review of Books*, pp.47-51; Rempel, W.C. (1993.) *Delusions of a dictator: The mind of Marcos as revealed in his secret diaries*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown; Silva, J. A., Dassori, A., & Leong, G.B. (1997.) *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 42, 90; Thomas, R. McG., Jr., R. July 27, 1997.) *Saw Maung is dead at 68; Led a brutal Burmese coup*. *The New York Times*, p. 13Y.) (Keywords: Delusions, Diathesis, Personality, Stress.)