

The Burmese Political Mosaic

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Introduction

Burma borders our country on the northeast. The population of Burma has a natural similarity with India's northeast. This is because the population of Burma and northeast India are anthropologically similar. India's northeast was inhabited by people who migrated from China via Burma and gradually settled in India's northeast. All these people had different animist religions. Subsequent to their migration and settlement in India's northeast, there was a migration of asiatic people from northern India who had evolved Hinduism as their religion. Thus, some of these migrated people who had settled in India's northeast were converted to Hinduism. These are today the Assamese caste Hindus.

In Burma all the migrated population that had settled there followed different animistic religions. Subsequently, in India, during his reign, Ashoka the Great adopted Buddhism and was so taken up with this religion that he sent emissaries far and wide, who travelled East, West, South and North and spread the gospel of Buddhism. The majority of people who had inhabited our neighbourhood to the east-Burma were thus converted to Buddhism. The Burmese kings patronised Buddhism. Ashoka's emissaries carried Buddhism further East to China, Japan and southeast Asia. Meanwhile, while Buddhism took root in the plains of Burma, it did not find place in the eastern hilly border regions of Burma. The eastern borders of Burma are hilly, thickly forested and people following animist religions had settled on this axis. North-South was inhabited by people that were the Wa, Kachin, Kokang, Pa O, Karen, the Shan and some smaller tribes. Each of these tribes had their respective animist religions. Today, the Karens are partly Buddhist, as also the Shan. The other tribes are either still animist or some, like the Kachins were converted to Christianity by the British when they conquered Burma. The majority of Burmese who live in the central plains of Burma are all Buddhist as also the Mons who live in the South and the Rakhines in the West. In the West are also some migrants from Bangladesh, who have spilled into Burma. They are Muslims, and are called Rohingyas. Besides, there are several Naga tribes all animist and Chins who have all become Christians.

Meanwhile, China on the eastern borders had become Communist. This was obviously not welcome to the Buddhist leadership in Burma. Communism had its impact in Burma with the formation of the Burmese Communist party. They made their headquarters in the North and East of the country bordering China. This was not to the liking of the Burmese army which was solidly Buddhist.

The Legacy of British Rule

The British ruled Burma in two very different ways. In the lowlands of Burma proper, the Irrawaddy valley and the adjacent coastal areas, the British had imposed direct rule, abolishing the monarchy and replacing the aristocracy with British civil servants and local clerks. From the 1920's in Burma proper the British also began to introduce representative government. Political parties flourished and regular elections were held with a very limited franchise. Under a constitution approved in 1935, the people of 'Burma proper' were allowed to form a government. Thus, by the time of Independence, lowland Burma had considerable experience of parliamentary politics.¹

The highlands were treated very differently. Here the British kept the hereditary Chiefs in power. British Political officers controlled the hereditary Chiefs. In the Buddhist Shan areas, the British appointed thirty four Sawbwas. The British supported their authority as also of the different tribal Chiefs. In these "tribal" areas, there was very little economic development. Almost no roads were built and only a single railway line was laid from Mandalay to Lashio. Lowland Burma became a cauldron of left wing and nationalistic politics; the hills were almost entirely peaceful. The British tended to trust these highland people and recruited them into the Indian army and police, while excluding the ethnic Burmese. The plains and the hill people of Burma thus went through very different experiences of colonial rule. At Independence, there was intense suspicion followed by civil war.²

Meanwhile, across the border in China there was a revolution and a Communist government took over. Communism attracted the Burmese and a strong Communist party of Burma was formed. This leaning to left extremism was not appreciated by the majority of Burmese. The Burmese army was mainly recruited from the Burmese from the central plains, all Buddhist who did not appreciate the godless Communists. Hence, the Burmese Communist party was forced to the northern and eastern borders of Burma and sustained by the parent Communist Chinese. With strong support from the parent Chinese Communist party, the Burmese Communist party survived for several years, but remained confined to the northern and eastern parts of the Country. Then Deng Xiaoping took over and reversed the Communist way and encouraged private enterprise. Soon dozens of factories had sprung up on the Chinese-Burmese border in Yunnan producing goods specifically for the Burmese market.³

Independence and the Civil War

When the time came for granting Independence to Burma, the British were worried about the fate of the Shan and other ethnic minorities in an independent Burma and suggested detaching the upland areas and keeping them as a British Crown colony.⁴ However, this plan was not followed-up.

The country was soon wrecked by civil war. Armed unrest started as soon as the British left and was at first not an inter-ethnic conflict but a fight between the Burmese Army dominated by ex-student politicians and the Burmese Communist party. Before long however, the civil war involved a dizzying array of factions, insurgencies and militias, from ethnic Karen soldiers, once loyal to the British, to Islamic Mujahedeen fighters demanding a separate state along the East Pakistan border. By the end of 1949, a fresh complication ensued. Chiang Kai-sheks Nationalist army was in full retreat from Mao's Communist army. A section cut-off from the main army crossed over into Burma through Yunnan. They were backed both by the United States and the Thai government. Soon a vast tract of land on the eastern border was in Chinese Nationalist hands, complete with its own airstrips. Later, some of them moved to Taiwan, others married locally and became the centre of an ever expanding network of opium and heroin cartels. Over the late 1960s

and 1970s war lords like Khun Sa, half Chinese and half Shan and Lo Hsing, Han from the Chinese border enclave of Kokang emerged as internationally wanted drug kingpins, battling the Burmese Army as well as each other for control of what became known as the Golden Triangle.⁵

Soon, this developed into regular war against the Communist insurgent forces by the Burmese Army and they gained the upper hand. In March 1989, the Burmese Communist party itself collapsed. The end had begun with the mutiny of units from the town of Kokang, led by their ethnic Chinese commander Peng Jiasheng, who was heavily involved in the narcotics trade and more mercenary than the Marxists. Within days the mutiny spread and soon Peng and his co-conspirators had captured the Communist HQs and radio station.⁶

The erstwhile Communist forces then splintered into four smaller militias. The Burmese army's Intelligence Chief General Chin Nyunt reacted with speed and ceasefire deals were signed between the Burmese Army and the Communist militias. By the mid 1990's, ceasefires had been extended to almost all the insurgent ethnic groups around the Country. In offering the ceasefires, the Burmese Army also promised development in the hills. The World Bank and the United Nations could not intervene. It was into this vacuum that the Chinese traders, businessmen and traders stepped-in.

Not long after this the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) with its several thousand fighters agreed to a ceasefire with the Government. The KIA was allowed to keep their arms because the territory they controlled had been in a kind of limbo. The Burmese Army and the KIA are now located interspersed. This has of course not precluded business, especially cross border business with China; and over the years, jade mines, toll roads and relentless logging have kept powerful men of every faction comfortable. A new political economy has emerged – tied to China's increasing presence with both sides, Burmese and Kachins tied to China's increasing presence.⁷

The Growing Chinese Influence

By the 1970s, Beijing was directly involved in the war supporting the Burmese Communist party. Burma's is the longest lasting military dictatorship anywhere in the world. It is also a uniquely isolationist state that has gone through several different incarnations since the military coup of 1962 overthrew the last elected government. In its early years, the generals at the top, led by General Ne Win were organised as the Revolutionary Council overseeing their singularly disastrous Burmese way to Socialism, cutting-off nearly all contact with the outside world, expelling the Indian middle class and nationalising most businesses. At a time when parts of Asia were starting to zoom ahead, Burma fell far behind.

To the southeast of Lashio, a town on the northeastern border with China is the territory of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), boasting more than 10,000 armed men, backed by armour, artillery and even surface to air missiles. The Wa were once very remote people, like the Kokang. From being head hunters, today the Wa are big players in the Burma-China borderlands. Their Army is one of the largest private armies in the world. In the 1990's, they were the world's largest producers and traffickers in heroin. They have recently turned to meta-amphetamines. Under their ceasefire agreement with the Burmese Army, they are allowed to keep their weapons and their autonomy. To enter the Wa state proper, there are checkpoints and Burmese soldiers are not allowed. But there is no border with China. Coming from Lashio, the dirt roads become Chinese highways, and much of the Wa zone is on the Chinese electricity grid and so is even its internet and mobile phone grid. It is a stunning reversal of Burma's geography. What were muddy mountain hamlets are now more modern than Rangoon.⁸

Even stranger an entity than the territory of the UWSA, is the town of Mongla, further South, along the Mekong and adjacent to Laos. A one-time communist rebel base, Mongla transformed itself over the 1990's into a sleazy holiday destination for Chinese tourists, complete with casinos, transvestite cabarets, nightclubs and brothels featuring women from across Asia and even Russia! Officially the area around Mongla is in the Shan state of Burma.⁹

Over the past twenty years China has emerged as the Burmese government's top foreign friend and supporter. China has provided millions of dollars' worth of military hardware, including planes and tanks as well as crucial diplomatic protection at the United Nations. Trade has risen to an all-time high with official figures now placing bilateral trade at over two billion dollars a year; the real figure, including contraband is doubtless much more. Together with a growing array of investments, the Burmese economy today is tied more closely to China's than at any time in history.

China for its part was denouncing Burma's generals as fascists and actively plotting the regime's overthrow through all-out backing for the Communist insurgency. Only with the consolidation of power of Deng Xiao Ping and like-minded reformers did the focus turn to economic development at home. Export of Maoism ended and the search for markets began. Human rights were never on the agenda. In Africa, Chinese firms have been buying mines, building roads and in general spending billions of dollars without so much as a peep into good governance, gender equality or other issues linked to western aid. Burma though is not just another foreign country, it occupies a critical space on China's southwestern flank, right next to its densest concentration of ethnic minorities.

By early 2010, construction had also begun on the oil and gas pipelines that would connect China's southwest across Burma to the Bay of Bengal. These pipelines would run from Mandalay, past Ruili, first to Yunnan and then onwards to the Guanxi autonomous region. Like the huge hydroelectric projects on the Irrawaddy and the Salween, that were also moving forward, the pipelines from Burma would ensure the energy needed for ever faster industrialisation of China. This has also solved for China what is known as the Malacca dilemma. All ships moving with oil or minerals from Africa or Europe have to slip through the Malacca straits to reach China. With the pipelines from Sittwe to Yunnan over the hills of northeastern Burma all ships would be decanting oil at the new terminal near Sittwe on the western coast of Burma!¹⁰

Elections and the Democratic Reforms

After several years of army rule the Country's elections were held in 2011. The pro-army Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the election, capturing eighty per cent of the seats. A number of ethnic regional parties did well in their own regions. The leadership of the USDP was nearly all recently retired army officers. The retired General Thein Sein was sworn in as the President in March 2011. A week later Ms Aung San Suu Kyi was released after six years of house arrest. The new government was little more than a façade for the continued rule of the Army. However, the new President, General Thein Sein was different from the earlier Army generals who were ruling Burma, to the extent that a more human face was presented in governance. The Army still held the levers of power. No relaxation was made to Ms Aung San Suu Kyi. The West however continued to tie their policy to Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy for Burma.¹¹

The next parliamentary elections are scheduled for November 2015. The military dominated government of President General Thein Sein promises that they would be free, fair and inclusive. The promise is looking increasingly tenuous, amidst signs that Burma is retreating on democratic reforms. A recent crackdown on protesters recalls the ruthless repression of student protesters by Burma's military junta in 1988. During a protest rally on 09-10 Mar 2015, more than 120 people, mainly students and Buddhist monks were arrested and many injured. The groups were protesting for more democratic freedom.

In another threatening sign, General Thein Sein effectively revoked the persecuted Rohingyas right to vote with an executive order on 11 February 2015 that said temporary residence white cards that many Rohingyas hold in lieu of citizenship would expire on 31 March 2015. Also, the Constitutional provision that prevents Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition to contest the elections as her children have foreign citizenship still stands.¹²

Conclusion

The writ of the Burmese Government does not run in the eastern peripheral units of Burma, starting with the Kachin, Wa, Kokang, Palaung, Padaung, Karen and Shan states. In all these states, the Burmese Army units and the local militia are both billeted. The eastern periphery states have their own armies with weapons, all purchased from China with proceeds from the export of timber, mainly teak, and a flourishing drug trade. Where earlier the drug export used to be opium and heroin, now it is metha-amphetamine. There is likely to be only desultory polling in these peripheral states.

In the mainland of Burma, a large section of Rohingyas, Bangladeshis, who have migrated from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, but have been living in Burma since 1971 and even earlier have been defranchised by the Central Government of Burma. The fact that they had migrated long before Bangladesh was born in 1971 has not been considered by the Burmese Government. By all standards they are citizens of Burma, but the present Government does not concede this. If the elections are held, these Rohingyas will not be allowed to vote. Regrettably, in communal incidents that have taken place between ethnic Burmese Muslims living in the central plains of Burma and also in the eastern borders in Lashio, the ethnic Burmese Muslims were given no shelter, when attacked by the local Buddhist Burmese. In the West the Rakhines who live on the border with Bangladesh are Buddhists like the mainland Burmese, but they too have their own private army with weapons.

The Burmese Government should consider amalgamating all peripheral groups each with a private army and each engaged in illegal trade with China and also having a flourishing trade in narcotics into mainland Burma before going in for the next elections. If they conduct elections leaving the semi-independent groups like the Wa, the Kachin, the Kokang, Palaung, Padaung, Karen and Shan it will be a continuation of the present Burma where the Burmese Army's writ runs only in that part of Burma where the Buddhist Burmese dominate the land.

Endnotes

1 Thant Myint U, *Where China Meets India*, Faber and Faber, 2011.

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5 Ibid

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12 Backsliding on Reform in Burma. Editorial. International New York Times, 23 March, 2015.

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