

Burma - In Retrospect and Prospect

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Introduction

Burma was inhabited by migration of Mongol people from China thousands of years ago as part of a migration that also settled Mongol people in Assam, the hills and valleys of Northeast India, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, and Tibet. Another wave migrated and populated South East Asia-Malaya, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In Burma, a majority settled in the Central plains, while others settled on the hill ranges that extended north-south on either side of the Central plains. All these different groups had evolved animist religions. In India to the West, two major religions evolved, besides numerous animist religions too. The two major religions were Hinduism and Buddhism. It was the Buddhist king Ashoka who propagated Buddhism to several countries to the West and East of his country. To the East, the emissaries of Ashoka carried Buddhism to Burma and several South East Asian countries, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Tibet, China and Japan.

In Burma two groups who had settled in the Central plains, the Burmans and the Mons were converted to Buddhism, while the groups who had settled on the hills ranging roughly North-South on the East and the West retained their animist religions, except for the Rakhines in the West and the Shans on the East who also adopted Buddhism. Later, when the British came to India and then to Burma, they converted some of the animist groups to Christianity.

Today, if you work from North to South on the eastern borders of Burma, you have the Kachins and Wa to the North. Of these, the Kachins are mostly Christian, while the Wa are animist. Further South, there are Shans who are mostly Buddhist; Karens are mostly Christian and some are Buddhist; Kokang, Kayan, Pa-o are all animist. In the West, the Rakhines are Buddhist, the Nagas are now mostly Christian, though some are still animist, while the Chins are all Christian.¹

The main Buddhist Burmese resented the rule of the British. In fact, the Buddhist Burmese looked down upon all the animist groups of their country. The different animist groups however did not resent the British and some like the Kachins and the Karens liberally converted to Christianity.

The Buddhist Burmans generally dominated the animist peoples of their country. When the British East India Company took over Burma, the Buddhist Burmese resented the British. The Christian British however liked the animist people of Burma. They sent missionaries to these areas to set up schools and hospitals and soon converted many of these people to Christianity. The British also recruited people from the animist groups to posts in the civil services and the army.

As a reaction to the British colonial rule, the Buddhist Burmese students began calling themselves Thakin or the Master. The Burmese set-up institutions run by them independent of the British schools. A "We Burman" association was also set-up as Dobama Asiyaone which later became hubs of political activity and led to a widespread movement for Independence.²

Nationalist passions were aroused because of the way in which the British had privileged ethnic minority groups over the Burmese. The Second World War then broke out and Japan invaded Burma and the British had to hastily retreat to India. The Burmese were upset, because the Japanese ruled Burma as a conquered territory. Aung San, a Burmese officer had at first sided with the Japanese after being dissatisfied with British rule. When he found the Japanese treating Burmese as a conquered country, he changed sides and started resistance against the Japanese along with the British.³ The Burmese did not like the Japanese military and civil government and set-up an Anti Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL). This included the Burmans and the Hill people.

During the British rule, they had openly favoured the hill groups like the Kachins, Karens and Shans. This was because the Buddhist Burmese felt that they had a superior religion Buddhism, while the hill people were all animist. The British Christian missionaries had meanwhile converted many of the hill people to Christianity. The British had governed the hill areas differently from the plains where the Burmese lived. The British had recruited a large number of ethnic minorities from the hills in the Burmese Army, and used them against the ethnic Burmans.

The one person who could reconcile this situation was General Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi. When the British gave Independence, General Aung San reached out to the Hill groups and appointed a Karen as Chief of the Burmese Army. He immediately organised a multi-ethnic conference at Panglong where a concept of a federal union was agreed upon and ethnic States were to be created with full autonomy. In the final Panglong agreement, representatives from the Shan states, Kachin Hills and the Chin Hills signed their willingness to cooperate with the interim Burmese Government. Representatives of the Karens and Karennis, Mons, Arakanese, Was and Pa-o were absent.⁴ Unfortunately for Burma, General Aung San was assassinated by a right wing Burmese group, who probably resented the latitude shown to the Hill groups by him.

The situation was confusing. The Communists opted out of the AFPFL and went underground. Different States were to be created with each having autonomy over their internal affairs. Meanwhile, the Kuo Min Tang had retreated from Yunnan in China into Burma and settled in the southern border with Laos. The United States fighting the Chinese Communists was sending daily plane loads of arms and equipment. The pilots flying these planes complicated the situation by loading their planes with opium and heroin on the return flights.

U Nu, the Prime Minister made the mistake of making Buddhism the State religion that alienated the hill groups who were animists or Christians. It was at this stage that General Ne Win seized power. The students did not get along with the Army and there were clashes in the University. Over 100 students were killed in the firing and the

University had to be closed for some time. His nationalisation and land reforms led to economic disaster. He then resigned and assumed civilian titles and initiated a one party system.⁵ General Ne Win then made the mistake of trying to exercise control over the Buddhist Monks, going to the extent of closing the monasteries when the Monks resisted. He replaced about 2000 civilian Government servants with army personnel and nationalised the banks. A large number of Chinese and Indians who had come during the British time were removed and replaced by army personnel. Burma, which was ahead of Malaya and Thailand in industrial production steadily declined. Industrial and agricultural production suffered and very soon there was a thriving black market.

When U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations died, and his body was brought to Rangoon, the Nation should have honoured him. Instead, the students of the University in Rangoon took over the responsibility and began to construct a mausoleum for the late U Thant. The Government reacted by closing the University and calling out the Army. There was firing on the students and again a number of them died.

At this stage, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) organised the Wa group living on the northeastern hills bordering Yunnan and fought against the Burmese Army. They managed to control the northeastern part of the country bordering Yunnan. Three other groups, living on the eastern borders, the Kachins in the north formed the Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO) and the Karens living further south formed the Karen National Union (KNU), the Shans living further south formed the Shan State Army. All started to fight against the Tatmadaw (The Burmese Army). In the Southern plains, the Mon State party also took up arms against the Burmese government. Regrettably, most of these insurgent groups including the CPB purchased arms and maintained their armies by taxing the trade in opium that was grown all along the eastern hills of Burma.

It was during this stand-off between the Army and the people of Burma that Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San entered the scene. She had married an English Scholar and had come to Burma and was living in her father's house nursing her sick mother when the demonstrations against the Ne Win government broke out.⁶

Aung San Suu Kyi decided that she would speak to the people at a public meeting on 26 August 1988. She spoke simply but eloquently. She asked the people not to turn against the Army but to seek for democracy in a peaceful way. She was not affiliated to any group, but immediately became a key figure in the politics of Burma. On 18 September the Army carried out a coup and deployed units in all strategic places in the city. After two days of confrontation the Army resorted to firing in several places and controlled the situation. The armed ethnic groups on Burma's periphery and the armed CPB in the North did not participate in these demonstrations. This was the main factor in the success of Army's coup. The Army Junta called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). General Ne Win was not on the forefront of this coup. General Saw Maung headed the coup, but General Ne Win was reported to be in the background.

A short while after the coup, General Saw Maung announced that political parties could register for elections. The National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung San Kyi and Tin Oo and the National Unity Party (NUP) also registered. The latter party represented the old order and was backed by the Army. The NLD quickly became popular, mainly because it was led by Aung San Suu Kyi. She and Tin Oo campaigned extensively particularly in the ethnic areas.

The SLORC leaders immediately realised the popularity that Aung San Suu Kyi was gaining. Shortly thereafter Aung San Suu Kyi was planning to lead a procession to the tomb of her father on Martyr's day. The SLORC acted swiftly and she was put under house arrest. Tin Oo was also arrested in his house. Aung San Suu Kyi cancelled the plan to lead a procession to her father's tomb on Martyr's day.

When the results of the election were declared, the NLD had won. Most significantly, the NLD won seats in military dominated districts in Rangoon and elsewhere. It won 392 out of the 485 Parliamentary seats, including all 59 seats in Rangoon division. The NUP won only ten seats.

Once the Army realised that they had lost badly, the Generals began delaying the decision to allow the elected party to form the Government. The monks began to agitate on behalf of the elected party. When the Army acted against the monks, they refused to attend Army personnel for religious rituals. The Army then raided over a hundred monasteries. The Army forced the monks to submit.

The Army now began to expand and soon, from a figure of 1,80,000, the Army touched a strength of 3,00,000. The Army

then turned to the dissident groups on its northern and eastern periphery. The Army was able to contain the insurgent groups to some extent over the next two years. Also over the next two years, the Army ruling the country opened it up to foreign investment and tourism. In the process they improved roads, bridges and irrigation canals. The Army also began to control the long standing insurgencies on its periphery in the North and East. The CPB which had been fighting the Government collapsed in 1989. Two ethnic factions with the CPB, were the United Wa State Army and the Kokang led Myanmar Democratic Alliance (MDA). The agreement was that there would be minimal interference by the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw, in their affairs. This also meant that these two groups could now produce and peddle drugs with impunity. Between 1989 and 1991, 23 new heroin refineries opened up in Kokang territory in the hills of northern Burma.

The Pa-o National Organisation and the KIO also made their peace with the SLORC. The worst case scenario was of Khun Sa the biggest drug lord on the eastern border of Burma. The Army brought him to Rangoon. He was allowed to invest in property and set-up two casinos near the Thai border. He was also wanted by the USA on heroin trafficking charges.⁷ The US government had a reward of two million dollars for him. Despite this the Military regime did not allow his extradition.

In December 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Prize, the Military regime did not release her though University students called for her release. The Army closed the Universities for some months.

In 1992, the Junta sacked General Saw Maung. The SLORC was now headed by Senior General Than Shwe. They called a National Convention in January 1993 to write a new Constitution. The first meeting was called in January 1993. Out of 702 delegates, 603 were appointed by the SLORC. Only 99 were elected Members of Parliament. When the deliberations started, they found that the six main objectives of the Constitution had already been drafted by the SLORC. The sixth objective stated that 25 per cent of the Parliament's seats must be held by military personnel chosen by the Commander-in-Chief! The whole exercise was just a charade.

On 10 July 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi was informed that her period of house arrest was being terminated. Two other senior party members Tin Oo and Kyi Maung were also released. When the news spread people began to rush to her house. She came out and standing on a table began to give audience to the people who came to greet her. Foreign journalists began to interview her regularly. A new political centre emerged at Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. She began giving talks every weekend from her compound. She answered the mail dropped in a box outside her house. This sparked off student protests which the Army ruthlessly crushed. The Army also had several academic courses shifted to different parts of the country, to divide the student community.

In September 1997, the Army renamed the Government as the Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The Military Government then did a shameful act by denying a permit to Michael Aris, husband of Aung San Suu Kyi who was seriously ill, to visit Burma. They wanted Aung San Suu Kyi to go to England to visit her dying husband, obviously with the intention to never allow her to come back. Knowing this, Aung San Suu Kyi refused to go to meet her dying husband. Michael Aris died on 29 March 1999.

Fifty years after Independence, Burma was still struggling to resolve its political and economic problems with the Military still clinging to its idea of a Unitary State.

Aung San Suu Kyi was again put under house arrest. This time after some interval the United Nations intervened and the Army released her and also allowed her to travel. She began touring parts of the country by car. She became increasingly popular as crowds collected wherever she stopped to hear her views. Then on 30 May 2003, her convoy was attacked by a mob near Depayin town, who assaulted her entourage mercilessly. None of the perpetrators was arrested but 150 NLD supporters were arrested.

In October 2004, General Than Shwe sacked General Khin Nyunt. This was probably an internal power struggle. In November 2005, General Than Shwe moved the Military to a new Headquarters in a previously undeveloped area in interior Central Burma called Naypyidaw.

In the next two years conditions continued to deteriorate. In mid August 2007 the military Government suddenly increased the prices of diesel and gas. Transportation and food prices skyrocketed. The 88 generation student groups started marches in Rangoon and other towns asking for a reduction in the prices of gas and food. The Government deployed Paramilitary forces and tried to crush the agitating groups. Starting on 8 September, monks from the monasteries in Sittwe, Rangoon, Mandalay and other towns started to march through the towns in protest against the Government's price rise. Many monks were carrying their bowls upside down indicating their refusal to accept alms from the authorities. In Rangoon a group of marching monks passed by Aung San Suu Kyi's house. She came out and met them with tears in her eyes. More people began to join the protesters. In confronting Buddhist monks along with protesting people, the security forces threatened to shoot the monks if they did not disperse. The situation did go out of hand and the civilians and monks were beaten and some were shot. A Japanese reporter was also shot dead in the riots. The Army raided several monasteries and some monks even left Burma to take shelter in neighbouring countries. General Than Shwe was unfazed by the International community's concern.

The Army now set-up a committee to draft the Constitution. This was published in 2008. Then the Army decided to have a referendum on the draft Constitution. When published it was found that twenty five per cent of the seats in each legislative body were reserved for the Military. Also the President of the country had to be of a Military background. Besides, the Army had the right to manage military affairs without any civilian interference.

The next step for the Army was to set-up a political party. This was called the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). A large number of its members were ex military personnel. It captured almost 80 per cent of the votes and won a landslide victory. In the ethnic minority areas only the local parties won. The leaders of the USDP were all recently retired Military personnel. Aung San Suu Kyi's party was split on whether to take part in the elections. She opposed the elections. One section participated. A week later, the results were declared. Shortly thereafter, Aung San Suu Kyi was released after six years of house arrest.

The new President sworn in after the elections on March 2011 was a retired General, Thein Sein. His opening call was a refreshing change from the usual military generals. He called for urgent economic reforms and an end to corruption.⁸ General Thein Sein has been a welcome change from the usual Burmese generals who have ruled Burma till 2011. He however has continued to get the best deals from China. In addition to the new pipelines, roads and railways, the Chinese Government agencies have offered loans worth billions of dollars and help on everything from new information technology and telecommunication infrastructure to a major expansion of the country's electricity grid. The United States and the United Kingdom however have both tied their policies very closely to Aung San Suu Kyi and have stood firm on sanctions.

The disturbing feature is that though the Burmese leader General Thein Sein has a much more humane presence, there have been several communal incidents involving the Rohingyas, Bengali Muslims from erstwhile East Bengal, who have migrated and settled in Western Burma in the Arakhans. There have been periodical attacks on the minority Rohingyas in the Arakhans by the majority Buddhist Rakhines. The Police and the Government regrettably side with the local Buddhist Rakhines. During the last one year there have been attacks on the local Burmese Muslims living in Central Burma and at least one incident in Lashio on the eastern border with China. These attacks were on ethnic Burmese who had converted to Islam. In all these instances the Police regrettably took no action against the Buddhist

Burmese attackers. Regrettably in all these cases Aung San Suu Kyi did not make any statement to the press. The inescapable conclusion is that there is a streak of Burmese Buddhist superiority in the nation. Aung San Suu Kyi's silence on these incidents regrettably shows that she could not rise above the Burmese Buddhist majority.

Because the Rohingyas were being treated as literally second class citizens, a French humanitarian organisation, the Medecin Sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders), operating in Burma began to attend to the medical needs of the Rohingyas. The Burmese Government banned this humanitarian organisation from Rakhine state. This has left some 250,000 Rohingyas without medical care since February 2014. As a result, about 150 persons including women with difficult pregnancies have died since the ban was imposed. The Burmese Government decided to take this action after Medecin Sans Frontiers doctors treated 22 Rohingyas for gunshot wounds following an attack by a Buddhist mob in January 2014. United Nations (UN) investigation concluded that up to 40 men, women and children were killed in the rampage.

If the objective of banning the Medecin Sans Frontiers from functioning in Rakhine State and depriving thousands of people of their only source of medical care is to prevent foreign witnesses to the human rights violations in the region, it is a badly calculated strategy. The Rohingyas have long been persecuted. In 1982, they were stripped of citizenship and restrictions were placed on their right to travel or own property. The UN is seriously negotiating with the Burmese Government to let Medecin Sans Frontiers resume their medical work among the Rohingyas.⁹

The other pressing issue that has defied solution in all these years is the relationship between the Burmese Buddhist majority living in the Burmese plains and the minority people who live on both the eastern and western borders of Burma. The understanding that was arrived at by the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw was that all these groups were to be given a degree of independence. However in all the hill areas on the eastern border with China in the North, and Thailand in the South, opium is grown and refined to heroin and related derivatives. These are marketed across the border into China, Laos and Thailand. Obviously, the drug generated funds contribute to the general economy of all these semi autonomous units. They include the Was, Kachins, Shans, Karens, Pa-o, the Kokang and some smaller groups. The issue preventing the absorption of all these groups is that the Burmese Buddhists look down on the animist or Christian religion. It will be necessary to include all these groups after ensuring a degree of autonomy for all of them. These are the two big challenges facing General Thein Sein!

Endnotes

1. Christina Fink, *Living Silence*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2001.
2. Martin Smith, *Burma- Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 1999.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Christina Fink, op. cit.
6. *Asia Week*, 2 September 1988.
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9. Myanmar's deadly Medicine, *International New York Times*, 19 March 2014.

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