

Historical Background to Modern Burma: East / West or Rather Colonizer and Colonized

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Abstract. The aim of this paper to explore how and why the Burmese military came to power in 1962, with particular emphasis on the Anglo/ Burmese relationship, colonialism, nationalism and ethnic tensions. Methodology will be mainly historical and literary evidence, and the conclusions will determine how far the relationship between coloniser and colonised determined the Burmese political future. Although the military changed the country's name to Myanmar, for the purpose of this paper I will use the old name, as much of what I will examine is pre name change.

Keywords: Colonizer and colonized, Anglo/ Burmese relationship, Burmese military.

1. Introduction

In the West, whenever Burma is mentioned the image that springs to mind is often Aung San Suu Kye; 'the lady' fighting against the military ruling Burmese Army. Suu Kye presents to the world an image that is both powerful and gentle, especially when she won the noble peace price in 1991. Her mission has been to promote democratic reform, with her party the National League For Democracy (NLD), and since the uprisings in 1988 and 2007 Burma has been the object of many good faith efforts by western governments, NGOs, too, yet the results have been disappointing. Indeed, is democracy a concept that will ever work in Burma? Therefore, by looking over Burma's past it could be asked if there might be some lessons we can learn today. In particular the relationship with Britain, colonialism, nationalism, the civil and ethnic tensions that swamped Burma following her independence, and more recently, international relations. When Burma became independent from Britain in 1948, it was 'predicted' that it would be one of the forerunners in modern development in the region, with an abundance of natural resources, an educated population and a lively literary culture. Yet according to the corruption organisation 'Transparency International' in 2007 Burma ranked as one of the most corrupt and underdeveloped countries in the world. However, long before Ne Win seized control in 1962 and ended the countries' short lived dip into democracy, It could be argued that the seeds of destruction had already been sown.

2. Seeds of Destruction

Following independence in 1948, Burma did have democratic government, however, this was almost always doomed to fail; 'why'. Marxist analysis as outlined by Weber and Durkheim propose that authoritarian regimes generally exist in pre-modern structures, which will eventually be replaced by democracy if societal variables i.e. value systems, modes of production and rationality allow (1). The argument is that in Burma this has not been allowed to happen due to several significant factors: her colonialist past; Burma's ethnic nationals (tensions also exasperated by colonialism); the identity crisis that the generals played upon, a closed regime (both prior to 1962 and more so after Ne Win seized power), and international relations. The Tadmaw (Burmese police) justify their power base by claiming that the country will deteriorate if their regime is not supported. They appeal to tradition and culture because they were able (and were arguably justified) due to the historical conditions that led them to take power in 1962.

3. British Rule

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The British impact on Burma was profound. The abolition of the monarchy in 1886 and Burma's incorporation into British India meant acute humiliation of a proud nation with a long tradition of masterful achievement. Burma was ruled from Calcutta as a minor part of the Indian Empire. The British had little idea or respect for local social structures, imposed Indian models of administration. During the colonial period the Burmese resented being, as they put it, 'kept down by Indian troops'. Despite the strong connections their civilisation owed India, the Burmese of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had only a moderate regard for their darker skinned neighbours (2). The Burmese lived in a land with more than enough natural resources to feed its entire people, and their essentially Buddhist beliefs meant that they tended to take life at an easy pace. Thus, they were inclined to despise the restless exertions of the Indians dictated by the struggle for survival in their overpopulated world. They had never been subject to it, and in reality just didn't understand it. Because of this, economically they began to lose out, not only to the ruling British, but also to the Indians immigrants.

Lower Burma, the alluvial plains, which were ethnically Burmese and the heart of the Burmese empires, were ruled directly by the colonial government with the powers of the traditional regional and local elites destroyed. However, resistance to British rule did not end with the abdication of King Thibaw. For the ten thousand monks who lived in and around the capital, occupation by a non-Buddhist power was inconceivable. Mandalay was the centre of religious life in Burma, and the king was patron to dozens of monasteries and monastic colleges around the city, when all of a sudden their king was gone, it meant the beginning of the end for the entire system of higher education and religious training for the Burmese. For several years' spontaneous rebellion continued across much of the Lower and Upper Delta. Though British records tend to speak of the leaders as bandits and dacoits, many were in fact, former Wuns and Myothugyis and officials of the dissolved central court, or Hutladaw. Buddhist pongyis, too, played a leading role. They were eventually crushed, but it took 30,000 troops to complete the task.

In 1897 Burma was granted limited legislative autonomy under a lieutenant governor and advisory and appointive Legislative Council. Originally including only two Burmese members, the council was expanded to include thirteen by 1920. The lieutenant governor was appointed by the Governor General of India, who in turn served under the Secretary of State for India in the Colonial Office in London. Each of these three officials could veto council actions, and the Burmese bitterly resented this authority structure and their subordination to the government of India. Direct British rule also introduced the beginning of British immigration policies that allowed unrestricted Indian labour, with detrimental costs. The British had developed the Irrawady delta as a rice bowl for India's rapidly growing population. British firms controlled the wholesale trade and had created a cartel among them, dictating the price of rice on both the local and international markets. Chinese and Indian merchants controlled the retail trade; they were also moneylenders, lending farmers money for seeds and other needs between harvest, as well as capital to open up new lands as population pressure and the demand for rice increased.

The failure of many of the peasants to meet their debt payments, and their frequent inability to establish title lands under British law, led farmers to lose their lands to the foreign moneylenders. Landlessness led to rural unemployment, which again was intensified by when Indian migrant labour were willing to work for lower wages. At the very time the Burmese peasant was losing his land and his livelihood, the value of rice exports was rising from 160 million rupees in 1899 – 90 to 390 million in 1913-14. By 1942 Burma was exporting two fifths of the world's supply of rice (3). The profits, however, were largely remitted out of the country: to England by the great trading companies, and to India and China by the retail merchants. The pattern also characterised the trade in forest products, minerals, and after 1900. Oil. The bureaucracy was British but staffed mainly by Indians. The administrative link with India meant that Indian nationals were free to migrate. By 1931 two thirds of the population in Rangoon was Indian, and much of the capital for agricultural expansion came from Indian moneylenders. The lack of land and resultant unemployment were the root causes of the social disintegration and urban violence. Immigration, always a difficult issue, but given that this was imposed under foreign rule further exaggerated the tensions. Indians in the principle towns and cities came to represent the majority of the people, and to many what constituted the new society, occupying many of the top official jobs within government, and formed the urban working class of the new era, that to many was simply alien.

4. Ethnic Nationals

Traditionally, Burmans inhabited the middle, flat land, while people with markedly different languages, customs and traditions inhabited the hills. There are over 106 ethnic groups in Burma, with differing languages, customs and religion. In 1948, Frontier Areas had to be incorporated into the new Union, thousands of square miles of rugged hills and loosely independent states had to be brought under the central administration by the Burman majority leadership in Rangoon. Burmans make up around 60% of the population, and have claimed supremacy over the ethnic minority hill tracts for centuries, but their hold was never entirely secure, the hill peoples as often according nominal tribute to the kings of Siam as to the kings of Burma and sometimes reducing the Burmans to submission. Karens and Mons, who lived in closest proximity to the Burmans, had a particularly parlous relationship with them. British rule had exaggerated the historic tensions between the minorities, and the majority Burman, often favouring the hill people and using a system of divide and rule tactics.

This was particularly so of the Karen nationals. The British were well able to exploit traditional Burman/Karen hostilities, favouring the Karen in governmental and official positions within government, as well as higher educational opportunities, with the majority of pastors, teachers and nurses being western educated. In return the Karen often fought on the side of the British, and Karen often held higher-ranking posts, and most of the army and police positions. Religion also played a key role in further dividing the Karen from the Burman; Christian missionaries had little or no success in converting Buddhist Burman to Christianity, however, many Karen became Christian. However, the Karen were aware that their position within Burma – if and when the British left would be perilous, and repercussions from the Burmese likely.

A new nationalism was stirring in Burma, a nationalism that would have consequences far reaching. In 1929 tensions broke out in Rangoon between the Burmese and the Indians, which were severely repressed by British forces. From 1935 Nationalist movements in Burma began growing, Aung San was one of the most influential leaders during this time. By this time he had begun working with important figures such as U Nu, Hll Pe, Thein Pe and Kyaw Nyein. By 1936 the young nationalists had entered all of the major posts in the Student's Union (5). Aung San was elected to the executive committee, and also became editor of the union magazine. U Nu was one of the leaders of the All-Burma Youth League, which had been founded by Thakin Ba Thaung and Thakin Lay Maung, who were also the founders of the Dobama Asi-Ayone (we Burman Association). Founded in 1931, the Dobama Asi-Ayone became popular throughout Burma, Members of the organisation addressed each other using the title Thakin (master), a term that the British had insisted the Burmese use when addressing them. By using this pre-fix the young thakins were expressing their will be masters of their own, and not subjugated by the British hierarchy.

In 1939, Aung San left university to become a full time member of the Dobama Asi-Ayon. Although popular among the young nationalists, the association was not universally accepted. Even within the organisation itself internal differences caused rifts. The faction split in two, and Aung San joined the majority faction led by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing. The other, with seemingly more right-wing leanings was lead by Tun Ok and the Dobama's other co-founder, Ba Sein. Both broke away in 1938. In 1939 the British Empire declared war on Germany. For a while Burma remained comfortably far away from the war, but many politicians saw the war as an opportunity. Many of the Thakin side leaned to the left and saw fascism as a threat, but many saw it as an opportunity as well, as: 'Colonialism's difficulty as Freedom's opportunity' (4). Dr Ba Maw helped to form the 'Freedom Bloc', an alliance of Ba Maw's Sinyetha Party, and the Dobama Asi-ayone, the students and some individual politicians. The message of the Freedom Bloc to the nation was that the people should only support the war effort, if they were promised independence at the end of the war; if the British government refused, the people should fervently oppose the war. There were differences of opinion about how to do this. Some like Ba Maw wanted to seek an alliance with the Japanese. Others wanted to join forces with the Chinese, this faction included the future prime minister U Nu (5). The freedom Bloc kept up pressure on the British authorities with a series of mass independence demonstrations and rallies across the country. The authorities responded by jailing many of the nationalist leaders, including Ba Maw. With a warrant out for his arrest, in of August 1940, Aung San smuggled himself aboard a ship bound for Amoy. Subsequent arrangements were made to smuggle other nationalist leaders out of Burma to Japan for military training. They later became known as the 'Thirty Comrades'.

For a whole generation of Burmese, the Second World War was a major determining political experience. The armies of two colonial powers devastated Burma, as they trampled through towns and countryside, destroying property and ruining infrastructures. What the invading Japanese army did not destroy, retreating British soldiers burnt down in a calculated 'scorched earth' policy. Three years later the pattern was repeated in reverse as the British army re-entered Burma. But it was not only the Japanese and British who occupied Burma; nationalist Chinese armies continued operations in the north-east frontier area, and the ethnic Kachin suffered horrendously as a result. As fighting swept across Burma, the years 1940 – 1949 and the revolutionary traditions that developed as a result fuelled almost 60 years of insurgency and unrest.

The years leading up to independence were fraught with confusion, left-wing politics, communists, socialists and separation. From the beginning the central government, under the leadership of U Nu was under armed challenge. Independence came with the smaller breakaway Red Flag faction of the CPB of Thakin Soe already underground. Three months later the mainstream White Flag faction of the CPB, and next the Socialist Party, followed the Red Flags underground and launched an all out offensive to seize power. The start of the CPB insurrection acted as a fuse for the mass mutinies from the police and army. From this disastrous beginning the situation continued to deteriorate rapidly. At the beginning of 1949 the rebellion of the Karen's broke out in South East Burma and, buoyed up by the defection of Karen units in the fledgling Burma Army, the Karen National Union (KNU) began its long bid for an independent Karen state. As rebellion raged across the Delta and into upper Burma, revolt swiftly spread to other minorities.

In 1958 Ne Win, Army General, a socialist, nationalist and authoritarian moved firmly to take over the decaying political situation. He arrested political opponents, including students and workers, and improved public services by employing army officers in the middle levels of administration. He appointed a cabinet of senior judges, academics, bureaucrats and businessmen who had no alliance to any political party and therefore were answerable only to him. He cancelled contracts with overseas governments, and the country increasingly turned inward. He also took a strong pro-Burman stance against the minorities. In 1962 he carried out a successful coup d'etat, arrested 52 high level officials-including U Nu, and declared that he had intervened to save the country from self destruction. Over the next 26 years he abolished the constitution and all legislative, judicial and executive bodies, including the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, retaining only a civil service. In 1974 the Socialist Republic of Burma was established with a new constitution. President, as well as head of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) Burma's only officially recognised political party, Ne Win declared "Our Union is just one homogenous whole". Considerable civil unrest continued during the 1970s and 1980s. Uprisings of students, Buddhist monks and workers were brutally suppressed by the army. The government continued to further isolate Burma in matters of foreign policy.

In 1988 mass student demonstrations in Rangoon shouted for an end to the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), and a call for democracy. Protests soon spread to the rest of the country. From August to September that year over half a million people took part in the protests. The military government responded by shooting, killing and maiming over 10,000 people. During this time a 43-year-old expatriate, Daw Aung San Suu Kye, Oxford educated and married to British diplomat was in the country visiting her ailing mother. Aung San Suu Kye was the daughter of the founder of the modern Burma Army, Aung San, who had been assassinated when she was just 3. When she addressed a 500,000 strong pro-democracy rally on the slopes of Shwedagon Hill she instantly became the ideological saviour of the people, just as her father before her had been. She was quickly supported by a close circle of advisers, well known writers, artists, and well known lawyers such as U Win, U Aung and U Tun Tin, who had all been secret but bitter critics of the BSPP (7). The pro-democracy movement found their leader. The NLD was formed, and soon received overwhelming support from the people. However, despite the fact that the NLD won a landslide victory in 1990, the military junta refused to give up power. Suu Kye spent many years under house arrest, and was only released in November 2010. At the time of writing, the NLD are negotiating with the government for more autonomy, and although in the early stages, the future of Burmese democracy appears to have hope.

In conclusion, British imperialism meant the collapse of centuries of tradition that left Burma without an anchor, the fracturing of ideas and culture, the depressing economic condition that was exasperated by Indian immigration and the ethnic tensions meant that when the country did become independent it was in a

situation that was almost doomed to fail. Colonialism was arguably a major determining factor that has meant the county is still in the process of trying to re-build it's own identity once again.

5. Acknowledgements

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6. References

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