



Political Developments in Myanmar During the Period of Independence

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ABSTRACT: This paper describe the political developments in Myanmar from the dawn of independence till the initial period of independence. It discusses a brief historical account of pre-independence period followed by the period of independence and parliamentary democracy. The paper attempt to analyze the development of politics since the inception of Myanmar as a sovereign independent nation. It aims to highlight the underlying factors behind the status of political developments in Myanmar.

KEYWORDS:Burma, Ethnic, Frontier Areas, Independence, Myanmar, Panglong.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar (formerly Burma), officially known as the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is the one of the biggest country within South East Asia. It is a multi-ethnic State containing more than 100 groups. The majority of the population followed Buddhism as their religion although other religions such as Islam, Christianity and Hinduism are also prevalent in Myanmar. The country started off with a parliamentary democracy in 1948 and lasted into 1962. The country was placed under a military administration for over five decades from 1962 onwards.

After being invaded three times by the British, Myanmar was eventually conquered on 1 January, 1886 (F. Donnison, 1953: 32). Before the British colonialism, the areas of ethnic minorities (Frontier Areas) were not part of mainland Burma. For example, the Shans were controlled by their own sawbwas (princes) while the Chins, Kachins and others were ruled by their own distinct chiefs. The conquest of Burmese monarchy in 1886 provided the British not only the kingdom but also the Frontier Areas (Donnison, 1953: 32). During the colonial era, the British administration managed

central Burma (mainland Burma) and the Frontier Areas separately.

Even before the colonial period, the kingdoms of central Burma exercised only nominal sovereignty over the Frontier Areas. The colonial administration maintained that the Frontier Areas were less developed both politically and economically and thus needed special treatment. While the Burmans lost their monarchy in 1885, the Frontier people were able to preserve their traditional political institutions and social norms.

I. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Christian missionaries were active inside the Frontier Areas, who then constructed the written languages of the Frontier people using Roman alphabet rather than Pali script followed by the majority Burmans. Due to religious differences, minorities such as the Chin, Kachin and Naga, who are mostly Christians, harboured a sense of distinct identity from the predominantly Buddhist Burmans. During World War II, the Burmans, notably the Burma Independence Army (BIA) commanded by Aung San originally allied with the Japanese in anticipation of early independence.

The Frontier inhabitants, despite the obstacles were typically loyal to the British. The Frontier people were also apprehensive that the majority Burmans would not heed to their interests following the country's independence from the British (J. Bray 1992: 144-147). The beginning of Second World War in 1939 was a turning point for independence movement against the British colonial rule in Burma. National politicians urged the people not to support British war efforts unless Burma was promised independence at the end of the war. The British government arrested many nationalists.

A group of young men left the country secretly to receive military training in Japan. They



came to be known as ‘Thirty Comrades’. The Burmese people hoped that the Japanese would help them win back their independence. The Burma Independence Army (BIA) was organized with the Thirty Comrades as the nucleus. In 1941, the BIA marched into Burma with the Japanese forces and as a result of it, the British were driven out of the country (Suu Kyi, 1991: 54).

The Japanese then, governed Burma under military rule until August 1943, when the country was granted independence under Japanese protection. However, on 27 March, 1945, the Burmese Army revolted against the Japanese forces and joined the British Army to fight against the Japanese rule in Burma (Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2002-03: 8). However, this was not the end of Burma’s struggle for independence. The Burmese did not want the British to come back as their rulers.

The strongest opponent of the British rule was the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), a nationalist party led by Aung San, who left the army to engage in independence politics. The British gradually had to give in the demands of the AFPFL, which won the popular support of the country. The British, while agreeing to Burmese demands for independence, insisted that the people along the Frontier Areas should be allowed to decide their own future for themselves.

When the British left Burma, there were incidences where the Burman soldiers killed Karen villagers and the Karen villagers retaliated by killing the Burmans. After the Allied powers defeated the Japanese forces during World War II, the Burman soldiers shifted their support to the Allied forces but the animosity between the Burmans and the Karens had remained. The participation of soldiers from the ethnic minority groups in suppressing the Burmans who rebelled against the British colonial rule increased the animosity between the Burmans and the minority groups.

Some Burman leaders also considered themselves superior to ethnic minorities and thus, did not like to give in to their demands (C. Fink, 2001: 22). During the height of violence between the Burmese Army and the Karen people in the 1930s, the official death toll of Karens in Myaungmya district alone in the outlying areas of the delta was reported to be over 1800 and 400 villages were destroyed (M. Smith, 1994: 62). Thus, it can be said that even before the period of independence, there exist a kind of animosity between the mainland Burman people and the people of the Frontier areas.

II. PANGLONG AGREEMENT

To form the Union of Burma, 23 representatives from the Frontier Areas and mainland Burma, represented by Aung San as head of the interim Burmese government signed an agreement in Panglong (in Shan States) on 12 February, 1947 (N. Kipgen, 2016: 15). This historic event came to be known as ‘Panglong Agreement’. The agreement was for establishing a unified country and was not aimed at putting an end to the traditional autonomy or self-rule of the Frontier Areas. Prior to this, in March 1946, a meeting was convened at Panglong in Shan State to discuss the possible formation of a unified Burma.

Representatives from colonial British, mainland Burma (ethnic Burmans) and the Frontier Areas (ethnic minorities) attended the meeting which became a precursor to the 1947 Panglong Agreement. Although the representatives were there to discuss the possible formation of the union, the Frontier leaders were suspicious about the motives of the Burman leaders (N. Kipgen, 2016: 35).

In an attempts to persuade the Frontier leaders to join the Union of Burma, ethnic Burman leaders proposed the idea of granting autonomy, which basically means that the Burmans would not interfere among others, in the customs and religious practices of the Frontier Areas. Despite the proposition, leaders of the Chin, Kachin and Shan refused to take part in forming the Union of Burma and instead discussed the idea of establishing a ‘Frontier Areas of Federation’ (N. Kipgen, 2016: 35).

The year 1947 was a crucial year for the ethnic minorities because they were to decide on their future whether to join the Union of Burma or not. Some Frontier leaders were ready to trust the Burman leaders but some others were still reluctant to do so, fearing that they may lose their identity, culture and freedom to the majority. Most Frontier leaders had a lingering fear about possible domination by the Burmans. Despite suspicion and anxiety, some Frontier leaders like the Chins, the Kachins and the Shans decided to participate at the Panglong conference. When these Frontier leaders were invited to write the constitution of the Union of Burma, they were still uncertain about their future (J. Silverstein, 1998: 21).

The ethnic Burmans leadership was fully aware that without the cooperation of the Frontier Areas, there would not be a unified Burma. In order to prove their sincerity about the future of the Frontier people, the Burman leadership had to persuade both the leadership of the Frontier Areas and the British administration. There were doubts in



the minds of the Frontier leaders and the British as to whether or not the Burmans would treat all ethnic nationalities equally in the post-independence era.

To clarify the lingering concerns, Aung San gave an assurance that every ethnic group within the Union of Burma would receive equal treatment. Such reassuring remarks from a prominent Burman leader persuaded the representatives from the Chin Hills, the Kachin Hills and the Shan States to cooperate with the interim Burmese government (N. Kipgen, 2016: 35).

Subsequently, 23 representatives from the Frontier Areas (three from the Chin Hills, six from the Kachin Hills and 13 from the Shan States) and mainland Burma, represented by Aung San, signed the Panglong Agreement on 12 February, 1947. For Karens also attended the conference as observers. The agreement to form the Union of Burma was a significant achievement and a great success for the lobbying team of the Burman leadership. However, this historic agreement was not meant to end the traditional self-rule of the Frontier people (M. Smith, 1999: 79). The expectation of the Panglong conference was that the Chins, the Kachins and the Shans would attain freedom faster by cooperating with the interim Burmese government Universities (Historical Research Centre and Innwa Publishing House, 1999).

However, the spirit of 1947 Panglong Agreement is yet to be fulfilled. Even after more than 70 years of independence, minority groups continue to fight for autonomy/federalism. Ethnic minorities utilise various sorts of campaigns, such as military resistance, or nonviolent measures, such as lobbying the international community, to continue their activities. They have set up various advocacy networks to connect with one another and with the worldwide community. The Kuki International Forum, the Chin Human Rights Organization, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand, the Karen Human Rights Group, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland, the Shan Women's Action Network, and the Ethnic Nationalities Council are among these groups.

III. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS DURING INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

On July 19, 1947, five months after signing the historic agreement, General Aung San and the majority of his cabinet colleagues were killed. U Saw, a political rival, was convicted and executed the following year. Burma was then granted independence by the British on 4 January, 1948. U Nu, the most senior member of the AFPFL

remaining after the assassinations, became the first Prime Minister. When U Nu became Prime Minister in 1948, general election was scheduled to be held within 18 months.

But his government was soon disrupted by insurrections from different groups like the Burma Communist Party (BCP- White Flag communists), the Communist Party of Burma (CPB-Red Flag communists), the White Band People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO), the Mon National Defence Organization (MNDO) and the Mujahids (Muslims of Pakistan and Burmese origin), all rebelled against the government.

These insurgents made two different demands – the communist groups fought for the absolute replacement of the democratic government, while the ethnic minorities demanded autonomy or federalism. In short, the minorities demanded greater autonomy while the communists fought to win total power. By the spring of 1949, insurgents controlled most of the countryside and even parts of the capital, Rangoon (now, Yangon) were at times in rebels' hands C.S. Liang, 1990: 19).

During the process of negotiation for Burma's independence in England, no representatives from the Frontier Areas were included in the Burmese delegation. Many ethnic minorities doubted the motive of the ethnic Burmans and therefore, did not sign the Panglong Agreement. Autonomy was the primary objective why the leaders of the Chins, the Kachins and the Shans agreed to cooperate with the interim Burmese government to form the Union of Burma.

The Burman nationalists, particularly the military leaders, saw the minorities' demand for political autonomy/federalism as an attempt to disintegrate the union. The 1947 Constitution, in fact, had a clause on secession rights for ethnic minorities (N. Kipgen, 2016: 51).

Greater responsibility and representation of their own affairs was something the minorities demanded from the Union government. The continued ethnic minorities' armed struggle is considered to be amongst the longest movements in the world. During the first decade of independence, the civilian government led by U Nu made a sincere efforts to implement the Panglong Agreement and the 1947 Constitution of Burma. Initially, the U Nu government did not interfere (or interfered very little) in the internal affairs of the local government. For example, each year during Independence Day and Union Day Celebrations, representatives from the states were transported to Rangoon at the expense of the central government.



Different ethnic groups used to dress in their traditional attire and performed cultural dances in these important occasions. The union government leaders occasionally visited the states and participated in locally organized functions. When union leaders were visiting the states, they wore local dresses and followed their customs during their stay.

Moreover, the local governments were given some amount of control over their education system. They were allowed to teach in their own dialects up to the fourth grade in schools. The freedom to use their own languages to teach the younger students gave them the opportunity to simultaneously learn their own culture and that of the majority Burman culture. This was an indication that the Union of Burma had a diverse culture yet maintained unity. However, this unity in diversity was threatened by a presidential proclamation of the transfer of the Shan state's power to the army from 1952 to 1954 (J. Silverstein, 1959: 101).

Unity in diversity was further devastated by unequal treatments meted out to ethnic minorities on the issue of the state as well as by the introduction of nationalized policies. The Karens, who formed the majority group in the Frontier Areas and the largest minority in Burma were unhappy with the size of the state demarcated for them. The Burmans were reluctant to give up the territories they jointly occupied with the Karens. The Karens protested that the size of the state allotted to them was enough only for a fraction of their population.

The greater threat to unity in diversity emerged when the policy of mandatory use of the Burmese language in educational institutions and government offices were promulgated. Subsequently, all students were required to learn the Burmese language along with English in middle schools, high schools and universities. Burmese was the only language permitted inside the Parliament for bringing up any agenda for formal discussion.

The costume of ethnic Burmans used in Rangoon and Mandalay was informally adopted as the pattern for the national dress. Temporary residents or visitors wearing the traditional clothing of their birthplace on days other than holidays are viewed as rustics (J. Silverstein, 1959: 102-105). A serious threat to unity in diversity developed when Buddhism was made the official state religion by U Nu's government.

All these gradual but deliberate changes were difficult for the non-Burman ethnic groups to accept for a number of reasons. To begin with, these changes were against the spirit of the Panglong Agreement which promised autonomy for each

ethnic group. In addition to, the non-Burman groups considered the changes as a mischievous Burmanization policy of the majority. Burmanization is considered as an assimilation policy implemented since 1948 by the successive Myanmar governments to assimilate the non-Burman ethnic groups into ethnic Burman group.

Another pertinent point is that by adopting these new policies, the non-Burman groups were concerned that they would lose their culture, language and tradition. Fourthly, since not all the non-Burman groups were Buddhists, making of Buddhism as a state religion was considered as against freedom of religion and a threat to the survival of their own religion.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be argued that Myanmar (Burma) from the dawn of independence experienced a complex political developments marked by ethnic diversity and ethnic related problems. This ethnic issue has been one of the main obstacles that Myanmar faces right from the independence era till today. Many people believed that it is the unresolved ethnic problem that eventually led to the military coup in 1962. Hence, it can be said that political developments in Myanmar is largely associated with the lingering problems of unity and ethnic conflict.

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