

Elections in Burma/Myanmar, 1922-2015 plus their constitutional contexts and political impact

An analytic narration

Introduction

The following series on elections held in the country now known as Myanmar between 1922 and 2015 present a narration of events based on documents mainly coming from indigenous sources. The unavoidable analytic interpretation of documented evidence comes second. This approach is meant as a small antidote to the widespread inclination of jumping to conclusions in matters related to development and non-development of democratic institutions in Burmese/Myanmar both in the field of common wisdom and theoretical consideration of political scientists.

Elections are a core instrument of organising small and great units of society in almost all societies of the world. In this narrative, the word is used in the “modern” sense denoting a means to organise a parliamentary democracy. In this sense, provisions to hold were one of the immaterial goods exported from Britain to Burma at the beginning of the 20th century. Such import was part of the endeavour to reform the political system of the most eastern part of the British Indian Empire that was fully brought under the control of the colonial power in 1886.

The new commodity was not well received as the first part of this narration will show. At the time of writing this introduction some months before the general elections scheduled to take place in November 2020, Myanmar’s electoral process and its constitutional context are still disputed. According to the constitution adopted in 2008 under the supervision of a military junta, only three-quarters of the seats in parliament will be elected by the people, the rest are going to be selected by the supreme commander of the armed forces, the Burmese Tatmadaw.

A just superficial look at the polls held since the British tried to connect Burma to western political practices reveals other salient features. After the elections of 1956, the Prime Minister whose League had dominated Burmese politics since independence stepped down from his post for some time to reorganise the party that had just won a comfortable majority of seats in parliament again. In 1990, the parliament to be formed after the elections never convened.

In face of such peculiarities, one may wonder why until now no detailed history of Burmese/Myanmar elections has been written. A handbook on elections in Asia and the Pacific published in 2001 contains a number of data on what happened after independence until 1990 preceded by an overview of Myanmar’s political history and an outline of the evolution of electoral provisions.¹ In another handbook on political parties originating and vanishing in the same region, Robert Taylor has compiled much information about the organisations that took part in elections until 1985 after a short introductory essay on Burmese elections.² In 1996, the same author contributed an essay for a collection of articles on “The politics of elections in Southeast Asia” asking “for whom and why” elections might have been held considering the fact that all rulers in Burma/Myanmar have “held out [elections] as a panacea but when the results, or the expected results, have not been what those who offered the ballot thought, those in power have had no qualms about setting aside the outcome.”³

1 Tilman Frasch 2001 Myanmar. Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Dieter Hartmann (eds.) 2001 *Election in Asia and the Pacific. A Date Handbook. Volume I. The Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 597-620.

2 Robert Taylor 1985 Burma. Haruhiro Fukui (ed.) *Political Parties of Asia and the Pacific*. Afghanistan-Korea (ROK). Westport Ct. and London, Greenwood Press: 99-154.

The following narration tries to suggest some answers to this question in a way offering the reader the option to find out himself what patterns can be derived from the documentation of event presented here that might differ from the analytic commentaries made by the author.

The following series of essays covers three periods of Myanmar's recent history, the colonial period (I 1920-1941), the parliamentary period (II 1947-1962) and the not yet finished period of elections held under military supervision or with military participation (III 1988-today). Each period will be framed by a short prologue and an epilogue. The narrations on the elections are thus framed by the major events characterising Burma's history since the exile of the last Burmese king that made it necessary to look for another political system than the absolute monarchy. After the two first parts of this trilogy, two "intermezzos" provide short information about the periods of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) and the Socialist Period (1962-1988) in which no elections were held or the outcome was predefined by one-party rule.⁴ At the end, a postscript will deal with the elections held in 2020.

I 1922-1945

Prologue

On Saturday, October 1884, a mass meeting was held in Rangoon Town Hall in which some 5.000 people participated. Around 3.000, it was reported, were not able to enter the fully packed largest hall in town to "beg our Government to interfere on behalf of the miserable victims of Theebaw's misrule as the Rangoon Gazette worded it some days later. The convention composed of citizen from "all races" had been eager to protest the recent massacres that had happened in Mandalay on September 21 in course of a prison revolt that caused the death of some 300 victims, among them women and children. The "horrible massacre" was seen as the last example the "misery and distress" of the misgovernment under King Thibaw's rule. In the end, a resolution was passed unanimously that asked the British Government to annex Upper Burma or, if that was not possible, to make the region a part of the British Empire by other means. One year later, in November 1885, British forces occupied Mandalay, deposed the king and sent him into exile in India.

This final act of the British annexation of Burma resulted in the imperative for the British administration to implement a completely new political, economic and social system for Burma including finding a substitute for legitimate rule that had gone with the king and his family. Due to a previous "massacre" that had happened after the death of his father Mindon Min in 1878 when 20 year old Thibaw had been put on the throne. Some 80 members of his many brothers and other members of the royal family who had been killed then because they had been regarded as claimants to the throne and a threat to the rule of the young king. Few others had been escaped to the British and were therefore did not qualify to be enthroned to legitimise a constitutional monarchy.

3 Robert Tayler 1996 Elections in Burma/Myanmar: For whom and why. (Robert Taylor ed.) The politics of elections in Southeast Asia. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (164-183): 183.

4 See: *Mandalay Massacres. Upper Burma during the Reign of King Theebaw*. Rangoon Gazette Press (1884)

Elections were one of the measures introduced to fill the legitimacy void created when Lord Randolph Churchill as Secretary for India announced the annexation of Burma in a short declaration on January 1, 1886⁵. The episode of 1884 and their context illustrate the broad ditch separating the enlightened British attitude towards government and the old Burmese system that had been



King Thibaw on his way into exile (Source: Wikipedia)

terminated for good by taking over the last capital of royal Burma. It took the British forces some years to quell the Burmese rebellions that aimed at restoring the old order and bring the adjacent hilly areas under their control. For a short time at the end of the 19th century the future province of Burma was united in the resistance against foreign domination.

On the other hand, members of the deposed king's council, the *hluttaw*, assisted the colonial rulers in building up a new order and the British were eager to acquaint people from the new part of the Indian Empire with the benefits of the modern and civilised world. The introduction of elections as a part of the attempt to "modernise" Burma as other reform measures thus happened in a field of intense tension that can be exemplified by a look at the end

of the period under review in this first section on elections in Burma/Myanmar. Three important men who fought for the country's independence later, were motivated by events related to the fall of the Burmese kingdom.

Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876-1964), the political poet and patron of the main wing of the *Do-bama Asiayone* (We-Burma Association) witnessed the deportation of Thibaw in Mandalay. Ba Maw, the first Premier under the constitution of 1935 and head of the Burmese government under Japanese occupation, was the son of a member of the royal court and had accompanied the Kinwun Mingyi (1822-1908), a prominent minister under the kings Mindon and Thibaw, on his travels to Europe. He later however was rumoured to have joined a rebel group and died shortly after his two sons were born. Finally, Aung San - the military and political hero of the independence struggle – told later that already as a child he had dreamt to become a rebel against the British after a grandmother had told him that one of her cousins had fought the British after 1885.

The three men and many others in very different ways merged Burmese political traditions and the new ideas coming from outside one of them being the instrument of elections.

A November 21, 1922: Boycotting a Crucial Instrument of Western Political Culture

1 Introduction

⁵ In the biography of his father, Winston Churchill later wrote: "Lord Randolph arranged that the proclamation should be made on January 1, 1886, as 'a New Year's present to the Queen.' On the last day in December he was staying with FitzGibbon for his Christmas party; and as the clock struck midnight he lifted his glass and announced, with due solemnity, 'Howth annexes Burma to the British Empire.' The next morning the Viceregal proclamation was published. It is one of the shortest documents of the kind on historical record: *By command of the Queen-Empress, it is hereby notified that the territories formerly governed by King Theebaw will no longer be under his rule, but have become part of Her Majesty's dominions, and will during Her Majesty's pleasure be administered by such officers as the Viceroy and Governor-General of India may from time to time appoint.* (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42817/42817-h/42817-h.htm#CHAPTER_XI; accessed 14.4.2020).

The first general elections in Burma⁶ were organised by the British administration to establish a parliament called Legislative Council that was scheduled to be an initial step to let the people of the people of the core territory of the Province of Burma - that excluded the Frontier Areas inhabited by the Chin, Kachin, Shan Karenni and some territories with Karen dominance - actively participate in the configuration of their social life.. The reform that became effective in January 1923 after the elections followed the Government of India Act passed by the British Parliament in 1919. After a recommendation of a special commission, they were implemented in Burma later with some modifications. The Indian government had realised that Burma was different from India and having been integrated into the Indian Empire just by accident.

In 1897, a Legislative Council had already been created in Burma consisting of nine members – 7 British, one Burmese, one Shan chief. All but two – elected by the Burmese Chamber of Commerce and the Rangoon Trade Association - were appointed by the governor. The number was increased in 1920 to 29 and more Burmese members were added. The Council passed bills, most of them proposed by the government, discussed the budget and other matters and received answers to questions asked.

2 Dyarchy

The constitutional scheme adopted in Indian Empire and Burma was called “Dyarchy” – dual rule. The control of some areas of government called the “transferred subjects” - agriculture, forests, public works, health, and education - were given to two ministers answerable to the Legislative Council that was elected by the portion of the population that paid taxes. The crucial political posts – dealing with law and order, currency, defence, foreign affairs, and communications - remained reserved for British officials appointed by the governor. The elections of 1922 were the first practical exercise of a central element of democracy to be introduced in Burma and Governor Reginal Craddock in his farewell speech to the pre-dyarchy council stated that they were the result of a very rapid political development in Burma and did “not fall very short of manhood suffrage”.⁷

This detail is an interesting parallel to the today’s situation. According to the constitution of 2008, some decisive portfolios are reserved for the Tatmadaw. Another parallel: Only 80 of the 103 members of the Council were elected, 23 were nominated by the governor, two of them being members of the cabinet. Furthermore, 22 of the 80 contested seats were reserved for members of ethnic groups (8 Indian, 5 Karen, one each European and Anglo-Indian) and people representing special interests (a number of chambers of commerce and the University).

3 Boycott

The response of the Burmese population to the British proposal was – in a way - similar to the attitude of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD towards the 2008 constitution before 2012 when they decided to boycott the 2010 elections. In November 1922, it was the voters that boycotted the elections. The voter turnout was 6,9 %.⁸ The number is particularly remarkable because the suffrage was reserved to all people over 21 who paid the capitation tax. This applied to 1,8 million of 12 million inhabitants of Ministerial Burma, directly ruled by the British.

The parliament convened for the first time in early 1923 therefore was an institution rejected by the overwhelming majority of the people. They followed the appeals of the leaders of the *wunthanu*

6 The first election to a local body had already happened in 1882 for Rangoon Municipality. They were designed to represent the interests of special ethnic and business groups. (High Tinker 1967 The Foundations of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma. Bombay (et.al.), Lalvani Publishing House: 49).

7 Abstracts from the Proceedings of the Council of the Lieutenant-Governor of Burma, assembled for the Purpose of Making Laws and Regulations under the Provisions of the Government of India Act, 1915: 1092. (Quoted as “Proceedings”)

8 It can be safely assumed that the voter turnout in the cities was higher. For the participation in local elections in rural and urban areas see Tinker 1967: 218-219.

athin, grass-root nationalist associations in which ethnic “Burmese-ness” and Buddhist religion were merged. The movement was based in rural Burma and refused to pay taxes to the government. They were connected to the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) founded in 1920 and thus constituted a kind of alternative administration to the institutions that the British aimed to build up. From the perspective of the mainstream Buddhist perspective were simply not legitimised to rule the country after having deposed the last king, the symbol of Burmese sovereignty.

4 Monks’ Involvement

The Buddhist face of resistance against the constitutional reform was the Arakanese monk U Ottama (1879-1939). He had studied and lived in India and Japan for some time and advocated a Gandhi-style opposition to the British government arguing that the foreign government was destroying Buddhist-Burmese culture. In one of his speeches in 1922 he said: “Out of taxes paid by Buddhists, missionaries of an alien religion are being paid and fed and provided for while the monk is being deprived of his natural living.”⁹ Furthermore, he compared the Dyarch system to a stillborn child that could not be revived. Such speeches were regarded as seditious by the colonial power and U Ottama became the first monk to be sent to prison in 1921, a measure that greatly inspired the boycott movement. U Ottama was further instrumental in founding monks associations all over the country as counterparts of the local *wunthanu athins*.

U Ottama and his followers were criticised by the British administration. According to the governor, Sir Reginald Craddock, the monk sacrificed “the veneration of the ages for the nine says’ applause by a gaping multitude.”¹⁰ U Ottama answered with an open letter entitled “Craddock go out!”. The controversy on ‘political monks’ had begun.

5 Antagonism

The election boycott had been preceded by several other protests. A commission sent from India investigate the Burmese views on constitutional reforms was boycotted by Burmese nationalists. The boycotters wanted “Home Rule”, in other words: self-government or independence. The meetings of the commission were picketed, and the Burmese newspapers reasoned that such measures were the only way to make clear that the Burmese demand could not be compromised. On this background, precautions were taken when the Prince of Wales was scheduled to visit Burma in February 1922. The leader of the GCBA was interned in Taunggyi and four other people, among them journalists, were brought to other remote places. According to a newspaper report, the governor regarded them as a “clique animated by race hatred and by a desire to undermine the authority of the government”.¹¹

In sharp contrast to such drastic wording and actions on both sides, the discussions on these matters in the Governor’s Council were “marked with moderation and restraint” without “the slightest tendency towards heat and acrimony” as Governor Craddock remarked in the last session of the Council on November 14, 1922,¹² some days before the elections. This however pertained just to the polite tone of the discussions adopted from British custom, not to the substance of the matters discussed.

6 Essentials of “Burmese Democracy”

On February 12, 1921, the forthcoming constitutional reforms were discussed on which the Council was entitled to submit recommendations. One of the Burmese members argued that the Burmese were able to rule themselves without mentioning the term “Home Rule” and substantiated his assessment thus in comparing Burma to India:

9 Donald Eugene Smith 1965 *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press: 96.

10 Ibid.

11 *Clsrion-Ledger*, Jackson Mississippi, 12.2.1922: 18.

12 Proceedings: 1093.

It may be said that in India the races are as different from each other as the Esquimau is from the Spaniard or the Irishman from the Turk, but in our country, there is practically one caste, one religion, one race and one language.

Our Lord Buddha was a Great Democrat, our religion is the most tolerant of all the great religions. The people are a democratic race, no aristocracy, and their standard of life is practically the same. Their women are free and enjoy a status higher than that of women in all other countries in Asia. Burma is an agricultural country, its people are one, their interests are identical and there is no difference of interest to clash if it is ruled by its own people.

Apart from the question of fitness or unfitness, a nation has the natural right of liberty and freedom.¹³

The very clear subliminal message of this statement was: You British must not teach us Burmese about democracy. But this subtext was not discussed at the meeting. It however characterised the irreconcilable attitudes of the two conflict partners at the beginning of Burma's struggle for independence, the Burmese nationalists and the British administration. The former referred to the principles of their civilisation shaped by Buddhism, the latter backed their decisions on the enlightened principles of the colonial power. In practice, this clash of civilisations resulted in a power struggle. The nationalists tried to cripple the British attempts to "modernise" Burma by recalling the spiritual values of the Burmese culture, the British administration used the laws introduced to the new province. These laws could be enforced because of the physical superiority of the British-Indian security forces, the army and the police.

7 The Anti-Boycott Bill

One of these laws was the "Anti-Boycott Bill" passed shortly before the elections of November 1922. It was introduced by the British administration to counter a number of methods used by the promoters of boycotting the British institutions. It was introduced in the Council to "deal with an evil that is spreading slowly over the whole of the Province. The evil is the use of the boycott or the treat of boycott to suppress freedom of political thought."¹⁴ The 'evil' was exemplified on a case related to U Ottama, the case of Maung Po Pe, characterised by the British officer as an "officer [in service of the British administration] than whom is no Burmese gentleman in this country of greater ability and greater character or one whom his countrymen have greater cause to respect."

It was his unpleasant duty to have to try under section 124A, Indian Penal Code, a *phôngyi* called U Ottama. Maung Po Pe convicted, and the justice of this conviction was confirmed when the conviction was upheld by the Chief Court. What happened to Maung Po Pe? He was threatened with a complete stoppage of all the necessities of life. The bazaar people [...] were instigated to refuse him supplies [...] When Maung Po Pe's sister died, what did the people do? The Y.M.B.A ordered a complete boycott of the funeral. Musicians whom Maung Po Pe had engaged were intimidated into not coming. [...] *Phôngyis* invitations to the funeral were intimidated by the Y.M.B.A into not attending. More persecution followed Maung Po Pe on the death of his daughter. Maung Po Pe went personally to the local *Sangha Sammaggi* [the monks association] and explained the position. The local *Sangha Sammaggi* accepted the explanation put forward and were satisfied that Maung Po Pe's action had nothing to break the rule of the Sangha. But they were intimidated by a small group within themselves who insisted on the matter being referred to Rangoon, and had it not been for the courageous action of the Vice-President of that society who insisted that he had taken the robe to acquire merit and not to inquire demerit, that funeral also would have been boycotted.¹⁵

Three Burmese members of the Council opposed the bill, a rich merchant from Moulmein who had received his early education in England and an Anglo-Indian opposed the opposers. The final vote in the Council was 21 to 4 in favour of the bill that provided for sentences of up to two years

¹³ Ibid: 751.

¹⁴ Ibid: 947

¹⁵ Ibid.: 947f.

imprisonment, a fine or both. A later attempt by the Burmese minority to postpone the bill or amend it were not successful as well.

The debate on the bill in the Council shows that no compromise could be found. It was finally the British that decided how to deal with the boycott and in the last debate on the issue the British official who had introduced the bill had the final word. The debate further shows that the Burmese members were split on the issue as well as on the issue of the whole constitutional reforms. The same had happened before when 21 members of the GCBA left the organisation in 1922 and decided to take part in the elections. The “Twenty-One-Party” won 28 of the 58 of the “general constituencies”. The proclaimed aim was to fight for Home Rule within the Parliament. Some 15 seats were won by members of the Independence Party better known as “Golden Valley” Party named after the wealthiest district in Rangoon where many of the party members lived. Members of the group were preferred by the government in filling the ministerial posts for the

The issue of abolishing the Anti-Boycott Bill as well as other restrictive laws was taken up from time to time in the Legislative Assembly later, but to no avail. Furthermore, the term “political prisoner” came into use referring to the people sentenced under the bill of 1922. The answer of the government was that no political prisoners existed because the convicted persons had been sentenced under for criminal offences.

8 A Karen View of the Boycott

Whereas the “hill tribes” living at the margin of the Province of Burma were excluded from the constitutional reforms, The Karen, the Indians and some other minorities relevant for business and commerce were included. They were given a quota each of seats in the Legislative Council, the Karen many of them living in the Ayeyawardy Delta getting the highest number. The most prominent Karen leader of that time was Dr. San C. Po, a medical doctor who had been trained in the United States and later became a member of the Governor’s Council. In 1928, he published a book entitled “Burma and the Karen” in which he advocated a different administration for the Burmese and the Karen due to their cultural differences. He exemplified his opinion with some remarks on the Burmese reaction to the visit of the committee that had visited Burma in 1921 to learn about the Burmese situation. He had been a member of the body named after its head.

During the sitting of the Whyte Committee in 1921, in connection with the Reforms Scheme, there occurred many incidents which were worthy of serious notice. An influential section of the Burmese people was from the very beginning against the Committee and its work, and the great trouble they took in boycotting it might have turned out seriously if the authorities had not been on the alert. As it was, the attempt at boycotting proved to be more amusing than otherwise. Here again, the wonderful adaptability of the Burmese nature in any situation was manifest. They seriously meant to obstruct the work of the Committee, but when they found that their efforts at obstruction were effectively countered, they tried to pass the whole thing off as a joke. This characteristic of the Burmese would be hard to find in any other nation or race.¹⁶

Based on such observations, San C. Po advocated for a federal system to be implemented in Burma. One-seventh of the country should be administered by the Karen according to the author’s estimation of the ratio between ethnic Burmese and Karen. Tenasserim would be suited. He further elaborated:

The Karens in other parts of the province can remain where they are if they wish it just as people of other nationalities domiciled in Tenasserim can remain there, as long as it is recognised that Tenasserim is a Karen country. [...] Like the powerful British nation formed of four mighty nations in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, a great Burmese nation may be formed of the four principal races of the country, the Burmese, the Karens, the Arakanese, and the Shans; each nation with its

16 San C. Po 1928 *Burma and the Karen*. London, Elliott Stock: Chapter II (<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks08/0800051h.html>; accessed 8.2.2020)

own country and its own distinctive national characteristics, ready to unite for the good of the whole country.¹⁷

He further referred to Switzerland as a model arguing that the strife between the Catholic and the Protestant cantons could only be resolved because of the “meagre federal rights of the Swiss Constitution to a National Government”. Here, an alternative to the vision of “Burmese Buddhist” nation was expressed.

9 More Elections, further Splits

Elections for the Legislative Council were held again in 1925 and 1928. The ratio of voters increased to 16 and 18% respectively. The landscape of parties changed due to mergers, newcomers, and renaming. Given the composition of the legislative body, however, most votes supporting the British-led government was never endangered. Boycott activities continued albeit to a lesser extent. In February 1929 a commission came to Burma to investigate the option of separating the province from India. Monks called for a boycott of the commission. The activities of the members of the Sangha however were hampered by the many splits of the monks’ association that paralleled the divisions within the GCBA. The competing secular leaders made use of monks as advisers. The pluralisation of politics following the end of the monarchy thus resulted in splits of the Sangha, the community of monks. This plurality was a problem because according to Theravada Buddhist doctrine, the Sangha had to be united – for the sake of the Buddhist religion and the welfare of the state. Therefore, the public got annoyed with the effect of reforms within the Sangha brought about by the element of competition inherent in Western-style elections.

10 Summary: No Trust

The first elections in Burma were characterised by a severe antagonism between the British administration that organised them and most of the population. Here, the question of legitimising government played the outstanding role. The model of parliamentary rule was rejected. The Legislative Council that was convened from 1923 onwards was not more than a continuation of the Governor’s Council. Buddhism played a crucial role in the rejection of the reform scheme. The handing of the boycott by the government clearly shows that the British government was determined to enforce their reforms regardless of the sentiments of the people.

Besides and connected to this basic antagonism other discrepancies came to the fore. The Burmese nationalist movement, for a short time united under the umbrella of the GCBA, split in a dominant wing supporting boycott to achieve Home Rule and a minority accepting parliament as a means to achieve this goal. This divide went along with a fission between the rural population and the urban elites: “Politics” became the playground of the city-bred elites, many of them having been educated in England. Agricultural Burma became the object of the wisdom of the educated city dwellers which added an inward and outward looking dimension to the divide.

Finally, there was the difference between Burma proper and the excluded areas that - with the exception of large parts of the Shan States - coincided with a split between the “civilised” Buddhists in the plains and the non-Buddhist hill tribes that were regarded as not yet fit to be included in the new scheme.

This first Burmese encounters with a core element of Western-style democracy was not very promising – to put it mildly. The Burmese people mistrusted the new schemes introduced by the colonial power. On the other hand, the old institutions were gone and could not be recalled. The new urban elites of the country were not connected to the rural majority, great sections of the Sangha had been “politicised” and thus forced to abandon their traditional role as living examples of Buddhist spirituality and the dual rule instituted in the Burmese, Mon and Rakhine Buddhist heartlands of British Burma and the hills bore the seeds of future conflict.

17 Ibid.: Chapter XII.

B November 9, 1932: A Highly Confusing Plebiscite

1 Introduction

The 1932 elections attracted more voters than those held before in 1922, 1925 and 1928: almost 40% of the electorate participated. The main reason was that a public debate had arisen about the issue if Burma should be separated from India or not. The elections were supposed to be decisive. Furthermore, a number of significant events, not directly connected to the separation topic, had happened between 1928 and 1932 that had aroused the interest and emotions of the Burmese population both in Rangoon as in the countryside. All in all, the interest in “politics” grew and spread to greater parts of the Burmese population.

2 Violence

In May 1930, riots between Burmese and Indian dock labourers broke out in Rangoon that quickly spread to other parts of the city and other places. At least 100 people were killed and some 1.000 injured, most of them being Indians. The violent events revealed the tensions between the Indian and the Burmese community. The latter felt marginalised by the former economically and in Rangoon demographically as well since more than 60% of the population was of Indian descent there. Indians fought back. It is reported that Indians attacked a building hosting a Burmese newspaper that advocated for separation from India.

Unnoticed from the broader public, the Indo-Burmese riots gave rise to the founding of the *Dobama Asiayone* (We-Burman Association) that later became the driving force of attaining independence under the leadership of Aung San. A lecturer at the university who called himself Thakin (master) Ba Thaung wrote and distributed a series of short articles exhorting his compatriots to take the fate of their country in their own hands. By using the “Thakin” title, normally reserved for addressing the British ‘masters’, he symbolically claimed that the British had no right to govern the country. In this spirit of promoting Burmans as a “race of masters”, he wrote a text for a song promoting the cause of the Thakins that – in a modified way – still serves as Myanmar’s national anthem.



The - almost - Round Table Conference

money lenders that had migrated from India. Furthermore, the effects of the worldwide economic crisis after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 that were felt in Burma played a role.

3 An Edgy Round Table Conference

These two events that like the boycott campaigns and the British response were characterised by violent antagonistic actions. In contrast, a round table conference held in London between

Half a year later, a peasant revolt broke out some 120 km north of Rangoon that made headlines all over the world, the Saya San Rebellion. The leader who had worked for a branch of the GCBA for some time was caught rather quickly but it took the British-Indian troops almost two years to restore law and order. A main cause of the uprising was the protest against the economic policies of the colonial power implemented with the help of

November 1931 and January 1932 on the question if or if not Burma should be separated from India - like earlier the discussions in the Governor's Council – was conducted in a conciliatory tone. The positions taken by the various parties however were irreconcilable and mostly presented in – often very long – monologues. Both ways of interchanging opposing views were characterised by antagonistic positions.

The 23 Burmese delegates participating in the London meeting had been selected by the Governor¹⁸ and represented different ethnic groups and a variety of attitudes. Splits became visible between the ethnic Burmese even before the meeting started. Potential delegates were divided on the issue of how to respond to the rules of the game implemented by the British. Those still advocating a strict boycott attitude, declined to accept the invitation. Others did not disclose their decision to participate to avoid public criticism. Such critic was voiced by young members of the *Dobama Asiayone*. The published cartoons one of them depicting the participants as dogs following a bone held by a British official.¹⁹

The objective of the conference was defined by the British organisers for discussing details of a new constitution for a Burma after separation from India. Burmese delegates at the beginning asked if the issue of separation vs. non-separation could be decided as well and the answer was a clear “No and Yes”. The argument of the British side was that it would make no sense to discuss a constitution of Burma that might not be enacted when Burma remained one of the provinces of British-India. According to the chairman of the conference, the Secretary of State for India: “If the Conference is unanimous in favour of remaining united with India, our task will be commendably short., because we have nothing to do.”²⁰ In other words: The rules set by British Government could not be changed and thus to a great degree pre-determined the outcome of the meeting. However, the delegates were free to voice their opinion and ask questions at the proper time, the conference organisers said.

The members of the Burmese delegation voiced different views on the issue of separation. Five ethnic Burmese and the two Indian delegates opposed, all others favoured it. The Burmese delegates however emphasised that they were nevertheless united and submitted a joint statement. It strongly condemned British rule including the reaction to the ongoing peasant rebellion, qualified the reform initiated in 1923 as a complete failure and demanded to give Burma the same status as the British Dominions. “We ourselves desire a constitution on the Irish Free State model.²¹ We are willing to be fair to all concerned, [...] whether settlers or non-settlers. [...] There is no communal strife in Burma and no minority problem.”²²

Thus, self-government was asked for exercised by the country's Burmese majority that regarded itself as the legitimate successor of the Burmese kings. Consequently, the abolition of communal seats in the Burmese parliament was demanded. The two Burmese factions present at the conference just differed in the method to achieve this aim. The separationists argued that it should be achieved right away, whereas the anti-separationists voted for becoming part of an Indian Federal State with the option of secession. Both options were rejected by the representatives of the Karen, Shan and

18 12 Burmese, including one woman, 2 Shan Princes (Sawbwas), Karen, Indians (one Muslim, one Hindu) each, 1 Anglo-Burmese, Chinese and Arakan each (a Muslim); (Proceedings of the Burma Round Table Conference, 27th November 31 - 12th January 1932. Rangoon, Supdt. Govt. Printing and Stationery Burma: IV). 9 British delegates participated and some members of the Indian and Burmese government who however did not participate in the discussions.

19 Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.) 2006 *Material on Ba Khaing: Political History of Burma*. Passau, Passauer Beiträge zur Südostasienkunde: 70-71. (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs11/mlp10.05-op.pdf>; accessed 19.2.2020).

20 Proceedings of the Round Table Conference: 13.

21 The Irish Free State was the state established in 1922 under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 that ended the three-year Irish war of independence. According to the amendments to the constitution of 1927, the King remained the head of state but the real power was executed by an Irish Executive Council headed by a Prime Minister.

22 Proceedings of the Round Table Conference: 27.

Indian minorities as well as by the British government. The Round Table Conference therefore did not pass any joint recommendation on the future constitution for which the British organisers had prepared a draft that was discussed after the third plenary meeting on December 3, 1931 and the fourth and the resumption of plenary meeting on January 8, 1932. The delegates agreed on a "loyal address" to the British monarch²³, but voiced their dissenting views later.

The speaker of the twelve ethnic Burmese participants summarised their common standpoint:

We feel that in determining the future constitution of Burma it is essential for the British Government, and later the Parliament, to know exactly not only what the minor communities about 2 ½ million desire, but also what over 10 million inhabitants consider is necessary for their happiness and welfare. [...] We would once again emphasise the necessity of keeping the popular Assembly, that is the House of Representatives, thoroughly democratic and fully representative of the people by removing all nominated and communal elements. The Burmese people are strongly opposed to the communal representation on principle and as there is no justification for it in Burma and because the retention of this vicious system would [...] only accentuate and perpetuate narrow communal feeling [...]. We maintain [...] that any person regardless of race or religion who associates himself generally with the welfare of the Burmese people will have as good a chance as any one else to be returned either to the Senate or to House of Representatives.²⁴

A British delegate residing in Burma voiced his disappointment about the outcome of the meeting by stressing the viewpoint of all minorities living in Burma:

[W]hen we opened this conference we all had, I think, great hopes that we would arrive at a considerable amount of agreement, and that the result would be the broad outlines of a constitution acceptable to majorities, minorities and all interests in Burma. It is, I think, with much regret that we must look back at the results of our labours, and come to the conclusion that we have to a very large extent failed on the most material point. The constitution suggested by a large majority of Burman Delegates is a constitution with no safeguards, except in the event of a complete breakdown; with no protection for minorities, and with practically no representation of their interests in the Legislature. [...] No constitution will be acceptable to the minorities of Burma which does not provide ample protection for their existing rights and for their future existence.²⁵

The major and decisive point of discussion that could not be bridged by the representatives of the British Government was the issue of communal representation in parliament.

In the end, the British Prime Minister gave a lengthy speech. He acknowledged that some Burmese delegates might be disappointed and admonished them to be patient. Before he read the final statement of the British government, he made some remarks with regard to political philosophy:

[W]hen you go home and meet your critics, do remember that a Constitution is not merely an instrument; it is a potentiality; and that potentiality will belong to you when you get the Constitution that is now contemplated. [...] The last point I have made is a point that I really want to emphasise, because it is in essence the spirit and the nature of political progress.²⁶

A newspaper report published in December 1931 pointed to another "spirit" guiding three of the Burmese delegates. They had walked out of the conference room to protest a statement by the chairman that fell "far short" of the expectations of the Burmese people of "immediate responsible government". At a "conference with pongyis (monks)" they had pledged to return to Burma for further consultations if this demand was not met. However, the three "extremists" as another report called the three delegates were willing to further attend the conference without participating hoping that the British government would change its mind.²⁷

23 Ibid.: 177-178.

24 Ibid.: 191-192.

25 Ibid.: 216-217.

26 Ibid.: 234

27 *The Guardian* 15.12.1931: 4.

4 A Dirty Campaign

Ten months after the end of the London conference, the next elections were held. The political parties that had emerged from the splits of the GCBA and the Sangha associations to which they were affiliated regrouped into two “Leagues”, one in favour of separation, one against it. Both leagues consisted of two parties, those campaigning against separation each known by the names of their respective three Burmese leaders. The two parties of the Separation League consisted of a mix of members who were regarded to be close to the British. The election campaign can be termed “dirty”. Corruption charges were discussed in the newspapers that supported the two camps. One of the Burmese participants of the Round Table Conference openly admitted in a series of newspaper articles in detail that he and other members of the delegation received money over a period of seven months from an Indian delegate participating in the conference as well. He was the Rangoon agent of a big Indian shipping company operation transports of goods and people between India and Burma. This way, The GCBA leader was expected to harm the faction promoting the cause of separation to which he himself had belonged.²⁸ All in all, the campaign was “abusive, acrimonious and personal” as a Burmese scholar worded it. Such behaviour however violated a sensitive point of the political culture prevailing among the electorate: they preferred “clean politics”. Politicians were expected to be selfless, taking money for serving as a member of parliament or a ministers was widely regarded as being not in accord with Buddhist morality.

The Anti-Separation League was well-funded by Indian commercial interests and was backed by members of the Sangha. By contrast, the Separation League was poorly-funded and had little widespread support mainly due to its alleged pro-British stance. The elections were won by the anti-separationists by a wide margin. They won 42 seats against 29, the remaining 9 seats went to neutral independents. The election result was a vote against the British intentions to separate Burma from India and the new constitution that had been discussed at the Round Table Conference.

5 Chaos in Parliament

The result of the 1932 elections had no impact on the further political process. In August 1935, the British parliament passed the Government of Burma Act and thus the constitution for Burma as a distinct part of the British Empire that came into effect on April 1, 1937 after elections held in November 1936. This was mainly due to the chaos happening in the newly elected Legislative Council that resulted in a series of twist and turns but no decision of the Council on the issue. Thakin Ba Thaung, the founder of the Dobama Asiayone worded the dilemma at discussion taking place at the University even before the Round Table Conference thus: “To vote for anti-separation means to remain a British slave, while to vote for separation would mean to remain a British bondsman.”²⁹ He advocated complete independence and the Do-bama movement later developed into a radical extra-parliamentary opposition that finally paved the way for independence.

The Burmese politicians that had entered the elections, bound by the parliamentary rules established by the British, engaged in a series of debates, resolutions and counter-resolutions, changes of alliances, and debates on the rules of procedure. The latter resulted in a successful no-confidence motion against the Speaker of the House, the senior GCBA leader and anti-separationist Chit Hlaing, that was supported by a spokesman of the other party that had favoured to remain an Indian province. He was replaced by a British member of the Council. Finally, the parliament voted for non-separation under the condition to secede from India at any time. This however was not accepted by the British government which decided that the decision of the Burmese parliamentarians was equivocal. A new debate lasting two weeks happened in the Legislative Council characterised by a Burmese historian thus: “The members debated brilliantly, long windedly, some speakers like U Ba Pe [an advocate of separation] totalling a handsome 40 hours of

28 Zöllner 2006: 79-80. The Indian agent sponsored conferences of the GCBA and activities of leading monks as well.

29 Khin Yi 1988 *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1920-1938)*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press: 14.

speech-making during the period.”³⁰ The title of a London newspaper report on the debate read: “Deadlock in Burma”.³¹

No decision was reached even at another round table meeting in London in December 1933. As a consequence, the British Parliament finally took over the initiative and – and finally decided the matter by passing the Government of Burma Act. Reginald Craddock, a former governor of Burma, in a Debate in the House of Commons painted a rather unfavourable picture of Burma: “It seems absurd in view of [...] Burma’s political history, to put the country in advance of India. From a defence point of view, Burma’s case for any form of self-government was very weak. The Burma did not lack courage, but could not learn discipline. [...] There was considerable risk in entrusting law and order to Burmese Ministers.”³²

6 The Rise of a Modern Burmese Politician

The rather confusing years between 1930 and 1937 mark the beginning of the career of Dr. Ba Maw who dominated Burma politics to a great extent until the end of World War II. He became the first Premier of a cabinet formed after the elections of November 1936 and the first President of a semi-independent Burma under Japanese rule in August 1943.

Ba Ma’s father had been in the service of the last Burmese kings in Mandalay and had accompanied Kinwun Mingyi, the chief minister, on his travels to Europe. He spoke English and some French. After the end of the monarchy, the family moved to Lower Burma. Ba Maw and his elder brother, Ba Han, were born in Maubin in the Ayeyarwady Delta in 1890 and 1893 respectively. The father allegedly left the family to join rebels in Mon State from where he originated and never returned to the family again. Therefore, the mother had to care for the sons. She managed to provide the means for the education for her sons by sending them to St. Paul’s High School, the best boarding school in Rangoon run by the Catholic Church. The mother became a member of a small Protestant community, the Plymouth Brethren, and the sons were thus acquainted with this branch of Christianity as well. The elder brother took the teaching and the practice of the Christian group much more serious than Ba Maw.

Both of them were excellent students, both studied in England and earned barrister-at-law degrees there and both submitted their dissertation at the University of Bordeaux, Ba Maw with a study on Buddhist mysticism (1924). After his return to Burma, he practised as a lawyer and became famous when he defended Saya San in 1931. That was the beginning of his political career. In 1934, he became minister for education and health under the Dyarchy system after he had won a seat in the Legislative Council in 1932.

Ba Maw’s career was untypical in many ways. Different from most other political players of his time, he was not deeply rooted in Burmese-Buddhist traditions. By defending Saya San in a case that could not be won, he however became connected to these traditions. It helped him to control one of the many branches of the GCBA that had been advocated strict boycott measures before. A contemporary political analyst described him thus:

Dr Ba Maw has some followers because of his abilities. He speaks words which peasants and workers like; he is friendly, he always greets with smile Wuntharus who are poor men; and he has done a project that benefits workers and peasants. It is known that he gives generously, and he has supported, with monthly payments, men and monks, who could become useful for him. When someone asks money from him, he never refuses; he always gives something.³³

On the other hand, the same author concluded:

30 Dr. Maung Maung 1959 *Burma’s Constitution*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff: 29. - Dr. Maung Maung was the last president of Burma before the coup of September 1988.

31 *The Guardian* May 8, 1933.

32 *The Guardian*, April 11, 1935: 4.

33 Zöllner 2006: 86.

To sum up, there is no consistency in Dr Ba Maw's work; no matching of words and deeds; his appearance betrays his inner mind. He uses 'for the country' as a deception, in his search for own fortune.³⁴

One can call this attitude either opportunistic or pragmatic. He himself seems to have been aware of his ambivalent political actions. He was quoted with the sentence "There can be no consistency in politics"³⁵ - a statement that can be regarded as an application of the Buddhist principle of impermanence (*anicca*).

Furthermore, Ba Maw from the beginning of his political career developed a special style of appearing in public. His most significant trade mark was his headdress. Instead of the traditional *gaungbaung* used by Burmese males at official occasions, he used to wear a velvet beret and it was told that he designed his elegant clothes himself that mixed Burmese and western styles.

7 The Electoral Defeat of a Remarkable Outsider

Thakin Ba Thaung, the founder of the *Do-bama Asiayone*, like Dr. Ba Maw can be termed a "modernist", but of a very different kind than the future head of a nominally independent Burmese state. His participation in elections resulted in a crushing defeat and signifies his first and last participation in Burmese politics.

Ba Thaung was - like the nine years older Ba Maw - a gifted student who however did not use his talents for an academic career. As the politician, nationalism was instilled him by his father who had been a courtier during the reign of Thibaw, the last Burmese king. He attended a Buddhist high school in Mandalay headed by an ardent nationalist and after participating in the countrywide student strike of 1920, until today celebrated as Myanmar's National Day, he left school without finishing grade 10. Despite this handicap, he worked at national schools springing up after the strike in Mandalay and Shwebo. He further became a contributor and co-editor of the "World of Books" (*Ganda Lawka*), a monthly magazine founded in 1924 by J.S. Furnivall in order to make Burmese students familiar with international literature including translating foreign texts into Burmese. Ba Thaung won the first prize in the first competition organised by the Club in 1927 and did so as well in the next years. Due to his linguistic capability, he became a tutor for translation at Yangon University. After an order that the teaching staff had to refrain from talking about nationalism in their classes, he quit his post and shortly later prefixed the title "Thakin" to his name and founded the *Do-bama Asiayone*.

The headings of the short pamphlets he published after the Burmese-Indians riots of May 1930 show that he was 'modern' in his own way. Some of the treatises were entitled: "The Business of Translation - Wenn Monasteries Transform into Universities - The Way to Success". In the latter article, he defined the central Buddhist category *kamma* as "work" and thus advocated a work ethic for Buddhists as a means to a good education, making use of modern science and strengthen the economic performance of the Burmese. In short, he propagated ways to pave the way for a "Burma for the Burmese".³⁶

The main medium however to propagate the young Thakins' message was the Dobama Song that was presented to a variety audiences in the country and became a hit.³⁷ However, the group founded by him was only loosely organised and poorly funded. A conference taking place in July 1933 to draw up future programs was attended by just six people. Given this bleak situation, Ba Thaung and his friends used the by-election in December 1933 that became necessary because of the death of a member of the Legislative Council who had died in a car accident to attract public attention. It was decided that Thakin Ba Thaung should contest the elections in Shwebo, Upper

34 Ibid.: 109.

35 Ibid.

36 For more details see Zöllner 2006: 87-99.

37 For the English text see Khin Yi 1988: 9.

Burma. The place was significant because Alaungphaya, the founder of the last Burmese dynasty had been born there. Furthermore, Ba Thaung had been worked in the town as a teacher for a short time.

The candidate registered as an independent. He faced five competitors, among them a lady representing a grass-root boycott movement. Two of the other candidates belonged to the two leagues campaigning for or against separation, one of them being the father-in-law of the deceased. One stood for the 21-party and the last one was an independent like Ba Thaung. All of them were connected to influential sectors of the town's society.³⁸

In line with Ba Thaung's status as an outsider, his and his Thakin friends' election campaign was exceptional. At all of the 40 meetings held between the registration in early December and election day, December 18, the *Do-bama Song* was sung, accompanied by a violin or a concertina, followed by my speeches in which the demands of the organisation were proclaimed, often in a manner that was regarded as very rough and reckless. The young men proclaimed that "what is lost through violence must be retrieved by violence."³⁹ Furthermore, the government and its local representatives were insulted.⁴⁰ This way, they expressed the uncompromising demand for independence and the absolute rejection of the political system that had brought forward the elections in which Thakin Ba Thaung took part.

In terms of attendance, the campaign was a big success, in terms of votes gained, it was not. In the end, Ba Thaung received just 330 votes, the lowest number of all candidates. The seat went to the father-in-law of the dead parliamentarian who had been rumoured to bribe voters. He won the seat with over 5000 votes by a small margin over the member of the 21 party. A contemporary newspaper report suggested even before polling day that the people flocked to the assemblies of the Thakins mainly out of curiosity.⁴¹ The young Thakins performed a good show.

Nevertheless, the campaign in retrospect was regarded as a success of the campaigners due to the fact that they were put on trial shortly after the election and sentenced to three months imprisonment because of not following the order of the authorities to leave Shwebo within 24 hours. The imprisonment made the jailed Thakins famous all over the country as people who had sacrificed their personal interests for the sake of the country. They had followed U Ottama and the martyr monk U Wisara who had died after a hunger strike in 1929. As others arrested for political reasons, they claimed a special status as prisoners different from ordinary criminals. Serving some time in prison became a trademark of the selfless young revolutionaries

Thakin Ba Thaung left the association he had founded soon after the elections and the following prison term – but not because the few votes he had won but due to a dispute over funding. He had promoted the idea of going back to Shwebo after the Thakins had been released from jail after one and a half month. For this venture, funds should be raised. His co-Thakins however argued that the movement should continue of relying just on donations given spontaneously by the people for the time being instead of collecting money to be used for feeding the participants of further campaigns.⁴²

From then on, Thakin Ba Thaung left the *Do-bama Asiayone*. One of his co-campaigner of December 1933, Thakin Ba Sein, became the first President of the executive committee of the organisation formed at the first conference of the organisation held in Yenaungyaung, a centre of Burma's oil industry, in March/April 1935. More importantly, the famous nationalist poet Saya Lun

38 Kei Nemoto 1987 *The Dòubàma-Asiâyôûn and the Shweibou Bye-[sic] Election (1933)* Ryuiji Okudaira 1987 *Burma and Japan. Basic Studies on Their Cultural and Social Structure*. Tokyo, Burma Research Group (247-256): 250.

39 Khin Yi 1988: 21.

40 Thein Tin 2001 *Thakin Ba Sein's Role in Burma's Struggle for Independence*. Rangoon: 42.

41 Nemoto 1987: 251.

42 Khin Yi 1988: 23; Thein Tin 2001: 45-46.

who adopted the name of Thakin Kodaw Hmine after that conference, joined the association and helped it to become the vanguard of Burma's final struggles for independence.

8 Summary: Voting on a Phantom Issue

Different from the first three elections held under the Dyarchy Scheme, the elections of 1932 were connected to a political decision to be taken – the separation-from-India-or-not-issue. For two main reasons however, this alternative did not correspond with reality. First, the British administration had already predetermined that Burma would be separated from India. Second, the two leagues formed before the elections did not offer a real alternative as suggested by the either-or contrast of remaining within the Indian Federation or not. Both leagues pursued the same aim to obtain independence as soon as possible, however by different means.

The “real” opposition before and after the elections was between the Burmese nationalists and the British administration represented by the governor and their allies in parliament, a few Burman, Karen, some Indian, and the British members of the Legislative Council. This crucial antinomy however was camouflaged by a mock-competition of the Burmese political groups induced by the instrument of elections that called for competition.

Besides this core features, the messy elections of 1932 mark the beginning of the career of a new kind of Burmese politicians and the emergence of a popular movement that presented itself as an alternative to achieving independence through electoral policies. Both Ba Maw's and the Thakin Ba Thaung's political activities started in connection with violent clashes indicating the tense situation within the country, the anti-Indian riots in Rangoon in May 1930 and the Saya San rebellion at the end of that year.

Ba Thaung by taking the Thakin title that had been used to address the foreign “masters” before, claimed the right to rule the country for himself and the whole Burmese “master race”. He symbolically anticipated Burmese independence and spread his message by singing the future national anthem of the country, he welcomed to serve some time in prison as proof of his and his co-Thakins selflessness in serving the national cause. Ba Maw on the other hand became prominent by defending the leader of the peasant rebellion who – like his followers – finally even sacrificed his life for his attempt to liberate the peasants from the system of collection taxes introduced by the colonial administration. Furthermore, by defending Saya San, Ba Maw became affiliated to the *wunthanu* movement and the GCBA in which Saya San's activities had been rooted.⁴³

Both Ba Maw and Ba Thaung were well acquainted with the modern world. The former had studied abroad, the latter had won many prizes for his translations of western literature. Both wanted Burma to make use of the instruments of international modernity to achieve the aim of Burma's independence. The big difference was that Ba Maw – like any others from the GCBA leaders who in the beginning had advocated boycott – decided to work inside the system established by the British whereas Ba Thaung mocked the rules of the political game installed by the foreign power and thus continued the tradition of the boycott movement. It was thus logical, that his participation in the 1933 by-election was the end of his engagement with “real politics” whereas the movement he had started became the vanguard of the fight for independence. For Ba Maw, the elections of 1932 became the beginning of a steep political career that however ended abruptly with the end of the Second World War after the Thakins had helped to defeat both the British and the Japanese colonial powers.

C November 26, 1936: A Parliamentary Scene for Competing for Burmese Leadership

43 See Pareicia Herbert 1982 *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930-1932) (Reappraised)*. Melbourne, Monash University (Working Paper No. 23)

1 Introduction

The British Parliament passed the Government of Burma Act in August 1935 together with the Government of India Act. It outlined the ways of how the Province of Burma should be governed after having been separated from India. The bill had been drafted on the base of the proposals submitted at the Round Table Conference of 1931/32 that had been given not much attention by the Burmese delegates who focussed on the separation vs. non-separation issue. It consisted of 159 sections and six schedules worded in the tradition of British constitutional tradition that does not aim at formulating a coherent system of state organs but comprises a set of rules and regulations that are derived from pragmatic considerations and lessons learned in the past.⁴⁴

The fifth schedule of the Act prescribing the oath of parliamentarians and High Court judges reads thus:

I, A.B., having been chosen a member of [one of the two parliaments] do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty the King, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully discharge the duty upon which I am about to enter.⁴⁵

Any allegiance to Burma is not mentioned here. This inevitably antagonised those members of parliament who had declared their allegiance to the nationalist cause and thus independence from British rule and the supreme symbol of the Empire's power. As a consequence, the future legislative body was predefined as stage on which people debated about a variety of issues without any chance to reach any compromise on the crucial issue of Burmese future.



The nationalist attitude was expressed by the symbolic act of burning the British flag, the Union Jack, on April 1, 1937 before the Secretariat, the building hosting the government, where the elected parliament had assembled. At the same time, the new regulations came into force. The flag burning, performed by Nu who was to become the first prime minister of Burma and some friends, can be seen as a prognosis of Burma's decision not to join the Commonwealth of Nations after independence. A union with the former colonial power was foreclosed by the symbolic act.

2 The New Burmese Legislature

In analogy to the British parliament, the new Burmese legislature consisted of the Governor as the representative of the King and two chambers, the House of Representatives (132 seats) and the Senate (36 seats). 92 seats in the former were elected in general non-communal (or general)

44 For the text see Ganga Singh (compiler) 1940 *Burma Parliamentary Companion*. Rangoon, British Burma Press: 40-141. (Online:

45 Ibid: 140.

constituencies, the remaining 40 (over 30%) were reserved for special ethnic communities (12 Karen, 8 Indian, 3 Europeans, 2 Anglo-Burmans) and members of one Rangoon University) and two each non-Indian labour and Indian labour). - Half of the members of the Senate were elected by the House of Representative and, the other half appointed by the Governor).

The two chambers had the right to discuss and pass bill that however needed the assent of the Governor and the Crown (e.g. the British government) to become affective. Furthermore, according to section 7 (1) of the Act, “Defence, ecclesiastical affairs, the affairs of the [excluded] areas [...] and the control of monetary policy, currency and coinage and [...] foreign affairs [...] shall be exercised in his [the Governor’s] discretion.”⁴⁶ The parliament therefore – as their predecessors - had the function of an advisory body of the Governor. He chose from the elected parliamentarians a council of up to ten ministers who were then sworn in “to aid and advise the Governor in the exercise of his functions.”⁴⁷ The Act did not provide for any post of Chief or Prime Minister.

3 Before the Elections: Regrouping of Parties

Different from the 1932 elections, there was no topic like the separation vs. anti-separation issue to arouse the interest of the voters. The British government had decided to separate Burma from India and opened the door for Burmese politicians to compete for more offices in the new administration to be formed – up to ten ministerial posts had to be occupied. As a consequence, the pre-election period was marked by a competition of potential leaders who might be chosen by invited by the Governor to form a council of ministers than on any subject affecting society – except the great underlying issue of getting independence as quick as possible. The question was what politician would be able to achieve this ultimate goal.

The establishment of the Legislative Council as a kind of parliament along with the Dyarchy system had helped to split the GCBA into different factions that now were called “parties” in English reports.⁴⁸ As factions, they were mostly named after their leader(s), as “parties” they had been given names that indicated their all-inclusiveness – like Home Rule, Independent, Nationalist, People’s, Progressive Party. In contrast, ‘modernist’ Sr. Ba Maw invented a name that pointed to a political program. He named the party under his leadership after having taken over one of the GCBA fractions *sinyetha wunthanu aphwe* “poor folks’ national association”, sometimes translated as “Proletarian Party”. Another party was named after the British Fabian Society promoting democratic socialism.⁴⁹

The Thakins after some discussions decided to participate in the elections as well. They chose a name already used in the election campaign of Ba Thaung in 1933, the *komin kochin aphwe* (One’s Own King, One’s Own Kind Association). Since the Burmese word *min* can be used to denote both a king and any government, the party name carried the demand for the restoration of Burmese sovereignty.

In the end, three major groups were formed that contested the elections. Two of them were headed by men who had been already active during the formative years of the nationalist movements, Chit Hlaing and Ba Pe, the third was Ba Maw who had become prominent in course of the pre-1932 elections.

Chit Hlaing, born 1878 in Mawlamyine as the son of a wealthy man, studied in England and became a barrister. After his return, he co-founded the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1907 and was elected president of the GCBA and a leader of the boycott movement. Due to the money he could spend and the support he got from monks and peasants, he became very popular

46 Ibid.: 50, Section 7 (1) of the Act.

47 Ibid.: 49-50 (Section 5 (1) of the Act.

48 Like with the term “democracy”, there is no Burmese word for “party” as a political association. The English loanword is used, pronounced in a Burmese way.

49 John S. Furnivall who tried to connect Burmese intellectual life to western thinking was a Fabianist.

and was regarded for some time during the 1920s as the most influential political figure in Burma. He lost much of his public support after becoming a member of the Legislative Council in the 1932 election in which he had become a member of the Anti-separatist League. He became a speaker of the Council but was replaced after a no-confidence motion.⁵⁰

Ba Pe (born 1883), originated from a district in Lower Burma, attended Calcutta University and co-founded the Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1906. In 1911, he established the newspaper *Thuriya* (Sun), that was to become one of the leading nationalist media. He became a leading member of the 21 party that split from the majority of the of the GBCA to accept the Dyarchy scheme and became a member of the Council from 1923 on. From 1930-1932 he served as Minister for Forests. Before the 1936 elections, he forged a coalition comprising of five groups that became known as the (re-)United GCBA or the *nga-bwin-saing* (Five Flower Alliance).

Only the new party of Ba Maw seems to have tried to win voters by issuing campaign pledges. He promised five acres of land for any landless peasant and free compulsory education in line with the name of his party and independence within five years.⁵¹ He further vowed to destroy the new constitution from within the parliament and that he would not accept any office. The same did the Thakins. U Ba Pe brought U Ottama back to the political scene, the titular head of his party was a distant relative of the last king whereas Chit Hlaing obviously relied on his fame acquired in the 1920s and his hostility to the constitution. Foreign observers were critical of Ba Maw and favoured Ba Pe and other “moderates”, but some doubts were raised on the enduring unity of his coalition of groups.

4 Results

On election day, around 50% of the electorate⁵² went to the polls. the “Five Flowers Group” won 46 , that is more than half of the 91 non-communal seats, Ba Maw’s and Chit Hlaing’s parties won 16 and 12 seats respectively, the Thakin party 3 and the Fabians just 1. The remaining 13 seats were taken by independent candidates.

5 After the Elections: A Struggle for Leadership Behind the Scene

The result called for bringing together a coalition in order to get the majority of votes to form a ministry – for the first and the last time in the constitutional history of Burma/Myanmar. An Indian who had lived and worked in Burma for some time in retrospect asked a number of questions about the approach of the elected to the House of Representatives or selected for the Senate to the new new situation:

Had any attempt been made to to bridge the gulf which admittedly existed between front-rank political leaders? When the country was about to enter upon a new era of Reforms, with wider powers vested in popularly elected Ministers, who would be responsible not merely to the Governor, but in a real sense to the House of Representatives, was it not felt that the country should be served by the best men available irrespective of Party? Was any attempt made to a truly National Government in the national interest? Was there any willingness on the part of the Leaders of of the various Parties to bury the hatchet and work together?⁵³

The author’s answer was: No. - Instead:

The true interests of the country were sacrificed on the altar of petty rivalries and jealousies and the country was flung to the wolves.⁵⁴

50 See section I,2 November 9, 1932: A Highly Confusing Plebiscite, p. 3.

51 *The Ottawa Journal* 31.12.1936: 6.

52 The number is calculated from the figures provide by Ganga Singh 1940. Other estimates are 40 or just 31 %.

53 C.N. Sen 1945 *A Peep into Burma Politics (1917-1942)*. Allahabad, Kitabistan: 56-57.

54 Ibid: 57.

In other words: According to the enlightened opinion of the observer, the Burmese politicians of that time were not mature enough to enter into a “great national coalition”. He advocated for a ministry comprising of all Burmese politicians – except the small Thakin group – and representatives of the Karen and the Indian communities. Instead, he notices, the Burmese leaders entered into “tug of war for the Premiership” - even if such a title was not mentioned in the Government of Burma Act. Only in September 1937, the Governor announced that the leader of the ministry should be called “premier” in official documents.⁵⁵

At that time, not Ba Pe, the leader of the party winning the most seats, had formed a ministry, but Ba Maw. He had brought together politicians from the major Burmese groups represented in the parliament plus an Arakanese and a Karen to take a ministerial post. His proposal got the majority of votes when parliamentary work started on April 1, 1937 and the new constitutional regulations came into effect. **[details about the election of the ministry]**

Most observers agree that the members of parliament were eager to gain prestige and status by winning a seat in parliament and have the chance to get ministerial post. The young Thakins regarded this attitude as corrupt and emphasised their readiness to sacrifice their career for the sake of the country in continuation of what happened in connection with Thakin Ba Thaung’s election campaign in Shwebo. The author Thein Pe who was close to the Thakins and should become one of the most prominent authors of independent Burma, already in 1935 wrote a satirical short novel about a rich landowner who got elected to the Legislative Council who lost his money and health because the lifestyle he had adopted in Rangoon during the session of the council.⁵⁶ The new constitution publicly became known as the “91-Department Scheme” referring to the 91 non-communal constituencies and alluding that each parliamentarian was caring for his own ministry.

On the other side, the votes supporting the ministry composed by Ba Maw show that the “national interests” invoked by the Indian commentator contrasted with the new rules of how to win a majority and the fact that 41 members of the House of Representatives were separately elected by ethnic groups or – mostly economic - interest groups. Ba Maw needed the votes of the latter. If he or another leader had formed a purely Burmese coalition, they would have antagonised the non-Burmese interests that the new scheme wanted to protect.

5 In Parliament: Four Premiers in Five Years

Ba Maw’s ministry faced turbulent times and was toppled in February 1939 at the first session of the Legislative Council of the new year after the year 1938 had been marked by a series of public unrest that started in early 1938 with a strike of oilfield workers in Upper Burma mostly supported by the Thakin movement. The “Year of Strife” as the year 1300 of the Burmese calendar was termed showed that the problem of successfully balancing the societal plurality of Burma in parliament were obstructed by extra-parliamentarian forces. They represented the Burmese “nationalist” desire of getting independence that was shared by most Burmese MPs but could not be realised because of the parliamentary rules of the political game introduced by the colonial power. As a consequence, the parliament as the new main “political arena” was given “something of the atmosphere of the jungle” as an American scholar worded it:

No holds were in the efforts made to embarrass political opponents within or outside the legislature. Members of the government were subjected in the legislature to a constant barrage of questions and personal attacks, punctuated with periodic no-confidence motions. Outside the legislature, the

55 *Calgary Herald* 16.9.1937: 9.

56 The original title of the story – *Min Tain Pin* – can be translated as “Royal Advisors”. The English translation was entitled “The M.L.A” (Member of the Legislative Assembly). See Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.) 2006 Material on Thein Pe, Biography of Saya Lun and Member of Parliament. Passau. Department of South-east Asian Studies: 53-70. (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/mlp10.02-op.pdf>; accessed 15.3.2020).

vernacular press even employed more sinister tactics on misrepresenting facts in fomenting popular passion and overt violence.⁵⁷

The fall of Ba Maw's ministry in early 1939 happened immediately after a violent end of a demonstration in Mandalay that caused the death of thirteen demonstrators, among them seven monks.⁵⁸ The demonstration happened after a meeting that had been held at the Eindawya Pagoda that endorsed a number of resolutions including the condemnation of the constitution and the end of the "coalition government" by way of a no-confidence motion.

Thakins in Rangoon endorsed such demands and mobilised the people to voice their support to the said demands by flying black flags at 9 a.m., the beginning of the session of parliament, beat tin cans for one hour and shouted "down with the coalition government", and burning sham coffins marked as the government and pictures of the ministers. After the successful no-confidence motion, the Thakins demanded that no new government should be elected. This however did not happen. A senior politician from the "Five- Flowers Party" was able to form a new ministry some days later. He again was succeeded in September 1940 by U Saw, one of the former members of his ministry who had formed a new party called *Myochit* (Patriot⁹).

At that time, the war broken out in Europe had overshadowed Burmese politics and motivated to create an extra-parliamentarian coalition established in October 1939 under Ba Maw's leadership comprising his party, the *Do-bama Asiatyone* and members of the *Nga-bwint-saing* party called the Freedom Bloc. The Bloc tied the Burmese support of the war on the side of Britain to the promise of independence after it had ended. Under the laws issued by the colonial administration, the propagation of the aim was a crime and many people, including Ba Maw, were arrested.

Saw pursued to reach independence by diplomatic means. He flew to London in late 1941 to ask for Dominion Status immediately after the war but was disappointed to learn that such matters would only be discussed after the war. He travelled to the US to advocate the Burmese cause there and was arrested on his return flight to Burma in Haifa in January 1942 after having seen the Japanese ambassador in Portugal on a stopover there. He was detained in Uganda for four years and returned to Burma in January 1946.

After Saw's arrest, the Governor appointed Sir Paw Tun, a politician loyal to the British and married to an American wife, to become the new premier. Both left Burma for India before the Japanese army and their allies, the Burma Independence Army (BIA) had celebrated a victory parade in Rangoon in June 1942..

6 Summary: An Unfinished Reform Project

The House of Representatives elected in November 1936 did not finish its term of five years after convening for the first time on April 1, 1937. The flag burning ceremony performed on that day proved to be prophetic. The British left Rangoon on March 6, 1942 some months after the last session of parliament had been terminated[**details**]. During that period, the parliament had been convened twice a year for some months each, many questions had been asked, bills introduced, discussed, passed and amended, and select committees established to look into special issues. The debates were very lively and many of them peppered by personal attacks hidden by polite language required by the house rules.

These rules however were "made in England" and the two chambers of the house were sandwiched between the authority of the British Crown represented by the governor and his staff and the tumultuous events happening outside parliament within Burma and internationally. The newspapers regularly reported about the rise of communism and fascism and after the outbreak of the war in

57 John F. Cady 1965 *A History of Modern Burma*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 387-388.

58 For a detailed account of the events see Khin Yi 1988: 126-130.

Europe and the slogan “Britain’s difficulty is Burma’s opportunity” - borrowed from the Irish uprising during World War I – became popular.

Given these circumstances, the new system had no chance to be tested, modified and mature. In September 1939, a contemporary Burmese observer diagnosed the attitude of his fellow-countrymen towards politics as child-like:

We refuse to grow up and think ourselves; we are unable to purge ourselves of the fear of ridicule. Burmese politics have no meaning save to keep Burmese newspapers busy. All our politicians are out to wreck the constitution but at the first available opportunity, the loudest lunged will not hesitate to swallow his spit. This is the picture of the Burmans as one of them sees them, but we need not despair. Recognition and detection of the cause of a malady are half of the cure.⁵⁹

The author of this self-critical sentences was U Thant who after the war became a close confident of Nu and later a became General Secretary of the United Nations.

Epilogue and Intermezzo 1: Some Features of Elections Held under Colonial Rule and “Independent” Burma under the Japanese

1 Lack of Legitimation and Corresponding Violence

The failure of the British attempt to introduce elections as a means of offering an alternative political system to the absolute monarchy can be easily explained. The reforms was introduced by a foreign power that was rejected by the majority of the people simply because it was not regarded as legitimate as the first elections held in 1922 clearly demonstrated. Since the colonial administration ignored the resistance and suppressed the measures of the grass-root movement to boycott any kind of co-operation with the new institutions, a vicious circle was set in motion. The repressive measures taken that were meant to secure law and order contributed to an increase of mistrust on the side of the people and their representatives that finally resulted in violent conflict. What happened when the Second World War reached Burma, was preceded by a militarisation of the minds of the people that exploded in the inter-communal riots of 1920, 1931 and 1938 as well as in the Sayaq San Rebellion of 1930-1932.

Furthermore, another kind of militarisation happened after 1930 when a number of para-military groups (*tats*) emerged organised as volunteer corps of a great number of civil groups and later of political parties as well consisting mostly of young people.⁶⁰ They were not armed but did have uniforms that showed their affiliation. After 1935, such groups that first were just used to exhibit the pride of a particular group by parading at festive occasions, later became politicised in a way that happened in Europe in the confrontation between leftists and rightists paramilitary units.

The instrument of elections introduced by the British created facts that were used by the Burmese political elites to pursue their aims of achieving their version of an independent Burma. Unavoidably, the element of competition inherent in this instrument contributed to splits within the Burmese nationalist lay movement organised in the GCBA and monks’ associations that acted as their consultants and supervisors. This process however did not lead to the establishment of political parties along the lines of British politics. The author of the first history of post-royal Burma who had served as secretary for one of the GCBA factions and joined the Fabian party summarised his assessment on the Burmese way of establishing parties thus:

59 Cady 1965: 388-389. The quotation is taken from the nationalist Burmese newspaper New Burma.

60 For some more details see Robert Taylor 1987 The State in Burma. London, Hurst: 202-210.

A pathetic state of Burmese politics is that political parties do not have definite ideology. In England there is no such thing as Baldwin's party, or Landsberry's party, or Mac Donald's party, or Lloyd George's party. The parties in England are Conservative, Socialist, Labour, Liberal, which are based on party ideology. The same is true in United States and France; their parties are not named after a person. In Italy they have Fascist party, not Mussolini's party; in Germany Nazi party, not Hitler's party. After Mussolini's death Fascism will remain. However, in Burma no ideology will remain after the deaths of U Ba Pe, U Chit Hlaing and Dr Ba Maw. As the parties are named after persons there can be no definite ism; only activities that follow the will of the leaders prevail. This is the greatest defect in Burmese politics; it is the duty of the people to correct it.⁶¹

Such personalisation of politics added by personal rivalries contributed to a continuity of shifting alliances that became clearly visible before the 1932 elections. The two Leagues that had been formed were engaged in a mock fight because both had the same aim – the achievement of independence. The methods used in this fight added to the image that electorate politics were some

A further impediment to establish a party landscape characterised by differences of political convictions was the phenomenon of the “plural society”. The term was coined by J.S. Furnivall who helped to introduce Fabian ideas of gradual political reforms to Burma labelled the multi-ethnic society of colonial Burma. Different ethnic groups got “met but did not combine” here. The parliament in which seats were reserved for Karen, Indians and British parliamentarians was just such a meeting place. Political standpoints were negotiated and exchanged like the goods offered by different groups, coalitions were formed but they were short-lived due to the lack of common interests – particularly with regard to the crucial issue of the country's independence.

The constitution under which the elections of 1936 were held, allowed for a greater participation of the two chambers in the shaping of the living condition of the country by passing bills that – if accepted by the British supervisors – had a concrete impact on the electorate. But such decision were overlaid by discussions taking place mainly in the House of Representatives that can be termed proxy debates on the topic of who the “real” ruler of Burma should be. One outstanding example is the long debate in 1941 on the issue of Burma's attitude to the war that had broken out in Europe. The majority of the parliamentarians voted against the British decision to make Burma an ally of Britain in the fight against Germany and thus indirectly supported the Freedom Bloc that had

linked the issue of the Burmese support of the British with the demand of getting an immediate promise of independence.



Burmese soldiers and civilians with the BIA flag (Source: Wikiwand)

Furthermore, the introduction of elections as part of a “modern” political system helped to create the phenomenon a “Buddhist nationalism” and the involvement of monks in politics, the anti-Muslims riots in 1938 being a lowlight of inter-communal relations in Burma due to the religious accentuation of ethnic tensions between the Burmese and Indian population.

61 Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.) 2006 *Material on Ba Khaing, Political History of Myanmar*. Passau, Department of South-east Asian Studies: 113 (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs11/mlp10.05-op.pdf>; accessed 15.3.2020).

2 The Time under Japanese Occupation

These and others issues ended with the Japanese attack on Pearls Harbour and the following conquest of the South-east Asian colonies. Instead of verbal fights in parliament, weapons were used as the main means to achieve the long-cherished goal of independence. The major political groups already had established their paramilitary units before the beginning of the German assault on Poland. After the Burmese Independence Army under Aung San had helped to drive the British out of Burma. The nucleus of the army, the famous 30 comrades, all had been Thakins before. Most pre-war Burmese politicians became integrated in the new political system established under Japanese domination.⁶² An interim constitution was drawn up that vested all executive power in the Head of State, a post taken over by Ba Maw. A new united party was formed, named the *Do-Bama Sinyetha Asiayone*. Streets and places were renamed, among them the former Churchill Rd. named after the British minister who had issued the proclamation under which Burma was integrated in British India in 1886. Since then, the road is named Komin Kochin Rd. after the Do-bama party. The house in street number 8, a noble villa built by a rich Chinese in the 1920s, became the headquarters of the Anti Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) in 1945, for a short time until Aung San's death the centre of Burmese political fight for independence.⁶³

The three years under Japanese domination, two of them under a nominally independent Burmese government, were a time determined by forced unity under the nationalist slogan "One Party, One Blood, One Voice and One Command." The celebrations performed on August 1, 1943 to mark the event contained elements borrowed from the days of royal rule. Three men who had taken the Thakin title for some time and took over different functions in the new administration dominated the politics of Burma until 1988: Aung San, Nu, and Ne Win. In contrast, no politician of the pre-war period who had been involved in the elections organised by the British administration became successful under the new constitution enacted in 1947. Interlude: Some Features of Elections Held under Colonial Rule and "Independent" Burma under the Japanese

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62 Some communists like Thein Pe and Thakin Soe helped the British to organise a guerilla warfare in Burma; some member of the last Burmese administration accompanied Governor Dorman Smith to Simla and some politicians like Takhins Ba Sein and Tun Oke as well as Saw were interned in other parts of the British Empire.

63 Today, the compound hosts the German Cultural Institute ("Goethe Institut").

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