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Myanmar's Misery
A Comment

1 Introduction

On November 5, 1947, the second reading of the Burma Independence Bill took place in the British House of Commons. It was introduced by premier Clemens Attlee who had headed the British team that had negotiated the terms of independence with a Burmese delegation under Aung San's leadership, at that time the de facto leader of the Burmese government, in January of that year. In his speech, Attlee defended the bill that provided for a quick independence of Burma less than two months after the debate. The bill made it clear that independent Burma was not to become a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. His main argument was that – in April 1947 - the people of Burma had elected representatives who had decided to cut the ties with Great Britain.¹

Winston Churchill, the leader of the opposition after the defeat of his Conservative Party in the elections of June 1945, vehemently opposed the bill. He referred to the "about 12,000 murders and [...] armed robberies" that had happened during the last seven months in Burma and predicted that this was just "a prelude [...] to the bloody welter which I fear will presently begin". At the end of his speech, he compared Burma with India where the division of the former colony into two states, one predominantly Hindu, the other Muslim, had resulted in a humanitarian disaster.

Burma is [...] likely to reproduce, though, of course, on a far smaller scale, the horrors and disasters which have overspread her great neighbour and which should ever haunt the consciences of the principal actors in this tragedy. [...] There is no assurance that the power of the new Government will be sufficient to maintain internal order, or, I might add, national independence against far larger and far more powerful neighbours. We stand on the threshold of another scene of misery and ruin, marking and illustrating the fearful retrogression of civilisation which the abandonment by Great Britain of her responsibilities in the East have brought and are bringing upon Asia and the world. I say this to the Government: You shall bear that burden.

Shortly after the debate, a civil war broke out in Burma almost simultaneously with the declaration of independence. It was a war between Burmese and Burmese people. Thus the 1947 war is a parallel of the conflict that broke out after the military's – renewed - takeover of full governmental control on February 1, 2021.

One may therefore say that Myanmar has returned to point zero, to the day before independence. The civil war is back in the Burmese heartland, and yet had never ceased in the country's border regions during the 70plus years of Burma's becoming a post-colonial state - until today. In other words: Churchill's father had proclaimed the integration of Burma into the British-Indian Empire and the end of the Burmese monarchy on January 1, 1886. This was meant as a new year gift to Queen Victoria. In 1947, Churchill's son was right in his assessment that "bloody welter" would happen if the British left the country as early as provided by the Aung San-Attlee Agreement.

It is of course futile to blame Attlee's government for what is happening right now in Myanmar and to praise the convinced imperialist Churchill in retrospect for his foresight. But it might be worthwhile to look at the present crisis from a historical bird's eye view. This overview will start by taking up some points made by Churchill in 1947 (2) and will present some observations on today's communication on the recent crisis both in Myanmar and in the west (3). The final part draws a short and very sober conclusion (4).

1 For this and the following information see the [transcriptstranscripts](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/05/burma-independence-bill) of the debate: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/05/burma-independence-bill> (accessed 18.4.2021).

2 Aung San, Saw and Than Tun – Failures of Communication and their Catastrophic Consequences

The Labour premier Attlee referred to the "will of the people" to justify the decision of his government to grant Burma its desired independence very quickly. To support his standpoint, his conservative opponent brought up the names of two Burmese politicians that had participated in the negotiations. He called Aung San the head of a "quisling army" that had committed "great cruelties whose hands were dyed with British and loyal Burmese blood " and a "traitor". With regard to Saw who at that time stood on trial for the assassination of Aung San, he retold the story of Saw's travel to Britain in late 1941 as the country's chief minister. Churchill, the then premier, had met him, but declined the wish to grant Burma independence. When Saw "offered his allegiance to Japan" after the visit to London, Churchill acted. Saw was arrested on his way back to Burma and interned in Uganda.

Churchill concluded: "Such were the two figures whom the Government welcomed as the outstanding authorities with whom they were to confer and to whom they were to confide the future of Burma where 15 million people had dwelt for more than 60 years in peace, justice and contentment under British rule." Thus, Burmese politicians could not be trusted and the agreement on independence concluded with them, consequently would result in a catastrophe for the "loyal Burmese" - and of course for British interests in Burma as well.

Such unfavourable portrayal of the last pre-war and the first post-war leader of a Burmese government can be easily dismissed as statements of a man who enjoyed the "white man's burden" of spreading western civilisation to the rest of the world. The tense relationship between the two Burmese politicians resulting in the killing of Aung San in the manner of deciding conflicts on the legitimacy of rule however points to a problem that characterises Myanmar politics until today.

Aung San and Saw had been chosen by the British governor to represent different Burmese political factions that were members of the Governor's Council, the provisional Burmese government. Aung San represented the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), Saw the Myochit (Patriot) Party founded by him in 1938. During the 14 days of the negotiations of independence, the Burmese six men delegation was accommodated at the posh Dorchester Hotel. Ten meetings of both delegations took place. In the intervals each delegation held separate meetings. Furthermore, a number of sightseeing and social functions had been organised. Despite this tough programme, there was plenty time to discuss formally and informally about the Burmese demands between the members of the delegation.

On the final day, the British members of the negotiation team were surprised to learn that the two members of the Burmese delegation that were not related to the AFPFL, Ba Sein (from the *Dobama Asiayone*) and Saw, refused to sign the agreement. The British wondered why the two men had not voiced opposition to the Burmese delegation's demands brought forward by Aung San before. They got no answer. Aung San's reaction was summarised thus: "Let them resign [from the Executive Council] and say ... that they don't take any responsibility for it."

It seems, that this show of disunity did not surprise Aung San and his AFPFL colleagues. The refusal to sign the agreement and Aung San's cool reaction are clearly connected to Saw's decision to hire some gunmen to kill Aung San 18 months later. It was the end of a long chain of tense relations between Aung San and Saw that can be traced back to the late 1930s. The dramatic increase of tensions is highlighted by an assassination attempt on Saw in September 1946. Aung San together with Nu visited Saw in hospital, but rumours were spread that it was Aung San or the AFPFL who were behind the attempt to remove Saw from the political scene.

Anyway, the end of the conference in London shows that no serious communication had taken place between the members of the Burmese delegation's different factions. Aung San's reaction indicated that this did not matter much to him.

Three months before the London negotiations, on October 20, 1946, Aung San explained in a lengthy speech why he had expelled the Communist Party of Burma headed by his brother-in-law Than Tun from the AFPFL. He used political arguments, but in the end, he labelled the communist leaders "dirty people". Than Tun and Aung San had closely cooperated with each other since the end of the 1930s. In 1939 they had co-founded a communist cell, during the war they had not just married sisters but served as ministers in the Burmese government headed by Ba Maw. They were co-founders of the AFPFL, but apparently unable to settle their different political views in the interest of the country's often invoked national unity. Aung San's decision resulted in the outbreak of an intra-Burmese civil war that lasted until 1988 to be replaced by a "mental war" between Aung San Suu Kyi and their followers in the "democracy movement" and the armed forces, the Tatmadaw. However, it was the army that had saved the democratically elected government of Nu from being overthrown in 1948.

These two events are only two negative highlights of many other personal splits that happened since the beginning of the political awakening in Burma at the beginning of the 20th century. Never ever a culture of political compromise came into being. Myanmar politics always were conducted in the form of political duels between personalities aiming at leading the country. The loser never got a chance to return.

3 Confrontation within Myanmar, Roller-coaster Moral Rides Abroad

The recent split sealed by the taking over of full control of the Myanmar government on February 1, 2021 was preceded by a failure of communication between the leaders of the civil and military wings of the government. The "civil government" was led by Aung San Suu Kyi whose National League for Democracy (NLD) had won a landslide victory over the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). This party had won the 2010 elections, however was boycotted by the NLD because of the "undemocratic" essence of the 2008 constitution drafted by the Tatmadaw. The co-operation of the unequal partners started in late March 2016. The stability of this very special coalition rested on the leaders of the two blocs in parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi for the NLD and Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief who had appointed the 25% of soldiers in all parliaments. This "institutionalised opposition" to elected civilians was one means provided by the constitution to guarantee the military a continuous co-regency in the affairs of Myanmar.

The communication between the two leaders obviously did not work. In 2021 the point of dispute was the charge of the Tatmadaw and two parties close to it, that the election procedures had been flawed. The essence of the conflict however clearly was a dispute about the constitution of 2008. The NLD from the beginning had promised to change this constitution, whereas the Tatmadaw had rejected any amendments which would make an end to its power to veto fundamental changes.

The result of the military's action was a public outcry that quickly resulted in a bloody suppression of the - over time not alone peaceful - protests and in a mutual excommunication of the two political bodies claiming to legitimately rule the country. The Committee Representing the Pyidaungmye Hluttaw, the Union Parliament (CRPH), a kind of underground alternative government, declared the State Administrative Council (SAC) formed on February 1 by the Tatmadaw leadership, a "terrorist organisation". On the other side, the SAC declared CRPH illegal, and anyone involved with it to be charged with high treason, which carries the death penalty. On this basis, even any attempt of talks between the two sides seems impossible.

Myanmar neighbours try to keep a low profile in the present conflict, the Western countries continue a roller-coaster ride in assessing the situation of the country since 1988. Before that, only few people even knew where Burma was even located. It was not the coup of 1988, which had ended the 28 years of the "Burmese way to socialism" by the military suppression public protests, which aroused Western interest in Burma. It was the personality of Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the "father of the nation". Within the country, she became recognised as the country's "mother"

and the beloved alternative to tough military rule. Outside, she was elevated to the position to an icon of democracy and human rights. After her acceptance of the rules of the political game set by the military through her participation in the 2012 by-elections, a rush of western support of Myanmar commenced spurred by the expectation that the country was on the way towards the ideals for which Aung San Suu Kyi had been adored up to then.

This euphoria however quickly ended after she did not react corresponding to Western expectations in the Rohingya crisis. Many commentators accused her of having become a fig leaf for the brutal military, and alleged that she did so in order to fulfil her dream of becoming Myanmar's president one day. After February 1, the young protestors in Myanmar, the Generation Z and the activists of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have taken her place.

What has however never taken place over the last three decades, is a thorough analysis of the country's political culture highlighted by the continuity of communication failures and of other problems, to be done by the western opinion-forming agencies, the media and politics. Burma/Myanmar was and is a perfect screen for western fantasies of a good tropical life in a far away small, beautiful, needy but not really important country.

As a consequence, no real debates about the reasons for the Myanmar misery took place. Instead, just ritual moral condemnations of the alleged scoundrels and praise of the heroines and heroes of the day are being uttered.

In a way, this situation resembles the debate in the British Parliament in November 1947. It was a shadow debate between people who didn't and could not know what the "real reality" of Burma was at that time. But politicians had of course to pretend they knew. Today's almost unanimous attitude towards the events in Myanmar is equally ignorant for a number of comprehensible reasons. Such ignorance however might – again - contribute to catastrophic results.

Winston Churchill used the wrong arguments, but his prophesy that Burma was released into independence that would be full of bloodshed and misery was correct.. Today we would likely use the - neo-imperialist - phrase that the country was predetermined to become a "failed state" after independence.

4 Conclusion

In retrospect, Burma's/Myanmar's history can be seen as a tragedy that started even before the country's independence with Aung San's assassination. One can doubt that he would have prevented what followed because he contributed to the culture of no-compromise. Tragedies have – first of all - to be mourned. There are no ready-made recipes to stop them. The beginning of any attempt to "help Myanmar" is to admit the sad fact that a historical tragedy is continuing here as in many other post-colonial countries.

As a second step, one could try to work on the lack of debate on the reasons of Myanmar's misery instead of producing addresses of solidarity that might rather pour oil on fire than nurture attitudes of compromise. No doubt, it would be a difficult task to conduct rational debates in view of the misery happening in Myanmar right now. But it could be a small beginning of breaking - or just interrupting - the vicious circle of failed or not existing communication. Any communication about the reasons of Myanmar's misery both in Myanmar and abroad that is more than a sequence of monologues is vital.

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