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Elections in Burma/Myanmar, 1922-2020.
Their Constitutional Contexts and Political Impact
An analytic narration

0 Introduction - Outline of the Study

On November 8, 2020, general elections were held in the country today called Myanmar¹ for the 17th time. Two months before the event, two foreign analysts characterised these polls as a further stage on the country's "rocky road to democracy".² The following texts contain the stories of the previous stages on this road since the British administrators of Burma organised the first polls almost 100 years ago on November 21, 1922 in the last province added to the British Raj between 1824 and 1886.

The first and the last elections covered on the following pages illustrate the size of the rocks that blocked the road to democratic elections in Burma/Myanmar. The first one was almost completely boycotted by the electorate, the last one was nullified by the military leadership because of alleged irregularities, an action that was followed by massive protests of the people who had voted for the winning party, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). A closer look at the polls held in the country might help to understand the difficulties to make elections an instrument of democracy in the country.

This narration of events is based on documents mainly coming from contemporary sources with a focus on material originating in Burma/Myanmar. The - unavoidable - analytic interpretation of any documented evidence comes second. This approach is meant as a small antidote to the widespread inclination of jumping to conclusions in matters related to the development or non-development of "democracy" in Burma/Myanmar both in the field of media reports and theoretical analyses of various academic commentators.

The strategy of providing the background of the events happening before, on and after the respective election day thus takes a special view on the "Burmese way" to whatever kind of "democracy". It is hoped that this approach can help to shed some new light on the "rocks" that contributed to make Burma's/Myanmar's political journey since the first introduction of "modern" political reforms so bumpy.

General elections are "held at regular intervals in which candidates are elected in all or most constituencies of a nation or state".³ Details about the "regularity" are laid down in the constitution of the respective country or state. Such a legally binding document was for the first time enacted in Burma by the British colonial power on January 1, 1923, shortly after the first elections of November 1922. This happened more than three years after the reforms introduced in the other Indian provinces what can be seen as an indication that the country's road towards becoming and provides information about the role of parliament in the political process that was rocky not only

¹ This study uses "Burma" as name of the country until 1989 when the military government issued the Adaptation of Expression Law (June 18, 1989) that ruled to substitute the term "Burma" and its derivations contained in legal texts by the word "Myanmar". This term is used for the time after the decree. - According to the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Notification 5/89, the same applies to the use of Rangoon and Yangon for the country's biggest city and Karen and Kayin. For most other geographical and ethnic designation the Myanmar version is used, i.e. Bago and Ayeyarwadi instead of Pegu and Irrawaddy.

² <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/wahlen-2020-in-myanmar> (accessed 29.9.2020).

³ Definition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/general%20election>; accessed 23.10.2020).

when Burma became independent as a presumably independent modern state but already from the first general elections held in 1922 on.

This narration contextualises the elections in a double way. It contains information about the five constitutions under which Burma/Myanmar was ruled since the beginning of the 20th century as well as a few episodes on what happened inside the elected legislatures. Albeit not held all the time at "regular intervals", the 17 elections between 1922 and 2020 covered here in some detail represent some kind of civic continuity throughout the country's modern history that is very often portrayed as a sequence of breakups in which authoritarian military involvement played a crucial role.

The particular approach of this study can be illustrated by a linguistic plus cultural-anthropological observation. As no indigenous term fitting the English word "democracy" could be found, the term was just transcribed in letters of the Burmese alphabet. (Blum 2010: 8-9) In contrast, a Burmese word for "election" exists: ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ (jwei:-kau'-pwe:) designating a communal event at which something or somebody is elected or selected. The word thus has a very broad meaning but was not used in a somewhat specifically political sense until colonial times because formal bottom-up electoral procedures were unknown in the traditional Burmese society. On top of the society was the king who ruled indirectly through governors supposed to be loyal to him. In the countryside, the office of the headman was hereditary.

However the ideological background of monarchic rule contained an "electoral" element. A famous and often quoted Buddhist text, the *Aggañña Sutta*, tells the story of the first ruler of the world called the *Maha-Sammata*, the "Great Elect" or "Select" chosen unanimously by the people whose main function was to prevent moral decay, that is in modern terms: to preserve law and order. The first ruler was a kind of role model for the ideal concept of Burmese kingship based on a vertical social contract. The story was used by Aung San Suu Kyi to argue that the idea of democracy" is rooted in Burmese-Buddhist traditions and the Burmese word for "president" - *thamada* - is derived from the Pali term. (Walton 2012: 70-86)

The old story shows that in Burma an indigenous model for elections exists that might be a part of the explanation of why the "road to democracy" is so rocky as almost stereotypically noticed. By a variety of observers This does not mean however that the narration presented here serves the aim of suggesting any "culturalistic" thesis. Readers are just invited to make up their own mind on the logic of events that might or not might connect recent developments with what happened earlier in the century between the preparations for the first elections held in the central region of British Burma in 1922 and the polls of 2020.

As a narration, the following chapters try to present some vivid views on what happened before, on and after the day or days of voting. The five constitutions under which the 17 elections were held are outlined, the available information on the election results are presented, some highlights of parliamentary work are retold, and details about some political protagonists are provided. A few pictures shall help to visualise some of the scenes related to the electoral proceedings.

Besides sources from Burma/Myanmar highlighting indigenous views on elections, some information on the contemporary western perception is supplied⁴ to help looking at the topic from different perspectives and to get an idea about the interrelationship of "native" and western views on the elections held. Furthermore, some information about the representation of the non-Burmese ethnic groups that played an important role right from the start of the electoral provisions in the early 1920s will be presented.⁵

⁴ Most material on this topic is taken from the two newspaper archives "Newspapers" (<https://www.newspapers.com/>) and The British Newspaper Archive (<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>).

The starting point of this narration is determined by the observation that the provisions of holding elections 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.

As the initial part of this narration will show, the new commodity was not well received in the beginning. The first polls were ignored by the majority of the electorate. Other peculiarities followed, the best-known from recent time is the election from May 1990 organised by the military junta in a free and fair way for a parliament that was never convened.

In face of such special features, 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; it is preceded by an overview of Myanmar's political history and an outline of the evolution of electoral provisions (Frasch 2001). In another handbook on political parties originating and vanishing in the same region over time, Robert Taylor, after a short introductory essay on Burmese elections that took part until 1985, has compiled a lot of valuable information about Burmese parties (Taylor 1985). 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 in the country (Taylor 1996): Recent contributions on elections in Myanmar concentrate on what happened after the popular uprising of 1988 that ended the socialist period (1962-1988) under one-party rule. The elections taken place under British colonial rule are never discussed and only some basic information is given on the post independent periods until the "democracy movement" of 1988 (see International Crisis Group 2015; Aktar 2020). The article deals with the buildings hosting parliaments from the colonial period until the construction of a large parliamentary complex in Myanmar's new capital Naypyidaw (Egretau 2017):

From the Burmese side, no detailed studies have been written about this topic. In June 2010, the *Irrawaddy* however published a series of three articles entitled "Ghost of the Elections Past" written by a Burmese author who had left his country after 1988. They give an overview on the elections since 1922 and some assessments in view of the 2010 elections, the first held under the constitution of 2008 (Ko Ko Thett 2010).

This study - just like as the essays of the Myanmar author - is divided into three parts. As to the colonial period between the wars (Üart A, 1920-1942), the elections of 1925 and 1928 are covered together because of the lack of material available here. Part B covering the end of World War II to the military coup of March 1962, informs about the elections to a Constituent Assembly, the drafting of Burma's first constitution and the three polls of 1951, 1956 and 1960. Part c (1988 -2012) outlines the three general elections of 1988, 2010 and 2015 as well as the by-elections of 2012 in which Aung San Suu Kyi participated for a first time as a candidate together with some 40 plus other members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) participated for the first time under the regulations of the 2008 constitution drafted under the supervision of the military.

After the two first parts of the trilogy, two "intermezzi" will provide some basic 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.

Each period will be framed by a prologue and an epilogue to connect the elections to the main turning points of Burma's/Myanmar's history since the end of royal rule that made it necessary to

⁵ For the special theme of "ethnopolitics" see Buzzi 2003, a study concentrates on the period between 1948 and 1962. Zhu 2019 gives an overview on inter-ethnic relations with a view on the 2020 elections.

introduce a completely new political system. The events of 1885, 1945, 1962 and 1988 are characterised by military actions of different kinds. At the same time they designate new attempts to establish the foundations for a government dominated by elected civilians. It can be expected that both the events retold in the following texts as well as the narration of what - might have - happened include some redundant information. The author is sympathetic to the rather philosophical observation of Maung Maung, the last president of socialist Burma that change in Burma/Myanmar "happens in cycles, patterns and rhythms". (Maung Maung 1999: 9)

In this sense, the elections of 2020 can be seen as an open window allowing a look to a future that with regard to electoral matters might resemble what has happened in the past.