

21 November 1922

An Election Boycotted – or Ignored – by the People

On Saturday, February 12, 1921, the members of the Governor's Council met at Government House, today called Secretariat located between Bo Aung Gyaw and Theinbyu Streets, then named Sparks and Judah Ezekiel Roads. After two new members of the Council had taken the oath of allegiance to the Crown, Governor Craddock informed the members of the Council about the desire of the British government to obtain the opinion of the Council on the constitutional reforms to be discussed in the British Parliament soon. At the end of his preliminary remarks, he mentioned an article published by a newspaper close to Burma's "advanced party" as the Governor named it, most likely referring to the newly founded General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) that had succeeded the YMBA at the annual conference held in October 1920 in Prome (Pyay). According to the governor, the article threatened the "elder Burmese members of the Council" with a "social boycott" if they would not "respond[...] to the appeal" of the party. Such remarks, the governor added, were not legitimate, and the newspaper

as guilty of grossly improper conduct, which if persisted in would be destructive of all liberty of speech and free expression of legitimate opinion. I feel no doubt that those who are directing the policy which the paper claims to represent will utterly repudiate disgraceful tactics of this kind [...] (Proceedings GC: 749.

This episode shows that a Burmese boycott mentality towards reforms initiated by the colonial power that had characterised the university strike of 1920 continued and was next directed against the constitutional reforms by the umbrella organisation of Burmese nationalist groups. This attitude of bellicose non-cooperation affected the elections under the reform scheme - just 6.9 % of the electorate went to the polls when the first general elections¹ in Burma were finally held in November 1922. They were virtually ignored by almost all citizens who were entitled to vote. The electorate was limited to people over 18 years who paid taxes. The system of payment was different in Upper and Lower Burma. According to a British newspaper report about debate in the British Parliament, 3 million

The following sections deal with some features of the events leading to this electoral outcome and its context spanning the time until the end of the 1930s. The first two sections will highlight two aspects of Burmese-British relations after the end of World War I (2 and 3) followed by some details on the introduction of Dyarchy in Burma (4) and the split of the GCBA before the elections (5). Some remarks on the Anti-Boycott Bill issued in 1922 (6) and some information about the performance of the elections and their results (7=) are provided.

2 The Emergence of Two Stages on Which Burmese Politics Were Performed

Until World War I, Burma was widely regarded as "peaceful and loyal" to Britain and "not yet affected by the unrest prevailing in the other portions of the Empire" as the headline of a long report on the youngest province of British India published in 1910 worded it.² In terms of politics, the population was regarded as apathetic. According to the assessment of the British authorities, this attitude was mainly due to the fact that people of Burma "lacked the political experience and education necessary for working a democratic constitution." (Hall 1950: 149) In line with such appraisal, the British administration on the spot did not take the Burmese sentiments as expressed in

1 In addition to the general elections, local polls on the village and circle boards (administrative unit for several small villages) were organised. They will not be covered here. For some details about the situation in 1922 see Maung Maung 1980: 29-20, 44-45..

2 *Detroit Free Press*, 13.3.1910: 69.1

the support of the student strike of 1920 and the following boycott measures serious. But just viewed them as “destructive” – and acted accordingly.

In this vein, a deep gulf becomes evident between two stages of Burmese politics, the "official" one built according to the rules of British standards and a native scene according to which a very different set of rules governed the political game. Governor Craddock and a number of Burmese and other members of ethnic groups living in the country represented the actors on the scene of politics aiming at introducing the Burmese to western-styled democratic politics; the leaders of the students strike and the majority of younger Burmese politicians who had established the YMBA and the GCBA opposed this long-term project of getting politically education claiming that they were able to educate and govern themselves right away.

The rift that might have lay dormant for some time became obvious after the colonial administration decided to not include Burma in the reform process initiated through Government of India Act 1919. The controversies on the University Act showed that the times of Burmese political apathy had ended. At the same time, the two separate stages became visible on which the controversy was enacted according to contrasting rules of the game and before different audiences. The decisions to implement the Act were taken in closed meetings after procedures practised in Britain and later accomplished by the colonial bureaucracy. The protest was solemnly sealed at a public place revered by the Burmese people and resulted in a popular movement that invented and practised alternatives to the schemes of the government.

With respect to the constitutional reforms, two meetings held in the same place in July and August 1919 illustrate the difference at the beginning of the discussion of how the Indian reform scheme should be implemented in Burma. The gatherings that were held at the prestigious Jubilee Hall in Rangoon in connection with the journey of the YMBA delegation to London in July 1919 to advocate the nationalist cause. (Tin Htway 1969: 73-78; Cady 1965: 207-208) First, the governor invited a number of people representing the notables of Rangoon to a "mass meeting". At the end of the function, a resolution was passed and sent to London by telegram in support of the governor's scheme and the recommendation that no support whatever should be extended to the delegation which had gone to England to protest it. (Tin Htway: 74) Craddock's speech given at that occasion is not reported but on another occasion in August 1919 he voiced his criticisms of "Young Burma" by saying:

The young Burmans are in danger of taking the wrong turning. My information is that they are sending paid emissaries³ to arrange for a snowball of several hundred telegrams to the Secretary of State to prove that the whole people of Burma are hot for the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford scheme [the Indian reform scheme; hbz] I hope that this information is incorrect for such a course of action would be futile as it is dishonest. (Craddock 1924: 186)

In response to this meeting, on August 17 a mass meeting organised by the YMBA happened at the same building. It was overcrowded with people many of them had come from far away in support of the delegates and their pleading for Burma's inclusion in the Act. The meeting was chaired by Chit Hlaing, the President of the association. A Burmese writer who should become Burma's national poet and known as Thakin Kodaw Hmine later, published a long poem that was published one month later in the *Thuriya* newspaper:

Oh rejoice! Here in the Jubilee Hall – With the same ideas and with unity - Oh! - what a mass, what a crowd - Marvellous! Marvellous! Marvellous! - It is a fantasy, it is indescribable - And I know it is for the national pride of Burma in the world.

Here was no doubtful mind about town or country-side, it is as a single mind. - All are so friendly and united, and there are no differences, none whatever. - Their states of minds, their states of

3 The YMBA had raised some £ 2,000 to finance the journey. (Cady 1965: 207)

consciousness are so active and alive – All people, not lay folk alone, but monks also who should avoid worldly affairs.

Within the auspicious and motherly British Empire – which claims that everything should be just and fair in accordance with real democracy -Indeed Burma will also play her part with the solemn determination – That we may have our own share of rights. (Tin Htway 1969: 76-77)

The end of this vision of a classless Burmese society as part of a just and democratic worldwide empire contains a hidden challenge to the "motherly British Empire" in case that the "share of rights" would not be granted.

This veiled declaration of war was put into practice when the GCBA at the end of 1921 decided to boycott a commission chaired by the President of the Indian Central Legislative Assembly established in 1920 after the elections held under the Indian Act of 1919.⁴ Its task was to inquire about Burmese public opinion. Shortly later, the association asked the people to shun the highly symbolic visit of the Prince of Wales in January 1922. In advance of the Prince's visit, Governor Craddock, on the basis of the Defence of Burma Act, had seven leading Burmese nationalists, among them Chit Hlaing who kept his post as president after the YMBA had been transformed into the GCBA, temporarily interned.

According to a newspaper report, he justified this warlike action by saying

that there was in Burma a small political clique animated by race hatred and by a desire to subvert the authority of the government and take the reins in their own hands. These men [...] were using every means, fair and foul, to make the visit of the Prince a failure.⁵

The governor further alleged that the "clique" were about to tyrannise the people and their actions would finally result in violence "by use of the boycott".

3 Two Protagonists: The Monk and the Governor

Without doubt, Governor Craddock was the outstanding actor on the political stage constructed according to the British notions of how to help Burma to become a full member of the Commonwealth of Nations. He was head of the Burmese government and very much convinced of his mission to "modernise" Burma about which he liked to speak in public.

In one of his first speeches in Burma in early 1918, he described himself as a fighter for "the ideals of liberty and justice" that the British "nation of shop-keepers" was defending in the still ongoing war. (Craddock 1924: 10-11). Already in August of that year, in a speech at the yearly meeting with representatives of the city, he gave some "friendly words of warning", particularly to the "young and enthusiastic" among his listeners based on his experience in India. On the other hand, he expressed his satisfaction with the present conditions in Burma where no "extremist party of young Burmans" existed and "thank God, no signs of unrest among Burmese students and even not the slightest suspicion of anarchy." He hoped that this "happy state of things" would continue. The reform process laying ahead should therefore not be endangered by extremist views and the sowing of mistrust among the "ignorant and untrained masses of the people." He had "condemned" and "suppressed" such actions during his service in India and would have no choice but to do the same by making use of the law to protect the country by the "poison gas" spread by extremist trouble makers. (Craddock 1924: 81-87).

Craddock's experiences with the student strike of 1920, the calls for boycotting the Whyte Commission and the visit of the Prince of Wales had convinced him that the "happy state of affairs" in Burma suddenly had come to an end.

4 Four members were appointed to represent in the Assembly, one British and three "general", two of them Indians.

5 *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic* (AR) 2.2.1922: 4.

To a large extent, the change was due to the activities of a man 15 years younger than the governor. He was a monk born in Arakan named Ottama and represented a core sphere of Burmese life that was usually left out in his Craddock's speeches. that contain not a single reference to Buddhism what can be seen as a result of the no-footwear campaign. Craddock never visited the Shwedagon Pagoda or any other Buddhist building.

Ottama can be considered as the representative of Burmese Buddhist resistance against the constitutional British reform project, and his and his followers' attitude towards Governor Craddock is expressed in his famous appeal "Craddock go home" that he used in many speeches published by the nationalist newspaper *Thuriya* (Sun). The slogan very much contributed to the governor becoming the "ugly face" of British colonial rule in contrast to "the Light of Asia" as Ottama was emphatically called later by one of his admirers. Ottama (1879-1939) had studied and lived in India and Japan for some time and after his return to Burma in 1920 advocated a Gandhi-style opposition



1 Celebration on the 73th anniversary of U Ottama's death in 2012 (Source: BNI)

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." (Smith 1965: 96) Furthermore, he compared the new political system to a stillborn child that could not be revived. Such speeches inspired local associations called *wunthanu athins* - "guarding (or loving) one's own kind" - and a great number of mostly young monks to follow in his steps. The government regarded his speeches as seditious, and Ottama became the first monk to be sentenced to ten months' imprisonment in June 1921 after he had delivered a speech on taxes in the Ayeyarwadi Delta in March of that year. This arrest strongly increased nationalist feelings, and after the monk's release in the middle of 1922 he was celebrated by large crowds throughout the country. In a speech in Mandalay before some 50.000 people, he invoked his listeners to wear homespun clothes and avoid buying imported goods so as to achieve home rule because "Englishmen do not want your country if they cannot make money out of you".⁶

Ottama's advice was echoed by a great number of monks who started to form local associations of members of the religious order, the *sangha*, that became counterparts to the laic *wunthanu* associations. The members were trained to teach other monks to strictly follow the *vinaya*, the canon of rules to be followed by members of the Sangha, the community of monks. Later, these *dhamakatikas* (preachers of the *dhamma*, the Buddhist law) also acted as political tutors concentrating on how to act in line with the Buddha's teaching and to be not afraid of the police in case people refused to pay taxes. The villagers were taught that the only laws they had to be afraid of were "the laws and teachings of the Buddha and keeping the Buddhist precepts". (Herbert 1982: 8-9; (U) Maung Maung 1980: 24-26)

6 *The Buffalo Commercial*, 21.9.1922: 5.

By this means, monks contributed to build up a network of grass-roots organisations based on Buddhist teachings and practising "independence" at the local level. Besides monks, women - from the beginning organised in separate organisations - played a crucial role, particularly in the economic field. "The politization of the monkhood in essence allowed for the politization of its most devout followers, many of whom happened to be women." (Tharapi Than 2015: 19)

Ottama never occupied any post in any organisation but became the "model" of a political monk whose influence relied only on his personal influence on his followers. He was a "charismatic" who integrated the knowledge gained abroad about the "Asian awakening" that had started at the beginning of the 20th century with his gifts as a preacher. As a consequence, his direct political influence waned after a second imprisonment in 1924. Until today, though, he is remembered as an "independence leader"⁷ whereas Reginald Craddock under whom the constitutional reforms were implemented in Burma, is almost forgotten.

4 Dyarchy in Burma

The reforms implemented in India in 1919 known as Dyarchy (dual rule) were finally enacted in Burma with some modifications and a time lag of four years on January 1, 1923 shortly after Craddock had left Burma. The new scheme implemented in Burma widely followed the regulations laid down in the Government of India Act 1919 with a few modifications suggested by the Whyte Committee that had visited Burma in November 1921. One critical point with regard to the composition of the Legislative Council was communal representation. It was rejected not only by the Burmese nationalists and the two Burmese members of the commission. In the British parliament, Colonel Wedgwood had argued against it, too. It would add to the sentiment of the Burmese people of a British "divide-and-rule policy", he stated.⁸ The attempt to change the Bill was however rejected by the majority of the House. The Committee had – very cautiously - favoured communal representation against the arguments of its two Burmese members who were not directly involved in the activities of the GCBA (Cady 1965: 228).

The composition of the Council provided for 75% elected members from different communities, much more than the minimum of 60% as determined in the 1919 Act. The 58 members to be elected in the "general" constituencies most like by to be won by ethnic Burmese candidates formed more than half of all members of the Council added by one Burmese from the respective Chamber of Commerce..

The list of members of the new legislature sworn in on January 1, 1923 shows that all official members were British except one Burmese. The non-officials members nominated by the governor

ELECTED:	
Urban general	14
Urban Indian	8
Rural general	44
Rural Karen	5
Anglo-Indian	1
Europeans	1
Burma British Chamber of Commerce	2
Rangoon Trades Association	1
Burmese Chamber of Commerce	1
Chinese Chamber of Commerce	1
University	1
	79
NOMINATED:	
Total	24
(no more than 14 officials)	
(1 Indian commerce)	
(1 labouring classes)	
TOTAL:	103

Source: Bless 1990: 105

7 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmese-independence-leader-u-ottama-remembered.html> (accessed 25.9.2020).

8 For the debate held on June 6, 1922 see [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1922-06-12/debates/7f4cbe8a-e419-492e-95c8-2dfce393239e/GovernmentOfIndiaAct1919\(DraftRules\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1922-06-12/debates/7f4cbe8a-e419-492e-95c8-2dfce393239e/GovernmentOfIndiaAct1919(DraftRules)) (accessed 15.9.2020).

were three persons each from the Indian and Burmese community and two British. The member representing the university was a British.

Besides regulating the composition of the new legislative body, details about the franchise were determined. Differently from India and Great Britain at that time, the voting age was set at 18 years. This was because the right to go to the polls was linked to the payment of taxes that Burmese people had to pay from the age of 18 to 60 – regardless of gender.⁹ The British administration estimated that the electorate comprised of about three million people (out of a population of 12-13 million living in Burma proper), 200,000 of them would be women. 2,4 million of them lived in the rural areas.¹⁰

It is not known how the "moderate" Burmese members of the commission thought about the whole scheme. A general Burmese view on the reform scheme was expressed in course of a discussion on the constitutional reforms in the Governor's Council on February 12, 1921. The body was called upon to submit its opinion on the new scheme. One of the Burmese members – not belonging to the younger generation of Burmese politicians - commented:

It may be said that in India the races are as different from each other as the Esquimaux 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. (Proceeding GC: 751)

The very clear subliminal message of this statement was: "You British must not teach us Burmese about democracy." But this subtext was not discussed neither at the meeting nor elsewhere later. It however characterised the irreconcilable perspectives of the two sides at the beginning of Burma's way to regain her independence. Even the moderate Burmese nationalists referred to the principles of their civilisation shaped by Buddhism, the representatives of the British administration backed their decisions on the enlightened principles of the colonial power. A resolution brought in by a member of the Council rejecting the Dyarchy reforms and opting for separating Burma from India was rejected by the majority of the Council.

5 The Split of the GCBA on the Issue of Participating in the Elections

From the very beginning, General Council of Burmese Associations had a pyramidal structure with thousands of local organisations, best known under the name *wunthanu athin*,¹¹ at the grass roots. It is estimated that the number of local associations rose from some 1,000 in 1919 to some/about 10,000 in 1925. (Herbert 1982: 8) The GCBA functioned as the umbrella organisation, and it was headed by a president. The Burmese name of this central "Council" can be translated as "The great Burma group of controlling (*wunthanu*) associations" (Houtman 1999: 234). The president was

9 For details see Vady 1965: 244.

10 According to an estimate of Col. Woodworth, a supporter of Burmese nationalist ambitions, the number was between two and three million. He further proposed to add women married to tax-paying men to be eligible to vote and submitted an amendment giving women the right to stand for elections that was defeated. (The Telegraph 13 June 1922: 11). According to a Burmese author writing in 2010, the numbers were much lower. Just 1,8 million voters out of 12 million were entitled to vote (Ko Ko Thatt 2010), Part I. A Burmese journal informs the readers that 1,767,227 people (out of 12 million) were eligible to vote and that "only over-25s from the middle and upper classes were allowed to take part" (Wei Yan Aung 2010: 7).

11 Besides the *wunthanu athins*, there were at least two other groups working in the villages, co-operation societies and women organisations ((U) Maung Mung 1980: 248 fn. 7).

elected together with an Executive Committee at the annual all-Burma conferences attended by up to 200,000 people, among them some 10,000 delegates and a number of monks. The numbers of participants from the sangha grew over time (Maung Maung 1980: 26). The bottom village level was linked to the central organs of the organisations by village tract, circle and district boards that paralleled the administrative structure set up by the colonial government. (Herbert 1982: 8) This way, a kind of parallel administration took shape that contested the governance established by the British. (Moscotti 1974: 34) Chit Hlaing who headed the YMBA/GCBA from 1917 on was widely revered as the "uncrowned king of Burma" (Cady 1965: 310). He was referred to as *thamada* (president) or *thamada-gyi* (great president), a title referring to the first ruler of the world according to the Aggañña Sutta of the Buddhist scriptures (Ba Khaing 1938: 54-55).

The first rift in the GCBA occurred due to differences in organising the GCBA properly and dealing with the funds that came to a great extent from Chit Hlaing. A gap between the radicalisation happening at the village level and the more cautious attitudes of members at the central office contributed to further tensions, together with personal rivalry. The tensions resulted in the resignation of some 15 members of the GCBA's Executive Council after a turbulent meeting in Rangoon's Jubilee Hall shortly after the British Parliament had passed the Dyarchy scheme for Burma on 12 June 1922. The majority of *wunthanu* delegates supported by monks who witnessed the meeting from the gallery had voted against participation in the elections. The number of GCBA dissidents later increased to 21.¹² The group participating in the 1922 elections was therefore called the "Twenty-One Party" (Maung Maung 1980: 28-32). It might be no coincidence, that two of the leaders of the group, Pu and Ba Pe, had participated in the talks in London to present the views of their organisation in 1920/1921 and came back quite content with the results of their talks (Cady 1965: 210-211). Both belonged to the "first generation" of Burmese nationalist politicians. Ba Pe as the founder of the *Thuriya* newspaper had been particularly important by helping to propagate anti-colonial issues as in the anti-footwear campaign.



Ba Pe around 1921
(Source: The Kaiserreich Wiki)

6 The Anti-Boycott Bill

The split mainly concerned the upper segment of the GCBA pyramid. On the grass-roots level nothing changed in the attempts to preserve a village administration without government interference. The measures used to achieve this aim contradicted the British view of guiding Burma on the way to "responsible government" in a fundamental way. This became already manifest in the above mentioned statement of Governor Craddock before the discussion of the constitutional reforms.

After the governor's fear of a "destruction of all liberty of speech" in the eyes of the government had become reality, an Anti-Boycott Bill¹³ was passed. It came into effect shortly after the British Parliament had passed the reform scheme for Burma in June 1922. It was one of the circumstances that caused the preachers of the "Buddhist Law" to teach the people how not to fear imprisonment and other forms of repression. It was introduced in the Governor's Council in February 1922 shortly after the reading aloud of a message of the Prince of Wales in which he expressed his thanks for the "warmth of the welcome extended to me throughout my tour in Burma." (Procedures GC: 943) The bill was introduced by the Chief Secretary of the Government, one of the official members of the Council, to "deal with an evil that is spreading slowly over the whole of the Province. The evil is

12 For the names of the 21 see Ba Khaing 1938: 43. The comparison with the list of members of the Council that started to work in January 1923, shows that only some 7 of the 21 persons were actually elected.

13 For the text see <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-act-v-1922-the-anti-boycott-act> (accessed 9.8.2020).

the use of the boycott or the treat of boycott to suppress freedom of political thought.” (Proceedings GC: 947)

The ‘evil’ was exemplified by a case related to Ottama, who had been convicted by Maung Po Pe, a Burmese member of the administration characterised by the British officer as a man qualified as exceptional because “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* [monk] 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 necessaries 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 by his action had done ? 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 (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. (Proceedings GC: 947-948)

Three Burmese members of the Council opposed the bill, a rich merchant from Mawlamyine 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 imprisonment, a fine or both. A later attempt by the Burmese minority to postpone the bill or amend it were not successful either. 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 convergence of positions could be achieved. A Burmese deputy argued that at present two parties were opposing each other, the "Government party" and the "people party", the former advocating Dyarchy, the other Home Rule and "there is no intermediate party between these two parties at all." (Proceedings GC: 956). This statement can be connected to the discussion in the Council on the need for Buddhists to follow the advice given by the Buddha "not to follow evil men". As a consequence, it was argued by one of the Burmese members: "If you enact this Law, you will destroy our religious belief". (Proceedings GC:1002)

Accordingly, speakers from the two sides based their arguments on two incompatible principles, Buddha's Law guiding Burmese behaviour and British Law protecting freedom of thought respectively. No wonder that the speeches given by both sides were monologues that did not change the preconceived concepts held by the representatives of the two sides. As in the case of the debate on the University Act, the outcome of the vote was preset.

7 The Elections

The splits within the GCBA resulted in the emergence of different groups that were named “parties” according to the British model of democracy.¹⁴ Furthermore, the adopted British electoral system, stressed the importance of the single candidates competing in the constituencies at the cost of the policy of the party to which they might be affiliated. In the absence of any tradition of political programs as a base of a party platform, elections from the beginning were thus dominated by personalities. Accordingly, the organisational structure of the groups was rather fluid. In terms of political issues, there were no great differences. Almost all “parties” contesting the elections

14 *Birmanische Bezeichnung*

propagated the same aim taken over from the still united GCBA: to regain the independence finally lost in 1886.

A look at the “groups of candidates “contesting the 1922 elections throws some light on the dominance of single personalities. The first “party” emerging in Burma to contest elections was a group that was first called the “Twenty-On-Party” consisting of the dissidents objecting to the GCBA’s election boycott decided in June 1922. Th< dissidents were called “traitors” by the majority favouring boycott (Maung Maung 1980: 39). The group become known as the “Nationalist Party” later and underwent some transformations (Taylor 1987: 151). The members joining another

other group emerged from a previous split of the YMBA on the issue of the attitude towards the British (see above) , The group was conventionally known as the Golden Valley Party named after the quarter of Rangoon in which many well-to-do people lived, among them a number of Indian and Chinese merchants. The “political” name of the group that had no formal organisation and no leadership is mostly referred to as the I Progressive and later Independent Party (Taylor 1987: 132-133; Sem 1945: 18)..

On this background, the low voter turnout of 6,9% suggests that the country’s majority of the people living in the rural eras ignored or boycotted the polls. They followed the mainstream section of the GSCA and the local *wunthanu athins*.

Results 1922 elections		
General Constituencies	Nationalist Party	28
	Progressive Party	15
	Independents	15
Special Constituencies		21
Nominated		24
Total		103

Nothing is reported about any campaigning and voting day was quiet, according to foreign newspaper reports. In Rangoon., leaflets had been distributed, manifestos posted on motor trucks told the people not to vote.¹⁵ It was further reported that monks came to the polling booths and said they would "do this and that" if votes were cast. On the other hand, government agents under police protection had instructed the people about why to vote and how to do it. It was reported that on election day police forced people to cast their votes (Maung Maung 1980: 44). A member of the 21-group further stated that due to the "little votes" it was easy and not costly to win ta seat. (Maung Maung 1980: 249, fn 28) Members from the Chinese and Christian Karen communities were reported to participate actively in the polls, the latter even winning two seats in "general" constituencies. (Cady 1965: 245) The situation on the local level where villagers could elect

In the British parliament, Col. Wedgeworth some days after holding of the elections asked the government if any non-cooperation had been occurred. The Under-Secretary of State for India answered: “There is no reason to suppose that the elections are not being held under normal condition.”He expected that the results would be made public by 15 December.¹⁶ Contemporary reactions on the outcome in the foreign press stressed the lack of violence the low voter turn out fue to the boycott initiatives of the monks and the success of a “reform party”.¹⁷

8 The Legislative Council at Work

In the first session of the Council, Frank McCarthy, a barrister and nominated British official was elected Speaker with Ba Pe as his deputy. When McCarthy died in 1925, he was replaced by a coeague. The new governor Harcourt Butler who succeeded Reginald Craddock on the day on which the dyarchy scheme took effect in Burma choose the two Burmese members too head the

15 *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (New York) 4.2.1923: 60.

16 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1922/nov/28/burma-legislation-electors> (accessed 22.1.2924).

17 *The Portsmouth Herald* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire) 26.1.1923: 6 (accessed 23.1.2024).

ministries of the two “transferred subjects” (education/health and agriculture)/forest¹⁸.) The flatter post was given to Sir Joseph Augustus Aung Gyi, (1871-1955) an anglophile barrister and a member of the Golden-Valley group.¹⁹ The former ministry was given to Maung Gyee, another British trained barrister, from the National Party.

The name of the new council indicates its main functions e.g. to legalise the bills drafted by the Executive Council headed by the governor. In addition, the members made broad use to ask questions to the government that can be seen as its main function to criticise it. Only the two ministers appointed for the transferred subjects could be charged by the council by way of a no-confidence motion. Many resolutions were passed, many of them expressing critical views of the British and their Burmese supporters’ politics regarding the date of “political prisoners” that had been charged under the Anti-Boycott Bill. Furthermore, a “Burmanisation” of the administration and police and thus a reduction of Indian and Europeans staff was demanded (Cady 1965: 248-249).

9 Assessments and Questions

Governor Craddock in his farewell speech to the outgoing Legislative Council one week before the elections expressed satisfaction about what had been achieved. He praised the Anti-Boycott Act as a means to curb “political agitation” and promote the “political liberty of the people”. (Craddock 1924; 483) Any remarks on the outcome of the elections are not recorded. He left Burma on 21 December 1922.

Both Burmese and Western scholars expressed critical views about the performance of the first phase of the Legislative Council. Htin Aung in his “History of Burma” published in 1965 emphasises the effects of the split of the GCBA in connection with the introduction of general elections:

The split in the ranks of the GCBA bewildered the people who had given their full support and as a result they became apathetic towards the new reforms. (Tin Aung 1965: 287)

John F. Cady in his “History of Modern Burma” is even more critical with regard to the societal split happening as a consequence of the introduction of a first trial of parliamentary democracy by reducing the differences between the Burmese members in the council who all belonged to “Westernized urban intelligentsia” and stresses the difference

between the Burmese councilors as a whole and the boycotting majority of the electorate outside. Party differentiation within the council had little or no relevance to the issues which governed which governed political attitudes outside the council. (Cady 1965: 249)

Given such statements, one may ask what kind of “reforms” and “politics” might have been relevant for the majority of the rural population living in the Burmese heartlands. Governor Harcourt Butler once mentioned that “Dyarchy” had become a term of abuse. . Maung Maung, socialist Burma’s last president summarises:

Dyarchy failed because it only fed a few and the appetite of the few grew bigger with feeding the many who were not fed were disgruntled. (Maung Maung 1950: 21)

In view of such assessments one may ask if the low voter turnout of the 1922 elections was due to an intentional boycott mentality or a more silent expression for ignoring a practice that did not belong to Burma’s culture. Anyway, it can be termed a kind of “clash of civilisations” , Furthermore, the question arises, in what way the first general elections in Burma might be telling about what happened later in connection with this core tool of democracy.

18 The provisions of the Act provided details of how the "minor" subjects were defined in the different provinces of India.

19 Maung Gyi was appointed judge to the High Court and in August 1930 became Acting Governor of Burma in the absence of Governor Innes during his home leave due to illness. This tenure happened during the Saya San-rebellion.

One of the architectural legacies of the Dyarchy-period is the building constructed after 1923 to house the parliament. A one-story building was constructed in the inner courtyard of the impressive Secretariat Building built in Victorian style housing the many offices of the colonial government "by which it was dwarfed and overshadowed, the contrast between the two buildings suggesting their relative importance in contemporary politics."(Furnivall 1960: 16) The rather modest importance of the new institution was reflected by schedule of meetings. The Council met twice a year – compared to 4 to six times in Great Britain between the 1920s and the 1930s) in the first and the second half of the year as thought appropriate by the governor, the first session lasting around four weeks, the second often just one week.legitimate, and the newspaper



The Legislative Council building, around 1925 (Source: Yangon Time Machine)



Aerial shot of the Secretariat (2018), the parliament building situated in the middle (Source: SCR Project)