

**17 November 1925 and 5 November 1928
An Interim Period of Shifting Alliances**

1 Introduction

Following the provisions of the India Act of 1919, the tenure of Burma’s legislative Council was set at three years. In course of the revision after 1tenyears, the period was extended to four years after 1929. These election have not received much attention. They were routinely performed by the administration as a consequence in course of carrying on with the Dyarchy scheme’s trial period. As in 1922, no political issues were directly connected to the polls. However, a number of evolutions can be noted that are connected to the legislative body. Four off them will be touched in the following sections: The disintegration of organisations both with regard to parties and the Buddhist clergy (2), the continuation of a boycott mentality (3), the issue of ethnic tensions (4) and the rendering of a debate about the Burma army in the legislative Council history(5)..

2 The Fragmentation of Burmese Unity

The number of voters rose to a certain extent to 16% (1925) and 18% (1928). The figures indicate that the rural-urban divide still existed, but exact data about the voter turnout in different regions could not be found.

The “party landscape” underwent some changes and became more diverse as the results in the following table show.¹

Party	Votes	%	Seat	Party	Votes	%	Seats	+/-
Nationalist Party			25	People's Party			40	-5
Independence Party			20	Independent Party			12	-8
Home Rule Party			11	National Parliamentary Organisation			5	New
Swaraj Party			9	Others			46	
Others			15	Total			103	
Appointed members			21					
Ex officio members			2					
Total			103					

Results 1928 (Source: Wikipedia)

Results 1925 (Source: Wikipedia)

The Nationalist Party, emerging from the “Twenty-One-Party” After the GCBA split in June 1922 still existed and lost five seats. The same number was won by members of the “Independence Party” known as the “Progressive Party” in 1922. Two new parties of different kind emerged. The “Home Rule Party” came up after another split in the GCBA. The leader was Pu often referred to as “Tharawaddy Pu” after the town located some 100 km north of Rangoon from where he came.² The Swaraj party was named after an Indian party founded in 1923 using the Hindi name for “independence.” Besides a Burmese who did not win the seat he contested,³ the Bangali politician N.C.Bannerji worked as the party’s organiser (Taylor 1987: 150).

1 The information of Wikipedia given below is based on secondary sources and mainly on Robert Taylor's overview about Burmese parties published in 1987. - Other sources might give different numbers. For example: A report in a British newspaper provides the following figures for the 1925 elections: Independents: 34; Nationalists 28, Swarajists 10. *Westerham Herald* (Westerham, Kent, England) 5. December 1925: 6 (accessed 26.1.2024).. A Canadian newspaper gives the following numbers for the three parties: 25 – 13 – 45 (*The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) 20 November 1925:1 (accessed 24.1.2024).

2 Another Pu came from Yamethin and became chief minister in 1938 under the new constitution after the downfall of Ba Maw.

3 *Westerham Herald* (Westerham, Kent, England) 5. December 1925: 6 (accessed 26.1.2024).

English newspapers took a special interest in the party. It was reported that it wanted to cooperate with the British labour Party.⁴ This might have been the reason for reports that the party did not win as many seats as expected by the foreign observers.⁵ - The status of the “National Parliamentary” Organisation mentioned by Robert Taylor (1976:) is obscure but indicates the fluidity of the Burmese party landscape of the time.

The People’s Party – popularly known as the “Burma for the Burmans Party” was a merger of the Nationalist, Home Rule and Swaraj Party happening in 1916 or 1927 to jointly fight to counter the dominance of the members from the Independence Party, the officials, non-Burmese deputies and representatives of business groups. The merger can be called a symbolic measure because important matters could not be decided by the council against the will of the British administration.. This is shown by a report about a walk-out of parliament in protest against the alleged intention to “rush national aspirations with the help of the official bloc.”⁶

The unity was further short-lived. In course of the discussion about Burma’s separation from India, different groups and leaders parted ways.

In terms of realpolitik, the nationalists had no chance as a government statement shows.

In the past two Dyarchy legislative Councils all the proposals of the government had been approved and all private member's bills [*bills moved not by the government hbz*] opposed by the government had been rejected. Of the 68 resolutions which had been moved in the legislative Council, the government had lost only nine and most were considered by the government to have been unimportant. (Maung Maung 1980: 55-56)

In the legislative Council, some symbolic walk-outs of parliamentarians opposing the government happened.⁷

In the same period of Burmese “party politics” the GCBA, the “mother” of Burmese political nationalism⁸ degenerated together with a parallel organisation of members of the *sangha*, the order of Buddhist monks. A great number of monks had been the backbone of the earlier boycott measures and many of them – following Ottama’s example had been jailed In 1921, two sangha councils had been founded in Rangoon and Mandalay that joined in 1924 and formed the General Council of Sangha Sameggi GCSS) – the Pali word *sameggi* meaning “harmony, unity”.

Maung Maung⁹ has shown in his study “From Sangha to Laity” published 1980 how closely the monks’ council was connected to the GCBA. Prominent monks acted as spiritual and political advisers and younger monks took part in the meetings mainly in support of actions favouring boycott. His study further illustrates the relation of splits in the GCBA and the emergence of political parties and their relationship to popular leaders (Maung Maung 1980: 27-68.)

This function of members of the Sangha can be seen as a result of the vacuum emerging after the end of the monarchy in 1886. The king had supported and cleaned, if necessary, the Buddhist order. The monks acted as his adviser in return and provided legitimacy as a Buddhist ruler , From the end

4 *Daily Herald* 1. August 1925: 3 (accessed 26.1.2024).

5 *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) · 20 November 1925: 1 (accessed 26.1.2024)..

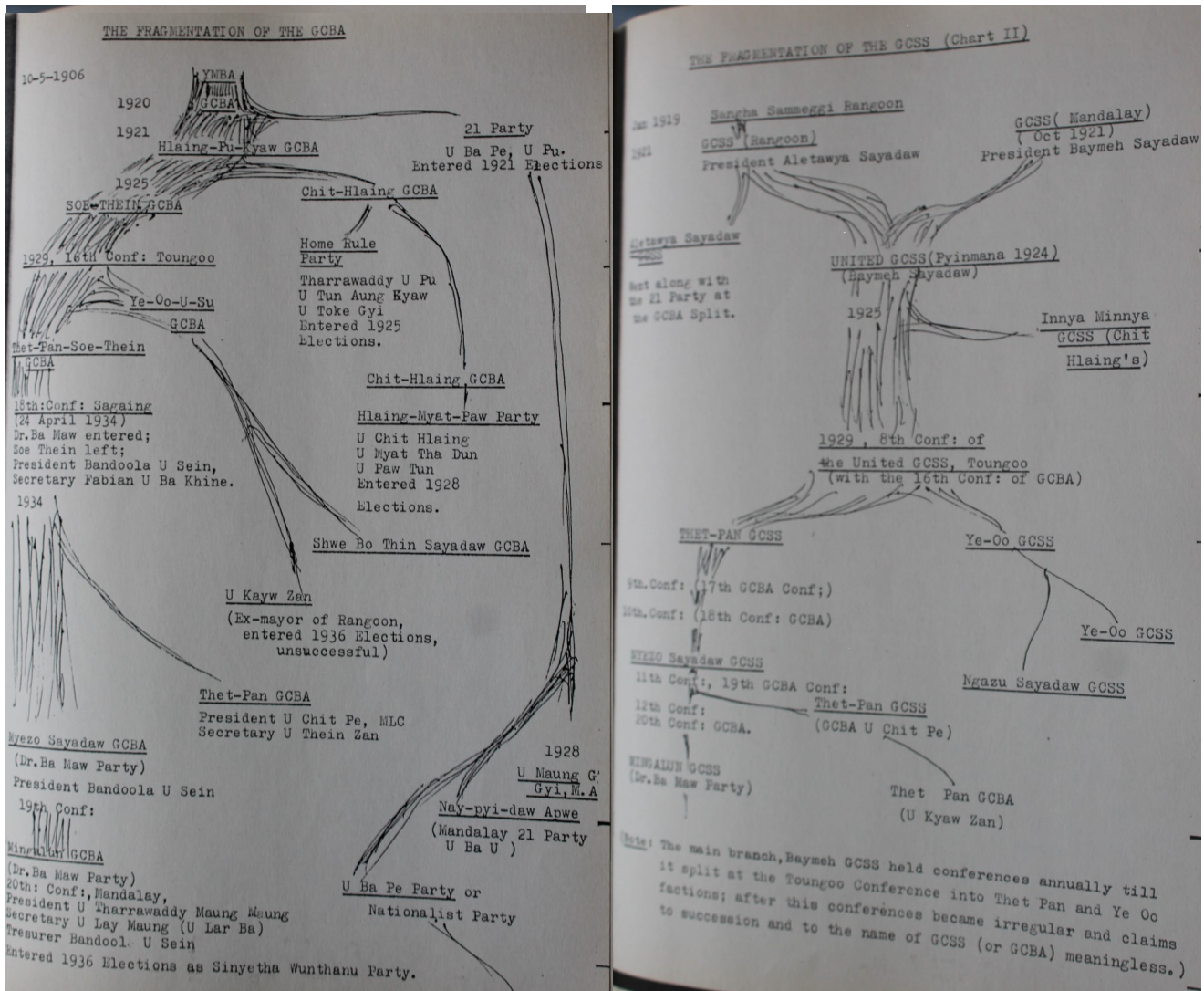
6 *lincolnshire Echo* (lincoln, lincolnshire, England) · Sat, 9 July 1927: 5 (accessed 26.1.2024)..

7 *The Guardian* (london, Greater london, England) 9, March1926: 14 (accessed 26.1.2024)..

8 Here and elsewhere in the text, this term refers to the ethnically non-Burmese groups in Burma proper, the Arakanes and Mon, as well. They were Buddhist like the largest ethnic groups but looked back at their own kingdoms that had been conquered brought under control by Burmese kings in the 18th century.

9 Born 1920. Maung Maung became a soldier of the Burma National Army during the war and worked together with Aung San. After the war, he became a brigadier and – together with Aung Gyi – was close to Ne Win and helped develop the Tatmadaw in a professional way. In 1958, he intervened in the political crisis an that led to the formation of the Caretaker Government (1958-1960)in which he acted acted as chairman of the National Security Council . In 1961, he retired from the military and became I diplomat. He died in 2009.

of the 18th century on, the order was headed by a *thathanabaing* (keeper of the religion), a kind of a Buddhist supreme patriarch. ¹⁰The close relationship between State and Sangha was abolished with the end of monarchical rule even though the office of the Sangha head was formally abolished only in 1938.



Fragmentation of GCBA

Fragmentation of GCBB

Instead, a close relationship between the different GCBA s and the political active monks developed during the 1920s. Maung Maung gives the following example in connection with the 11th conference of the council in May 1924 that was attended by 7,000 monks one of them being Ottama. Furthermore, 3,000 delegates and 90,000 visitors attended (Maung Maung 1980: 34).He further writes:

The most important development was the adaptation of resolution no. 11 which authorised the GCSS sayadaws [senior monks, abbots; hbz] to advise, direct, and sit in all GCBA Committee meetings as one body, and supervise the headquarters administration. (Maung Maung 1980: 35)

Two monks were delegated to the headquarters, bet not admitted to stay there by Chit Hlaing and Pu. the chairpersons elected at the conference who had not objected to the resolution. As a consequence, the sayadaws organised a conference in the following year on which a number of scandals happening under the previous leadership was made public and unanimously decided that

10 For details of the development of *sangha*-state relations since the Bagan period see Mendelsohn 1875.

“U Chit Hlaing and U Pu had acted for the destruction of the GCBA”.¹¹ From then on, Chit Hlaing gave up his boycott of participating in the electoral processes and participated in the 1928 elections. He was then elected speaker of the council.

Particularly the splits within the sangha caused disappointment among the Buddhist population- the Buddhist order had to be united. This factor contributed to the decrease of the role of “political monks” in Burma. A “Buddhist revivalism” occurred and people flocked to monks concentrating on spreading Buddha’s teaching of escaping the wheel of rebirth and suffering by meditation and other means.. In terms of politics, a young generation took over and students replaced monks as the vanguard of the fight for independence. Maung Maung concludes:

All political leaders, whether lay or sangha had by the end of the decade been corrupted by the evil force, the dyarchy constitution, to begin with the elections in 1922, and caused the first split in the GCBA in [...] 1921. (Maung Maung 19806: 4)

3 Canonising the Boycott Movement

The fragmentation of both the lay and *sangha* organisations did not mean that the spirit of boycotting the British attempts to modernise Burma disappeared. The issue of the tax system implemented by the colonial administrators that was linked to the political reforms continued to antagonise the majority of Burmese farmers. The repressive measures enacted by the government reacted had contributed to keep this spirit alive. New radical associations called *bu*¹² *athins* had emerged. The oath sworn by members contains the determination "to suffer in Hell" permanently in case of any co-operation with the British government (Moscotti 1974: 205-206). One may say that the spirit in which religion and secular elements were mixed survived but materialised in an opposition to the political agenda of the British administration.

The issue of the separation or not-separation from India and the visit the Simon Commission, named after its chairman, appointed to examine the effects of the constitutional reforms of 1919 in all Indian provinces ten years later are cases in point. The commission recommended a separation of Burma from India and the Burmese opposition boycotted its hearing thus opening the way for the following controversies in connection with the next elections held in 1932.

On this background, the literary document written in December 1921 and republished in 1927 dealing with the boycott issue is notable. The author today known as Thakin Kodaw Hmine (1876-1964) who named himself "Mister Maung Hmine" at that time¹³ started his literary career as a playwright and later contributed articles to the nationalist newspaper *Thuriya* from 1911 onwards. They became popular as "Tikas", that is commentaries on current affairs.¹⁴

His “Boycott Tika” published in January 1921 (Than Tun 2012: 33) was a praise of the student strike of 1920- It informed the readers about the origin of the English word “boycott” that was adopted from the name of a British land agent, Captain Charles Boycott, the British land agent who in 1880 had been ostracised by the residents of a county in Western Ireland in course of a conflict with the tenants about a reduction of rent in face of a poor harvest.

11 Maung Maung,, Appendices to “From Sangha to laity”: 589. The appendices are not included in the printed version of Maung Maung’s MA dissertation submitted at the Australian National University. A copy is archived at the Asian Africa Institute, Hamburg University.

12 The)“bu” stands for the Burmese phrase ma-thi-bu (I don’t know) and refers to non-cooperation with all sorts of government agencies and activities. (Moscotti 1974: 221 fn63.).

13 The author was born in lower Burma that had already come under British rule then. His original name was "lun". He was sent to Mandalay at an early age to receive a traditional education there and as a boy witnessed the exile of King Thibaw (Than Tun 2012: 31-32).

14 The Pali word *ṭīkā* denotes a sub-commentary to the Buddhist scriptures.

"Mister Maung Hmine" connected this Irish story with the Buddhist practise of *thabeik hmauk*, the turning over of the alms bowl by monks as a protest of actions performed by laypeople and not in line with the teachings of the Buddha. He referred to such "strike measures" told in Jataka tales and to events in Burmese history in which monks had threatened to refuse taking alms from a king as a means to prevent him from violating Buddhist laws. The author referred here to the Thabeik Hmauk Pagoda in Bagan remembering an action of a senior monk against a king.

This way, the term "boycott" was linked to Buddhism. Until today, the phrase is the Burmese word for "strike" in a secular sense and the Boycott Tika might have been the origin of this meaning. Before 1920, the English term was applied to actions of workers to protest against their employers. Very likely therefore, the term *thabeik hmauk* was first used in connection with the student strike in 1920 by the poet¹⁵

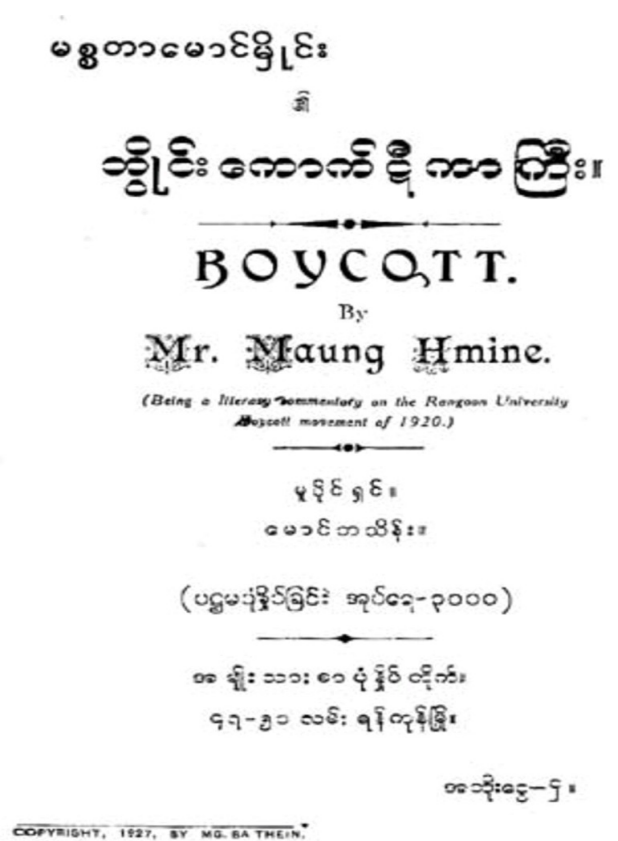
The commentary on the student strike thus linked the old Buddhist way of criticising their own rulers to the Irish independence struggle that started during World War I. The phrase that the Burmese were "the Irish of the East" had already been coined before by western observers. They "flare much more easily than the Indian, and there is an extraordinary cohesion amongst them. They join as one man in a boycott without a moment's warning" as a newspaper report stated in 1921.¹⁶

This way, the traditional method of a religious boycott was connected to contemporary European history and thus legitimised as a Burmese variety of "global" resistance of small countries fighting against foreign suppression. According to the "traditional modernist" as his name chosen at that time – Mister Maung Hmaing - indicates, Burmese Buddhists followed the tradition by boycotting the Burmese assistants of the actual British rulers of the country like the Irish farmers had did. In this manner, a specific Burmese political culture was postulated that was to be regarded on an equal level with developments in other countries. At the same time, the boycott of 1920 was sanctified and became a symbol for Burmese identity.

The tradition of *thabeik hmauk* was taken up after the military coup of 1988 in 1991 by monks in Mandalay and during the so called Saffron Revolution in 200 (Zöllner 2009: 81-91).

4 The Boycott of the Whyte Commission and the Issue of Culture – a Karen View

Not only the British authorities objected the boycott movement that was praised by the Burmese author. leaders of other non-Burmese groups did the same, among them the most prominent Karen leader of that time, San C. Po (1870-1946). He had been trained as a medical doctor in the United States. He became a member of the Governor's Council and was invited to join the Whyte Commission. In 1928, he published a book entitled "Burma and the Karen" in which he advocated a



The title page of the 1927 edition

15 When workers went on strike in 1915, a Burmese transcription of the English word "strike" was used in the reports about it. (Information provided by Ko Aung Kyaw Min).

16 *Nottingham Journal* 18.2.1921: 1.

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.

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.¹⁷

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 as a territory as a territory for such purpose. 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 own country and its own distinctive national characteristics, ready to unite for the good of the whole country.¹⁸

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 a "Burmese Buddhist" nation was expressed.

10 Summary: An Overture with Many Themes

It is absolutely not surprising that the introduction of electoral procedures in Burma by the British administration was not welcomed by the people of the new part of the Empire. The reform introduced by strangers who had eradicated the country's traditional political institutions. The new scheme of Dyarchy was meant as a first step to establish a completely new way of legitimising a "responsible



The Whyte Commission. First from the left: San C. Po; first from the right side: Myint, one of the two Burmese delegates. The other one (Po Bye) is missing (Source: Burma and the Karen)

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

18 Ibid.: Chapter XII.

government" not relying on the orders of an absolute monarch and his advisors but on the skills of well trained political administrators being responsible to a parliament elected by the people.

This concept encountered a mix of indifference, cooperation and rejection shown by different segments of Burmese society. The "masses" were "apathetic" as the British saw it with regard to going to the polls, but could be aroused to support the students' strike in 1920 and work within the *wunthanu athins* under the guidance of monks and under an umbrella organisation controlled by the political elites mostly trained in England.

On this background, the election of 1922 were just ignored by the majority of the people, not intentionally "boycotted". It had no meaning for the people who concentrated on participating in the lay and monks' associations mushrooming after 1919. The "colonial way" of organising Burmese society was set aside and an attempt was started to build up a modern Burmese society based on the principals of a Buddhist inspired "grass-roots democracy".

The Burmese elites on the other side were split on the issue of to participate in the "training" offered by participating in the elections or not. A minority of Burmese and many representatives of other ethnic groups accepted the British reform proposal in principle, the majority of Burmese leaders did not. This majority however became split on the issue of boycotting the elections for the legislative Council or not. This divide resulted in an opposition to the government acting inside the Council and another that continued boycotting it from the outside.

The spiritual backbone of the latter groups were the monks who encouraged the local people to carry on their "independent" ways of life at the grass-roots level and resist the attempts of government agencies to abide by the administrative orders enacted by the government. Here and in a different way in the controversial discussions between the advocates of the government and its Burmese opponents, two antithetical conception of legitimising "democratic" rule can be identified. For Burmese members of the Councils, the rules set by the Buddha were regarded as the basic guidelines. On the other sides stood the belief in civil liberty in the tradition of the Magna Carta of 1215 protecting the right of the individual against tyranny.

The British concept put the freedom of the individual first, the Burmese regarded the liberation of the community of Burmese Buddhists as the primary goal. As a consequence, two contrary roadmaps were envisaged. The Burmese nationalists called for "independence first" after which the details of individual freedom etc. would be regulated. The British concept provided for the development of a political order based on the standards governing the Empire before some kind of independence could be granted.

Both concepts obstructed each other. The British emphasis on competition between political parties and their individual representatives in the constituencies resulted in the split of Burmese unity both of the lay and the monks' association and eroded the boycott movement (Maung Maung 1980: 65-66). The British policy of securing their liberal concept with restrictive laws like the Anti-Boycott Act contributed to further strengthening the resistance to the noble aims of colonial rule. It further sowed the seed of mistrust in British-style politics and the Burmese politicians taking part in the game. Furthermore, the British assessment that the Burmese were not fit for ruling themselves in a responsible way was endorsed.

Finally, no meaningful communication on the two stages of performing politics during the period of trying Dyarchy happened. In the legislative Council, the nationalist opposition never had a chance to change the course of politics dominated by the government and its supporters in the Council. As a consequence, the debates in the Council were just rituals conducted according to the regulations applied in Westminster. Outside parliament, various Burmese actors tried to confront the British authorities. On the village level, this happened by non-cooperation, in Rangoon through the agitation of nationalist newspapers.

Until the elections of 1932, the constitutional reforms in which the three elections were embedded could be regarded as a failure. The reasons for this failure were of course assessed controversially by both sides. Hartcourt Butler who served as governor before and after Reginald Craddock blamed the Burmese attitude. At the end of an article written shortly before the elections of November 1932 and the choice to vote for a separation from India, he wrote:

It may be said in no unkindly spirit that the Burman is peculiarly disposed to run before he can walk. It may be hoped that he will make the best of the opportunity now generously offered him. (Butler 1932: 658)

A negative answer with regard to this hope had been given already before by the peasant revolt in lower Burma between 1930 and 1932 that later became known as the Saya San rebellion. The oath of the rebels addressed to the "lord of Heaven, who cannot lead us to Nirvana" contained the following sentence:

Grant that I may escape from all bodily danger and that should I be forced to take an oath in a Court of law as a witness that I may break it with impunity and without fear of vengeance. Grant that if I die that I may attain Nirvana. (Solomon 1969: 21-22)

Besides these rather extremely divergent outlooks at the end of the overture of introducing electoral procedures as a component of constitutional reform in Burma, a number of themes can be identified that emerged between 1919 and 1932. The most prominent is the call for "national unity" as a precondition of regaining the country's sovereignty. From the beginning however, this unity was threatened. One major cause was the introduction of the modern instrument of political competitions through the introduction of general elections calling for some kind of parties. The other main factor was the ethnic and religious diversity even within the Burmese, Mon and Rakhine heartlands of the new province of British India. From the beginning, Buddhism played a central role in the nationalist awakening as a core element of building up a "national identity" vis-à-vis India and Great Britain. Buddhist monks supported the boycott movements against foreign domination at the cost of jeopardising the unity of the Sangha, one of the three indivisible gems according to the doctrine of Buddhism.

All in all, the introduction of general elections as a means to connect Burma to the world of modern politics went hand in hand with creating mistrust between political actors and the inability to solve conflicts by way of peaceful communication.

5 A Proxy Debate on Burma's Military

On 8 August 1929, a resolution was brought in by Pu, a prominent member of the People's Party in which the decision of the Indian Government of the "disbandment of the Burma Sappers and Miners" was criticised and the Burmese government was asked to work for a retraction. This military unit had been established to assist the British in World War I. A limited number of topographical and engineering units had been sent to the Palestine and Mesopotamian fronts as well as labourers to the western front in Europe caring for Turkish and German prisoners-of-war. The hopes that such engagement would be honoured by a quick granting of independence had been disappointed. In contrast, after the beginning of nationalist agitation in the 1920s, no ethnic Burmese had been integrated in the British Burma Army. In contrast, Chin, Kachin and Karen soldiers were recruited.

In the end, the resolution was passed without any votes against it. However it had no consequences. In the rather extensive debate – the rendering of the speeches held in English covers 27 pages¹⁹ – members of almost all groups represented in the council voiced their opinions. The debate can be regarded as a proxy debate on the country's past, present and future state of affairs.

19 Proceedings IC XV, I.: 230-247. Some contributions were given in Burmese. They were published in a special volume that could not be consulted were given in a separate volume.

The mover of the resolution concentrates on the formal aspects of the decision and the reasons of the Indian government for the decision that were summarised in the argument that "the class of Burmese recruits had been found in various respect unsuitable." With regard to the alleged "lack in discipline", Pi mentioned the famous general Maha Bandoola, the leader of the Burmese army in the first Anglo-Burmese War as a proof of the incorrectness of the claim. In summary, he called the decision of the Indian governments Army Department an "insult" to the Burmese. If armed with rifles, they would kill any enemy of the British. The answer of the "Home Member" representing the government, a British official, regretted the decision of the Indian government and stated that this matter was beyond Burma's government's authority.

Another member of the People's Party got applause for his narrations of how bravely the Burmese soldiers had behaved in Mesopotamia. He f- like other members of the group - further stated that a separation of Burma from India would solve the problem a claim that was dismissed by an Indian member, but an Anglo-Indian advocated separation of the grounds that the habits of the people in both countries were different. A member representing the Indian community referred to the Japanese victory in the war against Russia (1905) stressed the need of military training and discipline and that a Burmese army raised by constitution would be as strong as the German army and would be "a match for anybody in the world." An Indian colleague warns against instigating mistrust between the Indians and the Burmese. A further member of the Burmese bloc opposing the government criticized the constitution that allowed a member of the government to sympathise with the opposition without any consequences and called them "good bad man" thus ridiculing their position to please both sides.

Two Karen members supported the resolutions as well but with some reservations. The first calls his Burmese "loving brothers" selfish because up to now they relied on the soldiers recruited by him and other Karen, Chin and Kachin people. He however would not mind if the Burmese would make sacrifices themselves, he would "cheer them up from behind with three cheers minus two." The speaker further ridicules the opposition as a "Variety Party" of so many parties that he is unable to "catty their names in my head." The second Karen speaker pleads for "different regiments maintaining their own characteristics" as in the United Kingdom where the army consists English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish units.

The last speaker of the delegate from Rangoon University recalled the royal times:

The idea of a King, a Queen, a Throne, remains still fresh in our minds and we were unfortunate our kingdom was. Taken away, at a period of national awakening. If you will look back at our history, you will find that the Burmese people are over and above a fighting nation. So it is no wonder that then that Burma still has the spirit of fighting and if we have a chance we still desire to fight and and fight for a good cause. (Proceedings IC XV, I; 246)

He then mentions the "University Training Corps the aim and objective of which is obvious. It is our object to train in a way suitable to maintain their manhood and to look after their country and their people." This corps mentioned heralded the foundation of a number of paramilitary forces called *tats* (military units), the precursors of the Burmese modern *tatmadaw*, the Burma independence Army.