

Prologue to Part B (1945 - 1962)

Independent Burma's First Parliamentary Period Created by a Soldier-Politician

On June 15, 1945, a flag featuring a white star on the upper left side of a red ground could be seen in Rangoon flying besides the Union Jack at the military parade celebrating the victory over the Japanese. The flag was displayed by soldiers of the Burmese National Army (BNA) and symbolised a new political organisation clandestinely founded almost one year before in a military camp near Pegu (Bago) by leaders of the BNA and the communist and socialist parties. Under the acronym AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League – Burmese acronym: *hpa-hsa-pa-la*) - it was to become the dominating political force of Burma until 1962.



The star symbolised resistance, the red colour bravery, but could be seen as an indication of the leftist orientation of the founding partners as well. The flag further indicated that the army having resisted both the British and the Japanese invaders of Burma could be regarded a force that had been the key element in winning what Burma had longed for since the end of the Burmese kingdom: independence.

It is interesting to note that it was Ne Win who in 1942 had been the first BIA soldier to enter Rangoon (see above p.) was the first to address the Burmese public in a radio broadcast already. He did so five weeks before the victory parade on May 7, 1945 as the spokesman of the Burmese armed forces (AFPFL 1946: 30-35). Similar to 1942, his military unit was the first to enter Rangoon even two days before the British troops. Ne Win got the radio transmitter repaired and wrote his speech in English with the help of a prominent journalist. The speech was read on his behalf in English and Burmese by two speakers while he had a discussion with British officers (Taylor 2015: 67). Before explaining the emergence of the army, justifying its cooperation with the Japanese and its achievements and dedication to the country's freedom and sovereignty, he said:

You have seen [...] that it is a united front put up by all the indigenous races that call themselves Burmese. Thus it is that it is the Burmese Army which is composed by the Burmese, Shans, Kachins and Karens has been looked upon by all as not only the hope of the country but also as its very heart and soul. (AFPFL 1946: 30)

Ne Win did not elaborate further about the proclaimed unity of all ethnic groups including those non-Burmese ethnic soldiers who had fought on the side of the British against the “most ruthless of all Fascist Powers”. It was an “anti-attitude” that characterised the unity.

Aung San, Ne Win's comrade-in-arm, whom Ne Win had replaced as head of the Burma army in 1943, the most prominent leader of the new league as well as still of the Burmese army, did not take part in the march through the city. He witnessed the parade – clothed in a Japanese uniform – from a pedestal and watched soldiers being celebrated as liberators by the Burmese onlookers. Some of them might have done so already three years before when the BIA,



Admiral Mountbatten speaking at the victory parade
(Source: Australian War Memorial)

predecessor of BNA, had entered Rangoon on the side of the Japanese forces. Aung San kept a low profile because many British regarded him as a traitor because of his collaboration with the Japanese. However, the allied forces – British, American and Chinese – already had accepted Aung San's offer to join forces with them to complete driving out the Japanese after the Burmese general and defence minister had ordered to turn against the former ally on March 27 of that year.

One day before the parade, Aung San had written a letter to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Commander of the allied forces who had flown from the headquarters in Kandy (Ceylon) to Rangoon to participate in the celebrations. The letter proposed a scheme to reorganise the BNA and added the request to help solving the "currency problem" in the city. The currency introduced by the Japanese had become useless by now. This way, Aung San showed that he was not just a soldier but a political minded man who had used the opportunity to create a Burmese army with the assistance of the Japanese to achieve a political goal.

One day after the celebrations – and two days before his first daughter, Suu Kyi, was born – Mountbatten met Aung San and Than Tun – his brother-in-law, communist leader and general secretary of the AFPFL – after a reception for prominent Rangoon citizens. It turned out that the two soldiers got along very well. On this basis, they jointly laid the foundations of Burma's post-war future.

Aung San, the political soldier became the father of the new state and Mountbatten can be regarded as the British godfather of the country's independence. His pragmatic attitude was based on his conviction that the assistance of the BNA would be crucial to ultimately dispel the Japanese army from Burmese soil. More importantly, he was further convinced that the Burmese general exercised the greatest authority in Burma both in military and civilian matters and that a "minor civil war" would be risked if Aung San and other "collaborators" would be treated as war criminals as had been recommended to him (Mountbatten 1951: 201).

The dawn of Burma's independence being in the air at the parade of June 1945 was a product of the great war. Aung San some months after the victory parade declined Mountbatten's offer to continue his military career in a new Burma army composed of soldiers from the forces that had fought each other in the war. He became the architect of the country's independence by heading a delegation to London in January 1947 that concluded an agreement on the country's independence with the British government and drafted the constitution of 1947 after a Constitutional Assembly had been elected in April 1947.

Aung San was however prevented to become independent Burma's first prime minister because of his assassination on 19 July 1947. His elder friend Nu took over to become the leading Burmese politician through the period under review in this part until March 1962. This period is conventionally termed the "democratic "or parliamentary" era of post-independent Burmese history.

This first period of the Burma's post war history ended by another military action, a coup d'etat of the Burmese military, then known under its Burmese name Tatmadaw against the elected government headed by A Nu on 2 March 1962. In the morning of the day, General Ne Win announced that the military had staged a coup d'etat because of the "extremely grave situation that has befallen the Union" (Taylor 2015: 258). He did not elaborate on the nature of the "graveness" but it soon became clear that the military was a fraud that a federal seminar that had begun on March 1 could lead to the disintegration of the Union. In a way, Ne Win thus took up the theme of unity that had already been mentioned at the beginning of his radio address in May 1945.

In contrast to the first military takeover in 1962¹, the time period under the constitution of 1947 is often referred to as Burma's "democratic" or "parliamentary" era. The holding of elections during this period supports such labelling. On the other hand, Ne Win's speech, the flag of the new political organisation and Aung San's meeting with the head of the allied forces indicate that the Tatmadaw was involved in the politics of Burma from the beginning of the final struggle for the country's independence. The period was framed by the emphatic self-description of the army as an instrument to achieve and safeguard the country's integrity.

On this background, this part of the study can be expected to inform about the early phase of military-civilian relations in Burma. The following narratives are not just about a very chequered period of post-independent Burmese history that has been evaluated rather sceptically by different authors.

For Michael Aung-Thwin and Robert Taylor, the period until 1962 was a kind of impasse. Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" was a new beginning. According to Aung Thwin, the coup leader revived Aung San's concept of leadership as a *minlaung*. He stated in an essay written 1985, three years before Ne Win's retirement:

He [Ne Win] may be not as popular as Aung San was, but people are loyal to his status, that is, he is there because of his *kamma*, so they are in fact loyal to the principle and doctrine of kammic determination, not necessarily to the person. He is the *minlaung* who out of chaos and near disunity stepped in to create relative order and unity. (Aung Thwin 1985: 258)

Two years later, Taylor characterises the periods from 1942 to 1962 as a "displacement of the state" followed by its "reassortment after 1962. The Second World War followed by civil war commencing after independence displaced the state "s the creator of political order and economic direction and lost its hegemonic position". (Taylor 1987: 217). He argues that no symbols accepted by the many existing "alternative authorities" - communists, local ethnic and Burmese leaders, the military, religious groups- could be implemented that legitimised the state government.

The initial promise of a socialist programme,² including land reform, was intended to move support from the government. However, during the 1950s, religion, especially Buddhism, became the most important element in the state's search for legitimacy. (Taylor 1987: 287)

After the end of the socialist era, the former head of the US embassy in Yangon in an essay written end of 2007 stated:

Burma's democratic governance began 1948 and lasted only fourteen years. The quasi self-rule of the latter colonial years produced a functioning parliamentary system after independence but did not succeed in developing a sense of national identity and common interest for Burma's multiethnic society. (Clapp 2007: 3)

This view emphasising the success of the British attempts to lay the foundations of a parliamentary system in which elections play a central role has been challenged with the argument that "an analysis of the 1950s reveals systematic sources of instability for democratic governance that still exist today." (Callahan 1998: 6)

On the backdrop of such variety of assessments of the whole period of time some closer looks at the elections held during the first years of Burma's post-war history and their particular contexts might be helpful to better understand a number of features characterising Burmese political development then and later. Besides the crucial interrelationship of the civilian and the military sectors of society, the following topics can be named: The role of the pre-colonial political order; the

1 In retrospect, Ne Win's appointment as prime minister in 1958 with the consent of the parliament has been coined a "coup" as well that was however disguised by the fact that the parliament had elected Ne Win on October 28 unanimously to become prime minister for half a year.

2 See the Constitution of 1947, , Chapter III and IV.

importance of elections to legitimise political power; the “functioning” of the parliamentary system in relationship to the reforms undertaken in the colonial era, the problematic inter-ethnic relations and the impact of elections on the stability of the “democratic governance” until 1962.

Besides such overarching aspects, each of the four elections covered on the following pages displays special characteristics. The first held in April 1947 decided on the composition of the Constituent Assembly that drafted and adopted the first constitution of independent Burma. This constitution defined the role of an elected parliament and contained a number of elements that are still valid until today as the first-past-the-post electoral system taken over from the British. It was further held under almost the same electoral rules that the elections of 1936. The elections of 1951 had to be conducted under the conditions of civil war but included for the first time the formerly “excluded areas” at the fringes of the Burmese heartlands. The 1956 polls were followed by the decision of prime minister Nu to step down from his post as head of government for some time in order to concentrate on reorganising the AFPFL. Nonetheless, a political crisis became obvious in 1958 that led to the break-up of the league and the handing over of power to a military led government for a limited period of time. The last elections of 1960 were organised by this government headed by general Ne Win whose election as well as the extension of his term as head of a caretaker government had been approved by the parliament elected in 1956.

Unfortunately, not much material could be found to shed light on how electoral processes were used by the leaders and the people in those regions that had not experienced the five elections held under colonial rule in Burma proper. Only some features of this inclusion can be presented therefore. However, the story of the events leading to the National Convention of February 1962 that was terminated in the early morning of its third day by the coup that put an end to the legal force of the constitution of 1947 as well. The conference dealing with the issue of federalism, regarded as a core issue of Myanmar politics until today, is well documented. Some aspects of the issue will be included in the section about the 1960 elections to illustrate the “extremely grave situation” mentioned by Ne Win in his radio address on early morning of 2 March 1962 that ended the first parliamentary period of Burma’s history.

The narration of these events forms the last section of this part before the second "interlude" outlining some features of what happened under direct military rule (1962-1974) and under the constitution of 1974 that provided for a one-party system (1974-1988).