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Elections in Burma/Myanmar, 1922-2020. **Their Constitutional Contexts and Political Impact** *An Analytic Narration*

Introduction - Outline of the Study

On 8 November 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 back on 21 November 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 obstructed the road to democratic elections in Burma/Myanmar. The first election was almost completely boycotted – or ignored - by the electorate, the last one was nullified by the military leadership because of alleged irregularities. This action resulted in massive protests of the people who had voted for the winning party, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). The oppression of the protests by the military led to a new stage of the civil war that plagued the country since it became independent in 1948.

A particular feature of the country's post independent history is the involvement by the military in its political history highlighted by two military coups in 1962 and 1988 before the last takeover of full power in 2021.³ It can further be noted that the last two of the three constitutions under which the country was ruled (1947, 1974 and 2008) were drafted under the supervision of the leadership of the Tatmadaw, the name under which the military is known in Myanmar.⁴ It can further be noted that Aung San, the designer of the first constitution that provided for elections after the British model, had founded the Burmese Independence Army that played a crucial role in Burma's final struggle for independence, is still referred to as *Bogyoke* (General) Aung San in the many places named after him. The armed struggle against the British on the side of the Japanese had been an instrument of his political aim to liberate Burma. He gave up his military post to become a political leader, but was assassinated by a political rival half a year before Burma celebrated the independence negotiated by him with the British.

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. The same applies to the use of Rangoon and Yangon for the country's biggest city and the ethnic group Karen (before 1989) 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 The events of 1958 that resulted in the election of General Ne Win as head of a "Caretaker Government" to solve a political crisis by organising new elections are often called a "coup" as well. **For details see below ...**

⁴ The name is originally an honorific title from the royal times and can be translated as "The Royal Armed Forces". As a result of recent developments, and the fact that the word refers to an institution of the major ethnic group regarded as an oppressor by many other ethnic groups, the term has lost its honorific connotation (see <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/please-dont-call-myanmar-military-tatmadaw.html>; accessed 29.6.2024).

His daughter Suu Kyi entered the stage of Myanmar politics rather accidentally shortly before the coup of 1988 that ended the Burma's socialist one party rule after the resignation of Aung San's comrade-in arms Ne Win who had chaired the ruling party. Before, she had lived for almost three decades abroad, mainly in England. Aung San Suu Kyi became leader of a movement propagating democracy, was put under house arrest for years, became a worldwide acknowledged icon of democracy and human rights highlighted by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and headed a party that won all elections in which it participated by a great margin. Since the last takeover of the military, she is detained again by the leaders of the Tatmadaw founded by her father. Her reputation particularly in the western hemisphere rapidly declined after she defended her country before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the charge of genocide of the Muslim Rohingya minority.

In view of such volatile and often rather enigmatic twists and turns of Burma's/Myanmar's recent history, and its international perception an analytic assessment of the role of elections has to put a focus on civil-military relations. The short narration presented above shows that both societal sectors are closely and tensely linked in Myanmar since the beginning of the country's struggle for independence from colonial rule.⁵ The "Burmese case" can be illustrated by the tradition of "changing clothes" from a military uniform to civil clothes that started with Aung San, the "founding father" of the state and continued in connection with the constitutions of 1974 and 2008. General Ne Win became the civilian U⁶ Ne Win and the former General Thein Sein became U Sein Thein before the elections of 2010 held after the rules of another constitution drafted by the military and enacted in 2008.

On this background, a detailed investigation of the elections introduced by the British authorities in order to make Burma a part of the "modern and civilised world" of the day might help to better understand the difficulties that prevented Myanmar to achieve a political system accommodating the country's conditions among them the political traditions inherited from the royal past, the impact of colonialism and ethno-religious diversity.

The study takes a historical approach by presenting a long-term study of documenting the single general elections held in Burma/Myanmar since 1922 with a focus on the polls in which a number of contestants participated. In addition, the constitutional contexts of the elections will be outlined including the preparations to draft the constitutions that took the long timespans of twelve respectively twenty after the military coups of 1962 and 1988.

Features of an Analytic Narration

The following narration of events is based on primary and secondary sources with a focus on material originating in Burma/Myanmar. The analytic interpretation of the documented evidence comes second. This approach is meant as an 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 theoretical analyses of various academic commentators and media reports. Such a cautious approach is based on the observation that the country's recent history exhibits a number of peculiarities.

⁵ For an overview on some of the literature dealing with Burma/Myanmar see Zöllner 2012: 51-82.

⁶ "U" is a prefix designating elder people in Burma, the female counterpart being "Saw". These and other elements characterising the traditional Burmese custom of linguistically denoting the relationship to others are neglected in this study,

The first parts of the present territory of Myanmar were integrated in the British Indian Empire after the British East India Company had won a war against the Burmese Buddhist kingdom in 1826. From the beginning, the different cultural environment contributed to problems in administering the new acquisitions (Furnivall 1939). After the new province of Burma had been fully incorporated after a third war in 1885 and the last Burmese king had been exiled in India, Buddhism played a crucial role in the resistance against foreign rule (Winfield 2010). The territory was separated from India in 1936 to become part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere under Japanese domination in 1942. After the Japanese defeat and the re-establishment of the pre-war British administration, Aung San, different from most of other leaders of the former British Empire, did not agree to join the Commonwealth of Nations.

In the same vein, Aung San's successors Nu and Ne Win pursued politics of strict neutrality during the post-war periods. Over the years until 1988, close bilateral relations with other countries in the fields of economic and development assistance were only established with Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany, two countries that had lost World War II.⁷ Having been an eager promotor of the non-alignment movement under Nu, the country informed the UN that it had left the organisation in September 1979 due to Cuba's attitude towards the crisis in Cambodia.⁸ Ne Win's government however was credited for not letting the country get involved in the Vietnam War. Socialist Burma under Ne Win's rule was labelled a "Hermit Nation" by foreign media.⁹

Ne Win's resignation from his last post as his reaction to the student led popular unrest starting in March 1988 created a political void that was soon filled by Aung San Suu Kyi who had entered the country shortly after the unrest started and accepted the invitation of students to take a leading role in the protests against the socialist regime (Zöllner/Ebbighausen 2015: 11-24). She made the new catchword "democracy" the creed of her followers and admirers both in Myanmar and abroad. After the coup of September 1988, a very catchy fairy-tale metaphor of "The Beauty and the Beast" took shape (Zöllner 2015). It promised a swift surrender of the military leadership still influenced by Ne Win. One can say that this hope of a "transition to democracy" collapsed with the resumption of full political power by the Tatmadaw after the elections of November 2020. On the way to this cherished "happy end", the holding of free and fair elections was seen as one of the prerequisites to achieve the goal. In a comment on the coup of 1 February 2021 the Indian scholar and long time observer of Myanmar politics Nehginpao Kipgen writes:

Elections are necessary but not sufficient for the establishment of a strong and vibrant democracy. Developments in Myanmar's electoral process show that the successful holding of an election was evidence of the country of moving towards democracy. (Kipgen 2021: 13)

The "narrations" of the 18 elections covered in this study provide differentiated information about the meaning of a "strong and vibrant democracy" on the part of different actors both inside and outside of the country. Besides the various political actors – politicians, soldiers, businessmen, bureaucrats, civil society leaders from different ethnic and religious groups, foreign observers and interlocutors - special focus will be on the electorate. It can be expected that such information may help to analyse why the holding of elections until now were not sufficient to form governments that

⁷ Zöllner 1994.

⁸ *The Daily Herald* 30. 9.1979: 36.

⁹ *The Sentinel* 8.9.1966: 10. - The undisputed leader did not act as a hermit. He undertook many travels including yearly trips to Europe lasting months (Taylor 2015).

were able to act according to the needs and wishes of the entire population. This way, reasons for the continuance of manifold attitudes of confrontation that a “strong and vibrant democracy” is expected to master might come in sight. This way, it can be expected that this study will shed some more light on the Burmese understanding of the catchword “democracy”. Since 1988 it is used in an almost inflationary way, but its meaning in the eyes of the many stakeholders in Myanmar politics remains mostly vague. However, the holding of “free and fair” elections is generally regarded as a core ingredient towards a “true” and “genuine” democracy.

With regard to such a teleological perspective, the focus on narrating the history of elections can provide empirical material. The election results are mostly known as are details about campaigning, boycott initiatives, campaign speeches and – often conflicting - assessments about the main protagonists.

The particular approach of this study can be illustrated by a linguistic plus cultural-anthropological observation. As no indigenous Burmese term fitting the English word "democracy" could be established, the term was just transcribed in letters of the Burmese alphabet (Tin Hlaing 200, Blum 2010: 8-9). In contrast, a Burmese word for "election" exists. The word ရွေးကောက်ပွဲ (jwei:-kau'-pwe:) designates 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. Formal bottom-up state wide electoral procedures were unknown in the traditional societies on the territory of today’s Myanmar. On top of the society of the kingdoms in the plains was the king who ruled indirectly through governors supposed to be loyal to him. In the countryside, the office of the headman was hereditary. This model pertained to the “galactic polities” (Tambiah 2013), but not to the various people living at the fringes of top-down organised states. In contrast, the people in the hilly regions around the lowlands developed the “art not to be governed” in a more or less “democratic” way (Scott 2009)..

According to the *Meriam-Webster Dictionary*, general elections are “held at regular intervals in which candidates are elected in all or most constituencies of a nation or state”.¹⁰ Details about the "regularity" are generally laid down in the constitution of the respective state. Laws regulate the way in which the polls should be conducted. In Burma, the first such legally binding provisions were enacted in Burma by the British colonial power for the first time on 1 January 1923, shortly after the first elections of November 1922 had been held. This happened more than three years after reforms had been introduced in the other Indian provinces. This can be seen as an indication that the country was somewhat “special” from the beginning and obviously did not develop like India that is often called the “largest democracy in the world.”

Burma’s first constitution like its Indian model was known as “Dyarchy”, dual government in which the colonial power and the colonised people cooperated by way of a kind of power sharing as a first step to becoming a full-fledged independent and democratic nation. The term denotes a kind of asymmetric cooperation between elected parliamentarians and ministers chosen from them and the colonial administration. For the latter, a number of core subjects like the defence of the province, justice, police and foreign relations were to be administered under the jurisdiction of the British Crown represented by the governor.

Interestingly, the period between the elections of 2015 and 2020 happening under the constitution enacted in 2008 by the Tamadaw leadership has been termed “Dyarchy” as well¹¹. During this

¹⁰ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/general%20election>; accessed 23.10.2020.

¹¹ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/The-ghosts-of-dyarchy-haunt-the-future>; accessed 2.6.2024.

period, power sharing happened between the elected civilian government and the military that was regarded by many as a new “colonial power” that was based – as in the pre-independent period – on the strength of the armed forces.

Such a “*dejà-vu*” might be an inducement to think about different analytic options to analyse Burma’s/Myanmar’s colonial and post-colonial history not just from a target-oriented perspective, but include the alternative of a variety of re-enactments. On this backdrop, the narration presented here contextualises the elections held since 1922 in a double way. It contains both information about the five constitutions under which Burma/Myanmar was ruled since the beginning of the 20th century and retells a few episodes on what happened inside the elected legislatures. Albeit not held all the time at “regular intervals”, the 17 general elections plus the by-election of 2012 designating Aung San Suu Kyi’s entering the realpolitik of the country under the military drafted last constitution between 1922 and 2020 represent some kind of continuity characterised by a sequence of breakups. The narration thus tries to help taking an analytic “birds-eyes view” on the country’s modern history in order to include the variety of perceptions developing over time in respect of the processes related to holding elections.

Notes on the Literature

The following paragraphs give an overview on the academic literature on netters related to elections in the context of the country’s post 20th century history. Section a) provides information about foreign scholarship until the coup of 1998, section b) for the time after the coup terminating the public uproar and the socialist regime. Section c) provides information about views from some Burmese authors.

a) From colonial times to 1988

The first studies on Burmese history and culture were written by western authors who entered Myanmar for various reasons in the 19th century. The first organised approach happened on 28 March 1910 with the establishment of the Burma Research Society in Rangoon, some two decades after Britain had taken control over the whole country, by a number of Burmese intellectuals and – mostly British – foreigners. According to its Over the course of time, the society aimed at . establishing “an authentic and unified identity for the country that would act as an antidote to the increasing social and economic plurality within society” . The roots of such an identity were found in the culture of the kingdom of Bagan in the 11th century (Boshier 2016: 315). The most prominent member was John S. Furnivall, a colonial officer married to a Burmese whose writings and educational activities tried to match the country’s social traditions and the actual conditions of the contemporary world.

The word “elections” is not mentioned in the index of Furnivall’s seminal work on colonial policy and practice in Burma and Netherlands India in which he developed the concept of “plural society” in both tropical dependencies characterised by a cohabitation of people from different ethnic groups which “mix but do not combine” (Furnivall 1956: 304). As a consequence, the author is sceptical about the prospect of democratic government that requires that the “national interest shall prevail by legal methods over sectional and local interests”. “But in the plural society of tropical dependencies, each separate section is [...] preferring its sectional interests to common national well-being.” (Furnivall 1956: 407).

Furnivall returned to Burma after war to serve as an adviser to the government and wrote and summarised his analysis of the country’s political development shortly before his death in 1960.

The work provides a detailed account of the provisions of the constitution regarding the legislation and parliamentary procedures (Furnivall 1960: 36-48,) but no detailed information about elections. Such data are provided by studies written by Anglo-American scholars who worked in the country for some time, particularly John F. Cady who covered the history during the colonial period until the early 1960s (Cady 1965) and Hugh Tinker whose study concentrated on the first years of independence until 1956 (Tinker 1957). Two other scholars did research on particular topics related to political issues. Lucian Pye focussed on the personalities of bureaucrats and politicians involved in the task of nation building (Pye 1962) while Manuel Sarkisyanz outlines the Buddhist background of the socialist policies in the era of Prime Minister Nu until 1962 (Sarkisyanz 1965). Both studies with the relation of tradition and modernity in the politics of the newly independent country. Pye diagnoses a deep and unresolved ambivalence affecting the identity of the people from the country's elites interviewed by him that might negatively influence the task of forming an independent modern nation. Sarkisyanz highlights the difference between the anglicised elites and the majority of the rural people and states that Nu's reuse of Buddhist traditional concepts is welcomed by the majority of the voters.

No detailed studies on the process of democratic election were written since after the war the discipline of area studies originating in the colonial period and the accompanying academic efforts to better understand the languages, cultures, and social organisations in colonised societies. The author of an essay on Myanmar emphasises the

problem-driven research rather than approach-driven analysis. As a consequence, even when focusing on quite specific issues modern Burma scholars have tended to take an inter-disciplinary view, rather than approach them through the traditional departments into which academic institutions are usually organised. (Selth 2010: 224).

With regard to period until the coup of 1962, the "democratic" character of the Burma's state under the leadership of premier Nu versus the threat of communist ideology and ethnic rebellion, Specific reflections on the role of elections are missing. John F. Cady comments the last elections of the "democratic period" in 1960 and organised by a Caretaker Government headed by Ne Win, the head of the armed forces, this way: "Counter-revolution had won the day; traditional Burma head reasserted its character quarter. Buddha had triumphed Marx." (Cady 1965: Supplement 34). Nu had promised to change the constitution to make Buddhism the state religion in case of an election victory over the rival party advocating secular socialist ideas and used modern means of communicating their message.

Sarkisyanz drew a similar conclusion as Cady does: "[Nu's] victory meant for most Burmese the triumph of charismatic personality over a party machine, of oriental tradition over imported slogans." (Sarkisyanz 1965: 228) Two years after these elections, the military staged a coup and deposed Nu. The military junta named Revolutionary Council started the Burmese Way to Socialism, withdrew the constitutional change, and drafted a constitution providing for just one party and thus tried to reverse "Buddha's victory".

b) After 1988

The long period of the military inspired Burmese socialism heavily affected the research on the country. Travel to the country was heavily restricted until 1988.¹² From the student uprising, Ne

¹² From 1962 to 1988, tourist visas were limited to 24 hours. In 1974 – after the new constitution had been adopted – the term was extended to seven days. - For a critical assessment of western Burma studies until the 1980s see Taylor 1983. The review does not mention democracy and elections as a focal point of Burma studies.

Win's resignation and Aung San Suu Kyis coming to prominence the antagonism of Buddhist charismatic leadership versus Marxist communism changed to the alternative of democracy and military dominance, authoritarianism or dictatorship.

For some time, the new antagonism caused a linguistic decide about the use of the names Burma and Myanmar for the country after the military junta had issued the Adaptation of Expressions Law in 1989.¹³ With the sharp increase of public interest on Burma/Myanmar and the rising academic interest in the country's politics, the antagonism in the country spread to western countries in which a great number of NGOs supporting the "democracy movement" and human rights emerged. Not surprisingly, the issue of a morally and ethically justified advocacy of a just case against a brutal military moved in to the academic realm. Usually, such conflicts between academics were not waged in public.

An exception of the rule is a controvert between two Australian scholar. A reviewer of a book about the situation in Myanmar at the beginning of the 21th century expressed severe doubts about the accuracy of what was reported. Historical facts were "inaccurate" and the book "exists more in the realm of creative writing than of anthropology, history or politics" according to the reviewer. It presents a "Kafkaesque construct" by referring to her own experiences in the country. (James 2006: 374).

In her answer, the book author argues that by dismissing her "account of in-depth fieldwork as 'fancy', 'creative writing' and 'nonsense'", she "dismisses the words of my Burmese informants about their affective dimensions of repression." (Skidmore 2007: 95). Both scholars absolutise tend to the experiences of their scholarly work in Myanmar and carry the conflict in the academic world.

Such antagonistic assessment about the "Myanmar realities" might existing in a hidden way behind western information on electoral processes in Myanmar as well. The following narrations try to present different views on disputed facts and controversial assessments in order to enable the readers to form opinions on the own.

With regard to factual evidence about elections, most information is provided by western sources. A handbook on elections in Asia and the Pacific published in 2001 contains a number of data on the elections after World War II until 1990. The statistical evidence given is preceded by a short outline of the evolution of electoral provisions according to the constitution.¹⁴ About the pre -independent period, a very short information is given which points to the limitations of suffrage and the low voter turnout (Frasch 2001: 599-502). At almost the same time, a "snapshot" on Burma's election and constitutional history commencing in 1922 was published by the Burma Lawyers' Council working in exile that stated: "Burma's people have rarely been able to exercise their political will or have their voices heard." The last example had been the fact that the parliament elected in 1990 had not been able to elect a government because of the military junta's argument that a new constitution had to be drafted before a transfer of power could happen.¹⁵

¹³ On the occasion of the award of the International Willy Brandt Prize in April 2014, Aung San Suu Kyi spent some 15 minutes of her speech to explain why she still stuck to the name "Burma" for the country: The new name "Myanmar" had not ben democratically be endorsed by the people (author, personal observation).

¹⁴ The information given is not quite accurate with regard to the composition of the House of Representatives- No provisions resisted for a communal representation in this hose.

¹⁵ https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs/LIOB07-Saffin_Snapshot.htm (accessed 31.10.2024).

Already before, the senior Myanmar scholar Robert Taylor sometimes accused to be close to the military had written a short introductory essay on Burmese elections up to 1985 in a handbook on political parties originating and vanishing in the Asian and Pacific Region over time,. The text provides a lot of valuable information about Burmese political groups set up from the beginning on the 20th century on and their electoral performances (Taylor 1985). In 1996, the same author contributed an essay for a collection of articles on “The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia” edited by him. He provides a sober summary of the volume’s findings and his own contribution on Burma:

Elections are double-edged swords in the rise of democracy and in the formation of a dominant, stable, and permanent political order. On the one hand, they are pacifying instruments. They are often means of depoliticising populations, limiting the politically possible to formalized campaigns and episodic voting opportunities. [...] On the other hand, in circumstances where narrow, ageing, ineffectual regimes have effectually lost touch with , or alienated, the bulk of the population elections can provide a lever for prying open and widening the sphere of legitimate political activity by demonstrating the illegitimacy of the old regime. The essay on Burma illustrates this point. It remains to be demonstrated, however, whether such elections provide an opportunity for genuinely new groups to enter politics [...] (Taylor 1996: 8)

Taylor further gave some explanations about the factionalism in Burmese parties (Taylor 2020) and wrote an end-of-year review on Myanmar published before the coup of 2021 in which he takes up the metaphor of electoral “triumph” achieved Aung San Suu Kyi. He states:

For the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi is thus their biggest electoral asset. Without her, the election would potentially have been more open and competitive,[...] Hence, with no one foreseeable successor to take her place, the post–Aung San Suu Kyi future of the NLD looks bleak (Taylor 2021: 215).

With regard to the future, he is rather fatalistic: “As 2020 comes to an end, the future does not look promising for Myanmar, but only time will tell.” (Taylor 2021: 219)

A great number of recent contributions on elections in Myanmar concentrate on what happened after the popular uprising of 1988 that ended the period under one-party rule. Here, the elections having taken place under British colonial rule are only rarely taken into account 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). Furthermore, another article deals with the buildings hosting the parliaments from the colonial period until the construction of a large parliamentary complex in Myanmar's new capital Naypyidaw (Egreteau 2017). A number of academic works exist about the elections happening after the military coup of 1988, particularly dealing with those held after Myanmar’s third constitution enacted in 2008. Most of them concentrate on the prospects of democratisation and emphasise the necessity of “electoral integrity”¹⁶ and the need to amend the constitution in favour of removing privileges of the military to control the country’s politics among them a veto to change certain provisions of the basic law.

Another focus of recent studies is related to Myanmar’s’ ethnic-religious diversity that is closely linked to the civil war that started almost simultaneously with independence. The problem is highlighted by the fact that 135 ethno-linguistic groups are officially recognised. Participants in the census of 2014 conducted with the assistance of UN agency could choose one of them.^{17c)}

¹⁶ For an overview of contributions of the Austrian author Michael Lidauer who specialised in doing research on various aspects of elections in post-1988 Myanmar see <https://uni-frankfurt.academia.edu/MichaelLidauer> (accessed 30.10.2010).

Burmese contributions

From the Burmese side, no detailed studies have been written about the topic in English. However, a number of studies written by Burmese having studied outside Myanmar came out. In June 2010, the news website *Irrawaddy* 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).

The author summarises that the Burmese people "have had tough luck with elections." even under the "constitutional period" until 1960 because "Burmese elect oralism, and Burmese political culture for that matter, has always been characterized by the elimination of one opposition by another, a zero-sum game historically." (Ko Ko Thett 2010. part III).

This remarks take up the argument of a Burmese historian and political scientist who left Burma in 1967 to work in the United States.¹⁸ Some years before he left his home country in protest against the socialist regime, he wrote an article entitled "Thoughts on Burmese Political Traditions" in which he focussed on the difficulties to implement democracy in Burma (Maung Maung Gyi 2013). His article was republished in 2013 in the first issue of a *Myanmar Studies Journal*¹⁹ after a "transition to democracy" was envisaged after the military had loosened the grip on power after 2011. The reprinted article served as a kind of bridge between the Burma Research Society and its journal both of which had been terminated in 1977 by the socialist government.

As a "foreign import" that could not be expected to take roots in Burma given the "political habits which we have inherited from our forefathers" that are characterised as "authoritarian traditions" firmly established in Burma since the first Burmese dynasty was founded in 1044. Maung Maung Gyi 2013: 5).. Some twenty years later Maung Maung Gyi applied his thesis to the socialist era that had started with a military coup happening shortly after his article had been published. The author calls his book a "case study of authoritarianism in developing countries" and exhibits the authors "bias against all forms of authoritarianism, rightist, leftist, benign, malignant in-between, or in its ever changing mood and style". (Maung Maung Gyi 1973: v-vi).

The author-enumerates a number of characteristics shaping the "social psychology" and "political culture" over centuries among them the "highly personalised hierarchical system" and the "lack of concept of opposition". The further is qualified by a lack of a legally binding "well defined body of objective rules for regulating the superior-inferior relationship" with the result that the person in power always had the last word. The latter is characterised in his way:

The Burmese generally thought in terms of victory or vanquished in the absolute sense. Victory to them meant having the situation entirely under their control. (Maung Maung Gyi 1983; 46)

Such attitude limited the room for compromise that was limited to interpersonal relations between equal partners (Maung Maung Gyi 2013: 24).

¹⁷ The results of this part of the census has not been published until now indicating the brisance of the issue. The pollees could only give one answer disregarding the fact that a "pure ethnicity" is rare in Myanmar. The whole scheme goes back to the categorisation of inhabitants of Burma during the colonial period. For a critical assessment see <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/ethnicity-without-meaning-data-without-context> (accessed 30.10.2024).

¹⁸ For Maung Maung Gyi's biography see <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S1049096500034387> and <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0021911800050646> (accessed 28.6.2024).

¹⁹ The journal was edited by the newly founded Myanmar Knowledge Society as a successor of the Burma Research Society. It was intended to publish two volumes a year but it seems that only three issues came out.

The critical view on parliamentary democracy in the first years of Burmese independence illustrated by Maung Maung Gyi by an analysis of debated in the parliament between 1948 and 1958 (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 111-138) is shared by other Burmese writer who stayed in the country during the socialist period.

Historian Htin Aung in his "History of Burma" published in 1967 which concentrates on the time until independence notes that the post independence multi-party polls might have been "too successful". The results, he writes "fully represented the will of the people. The consequence was a one-party government without an opposition." The people had wanted the League that Aung San had created to rule, and could therefore not be blamed for the failure of parliamentary democracy. It was the "acrimony" between the League's leaders that caused the end of the first democratic period (Htin Aung 1957: 324-325)

With regard to Ne Win, he emphasised that the politics of the almost undisputed leader of Burma's politics was rooted in Burmese traditions:

Knowing the Burmese chronicles almost by rote, he looks at the Burmese past to create the Burmese future.. Holding that the Union could be preserved only by the maintenance of traditional values, General Ne Win's aim was to define and follow the "Burmese way" in all aspects of life, in social affairs, in economics, in politics, and even in socialism. (Htin Aung 1967: 328)

Finally a fourth Burmese author who had co-shaped Burmese society from the end of World War II to 1988 in many functions as lawyer, journalist, writer, functionary in the socialist regime and finally the last president under the socialise system, can be quoted. In his biography of Ne Win published in 1969, he wrote about the elections of 1960 organised by a military led government under Ne Win's premiership that resulted in a clear victory of Nu's faction:

The election campaign was hard and bitter. Mudslinging, name calling, washing one's dirty linen in public, these the party leader did unashamed, and unaware – or uncaring – that in the end politics and politicians would be debased in the public eye. The campaigns cost money – heaps of money – and business men who had made their fortunes in the decade of AFPFL power were called upon by both factions to contribute. (Maung Maung 1959; 271)

This depiction supports the author's assessment that Ne Win's coup might have been an attempt to return to the "Burmese ways" invoked by Htin Aung. These "ways" can however be assessed very differently as Maung Maung Gyi's and the contemporary advocates of implementing democracy in Myanmar show

In Maung Maung's personal recollections of the 1988 uprising, the last president of socialist Burma pointed to a particular aspect of his country's post-independent history, the existence of 10-15 years long cycles. This Buddhist way of looking at the country's history can – with changes of the time intervals - be applied to Burma's royal history with its rise and fall of dynasties since the 11th century as well (Lieberman 1984). This model contrasts the linear model or can be seen as integrating it. Maung Maung writes:

Change happen in cycles, patterns and Rhythms, sometimes seemingly regular and obeying law of nature, sometimes seemingly erratic, unshackled by any law, entirely wild and free. And scholars and scientists watch them, analyse them, and make their projections. They do not always get their things, of course, but that does not matter. They do not always agree about their conclusions, either, to put it mildly but that too doesn't matter. It's a fascinating occupation anyway. (Maung Maung 1999: 9)

In accordance with this Buddhist-philosophical remark, this study aims at presenting a balanced account with regard to the inside and outside views on the three “cycles of elections” and their respective contexts

d) To sum up: Since 1988, academic works on general elections in Myanmar concentrated on the issue if the country was on the way to become a “truly” democratic country or not. Both the influence of the military in politics according to the constitutional provisions proscribed by the military leaders and the problems to reflect the ethnic diversity through elections were main arguments for such scepticism.

In contrast, Burmese authors writing before 1988 emphasise the influence of the traditional ways of legitimising political power going back to the precolonial royal period. The influence of this authoritarian tradition and its impact on the performance of general elections from the colonial period has not yet been a focus of studies on Burmese politics.

The Burmese reception was generally sceptical with regard to the western “imports” of general elections. An alternative model to a more or less benevolent authoritarianism has

Structure of the Study

This study aims at putting the narrations on the elections held in their historical and political contexts. As a consequence, events happening before and after the polls are outlined. This refers to the five constitutions under which the 17 elections were held. In addition, the available information on the election results are presented, some highlights of parliamentary work are retold, and details about some political protagonists are provided to allow for a multiplicative view on the polls.

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 easternmost part of the British Indian Empire that was fully brought under control of the colonial power in 1886.

As the above mentioned essays of the Myanmar author recalling “The ghost of the elections past”, the study is divided into three parts. Part A refers to the colonial period between the two world wars (part A, 1920-1942). Here, the elections of 1925 and 1928 are covered together because of the lack of material available. Part B covers the time between the end of World War II and the military coup of March 1962, informs about the elections to a Constituent Assembly, about drafting Burma's first constitution and about the three polls of 1951, 1956 and 1960. Part C (1988 -2020) outlines the three general elections of 1990, 2010 and 2015 as well as the by-elections of 2012 in which Aung San Suu Kyi participated for the first time as a candidate together with some 40 other members of her National League for Democracy (NLD). The participation took place under the regulations of the 2008 constitution drafted under the supervision of the military and was widely regarded as step initiating a “transition to democracy” in Myanmar.

After the two first parts of the trilogy, two “intermezzi” will give some basic information about the periods of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) and the Socialist Period (1962-1988) in which no elections were held between 1962 and 1972 and four elections until 1988 in which only the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) participated. The outcome of these elections conducted under the constitution of 1974. is included here. Furthermore, some information is given about the reasons for the end of the 26-year long Period under the “Burmese Way of Socialism”.

All three parts are framed by chapters about the general conditions of the country during the period under review (prologues) and analytic remarks on the features characterising the elections covered in the respective part. It is hoped that a number of topics will be touched that deserve analytic research

At the time of finishing this introduction (January 2025) the future of the state of Myanmar is completely open. It seems that Maung Maung Gyi's observation the people think in terms of "victory or vanquished" still pertains and not just with regard regard to the ethnic Burmese. It is hoped that the story of the elections held on Burma as a means to overcome such an attitude might be helpful to get some more insight about the reasons for the durability of this attitude and the prevalence of violent means to solve political conflicts that characterised the country's modern history as well as its authoritarian past.