

Elections in Burma/Myanmar, 1922 to 1990 – A View from Abroad

Im am very glad that I am here again to talk to students of Egress School and – hopefully – have an interesting discussion with you. Some ten days ago, I met some of the Egress-Alumni in Chiang Mai in Thailand. They attended a three months CDCE course there and I had the chance to ask them for their assistance with regard to a project that I am just trying to bring forward. This project is about the perception of economic issues here in Myanmar. I will put my request for help before you today as well but only after sharing with you some of my findings and ideas about elections in Burma in Myanmar since the colonial times.

This presentation was conceived some years ago to give German readers of a journal on South Asian affairs an idea about elections in Burma. It is therefore not meant to directly address the issue of the forthcoming elections in 2010, but maybe it might shed some light on this event as well.

My talk will contain three very unevenly proportioned parts: First, I will retell an old Buddhist story to you that some of you might know already in another version than mine. By the way, it is a little bit related to this place where we are just sitting. Second, I will give you an overview about the elections held in your country up to this day added by some observations. And finally, there will be a thesis that hopefully will open the door for questions.

Inbetween my talk there will be some small breaks that I will use to take a sip of water. You may freely use this short intermissions to ask questions about what I have just said because it might be that I have not expressed myself clearly enough in this or that matter - okay?

I The Story of the Election of Maha-Sammata

The story I would like to start with can be found in the Buddhist Scriptures in the Aganna Sutta. It could be read as a story of how the world we live in came into being. As you may know, according to traditional Buddhist thought, there were other worlds before. This *sutta* tells a very very long story. This is appropriate because it took some time until the world developed into the state when human historical records started. I concentrate on that part of the whole story that is interesting in connection with elections.

In the beginning, the Buddha is reported to have said, there was no gross material world. Everything was just spiritual and very very fine. But then, a process of materialisation set in leading to the emergence of rather primitive living beings. These beings developed into humans with the assistance of the growing of rice crops and the eating of rice as the staple food. You see, it is a very Asian story. In Europe instead of rice, wheat would have been mentioned. The humans depended on growing rice for their livelihood and this dependence, so the story goes, developed into the

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emergence of social problems. Some people became greedy and lazy at the same time. They stored rice away that they had grown by using land from other people. Others simply began stealing rice and so forth. In short: chaos was beginning to spread because at that early times there was nothing like a police force looking after law and order.

The people were unhappy with the situation but they were quite clever. They held a meeting, discussed the problems that had arisen and decided to solve it. They chose and elected the most gifted, the most capable and, it the said, the most beautiful and gentle as well among them to become their ruler. The task conferred on him was to look after law and order, to punish who deserved to be punished and to send into exile or put under house arrest (okay, that is the modern version of the story) who deserved to be exiled. In exchange to the services rendered by the ruler the people vowed to give him ten percent of their rice harvest. Human society emerged together with the raising of taxes. And the name of this first ruler in human history was Maha-Sammata – the Great Elect or th Great Chosen One. In Myanmar language, the Pali word Sammata is adopted as *Thamada*, the elected or chosen president. The name of this hotel therefore indicated that each president might be a successor of the great First Ruler.

For the sake of time, I have to stop here. The story goes on telling how different classes emerged among the people and how from all classes some people left the worldly society and became recluses, monks. The Sangha emerged as a classless and therefore pure society that could lead the people back to the pure spiritual realm as it had been in the beginning.

Before leaving this story for some time – I will come back to it at the end of my talk - let's have a look at the election of the first ruler. It was supposedly free and fair and the Maha-Sammata was elected unanimously. He got 100 % of the votes.

II Elections in Burma and Myanmar

a) The Colonial Period

Some 2500 years after this story was told by the Buddha, the first elections were held in Burma by the British under, of course, very different conditions. A system called „Dyarchy“ was implemented in India part of which Burma was at that time. A Legislative Assembly was to be elected by the people that was entitled to discuss the affairs of the Province and particularly the duties of two Burmese ministers who were responsible for the so called „transferred subjects“ like agriculture, forests and education. The Governor and his British staff still looked after the „reserved subjects“, money, military, foreign relations and the like, that is the most important subjects. This first kind of a parliament – and the following assemblies – were meant as places where Myanmar politicians could gain their first experience in democracy.

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The first elections under the new constitution were held in Burma in November 1922. Not all adults were entitled to vote, only those who paid taxes. Suffrage was thus restricted. I do not have the exact numbers at hand today but let us suppose that 10 % of the adult population of Burma was entitled to vote. From this electorate only 6,93 % went to the polls. All others did not. Thus less than 1 % of the whole population voted. Why the majority did not go to the polls was due to a boycott campaign by the GCBA (General Council of Burmese Associations) that was strongly supported by monks, In other words: The elections resulted in an overwhelming victory of the election boycotters, a negative election victory, so to speak.

Another result of the elections was the first split of many of the GCBA. There were different opinions on the issue of or of not to participate in the elections. Some members said: Let's do it in order to have the chance of influencing the political process. Others said: No – let us boycott and work for complete home rule, for complete independence.

Partly due to this split, the voter turnout was a little bit higher in the next elections held in 1925 – 16,16%. But despite this lack of participation of the electorate, in the eyes of the British administrators the people elected to the Legislative Assembly were regarded as representatives of the whole Burmese populace. They were regarded as the vanguard of a future democratic country modelled after Britain. (By the way, the so called „hill people“; Shan, Kachin, Naga and Chin) were totally excluded from elections until 1947. There were thought to be too „backward“.)

The next elections only happened in 1932 because of the big debate on the question of whether or not Burma should be separated from India or not and because of the Saya San rebellion that started in late 1930 and was only suppressed more than one year later.

In the elections of November 1932, some two million Burmese were entitled to vote. Some 40 % did. Two blocs competed in the elections, one campaigning for the separation of Burma from the British, the other for a continuation of the *status quo*, Burma still remaining a part of British India. The campaign was rather muddy, it is told, and the winner, by a wide margin, were the Anti-Separationists, the parties that campaigned against the creation of a separate Province of Burma.

This election result is rather surprising and one may ask: How come? One may argue that the majority was uneducated and did not know on what issue they voted. I think the main reason for the vote resulted from an anti-British sentiment. The colonial rulers had advocated the separation. Therefore, the people were persuaded by the leading politicians to oppose the move. Dr. Ba Maw who led one wing of the anti-separationists, was one of the most educated people in Burma of that time having his Ph.D. in France. But he was suspected to use the simple minds of his followers in favour of his personal ambition. Dr. Ba Maw and others were suspected of having received money from the Indian business community that – besides the British – dominated Burmese economy. The

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Burmese politicians needed funding for their election campaigns and the Indians were interested in a continuation of their activities in Burma that could have been negatively affected by separation.

The British implemented the division of Burma from India despite the popular vote by passing a new constitution for a separated Burma in 1935.

The new constitution preserved some regulations of the Dyarchy system as the voting along communal lines: The Indians, the Karen, the Europeans, the Anglo-Burmans and the Chinese were guaranteed to get a certain number of seats in Parliament. On the other hand, the parliament now had the right to elect a Prime Minister who was entitled to form a cabinet of eight ministers who were responsible for almost all political departments except – as before - military and foreign affairs. But on the other hand, the Governor could veto any decision by the Burmese government. The Burmese nationalists strongly opposed the constitution, Maung Nu, the later Prime Minister, together with some other young men, burnt the Union Jack on the day when the constitution came into effect on April 1, 1937.

The first and only elections under this constitution were held on November 9, 1936. The voter turnout was again about 40% but more voters participated because the suffrage was enlarged due to a relaxation of the restrictions on the preconditions of the right to vote. After the elections and some bargaining, the parliament elected Dr. Ba Maw as Prime Minister. Before the election, he had vowed that his main aim was to wreck the constitution from within.

Ba Maw lost his premiership due to a non-confidence vote in early 1939 after a series of strikes and unrest in the year 1938 that can be seen as an early parallel of what happened in 1988. Ba Maw's successor, U Pu, suffered the same fate of losing a non-confidence motion in 1940. He was replaced by U Saw who was arrested by the British because of his talks with Japanese officials in Lisboa, Portugal, on his return from Britain in 1941. Sir Paw Tun, the last pre-war premier, went into exile together with the British after the conquest of Burma by the Japanese in 1942.

b) 1945 to 1962

After the war, the first elections were held in 1947. The people elected were supposed to draw a constitution for independent Burma. Actually, this constitutional assembly later just endorsed the ideas put forward by Bogyoke Aung San and formulated properly in legal language by some legal experts. Aung San as the head of the AFPFL toured the country and scored an overwhelming victory. His party won all but eight seats that went to the communists in their strongholds in and around the Bago Yoma area. Many politicians resorted to boycott tactics again like many Karen leaders and Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw. As you know, Aung San together with members of his cabinet was assassinated shortly after the elections by gunmen hired by his political rival, U Saw.

The first elections after independence were held in 1951 and 1952 under the conditions of civil war.

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The AFPFL under U Nu won with a great majority. The same did not happen four years later, in 1956. Here the opposition, the NUF (National Unity Front), a coalition of parties from different ideological backgrounds, won almost as many votes as the AFPFL. Only because of the majority vote system after the British model, the leading party won a comfortable majority in parliament. According to this system, all votes for candidates who lost against the winning candidate in a constituency are lost, even if the winner did not get the absolute majority in the constituency and might have got just one vote more than his nearest competitor. In the extreme case, if a candidate in a constituency in which 10 candidates competed and 10.000 votes were cast won just 1001 votes would win the seat for his party and the other 8.999 votes were totally irrelevant.

The election of 1956 resulted in a deep political crisis. The AFPFL felt that it had lost the trust of nearly half of the population. In consequence, U Nu resigned from premiership and promised to reorganise the AFPFL. But his work failed. In 1958, the party split into the Clean and the Stable AFPFL, U Nu was persuaded to hand over power to a military interim government headed by General Ne Win.

In February 1960, this Caretaker Government organised the next elections which were won by Nu's Clean AFPFL renamed the Pyidaungsu party comfortably: the party received 52% of the votes against 31% of its opponent, but because of the election system Nu's party won a two-third majority of seats in parliament (159 members to 42 plus some independents). That enabled Nu to fulfill one of his election promises to elevate Buddhism to become state religion. The constitution of 1947 had to be amended.

c) 1962 to 1988

Two years later, in March 1962, this move of elevating Buddhism to the state religion was quoted by the military as one reason for the coup d'etat because it endangered the peace within the adherents of the variety of religions in Burma.

After the putsch, there were no elections for twelve years and then the election results in and after 1974 were clear even before the elections took place because there only one party, the BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party), contested the elections.

d) 1990

Finally, there are the elections of 1990 organised by another military „caretaker government“, SLORC. As anybody knows, the NLD won and got even more than 82% of the seats in parliament if you add the seats won by ethnic parties carrying the phrase „League for Democracy“ in their party's name. In terms of majority, this victory resembled that of Aung San's in 1947.

III Conclusion

What do these facts and figures mean? I will give just one of many answers, just my personal interpretation. I think that the story of elections in Burma and Myanmar up to now shows that the principles contained in the old Maha-Sammata story are still valid today. Here are some arguments that could support my thesis:

First: Elections in Burma and Myanmar are highly personalised. It was the charisma of Aung San, Nu and Suu Kyi that was the main cause behind the victories of their parties in 1947, 1960 and 1990 respectively. Like the „Great Chosen“ in the Buddha's story, they were regarded as the most able, morally perfect and in the third case even the most beautiful to lead the country.

Second, election victories are still won by a majority of close to 100% of seats in parliament (not of votes as in the old story; something has changed, of course). When an election like in 1936 and 1956 resulted in an equal distribution of votes among contending persons and their parties, severe crises followed.

Third: If the people as a whole or some leaders who believe that they represent the people see no chance to get elected, they choose to boycott elections. The boycott movements during the colonial period, after the war and later are examples for this attitude of everything or nothing. The virtue of the Maha-Sammata cannot be compromised.

Finally: Aung San's assassination might show that the election system introduced by the British did not much influence the system of government change that was practiced during the times of the Burmese kings. If in the old times a king was seen to be unable, he was overthrown and often killed and a new successor of the Maha-Sammata was put on the throne.

In short: I think that the Maha-Sammata myth can and should be used as a pattern to analyse Burmese elections then and in future.