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## **The Young Revolutionary and the Sceptic Nationalist**

### **Towards a Typology of Burmese Political Thought**

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#### **1 Introduction**

As in any year, many anniversaries can be remembered in 2008. With regard to the country that brought us together here, there is, most prominently, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1988 with its manifold connotations. There was the public uprising culminating in the worldwide remembered date of the four 8s – 8.8.88 - and SLORC's takeover of power on September 18. Before that time, within the 26 years of Ne Win's Socialist regime, the number 8 as the last digit of a date did not signify significant events. 1958 is the next year that can be mentioned, the year of the semi-constitutional transfer of power from Nu to Ne Win and - as many see it – the rehearsal for the 1962 coup. Then we have January 4, 1948, Independence Day. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event did not attract much attention up to now worldwide. Finally in my enumeration, there is the year 1338 - 1300 according to the Burmese Era. It was called „The Year of Strife“ and the „Year of Revolution“ shortly after the boycotts and strikes of that year had ended in early 1339. In a way, the happenings of this year can be regarded as a preparation for the final independence struggle that commenced after the war.

Looking back at these anniversaries, the number “8” cannot be called a lucky one. All events recalled here are deeply ambivalent. Great hopes were pinned on the events but these hopes were deceived. The dates, therefore, denote unsuccessful attempts to direct Burma's history on the right track. They designate a history of failure but on the other hand signify the determination of people remembering the anniversaries to carry on with the still unfulfilled mission. In this respect, what happened in 1988 is very instructive. The opponents of the military regime still celebrate August 8 as a foretaste of the emergence of a new and democratic Burma. For the military rulers, this date indicates the attempt of destructive elements within and outside Myanmar to destabilise the country. Inversely, the takeover of power on September 18, 1988, is hailed as the beginning of a long way to a happy country by the regime whereas the latter date is looked at as the new beginning of an evil era as shown by the monks' activities last year. The monks' ultimatum that called for an about-turn of the government's policy terminated on September 17. One day later, according to Burmese

counting of birthdays on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military's takeover, the demonstrations started.

All this raises a simple question that as most simple questions cannot be answered easily. What reasons may explain this cycles of misfortune and the ongoing occurrence of alternative and contradicting visions of the country's future?

This contribution singles out some small pieces of information that are part of a greater attempt to contribute to the reconstruction of the history of political and intellectual thought in Burma/Myanmar, the Myanmar Literature Project.

I am going to present some findings based on results of the said project, writings of Ba Hein and Ba Khine. Both were involved in the independence struggle and were ardent nationalists. Writings of both authors were published in 1938 by the Nagani Book Club and later in U Tun Aye's Burma Publishing House that split off Nagani in 1939.<sup>1</sup> And both men died an early death, Ba Hein, born 1917, was 29 when he died in a Mandalay hospital in 1946. Ba Khine, born 1906 died in 1940 at the age of 34. Maybe, due to their short lives, both men have not yet been the subject of a thorough academic investigation.



Ba Hein (left) together with Nu (second left) and his Family, around 1942  
(right: A Japanese journalist)

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the project, see Working Paper 1 of the project. The introduction informs about its history. The Project is funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES) named after the German Social Democrat politician who became the first President of a democratic Germany after World War I.

Besides these more or less superficial similarities, there is reason to assume that there were differences between the two authors. There was a difference in age, Ba Khine being some ten years older than Ba Hein. The age factor is may be important for a comparison as well as in other contexts with regard to Burmese political thought. My starting point, however, is the difference in the prefixes attached to the names of the two men. Ba Hein is remembered as Thakin Ba Hein, whereas Ba Khine was known as Fabian U Ba Khine.

After unfolding the context of my small contribution at some length, the next paragraph will develop a hypothesis based on the two prefixes mentioned. Next, a short overview on the writings of Ba Khine and Ba Hein on which this paper is based will be presented. Finally, some general conclusions will be drawn. I hope that the commentaries and questions following my presentation will help me to elaborate the theme taken up here later.

## **2 Thakins vs. Fabians – Master planned revolution vs. gradual political progress**

The Thakin movement has been given due academic attention.<sup>1</sup> It tried to revolutionise Burmese politics both in contents and style as shown by its activities in the “Year of the Revolution”, 1938.

In contrast, the Fabian movement in Burma has not yet been specified let alone analysed. It is known that U Ba Choe, patron of the Nagani Book Club, founded a “Fabian Party” to contest the 1936 election. The party won one seat. Its foundation was regarded as a mistake because the party split the votes for the progressive forces represented by the *Dobama Asiayone*’s Komin Kochin Party.<sup>2</sup> For some time, Nu was a member of the party before he joined the *Dobama* together with Aung San in late 1938.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, J.S. Furnivall who as the mentor of the Burma Education Extension Society and the “World of Books” had close contacts to all young Burmese intellectuals, was a Fabian socialist.<sup>4</sup> The epithet “Fabian” is linked to an intellectual society advocating Social democracy via gradualist and reformist, rather than revolutionary means laying the foundations for the program of the Labour Party.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Khin Yi 1988; Maung Maung 1980; Nemoto 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Maung Maung 1980, p. 144: „U Ba Choe was thought o have frightened away from the Dobama Asiayone people who accepted its general policies but who for cultural reasons were reluctant to accept the style of the Thakins.“

<sup>3</sup> He does not mention this episode in his memoirs. It is noteworthy, that one founder of the Fabian Society was George Bernhard Shaw and that Nu wanted to become the “Burmese George Bernhard Shaw” (Nu

<sup>4</sup> See Pham 2005. The paper just deal with Furnivall’s thought and does not mentioning about the “Fabian branch” established in Burma.

<sup>5</sup> The name „Fabian“ refers to the Roman Senator and Consul Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus who was called “Cunctator” (waverer, delayer) due to his autious – and successful – tactics applied in the second Punic war.

The Burmese Fabian Party, therefore, may be seen as an attempt to introduce the leftist political traditions of Britain to Burmese politics and to establish a branch of the British party.

This rather superficial information that needs to be accomplished can be transformed into a simple hypothesis. Thakin Ba Hein may be seen as an advocate of revolutionary turnover, Fabian U Ba Khine as a promoter of piecemeal change. Since the events happening in Myanmar last year were termed a “Revolution” it is clear that the difference of both lines of thought - if substantiated - may be of some interest to assess current affairs.

### **3. The material**

I will just enumerate the writings of both authors that can be used to support, differentiate, modify or refute the hypothesis. All but one of them were published by Nagani and the Burma Publishing House. The Catalogue of Books kept by the British administration listing all books published in British Burma and identified by the authorities does not contain any other book by the two men. That does not mean that the following list is complete. One can assume that both wrote more articles for newspapers and magazines than the contributions for the Nagani News evaluated here. But the material at hand may be regarded as representative for the literary output of the authors.

First Ba Khine: Around March 1938, his book “Political History of Myanmar” (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရေးရာဇဝင်) was published.<sup>1</sup> One month later, there came an article in the Nagani News entitled “Long Term Planning”.<sup>2</sup> Two more books were published in early 1940 by Tun Aye’s Burma Publishing House, “Internal Affairs of Germany” (ဂျာမနီအတွင်းရေး) and War and Communism (စစ်နှင့်ဘုံဝါဒ). This book has two parts. It starts with an article by Thakin Hla Pe and is followed by another longer elaboration by Ba Khine.<sup>3</sup> In April, 1940, he wrote a small contribution to a pamphlet entitled “World War and Burma” (ကမ္ဘာ့စစ်နှင့်ဗမာ).<sup>4</sup> Aung San wrote the first and longest article in this volume.

It is noteworthy that Ba Khine and young Thakin leaders both contributed to collected volumes that dealt with the most outstanding issue of those days, the effect of the war on Burma’s future.

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<sup>1</sup> See MLP 5.

<sup>2</sup> Not yet published. A copy of the Burmese text as well as a translation can be obtained from the author.

<sup>3</sup> Hla Pe’s contribution runs to 45 pages, Ba Khine’s to 110.

<sup>4</sup> See WP 8, 83-86.

The first writings of Ba Hein are contributions to the Nagani News, a monthly magazine edited by Tun Aye. It ceased after Tun Aye had set up his own publishing house and was later substituted by The Nagani Weekly. In number 3 of the News, published June 1938, he wrote a book report on the work of the British author Joan Beauchamp “British imperialism and India”<sup>1</sup>. Two months later, he wrote about the students’ chances to work for independence under the amended University Act. Title: “My Answer”.<sup>2</sup> End of October 1938, he wrote an appraisal of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the “Party that made the World Frighten”.<sup>3</sup> Then, in March 1939, a booklet came out that made him famous countrywide because it dealt with current happenings in which he had been involved. “Students’ Revolution” (ကျောင်းသားများအရေးတော်ပုံ) is both another political history of Burma since the first student strike of 1920 and a recollection of his own participation in the march of the striking oilfield workers and their march to Rangoon in late 1938.<sup>4</sup> At least 50,000 copies of the pamphlet were printed. Three months later, he was the author of the first book published by Tun Aye’s publishing house after his split from Nagani, “World of Capitalists” (နေရှင်လောက).<sup>5</sup> Both Thakin Soe and Thakin Than Tun wrote a foreword to the book<sup>6</sup> that was an adaptation of a work written by the British communist Rajani Palme Dutt.. Finally, in October 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the war in Europe, he wrote a book “World War and Burma’s Future (ကမ္ဘာ့စစ်နှင့်ပမာ့ နောင်ရေး) the same theme taken up by Aung San and Ba Khine later.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4 Conclusions

Thus, the material available facilitates a variety of comparisons that cannot be presented here in detail. And since the material that has been and still is collected in the course of the project calls for the active cooperation of many people making use of it, there is no need to hide this weak point. The following remarks take up the hypothesis, elaborates it a little bit and after modifying it draws a very preliminary conclusion in respect to Burma’s / Myanmar’s continuity of political crises.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Beauchamp (1935); *British Imperialism and India*. London: Martin Lawrence. For an abstract of the article see MLP 11, 92-93.

<sup>2</sup>For a translation of the article see MLP 11, 94-97.

<sup>3</sup>For an abstract see MLP 11, 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> The Burmese text is reproduced and translated in MLP 11.

<sup>5</sup> See MLP 3.

<sup>6</sup> A translation of Than Tun’s foreword is included in MLP 3, 13-23. It gives an insight into the personal relations of the revolutionaries.

<sup>7</sup> See WP 8, 18-32.

a) Ba Hein's political reasoning strictly follows Marxist lines. The student movement in Burma as well as the world wars are caused by laws governing the course of history. The consciousness of the students is linked to the unfolding economic and political antagonisms in Burma and worldwide. Ba Hein's own history must be seen as part of the whole picture and on the other hand adds brushstrokes to make the picture complete.

This is a holistic "all-in-one" approach using Marxist terminology in combination with the motif of "sacrifice" oneself unselfishly for the common good. Here, another, the human factor comes in. Ba Hein was willing to sacrifice his career as a student, and he performed this task in his very own style. He held firm convictions but he possessed a special personal charm as well. He was not the brute as Aung San was but the young man with the lotus smile as Dagon Taya portrayed him later. He was a sweet, poetic revolutionary and thus, maybe, the model of all other young student heroes following him until today standing out through their firm convictions, personal charm and an aura of tragedy.

b) Since Ba Hein's coming out as a future leader of Burma during the strike of 1938, his person was linked to everything he wrote. The vision of a future Burma he outlined in his writings was impersonated by him. In sharp contrast, Ba Khine disappears behind his writings. He is not mentioned in the Myanmar Encyclopedia and up to now no appreciation of his achievements in post-war Burma.

As judged from his writings, Ba Khine was a man with an academic attitude. In contrast to many other Nagani authors, he informed the reader about the sources he had used. For his book on Germany, 18 reference books are listed in the foreword. Other members of the young intellectual elite like Aung San read many books as well but not that much to the point. In addition, Ba Khine kept an intellectual distance from the objects he dealt with. In his pioneering "Political History", he pointed at the contradictions in the *Dobama's* ideology. I quote:

The main idea of the Dobama Asi-ayone was to destroy the habit of fear and the acceptance of an inferior position in the Burmese actor as though they were slaves in their own land; and to carry a social revolution on socialist lines. But actually their name Dobama Asi-ayone and their prefix Thakhin were quite contrary to the tenets of socialism. The word Dobama belongs to nationalism - one race or one nation, but socialism belongs to a world proletariat, in other words, internationalism. And the word Thakhin also belongs to capitalist nationalism as it is used in upper-class society well-to-do people and high officials. Indeed, if there is a Thakhin (Master) it follows that there must be a kywan (slave or inferior), a concept quite alien to socialism. This was a point of debate and controversy.

In his statement on the war's meaning for Burma he listed six factors necessary for a country to gain independence and stated that it would take some time until Burma fulfilled these criteria. Finally, his article on "Long Term Planning", he recommended to a state planned development for Burma in the sectors of education, health, social relations and economy.

c) These brief observations illustrate that the hypothesis derived from the difference of the Thakhin – Fabian prefixes to the names of the two authors could be developed into an elaborated thesis. That does not mean, however, that the two lines of political thinking were accompanied by the existence of political parties propagating different concepts of political change. The Thakins as well as Tun Aye who strongly supported Ba Hein's approach accepted Ba Khine's scholarship - and omitted the prefix "Fabian" in the book titles published. On the other hand, Ba Khine accepted that his essay on "War and Communism" came out together with an article of Thakin Hla Pe that expressed quite a different assessment of communism than his own.

This concord should not be explained as an indication of an emerging pluralistic political culture but as an expression of the endeavour to fight the battle for independence as a united force. Fabian Ba Khine and the Thakins both were nationalists striving for an independent Burma but had quite different ideas about the realisation of that goal.

During and after the war, the "thakinist" line of thinking and acting impersonated by Ba Hein prevailed. The unity, however, did not last. After the war, the communist and the socialist Thakins competed for the implementation of their all-in-one revolutionary vision that was impersonated by Than Tun, Soe and Aung San. Aung San won the battle but the unity he had achieved died when he was assassinated. The Fabian party, by the way, died at the same day as Aung San because U Ba Choe, its founder, was assassinated together with the hero of the independence struggle.

Until today, the mode of political thinking represented by Ba Hein, revolutionary, all-in-one, impersonated by a strong and/or charismatic leader, has dominated the politics of the country. The piecemeal, reformist Fabian approach represented by Ba Khine never had a chance. That may be part of the answer to the simple question posed early of the reasons behind Burma's/ Myanmar's continuing misfortune.

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