

## 9 November 1932

### A Hihgly Confusing Plebiscite

#### 1 Introduction

The 1932 elections attracted more voters than those held before in 1922, 1925 and 1928 - almost 40% of the electorate participated. This can be attributed to the hotly debated issue if Burma should be separated from India or not. The subject had already been raised by the first delegations of the YMBA to Calcutta and London in connection with Burma's delayed inclusion in the Government of India Act of 1919. The effects of the Act had been scheduled to be reviewed after ten years in all of the Indian provinces. This task was performed by a commission of seven members of the British Parliament. The Simon Commission - named after its head, an experienced liberal politician - visited Burma for three weeks in early 1929. It was boycotted by the majority of the nationalists. Thus, the visit contributed to make the issue of separation from India or not a matter of great public interest that from then on dominated the newspaper headlines and later the election campaign.

The final report of the commission recommended separation because the present connection between India and Burma was "arbitrary and unnatural".<sup>1</sup> Thus the arguments for the delay of implementing the Indian reform scheme of 1919 in Burma were repeated. It was widely expected that this commission's recommendation reflected public opinion in Burma and would be endorsed by the result of the 1932 elections

The following narration of the events connected with these elections starts with some remarks on various kinds of upheavals happening in 1930 that highlight the political climate existing among large sections of the Burmese population both in the cities and the countryside at that time. (2) Two views on events happening before the elections follow - some notes on a Round Table Conference held in London between November 1931 and January 1932 dealing with the new constitution of Burma as well as the separation issue (3) and the election campaign starting after the conference. (4). After a short paragraph on the election results (5), the proceedings in the new Legislative Council happening after 1932 are outlined. They did not result in any decision on the topic that had dominated the election campaign. As a consequence, the decision of separating Burma from India had to be one-sidedly taken by the British side on the line of the preconceived ideas by the government of the colonial power. (6). Before the summary(9), portraits of two actors participating in the electoral process in a different way are presented. (7 and 8)

#### 2 1930 - A Series of Upheavals

On May 5, 1930, a heavy earthquake shook Bago and Rangoon. It caused the deaths of many people and damaged pagodas of great importance. In Rangoon, the *hti*, the final ornament on top of the Shwedagon Pagoda that had been donated by Mindon Min, the father of Thibaw, fell down. According to Burmese beliefs, this event could be seen as a sign that political turmoil was imminent.

Some weeks later, riots broke out between Burmese and Indian dock labourers in Rangoon that quickly spread to many parts of the city. At least 100 people were killed and some 1,000 injured, most of them being Indians. The violent events revealed the tensions between parts of the Indian and the Burmese community. The latter felt marginalised by the former economically and demographically as well since more than 60% of the population of Rangoon was of Indian descent as the census taken in 1931 revealed. Indians fought back in the riots. It is reported that a building hosting a Burmese newspaper that advocated separation from India was attacked by some of them (Maung Maung 1980: 254). The security forces had to step in to quell the unrest. In January 1931,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ottawa Citizen* 7.8.1929: 15.

Burmese-Chinese riots of a smaller scale broke out. It started with a quarrel at a noodle shop and was exacerbated after a monk had been attacked. Communal unrest happened in other cities too after the incident. In both cases, the authorities were accused by Burmese newspapers to be biased in favour of the “foreigners” (Ba Khaing 1938: 71-2).

Unnoticed from the broader public, the Indo-Burmese riots gave rise to the founding of the *Do-bama Asiayone* (We-Burman Association) that later became the driving force of attaining independence under the leadership of Aung San. The association was devised by lecturer at the university who had specialised in translations. Shortly after the riots, he decided to put the prefix *thakin* (master) before his name and thus wanted to be addressed as Thakin Ba Thoung from then on. To propagate the aims of the new association that became known as the “Thakin organisation” as well, he wrote and distributed a series of short articles. The pamphlet exhorted his compatriots to take the fate of their country in their own hands. By using the title “Thakin” usually reserved as an address of British officials, he symbolically claimed that the Burmese and not the colonial administrators were entitled to lead the affairs of the country. In this spirit of promoting Burmese as a “race of masters”, he wrote a text for a song promoting the cause of an independent Burma that – with a modified text – still serves as Myanmar’s national anthem.<sup>2</sup>

Half a year after the attempt to revolutionise the mindset of the urban Burmese population, a peasant revolt broke out some 120 km north of Rangoon that made headlines all over the world from later December of that year in. It became famous as the Saya San Rebellion after the man who had started the revolt. Saya San who had worked for a branch of the General Council of Burmese Association to explore the hardships of Burmese peasants caused by the British economic policy with the help of money lenders that had migrated from India. He was crowned as king in his headquarters and thus emphasised his intention to make an end to British rule. He and his followers further used traditional means like tattoos in their fight. The British authorities and a number of western historians regarded the rebellion initiated by him as a backward medieval affair (Aung Thwin 2008).

Saya San’ headquarters were soon taken by the British and the leader was caught in August 1931 in the Shan State. He was put on trial and sentenced to death but it took the British-Indian troops almost two years to restore law and order in some Burmese regions. In Burma and in other countries in the region, a main cause of the uprising of peasants was caused by the effects of the worldwide economic crisis



2. SAYA SAN, with bandaged feet, being brought out from Tharawaddy jail for trial.

*Saya San brought to court in 1933 (Source: Maung Maung 1959)*

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2 This slogan “race of masters” coined in the song (for different versions of the text see Zöllner 1998: 147-9) underlined the claim of the Burmese people to rule the country and was not meant to discriminate other ethnic groups living in Burma.. According to a Burmese author, the choice of the title *thakin* by Ba Thoung was influenced by Nietzsche’s concept of a Superman (German: *Übermensch*) as expressed in his writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Zöllner 1998: 164-5). - However, the name of the organisation as *do-bama* (We-Burma) was paralleled by labelling the British and all those cooperating with them, being it Burmese or members of other ethnic groups as *thudo-bama* – Their Burma - drawing a clear line between the attitudes of the two camps. (Nemoto 2000).

after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 that increased the problems of farmers under colonial economics.

### 3 An Edged Round Table Conference

In contrast to the physical violence happening in and after 1930, a round table conference held in London between November 1931 and January 1932 on the question of how to draft a new constitution for Burma was conducted in a conciliatory tone. It was a follow up of a conference dealing with the future of the whole of India that had taken place in London in 1930. It was attended by four delegates from Burma, all of them members of the Legislative Council. All of them favoured separation but voiced different ideas about how to deal with the Burmese "dissidents" advocating non-separation at home. The solution of this problem was to hold another conference in which all political views on Burma's future were to be represented. (Cady 1965: 322-328)

Accordingly, one year later 24 delegates from Burma participated in the conference about the country's future between 27 November 1931 and 12 January 1932. They represented various ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> The Burmese representatives came from different parties. The proceedings of the meeting shows that the delegates presented their different views on the conference's matter by way of – often very long – monologues. Debates about arguments were the exception. The differences on the conference's main topic, drafting a new constitution for Burma, were clearly expressed but no convergence of the stances happened.



*Opening session 8 January 1932; right side: Miss May Oung (Daw Mya Sein) - Source: Lost Footsteps*

The differences of opinion among the ethnic Burmese delegates had started even before the meeting had started. Potential delegates were divided on the issue of how to respond to the rules of the game designed by the British. Some of them, still advocating a strict boycott attitude, first declined to

3 The Burmese delegation consisted of 13 Burmese, including a young woman, Mya Sein, the daughter of May Oung, co-founder of the Burma Research Society and member of the cabinet under the Dyarchy system who had died in 1926. The reports about the conference called her "Miss May Oung"., 3 British, 2 Shan Princes (Sawbwas), 2 Karen, 2 Indians (one Muslim, one Hindu), 1 Anglo-Burmese and Chinese each; (Proceedings RT: IV). Nine delegates members represented the British government and some British members of the Indian and Burmese government were present as well who however did not participate in the discussions.

accept the invitation. Others did not disclose their decision to participate until the last minute to avoid public criticism. Such criticism was voiced by young members of the *Dobama Asiayone*. The published cartoons one of them depicting the participants as dogs following a bone held by a British official (Ba Khaing 1938: 70-1).

The main objective of the conference was predefined by the British organisers. The issue was not if Burma should be separated from India but *how* after separation from India the details of a new constitution should be conceived. Burmese delegates at the beginning asked if the issue of separation vs. non-separation could be introduced as well. The answer was a clear “No and Yes”. The chairman of the conference, the Secretary of State for India, gave this answer: “If the Conference is unanimous in favour of remaining united with India, our task will be commendably short., because we have nothing to do.” (Proceedings RT: 13) In other words: The rules set by British Government could not be changed. The Burmese delegates, the British convenors emphasised, were however free to voice their opinion and ask questions.

As to be expected, the members of the Burmese delegation voiced opposite views on the issue of separation. Five ethnic Burmese and the two Indian delegates opposed, all others favoured the British proposal. All Burmese delegates however emphasised that they were nevertheless united and submitted a joint statement that strongly condemned British rule including the reaction to the ongoing peasant rebellion, qualified the reform initiated in 1923 as a complete failure and demanded to grant Burma the same status as the British Dominions right away. “We ourselves desire a constitution on the Irish Free State model.<sup>4</sup> We are willing to be fair to all concerned, [...] whether settlers or non-settlers. [...] There is no communal strife in Burma and no minority problem.” (Proceedings RT: 27)

Thus, self-government was asked under the leadership of the province’s ethnic Burmese majority as the legitimate successor of the Burmese kings. Consequently, the abolition of communal seats in the Burmese parliament was demanded. The two Burmese factions present at the conference just differed in the method to achieve this aim. The separationists argued that it should be achieved right away, whereas the anti-separationists voted for becoming part of an Indian Federal State with the option of secession. Both options were rejected by the representatives of the Karen, Shan and Indian minorities as well as by the British government.

The Round Table Conference therefore did not pass any joint recommendation on the future constitution for which the British organisers had prepared a draft that was discussed between the third and fourth plenary meetings between December 3, 1931 to January 8, 1932. However, no common draft of a new constitution was adopted. All delegates from Burma just agreed on a “loyal address” to the British monarch (Proceedings RT: 177-8) and continued to voice their dissenting views in the final plenary sessions after the chairman had given an overview about the discussions on the draft. It contained a number of points in which the participants agreed at least in principle, but very often with a reservation expressed in the section on the creation of a second chamber besides the House of Representatives. The beginning respective section reads:

There was unanimous agreement upon the desirability of a Second Chamber, though many delegates considered that the necessity of the Chamber depended on the grant to Burma of full responsible government. (Proceedings RT: 133)

In other words, technical provisions were agreed upon, but no consensus was reached about the political status of the country governed under the new constitution. With regard to the issue of communal representation in the future parliament, Pu, speaking for all ethnic Burmese participants summarised their common standpoint reiterating the demand for no communal representation::

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4 The Irish Free State was the state established in 1922 under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921 that ended the three-year Irish war of independence. According to the amendments to the constitution of 1927, the King remained the head of state but the real power was executed by an Irish Executive Council headed by a Prime Minister.

We feel that in determining the future constitution of Burma it is essential for the British Government, and later the Parliament, to know exactly not only what the minor communities about 2 ½ million desire, but also what over 10 million inhabitants consider is necessary for their happiness and welfare. [...] We would once again emphasise the necessity of keeping the popular Assembly, that is the House of Representatives, thoroughly democratic and fully representative of the people by removing all nominated and communal elements. The Burmese people are strongly opposed to the communal representation on principle and as there is no justification for it in Burma and because the retention of this vicious system would [...] only accentuate and perpetuate narrow communal feeling [...]. We maintain [...] that any person regardless of race or religion who associates himself generally with the welfare of the Burmese people will have as good a chance as any one else to be returned either to the Senate or to House of Representatives. (Proceedings RT: 192-193)

A British delegate residing in Burma voiced his disappointment about the outcome of the meeting by stressing the viewpoint of all minorities living in Burma:

[W]hen we opened this conference we all had, I think, great hopes that we would arrive at a considerable amount of agreement, and that the result would be the broad outlines of a constitution acceptable to majorities, minorities and all interests in Burma. It is, I think, with much regret that we must look back at the results of our labours, and come to the conclusion that we have to a very large extent failed on the most material point. The constitution suggested by a large majority of Burman Delegates is a constitution with no safeguards, except in the event of a complete breakdown; with no protection for minorities, and with practically no representation of their interests in the Legislature. [...] No constitution will be acceptable to the minorities of Burma which does not provide ample protection for their existing rights and for their future existence. (Proceedings RT: 216-217)

In the end, the British prime minister gave a lengthy speech. He acknowledged that some Burmese delegates might be disappointed and admonished them to be patient. Before reading the final statement of the British government, he made some remarks with regard to his political philosophy:

[W]hen you go home and meet your critics, do remember that a Constitution is not merely an instrument; it is a potentiality; and that potentiality will belong to you when you get the Constitution that is now contemplated. [...] The last point I have made is a point that I really want to emphasise, because it is in essence the spirit and the nature of political progress. (Proceedings RT: 234)

This spirit of trusting in the “nature of political progress” was not shared by at least some Burmese delegates. As a newspaper report published in December 1931 in London shows, some delegates had already promise to not give up their position before travelling to London. Three of them, it was reported, had walked out of the conference room to protest a statement by the chairman that fell “far short” of the expectations of the Burmese people of “immediate responsible government”. The report referred to a meeting held before the conference in Burma. The spokesman of the three dissidents was quoted to have said:

At a conference with the pongyis (priests) a resolution was passed to which he and his two colleagues were signatories, requiring them to return to Burma for further discussions if full and immediate responsible government were refused at the Burma Round-table Conference. Any Constitution based on a different and lower status was also agreed to be rejected without hesitation. [...] However, they were still hoping that the Government might even at the last moment modify their attitude and bring their intention in consonance with the national demand in Burma.<sup>5</sup>

The three “extremists” - as another newspaper called them - were however willing to further attend the conference, but without participating in an active manner.

Such an uncompromising attitude was not singular. The second Round Table Conference on India that had started shortly before the Burma Conference in September 1931 did not reach an agreement

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5 *The Guardian* 15.12.1931: 4.

on communal representation as well. Here, the differences between Hindus and Muslims could not be bridged. The same happened around the same time in talks about the future of Palestine.

#### 4 A Dirty Campaign

Ten months after the end of the London conference, elections were held. The political parties that had emerged from the splits of the General Council of Burmese Associations and the Sangha associations to which they were affiliated regrouped into two “Leagues”, one in favour of separation, the other against it. The Anti-Separation League continued the boycott tradition now directed against the obvious British intentions of ruling Burma in a more easier way than as a part of India. The advocates of separation on the other hand continued to show their basic willingness to cooperate with the British in striving for independence. They were joined by Karen leaders whereas the rival bloc got support by Indians who had reasons to fear that separation could lead to a loss of influence, particularly in the field of economics. The dilemma of the Burmese nationalists was to choose between two evils, British or Indian domination. This problem was worded by a contemporary Indian observer this way:

Why should these countries, so different in all their essentials, remain bound together like Siamese twins, especially in the days of self-determination. [...] Are they [*the Indians; hbz*] alone to be given the benefit of it as to throw off the British yoke or are they willing to let the Burmans self-determine to rid themselves off the Indian trammels. - This is one side of the story. Now for the other. - The agitation for separation [...] has been stimulated by the British in Burma who know that India is strongly nationalist and therefore, fear her. [...] The separation of Burma from the Indian political system and its transfer from the Indian Office to the Colonial Office would undoubtedly weaken - if not actually deaden - the nationalist tendencies that some Burmese have acquired [...]<sup>6</sup>

Besides such political considerations, economic interests were involved on all sides. This melange contributed to a dirty campaign. Corruption charges were discussed in the newspapers that supported the two camps. One of the Burmese participants at the Round Table Conference openly admitted in a series of newspaper articles in detail that he and other members of the delegation had received money over a period of seven months from an Indian delegate participating in the conference as well. The donor was the Rangoon agent of a big Indian shipping company operating transports of goods and people between India and Burma. This way, the GCBA leader was expected to harm the fraction promoting the cause of separation to which he himself had formerly belonged.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it was rumoured, a manager of the British Burma Oil Company, who had attended the conference too, had tried to influence other Burmese delegates to support the separation cause (Ba Khaing 1938: 79-80).

All in all, the campaign was “abusive, acrimonious and personal” as a Burmese scholar worded it (Maung Htin Aung 1967: 293). Such behaviour however violated a sensitive point of the political culture prevailing among the electorate: they preferred “clean politics”. Politicians were expected to be selfless, taking money for serving as a member of parliament or a ministers was widely regarded as being not in accord with Buddhist morality.

The Anti-Separation League was well-funded by Indian commercial interests and backed by the majority of politically active monks in continuation of their anti-British stance. By contrast, the Separation League got little financial and popular support mainly due to its alleged pro-British attitude. The leading nationalist newspapers *Thuriya* (Sun) and *Myanmar Alin* (New Light of Myanmar) the former owned by a member of the Burmese delegation to London however supported the pro-separation camp. On the other hand, some recently established papers supported its rival (Ba Khaing 1938: 81-2).

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6 *The Baltimore Sun* 1. 5. 1929: 13.

7 The Indian agent sponsored conferences of the GCBA and activities of leading monks as well.

## 5 The Results

The elections were won by the anti-separation group by a wide margin. Most of the seats of the winning league were won by the anti-separation fraction led by Ba Maw, a political newcomer (see below under section 7). The other anti-separation group under Chit Hlaing<sup>8</sup>, the speaker of the group that had walked out shortly from the London conference, was less successful (Cady 1965: 339). His sister Hnin Mya was however elected as the first female member of parliament after women had been given the right to stand for elections in 1929.<sup>9</sup> A demonstration of women at the time of the visit of the Simon Commission had successfully demanded to give Burmese women the right to get elected.

The absolute number of votes is given as 415,000 to 250,000 in favour of the Anti-separation League (Taylor 1983: 114). The can be primarily regarded as an anti-British, but not as a pro-Indian plebiscite.

One week after the elections, a Belfast newspaper commentary expressed some perplexity about the result.

The result of the Burman election on the separation issue proves once more, if proof were needed, the error of trying to judge the Oriental mind by Western standards. Almost every condition was present to indicate that on free vote the people of Burma would declare overwhelmingly in favour of political dissociation from India. The union of the two countries is historical accident less than 50 years old, and dependent solely on the exigencies of administrative convenience. In race, religion, language, outlook of life, the Burmans have next to nothing common with any of the peoples of all India. [...] Well may it be asked: What has moved the Buddhist Burman to enter into paradoxical association with the traditional enemy of his religion, the Hindu? [...] There is evidence that some at least of those who at present label themselves Separationists may be found in the other camp when it comes to the point of voting in the Legislative Council, with which the decision on the separation questions rests. But even should that turn out to be the case it still remains mysterious why so many seats should have been won by candidates who ever nominally favoured separation. Democratic or semi-democratic electorates are notoriously fickle but such fickleness as this is strange even in the East.<sup>10</sup>

Party ▲	Seats ▼
Anti-Separation League	42
Neutrals	9
Separation League	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>

Source: Wikipedia

Such doubts about the working of some kind of democracy in a country like Burma was underscored by the names of the groups competing for votes. In the beginning, they had been given special names that however were not very meaningful and changed often. Now, the different groups were known just after the names of the leaders (Maung Maung 1959: 28-9). This illustrates the “personalisation” of early Burmese “party politics”.

## 6 Confusion and Chaos in and outside Parliament

What happened in parliament during the following legislative period was not suited to ease such bewilderment about the “oriental mind”.

The British authorities had expected that result of the 1932 polls would be followed by a decision in the Legislative Council on the separation issue. This was not the case however. The debates in parliament were as confusing as the statements of the different Burmese fractions at the Round

8 U Chit Hlaing had been the first head of the GCBA before the split and was revered by his followers as the new “king” of Burma (Maung Maung 1980: 19).

9 Hnin Mya (1887-1974) submitted proposals to end the imposition of the property tax, to allow women aged over 18 to vote (the right to vote had in principle already been granted in 1929) and for women in Burma to be able to inherit the estates of foreign husbands. (The *Irrawaddy* 16.11.2019; <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-myanmar-elected-first-female-senator.html>; accessed 22.8.2020).

10 *Belfast News-Letter* 16.11.1932: 14.

Table Conference. This became clear shortly after the new legislative body had convened. In its first session, Chit Hlaing – head of one the non-separation blocs – was unanimously elected President of the house, a function equivalent of the Speaker in the British House of Commons.<sup>11</sup> Shortly later, he had to preside about the motions dealing with the separation issue. Two motions submitted by the two camps were rejected. Shortly later Chit Hlaing was removed from his position as President of the Council because of his decisions about the motions on the separation issue (Ba Khaing 1938: 82-3). Ba Maw, his ally in the anti-separation battle accused him of manipulating the rules of procedure.

He was replaced by Oscar de Glanville<sup>12</sup>, an Irish-British businessman who had lived in Burma for a long time and was married to a Burmese lady. He chaired the meetings when in late April and early May the separation issue was debated for six days. Lawyer and writer Maung Maung, the last president of socialist Burma

characterised the debate in *Some Burmese delegates of the December meeting in London with his book on the Burmese constitution of 1947* thus: (29.12.1933)

“The members debated brilliantly, long windedly, some speakers like U Ba Pe [an advocate of separation; hbz] totalling a handsome 40 hours of speech-making during the period.” (Maung Maung 1959: 29) As before, the discussions did not result in a resolution supported by the majority of the parliamentarians. On other occasions, parliamentarians walked out<sup>13</sup>.

To break the impasse, twelve persons were invited to London in December 1933 to discuss the matter. Again, a Burmese lady, a medical doctor, and member of the Rangoon Municipal Council represented the women of the country.<sup>14</sup> No consensus was reached. The British side did not accept the demand of Burmese anti-separationists to become federated with India with the right of secession at any time.

The underlying anti-British attitude of various Burmese fraction in the removal of Oscar de Glanville from his post as Council President in February 1935. Chit Hlaing whom he had replaced in 1932 became his successor. In August 1934, a majority of the Council voted for his removal because he could not speak Burmese well allegedly and therefore was not able to follow the speeches of Burmese



*Some Burmese delegates of the December meeting in London with Dr. Saw Sa. Second from right: Ba Maw (Source: Calgary Herald 29.12.1933)*

11 *Thamada*, the Burmese name for “president in a famous Buddhist text, the Aganna Sutta

12 De Glanville had been one of the four Burmese delegates to the Indian Round Table Conference.

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14 Saw Sa (1878-1962) came from a Christian family. She was the first Burmese woman to earn an advanced medical degree, and the first woman to serve in the upper house of the parliament after 1937. (For the list of participants see *The Guardian* 2. 11. 1933: 14.



members. Furthermore, his rulings were claimed to be "partial". The accusations as well as De Glanville's attempts to halt aggressive behaviour resulted in motions to remove him from the post. In August 1934, the majority of the house voted against him. The however governor refused the removal and a walkout of most of the Burmese members followed one day. Some months, later, in August 1935, the British parliament passed the Government of Burma Act and thus decided on the constitution for Burma as a distinct part of the British Empire. The separation came into effect on April 1, 1937 after the next elections had been held in November 1936.

Most of the Burmese protagonists that had been elected to the last parliament established under the diarchy system in 1922 continued their political career. The context of the 1932 elections clearly shows that their political actions were not shaped by any programmatic guidelines. A main reason was that the distribution of seats in parliament was organised on communal lines in which ethnicity played an important role. This led to a basic distinction between the Burmese majority and the "others".

The competing groups can be characterised as rather unstable alliances formed around a leader. Thakin Ba Thoung, the founder of the *Do-bama Asiyone* worded the dilemma at a discussion taking place at Rangoon University even before the Round Table Conference thus: "To vote for anti-separation means to remain a British slave, while to vote for separation would mean to remain a British bondsman." (Khin Yi 1988: 14) He advocated complete independence. The *Do-bama* movement later developed into a radical extra-parliamentary opposition that finally paved the way for independence. However Ba Thoung himself became a candidate in a by-election (see below section 8) and the *Do-bama Asiyone* formed a party that took part in the 1936 elections.

Concerning the separation issue, no decision was reached at another round table meeting in London in December 1933. As a consequence, the British Parliament finally took the initiative and decided the matter by passing the Government of Burma Act. Reginald Craddock, the former governor, in a debate in the House of Commons painted a rather unfavourable picture of Burma:

It seems absurd in view of [...] Burma's political history, to put the country in advance of India. From a defence point of view, Burma's case for any form of self-government was very weak. The Burma did not lack courage, but could not learn discipline. [...] There was considerable risk in entrusting law and order to Burmese Ministers.<sup>15</sup>

## 7 The Rise of a "Modern" Burmese Politician

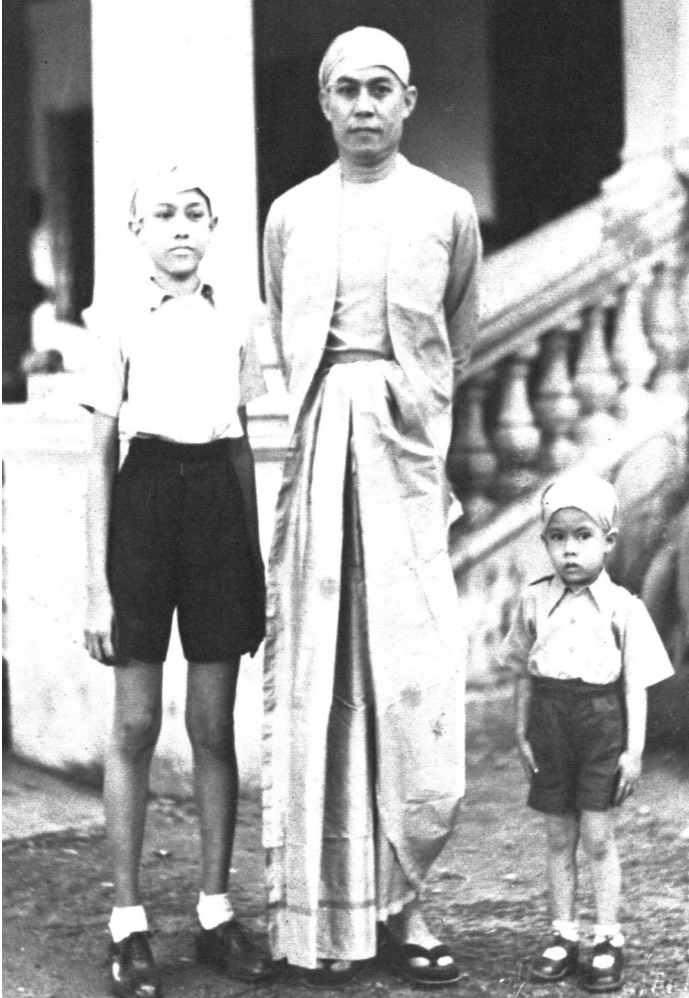
The rather turbulent and confusing years between 1930 and 1937 mark the beginning of the career of the politician mostly referred to as "Dr. Ba Maw" who dominated Burma politics to a great extent until the end of World War II. He became the first Premier of a cabinet formed after the elections of November 1936 and the first President of a semi-independent Burma under Japanese rule in August 1943.

Ba Maw's father had been in the service of the last Burmese kings in Mandalay and had accompanied Kinwun Mingyi, the chief minister, on his travels to Europe. He had learned to speak English and some French. After the end of the monarchy, the family moved to Lower Burma. Ba Maw and his elder brother, Ba Han, were born in Maubin in the Ayeyarwady Delta in 1890 and 1893 respectively. The father left the family. later It was rumoured that he had joined a rebel group in southern Burma. The mother had to care for the sons and managed to provide the means for the education for her sons by sending them to St. Paul's High School, regarded as the best boarding school in Rangoon run by the Catholic Church. She became a member of a small Protestant community, the Plymouth Brethren, and the sons were thus acquainted with this branch of Christianity as well. The elder brother took the teaching and the practice of the Christian group much more serious than Ba Maw.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Guardian*, April 11, 1935: 4.

Both of them were excellent students, both studied in England, earned barrister-at-law degrees there and submitted their dissertation at the University of Bordeaux, Ba Maw with a study on Buddhist mysticism (1924). After his return to Burma, he practised as a lawyer and became famous when he defended Saya San in 1931. That was the beginning of his political career. After winning a seat in the 1932 elections as the head of the larger faction of the Non-separation League, he became minister for education and health under the Dyarchy System in 1934.



*Ba Maw and two sons with dama-caps (Source: Ba Maw, Breakthrough in Burma)*

Ba Maw's career was untypical in many ways. Different from most other political players of his time, he was not deeply rooted in Burmese-Buddhist traditions. By defending Saya San in a case that could not be won, he however became connected to these traditions. It helped him to control one of the many branches of the GCBA that had advocated strict boycott measures before. A contemporary political analyst described him thus:

Dr. Ba Maw has some followers because of his abilities. He speaks words which peasants and workers alike; he is friendly, he always greets with smile Wuntharus who are poor men; and he has done a project that benefits workers and peasants. It is known that he gives generously, and he has supported, with monthly payments, men and monks, who could become useful for him. When someone asks money from him, he never refuses; he always gives something. (Ba Khaing 1938: 86)

On the other hand, the same author concluded:

To sum up, there is no consistency in Dr Ba Maw's work; no matching of words and deeds; his appearance betrays his inner mind. He uses 'for the country' as a deception, in his search for own fortune. (Ba Khaing 1938: 109)

One can call this attitude either opportunistic or pragmatic. Ba Maw himself seems to have been aware of his ambivalent political actions. He was quoted with the sentence "There can be no consistency in politics" (Ba Khaing 1938: 109) - a statement that can be regarded as an application of the Buddhist principle of impermanence (*anicca*).

After having been elected to the Legislative Council in the 1932 elections as an anti-separation advocate, he begot his ministerial post after a successful no-confidence motion against the two Burmese members of the Council entrusted with the transferred subjects, one of them being his former ally. The other minister chosen at this occasion was Be Pe, a leader of the Separation League.

Besides such political flexibility, Ba Maw from the beginning of his political career developed a special style of appearing in public. His most significant trade mark was his headdress. Instead of

the traditional *gaungbaung* used by Burmese males at official occasions, he used to wear a cap designed by him, the *dama-cap*<sup>16</sup> that was meant to be part of the uniform of the political party founded in 1936. It was told that he designed his elegant clothes himself that mixed Burmese and western styles. In March 1937, it was asked in parliament, “if the headdress of the h’ble member Dr. Ba Maw is a respectable dress”. At the same time, opponents of him had filed a no-confidence motion against his ministry (Proceeding HR I: 660).

## 8 The Electoral Defeat of a Noteworthy Outsider

Like Dr. Ba Maw, Thakin Ba Thoung, the founder of the *Do-bama Asiyone*, can be termed a “modernist”, but of a very different kind than the man who should become the first chief minister of a Burmese government according to the 1835 Government of Burma Act and head of a nominally independent Burmese state during the time of the Japanese occupation. His participation in elections resulted in a crushing defeat and signifies his first and last direct participation in Burmese electoral politics.

Ba Thoung was - like the nine years older Ba Maw – a gifted student who however did not use his talents for an academic career. Nationalism was instilled in him by his father who had been a courtier during the reign of Thibaw, the last Burmese king. He attended a Buddhist high school in Mandalay headed by an ardent nationalist and after participating in the countrywide student strike of 1920, he left school without finishing grade 10. Despite this handicap, he worked at national schools springing up after the strike in Mandalay and Shwebo. He further became a contributor and co-editor of the “World of Books” (*Ganda Lawka*), a monthly magazine founded in 1924 by J.S. Furnivall in order to make Burmese students familiar with international literature including translating foreign texts into Burmese. Ba Thoung won the first prize in the first competition organised by the Club in 1927 and did so as well in the next years. Due to his linguistic capability, he became a tutor for translation at Yangon University. After an order that the teaching staff had to refrain from talking about nationalism in their classes, he quit his post and shortly later prefixed the title “Thakin” to his name and founded the *Do-bama Asiyone*.

The headings of the short pamphlets he published after the Burmese-Indians riots of May 1930 show that he was ‘modern’ in his own way. Some of the treatises were entitled: “The Business of Translation – Wenn Monasteries Transform into Universities – The Way to Success”. In the latter article, he defined the central Buddhist category *kamma* as “work” and thus advocated a work ethic for Buddhists as a means to a good education, making use of modern science and strengthen the economic performance of the Burmese. In short, he propagated ways to pave the way for a “Burma for the Burmese”.<sup>17</sup>

The main medium however to propagate the young Thakins’ message was the Dobama Song that was presented to a variety of audiences in the country and became a hit.<sup>18</sup> However, the group founded by him was only loosely organised and poorly funded. A conference taking place in July 1933 to draw up future programs was attended by just six people. Given this bleak situation, Ba Thoung and his friends used a by-election in December 1933 in the town of Shwhebo (Upper Burma) to attract public attention. The new polling hat became necessary because of the death of a member of the Legislative Council who had died in a car accident. It was decided that Thakin Ba Thoung should contest the elections. The place was significant because Alaungphaya, the founder of the last Burmese dynasty had been born there. Furthermore, Ba Thoung knew the location from his short time as a teacher there.

*Thakin Ba Thoung*  
(Source: Wikipedia)

16 *Dama* means “knife”. The term was attached to the paramilitary unit of Ba Maw’s *Sinyetha* (“poor man”) party that was founded by him in line with many other political organisations from 1930 on. Their main functions were military drill for the mostly young members and securing the appearances of the respective leaders.

17 For more details see Ba Khaing 1938: 87-99.

18 For the English text see Khin Yi 1988: 9.

The candidate registered as an independent. He faced five competitors, among them a lady representing a grass-root boycott movement. Two of the other candidates belonged to the two leagues campaigning for or against separation, one of them being the father-in-law of the deceased. One stood for the 21-party and the last one was an independent like Ba Thoung. All of them were connected to influential sectors of the town's society (Nemoto 1987: 250).

In line with Ba Thoung's status as an outsider, his and his Thakin friends' election campaign was exceptional. At all of the 40 meetings held between the registration in early December and election day, December 18, the *Do-bama* Song was sung, accompanied by a violin or a concertina. Speeches followed in which the demands of the organisation were proclaimed, often in a manner that was regarded as very rough and reckless. The young men proclaimed slogans like "what is lost through violence must be retrieved by violence." (Khin Yi 1988: 21) Furthermore, the government and its local representatives were insulted (Thein Tin 200: 42). Ba Thoung further coined the slogan *komin kochin* - our king, our kind - during the campaign as an expression of the desire of unconditional independence. This way, they expressed the uncompromising demand for independence and the absolute rejection of the political system that had brought forward the elections in which Thakin Ba Thoung took part.

In terms of attendance, the campaign was a big success, in terms of votes gained, it was not. In the end, Ba Thoung received just 330 votes, the lowest number of all candidates. The seat went to the father-in-law of the parliamentarian whose death had caused the election to be conducted. The winner was rumoured to have bribed voters. He won the seat with over 5000 votes by a small margin over the member of the 21 party. A contemporary newspaper report suggested even before polling day that the people flocked to the assemblies of the Thakins mainly out of curiosity (Nemoto 1987: 251). The young Thakins at least had performed a good show.



Source: Wikipedia

Nevertheless, the campaign in retrospect was regarded as a success by the campaigners. They were put on trial shortly after election day and sentenced to three months imprisonment because of not following the order of the authorities to leave Shwebo within 24 hours. The imprisonment made the jailed Thakins famous all over the country as people who had sacrificed their personal interests for the sake of the country. They had followed U Ottama's and the martyr monk U Wisara's example. The latter had died after a hunger strike in 1929. As other people arrested for political reasons, they claimed a special status as "political prisoners" different from ordinary criminals. Serving some time in prison became a trademark of the selfless young revolutionaries

Thakin Ba Thoung left the association he had founded soon after the elections and the following prison term – but not because the few votes he had won but due to a dispute over funding. He had promoted the idea of going back to Shwebo after the Thakins had been released from jail after one and a half month. For this venture, funds should be raised. His co-Thakins however argued that the movement should continue relying just on donations given spontaneously by the people for the time being instead of collecting money to be used for feeding the participants of further campaigns (Khin Yi 1988: 23; Thein Tin 2001: 45-46).

From then on, Thakin Ba Thoung left the *Do-bama Asiayone*. One of his co-campaigner in December 1933, Thakin Ba its first conference held in Yenaungyaung, a centre of Burma's oil industry, in March/April 1935. More importantly, the famous nationalist poet Saya Lun who adopted the name of Thakin Kodaw Hmine after that conference, joined the association and helped it to become the vanguard of Burma's final struggles for independence.

9 Summary – Elections as a Stage for Various Mock Fights

Different from the first three elections held under the Dyarchy Scheme, the elections of 1932 were connected to a concrete political decision to be taken – the separation-from-India-or-not-issue. For two main reasons however, this alternative did not correspond to political realities. First, the British administration had already predetermined that Burma would be separated from India. Second, the two leagues formed before the elections did not offer a realistic political alternative as suggested by the either-or contrast of remaining within the Indian Federation or not. Both leagues pursued the same aim to obtain independence as soon as possible, however by different means. From 1920 on, this difference had led to a more or less strict divide between "soft" and "hard" nationalists.

The “real” opposition before and after the elections was between the two kinds of Burmese nationalists - moderate and radical - and the British administration represented by the governor and his allies in parliament consisting of a few Burmese, some Karen, Indian and first of all the British members of the Legislative Council. This crucial antinomy however was camouflaged by a mock-competition of the Burmese politicians induced by the instrument of elections that called for political contest.

Besides this core features, the messy elections of 1932 mark the beginning of the career of a new kind of Burmese politicians. Besides Ba Maw, another defence council of Saya San, Saw, entered the political scene after 1932 using "modern" political techniques (Taylor 1987). At the same time, a popular movement emerged that presented itself as an alternative to achieving independence not by electoral procedures but by means of a cultural revolution.

Ba Thoug by adopting the Thakin title that had been used to address the foreign “masters” before, claimed the right to rule the country for the Burmese “master race”. He symbolically anticipated Burmese independence and spread his message by singing the future national anthem of the country, he welcomed to serve some time in prison as proof of his and his co-Thakins selflessness in serving the national cause. Ba Maw on the other hand became prominent by defending the leader of the peasant rebellion who – like many of his followers – sacrificed his life for his attempt to liberate the peasants from the system of collection taxes introduced by the colonial administration. Furthermore, by defending Saya San, Ba Maw became affiliated to the *wunthanu* movement and the GCBA in which Saya San’s activities had been rooted (Herbert 1982). He was a politician who made use of the reforms introduced by the British to both strive for Burmese independence and promote his political career. "Master" Ba Thoug on the other hand used the elections as a means to demonstrate that the instrument of elections was of no use to achieve the cherished goal.

Both Ba Maw and Ba Thoug were well acquainted with the modern world, albeit in very different ways. The former had studied abroad, the latter had won many prizes for his translations of western literature. Both wanted Burma to make use of the instruments of international modernity to achieve the aim of Burma’s independence. The big difference was that Ba Maw – like any others from the GCBA leaders who in the beginning had advocated boycott - decided to work inside the system established by the British whereas Ba Thoug mocked the rules of the political game installed by the foreign power and thus continued the tradition of the boycott movement. It was thus logical, that his participation in the 1933 by-election was the end of his engagement with “real politics”. The movement he had started, however, became the vanguard of "Young Burma" in the fight for independence. For Ba Maw, the elections of 1932 became the beginning of a steep political career that however ended abruptly with the end of the Second World War after the Thakins had helped to defeat both the British and the Japanese colonial masters. During the war however, Ba Maw and the Thakin collaborated under Japanese rule against the two oppressive foreign powers.

Both in Burma and in Britain the work of the Legislative Council between 1932 and 1936 was assessed critically. The last President of the "dyarchical Council", Chit Hlaing, in his farewell speech after expressing his confidence that his rulings had not been governed "by any party spirit" pointed to a flawed practice he had noticed in his short tenure. A number of no-confidence motions

had been moved but none of them had been successful. The last of them happened some days before the Council's last session and was termed an "election stunt" in the debate. Chit Hlaing requested that "this procedure should not be adopted in the new legislature." (Proceedings LC XXXII: 404-405)

In London, a member of the British House of Lords asked why the governor had given in to the removal of Oscar de Glanville from his post on the second occasion. The answer was: "I think, the Legislative Council must learn by what is for many of us the best way of learning: by making mistakes."<sup>19</sup>

Many foreign observers were puzzled by the election results of 1932 because it had been anticipated that Burma would be in favour of separation from India. The "Oriental mind" and "Western standards" were obviously very different in terms of electoral behaviour as well as in applying the standing orders regulating the processors inside parliament. Here and there, two different kinds of logic were at work until the end of the first constitutional reforms aiming at introducing institutions of "responsible government" in Burma.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1935/may/21/presidency-of-burmese-legislative-council> (accessed 23.8.2020).