

Epilogue to Part A:
Split Opposition to British Style Political Modernity

Two constitutional reforms providing for the holding of general elections in Burma happened between the two World Wars. The attempt to connect the former kingdom to the 'modern' political world occurred at a time of global change – including the beginning of the end of colonial rule not just in India and Burma. From the Burmese perspective, this development had started with the end of the monarchy connected the final loss of independence. From the British perspective, the reforms introduced after World War I were means to safeguard and legitimise the economic interests that had been the main reasons for the abolishment of royal rule. One day, it was expected, Burma could become part of the Commonwealth of Nations and thus integrated in the British-styled family of nations.

The introduction of the instrument of elections was just one of many measures that intended to guide Burma on the way to become a full member of this kin group. It was by no means the first and most important measure taken. As the mass meeting in 1885 shows, economic interests and the establishment of a just order came first. For the latter purpose, a new legal system was introduced that replaced customary law at the grass-roots of society and the royal privileges of administering justice (Furnivall 1960: 7).

The boycott movement starting of the 1920s showed that this replacement was strongly resisted by the majority of Burmese people with the assistance of the monks, the upholders and guarantors of Buddhist custom. A main battlefield was the new methods of collecting taxes that were necessary to pay for the costs of the new administration. One of its tasks was to care for the education and social welfare of the people.

Elections – both on the local and countrywide level – were meant to let the people participate in this new administration. This attempt failed from the beginning simply because it had no meaning for the people. In the beginning, elections were just ignored, not intentionally boycotted. Since the colonial administration brushed aside the relevance of custom and suppressed the measures of the grass-root movement to boycott any kind of co-operation with the new institutions, a vicious circle was put into motion. The repressive measures taken as means to secure law and order contributed to an increase of mistrust on the side of the people and their representatives finally resulting in violent conflict that was regarded by the British administration as a further proof of Burmese backwardness. What happened when the Second World War reached Burma, was preceded by a militarisation of the minds of the people that had exploded in inter-communal riots of 1920, 1931 and 1938 as well as in the Saya San Rebellion of 1930-1932.

The new instruments of administrating the country introduced by the British created facts that could not be ignored. The introduction of the new ways of securing law and order resulted in a great rise of barristers among the Burmese some of them became leading politicians like Ba Maw and Saw. A great number of Burmese politicians had been able to study law in England and turned their skills later against the British "masters" to prove that the Burmese were already fit to look after their affairs without British advice and training. In contrast, the leading members of the *Do-bama Asiyone* mostly had been influenced by the education in the nationalists schools and had not studied abroad.

The legislative bodies therefore besides fulfilling their obligation to legitimise British rule by passing laws and giving the parliamentarians the chance to work for the benefits of their constituencies were to a large part utilised as stages to protest British rule. The Burmese parliamentarians reclaimed the independence lost in 1886 by a variety of actions. They refused to

approve bills of central importance for the government and called for "burmanise" all branches of administration. The most prominent issue was to attack the prescription that English, the language of the colonial power, had to be used as the main tongue spoken in parliament and used in the bureaucracy..

The often emphasised need of Burmese unity to regain independence was thwarted by the element of competition inherent in this instrument of elections that called for choosing between various candidates. This contributed to splits within the Burmese nationalist lay movement organised in the GCBA and the monks' associations that acted as their consultants and supervisors. This process however did not lead to the establishment of political parties along the lines of British politics. Here again, Burmese custom played a role. In all units of Burmese society, from the village level to the court, "power" was vested in persons, not organisations in the first place. "Politics" therefore were performed as interactions between individuals. Such personalisation of power had contributed to the massacre of 1879 and the abolition of the monarchy as a counter measure and precondition of "responsible government"..

The author of the first history of post-royal Burma who had served as secretary for one of the GCBA factions and joined the Fabian party took a critical look at the affects of this tradition.

A pathetic state of Burmese politics is that political parties do not have definite ideology. In England there is no such thing as Baldwin's party, or Landsberry's party, or Mac Donald's party, or Lloyd George's party. The parties in England are Conservative, Socialist, Labour, Liberal, which are based on party ideology. The same is true in United States and France; their parties are not named after a person. In Italy they have Fascist party, not Mussolini's party; in Germany Nazi party, not Hitler's party. After Mussolini's death Fascism will remain. However, in Burma no ideology will remain after the deaths of U Ba Pe, U Chit Hlaing and Dr Ba Maw. As the parties are named after persons there can be no definite ism; only activities that follow the will of the leaders prevail. This is the greatest defect in Burmese politics; it is the duty of the people to correct it. (Ba Khaing 1938: 113)

Such "pathetic state" of politics added by personal rivalries contributed to a continuity of shifting alliances that became clearly visible before the 1932 elections. The two Leagues that had been formed were engaged in a mock fight. Both propagated aims to reach the same goal – the achievement of independence. After the elections, the unity within the two camps ended and the parties known under the names of their leaders re-emerged.

A further impediment to establish a party landscape characterised by differences of political convictions was the phenomenon of the "plural society". The term was coined by J.S. Furnivall (Furnivall 1956) as a label of the multi-ethnic society of colonial Burma. Different ethnic groups "met but did not combine" here. The parliament in which seats were reserved for Karen, Indians and British parliamentarians was just such a meeting place. Political standpoints were negotiated and exchanged like the goods offered by different groups on the market, coalitions were formed but they were short-lived due to the lack of common interests – particularly with regard to the crucial issue of the country's independence. The issue of communal representation that had been adopted in 1922 from the beginning split the parliaments along ethnic lines. The rules regulating the franchise besides providing a few seats for Anglo-Burmans did not consider the option of inter-ethnic marriages and thereby contributed to a fixation of ethnic identities.

The constitution under which the elections of 1936 were held allowed for a greater participation of the two chambers in the shaping of the living condition of the country by passing bills that – if accepted by the British supervisors – had a concrete impact on the electorate. But such decision were overlaid by discussions taking place mainly in the House of Representatives that can be termed proxy debates. The underlying main topic was a contest on two levels. Among the Burmese leaders, it was contested who might be qualified to lead Burma into independence. The instrument of moving no-confidence motions was excessively used in this contest. On the other side, the Burmese majority in parliament had try to show that they opposed British domination. Debates on

the rules and procedures were used to convince the politically interested public about their dedication to fight for a Burma in which Burmese traditions prevailed.

Buddhism and monks played a crucial role in endeavour to uphold tradition in a "modern" way. The significance of the "victory" in the shoe-question was to show that "religion" first and foremost was not a matter of individual belief as the liberal westerners assumed, but an issue of national importance.

Many and often young monks formed the core of the early boycott movement, but were never directly involved in electoral politics. They were not mentioned in the rules regulating the franchise nor the qualifications to occupy a seat in a parliament. In terms of franchise, they were practically excluded because the right to vote was reserved for taxpayers. As members of the Buddhist order, they were however politically of utmost importance as advisors for laypeople on the different administrative levels. This can be seen as a continuation of their role as advisors to the kings. The splits of the *sangha* associations parallel to those of the GCBA however damaged the reputation of the Buddhist order that represented an indivisible spiritual unity.

Furthermore, the end of royal rule terminated the role of the Buddhist monarchs to purify the order if necessary. The conviction of Ottama and other monks under the secular laws enacted by the British administration aroused strong protests from the Burmese population. In this regard, the emergence of "political monks" was a result of the void created by the removal of the Buddhist monarchy.

Concerning the political involvement of lay people, the biographies of some leading nationalists show that the resistance to British rule was connected to the end of royal rule as well.

Thakin Kodaw Hmaing (1876-1964), the political poet and patron of the main wing of the *Do-bama Asiayone* (We-Burma Association) witnessed the deportation of Thibaw and his wife in Mandalay because his boarding house was close to the queen's palace. In his writings, he often referred to that event as a main motif to strive for regaining independence. When Thibaw's wife, Supalayay, was allowed to return to Rangoon, the poet contacted her and founded with other nationalists a "Protection Committee for the Queen."¹ Interestingly, she was given a residence in Churchill Rd.² named after the man who had ordered the annexation of Burma. It is not known if this was done intentionally to The street was renamed Komin Kochin Rd. after Burma nominally regained independence under Japanese rule.

Ba Maw, the first Premier under the constitution of 1935 and head of the Burmese government under Japanese occupation, was the son of a member of the royal court and had accompanied the Kinwun Mingyi (1822-1908), a prominent minister under the kings Mindon and Thibaw, on his travels to Europe. He later however was rumoured to have joined a rebel group and died shortly after his two sons were born.

Finally, Aung San – the military and political hero of the independence struggle – and co-founder of the Freedom Bloc together with Ba Maw in 1939 remarked that already as a child he had dreamt to become a rebel against the British. A grandmother had told him that one of her cousins had fought the British after 1885.

Aung San who can be regarded as the main person of political significance connection colonial Burma the emergence of an independent Burmese state had started his own fight against the British as a leader of a student strike in 1936 by stepping in the shoes of the heroes of 1920. He became a leader of the *Do-bama Asiayone* in April 1939, cooperated with Ba Maw in the Freedom Bloc and on August 8, 1940 boarded a ship to China with another Thakin to get foreign assistance for the Burmese independence struggle.

1 https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=6872 (accessed 27.8.2020).

2 See <https://yangontimemachine.com/2018/03/01/churchill-komin-kochin-road-supayalat/> (accessed 27.8.2020).

His journey finally resulted in the training of the "30 Comrades", nucleus of the Burmese Independence Army in Hainan at a time when in Burma the last session of the parliament took place. The army was finally founded in December 1941 in Bangkok and reached Burma in January of the next year to assist the Japanese army in liberating their country. Aung San hence got the chance to follow the footsteps of his relative.

The following picture taken at a meeting of the Dobama Asiayone in late 1938 illustrates the alliance of extra-parliamentary activists who were instrumental to put an end to British rule in Burma.



Thakin Kodaw Hmine (centre between two monks): First row, third from the right: Aung San.

Ba Maw and other politicians standing had attempted to make use of the institutions implemented during colonial rule to reach the cherished goal of independence.

This goal could only be achieved through Burmese unity that had gone with the kings as the representatives of a vertical unity that allowed the people at the grass-root levels a great deal of autonomy. The British system of which democratic elections were a small part tried to establish a horizontal unity regulated by laws by way of a system that was alien to the people. As a result, instead of the great pyramid topped by the monarch a number of small political pyramids under a variety of leaders emerged, that were called political parties. The imported concept of democracy did however not contribute to unity them except in the principal dislike of foreign domination.

The *Do-bama Asiayone* under the leadership of Aung San and his colleagues propagated an alternative concept for which the term *loka neikban* – worldly Nirvana was used. It was propagated by Thakin Kodaw Hmine as well as by Aung San and can be seen as a blend of Buddhist ideals and socialist ideas that had entered Burma from the early 1930s on and allowed for an inclusion of all

ethnic and religious groups in a future liberated Burma. Elections as a means to reproduce political pluralism in parliaments, was not meaningful in such a concept.

One may say, that Burma was looking for another king as head of a new Burmese society.