

Epilogue to Part B:  
**Elections Held in a Highly Fragmented Context**

### 1 Introduction

The four general elections held between the end of World War II and the military coup in March 1962 are framed by two broadcasts of Ne Win in May 1945 and February 1962. One may say that the first attempt to introduce parliamentary democracy to independent Burma was characterised by a dominating influence of the country's military that had played a key role in achieving the cherished goal to be free from colonial rule. Furthermore, just a quick look at the context of the single polls reveals that each of them was connected to actions of the armed forces that were instrumental to guarantee the safety of voters and election officials in some parts of the country due to the civil war highlighted by the elections of 1960 that were organised by a government headed by the Tatmadaw's chief commander. A second look shows that all elections were embedded in a context of political misfortune.

Three months after the first polls of April 1947, Aung San was assassinated by order of a political rival who had not signed the London agreement paving the way for independence and boycotted the elections. He had correctly believed that his party would have no chance to win against the League headed by the nation hero. - The date of the first voting after independence prescribed by the constitution had to be postponed due to the civil war. They were later conducted in stages under rather irregular circumstances. - Nu resigned shortly after the polls of 1956 from the premiership. The step was followed by tensions within the AFPFL that might have existed before and developed into a split of the League and the appointment of an interim government headed by Ne Win. - Finally, the term of the government elected after the landslide victory of the party under Nu's leadership over the rival faction of the AFPFL in April 1960 was followed by political stability and a military coup less than two years after election day.

Naturally, a variety of causes as well as a number of accidental incidents contributed to such a depressing enumeration. Of course, the institution of elections alone cannot be blamed for the series of human and political mishap overshadowing independent Burma's first period of post-war history. However, the role of this particular instrument of furnishing a "modern democratic state" in Burma's first parliamentary period might help to understand the failure of the political period dominated by Nu as well as the following events in the country's history. As Mary Callahan argued in 1998, "an analysis of the 1950s reveals systemic sources of instability for democratic government that still exist today." (Callahan 1998: 6)

Two main gaps that could not be bridged can be named that contributed to the collapse of the parliamentary system in 1962. Both are connected to the post-colonial legacy that inevitably affected the politics of the new state. The first is the difference between British and Burmese concepts of legitimising government. (2) The second is related to the dual administration of the Burmese heartland (Ministerial Burma) and the fringes of the country (the Frontier Areas) by the British administration. (3) Both gaps were results of the rather hastily drafted Attlee-Aung San Agreement signed end of January 1947 as the basic document on which Burma's independence was founded.

### 2 A Failed Blend of Qualitative and Quantitative Democracy

The British side had given in to almost all demands of Aung San and his AFPFL colleagues had brought forward during the conference of January 1947. Nevertheless, the agreement could not but be a compromise that fell short of the comprehensive Burmese desire to attain "full" independence. This is indicated by the refusal of the two members of the delegation to sign the agreement as well

as the name "Independence First" given to the alliance of parties boycotting the 1947 elections. The communist parties took an uncompromising attitude as well (Fleischmann 1989: 83).

Aung San knew that "full independence" as a complete break with the colonial past was unrealistic. He therefore accepted that some core elements of the system of "electoral democracy" as introduced in pre-war Burma had to be continued. These elements however proved to be not fully compatible with Burmese traditions of attributing meaning to the institution of government. In Burma, the quality of an independent and self-determined life practised at the grass-root level and in a different way at the top of the state was of utmost importance. As a consequence, almost all pre-war Burmese politicians and a majority of the population had neglected more than rejected the system of letting the quantity of votes decide about who was to rule the country for a certain period of time.

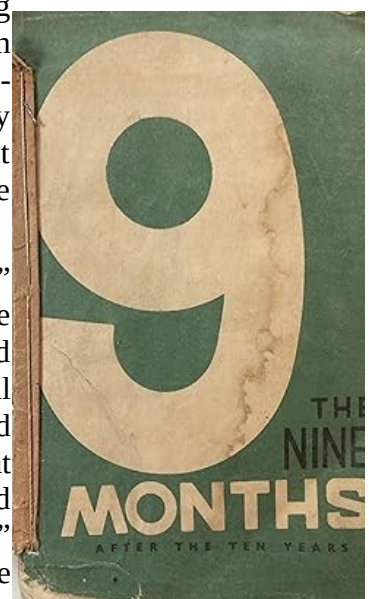
Aung San impersonated the qualities of the perfect ruler of independence Burma as a modern version of a king (Prager 2003). In April 1947, the AFPFL candidates were elected because of him, not because of any political program except that of the achievement of independence for which he stood. He had fought for this aim as a soldier and then negotiated the details of a transfer of power as a politician both with the British in London and the leaders of non-Burmese groups at the Panglong Conference.

After his premature death, elections became a routine procedure that were performed in a technically free and fair way as far as conditions permitted. The parliament however to a great extent functioned as an institution that rubber-stamped the decisions taken by government headed by Aung San's successor. The option of government change as a consequence of a change of the majority in parliament after counting of votes never came even close to be realised. At the same time, no party system similar to the assumed British model developed.

The failure to make the London compromise meaningful with regard to a mode of government change as a consequence of election results can be illustrated by the similarities between the elections in the colonial period and what followed after World War II. First, the tradition of election boycott came back, particularly in the decisive polls to the Constituent Assembly. The political groups headed by persons that rejected the agreement signed in London did not take part with the exception of a few communist candidates.

The tragic side-effect of the boycott was the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet by order of Saw one of the pre-war premiers and of the politicians boycotting the elections. His action can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of to remove a king in royal times by an armed rebellion. Later, a series of splits and shifting of allegiances took place as during colonial times highlighted by the support of the NUF for the Clean AFPFL in the no-confidence motion of June 1958. Any hopes that a two-party system à la Great Britain or the USA would emerge, were finally crushed in the 1960 elections. It was the Burmese electorate that – at least for the time being – exposed this hope as an illusion. The Stable AFPFL leadership was "decapitated" as a newspaper worded it.

The elections of 1960 can be seen as a victory of Nu's "qualitative" approach towards politics illustrated by his main argument that the people had the choice between Fascism that was easy to achieve and Democracy that was not. The latter required cooperation and - material as well as immaterial - sacrifices of his followers. This way, he portrayed himself as the virtuous Buddhist ruler who would even accept his defeat if only Democracy would be maintained. In contrast, his rivals attempted to convince the public that the country needed more modern "stable" political institutions, programs and practices. As a consequence, the party leaders in principle accepted what the military led Caretaker



Government had done in a short period of time. The title of the booklet published by the army after the first nine months of its work illustrates this alternative approach: In nine months, The title of the books suggests, the government under Ne Win had achieved more than the civil politicians in ten years. This yardstick of political progress was rejected by the people in the elections of 1960.

Thereby, Burmese elections displayed the traditional model of a duel in which the loser is completely defeated in line with Nu's credo that the victory of his version of democracy was a life-and-death matter. The prevalence of this model of political culture is illustrated by the fact that Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein competed in the constituencies of the leaders of the rival party instead of choosing "safe" constituencies. As a consequence, they not just lost the battle for winning the majority in their constituencies but all of their political importance. Ba Swe, having been nicknamed "Big Tiger" before, was now called "Dead Tiger". After his defeat

This underlying political model might also help to explain the consequences of the outcome of the 1956 elections. The NUF was created to challenge the rule of the AFPFL. Its leaders were not linked by an alternative political program. They just relied on the dissatisfaction of the people with the ruling League.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the group's attempt was successful in the end, but not by winning the majority of seats in parliament, but by the split of the AFPFL and the following invitation of the army to organise the next elections. The wishful expectation of foreign observers that the of the 1956 polls might lead to the establishment of a two-party-system were mistaken. In the eyes of Nu, the quantity of votes cast for the NUF had an impact in terms of a core political quality: The People's League was about to loose the trust of the people.

The developments after the split caused the Tatmadaw to get involved in "party politics" in the double role of a neutral referee and a fellow player. As Nu mentioned in his broadcast message to the people on September 28, 1956, the holding of free and fair elections was as "precious as life itself". Because the situation in the country, his government was not able to guarantee this quality. Ne Win and the many military officers working within the government machinery took over as politicians and administrators after they had already drafted their vision for the country's political development. The first booklet on the Caretaker Government's accomplishments published in July 1959 displays the self-confidence of the armed forces to put an end to the "suffering of the country" during the first 10 years of independence (Nine Months: 23). The first chapter of the publication contains an implicit critique of party politics:

Factional politics had driven asunder the unity of the government of the day and the contending factions had engaged in a bitter all-conclusive struggle without pertinent regard to the consequences. It was inevitable that then that the factional strife in the Government became more embittered, the insurgents in the jungle should become more confident, more insolent; reaching that stage where these insurgents began to dictate the very terms of peace. It was under such conditions when the country appeared to be on the very brink of chaos and disaster, that the administration was handed over to General Ne Win. (Nine Months: 2)

"Fractional politics" had caused the necessity to hand over the government to the armed forces. The "core business" of the Tatmadaw to secure peace was requested. The actions of the civil politicians resulted in the all-encompassing task to clean a chaotic Augian Stable created by politicians. Inevitably, Ne Win turned to become a "soldier-politician" like Aung San. This parallel was visualised on the frontispiece of the full chronicle of the interim government's achievements in 1961, whereas two years ago a bust of Ne Win alone had been shown at the beginning of the book. One may regard this change as an indication of the army's awareness of the danger of a "personality cult" as shown by Nu's pictures on the ballot boxes in 1960. The second picture highlights the

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1 Callahan assumed that the NUF was a "loyal opposition" to the AFPFL (Callahan 1998: 9) and that the elections in 1956 and 1960 "represented clear steps forward on the paths towards institutionalizing a truly competitive parliamentary system" (ibid.: 10).

continuity between the founder of the army and his successor in their double roles as soldiers and politicians.



*Nine Months, frontispiece. Name of the Sculptor: Han Tin*



*Source: Trust*

### 3 Undefined Federalism

The Attlee-Aung San Agreement had stated at the beginning of the section on the “Frontier Areas”:

It is agreed objective of both His Majesty’s Government and the Burmese Delegates to achieve the early unification of the Frontier Areas and Ministerial Burma with the free consent of the inhabitants of those areas. In the meantime, it is agreed that the people of the Frontier Areas should, in respect of subjects of common interest, be closely associated with the Government of Burma in a manner acceptable to both parties.

Details of how to realise the “early unification in a manner acceptable to both parties” were left to the conference that was scheduled to take place in Panglong (Shan State) shortly after the London meeting.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the appointment of a small advisory group to the governor, the appointment of a councillor for the up to then excluded areas as member of the Executive Council “or by some other means” was envisaged. The final decision was left to a future agreement “upon the best method of advancing their common aims in accordance with the expressed views of the peoples of the Frontier Areas” between the British and the Burmese governments.

These rather very vague provisions reflect the intention of both sides to release Burma quickly into independence. They further reflect the Burmese delegation’s composition. The people outside Ministerial Burma were not represented at the London conference table. The Sawbwas sent a telegram with the message that the delegation could not speak for the Frontier Areas. Shortly later, a mass meeting convened in Taunggyi by the Shan State Freedom League passed a resolution in favour of an immediate independence of the Shan States together with Burma. Solidarity with Aung San was proclaimed as well (for details see Pe Kin 1994: 55-58).

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<sup>2</sup> A first conference at Panglong had taken place in March 1946 on the invitation of the Shan Sawbwas in order to discuss the future of the Shan states after independence. From the Burmese side, pre-war premier Saw and Nu participated.

These events show that the issue of how to regulate the relations between the various parts of Burma had caused a rift in the Shan State. On one side stood the traditional power holders on the other political activists of the young generation who regarded Aung San as an ally in their fight against feudal rule. According to many assessments of participants, it was Aung San's personality that convinced the ethnic leaders to sign the agreement.<sup>3</sup> After Aung San's death, the contrasting interests of the people living at Burma's fringes and the ethnic majority took prominence.

The political tensions both within the regions with a traditional majority of a non-Burmese population and "Burmese others" did not receive much attention for a long time. The overlapping issues of civil war and ideological controversies on how to define socialism and then the AFPFL split took precedence. The topic that became known as the "federal issue" surfaced rather lately. It had however been a hidden hot potato because of Article X of the constitution granting the States the right of secession after ten years. It seems not yet quite clear how this clause is related to what happened at the Panglong conference.<sup>4</sup>

The article raises a number of questions with regard to the interpretation of the status of the three states mention in the constitution, Shan, Karenni (Kayah) and Kachin.. It provided that "every State shall have the right to secede from the Union" (Section 201) and that this right "shall not be exercised within ten years from the date on which this Constitution comes into operation" (Section 202). Section 178 dealing with the provisions for the Kachin State stated that the "provisions of Chapter X of this Constitution shall not apply to the Kachin State". As a consequence, secession was only possible for the Shan and Karenni States until 4 January 1958, ten years after the Constitution had become effective. It was not quite clear therefore what these provisions meant for states created later like the Karen State in 1951. It therefore made sense to discuss about a way to clarify this and other issues as intended by the "Shan Federal Proposal" that can be regarded as the focal point of the developments leading to the end of the first period of Burma's post-independence history.

The proposal and its effects on the leaders of other ethnicities show that the elites of the ethnic communities had become acquainted with western modernity and tried to make use of it in their respective domains. Many members of the Sawbwa families had received education abroad. The younger generation had been acquainted with a "spirit of change" at Rangoon University. The example of the Kachin student association is instructive that gave rise to the foundation of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIA) and its armed wing, the KIO in 1961, that goes back to the foundation of a Kachin Cultural Enhancement Youth Organization by Kachin students.

The trends towards more political awareness within the former Frontier Areas together with the divide between the Burmese plains and the hills helped to create an explosive mix and a strong dynamic shown by the sympathies of numerous non-Burmese ethnic groups for the Shan Federal Proposal. Thereby, a rift was opened between almost all non-Burmese ethnic group and the ethnic majority. Nu's tactic of delaying a decision on the proposal by discussing the issue in parliament helped the dangerous mixture to explode on the early morning of 2, March 1962.

#### 4 Birth Defects

The foregoing considerations can be summarised by way of a metaphor. The state of Burma was released into independence with two serious birth defects both resulting from the failure of two hybrid constructs. Furthermore, the basics for the new state were laid under extreme time pressure.

3 A participant from Kachin State, Duwa Shan Lone, was quoted later that "the most enduring impression [he] had of the Panglong proceedings was the ease with which Bogyoke Aung San was able to establish rapport with the hill tribes leaders, and gain their trust. His charisma[.].. was the key to the successful signing of the Panglong Agreement. (<https://www.kachinlandnews.com/?p=25609>; accessed 10.2.2024)

4 The above mentioned Kachin delegate remembers that Aung San promised the right of secession of the Shan State in a talk with the later first president of Burma, Saw Shwe Htaike:"Sawbwa Gyi, let me put to rest all your concerns regarding union with Burma. Federated or not, your rights to secession will be honoured."



The Burmese leaders stuck to their aspiration manifoldly expressed before the war to achieve an unconditional independence, the Labour government wanted a quick face saving exit from the most eastern part of the British-Indian Empire. The new constitution was drafted within just less than five months, the Panglong Conference lasted only five days before the Agreement was signed by representatives of just four of the eight ethnic groups later being recognised as "indigenous" by the constitution.<sup>5</sup>

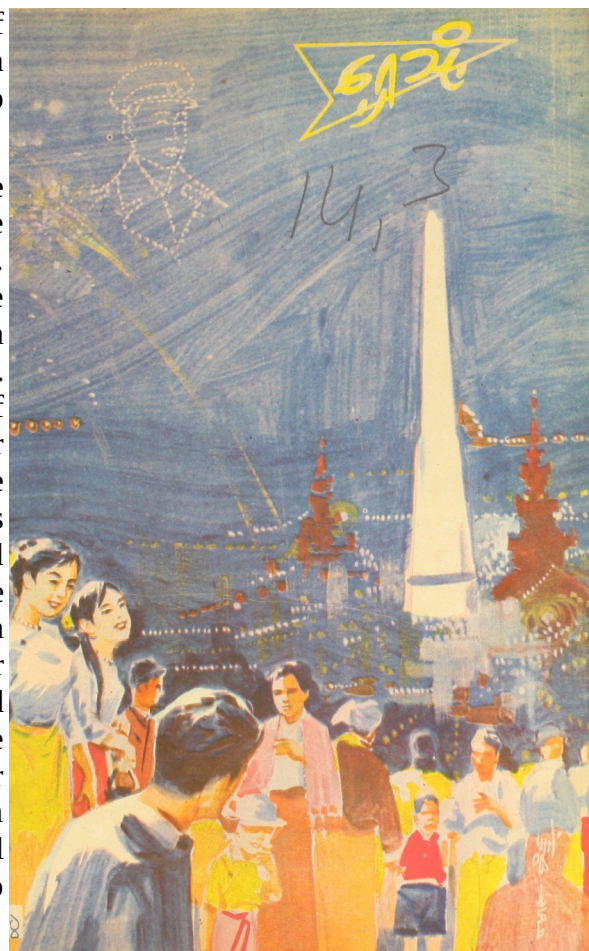
As a result, it took some time until the deficits of the foundations of the new state came into the open. The Shan Proposal worded the problem by stating that the delegates participating in the Constituent Assembly had been

[p]olitically immature; [...] had no understanding of legislative processes; [...] were preoccupied with the proposal of total independence within one year [...] accepted General Aung San's exhortation to trust the intentions rather than the words of the law. They never dreamt that after having gained Independence, those they considered as brethren, might bring pressure on them by resorting to precise and literal interpretations of the words of the Constitution. (Federal Proposal: 18-19)

As Furnivall remarked, the failure to quickly do away with Burma's problems was not mainly due to the weaknesses of the acting persons. The birth defects of the country were mainly consequences of the structural incompatibilities inherited from colonial times. The constitution of 1947 was kind of a patchwork that had to be amended or even completely redrafted. Nu's government seemed to be not able effectively to manage this difficult task. The military took over and started a new attempt to find a cure for Burma's birth defects.

It would be an attractive topic of a futuristic novel set in the past to describe what might have happened if Aung San had not been assassinated and thus given the chance to correct the imperfections he had had no chance to avoid.

The Burmese state survived despite of its defects. The coup that ended the discussion on the federal issue illustrates that until 1962 no nation had been born. The often use "family metaphor" reveals that the Burmese leaders just behaved as if it was a community based on common features. Remembering Aug San's role as the father of independent Burma played a significant role to cover the deficiencies. His picture was printed on the banknotes and on many stamps, three public holidays – Union Day (17.2.), Resistance Day (27.3.) and Martyrs' Day (19.7.) – remembered stages of his life on the way of gaining independence and even National Day celebrated in November or December commemorating the student strike in 1920 and Independence Day (4.1.) can be connected to him. He became prominent in 1936 due to his role as a leader of the student strike of that year and he was the main architect of independence. Concerning national affairs, he was all around, always in the air, so to speak, the beneficial spirit of the country.



5 Besides, the Burmese (Bamar= as the ethnic majority, th (Rakhine) and Chin States, the last three of them being recognised by the constitution drafted under the supervision of the Revolutionary Council and enacted in 1974.

This “spirit” however that had existed at the Panglong Conference vanished after Aung San's assassination and was replaced by a variety of myths (see Walton 2008).

It was therefore necessary to find unambiguous provisions regulating the relation between centre and peripheries in Burma. It was not sufficient to build the multi-ethnic nation on the trust that a “family spirit” would hold the Union of Burma together.

It was not sufficient as well to trust that the unavoidable plurality of political concepts could be represented in a parliament in which the members of the different “parties” were used to regard their respective group to represent the undivided and indivisible interests of the country. As a result, “party politics” tended to be turned into duels fought in an all-or-nothing manner. The “first-past-the-post” voting system adopted from the British became characteristic not just for the competition in the single constituencies but for the contest for the leadership of the whole state. This attitude was personified both by Aung San and Nu had been optimistic that the AFPFL would lead the government for 40 years.

Elections that were meant to help regulating conflict were thus turned into a cause for conflict. The parliament elected in 1956 was not able to solve the crisis after the AFPFL split. The military had to step in - and was prepared to do it because it had already adopted the attitude to regard itself as the guardian of the state due to its actions against the communist, the ethnic rebels and the Kuomintang intruders as well assisting the civil government of holding elections according to the constitution. This self-perception included the task to act as the watchdog over the integrity of the Union. Ne Win painstakingly abided by the letter of the supreme law the spirit of which however was very ambiguous. With the assistance of younger officers – most notably Aung Gyi and Maung Maung - the Tatmadaw started to become a “state within the state”. and Ne Win accepted the opportunity to acted as an internal moderator and a representative not only of the military legacy of Aung San.

In the end, the military leadership must have concluded that the ability of the civil politicians could not be trusted any more. On the other dose, its action of “cleaning” the country in-between October 1958 and the holding of elections in February 1960 caused many people – particularly in the urban centres – to regard the military leadership as an “enemy of the people” as an old proverb had denoted the government since royal times because such actions had infringed their cherished liberty.

On the other hand, Nu exploited this notion in the election campaign of 1959 and 1960 by contrasting his version of democracy based on Buddhist virtues with the threat of fascism looming if the “stable” wing of the split AFPFL allegedly or really being in favour of the army's mode of efficiency would win the elections.

The coup of 1962 made an end to the first period of Burma's independence in which multi-party elections did not help to create trust in a political system under the 1947 constitution. The split of the AFPFL an its consequences can be regarded as the crucial event showing that the imported instrument of elections did not – yet – help to hold the country together. What followed, was a “Burmese way to socialism” aiming at unity in a diverse country.