

Intermezzo 2: The Burmese Way to Socialism (1962-1988)

1 Introduction

The early-morning coup was almost bloodless.¹ It was the beginning of a period of Burma's post-independence history lasting more than a quarter-century that was dominated by Ne Win as the paramount leader who – like Aung San before – changed clothes from a soldier to a civilian - albeit only twelve years after the coup. These numbers indicate that the coup was the beginning of a long term undertaking. The name “Revolutionary Council” was chosen to represent the institution to initiate this project. The constitution of 1974 was “superseded”, not formally abrogated, and a “Turn of the Wheel” had happened as an American newspaper worded it in referring to the main Buddhist symbol.² The political system was about to be re-invented almost from scratch.

It can be noted that the English term “revolution” has been and is still used in Burma/Myanmar in very different contexts. Shortly after the 1962 coup, a book came out to commemorate the seventeenth anniversary of “Resistance Day” (27 March) on which Aung Sn in 1945 had ordered the Burmese army to fight against the Japanese on the side of the Allied forces. The book was entitled “Th Roots of the Revolution” (Ba Than 1962). The author, born 1914, had served in the Burmese army during the war and was appointed Director of the Defence Services Historical Research as well as the Education and Psychological Warfare Departments. which suggested that the author, a former soldier who had worked for some time in the museum. He regarded the army as the main revolutionary force that brought about Burma's independence. The book's editor from *The Guardian* newspaper stressed that the Union of Burma had to be defended again “the doubtful demands for federalism”. (Ba Thhan 1962: iv)³

Ba Than calls “Resistance Day the “D-Day” of the country's revolution in the fight against the Japanese fascists – in parallel to the landing of the Allies in the Normandy on 6 June 1944 (Ba Than 1962: 52). The revolution was thus performed by the army as a political entity as shown by its role as a founding member of the Anti-Fascist-People's Freedom League (AFPFL). (Ba Than 1962: 49)

Some years later, Ba Maw claimed to have been the leading actor of the “Breakthrough in Burma” between 1939 and 1946 when he called his recollections “Memoirs to the Revolution”.(Ba Maw 1966).

Both authors – and many others – make use of the term “revolution” to designate recent events in Burma/Myanmar. In some cases, the meaning of the term can be seen as opposed to institutionalising elections as a way to promote democracy. This happened in the “revolution” against the British and the coup of 1962 that terminated Nu's Buddhist concept of democracy. The popular uprising of 1988 against the socialist one-party system is not called “revolution” often, but advocated a complete change brought about by a “democracy movement” headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. In a similar way, the term has been used to characterise the monks protests in 2007 and the popular response to the cancellation of the 2020 elections and the military's response to it.

It might therefore be useful to reflect about the meaning of the term in the Burmese context. Robert Taylor has written an article about this topic (Taylor 1986) that has not attracted much attention in analysing recent developments after the end of the socialist ear (2). The next sections deals with the

1 A son of the first President of Burma was killed when soldiers entered the compound of the family. Ne Win apologised.

2 The Honolulu Star 12.3.1962: 12.

3 The research for the book had started in 1955 at the Defence Services Research Institute. The author had conducted interview than with politicians and soldiers, one of them being Ne Win. - The Psychological Warfare Department (known as Psy-War Dpt) suggested books to be read by soldiers and published a study in which the relationship of marxismu and Buddhism was explained (Lissak 1864: 11; 12).

time until the enactment of a new constitution in 1974 that provided a legal base for the “Burmese Way to Socialism” (3) and some remarks on the following period until Ne Win’s resignation in 1988 (4). Both sections will focus on the assessment and the effects of elections as a tool of organising society. Finally, some remarks on the transition from the socialist period to the next direct military rule commencing on 18 September 1988 will be given (5).

2 Burmese Concepts of Revolution

In his article on this topic published two years before the end of the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, Taylor first gives an overview about early Burmese efforts to find suitable Burmese words for the English words denoting modern political terms including a fitting equivalent for “politics” (Taylor 1986: 79-83). A case in point is the search for a fitting term to cover the meaning of “socialism”. Until today, the search was not successful for the key term “socialism” as for “democracy”.

Taylor then outlines the meaning of two Burmese words used for a political revolution that became prominent in the colonial period and expressed the new Marxist ideas imported from the 1930s onwards. The first – *ayei-daw-bon* – was used in the name of the party that later was known as the Socialist Party, widely regarded to formulate the political ideology of the AFPFL. The term was used to denote the independence achieved in 1948 as “U Nu’s revolution”. The second term – *tan-hlan-yei* – was employed in the name of the Revolutionary Council. The former, literally meaning “story of royal state affairs”, is older and “softer” than the second one that contains a word *bon* denoting an act of rebellion. While *ayei-daw-bon* can refer to a change sought by democratic means, *tan-hlan-yei* refers to a radical change through which a government is overthrown. The term was used to label both the monks’ “Saffron Revolution” of 2007 and the “Spring Revolution” proclaimed after the coup of 1 February 2021. The usage of the two terms was and is however somehow fluid and might have changed since time of Taylor’s analysis. Communist politicians used the term *ayei-daw-bon* before and after the war, for example in the slogan “Long live the revolution”.

Taylor describes the difference of both terms this way:

... the *ayei-daw-bon* concept is one which sees revolution as an inevitable movement for good propelled by the progressive masses who, nonetheless, must be carefully managed to prevent them from going faster than objectives circumstances will allow, the ideal of *tan-hlan-yei*, by contrast stresses the importance of endeavours to resist evil. When *ayei-daw-bon* emphasizes the role of the state as a continuing institution guiding the revolution through the channels of history, *tan-hlan-yei* insists upon the need to force the participation of the masses in social change, and views the state’s structure as impediments to the revolution. (Taylor 1986: 85)

As a consequence, an institution as elections takes a back seat in favour of political leaders. “The masses are basically good, but they are erratic. Unlike the political leaders they are not politically aware and thus are easily misled by the enemies of progress” Taylor writes in his characterising of the “hard” concept of revolution (Taylor 1986: 85). This assumption is based on a particular view of the nature of man.

This view however was shared by Nu who stressed the morality of politicians as a key of performing “good politics”. He stressed the “cleanness” of the single policy maker in his campaign for democracy whereas his rivals in the AFPFL emphasised the importance of a “stable” political program based on socialist ideas. Here, the leadership of the Tatmadaw agreed as shown in the last stage of the Tatmadaw’s “National Ideology”, to develop a “socialist economy” (see B4, p. 2).

The two concepts can be understood as two versions of revolution based on Buddhist culture. Taylor emphasises the role of the Buddhist conception of history characterised by the principle of impermanence (*anicca*). History is not necessarily progressive and therefore it is mandatory to guide the revolution. Because of this principle, history had to be “read” carefully in order not to miss the opportunities to take the right decisions. Aung San had been able to do so by leaving Burma

for China in 1941 at a time when many other Thakins were sent to prison to ask the communists there for help, then by accepting the Japanese offer to establish a Burma army, helping to drive out the British and changing sides on 27 March 1945 to assist the allied forces to expel the liberators-turned-aggressors from Burmese soil and later draw up a compromise to achieve Burma's independence as soon as any possible. Robert Taylor outlines the consequence of the Buddhist principle on view of political action:

... in this life men must act quickly to shape the historical moment. Since time is short, leaders, having only so many years in which to shape history before they succumb to impermanence, must act to speed up the processes of social change. (Taylor 1986: 86)⁴

With regards to a multi party system, it was dismissed as an “impossible means for achieving socialism, because anti socialist forces use it to mislead the masses”. (Taylor 1986: 89) As an implication, the neutralist course of the country promoted by Nu was exacerbated because the masses could be misled by agents working in the interest of communist or capitalist countries.⁵

In contrast, Nu's concept of revolution can be seen as based on the Buddhist principle of non-self (*anatte*) stressing selfless social engagement according to which “clean politicians” were needed to achieve good political results. This concept was impersonated by the devout Buddhist Nu. In stark contrast to him, Ne Win who was by no means a very pious man. Both in his private life and took a rather pragmatic approach to Buddhism followed Aung San's ideas, the “father” of both the Burmese army and the Burma's political independence. Under his supervision, the army had both developed its version of a “national ideology” aiming at a socialist economy as the foundation of the state and measures to curb the influence of communist and other organisations threatening the government through the Psy-War Department that concentrated on psychological means to fight enemies. The department even consulted such activities performed in the USA (Chit Hlaing 2008: 114-117).

2 Drafting of a Program for the New Era

The revolution attempted by the Council under Ne Win's command was by no means a spontaneous act but can be seen as a result of the involvement of the army in Burma's politics that started with its origins after Aung San had left the country in 1941. All members of the 30 Comrades had been members of the Thakin movement that spearheaded the fight for independence since the 1930s and had established its own para-military unit, the **Letyon () Tat**. On the other hand, the army of independent Burma could not but get engaged in politics due to the civil war and its fight against communist and ethnic rebels – an being engaged in protecting the holding of elections.

Some months after coup, a first document outlining the Tatmadaw leadership's vision of the country's future political system was launched. A document entitled “The Burmese Way to Socialism” was launched on 30 April 1962 together with the constitution of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). On 17 January 1963, its “philosophy” was published carrying the demanding title “The Correlation of Man and His Environment” (BSPP 1963). The main author of the text was Chit Hlaing who had become a research officer in the Psy-War Department in 1956. According to his memoirs (Chit Hlaing 2008: 114-160), Ne Win attended the opening of the first training cause and said: “The Tatmadaw should study political science, but should strictly stay away from political parties; that the Tatmadaw should stand to safeguard the constitution.”. (Chit Hlaing 2008: 116).

4 Such a statement can be regarded to be in line with Aung San's statement on a “Burmese Democracy” expressed at a big meeting of the AFPFL to discuss the foundations of the new constitution: “Economic principles are the underlying basis of political conception. Politics is inseparable from economy. A capitalist democracy may deny it

5 Socialist Burma's bilateral economic relations concentrated on Japan and Germany, the two formerly fascist countries that had been defeated in World War II.

According to Chit Hlaing's memory, four days after the coup Chit Hlaing and two others were ordered by Ne Win to write a paper explaining the new system of economy and politics. Chit Hlaing submitted a draft that was discussed with Ne Win in early April. On said occasion, the general is reported to have said on the topic of democracy:

We no longer have faith in parliamentary democracy. We have tried it. For example, parliament members and businessmen have been engaged in that four year cycle of elections, to win the election. They are dependent on businessmen's support to win the election. When the election is won, they have to repay by working for their benefit. Education and knowledge of the electorate is not high enough. Even in countries like America, they are spending huge amounts of money to fetch votes from the people. It's capitalist democracy.⁶ Even England, the Mother of Democracy, they haven't reached the goal. Therefore, democracy that we need, in simple terms is Eastern democracy. Let's say people's democracy. (Chit Hlaing 2008: 138)

Based on this meeting, a paper was composed that was published on 30 April as the "Burmese Way to Socialism". Shortly later, the constitution of the Burma Socialist Programme Party was fished after talks with some parties to build a "common front" had failed. After that, it was decided that the party needed a philosophy as a base for training courses attended by the applicants of the party (Chit Hlaing 2008: 150). Chit Hlaing who had read leftist literature after the Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club had published such literature started drafting a paper on the dialectics of "namarupa", of "mind and matter", a main topic in the Buddhist philosophy. Ne Win took a personal interest in the project and the final exposé was discussed by all members of the Revolutionary Council in mid January 1963. In the evening of 17 January the full text – covering 39 pages in the printed version – was read via the Burma Broadcasting Service. Kyaw Nyein, the former co-head of the Stable AFPFL, announced the special event (Chit Hlaing 2008: 152).

It took twelve years to put the new program in practice by building up the new party, drafting and enacting a new constitution, holding elections converting the soldier general Ne Win into the civilian politician U U Ne Win.⁷ However, almost from the beginning, a number of "revolutionary" measures were taken mainly in the field of economies in line with the most important issue from the Tatmadaw's agenda. A critical report published in a Canadian newspaper summarised in June 1966:



GENERAL NE WIN . . . Broods no opposition

Source: *Toronto Star* 6.7.1966, p. 6

6 Such a statement can be regarded to be in line with Aung San's statement on a "Burmese Democracy" expressed at a big meeting of the AFPFL to discuss the foundations of the new constitution: "Economic principles are the underlying basis of political conception. Politics is inseparable from economy. A capitalist democracy may deny it, but when we study profoundly the constitutions of the world, I we find economic laws immanent in them. Capitalists may argue that capitalism is the last word in the sphere of economic truth but no political or economic system can be permanent." (Silverstein 1993: 153)

7 This happened already two years before the new constitution was enacted on 20 April 1972 when Ne Win and 20 other high ranking members of the Revolutionary Council resigned from the armed forces.

The government has expelled foreign businessmen, missionaries and ancient minorities, banned foreign newsmen, restricted tourists to a few hours visit, discouraged normal social contacts between foreign diplomats in Rangoon and Burmese officials, and rejected help it badly needed from the West.

It's like the whole country has gone underground to keep foreigners from prying into Burma's travails. They are many.⁸

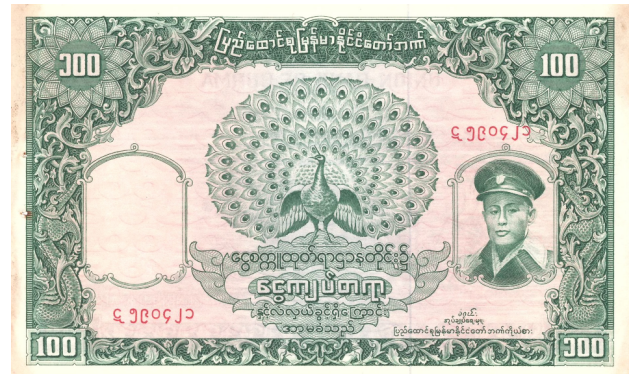
Most of the “foreign businessmen” were Indians who occupied a great part of the country’s retail trade since the colonial period. After the nationalisation of their businesses, they refused to continue to work under state control. The measure that caused an exodus that forced the Indian government to charter ships to bring the Indian nationals back.⁹

Already before the nationalisation acts were enforced, another drastic measure had been taken to “clean” the country’s economy shortly after banks had been nationalised in March 1964.. The two highest currency notes – 100 and 50 Kyat (worth 10 and 20 US\$ at that time) – were withdrawn from circulation invalidating half of the currency according to an estimation. Only up to 500 Kyat was allowed to be changed into smaller denominations.

Other reports indicate that the reasons for the interventions ins the market oriented economy inherited from colonial times were justified even by some Burmese people who had been affected by the resumes that the government regarded as “hoarding, black marketing and other ‘unscrupulous’ practices by private businessmen.” A former shopkeeper argued that black-marketeer have been operating without adequate checks for 15 years. Reforms were long overdue.”¹⁰ It was further often mentioned by foreign newsmongers that Ne Win frankly admitted failures as a statement from end1965. He was quoted ta have said that the country’s econm0y “was in a mess”.¹¹



50 Kyat note, issued 1958



100 Kyat note -The peacock is a national symbol

On the political level, the three parties that had won seats in the last elections were dissolved. The leaders of Nu’s Union Party were mostly interned – Nu was released in late 1966, members of the Stable AFPFL had been released earlier. Furthermore, Ne Win took steps to foster unity, for example by proclaiming a general amnesty in 1963 (Taylor 2015:) 279. The communist rebels did not accept it but some members of the “above -round” communists of the NUF participated in the

8 *The Toronto Star* 3.6.1966: 7.

9 *The Observer* (London) 757.1964: 6. - The paper reports that half of the 500,000 Indians living in Burma could adopt the Burmese citizenship if they wanted to apply (and lose the Indian citizenship) . During the colonial period, the “Indian question” had been an important issue, After the first Japanese bombs had fallen on Rangoon, a mass exodus set in. Indians were afraid that that a Burmese government would treat them baldly after a Japanese occupation. (Silverstein 1993: 153)

10 *The Arizona Daily Star* (Tuscon) 29.5..1964: 30.

11 *The News and Obsverver* 13.12.1965: 2,

new administration. This information caused the fear in western countries that Burma might become a communist country.¹²

A main task to be performed was to build up the new parts. It was decided that one should start to create a reliable cadre of members and sent out invitations to the military personnel first. Quality was given priority to quantity. In the first years, the principle was to admit “able and good” members, but it proved to be difficult to interest a great number of civilians, the order was changed to “good and able” because it had been discovered that many applicants just became members to gain personal benefits and thus damaged the image of the party (Taylor 2015: 480). Later, a number of purges happened on all levels of the party to keep it as clean as possible. In 1977, at the time of the third party congress, there were 171,637 full members and 703,843 candidates. The membership of some 18.000 members and 181.500 candidates had been ended, because they had “lost contact with the part” (Trager and Scully 1977a: 837) or had ben charged of being corrupt.

The first congress of the party held in June 1971 was the beginning of drafting a new constitution: Ne Win stressed just two main points taken from the party’s philosophy: The “exploitation of man by man” or one national group by the other” had to be ended prohibited and the “birthrights of every citizen” had to be guaranteed. (Moscotti 1977:5). In a later comment, he said that the question of adopting a single- or a multi-party system was still open but that h preferred the former option. His main argument was that the funding of elections allow the rich to get their was after the elections, to the detriment of the peasants and workers.” (Taylor 2015: 384)

In September of that year, a 93-member commission was appointed to start the drafting process which was scheduled to take place in three stages in participation with the people and finished in August 1973. A commission working on the holding of a referendum was appointed on August and shortly later the date of the referendum was announced to take place between 15 and 31 December. The text was published for the published on 2 November and advanced voting stated a week later. On 3 January 1974, the Revolutionary Council announced that the referendum “had been adopted by the overwhelming majority of the people” and one day later – Independence Day – the Revolutionary Council declared that it had come into force (Moscotti 1977: 6-27). Some 1000plus prisoners, including three former ministers, who had been detained for “security reasons” were release on that day.¹³

The provisions for elections in the constitution were rather formal. The principles underlying the provisions were worded by the “Working People’s Daily”, the mouthpiece of the government this way:

- (1) To strengthen the idea that only people are the real owners of power.
- (2) To formulate a people’s system of administration of justice aimed at serving the interests of the people.
- (3) To abolish the bureaucratic system of administration.
- (4) To work for the benefit of the majority of people.
- (5) To formulate a direct democratic system of elections.
- (6) To keep people entrusted with power under checks.
- (7) To aim at unity and solidarity among nationalities.

For the working people managing their own affairs is natural and correct. That the working people shall rule is a historical necessity. (Moscotti 1977: 46)



Logo of the BSPP

12 *Twin City Sentinel* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina) 1.3.1963: 11. The new was commented in the headline of the article by the slogan: “Burmese Radicals Gain More Power”

13 *The Vancouver Sun* 4.1.1974: 35.

Elections were thus embedded in a grand scheme of including “the people “ in governing the country and thus replacing the bureaucratic and judicial institutions inherited from colonial times.

According to the official results, 89,5 of the of the people eligible to vote went to the polls.¹⁴ The percentage of “Aye votes” was 90,19%, but a remarkable difference could be noted between the results in the seven divisions of the Burmese heartland and the seven states provided in the constitution. The lowest percentage – 66,4% - was recorded in the Shan State, the highest – 97,44 – in the Magwe Division (Moscotte 1977: 72).

The first elections were held shortly after the referendum between 27 January and 10 February 1974. The new parliament was convened for the first time on 2 March 1974, the anniversary of the coup. In 1065 the day had been made a public holiday named “Peasants' Day”

4 The Failure of Establishing an Egalitarian Society

Chapter XI of the new constitution dealt with the “Electoral System” to be established. It consisted of provisions for a number of elected bodies listed in a bottom-up manner from the local to the state level in Article 175.

Constituencies for the election of people's representatives to the Pyithu Hluttaw and the People's Councils at different levels shall be formed as follows-

- (a) constituency for Ward or Village-tract People's Council;
- (b) constituency for Township People's Council;
- (c) constituency for State or Divisional People's Council;
- (d) constituency for the Pyithu Hluttaw.



A poster on Peasants' Day 1984 (Hans-Bernd Zöllner)

The *Pyithu Hluttaw* (People's Assembly) consisting of 451 members replaced the two chambers provided for by the 1947 constitution. The formation of the different “Councils” took up the idea of the previous period to establish some kind of grass roots democracy (see above section 10). All in all 252,446 positions had to be filled in (1974 Taylor 2015: 426). The number increased with the growth of population from 15 million in 1974 to 19 million in 1985 to make sure that the elected members to the *Hluttaw* and the Councils at least numerically represented the composition of the country's population. In theory, the candidates

must not be a party member (1974 Constitution: Article 177), but in practice most were, particularly in the Union parliament and the State and Division Councils. The voters had the choice to accept or reject the candidate proposed. A candidate was elected if he received more than 50% of the votes cast (1974 Constitution: Article 181 b).

The state's most powerful body, the Council of State composed by 28 members of the *Hluttaw*, half of them representing each the 14 Divisions and States, half other members elected plus the prime

¹⁴ This is the number given by Moscotti 1977: 72; according to another report, the percentage was 95,5% (Frasch 2001: 603).

minister¹⁵ (1974 Constitution: Article 64). The Council elected a Chairman who at the same time took over the post of president and a secretary. Ne Win who retained his post as chairman of the BSPP thus obtained two other posts that made him both the most powerful man in the country and its representative in the family of nations.

Such “Eastern or people’s” electoral system could be compared to the to that if the Soviet Union and its East European allies. According to Robert Taylor, the holding of elections like other measures aimed at engaging the masses politically could be mainly regarded as “means of socializing individuals into the norms of the state, of legitimizing its activities and of communicating policy and other data to the public.” (Taylor 1987: 327).

The situation might have been at least a bit different at the two lower levels of administration, townships and wards/villages. Much material is however not available for a differentiated assessment. To a great extent, this is due he rapid decline of western researchers entering the country. Shortly after the enactment of the new constitution, a member of the BSPP in Mandalay was asked by a foreign journalist about his expectations. He was reported to have answered:

Its to earls to tell. As usual, the machinery isn’t functioning. People used to have a joke about councils:. In a four years term they spend the first year sleeping, the second pretending to work, the third actually working, and the last year giving out bribes to get re-elected. Well, the new council is not as the old councils, we hope, but its certainly taking its time.¹⁶

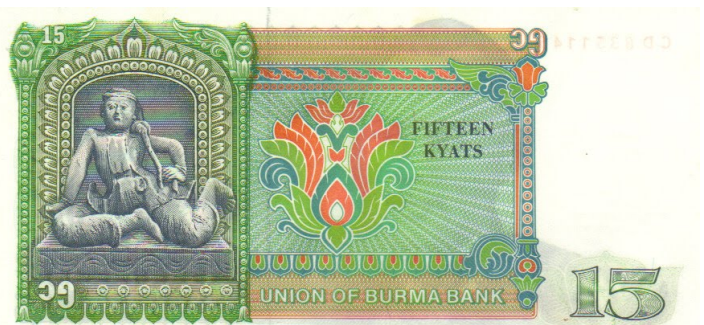
A study on the performance of the People’s Councils in the first years after 1974 based on Burma’s -state sponsored – newspapers published in 1977 (Moscott 1977:) suggest that this prediction was not far from what happened in the next years. The author concludes his survey:

The People’s Councils and related organs undoubtedly have some achievements to their credit so far. They have involved more people in political and administrative activity though essentially in carrying out the policy of the national leaders. [...] However, [...] it has not resulted in any real chance in the political power structure within Burma, (Moscotti 1977: 184)

The people’s councils on all levels had no legislative powers. The reservoir of local knowledge available at the lower levels of political administration could not be tapped and state policies not changed. Instead, conflicts with local state agencies happened. In other words: The people got no chance to participate in the “revolutionary process” that military had proclaimed to initiate in the final words of the proclamation of the “Burmese Way to Socialism” of 30 April 1962.

The Revolutionary Council has faith in the people and in their creative force. The Revolutionary Council believes that the people will, with an active awareness of their duties and responsibilities, play their part in full in the national revolutionary progressive movement and programme under the leadership of the Revolutionary Council. (BSPP Philosophy: 51-52)

The situation that all power rested with the state agencies that were controlled by the BSPP functionaries. The quantity of patty members and affiliates bodies like a youth organisation with more than one million members in 1985 (Silverstein 1986: 63), the quality of the members however was often disputed as the purges on the different levels of the party showed, most notably in 1977, when a number of high ranking people lost office (Trager/Scully 1978: 147-148).



15 The prime minister was elected by the Council of Ministers that was (s)elected by the Council of State and later confirmed by the *Hluttaw* (1974 Constitution, Article 82).

16 *The Guardian* (London) 20.4.1974: 11.

The general situation did not much change over the years. Party congresses were held from time to time at which failures of achieving the proclaimed aims of the economic plans were admitted in a matter-of-fact way and changes were announced. Further uneventful elections were held as prescribed by the constitution in a four year rhythm: and took place over two weeks 1-14 January 1978, 4-18 October 1981,¹⁷ and 6-20 October 1985. Voter turnout was always close to 90% (Frasch 2001: 603). I

In the end, the revolution proclaimed in 1962 failed in the course of a popular uprising in 1988. Most likely, the reasons for such failure were manifold. The idea to build up a new society by implementing a socialist economy did not work. Ironically, at the end of the socialist period, two denominations happened as at its beginning. In 1985 and 1987, high denominations were withdrawn from circulation and new banknotes were issued with rather odd values of Kyat 15, 25, 35 (1985/6) and 45 and 90 (1987). The latter figures were popularly referred to represent Ne Win's alleged personal "lucky number", the 9. Furthermore, in 1987 the country was recognised as a Least Developed Country (LDC), a status for which the government had applied to receive more financial assistance from international agencies. Both measures were quoted in three open letters to Ne Win written by Aung Gyi, a former member of the Revolutionary Council who had resigned in 1963 because of his disagreement with the council's economic policy.



The portrait shows Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the 1988 uprising against the military

For Aung San Suu Kyi, the economic misery was not the main reason for the uprising. In her famous essay "Freedom of Fear" written after having been awarded the Sakharov Prize by the European Parliament, she states: "But it was more than the difficulties of eking out a barely acceptable standard of living that had eroded the patience of a traditionally good-natured, quiescent people - it was also the humiliation of a way of life disfigured by corruption and fear. The students were

protesting [...] against the denial of their right to life by a totalitarian regime which deprived the present of meaningfulness and held out no hope for the future."

To lead a meaningful life in freedom, she advocated a "revolution of the spirit" without which "the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration."¹⁸ This idea is amazingly close to what Chit Hlaing remembers of having heard from Ne Win in his instructions for composing the BSPP's philosophy:

Before changing to socialist economy, we need to change ideas; systems of belief must be changed. To make socialism succeed, every one must work. Everybody must remember that he has to work. 'Where the water is deep, the lotus grows high.' In the same way, when the nation prospers, the individual also prospers. 'There must be no selfishness'. 'There must be no one starving'. (Chit Hlaing 2008: 139)

In his recollection on the failure of the revolution proclaimed in the 1960s written in 1990 he argues:

17 According to a newspaper report, the elections had been held a little bit to give the government the chance to prepare for the next four-year economic plan. Furthermore, Ne Win had declared on the fourth party congress in August to retire from the presidency. (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 16.10.1981: 4)
 18 Aung San Suu Kyi 1995: . (see also <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/freedom-from-fear-1990/>; accessed 18.2.2024).

Events have taken place. But whatever they were, although the leadership of the Myanma Socialist Lanzin¹⁹ Party declared its democratic principle with the motto 'From the People to the People' in the constitution, we find that it failed to practice that principle consistently and dutifully. This has led the party away from the people, getting further and further apart, and thus losing the respect and confidence of the people. That is how it was forced to get off the political stage. (Chit Haling 2008: 160)

Chit Hlaing further rejected the popular claims that the socialist period had been taken place under a military government. The problem had been that under the rule of the BSPP a “one-party dictatorship” had been established. It seems however clear that the backbone of the party was composed of military and ex-military officers – the most prominent of the being Ne Win.

This assumption can be connected to the aim of the party to “revolutionise” the structure of the bureaucratic system installed by the British.. Many of the foreign staff members – including secretaries – had already left the country after Burma’s decision not to become a member of the Commonwealth. The core of the new administration built up by the Revolutionary Council and after 1974 under the BSPP government transformed “nearly the entire human and institutional heritage from the colonial ICS/ BCS [*Indian/Burma Civil Service*; hbz] was largely lost.” (Nakanishi 2013: 167) A great number of administrative posts were taken by ex-soldiers after an administration reform had been taking place in 1972 that marked the final stage of the transfer of power from a military council to a – nominally – civilian government: This change was symbolised by the change of clothes and names after the example of Aung San and other members of the early Burmese army in and after 1945. This practice took place again after the enactment of the country’s third constitution in 2008.

During the next years, many officers and retired officers were transferred to civilian administrative posts. According to the research of Yoshiko Nakanishi, at least 1,743 of such transfers took place between 1972 and 1988, most of them (45,6%) to People’s Councils at region/state and township levels (Nakanishi 2013: 267; 269). As a consequence, ex-soldiers still loyal to Ne Win became the backbone of the administration. The same can be said in view of the composition of the BSPP membership and the parliament.

Finally, it was the politician Ne Win who initiated the end of the one-party rule as a reaction to the protests started by students in March 1988 and – after having been oppressed – resumed in June.. He surprised the party members and the listeners to the broadcast of the meeting on his opening speech at the extraordinary party-congress on 23 July 1988 with a proposal of how to react to the public protests.

I believe the 1988 March and June bloodshed and disturbances were meant as moves by those who took part in the disturbances and those behind them to show lack of confidence in the Government and the Party leading the Government. It is necessary to assess whether among the people of the entire country, a majority is behind those lacking confidence or a minority. As I believe that holding a national referendum on what they wish - a one-party system or a multi-party system - would bring out the answer, I am asking the Party Congress to hold a referendum.²⁰

This was a call to let the people decide about the future of the country’s one party system. Ne Win had realised that “the people” might have been dissatisfied with the how the party had tried to change their minds and lives. His proposal was in accordance with Article 194 of the Constitution of 1974 and with Article 205 that authorised the party to submit “suggestions and advice to organs of state power.”

19 “Lanzin” meaning ‘programme’ was the name under which the BSPP was referred to colloquially.

20 For the full text of the speech as printed in the Burmese newspaper see <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-press-summary-vol-ii-no-7-july-1988> (accessed 22.5.2020). For a detailed account what is known about the party congress see Taylor 2025: 522-528.

He further asked the congress to permit him to resign from his post as party chairman and as a party member for the reason that I am “not totally free from responsibility even if indirectly for the sad events that took place in March and June and because I am advancing in age.”

One can connect Ne Win’s speech to the notion of impermanence as one of the Buddhist principals governing both private and political matters. Already in 1981 at the Fourth Party Congress of the BSPP in a speech announcing his imminent resignation from the post as president. He then talked about the history of the country and told the audience to be confident in the view of the future, but not over-confident. Mistakes had been made and corrected because lessons had been learned. This is in line with the statements at the end of the BSPP philosophy:

Members of our Party must not [...] take the ideology and the programmes of the Party to be final and complete beyond the need of amendment or alteration. The programmes of our Party are mere relative truths. Nevertheless, for a man to work during his life-time for the benefit of fellow-citizens for that of the majority and for that of man in brotherhood is indeed a beatitude. (BSPP 1963: 39)

However the party congress did not follow Ne Win’s proposal of holding a referendum.²¹ The decision might be seen as one reason for the escalation of the uprising to which Ne Win in his speech contributed when he confirmed that the military shoot at demonstrators if necessary. Until his exit from his last political office, he still was the military leader. And it was this role that was and is remembered first by most people inside and outside Myanmar until today.

5 Transition to a New Era of Military Dominated Politics

The speech of Ne Win in which he proposed a referendum on the question of maintaining the one-party system or change it, was his last one to be broadcast to the public and his farewell message. What followed was a violent and volatile period of almost two months at the end of which the armed forces led by Saw Maung, a general who had not received much public attention before staged a coup and thus ended the “Burmese Way of Socialism”.

The student led protests increased after Ne Win’s resignation. Sein Lwin, a former general and deputy secretary of the BSPP since 1981 was appointed party chairman and president. He was called “butcher of Rangoon” because of his role in the suppression of the popular unrest in June 1988. He imposed martial law in the capital on 3 August, but demonstrations continued highlighted by the announcement of a countrywide strike on 8 August 1988 known as the “Four Eight Day”. The army shot at protestors, the public administration started to break down. Sein Lwin stepped down and was replaced by civilian Maung Maung, a lawyer and writer, He lifted martial law and tried to pacify the masses by initiating political change along the lines proposed by Ne Win. In early September, the BSPP began preparing for multi-party elections.

Besides the student leaders, a number of former officers of the military who had fallen out with Ne Win as well as Nu became active politically. Nu proclaimed that he was still the legitimated democratically elected leader of the country and formed a parallel government. This somehow nostalgic attempt to connect himself to his forced exit as prime minister 26 years ago did not win support.

More importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung San’s daughter, who had come to Burma to see after her ailing mother, entered the political scene on the request of the students and friends. She galvanised the people at a rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda on 24 August 1988 attended by almost half a million people and became the main leader of the “democracy movement” that demanded the step-down of the government to be replaced by an interim government.²²

21 The Congress even did not allow Ne Win and other high ranking officials to resign, from their party posts because of their special importance and experience. However, the statute of the party provided a resignation because of old age and health.

22 For details see her speech given by her on 24 August: Aung San Suu Kyi 1995 ... elections democracy

Demonstrations continued and the administrations came to a still stand in many parts of the country. The number of casualties grew, some of them due to beheading of policemen and other government agents. A London newspaper summarised the mood of the protests: “Pepole want free elections, They want to choose their leaders.”²³

Ne Win's initiative, rejected by the party congress, was taken up shortly later by his successors. The first was civilian Maung Maung. He had succeeded Ex-general Sein Lwin who resigned 17 days after having been appointed head of the party and unsuccessfully tried to end the protests by declaring martial law. In his first address to the Burmese people broadcast over radio and TV on August 24, he announced that martial law had been lifted and then brought up the proposal to hold a referendum. He further stated that he and the BSPP's Executive Committee would resign if the Congress would not accept the proposal again (for the complete speech see Maung Maug 1999: 86-89). Two days later, Aung San Suu Kyi in her first speech to a large audience below Shwedagon Pagoda - and opposite of the *Pyithu Hluttaw* - rejected the proposal and called for the establishment of an interim government because the people had lost confidence "in the government of the day" and it "was quite clear that everybody wants a multi-party system of government". (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: 197).

On September 10, another extraordinary BSPP Congress decided to hold multi-party elections without holding a referendum before. One day later, parliament endorsed the decision. This however did not make an end to the popular unrest. Shortly later, the government appointed an election commission headed by an 84 year old civil servant who had been trained by the British.²⁴

The demonstrations continued and “chaos was near” according to foreign diplomats in the country.²⁵ A great number of new organisations were formed among them a kind of “parallel government” headed by Nu on 9 September.



Aung San Suu Kyi sits between Nu (left of her) and Tin Oo; Aung Gyi is missing (Source: The Gurdian)

On 13 September, the “Big Four” (Nu, Aung Gyi, Tin Oo, Aung San Suu Kyi) met after a meeting with the election commission and issued a common statement. (The above picture was taken on that day). According to a newspaper circulating in Rangoon not controlled by the government

they pleaded for patience and continued peaceful demonstrations. The people have no longer faith in the government nor the Election Commission. They urged the entire people including students to use moral courage as the true weapons and timidity and unflinchingly continue the general strikes and peaceful demonstrations till the ultimate goal is achieved.²⁶

On the advice of Ne Win, the army under the leadership of chief-commander and Defence Minister Saw Maung staged a coup on September 18 (Taylor 2015: 530). The country's name was reverted to

23 *The Observer* 14.8.1988: 23..

24 See <http://bios.myanmar-institut.org/2021/05/01/ba-htay-1906-2000/> for his biography.

25 *Baaxter Bulletin* 6.9.1988: 5.

26 <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-press-summary-volii-no-9-september-1988>: 98

the pre-1962 "Union of Burma". The army's socialist revolution that had commenced 26 years ago was thus officially declared to have come to an end. A new chapter was opened. Its core elements were summarised by the coup leader four days later:

As it has been stated in Declaration No. 1/88 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council of which I am the leader, steps have already commenced to implement the following measures immediately:

(a) Maintenance of law and order; prevailing peace and tranquillity in the country.

(b) Providing secure and smooth transportation.

(c) The State Law and Order Restoration Council will strive for the better conditions of food, clothing and shelter of the people and render necessary assistance to the private sector and the cooperatives to do so.

The fourth point of the first paragraph of our organization's Declaration No. 1/88 concerns the holding of multi party democracy general elections. Arrangements are being made to implement this measures as soon as possible. We wish to inform all citizens of the nation and all political parties and organizations which would be running for elections that work has commenced on carrying out the necessary measures. In this connection the political parties and organizations which would be running for elections ought to be making preparations to get themselves registered according to law.²⁷

With Declaration 1/88, a new chapter of Burma's constitutional history after independence commenced in which the holding of elections played a significant role at the end of a process of restoring law and order and re-organising the economy. The election commission already established continued its work. However, no distinctive programme was announced. Coup leader Saw Maung was a nobody. Inside and outside Burma it was argued that he was "under Ne Win's thumb",²⁸ but of course nobody could read the former or still acting strongman's mind.. Burma's future was open.

27 <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-press-summary-volii-no-9-september-1988> (accessed 22.5.2020).

28 *The Daily Telegraph* 21.9. 1988; 10.