

## Appendix: Resource Paper

Unpublished paper written by Dr Myint Cho especially for the Stage 6 History Unit, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Pro-democracy Movement in Burma. Copyright granted for classroom use in the context of teaching the unit of work.

### Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy movement in Burma

Modern Burma is a country with complex mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, social, political and historical characteristics. There are eight major ethnic nationalities in Burma. The demographically predominant ethno-linguistic group among the population of 50 million people is called Burman. Burman is the largest ethnic group (68%) who with the Mon (2%) inhabit the central and southeast plain regions. Other ethnic minorities such as Karen (7%), Arakanese or Rakhine (4%), Shan (9%), Chin, Kachin, Pa-O, Palaung, Wa, Karenni inhabit areas along the county's mountainous frontiers. Other groups include Bengali and Tamil (2%) and Chinese (3%). Over 100 distinct languages or dialects are spoken in Burma.

Theravada Buddhism (89% of the population) is the most widespread religion. Buddhists believers include not only Burmans, but also the Rakhine (Arakanese), Mon and Shan and significant numbers of Karen and other minority groups. Additional religions include Christianity (4%), particularly among Kachin, Karen and Karenni, and Islam (4%), particularly among Bengalis, as well as various animist cults. Boundaries between religious beliefs are not clearly defined, and many minority people, in particular, practise a mixture of traditions.

#### 1. Historical background

##### a. Pre-colonial Burma

Burma has experienced a long history of migration and conflict among various ethnic groups along fluid frontiers, which were finally fixed only during British imperial rule from the 1820s to 1948. The Mon, who entered from the east (Cambodia) in the sixth century BC, established the earliest civilisation in Burma. The Arkanese settled in the West, founding an independent kingdom in the fourth century AD. The Burman entered Burma from the north during the eighth and ninth centuries AD. During this same period the Shan migrated from Yunnan in China to the northeast hills. Numerous tribal groups settled in the mountains of the north and west. From the tenth through eighteenth centuries, a series of conflicts and wars took place between numerous ethnic groups, tribes and civilisations, with the Mon, Burman, Rakhine and Shan

competing for the upper hand in terms of territory and labour power throughout different periods.

In the eleventh century, the country was forcibly unified by the reign of Burman King Anawratha (1044-77), which coincides with the Norman conquest in Britain. Anawratha's encounter with Shin Arahana (from Sri Lanka) in 1056 supposedly resulted in the introduction of the Theravada Buddhist monastic ordination tradition to the Pagan dynasty by forcible appropriation from the Mon (Thahton) in the south, but it also marked the beginning of a new Theravada Buddhist monarchic system in Upper Burma. During the Pagan dynasty, the influx of Theravada Buddhism gave the country a cultural and belief system that has endured to the present day, which it shares with its neighbours in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The successive Pagan, Toungoo, Ava, and Konbaung Burmese dynasties carried Burmese arms and influence into the territories of her neighbours. These domestic and regional conflicts did not cease until the nineteenth century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British fought three wars against the Burman Empire and finally displaced it in 1886.

#### **b. Colonial Burma, 1886–1948**

The modern boundaries of Burma are the legacy of administrative convenience during the century of British colonial rule, which ended in 1948. Since 1886, there were periodic uprisings against the British rule, with that of the “1920 Rangoon University Strike”, the “1930–31 Peasant Uprising” and the “1938 Worker Uprising”, being the best known and the inspiration for the nationalist struggle against the British.

On the eve of the Second World War, the Japanese secretly promised to help Burma recover its freedom by training 30 Burmans who then formed the nucleus of a national army led by General Aung San, father of Aung San Suu Kyi. During the war, the Japanese drove the British out of Burma and governed the country directly under military authority until August 1, 1943, when it granted independence under its protection. The Burmese army grew over time and on March 27, 1945, revolted against its mentors and joined the Allies in the final drive to victory. Also, during the war period, the leaders of the new Burmese army, together with an underground civilian group, formed a broad anti-Japanese coalition called, at war's end, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). It and the army were led by Aung San.

After the war the British re-entered Burma with their so-called “White Paper”, calling for economic recovery as the first priority and the suspension of progress toward self-government and independence until the economic objectives were well under way. The AFPFL rejected the priorities and the timetable and called for independence for Burma within one year from January 31, 1947. The ethnic peoples, particularly the Karen, continued to believe that whatever the state of British negotiations with the AFPFL, they still had the ultimate right of self-determination—independence. After a series of negotiations with ethnic peoples, Aung San was able to win the trust of the ethnic nationalities at the Panglong Conference in February 1947 and unified the ethnic peoples with the Burmans. Together, all the nationalities

participating in the conference demanded independence from the British. The Panglong Agreement is very significant in Burma's history as it paved the way to Burma's unity and independence in January 1948. On July 19, 1947 on the eve of Burma's independence, Aung San, the architect of modern Burma, and six members of his cabinet were assassinated while the constituent assembly was in recess. He was then thirty-two years old. Following approval of the constitution by the British parliament, and the signing of a defence agreement, Burma became free on January 4, 1948.

### **c. Post-independent Burma**

Following independence from Britain on January 4, 1948, Burma practised a short-lived parliamentary democracy. However, within three months after independence, the Communists went into revolt and took two battalions of the army with them. This was followed by multiple insurgencies that caused the country's near collapse. General Ne Win, claiming that the nation was about to break up, staged a coup in 1962 and instituted a system of governance that ensured the military remains supreme in every aspect of life.

Since an army coup overthrew the democratically elected government and abandoned the constitution in 1962, Burma has been run by the military or military-dominated regimes led by General Ne Win. They have wrecked its economy and repressed its ethnically diverse peoples. During 26 years of General Ne Win's "Burmese Road to Socialism" (1962–88), the country, once the world's largest rice exporter, experienced steep economic decline, which left it by the late 1980s as one of the world's ten "least developed countries" (LDC), with a per capita income of less than US\$250. The dominating role of the military was assured by subjecting the people to brute force and introducing a pervasive system of surveillance, political imprisonment, the use of forced labour, extra-judicial killings, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, and forced relocation.

In August 1988, a massive and peaceful "people power" movement demanded an end to dictatorship. Monks, students and workers led non-violent demonstrations and general strikes nationwide calling for democratic reform. The army reacted fiercely to preserve its rule. In September of that year, the military, calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (then renamed the State Peace and Development Council in November 1997) staged a coup and in the process opened fire and killed thousands of unarmed democracy protesters. In order to decrease international attention and concern, the generals changed the country's official name in English to Myanmar, a transliteration of the country's Burmese language name, by decree and without public consultation in 1989. The names of several cities, rivers, and regions were similarly revised, for example, the capital Rangoon, to "Yangon". The Burmese democracy movement rejects these changes because such changes have been taken without the consent of its peoples. To pacify the people, the military held multi-party elections in May 1990 after severe restrictions on oppositions,

particularly the popular National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, were imposed. Aung San Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest during and after the elections for six years (from 1989 to 1995). Despite the imprisonment of most of its leaders and the junta's strong-arm tactics, the NLD managed to win 392 of 485 seats (over 80%). The military-backed National Unity Party (former BSPP) won only ten seats. The military refuses to honour the election result, and embarks on a campaign of terror against the NLD members, elected representatives and political parties.

The regime still refuses to transfer power to the NLD and to convene the Parliament elected in 1990. It also ignores NLD's call for meaningful dialogue to solve the political problem and to restore democracy in Burma. The military regime intensified repression on the elected members of parliament (MPs) particularly NLD MPs when the NLD and four ethnic political parties formed the "Committee Representing the People's Parliament (CRPP)" in September 1998, with the stated purpose of functioning on behalf of Parliament only until the Parliament is actually convened. Over 150 MPs and 300 NLD members were arbitrarily detained for months. However, Aung San Suu Kyi continues to be the symbol of non-violent struggle for democracy and has successfully united diverse voices calling for the restoration of democratic freedoms and human rights. The NLD, representing democratic choice and reconciliation, continues to advocate peaceful solutions and dialogue. The international community including the United Nations repeatedly call upon the military to enter into a substantive dialogue with the NLD and ethnic nationalities to solve the political conflict. The generals have consistently refused.

Today, human rights violations in Burma are still going on. Burma is one of the world's worst human rights violators and largest heroin producers. Two principal problems of Burma: lack of equality and self-determination of ethnic minorities and lack of democracy, have not been resolved yet. Burma is in the midst of a political, economic and social crisis, and it will be in a disaster if there is no political reform in the near future.

## 2. Rise of the military in Burma

### a. Parliamentary democracy

Following independence a number of problems, particularly administrative, economic and political problems, confronted the new government. Most of the experienced administrative officers of the civil police forces, the engineering service, and the frontier services left the Burmese public service, and were replaced by enthusiastic but relatively untrained Burmese officers. The massive loss of experienced and trained civil servants and military officers caused dislocations and insufficiency.

In politics, shortly before independence, the AFPFL coalition's incipient contradictions came to the surface. There were divisions in the AFPFL, which saw the Burma Communist Party expelled and the Socialists gain ascendancy. Two factions of communists split with the AFPFL and went first

into political opposition, then underground in open rebellion. They were joined by leftist leaders of the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO) and its groups of armed veterans. In addition, units of the Union Military Police, the First, Third, and Sixth Burma Rifles of the army, and individual soldiers of the other Burma Army units left the government's side to take up arms with the rebels. In early 1949, under the leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karen National Defense Organisation (KNDO), the latter a group of Karen ex-servicemen similar to the PVO, the Karen Rifles companies of the Burma Army mutinied. They opposed the Burman policy toward minority tribes and supported the establishment of an autonomous Karen state. In addition to the communists, the PVO, and the Karens, a number of other groups rebelled, including the Pa-os, the Mons, and a group of Pakistani and Burmese Muslims. The multiple insurgencies nearly caused the Union to collapse.

The Burma Army, riddled by defections and mutinies, was reduced to just over 1000 trained, disciplined men. But the Fourth Burma Rifles stood firm under the command of General Ne Win. The Chin and Kachin battalions also remained on the government side, and other battalions composed of Shans, Karennis, Lahus, and Gurkas were quickly recruited and formed into units to fight on the government side. In anticipation of the crisis, the government had been organising auxiliary forces. These included the Union Auxiliary Force and fifty-two companies of territorials, or local militia. In addition, the old Frontier Forces and Military Police were combined into the new Union Military Police, given paramilitary capabilities, and brought under the army's command. The navy remained loyal and provided the government with riverine mobility. The air force provided the government with air cover, reconnaissance, and transport service to isolated government strongholds. The rallying of these forces to the government's side, material aid from Britain and India, and the fact that the insurgents were unable to combine or even coordinate their armed units, proved decisive.

The end of 1949 assured the survival of the government. Premier U Nu's leadership, the reorganisation of the army and the cooperation of foreign states in denying the insurgents arms and support, kept the government in power. The government gradually recovered control of people and territory, even though it was unable to bring the wars to an end.

In the early 1950s the army took this opportunity to undergo further expansion and reorganisation. From about six loyal battalions in 1949 the army grew to forty-one battalions by 1953. It was subsequently regrouped into thirteen regiments of about four battalions each; individual regiments were territorially based and were made responsible for basic security in their assigned region. The rapid expansion was accomplished by raising many of the Union Auxiliary Forces to regular army status. The armed services were brought under a single chief of staff, General Ne Win.

Following basic reorganisation, the military opened its Defence Services Academy (DSA) to train officer cadets. The Defence Services Institute was created as a sort of military post exchange or commissary. Consumer items were procured through the institute and sold at discount prices to military

personnel and dependents. As the institute's activity expanded, it provided the military, particularly the army, with experience in the management of commercial activities, and provided the army with a source of funds and financially rewarding posts, relatively independent of the national budget.

During the 1950s the army had come to regard the Israelis as a model worthy of emulation. For several reasons the Israelis were appropriate mentors of the Burmese. Both had experienced British rule and retained a British flavour in their insignia, ranks, and forms of military behaviour and organisation. Both admired the efficiency and devotion of the British model officer. Both armies were committed to the socialist development efforts of their respective governments. And finally, the military was central to the very survival of each of the two nations, in the face of armed threats from abroad and within.

(Israel assisted Burma in training for military aircraft operation and maintenance, and military hospital staffing. It also contributed advisers to Burma for the development of civilian programs in agriculture, irrigation, marketing, management, and economic planning. Britain and Israel have not been the only two nations to assist Burma. Exchanges of military visits with Yugoslavia in 1955 led to gifts of a battery of 76 mm cannon and light weapons for one brigade of the Burma Army. Visits by General Ne Win to China netted information and guidance but not substantial military aid. In later years the United States contributed small arms, vehicles, and other material.)

U Nu and AFPFL leaders had been deeply committed to a socialist form of government for many years, particularly because of idealism born of their student days, partly because of the socialist inspired British Labour Party had granted independence to Burma, and partly because socialism symbolised opposition to colonialism and exploitative capitalism. The U Nu government attempted to implement a socialist program. Elaborate economic plan were drawn up, a few industries were nationalised, and a mild land reform program was implemented. But all these projects were thwarted by lack of trained planners, experienced administrators, and money. Burma's treasury depended heavily on revenues from rice sales abroad. The end of the economic boom brought about by the Korean War caused falling rice prices and loss of revenues. In addition, military expenses incurred during the insurgency threat and the financing of the growth and rearming of the military establishment were a drag on the treasury.

Because the government was not able to move quickly enough towards a welfare state, radical opposition socialist leaders gained a wide following among the lower classes. The Burma Workers and Peasants Party and the National Unity Front cut into the AFPFL's electoral support in 1956. Electoral weakness, charges by the opposition of corruption, favouritism, and inefficiency, accusation by minority ethnic state leaders that the AFPFL was trying to "Burmanise" the government and exclude minorities, and failure to achieve its economic goals eventually led to a split within AFPFL leadership. Government revenues were further decreased by a period of poor harvests. The uncertainty of civil service officers about the future course of the government's economic policy further aggravated the mood. Finally, instead of

maintaining vigorous opposition toward the persistent communist and ethnic guerrillas, Prime Minister U Nu initiated an amnesty policy. He proposed that guerrilla organisations be legalised and allowed to contest the upcoming elections, and to join the Burma Army, in opposition to the views of the army leaders. By mid-1958 the trends combined to create crisis. The government was deadlocked. No one seemed capable of decisive or constructive action. At this juncture U Nu asked General Ne Win to temporarily replace him as prime minister.

### **b. The Military Caretaker Government**

It was with some enthusiasm, therefore, that all factions of the AFPFL leadership accepted General Ne Win's interim leadership. Public response was favourable. Only among minority group leaders and communists was opposition widespread, for their activities were in active conflict with the army's devotion to national unity under Burman socialist leadership.

Upon assuming office after his election by Parliament in late 1958, General Ne Win made several changes. He reduced the number of cabinet ministers from a cumbersome thirty to a more workable fourteen—all civilians. He dismissed thirty-eight politically appointed parliamentary secretaries and reassigned eighteen top civil service officers who administered the ministries and departments of government. Below the top level the government assumed a more military coloration. Military men guided six of the thirty ministries. Twenty key economic boards, commissions, and government enterprises came under military leadership. One hundred forty-four military officers in all were appointed to administrative posts. They brought to their jobs a stress on clear chains of command, discipline, rapid communications, and honesty. The effective decision making centre of government moved from the cabinet to the Military Staff Council composed of military officers in administrative posts. General Ne Win, Brigadier Aung Gyi, Colonel Maung Maung, and about twenty army colonels who had begun their careers in the Burma Independence Army in 1941–42 in turn dominated the council. Since then, although the constitution was scrupulously observed and the civilian apparatus of government continued to function, the army assumed effective political control of Burma.

The military's Defense Services Institute enjoyed rapid expansion. It first undertook joint ventures with American, Israeli, Japanese, and Singapore companies. It then moved into such areas as shipping, fishing, exporting, banking, bus transportation, hotels and restaurants, electronics products assembling, and coal marketing. The institute often accepted foreign investment to enable it to purchase controlling stock in existing private enterprises. By the end of 1960, with over twenty-five major firms, capitalised at a total of \$2 billion, under its control, the institute was one of the nation's most powerful economic organisations. Under the management of Brigadier Aung Gyi, General Ne Win's unofficial deputy, the institute established itself as an efficient, effective organisation utilising modern management and financial practices, often in contrast with older private and civilian government owned enterprises. This successful experience later gave the army leaders

confidence to undertake more sweeping management of Burma's economic life.

### **c. The Military vs New Democratic Government**

Finally, in early 1960 the military leaders fulfilled their pledge to hold an election. U Nu's faction won overwhelmingly, in what was regarded as Burma's cleanest election. From April 1960, when U Nu resumed the nation's leadership, he devoted his administration to strengthening democracy. But his announcement that he would leave politics when his term ended, ignited a split in his party and its public struggle undermined popular support; the people saw the politics of 1958 about to repeat themselves. Moreover, U Nu criticised the army for its abrasive treatment of Shan chiefs during counter insurgency manoeuvres on Shan soil. He also opposed two army proposals: the expansion of the National Defense College and the creation of a central intelligence organisation. The police were removed from army jurisdiction and a new state economic development corporation was created to take over some of the economic activities performed by the Defense Services Institute. Officers serving as economic administrators were told to resign their commissions in mid-1961. Political factionalism was reflected in the military. Officers disagreed on how active a role they should play in economic and political administration, and in development planning and execution. Not a few officers were reluctant to surrender power to U Nu's civilian ministers. Either they had little confidence in the ability of civilians or they had acquired a taste for political power and the personal economic benefits that accompanied it. Accordingly, the general atmosphere of fear imposed by the domineering attitude of the military. U Nu also sought to find a permanent solution to the lingering insurgencies and the threat to the nation posed by a faction within the Shan State who wanted to implement the right to secession. U Nu called a meeting of all minority leaders for February 1962 to find a solution for their grievances through peaceful and frank discussion. But before he could announce his own recommendations for a solution, the military led by General Ne Win seized power on 2 March 1962 and has remained in power ever since.

### **d. Military Government**

General Ne Win justified the seizure of power on three grounds: fear that U Nu would permit the secession of the Shan State that will lead to disintegration of the nation; the worsening economic conditions and the failure of the constitutional government to transform the promise of socialism into reality. The jargon of Communism was also used to justify the army taking over and staying in power indefinitely. In fact, the real intention is to control every aspect of Burma's political, economic and administrative life.

### **e. The Burmese Way to Socialism**

After the coup, General Ne Win suspended the constitution and instituted instead the "Burmese Way to Socialism", a mixture of Utopian Marxism and Buddhism, which brought the economy under total state (army) control. The frontier states were placed under direct government administration. In 1974 the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma was established with a new

constitution. The President as well as head of the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), Burma's only officially recognised political party, Ne Win declared, "Our Union is just one homogenous whole".

*Under the totalitarian socialism, official policies with little relevance to actual needs had placed Burma in an economic and administrative limbo where government bribery and evasion of regulations were the indispensable lubricant to keep the wheels of every day life turning. But through the years of moral decay and material decline there has survived a vision of a society in which the people and the leadership could unite in principled efforts to achieve prosperity and security. In 1988 the movement for democracy gave rise to the hope that the vision might become reality. At its most basic and immediate level, liberal democracy would mean in institutional terms a representative government appointed for a constitutionally limited term through free and fair elections. By exercising responsibly their right to choose their own leaders the Burmese hope to make an effective start at reversing the process of decline. They have countered the propagandist doctrine that democracy is unsuited to their cultural norms by examining traditional theories of government. Aung San Suu Kyi, in *Freedom from Fear*, Penguin, Revised Edition, 1995, page 169.*

In August and September 1988, a massive and peaceful "people power" movement demanded an end to dictatorship. It responded by a brutal crackdown. On 18 September 1988, a newly named junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) seized power. Crowds of peaceful protesters were machine-gunned by troops; thousands died. Since then the military under the names of SLORC and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has been ruling the country with terror. Although the military held a general election in May 1990, it still refuses to recognise the election results where Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) party won a landslide victory and military-backed party won only ten parliamentary seats.

#### **f. Burmese Way to Democracy: "Disciplined Democracy"**

In a calculated effort to avoid the transfer of power to a democratically elected government, the military convened a National Convention in January 1993, intending to fully navigate the constitutional drafting process. More than 600 out of total 702 delegates were handpicked by the regime. Only 99 members of parliament (MPs) out of 485 were entitled to participate in the National Convention, created to prepare basic elements for the drafting of a new constitution. The military is seeking to emulate Indonesian army (ABRI)'s political role in Suharto's "New Order" by ensuring that its influence is entrenched in the new constitution currently being drawn up by the National Convention. On 15 September 1993, the military created the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the army-backed "social movement", to function as the Burmese equivalent of Golkar, the Indonesian governing

party, which regularly triumphed at polls during Indonesia's five-yearly "festivals of democracy".

The real aim of the convention is to maintain the participation of the armed forces in a leading role in the future political life of the Burmese state. Section (1) (f) of National Convention Procedural Code (1993) provides for the participation of the military in a leading role in national politics in the future state as a principle upon which the drafting of a future constitution must be founded. The existence of these provisions means that free debate on the cause of civil war, human rights violations, equal rights for ethnic nationalities, the economic situation, the results of the 1990 election and the transfer of political power have been effectively eliminated from the political agenda. The future president must have long military service, and 25% of the seats in each house of the legislature must be reserved for the armed forces.

#### **g. Military's vision**

The military in Burma has always believed that without strong central control, the nation will disintegrate. This has been expressed by General Ne Win's Revolutionary Council (RC) in 1962, The Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1974, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. The key political platform of the Burmese military, therefore, has been the prevention of the disintegration of the nation, the solidarity of the Burmese union, and the safeguarding of Burma's sovereignty. The military views its task as one of the moulding Burma's "divisive" multi-ethnic cultures into a single "National" identity. To achieve this aim, the Burmese military believes that it is essential for it to control every aspect of Burma's political, administrative and economic life. All citizens must conform to the military's vision of "National Unity". No dissent or aberration is tolerated. In order to achieve "National Unity", the military therefore, justifies using all necessary instruments of intimidation and coercion including force.

