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BURMA'S COMMUNISTS

BY VIRGINIA THOMPSON

EVER SINCE BURMA ATTAINED independence last January 4 fragmentary reports of violence, or threats of violence, by and towards Communists have emanated from Rangoon. An Associated Press dispatch of March 11 announced the seizure at long last of Thakin Soe, leader of the Red Flag, or outlawed Communist Party of Burma. A dispatch of March 28 stated that the government had unsuccessfully attempted to arrest Thakin Than Tun and other leaders of the White Flag, or Burma Communist Party. Twice during the first week of April Premier Thakin Nu warned the Burmese that they could not remain neutral on the issue of communism, which he described as "the dangerous threat of those seeking violence." Fighting between "communist rebels in scattered areas" and government forces has been reported subsequently, as well as the assassination of individuals so widely divergent in origin as peasant organizers and the grandson of Burma's last reigning king. Although the whole picture is by no means yet clear, it is apparent that the issue has now been openly joined between the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which dominates the government of Burma, and its erstwhile allies—the mutually hostile and more radical communist parties.

Areas of Rivalry

The battle has opened along several fronts of which all but one is of long, though covert, standing. For almost two years rivalry for the leadership of labor, peasant, and student organizations has been growing increasingly acute. A more recent strategy, however, has been the communist attempt to cause a rift within the ranks of the AFPFL. Although they were successful to the extent of forcing the resignation from the Cabinet on January 14 of the wealthy industrialist, Henzada U Mya, following passage of a communist-sponsored measure forbidding cabinet ministers or their families to engage in private trading, this appears to be an isolated victory. More important was the split officially effected a few days later in the youth movement. Despite a misleading nomenclature the newly formed and impeccably patriotic-sounding Aung San League is reportedly led by communist dissidents from the People's Volunteer Organization, whereas its rival, the Marxist League, is sponsored by the socialist element within the AFPFL. Since the traditional conservative politicians

have been eliminated from the current Burmese political scene and a new rightist opposition has not yet crystallized, the present struggle in the newest-born Asiatic state is clearly between the two leftist nationalist groups which led the independence struggle against both the Japanese and the British.

On the eve of World War II Burmese communism was born of a widespread nationalist resentment of the domination of Burma's economy by foreigners, chiefly British and Indian. The party's prewar numerical strength was never publicized because at that time it was an illegal body working perforce underground. Its first propagators were a few students of Rangoon University who organized some of the peasantry in central Burma. Many of these students were also leaders of the radical and highly nationalistic Thakin Party, behind whose facade nascent communism developed.

All the Thakins, who subsequently became the outstanding political figures of contemporary Burma, were agreed on the primary importance of ousting the British, although they temporarily differed as to whether or not cooperation with Japan was an effective means of achieving that end. By late 1944, however, most of them, convinced that the "independence" granted to Burma by Japan was spurious, had formed an underground resistance movement (the AFPFL) under the leadership of General Aung San, one of the "Thirty Heroes" trained by the Japanese to help them in the 1942 invasion of Burma. The Communists, led by Than Tun, Thein Pe, and Soe, members of the Thakin Party, were the best organized and most aggressive element within the AFPFL. Their policy statement, issued on July 20, 1945—six weeks after Rangoon's liberation—was virtually identical with that of their nationalist-socialist colleagues within the League, namely, political and economic independence and a nationalized economy. In the rural districts, where the Communists worked principally, few of the peasantry differentiated between them and other members of the League. Little attempt was then made to draw any clear-cut line or to propagate straight Marxist doctrines. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, communism was sweeping forward on the tide of nationalist sentiment.

To the Burmese Communists belongs the credit for being the first group in the whole region, with the exception of the Philippines, to attempt an organization of the peasantry. Whereas all nationalists in Southeast Asia have long recognized the precarious and backward living conditions of the rural peoples, who form the

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great bulk of the region's population, the Burmese Communists had the imagination to make their major appeal to the peasantry. In Burma they were aided by the fact that, for the most part, it was to non-agriculturist and alien landlords—chiefly Indian Chettyars—that the farmers were heavily indebted. Thus the no-rent and no-tax campaigns launched by the Communists, together with rice-looting and support for "patriotic" bandits, combined the glamor of nationalist-oriented resistance with immediate economic advantages.

This communist program seemed dangerous enough to the conservative elements within the AFPFL, led by the veteran politician Ba Pe and the well-known journalist Ba Choe. Opposition to it, however, became widespread when the Communists included a frontal attack on Buddhism. In December 1945 the Rangoon press protested so strongly against the anti-pongyi (monk) sentiments expressed in a book written by Thein Pe that the author was forced to apologize. Once again, with similarly adverse repercussions, did the Communists inspire such tactics. In August 1946 some communist students of Rangoon University placarded the sacred Shwedagon Pagoda with sentiments expressing irreverent disbelief in the omniscience of Buddha. Thereafter the Communists returned to the proved and more effective path of anti-imperialism and of advocating mass revolution. Meanwhile they consolidated their organization, which consisted of a governing politburo and a central committee composed of fourteen members who elected their successors. Larger conferences were attended by seventeen district chiefs whose functions were purely advisory.

Double Rift in Left Wing

First signs of a rift between the opposing forces within the AFPFL appeared at the All-Burma National Congress convened in January 1946. Ba Pe, in a speech made at one of its meetings, denounced Russian totalitarianism, for which he was taken to task and labeled a "tool of the imperialists" by Thakin Soe, the most uncompromising of the Communists. On the ground that Soe's attack constituted a threat to the internal unity of the AFPFL, he was asked by Than Tun, Thein Pe, and the Central Committee to substantiate his charges against Ba Pe. In a conference of communist leaders, held the following months, Soe forced the resignation of Than Tun from his office of chief of the Politburo and of Thein Pe as Party secretary. But eventually they were reinstated and Soe himself was removed from the Central Committee. Shortly thereafter he formed the Red Flag or Communist Party of Burma. Soe's defection, like that of many Burmese politicians, was motivated primarily by personal animosity. During the Japanese occupation Soe had had the arduous task of organizing the rural resistance movement, at the cost of great

personal discomfort, whereas Than Tun had enjoyed the eminence of cabinet office and Thein Pe had been sent to contact the Allied command in India.

This double rift—first within the AFPFL and then between the communist leaders—was deplored by all Burmese sincerely desiring to preserve a united national front in the independence struggle. Yet when Soe's party was outlawed by the government on July 10, 1946 and again in January 1947 (after the ban had been temporarily lifted in October) its rival, the Burma Communist Party, protested against this infringement of civil liberties and affirmed its faith in Soe's political integrity.

In the same month that Soe's party was first banned, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League began a series of moves foreshadowing the eventual expulsion of the Burma Communist Party which did not take place until November 1946. In September of that year the AFPFL had come to power as the dominant party in the coalition Executive Council on which the Communists had been allotted only one of the two seats they requested. Shortly thereafter, charges of disloyalty and lack of discipline were leveled at the BCP by the AFPFL, but in an atmosphere remarkable for its lack of vituperation. In rebuttal, the BCP, while admitting that it had and always would put its party interests above those of the League, asserted that the AFPFL was "kneeling down" to the British imperialist-capitalists by accepting office and by checking the strike movement that had been jointly sponsored by both groups in its initial phase. Fundamentally, the AFPFL leaders had become convinced that the BCP was out either to wreck or to assume complete control of the League. The Communists, for their part, could not forgive the AFPFL its greater popularity nor for having cut short the "revolution" by a willingness to achieve independence through diplomatic rather than violent means. In January 1947 Than Tun prophesied that the Burmese Mission to London would return empty-handed, and when this was disproved he concentrated on belittling the results achieved. The BCP, however, did not go so far as did Soe's party, the CPB, in boycotting the elections to the Constituent Assembly, in April, but it contested only twenty-five constituencies, exclusively in the areas where its hold was strongest—Pynmana, Toungoo, and Yamethin districts—the while continuing its revolutionary propaganda among the peasantry. This aggravated the severe revenue difficulties under which the AFPFL administration was already laboring, as well as the very serious crime situation.

Just as the AFPFL's handling of the strike situation in September-October 1946 had shown its strength vis-à-vis the Communists in relation to urban labor, so the elections six months later confirmed the League's country-wide popularity. Out of a total of 182 general seats the AFPFL won 172 and had, in addition, support

from among the communal groups. Moreover, the AFPFL was by then making such headway in organizing rival peasant unions in the districts as to threaten the Communists' hold on the rural areas. These factors combined to make the BCP seek readmission to the AFPFL fold—an eventuality made more likely by the resignation from the League in May of its strongest adversary, U Ba Pe. Then the assassinations of Aung San and six of his ministers, the following July, instigated by the rightist opposition to the League, brought the left-wing nationalists closer together. (It was even rumored that Thakin Soe's tearstained face had been seen among the mourners paying their respects to the murdered leaders lying in state.) Thakin Nu, upon whom Aung San's mantle had fallen, was known to favor such a rapprochement. Hopes of imminent unity ran high when Than Tun joined AFPFL leaders in a tour of the bandit-ridden districts in an anti-crime campaign during the late summer of 1947. Finally, on November 7, Thakin Nu publicly stated his intention of working towards such a union when he announced the imminent merger of the Socialist Party with the People's Volunteer Organization. Nevertheless, within three weeks these negotiations broke down. In announcing this failure on November 17, the League spokesman accused the BCP of actively trying to undermine public confidence in the AFPFL-negotiated Anglo-Burmese Treaty of October 1947 and of secretly hoarding weapons at the very time its leaders were verbally supporting the anti-crime campaign.

Inevitably basic differences among Burmese nationalists have come to the fore now that the great cohesive

force supplied by the common objective, Burma's independence, has been eliminated. Although the AFPFL claims, and is widely given credit for, the achievement of independence and although the conservatives are not at present dangerous to its continued tenure of power, the AFPFL cannot rest on its laurels. Only a temporary respite has been furnished by the arrest of Thakin Soe and by dissension within the White Flag communist ranks. Removal of Thakin Soe will now perhaps enable the government to control the separatist movements in Arakan, of which the most aggressive was apparently supported by the Red Flag Communists. The eclipse of Thein Pe, who is said to be in ill-health and to have been censured for some unauthorized statements he made to the press on matters of communist policy, has necessitated a shuffle in the high command of the Politburo.

On the other hand the Communists' proved organizing ability and their strong appeal to the peasantry and youth of the country should not be underestimated. In approaching the former the government's failure as yet to tackle successfully the serious agrarian problem is vulnerable to attack. And in propagandizing the youthful intelligentsia the Communists continue effectively to flog the dead horse of British imperialism, asserting that Britain has merely substituted an economic and military stranglehold for its formal renunciation of political sovereignty. If Thakin Nu carries out his plan to retire from politics this June and if Boh Let Ya, the heir apparent and an untried and inexperienced military leader, takes the helm, the moment may be propitious for an all-out communist drive for power.

TRUSTEESHIP IN MICRONESIA

BY LEONARD MASON

AT THE SAN FRANCISCO CONFERENCE in 1945, Commander Harold E. Stassen of the United States Delegation cautioned the assembled representatives of fifty nations that the Trusteeship Committee's Report, which comprised the foundation for an international trusteeship system, "is tonight only a series of words mimeographed on a piece of paper; if it is to become a great document the peoples of the world must breathe into it the life that only sincere adherence and support of these principles can give it." Three years have passed, and the trusteeship chapters in the United Nations

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Charter have become a great document. The United States has acquired an important stake in that venture by virtue of its contributions at San Francisco, its support in establishing the Trusteeship Council, and its role as the Administering Authority of the Trust Territory of the Pacific. Sufficient time has elapsed since the United States assumed the administration of the former Japanese mandated islands that an evaluation may be attempted of the degree to which the United States has discharged its trust relative to the welfare of Micronesians inhabiting that insular region.

Nations administering trust territories are committed under Article 76 of the United Nations Charter:

to promote the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the inhabitants of the trust territories, and their progressive development toward self-government or independence as may be appropriate to the particular circumstances