



Nationalism in British Colonial Burma

Cecil Hobbs

The Far Eastern Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 2. (Feb., 1947), pp. 113-121.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0363-6917%28194702%296%3A2%3C113%3ANIBCB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

The Far Eastern Quarterly is currently published by Association for Asian Studies.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/afas.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

NATIONALISM IN BRITISH COLONIAL BURMA

CECIL HOBBS

Library of Congress

FOUR FACTORS will influence British colonial policy in Burma: (1) public opinion in various countries of the world; (2) liberal thought in England itself; (3) Japan's occupation of Burma; and (4) the growth of nationalism within Burma.

Though all these factors are important, this discussion will be concerned with only the last, namely, Burmese nationalism and its development. Burmese nationalism is of fairly recent origin. After the annexation of Burma by the British in 1886, there was no nationalistic movement revolving about the dethroned Burmese king or the royal family. It was not until after the first World War that the Burmans showed any marked interest in national politics. In 1923, after certain reforms had been introduced, organizations of a nationalist character known as *wunthanu* were formed. The avowed purpose of these groups was to obtain a larger voice in local administration.

In any examination of nationalism in Burma, four factors must be taken into account: (1) the Burmese press, (2) the student element, (3) the *pongyis* or Buddhist monks, and (4) political parties and their leaders.

THE BURMESE PRESS

Although no vernacular newspaper in Burma has a paid circulation of more than 10,000 copies, the influence of the press — at least in urban centers — should not be underestimated. After the separation of Burma from India in 1937, many new newspapers and magazines appeared, and the total circulation of the press was greatly increased. The Riots Inquiry Commission Report (1939) lists the Burmese press as first of the four main influences which incited the race riots in 1938. The Emergency Press Act was enforced in Burma as it was in India. The nationalist press asserted that the Burmans' civil liberties had been infringed.

The British have had to undergo some scathing denunciation at the hands of certain Burmese writers whose articles appeared, among others, in the *Saithan*, *New Mandalay sun*, *The new light of Burma* and the *Dagon magazine*. Fully four years before the war, Japanese paid propaganda, bitterly attacking the British and Chinese, appeared frequently

in the Burmese vernacular press. The Dagon Press and the *Dagon magazine*, which denounced the British policy on the defense of Burma, had each to forfeit the security deposit of Rs. 500 on the ground that they had published inflammatory articles. *The new light of Burma*, a leading daily in Rangoon which was outspoken on the subject of independence, carried an editorial on October 31, 1940 with these words: "The time has arrived for Britain to make a clear declaration regarding her intention towards India and Burma. We are afraid that if Britain now goes on juggling with words, she will have cause to repent later. Britain is now standing before the bar of international justice."

THE STUDENT ELEMENT

The movement toward nationalism has kindled the imagination of Burmese youth, particularly the student element. A prominent nationalist group in the 1920's was a student group organized in protest against mission-operated and other government-aided schools. This movement brought about the so-called "national schools," at first independently organized and supported, but by the 1930's most of these schools had succumbed to the grant-in-aid system of education. In November 1920 the youthful Thakin group founded Burma National Day on which the youth of Burma were to celebrate Burmese freedom and indicate aspiration for greater freedom until Burma might be independent.

A strong student union organized the schools throughout the country to the point where a single order would send all students on strike, including those in secondary and elementary schools. As an organized body they defied the government and looked upon their union as an important unit in the nationalist movement of the country. Strikes and demonstrations were staged in conjunction with the designs of political leaders. In 1936 when the government did not meet the union's demands with reference to the government's educational policy and administration, a nationwide student strike was invoked. The president of the All Burma Students' Union was Ko Ba Sein, a young Thakin, who later held a post in the Japanese Burma government and recently was one of the members in the Burma delegation during the London talks in January 1947. Prior to the war, young men constituted a large percentage of the Dobama asiayone or Thakin party, one of the most militant nationalist parties in Burma. This political group worked hand in hand with the student element at the University.

The East Asia Youth League, an organization set up by the Japanese

in all occupied areas, had an active contingent in Burma. It is reported that this voluntary group consisted of 30,000 members with 270 branches throughout the country. The All Burma Students' Union probably provided able leadership for the league. Members of the league were concerned with all civic affairs.

THE PONGYIS OR BUDDHIST MONKS

The participation of the Buddhist clergy in politics is a notable feature in Burma. In 1921-22, when nationalism was in an embryonic stage, the clergy supported the establishment of the "national schools." In 1938 during the anti-Moslem riots, *pongyis* are reported actually to have led the rioters. Within the past twenty years Buddhism has become closely associated with nationalism.

Apart from the organized political parties, the Buddhist *pongyis* comprise the most important organized group in Burma. Although there is no so-called religious political party in Burma, each party has, however, an ecclesiastical caucus in which prominent politicians are influenced by the *pongyis*.

A large number of the young *pongyis* interested in politics are intensely opposed to British rule. They, therefore, actively supported the Japanese invasion. Monks with political interests that exceeded their monastic vows were employed by the Japanese to set up co-operating village units, so that hundreds were trained to be propaganda agents. In the spring of 1943 the Maha Sangha Athin (Supreme Priesthood Association) was formed with the avowed purpose of enlisting a united collaboration of the clergy of all Buddhist sects. On one occasion, U Ba Maw frankly asserted, "*Sanghas* can best serve the State in the field of propaganda. *Sanghas* make very good propagandists as all of us know."¹

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR LEADERS

Three factors characterize politics in Burma: the multiplicity of parties, the lack of a uniform program, and the desire for independence. No well-defined two-party system has ever developed in Burma. Parties easily and quickly divide or coalesce, so that frequent changes of ministry are common. Nationalist leaders have been relatively free from violence and terrorist practices, however, and political assassinations have not occurred in recent times.

¹ *Burma during the Japanese occupation* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1944), vol. 2, p. 142.

The three politicians who have been most prominent in modern Burma are U Ba Maw, U Saw, and U Aung San.

U Ba Maw was Premier at the time of the separation of Burma from India in 1937. He was later the Chief of State when Burma gained her "independence" under the Japanese. Being an ardent nationalist, U Ba Maw was bold in his statements. In a public meeting on June 9, 1940 he is reported, by the *Rangoon gazette*, to have declared that "it was immaterial whether Britain or Germany won the war, but when peace proposals were to be discussed, Burma's case should also be laid before the conference table along with those of other small countries." He was arrested two and one-half months later under the Defense of Burma Act. It is significant that one month after U Ba Maw's famous speech, Mr. Amery, the Secretary of State for India, announced in Parliament that at the close of the war Burma would be granted "a constitution which will enable her to take *at once* her due place as a fully self-governing and equal member of any Commonwealth or Federation of free nations that may be established as a result of the war."² This statement was confirmed by the Governor of Burma, with the result that a Burman, who was to give special attention to defense problems, was appointed as a special counselor, in return for which Burma pledged to give full co-operation during the war.

The most important succeeding ministry was that of U Saw. Prior to his election U Saw was looked upon as an extreme nationalist who had pro-Japanese leanings. One incident which was evidence of the growing national spirit in Burma, and which caused considerable uneasiness was a resolution passed by the House of Representatives during the U Saw regime stating its "regrets that the British Government have made Burma a participant in the war between Great Britain and Germany."³ It was U Saw who went to London in November of 1941 to demand that the third clause of the Atlantic Charter (right of self-determination of nations) be applied to Burma, only to have Prime Minister Churchill state within a few weeks that the Charter did not apply to regions in which the people owe allegiance to the British Crown. U Saw disappeared from public view soon after Pearl Harbor, having been interned by the British for the period of the war. He is now in Burmese politics again and was one of the Burmese delegates to the recent Anglo-Burmese talks in London.

In the fall of 1939 a bitter quarrel developed between Burmese national-

² *Rangoon gazette*, July 8, 1940.

³ U Ba Thi war resolution, moved in the Burma House of Representatives on Sept. 2, 1940 as recorded in the *Rangoon gazette weekly budget*, Sept. 2, 1940.

ists and Sir Archibald Cochrane who was then Governor. The incident is rather important. In answer to an inquiry about Burma's independence, the Governor stated in no uncertain terms that Britain would continue to develop a responsible government in Burma as an integral part of the Empire, but that London alone would determine the nature and the time of specific measures to be taken. This policy of the British afforded Japan excellent propaganda when she came to deal with the nationalist collaborators in Burma. Opposition to the British was mainly voiced by the militant nationalist political parties – the "Freedom Bloc" founded in early 1939 by U Ba Maw and the Myochit (Patriotic) party of U Saw.

After the British evacuation in 1942, nationalism found expression in a variety of ways: English was abolished as far as possible as the official language in favor of Burmese; a movement was launched to standardize the Burmese language, a measure long overdue; English names of streets, buildings, and parks in most cities and towns were given Burmese equivalents; statues and memorials to Burmese national heroes were erected; and the British blue ensign mounted with a peacock was replaced by a gold, green, and red flag with the peacock medallion.

When Japan came into Burma, she employed real strategy in offering Burma independence. The declaration had a profound psychological effect. For one thing, the various political parties were fused together on the question of independence. The Japanese promise of independence to Burma was a strategic move to guarantee Burmese co-operation during the war. The Burmese nationalists, however, soon made it clear to the Japanese that their desire for independence was genuine.

The ardent nationalist, U Ba Maw, could not be pushed aside to an unimportant role in the Japanese administration. Through his and other nationalists' efforts the Japanese authorities were forced to adopt a policy of conciliation, and steps were taken toward granting Burma her independence. The proclamation declaring Burma independent was issued on August 1, 1943 with U Ba Maw as the Naingngandaw Adipadi or Chief of State.

Since the war, the popular military and nationalist leader by the name of U Aung San has risen swiftly to a prominent position in Burmese politics. Prior to the war U Aung San was an ardent nationalist. While a student at University College in Rangoon he was a conspicuous leader in the activities of the All Burma Students' Union, being elected its president in 1937. In the next year he joined the Thakin party, the strongest nationalistic political party at that time. In 1939 he became secretary of

the Burma Freedom Bloc, a coalition of the Thakin, Sinyetha, and Myochit nationalist parties headed by U Ba Maw. In 1940 U Aung San led the Thakin party's delegation to the All-India Congress at Ramgarh, where he met India's nationalist leaders, Gandhi and Nehru.

Early in the war U Aung San went to Japan in search of support for Burma's freedom. Japanese authorities agreed to aid the freedom movement and to train Burmese youth to lead a Burmese liberation army. U Aung San and twenty-nine others, later referred to as the "Thirty Heroes," were selected for officer training by the Japanese in the country of Siam. U Aung San, at the age of 27, emerged as the leader of the Burma Independence Army. Early in 1943 General Aung San accompanied U Ba Maw as a member of a Burmese mission to Japan when Tojo made his promise of Burmese independence within one year. In the spring of 1943, when U Ba Maw formed the Independence Preparation Committee, U Aung San was appointed Minister of Defense. Within the two years between 1943 and 1945 U Aung San came to realize the Japanese brand of independence which had been granted to Burma was not the kind which Burma wanted. By March of 1945 Burmese forces under the leadership of General Aung San were fighting with the British against the Japanese for the liberation of Burma.

After the war, U Aung San was influential in forming the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League with the stated purpose of achieving complete Burmese independence. As the League President U Aung San became the official spokesman for a prominent nationalist body. Soon after Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith returned to Rangoon as Governor of Burma, U Aung San and other Burmese nationalist leaders expressed their desire for self-government. In the late autumn of 1945 U Aung San and the Governor became engaged in a controversy concerning the membership of the Executive Council and the demands made by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. At the request of the Governor, U Aung San submitted certain names for a new Executive Council. The list of eleven fervent nationalists was completely rejected. The negotiations between U Aung San and the Governor were broken off, leaving the League with no participating members in the Council. This action on the part of the Governor elevated U Aung San to new popularity in the eyes of the Burmans. U Aung San as head of the League continued to appeal to the Burmans and on various occasions made appeals for support from the governments of foreign countries.

On many occasions U Aung San attacked the British policy in Burma. In *The Burmese review* of May 20, 1946 (p. 10) he is reported to have made the following statement when delivering the Presidential address before the Supreme Council of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League on May 16th:

The main conclusion which we cannot but arrive at is that the Government is following a policy of drift. Why is it then that the Government is pursuing such a policy or lack of policy? Again we find two answers to this question. The first is that the Government must be quite ignorant of what is really happening. That the Government either here or in Britain is misinformed about the situation can be seen in some of their own statements and acts which are brought to our notice from time to time. . . . On the other hand, let me advise the British Government in all sincerity that any mistaken pose or attitude of false pride or prestige on their part taken on the strength of unreliable intelligence reports will not cow down the people but may very probably incense them to the very situation which neither the British Government nor we ourselves desire to see. . . . If the British Government's intentions towards Burma are sincere, why still have the unpopular unrepresentative, powerless, Executive Council of the Governor? Why so much delay in announcing a general election? . . . Our aspirations are clear and explicit. We want a National Government representing the principal political groups, vested with full powers in all matter, including Defense and External Affairs, before the election for the Constituent Assembly on the basis of universal adult franchise for everyone of eighteen can be held. We want a National Government because this is the only effective way in which the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Burma can be carried out.

After the resignation of Dorman-Smith, Sir Hubert Rance was appointed Governor of Burma. Within a few weeks U Aung San requested the new Governor to withdraw the Defense of Burma Act. This and other requests of the Burman nationalists were refused. Within one week the Rangoon police went out on strike, and by the latter part of September 1946 strikes were spreading elsewhere. On September 21 Governor Rance met with Burmese political leaders to decide upon the personnel of a new Council. U Aung San was given the portfolios of Defense and External Affairs, while five League members were granted seats on a Council consisting of eleven members in all. This was a victory for U Aung San, and the strikes soon ended in early October.

One of the last demands made by U Aung San was that the British leave Burma by the last day of January 1947. Apparently the matter was referred to London. By the middle of November Prime Minister Attlee announced in London that a Burman delegation would come to London for a conference regarding Burmese independence. The delegation to London was

headed by the youthful nationalist, U Aung San, and the talks opened on January 13, 1947.

The conversations between the British Cabinet and the Burmese delegates in London on the future of Burma have produced promising results. The resulting Anglo-Burmese pact contains these significant points: (1) a Constituent Assembly consisting only of Burma nationals will be elected in April of this year; (2) with the elections to the Constituent Assembly completed, the Governor will nominate one hundred members for the Legislative Council including representatives of all minorities; (3) the Interim Government, with about the same authority as the present Interim Government in India, will conduct the affairs of state under the emergency provisions of the Act of 1935 until the new constitution comes into force; (4) certain matters now formally reserved by the Governor of Burma — for example, matters concerning defense and foreign relations — will be brought before the Executive Council which is to be fully associated with the disposition of such matters; (5) arrangements are in the making whereby Burma will be represented abroad; these include the immediate appointment of a Burmese high commissioner in London; (6) whatever action is to be taken with reference to the people of the frontier areas it is to be in accordance with the desires of the people within these areas. Representatives of the frontier peoples — the Karens, Kachins, Chins, Shans, Lahus, and others — are to express their views at a forthcoming conference relative to the form of association they will have with the new government of Burma; (7) Burma will have the power to decide whether or not she prefers to remain within the British Commonwealth of Nations.

Burma is not yet independent but she is well on the road to that accomplishment. Imperialism, as practiced prior to the war, is bound to undergo a change. The position of the British in Burma, India, and other parts of the world within a few years will be considerably altered. Those who profit most from the fruits of imperialism will labor to check such a change, but the handwriting on the wall clearly indicates that Burma is to have her independence. U Aung San referred to the agreement as an interim one which the Burmese people have to ratify. He further pointed out that the agreement did not indicate that the British government would have to ratify the decisions of the forthcoming Constituent Assembly.

Even though it is difficult to calculate accurately the impact of nationalism in Burma, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that it is a movement which manifests the fond hope of the Burmese for independence. It is a force which to a marked degree has brought pressure to bear upon the

policy of Great Britain in the colony of Burma. One wonders what the turn of historical events would have been in Burma had Britain actually granted independence to Burma in 1940 instead of baiting her until the conclusion of the war.

The results of the recent London talks makes it appear that Britain is ready to fulfill the liberal view as expressed by a certain Englishman who held a number of high positions in the government of Burma:

Reconstruction is impossible without the active cooperation of the people, and that cannot be expected unless there is an appeal to them on the ground of nationalism. Nor will any principle less powerful than nationalism suffice to bring economic forces under social control.⁴ [And on another occasion he said:] Twenty years ago Britain threw away a chance to rebuild society in Burma. . . . If she aims merely to reconquer Burma and restore British rule, then however she may dope her conscience with professions of good-will, she will merely be re-establishing the way of those economic forces that have already proved too strong for her to cope with. If, on the other hand, she aims to make Burma capable of independence but tied by interest and affection to the British Commonwealth, she should declare now her willingness to recognize its independence with freedom of secession and express her readiness to treat with any government supported by the people. . . . and able to discharge the international obligations of a modern state.⁵

Democracy does stand a good chance of flourishing in the country of Burma if imperialism will give it an unthwarted opportunity. The road will be new and hazardous; the road of freedom and independence usually is.

⁴ *Pacific affairs*, 16 (Sept. 1943), 298.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300.