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"THE BURMESE WAY TO SOCIALISM"

FRED R. von der MEHDEN

The formulation and articulation of national ideologies has been a characteristic of newly developed countries throughout the world. These ideologies have been found to be useful tools to legitimize new regimes, set and emotionalize national goals and obtain or maintain political power. The last emphasis has been particularly important in Southeast Asia as exemplified by "Guided Democracy" in Indonesia, "Personalism" in South Viet Nam and, more recently, "The Burmese Way to Socialism" in Burma. In fact, all three of these factors would appear to have been present in the Burmese case.

On April 30, 1962 the Revolutionary Council of the military-led government of Burma announced a new national ideology and plan of action termed "The Burmese Way to Socialism." This proclamation was both the culmination of army efforts to formulate an ideology which would consolidate and lead the people and a factor which was to foster serious splits in the already shaken party structure. Both of these facets of the action of the Revolutionary Council (RC) are worth consideration.

No purely military leadership in Southeast Asia has made such great efforts in the ideological field. This can partially be explained by the ideological context of some of the rebellions which have faced the government over the past fifteen years, the backgrounds of a number of the more influential colonels and, finally, by the tendency in Burma to present problems in ideological terms. A military formed ideological platform was initially publicly articulated in 1958 at about the time of the first coup against the U Nu government, although this had been considered at an earlier conference of commanding officers held in 1956. The statement made at the Defense Services Conference in 1958 previewed in somewhat less Marxian tones the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (BWS) of 1962.

Man's endeavour to build a society set free at last from anxieties over food, clothing and shelter, and able to enjoy life's spiritual satisfactions as well, fully convinced of the sanctity, dignity and essential goodness of life, must proceed from the premise of a faith only in a politico-economic system based on the eternal principles of justice, liberty and equality. This is our belief. . . .¹

¹ Union of Burma, *The National Ideology and the Role of the Defense Services*, 1959, p. 5.

According to official military doctrine this was part of an ideological development process which had proceeded as follows:

B.I.A. and B.D.A. Period

Freedom—First
Freedom—Second
Freedom—Third

B.N.A. and P.F.B. Period

Freedom—First
Democracy—Second
Socialism—Third

1948-1955

Period of ideological gestation

1956-1957

Period of study and discussion

1958 Defense Services Conference

National Ideology restated and adopted

1959 The Role of the Defense Services formulated²

1962 "Burmese Way to Socialism"

This ideological development was somewhat more confused than the military would care to admit, particularly during the period of the first Caretaker Government (1958-1960) and immediately after the return of U Nu in April 1960. Differences of opinion were apparent on the major questions of the role of the military in a civilian led government and as to whether a civilian administration could fulfill the Defense Services' desire for unity and economic and social progress. Politically, they experimented with the idea of a multi-party parliamentary system with independents holding the balance, rather than the single ideological party proposed after the second coup. In the religious field attempts were made to use Burma's various faiths as a tool against communism. Efforts were also initiated to make the Constitution a base for the nation's ideology. None of these activities was very successful.

The period between the two military governments (April 1960—March 1962) was apparently one of considerable shifting and re-thinking within the officer corps. A number of officers retired or were shunted off to diplomatic posts overseas. There were also reports that officers with pro-Western and sectarian views had been displaced from positions of influence during this period. Hopes, admittedly slight, that U Nu had "learned his lesson" and would be a more efficient administrator and maintain domestic unity were damaged by a number of incidents. Unity in particular appeared to be a rather frail vessel in the hands of the Nu government as his own party split, ethnic groups appeared to be acquiring more autonomy and the establishment of the Buddhist State intensified religious antagonisms.

Thus, when the army did return, it displayed a shifted emphasis in ideology although in every case previous ideological foundations were evident. The difference was primarily a hardening of tone and position, a heightened nationalism, puritanism and emphasis on socialism and

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

unity. Superficial signs could be seen in the promised elimination of various American and British educational agencies, beauty contests, horse-racing, etc. The impact of Marxist thinking became readily apparent two months after the second coup with the publication of the "Burmese Way to Socialism."³

The primary goal affirmed by the Revolutionary Council statement was socialism, based on a socialist economy which is described as "the planned, proportional development of all the national productive forces." Specifically, the nationalization of "vital" means of production such as industrial and agricultural production and distribution, transportation and commodities; work according to one's abilities and pay according to quality and quantity; a reasonable closing of income gaps and the recognition of workers and peasants as the vanguard and custodian of the "Socialist Democratic State" (but with the acceptance of loyal middle strata). Politically, the document noted that parliamentary democracy had failed in Burma due to its "defects, weaknesses and loopholes, its abuses and the absence of a mature public opinion." Thus, "the nation's socialist aims cannot be achieved with any assurance by means of the form of Parliamentary Democracy that we have so far experienced."

To achieve the "Burmese Way to Socialism" the RC called for education, an end to fraudulent politics, the prevention of "parasitism," reform of the bureaucratic machinery, modernization of agriculture, help to industries compatible with national resources and the formation of mass and class organizations. Science in education was stressed. Just as the old parties feared the document's implications to party government, the traditionalist religious community could take little comfort in the words of the RC. Toleration of all religions, obvious demands that education be based on more secular values and attacks on "hypocritical religiosity" were all signs of a secular approach within the military. Later efforts were made to assuage the feelings of religious groups when a member of the Revolutionary Council stated that the "Burmese Way" was in accord with the principles of Buddhism.

Looking at the pattern of this vaguely worded document, it used more Marxian terminology than previous military pronouncements and was more vigorous in its attacks on the failures of parliamentary democracy as a system applicable to Burma. Finally, it was developed within the nationalistic context of the new army group's ideology. As that indefatigable commentator on Burma's problems, Dr. Ba Maw, noted, "It is also Burmese; it wants socialism, which is good, but it wants it in a Burmese form and in the Burmese way, which is better still."⁴

As matters developed, discussions over the "Burmese Way to Socialism" centered upon two issues, the social and economic ideology of the socialist system expounded by the military and the political means of implementing that system. There was almost no argument on the socialist program put

³ Union of Burma, *The Burmese Way to Socialism*, 1962.

⁴ *Nation* (Rangoon), May 2, 1962.

forth in the Manifesto. Vaguely enough written so as to appeal to most politicians, it also fit into the Marxian rhetoric of post-war Burmese socialist oratory. AFPFL leaders grumbled that their party had worked for the achievement of socialist society for at least a decade and supported army efforts in the same direction. Pyidaungsu Party officers in and out of jail also stated that what the military was proposing had long been party policy. The far left NUF and its allied parties were initially the most active supporters of the military although desirous of clarification of the particulars of the RC program. Other politicians in and out of party life were equally ready to applaud these socialist principles when called upon to do so. Even former Communist Party "General" Bo Aung Min publicly approved of the army position. Only communist insurgents in the field appeared to voice open opposition.

As has so often been true in Burma, it was not the oratory but its implementation which brought division and confusion. What worried party leaders in the AFPFL, Pyidaungsu Party and minority organizations was the attack on the parliamentary system found in the "Burmese Way to Socialism." General Ne Win did nothing to disabuse them of these fears when in a press conference a week later he asserted that "parliamentary democracy contains too many loopholes for abuse to be of value to a country like Burma." Also inherent in the army plan appeared to be the establishment of a single party to lead the country toward socialism and this, combined with the fulminations against parliamentary democracy, brought criticisms from leaders of almost all parties except the extreme left. It also caused crises within these parties as factions argued over the acceptance of the army position.

The AFPFL was the most articulate voice for parliamentary multi-party rule probably because the former ruling party, the Pyidaungsu, found its leadership still in detention. Soon after the military proclaimed its views, the AFPFL elite under U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein called for the maintenance of democratic principles and the holding of free elections. The major objections centered on the possible establishment of one-party rule under the aegis of the army. While supporting the military's socialist program and accepting Ne Win as Burma's national leader, the AFPFL executives warned that the army program could lead to Fascist or Communist dictatorships and that although not as efficient, a multi-party system was the best way to achieve socialism. These arguments were expressed largely in moral terms although obviously the AFPFL also feared the loss of power which might ensue in a large party. It was particularly against working with the leftist NUF, especially in a situation in which the NUF appeared to be on intimate terms with members of the ruling Revolutionary Council. The AFPFL was not able to maintain its disassociation with the one-party system without splits in its own ranks, however, and there were reports of divisions between the top leadership and second line leaders. Some of the latter desired to accept fully all facets of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." This position was particularly strong in Tenasserim where

the dissidents were led by AFPFL leader, U Thein Maung of Thaton. U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein met with various divisions of the party in an effort to shore up possible weak spots, while U Thein Maung also travelled in the districts in support of the RC plan. When unsuccessful in gaining his full loyalty, the AFPFL expelled U Thein Maung who was followed out of the party by the Moulmein and Thaton divisions.

The AFPFL was not the only organization to advocate a multi-party system for Burma. The Mon National Front, fearing that minorities would be "forgotten," would not entertain the idea of a one-party system. The Pyidaungsu Party leadership, decimated by arrests, also found the one-party system unappealing, although members of its allied organizations, the Union Labour Organization (ULO) and the All Burma Peasants Organization strongly supported the views of the military. The ULO itself split when the Rangoon branch dissolved itself in favor of the army and the Mandalay and other branches remained intact.

On the other hand, the extreme left, particularly the Peoples' Comrades Party, Peoples' Progressive Party and Burma Workers' Party initially applauded the policies of the military, objecting only that the "Burmese Way to Socialism" did not go far enough toward the principles of Marxist-Leninism and that the army method of obtaining power was objectionable. In fact, in the early days of military rule the united front NUF was the major supporter of the new ideology and reportedly was in position to give advice to members of the Revolutionary Council. However, even in the NUF the new ideology brought the estrangement of groups and individuals. These tensions were later to bring the expulsion of the All-Burma Karen Organization from the NUF on the basis that the former could not accept the "Burmese Way to Socialism."

A new element was introduced into this discourse in early July when the Revolutionary Council, unable to obtain sufficient support for a single united party, presented its plan for a cadre party organization, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSP, also called the Burmese Way to Socialism Party or BWS). The Constitution of the BSP⁵ provides for a "transitional Party" leading to a mass party based on democratic centralism. It "performs such basic party functions as recruiting nucleus personnel called cadres, and training and testing them by assigning duties, etc." In time this party is supposed to take over the duties of the RC in leading the way to a socialist ideology. The cadre party, as envisioned, provides for individual membership, a very tight code of discipline including provisions relating to factionalism, conflicts of interest, individual income, gifts, secrets and disciplinary action, demands upon members for acquiring knowledge, self-criticism and acceptance of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." The BSP is to be the vanguard for a mass party of the future but presently is essentially under the control of the Revolutionary Council, with top positions held by members of the military.

⁵ Union of Burma, *The Constitution of the Burma Socialist Programme Party*, 1962.

The initial reaction of the various parties was caution, followed by a general acceptance of the view that individual members could join the BSP. Arguing that the heavy burdens of membership in the cadre party precluded dual membership, most party leaders felt that members who joined the BSP should resign from their parent organizations. This position was put forward in the Pyidaungsu Party, All-Burma Peasant's Organization, Burma Workers' Party and AFPFL. As the Secretary-General of the Pyidaungsu Party put it, members "cannot serve two masters at the same time," a statement in the mouths of others that masked deteriorating relations between those who joined the BSP and those who remained in the old parties. There was also considerable discussion of dissolving the political parties and entering wholesale into the new cadre organization, but the older parties considered this action most precipitous.

Among the first to join the new cadre party was Thakin Kyaw Dun, Secretary-General of the Pyidaungsu, followed by other leaders from that party plus personnel from Kachin and Karen organizations, the AFPFL and sections of the NUF. The majority of the major party organizations' leadership remained with their executive committees. A variety of reasons, articulated and unarticulated, were apparent, including an unwillingness to work within the strict disciplinary code of the BSP, a conflict of interest due to business commitments, disagreements with the military over definitions of socialism, a fear of losing hard-won positions in the older parties and a fear of being dominated by the military.

The future of party relationships in Burma remains cloudy. In spite of continuing party support for the military regime's policies, tensions are bound to exist between members of the older party organizations and the new military sponsored organization. Soon after the founding of the BSP twenty-six former old-line party members that had entered the cadre party accused their former comrades of possible future combinations against the BSP. Leaders of the AFPFL, NUF and Pyidaungsu Party immediately rejoined that the statement was inaccurate and, in the words of U Kyaw Nyein of the AFPFL,

You must remember that before leaving their mother parties, these men had done their best to discredit them. What else could they do than to try to ingratiate themselves with the Revolutionary Council.⁶

The bitterness of the comments made at this time does not augur well for close cooperation between the new and the old. Party officials see in the BSP a major danger to former patterns of power and tend to look on defectors as opportunists. Nor does the history of past army efforts at political organization give the military much reason for optimism.

During the last coup the military organized a non-partisan National Solidarity Association (NSA) as a mass citizens' organization to encourage mass participation in government. It was not entirely successful and at

⁶ *Nation* (Rangoon), August 22, 1962.

the time of Nu's return was remoulded into a cadre organization. This is not to state that a similar future awaits the BSP, but the same obstacles remain in the general apathy of the masses and the opposition of Burma's major political parties.

So far, the "Burmese Way to Socialism" has not been outstandingly successful in achieving any of the three aforementioned goals of new national ideologies. Instead, it has discovered the dissension and obstacles normal to attempts to concretize and implement vague slogans.