

From Crown Colony to Myanmar: Dynamic of Domestic Politics, 1937 to 2008

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Abstract:

The history of the transition of Myanmar from a “Crown Colony” to an independent nation-state is undoubtedly a unique episode of the political transformation of Southeast Asia. Myanmar/Burma is one of the notable countries in Southeast Asia that has drawn the attention of scholars engaged in exploring the literary transition of nation-states from colonial to post-colonial democratic politics. While other countries in the region have democratized and prospered, Myanmar has gone through extreme military dictatorship for a considerable time. After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar has experienced more than 50 years under military rule in its 75-year history. This feature of domestic politics derives from a broad historical perspective.

The present thesis thus attempts to focus on the transition of the crown colony to Myanmar during the period between 1937 and 2008. This thesis is set up to explore the reasons, nature, and status quo of domestic political dynamics in Myanmar. It sheds light on several important political issues, namely leadership, political parties, constitutions, elections, the military, and ethnic minorities. The period of the thesis on domestic political dynamics in Myanmar is very important because, in 1937, Burma was separated from British India and placed under the direct control of the United Kingdom. All administrative ties with India were severed, and the colony was granted a new constitution. The year 2008 was named because it turned out to be a crucial moment for the new constitution to designate it as a 'roadmap towards democracy'. The new constitution seems to offer little hope for democratization in Myanmar. This constitution gave more power to the military to control the government.

The objective of this study's endeavor is to elucidate the characteristics of Myanmar's internal politics and examine the progression of its dynamics. In order to achieve this objective, an analysis has been conducted on the 2008 constitution and the ensuing internal political landscape of Myanmar, commencing with the period when it was under British colonial rule. The introductory chapter of the study has addressed the introduction, initial statement, and research material. The three aims of this study have significant importance in the first chapter. Subsequently, further efforts are undertaken in the second, third, fourth, and fifth iterations to substantiate the three hypotheses.

Myanmar is a nation with a rich historical legacy. The pre-British invasion political landscape of Burma may be characterized as a persistent conflict involving many indigenous factions, including the Mons or Talaings, Shans, and Arakannese, as well as tensions between the Burmese people and neighboring communities. The beginning of the nation-building process in Myanmar may be traced back to the eleventh century. During the period spanning the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the progenitors of the contemporary Burmese population established the Pagan Kingdom, characterized by notable advancements in agriculture, irrigation systems, cultural practices, and architectural achievements. During the early 19th century, Myanmar had a prominent position as one of the dominant nations in the Southeast Asian region. Myanmar was annexed by the British colonial force in 1885. Nevertheless, the governance of Myanmar by the British government was not implemented by direct authority, but rather through the intermediary influence exerted over local elites, including ethnic leaders who operated within the framework of British administration. In 1886, the British colonial administration included Burma as a colony of India, establishing Rangoon as its capital. Subsequently, Britain transformed Burma into a territory under the colonial British Indian government, assuming governance over the region for about half a century.

On November 7, 1927, the Indian Statutory Commission was established by the British Government, with Sir John Simon serving as its designated leader. In the year 1928, the British government established the Simon Commission, which subsequently led to the convening of a Round Table Conference with prominent Burmese leaders. The separation of Myanmar from the British Indian government under the India Act of 1935 occurred as a result of the Round Table Conference. This legislative measure was put into effect on April 1, 1937. During the period of 1937-1941, Burma was placed under British governance, during which a new constitution was implemented. Consequently, Burma emerged as an independent nation under British rule, leading to the dissolution of its administrative connections with India. Subsequently, the colony was bestowed with a revised constitution.

The constitutional and political advancements in Myanmar were disrupted by the onset of the Second World War. However, despite the brevity of the period, the populace had the opportunity to reflect upon almost two decades of experience with electoral processes, parliamentary governance, political accountability, and political party dynamics. The nation-building process in Myanmar has been shaped by the indigenous nationality. The introduction of new ethnic conflicts in Myanmar by the British, along with their exploitative economic tactics, resulted in a significant portion of the population developing a negative perception of capitalism. Nevertheless, they also implemented a system of restricted representative government, allowing elected officials to participate in the process of governing. The individuals may possess a cumulative experience of twenty years in the domains of elections, parliamentary governance, political accountability, and political parties. The British administration has been responsible for the emergence of several national heroes and notable

Burmese proletariat revolutionaries. The current analysis demonstrates that Burma has achieved independence from its status as a Crown province. In the year 1942, the nation of Japan assumed control of Myanmar and proceeded to build a domestic governing body. In 1943, the Japanese government granted Myanmar a kind of formal independence. Myanmar saw the impact of Japanese military philosophy and fascist behaviors during the Japanese period from 1942 to 1945. The nationalist elite in Myanmar continue to exhibit traces of fascist ideology, as seen by their enduring influence. The current thesis comprehensively examines the historical context of Myanmar's internal politics in the second chapter.

The examination of internal politics in the three chapters reveals that Myanmar implemented a system of complete parliamentary democracy during two periods: from 1948 to 1958 and from 1960 to 1962, under the leadership of U Nu. The principles of freedom of speech, press, and assembly were largely upheld, and the court demonstrated a significant degree of independence. The first democratic administration led by U Nu successfully orchestrated a series of three national elections including many political parties. The conducted elections were characterized by a high degree of fairness and freedom, therefore mostly capturing an accurate representation of the prevailing popular sentiment. However, as a result of ethnic tensions, separatist movements, corruption, and factionalism, the military seized control in a nonviolent coup in 1962, led by General Ne Win.

The examination of internal politics in the four chapters reveals that in 1962, General Ne Win assumed control via a military coup, toppling the incumbent civilian administration. Following the coup, the military regime proceeded to form the Revolutionary Council. The time span ranging from 1962 to 1974 was characterized by an era of governance marked by direct military authority. During the first ten years of the Burmese Way to Socialism, the government led by Ne Win implemented extensive institutional modifications aimed at expediting Myanmar's revolutionary progression and fostering closer alignment between the military dictatorship and the country's political system. In 1974, the cessation of direct military governance occurred with the implementation of a new constitution and the conduct of national elections. The subsequent era of military governance may be characterized as a time of constitutional dictatorship. Despite the appearance of constitutionalism and civilian governance, there are still remnants of a strong authoritarian inclination. During this particular era, the military adopted a foreign policy approach characterized by the cessation of communication with other entities and the deliberate isolation of the nation from international and regional events. The democratic system saw a lack of progress during the tenure of Ne Win. During this period, a series of three national elections were conducted, accompanied by the implementation of a novel constitution that granted individuals the fundamental rights to participate in electoral processes as voters and candidates. However, in practical terms, the election might be characterized as just symbolic, lacking fairness and legitimacy.

The examination of domestic politics in the five chapters reveals that the mass revolt of 1988 may be attributed to a protracted period of disregard and ineffective governance according to the socio-economic and political ideologies of the nation. The mass movements in question have been marked by significant political advancements, such as the establishment of political parties, the conduct of elections, the promotion of democratic principles, the decentralization of authority, the attainment of sustainable peace and stability, the implementation of economic liberalization measures, and the cultivation of international relations. The political trajectory of Aung San Suu Kyi, including her emergence in politics, the 1990 elections, the saffron revolution of 2007, and the subsequent establishment of the 2008 constitution, has significantly contributed to the advancement of Myanmar's political landscape. Following the ratification of the 2008 constitution, the commencement of the democratic process was initiated by the conduct of the 2010 elections. The attainment of its fulfillment was realized by the conduct of the general elections in 2015. As a result, during the course of Myanmar's 50-year history, there was a transition of power from the military ruler to the democratic authority, which remained in effect until 2020. The period spanning from 2015 to 2020 saw the establishment of a civilian administration in Myanmar, which marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape by introducing democratic principles. Nevertheless, a military coup took place on February 1, 2021, resulting in the reinstatement of military governance in the nation.

Myanmar has not achieved the status of a unified, ethnically homogeneous democratic nation since its independence. The historical record of political achievements is marred by a series of challenges including internal political conflicts, ethnic animosity, protracted civil warfare, and enduring military governance. Consequently, the process of transitioning Myanmar's internal politics is characterized by a gradual and seamless progression. Political parties, competent leadership, constitutional progress, and participation in elections have played a significant role in facilitating good transformations throughout the democratic transition in Myanmar. In light of the prevailing circumstances, it may be inferred that the attainment of comprehensive democratization in Myanmar poses considerable challenges and necessitates a protracted period for the consolidation of democratic principles, notwithstanding the recurrent emergence of democratic administrations.

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