

1951 - An Election in Stages as an Anti-Climax

1 Introduction

The elections of 1951 is the least well-documented of Burma's/Myanmar's post-war elections. The event is often and mostly routinely mentioned in a number of accounts of the country's post-independence period in a matter-of-fact way. Only few details are available as well as some general assessments like Robert Taylor's statement: "If elections provide legitimacy for governments, the 1951 elections in Burma provided a mere leaf." (Taylor 1996: 175) Martin Smith notes that "the final count produced the most undemocratic anomaly in which 60% per cent of the votes were cast for the AFPFL, which received 85 per cent of the seats (Smith 1991: 124)..

Such remarks provoke the question in what way the 1951 elections might be significant for the elections that followed in Burma/Myanmar particularly with regard to the crucial question of legitimising political rule and its "democratic" quality. One can further note that they were the "first" not just held under the provisions of the hybrid constitution of 1947 mixing elements borrowed from the British parliamentary tradition and ideas of Aung San highlighting the idea of social justice based on a socialist economy. They were the first held after the premature death of the founding father of the nation, included the former Frontier Areas where no elections had been taken place in April 1947 and gave the voters countrywide the chance to elect members of a "Chamber of Nationalities"

It is often mentioned that the elections took place under the conditions of civil war. This caused the elections to be postponed. According to section 233 of the Constitution of 1947, elections were due to be held within 18 months after independence, that is latest in July 1949. The civil war that broke out almost simultaneously with independence (see timeline) caused not just the postponement of the elections but forced the government to hold them in stages.

Such procedures however were not quite unique. They can be compared with the situation at the time of writing (end of 2023) when civil war reached a new dimension through the emergence of the People's Defence Forces ((PDFS) in central Burma that contributes to postpone the election promised by the military junta to be held within one year after on 1 February 2021 the military had nullified the elections held in November 2020 that had resulted in another landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party.

The following sections provide information about some aspects of the elections and their context beginning with the symbolic role of parliament on Independence Day (4.1.1948) that had been elected to form the Constituent Assembly in April 1947 (2). The following part provides information about the work of this body that was convened until on 13 March 1952 the two chambers elected in 1951 assembled to elect a new president.(3). Next the status of the AFPFL as the leading political entity at that time (4) followed by an overview on contestants of the elections the elections (5). Then the available statistical data on the outcome of the polls will be discussed (6), followed by some notes about the freedom and fairness of the polls (7). and contemporary assessments (8). Finally, some remarks on the relationship between the Burmese heartland and the ethnic dominated fringes of the country will be presented (9) before a "look back into the future" that will throw some light on the significance of the elections (10).



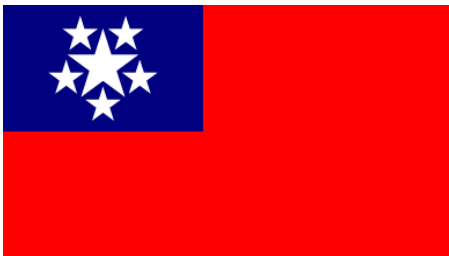
*The Burmese flag is raised
(Source: New Light of Myanmar)*

2 The Parliament as a Symbol of Independence

In the early morning of January 4, 1948 at 4,20, a ceremony to mark the transfer of power from the colonial administration to the Burmese government under Premier Nu took place before the parliament building. The date had been determined after an extended consultations with a number of astrologers. Initially, January 6 at 11.56 a.m. had been announced. The British side had been informed accordingly. As a consequence, Clemens Attlee had to explain in parliament about the change of date. "In Eastern countries these things are important." he reasoned.¹

The Union Jack was pulled down accompanied by playing the British national anthem "God Save the King" and the new Burmese flag was hoisted together with playing the tune of the *Do-bama* song that was chosen by the Constituent Assembly to serve as the new state's anthem. Even though the text had lost some of its original *bama*-centered nationalist flavour, it still emphasised the special role of the ethnically mainly Burmese members of the Thakin movement that had formed the nucleus of the Burmese independence Army as well.²

The flag resembled that of the AFPFL. The white star denoting the resistance movement was surrounded by five smaller ones symbolising the Burmese-Mon-Arakan people of the former Burma proper and the Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen (Maung Maung 1959: 206). The guests attending the ceremony faced the flagpoles before the parliament building within the courtyard of the Secretariat., the seat of government and the building in which Aung San had been assassinated.



One day before, the Constituent Assembly had met for the last time and prepared the way for the Provisional Parliament to meet on the following day by to elect a speaker who was designed to chair the provisional parliament that was to be convened after the official independence ceremony. Furthermore, 18 ministers of the first cabinet were elected, four more than the last one. The four new ministers were responsible for Karen, Kachin, Chin and Karenni affairs³.

The independence ceremonies lasted three days and people were jubilant all over the country. A newspaper reported:

Sacred candles were lit and temple gongs sounded as the Republic was proclaimed. Residents of various neighbourhoods passed out free drinks and food to the crowds, who participated in roadside festivals.⁴

Sports and games were performed during these days, gambling however was prohibited, another newspapers reported.⁵ After the flag pulling ceremonies, the former governor left the city on board of a British cruiser. Later that day, the former Constituent Assembly that had held its last session the day before, became the parliament of the independent Burmese State.

Nu took the oath, the cabinet of 18 ministers was sworn in. Then, the treaty with Britain was ratified that had been negotiated by Nu in October 1947 thus legalising the new relations between the newly independent country and the former colonial power. It provided for the cancellation of Burmese debts and the British maintenance of a military mission in the country. The few communist members of the house voted against the ratification and the Anglo-Saxon press noted this defeat with satisfaction but did not mention how small the opposition was.

1 *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times* 12.12.1947: 34.

2 The name change ordered by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989 to call the whole of the country "Myanmar" and reserve "Bama" (Burmese) for the largest ethnic group living tin the country to counter the trend of "Burmanising" the whole country linguistically. However, "Myanmar" is an old term denoting a state dominated by ethnic Burmese.

3 *Courier Post* 3.1.1948: 4.; *The Parsons Sun* 3.1.1948: 8.

4 *The Gazette* (Montreal) 5.1.1948: 1.

5 *The Fresno Bee* 04.1.1948: 1.



Prime Minister Thakin Nu (standing, left) takes oath of office from President Sao Shwe Thaik as government of republic became operative. Shwe Thaik immediately announced first aim of his administration would be establishment of socialism and elimination of capitalism. First act of parliament was ratification of economic and military treaty with Great Britain.

Nu takes the oath as Prime Minister (Source: St. Louis New Dispatch 25.1.1948: 94)

The symbolic value of the parliament as a symbol of the country's independence from Britain is confirmed by the date 4 January 1952, the fifth anniversary of Independence Day, chosen as the date that terminated the prolonged electoral process. The electoral process had been finished by then. Therefore, it is misleading to call the polls "1951/1952 elections"⁶.

3 The "Provisional Parliament at Work

The legislature met regularly after the independence celebrations, mainly to legitimise the actions of the government.⁷ A first important act to be passed was the Land Nationalisation Bill adopted in October 1948. In principle, the rhythm followed the

scheme of the colonial period. The parliament was to be convened twice a year for about one month starting in February and end of August/early September for the "Budget Session" some. Over the years, there were discussions to prolong the session periods, but the AFPFL majority thwarted all respective motions of the opposition. (Maung Maung 1959: 123).

After the constitution had been adopted on 25 September 1947, the assembly met again on 3 January 1948, one day before Independence Day and was in session until 19 January as Burma's parliament. Eleven more sessions followed until December 1951 before the new parliament elected in 1951 convened on 1952 (Maung Maung Gyi 1899: 149).

The sessions however took place within a very turbulent environment. End of August 1948, it was reported that "little more than half of the 225 members attended the session, that was boycotted by the Communists and a Section of the People's Volunteer Organisation, a party which has advocated negotiations with Communist insurgents." The parliament building was protected by barbed wire at that time.⁸

In August 1948, foreign media reported that President Sai Shwe Thaik had "declared a state of grave emergency" in the country "and issued a martial law act to combat the rebellion." It gave him the right to suspend civil administrations in certain parts of the country and hand the administration over to the military.⁹ According to the constitution, this "ordinance" was renewed by both houses of parliament every six months.¹⁰ The respective ordinances did not cover the whole country but special areas as Insein after the outbreak of the Karen armed rebellion in February 1949.

It is not clear how many members attended the respective sessions. The reasons for not attending were manifold. The civil war was a main cause in reducing the number of parliamentarians. An unknown number of them died and nothing is known about the holding of by-elections. Others were prevented to attend the sessions because of the travel risks. The few non-AFPFL communist members elected in 1947 might have shunned at least some sessions.

6 Wikipedia; Myanmar Elections Watch n.d.

7 It was calculated that between 1947 and 1957 some 700 bills brought in by the were adopted. According to the house rules adopted from Burma Act of 1935, those bills could be introduced by the government. Bills by "private members" could only move bills on Wednesdays (Maung Maung 1959: 123).

8 *Edmonton Journal* 31.8.1948: 1. - The *Daily Telegraph* reported on 1 September 1948 that troops had to guard the Parliament.

9 Muskogee Times-Democrat 21.1.1948: 1.

10 The term "martial law" was not mentioned in the constitution. For details see Maung Maung 1959: 126.

More importantly however, the unity of those who had won seats in the campaign of 1947 dominated by Aung San's personality had come to an end. The most significant events of this developments was the move of most of the members of the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO) consisting of former members of the Burma National Army towards the communists after Aung San's death who had not been integrated in the Burmese army after the Kandy agreement of September 1945. The total number of the organisation regarded as Aung San's "private army" comprised 100,000 members or more. 44 of them had been elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1947. Almost all of them vacated their seats between 1947 and the next elections in 1951. Only four of them were returned in the 1951 elections (Maung Maung 1957: 27; Tinker 1957: 55-56).¹¹

An American newspaper reported about an opening session of parliament in June 1949:

The Burmese Parliament met this week for "monsoon session" with half its members absent through adherence to insurgent factions, lack of communication or violent death. The communist members were not there [...] The opening sitting of the Parliament lasted only half an hour. [...] There was scarcely any mentioning of the rebellion. [...] Westminster's traditions and niceties rule is all there, but perhaps in a way Burmese Parliament has more dignity than any, a dignity fortified by gentle and stately sadness. As it were an assembly of good-natured ecclesiastics wearing their best robes. [...] Incidentally one member courteously wrote for "leave of absence" because he had been arrested by the insurgents.¹²

The observed dignity might have been due to the brief session observed by the foreign correspondent. Furthermore, many former supporters of Aung San had been absent for different reasons. Furthermore, the first open rifts within the AFPFL had not yet happened. The first visible split occurred in December 1950 after the outbreak of the Korean War when a number of members left the AFPFL in protest against the support of the American involvement in the war. and formed the Burma Workers' and Peasant's Party (BWPP). Ten of them had won seats in parliament in 1947 (Taylor 1985: 125). A second split happened when Aung Than, the younger brother of Aung San, who had left the socialist party already in 1949, allegedly because of its Marxist tendencies (Tinker 1957: 70-71) together with six other MPs left the AFPFL. He claimed that the League was "not any no longer the national front created by the Bogyoke [general, Aung San]s honorific name until today] but had become a puppet organisation of the socialists." (Aung Aung Gyi 1988: 129)

These tensions affected the government as well. In July 1948, the whole cabinet including Nu resigned for a short period of time and "caretaker government" was installed until the next session of parliament. Ideological differences might have been the reason.¹³ Another change of government happened on 2 April 1949 when the socialist and Yellow Band PVO members of the cabinet resigned as an action of commitment to the "restoration of peace and prosperity of the Union" in view of the civil war. It was meant as a gesture to find an arrangement with the communist rebels. General Ne Win who had been involved in talks with them together with Nu, was appointed to serve as head of the ministries of defence and home affairs.¹⁴ He quit the posts in September to concentrate on his duties as commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Taylor 2015: 213-214).¹⁵

11 The majority of them – called White Band PVO after the colour of their arm bands – went underground in August 1948 as another force opposing the government besides the Burma Communist party headed by Aung San's brother-in-law Than Tun. This happened after Nu's 15-point proposal of a "Leftist Unity" program had failed. - Some of the PVO members formed a group called "Yellow Band PVO" that joined the Socialists in the AFPFL (Smith 1991: 107).

12 *The Age*, 10.6.1949: 2.

13 *The Ottawa Citizen* 28.7.1948: .17.

14 The interim cabinet further included a number of ethnic ministers and six Burmese, among them E Maung who – like Ne Win - took over a number of ministerial posts

15 The constitution allowed a term of six months for non-elected persons to serve as a member of government. This clause allowed Ne Win to become prime minister in 1958 with the consent of parliament (Article 116). The same period of time was given for the duration of declaring a state of emergency.(Article 93, 3b and 4).

All these events plus the absence of many parliamentarians during the period until the newly elected parliament convened in March 1952 indicates that this body was not a forum of discussing political issues but a tool to formally legitimate the government as a symbol of the country's independence.

This does not mean however that the small opposition in parliament did not oppose the government. This however mainly happened by way of symbolic action too as an incident shows that was even reported in the western media.¹⁶ In March 1951, a "sitdown strike" in the parliament building happened that was called off after 28 hours. It was reported that 18 opposition MPs, one of them being Aung Than, had protested "alleged curtailment of parliamentary rights by the Government".¹⁷ An example given was the charge that the majority had only allowed one day of discussing opposition proposals instead of three as demanded (Aung Aung Gyi 1988:130). The antagonism between the AFPFL and the dissidents is illustrated by the claim of Kyaw Nyein, General Secretary of the League, that the dissidents "party breakers of faction-instigators office mad, privilege-mad, opportunists and criminals." (Maung Maung Gyi 1988: 129)

Besides and amidst such disputes and political fissures, parliament helped to pave the way for holding the election in accord with the constitution. End of January 1949, the "final pre-election session" of parliament was expected to commence. In February, parliament passed an Election Enquiry Act delegating the responsibilities for holding election to an independent bod, a seven member Parliamentary Election (Supervisory) Commission responsible to the President.¹⁸ It was headed by Ba U, a head of the Supreme Court who had been studied at Cambridge and was elected as the country's president by the new parliament in March 1952. On June 14 1949, the constitution was changed to allow a postponement of the elections until May 1950.¹⁹ Before the term had expired, on 16 February the postponement was extended by parliament extended until on the suggestion of the commission until May 1951. Shortly before, parliament had extended the state of emergency for another six months.²⁰ Finally, the term of Nu's government was prolonged until January 4, 1952. It was expected that the election process would have been finished by then.²¹

This enumeration shows that parliamentary procedures strictly follow the regulations laid down in the constitution. Furthermore, government's decisions were sanctioned – among them the land reform bill and the act to create a Karen State. This happened by changing the constitution in September 1951 in order to pacify the Karen community.²² On the other side, the "dignity" expressed by the oath to be made by each member of the two chambers who promised to "maintain the Constitution of the Union and uphold its laws" was only one side of the proceedings around parliament. The other side of the coin is illustrated by the often mentioned barbed wire surrounding the parliament building and the tough security measures – even ministers were searched. They show that the situation of parliament mirrored the country's overall tense situation. The Burmese state was on the brink of collapsing - and London insurance companies refused to issue life insurances for candidates participating in the forthcoming elections.²³

16 Such reports mainly consisted of the information provided by news agencies. Some of them like a report about a discussion in parliament about the preference of female telephone operators in love calls instead of subscribers' calls was republished by many newspapers in October 1950.

17 *Omaha World-Herald* 21.3.1951: 15.

18 The members were; The Union's Chief Justice, the Chief Justice of the High Court, another justice nominated by the Chief Justice, of the Union, a representative of the state governments, a Karen and two members appointed by the President. (Department of External Affairs 1951: 547)..

19 *The Evening Sun* (Baltimore) 14.6.1949: 35.

20 *Spokane Chronicle* 16.2.1950: 35.

21 *The Arizona Republic* (Phoenix) 20.3.1951: 3. For more details see Department of External Affairs 1951: 547-548...

22 For the text see <http://www.asianlii.org/mm/legis/code/caa1951268.pdf> (accessed 26.10.2023). - Three townships however were to be administered by the State government from 1 June 1954 (Tinker 1957: 159.

23 *Rreveille* (London) 28.9.1951: 16.

Western observers were impressed by Burmese attitude of calmness in light of the political trouble. Burmese-Buddhist traditions might have played a role to deal with the atmosphere of insecurity. A newspaper account informs about the resignation and immediate swearing in again of the cabinet in early April 1950 on the advice of some astrologers.²⁴ A western newspaper praised Nu's Gandhi-like attitude as a main reason for Burma's ability to survive the communist and the Karen rebellion.

4 The status of the AFPFL

The elections of April 1947 had been won by candidates loyal to Aung San and the AFPFL under his leadership. The structure of the organisation changed already during the time of his leadership. The army, one of the three founding bodies, was officially reduced to a mere military institution after the Kandy Agreement of September 1945. The Communist Party under Than Tun was excluded in October 1946 from the League. A number of other parties and organisation were included to make the organisation a body representing all people living in the country. Most of them left after the Attlee-Aung San Agreement had been concluded that they didn't support. In the end, two kinds of members existed: Private members and those belonging to one of the mass organisations representing various sectors of Burma's population. They had emerged in course of the anti-colonial fight representing trade unions, peasants, and workers and others. The socialists within the party played a crucial role as heads of these groups.

Officially, the Socialist Party was founded in 1945 to counter the influence of the two communist parties headed by Soe and Than Tun.. The senior leader of this party that had an ideological orientation was Thakin Mya (born 1897) who however was killed together with Aung San on 19. July 1947. In his place, two younger ex-students, Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein, became influential within the AFPFL as well as the government. Ba Swe became prominent as developing a political program based on Marxist ideas that were adopted to the Burmese situation (Ba Swe 1956). Kyaw Nyein was a "doer" who took over the most difficult ministry of home affairs and was regarded to be capable of taking over the premiership.

Nu who had taken over the leadership of the League after Aung San's death, was neither a member of the Socialist Party or affiliated to any other group. He had been close to Aung San since the student strike of 1936 that brought both into the public limelight. Born in 1907, he was some years older than his predecessor and regarded by the other young politicians as an "elder brother". As President, he headed the centralised organisation of the AFPFL. Under him, two Vice-Presidents and an Executive Committee directed the politics of the League in a top-down manner. Annual statewide conferences were and could not take place.²⁵ The members of the main committee were "chosen by a process of inner selection rather than by any method of election." (Tinker 1957:68). Due to its many branches and affiliated groups in various regions dominated by non-Bamar ethnic groups, the AFPFL was the only Burmese political body that was present in the whole of Burma – both in the minds of the people and to some extent through its organisation. At the grass-root level,, the position of AFPFL leaders in their districts was likened to that of "petty kings". (Tinker 1967: 67)

To sum up: Even after the death of Aung San, the AFPFL continued to be the dominant political organisation of the Burmese state. However, this status can be ascribed mainly to the fact that the unity of the League to a great extent was due to its main political rival, the communists. "Adversity held the AFPFL together." (Maung Maung 1969: 223) A two-front-war had to be performed. The armed forces tried to secure the territorial integrity as a precondition of social and political activities as shown by the Tatmadaw's actions to enable people to cast their votes in the regions in which a state of emergency had been declared.

24 *The Tampa Tribune* 3.4.1950: 7.

25 The conference in 1958 held at a time when the AFPFL was on the verge of splitting was only the second one and the first after Aung San's death.

On the other side, a number of political fissures affected the AFPFL. Here, the wish to overcome disunity and return to the unity that had existed under Aung San's leadership for some time played a role. This unity however had been damaged by the national hero's decision to expel the communists from the League. A political way had to be found to come to terms with the communist and Marxist ideology that had been shared by many of the AFPFL leaders in their struggle against the capitalist-imperialist colonial power. The latter task caused ideological disputes mainly about the understanding of "socialism".

In practice, the unity of the League and the country largely depended on Nu's double role as the head of the AFPFL and the government. The organisational network of the AFPFL however never developed beyond the Burmese heartland. In the hills and areas of the former Burma proper where non-Burmese ethnic groups like the Karen, Arakanese and Mon lived, local politicians were at best affiliated more or less loosely to the League.

5 The Contestants in the Elections

Due to the special quality of the AFPFL as an all-inclusive representative of the new Burmese state both in terms of social and governmental regard, the League could not have any contestant in the polls on eye level. It was an institution *sui generis* that was difficult to be classified. A report published by the Australian Foreign Office in October 1951 called the AFPFL "a nominally non-party coalition" (Department of External Affairs 1951 :549). The following "coalition members" are mentioned: The United Hill People Congress under the leadership of the Shan politician Chao Khun Khio holding the post of foreign minister at that time. The Congress mainly represented the non-Burmese signatories of the Panglong Agreement, that is Shan, Kachin and Chin. Furthermore, the All Burma Muslim Congress under the leadership of the justice minister Khin Maung Latt is mentioned. In terms of political aims, the report notes that there are none besides the support of the AFPFL and reservations about the Marxist leanings of the socialists.

The only political body coming close to a party in the western sense of the term, supporting the government therefore was the Socialist Party. It was however "submerged" in the League as Maung Maung, the chronicler of Burma's socialist period wrote:

Socialist leaders took pride that their's was the largest single party in the League, which was true.,
But the Communists were in opposition. Their were no other parties worth the name. (Maung Maung 1969: 197)

As a consequence, observers had difficulties to classify the supporters of the government in contrast to the "socialist" ministers properly. Nu and other AFPFL members or affiliates were regarded as "independents" or "non-party" cabinet members,. (Department of External Affairs 1951: 259)

The first party mentioned in the report that opposed AFPFL dominated "coalition" was the Burma Working and Peasant Party (BWPP) that had split off the Socialist Party and the AFPFL in 1950 - "unlike most fissures in Burmese parties this one concerned political issues." (Taylor 1985: 125). According to the Australian observer, the party had unsuccessfully attempted to form a "People's Parliamentary Democratic Front". Instead a "People's Peace Front" had been formed on the initiative of Aung Than that included a breakaway faction of the White PVO and the revived *Dobama Asiayone*. The front proposed negotiations with the communists without the precondition of surrendering their arms and prosed a caretaker government after the elections.

The report further mentions three parties headed by pre-war politicians. Ba Sein who had rejected the Aung San-Attlee Agreement headed the Democratic Party, Ba Maw revived his Maha-Bama Party and a Union Burma (or Patriot) Party joined by veteran politician Ba Pe proposed private ownership of land and the acceptance of foreign aid from "friendly quarters". (Department of External Affairs 1951: 250) In a second report published in April 1952, the leader of an Arakanese "landowner party" is mentioned who won a seat against an AFPFL candidate. This leader

represented a group of candidates called by their adversaries the “millionaires party”. They advocated some kind of autonomy for the region. In the Chin Hills, the minister representing the Chins in the cabinet was defeated by a candidate of the newly founded “Chin Hills Congress” (Department of External Affairs 1952: 182). This pertained to the Karen as well. The Karen National League (also known as Karen Youth League) had emerged in 1947 and supported the policy of the AFPFL whereas the Karen National Union (KNU) joined the civil war in early 1949.

One can conclude that the situation in regions in which the Burmese did not form the majority and the domination of the numerically dominating ethnic group was resented was rather complex.

6 Campaigning, Electoral Process, Voter Turnout and Results

The postponement of the elections and holding it finally in three stages – 12 June, 11 August and from 16 November on - made countrywide campaigning extremely difficult. The Election Commission under Ba U and his nephew E Maung who had taken his post as High Court Judge for a short time after the former fell ill advised the administration on the dates on which elections could be performed in specific districts after consultations with the security forces. Since the first-past-the post electoral system adopted from the British, the local context of the 375 constituencies – 250 for the Chamber of Representatives and 125 for the Chamber of Nationalities. Besides the local campaigning concentrating on the fights of the local AFPFL candidate against independents and/or rivals from other parties or blocs. The government promised that all “parties” would be given equal broadcasting facilities. No distinct issues dominated the campaign, the main rival of the AFPFL, the BWPP, advocated for a more “radical” policy than that performed by the AFPFL and a turning away from the neutralist foreign policy in favour of closer connection with the Soviet Union and other communist countries (Department of External Affairs 1951: 549-550).

Nu as the head of the League and prime minister was the dominating figure in the campaign. In a speeches, he stressed the necessity of the voters’ willingness to participate in the exercise of your votes. .

If the candidates, or supporter id candidates, happen to cast aspersions on one another, please forbear; avoid all forms of quarrel and antagonism. Avoid dishonest methods in the exercise of your vote; please try your utmost to make these elections the cleanest possible. [...] Although I am President of the A.F-P.F.L., I am more concerned in the strict observance of these three points by the voters than in the victory of the A.F-P.F.L. So long as these three fundamental principles are observed by the voters the democratic way of life, by which political power is sought from the people by the legitimate method of elections will be increasingly strengthened in our Union. If however the voters will not exercise their right to vote through sheer indifference, or if the voters indulge in mud slinging [...] resulting in the people’s distrust in elections, than the democratic way of life will vanish in our country. Once democracy vanishes from our midst what do you think would appear in its place? The substitute will be no other than the cult of the gun. (Department of External Affairs 1951: 551).

This was a moral appeal to care for clean elections through the cleanness of the electorate.

The first stage of election was held in just 51 constituencies and not in 121 as initially planned by the Election Commission. The voter turnout was low. No great disturbances happened albeit previous reports had claimed that communist and Karen rebels were eager to “wreck the election”. The AFPFL candidates won 29 seats, Shan affiliates to the League 12, independents 5, the BWPP only 3. This can be attributed that most votes were cast in Rangoon.

On and August the second stage of elections happened, 11 in Burma proper, 23 in the Shan State, the latter for the Chamber of Nationalities. It is reported that at least one minister who had lost the elections in the first round, won after having run in another constituency. All other elections were held from 16 November to the end of the year. The Election Commission finished its work on 4

January 1952..Four days later the results were published. Precise number are not available right now.

Up to now, no official record of results is available. It was estimated that 1,5 million votes cast their votes from around eight million people over 21 eligible to do so. In 25 constituencies elections could be held – 18 for the Lower and 7 for the Upper House. Most cancellations happened in Burma Proper

The Australian observers notes that in the 232 constituencies where MPs for the Lower House were elected. 141 were won by the AFPFL, 39 went to opposition groups and 52 to candidates of the Hill People, most of them supposedly supporters of the AFPFL.

Another information informs about the composition of the parliament in 1954. It is noted that MPs might have shifted alliances, died .(Silverstein 1977: 68. footnote 15)..

Chamber of Deputies : 232 / 236			
Pro-AFPFL: 198		Anti-AFPFL: 33	
AFPFL	143	BWPP	9
United People’s Hill Congress	39	Arakan Parliamentary Group	9
United Karen League	13	Parliamentary Independent Group ²⁶	8
Arakan Muslims	3	People’s United Party ²⁷	2
		Karen National Congress	2
		Pa-O Organisation	3
Independents: 5			

Almost nothing is known about the composition of the Chamber of Nationalities. In the Shan State, 25 seats of the Chamber were occupied by the traditional rulers, the Sawbwas (*saophas*) (Sai Aung Tun 2009: 344).

There is some information about individual results. Nu – who had only reluctantly taken part in a by-election for the Constituent Assembly – contested Aung San’s constituency Lammadaw taken by his wife Khin Kyi after his death. He distinctly defeated Aung San’s brother Aung Than of the BWPP. A prominent Karen lady was elected, the daughter of San C. Po who became known under the name of her husband as Mrs. Ba Maung Chain. She actively worked for peace between the Burmese and Karen troops and served for a short time as the minister for the newly established Karen State in 1952.²⁸



The Burmese cabinet of March 1952; first row, left side: Claribel Ba Maung Chain, the first female Burmese minister responsible for the newly created Karen State (Source: Biography Project)

In terms of parliamentary seats won, the AFPFL and its affiliated organisations or individuals secured a sound victory by

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²⁸ For some more details about Claribel Ba Maung Chain see <http://bios.myanmar-institut.org/2018/10/03/claribel-ba-maung-chain-irene-po-1905-1994/> (accessed 24.10.2023).

winning at least 80% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies,. On the other hand, it was estimated that only 60% of the votes were given to AFPFL candidates. (Taylor 1986: 175). Considering the low voter turnout of about 20%, the elections results did not say much about its popular support.

7 Free and Fair?

Freedom and fairness of the elections were doubted even before they were held both by the government and the opposition. The government anticipated threats by the rebel groups sympathising with the opposition candidates, the opposition feared that police and military controlled by the government would intimidate the voters (Department of External Affairs 1951: 548).. It is further doubtful if the electoral rolls were up-to-date all over the country. Refugees had come to Rangoon and got some housing under the control of the League (Tinker 1967: 72). The Election Commission heads were naturally close to the AFPFL leadership and the step-by-step conduct of the elections allowed candidates – mostly members of the League - to make up for an electoral loss by trying it again in another constituency. According to the rules taken over from the British, the candidates did not need to be a resident of their constituency. A preview on the elections being sceptical about Nu's chances of winning a his seat against Aung San's "leftist" brother reasoned that "he can try a second and a third time in another district."²⁹ The army helped by keeping away villagers who were supposed to be anti-AFPFL or polling booths were raided by unidentified army men (Maung Maung 1969: 223).

Foreign observers attributed the low voter turnout to the precarious situation in the countryside and a “general apathy to elections which had dragged on for so long.” The hot contests happening in the beginning particular in the big cities did not happen in the countryside whee a great number of elections were held in the last two stages (Department of External Affairs 1952: 182).

8 Assessments

Others than Robert Taylor’s and Martin Smith’s sceptical remarks quoted above, many observers writing before “democracy” became the focal issue of Burmese politics after 1988 assessed the elections of 1951 positively. Hugh Tinker, writing in 1957, after noting some of the flaws remarks: “But Burma today is a democracy, beyond question” and justifies this appraisal with some national characteristics like the absence of a caste system and Burmese individualism. He however notes as well that there are “some forces in Burma working against democracy” as the insurgents and some elements within the AFPFL (Tinker 1957: 77).

Western press reports lauded Burma as a “Bright Spot in Asia” for the “democracies in the stands against Communist aggression.”³⁰ However, the report on the experiences of a female American Baptist missionary, born 1908, who had worked since 1934 in Burma and for the last five years in the northern part of Kachin State close to the Indian and Chinese borders as a teacher gave bleak account about the political situation, In a press report published in July 1952, she told about the last elections and her general perception of Burmese politics:

Civil guards must be mustered to conduct the elections and to prevent bloodshed. - No one seemed to know who should vote. - Those who went to the polls were forced to drop their ballots in the wrong boxes by armed troops. - The big problem is that there are a number of groups, struggling for supremacy, each headed by a little man who wants to be a big man. - I don’t know when it will end. It’s unfortunate but the Burmese need a dictatorial type of government.³¹

From another perspective, the Burmese scholar Htin Aung appreciated the first elections held in independent Burma in an interview conducted after the coup of 1962:

29 *Chicago Tribune* 13.6.1951: 41.

30 *Fort Worth Star* 29.9.1952: 6.

31 *Santa Cruz Sentinal* 27.7.1952: 10.

[...]Parliamentary democracy was indeed too successful in that the people elected to the legislature the party that believed in parliamentary democracy, namely the A.F.P.F.L. The general election held in 1952 and 1956 were really free and fair elections, and the results fully expressed the will of the people. The consequence was a one-party government without an opposition. Many of the debates made in cabinet should have been properly made in the legislative, between the government and the opposition, if an opposition had existed. (Htin Aung 1967: 324)

On the other hand, Maung Maung Gyi, a Burmese scholar who left the country after the 1962 coup and continued to teach in the United States, lauded the increase of opposition members in parliament as a sign the “authoritarian values” domination the country’s politics, were reduced a bit, but: “The tradition of convening Parliament with an opposition was still on trial.” (Maung Maung Gyi 1988: 132).

9 A Note on the Relations between the Burmese Centre and the Ethnic Fringes

A look at the constitution of 1947 points at the complexity of the relations between the Burmese heartland as defined by the British administration as “Burma proper” or “Ministerial Burma” and the “Excluded Areas” surrounding it from the Chin Hills in the West to the Karen State in the west created by the provisional parliament.. Originally, just three “States” were recognised – Kachin, Shan and Kayah (Karenni) (Chapter IX, Parts I to III -Part IV on the Karen State was added later). In addition, provisions were made for administering a “Special Division for the Chin”. (Chapter IX. Part V) The respective provision for each State or Region were identical. In all of the a “Council” was to be established consisting of the members of both chambers in the respective region. Furthermore, a minister representing the respective State/Region was to be appointed “by the President on the nomination of the Prime Minister” who had made his proposal in consultation with the members of the Council. the Council. In the four States, the minister became “Head of State”. These provisions connected the five regions to the Union in a double way. First, the general elections decided about the composition if the parliamentary body in the State/Division.. Second, the leading member of the Council was both elected and selected and closely connected to the central government. He had to be lo loyal to his constituency, the State/Division and the Union.

Besides these and other general provisions – like to list of taxes that could be raised by the State/Division, a number of special regulation with regard to regional particularities. The most notable was the right given to the Shan and Kayah State to secede from the Union ten years after independence.³² The traditional rulers in the Shan State, the Saophas (Sawbwas), got the right to nominate the 25 members of the Chamber of Nationalities reserved for the State and thus constituted half of the State Council. The twelve seats of the Kachin State had to be filled half with Kachins and non-Kachin citizen with respect to ethnic diversity of the State. A referendum should decide about the accession of a part of the Shan State to the Kayah State.

In all states and ethnic regions dominated by non-Burmese ethnic groups, the relationship of the the leaders played a crucial role. Since the status of the traditional rulers had not been much changed under the British, tensions between the representatives of the older system represented in the Shan State by the Saophas and in Kachin State by the Duwas and the – mostly younger – “modernists” who rejected the feudal systems and were attracted to socialist ideas. Personal rivalries connected to different ideas of how to develop the country played a role as well. In the Kachin State, the AFPFL members of the State Council played a crucial role in deciding about the Head of State (Tinker 1947: 73-74).³³ Such interference led to split in the Kachin State Council (Kyaw Soe Nyunt 2019.: 598).

32 The reason for this provision is not quite clear. Very likely, historical reasons played a role and Chapter X of the constitution was seen as a means to overcome mistrust.

33 For more details see Kyaw Soe Nyunt 2019.

In two regions of former Burma proper that had been conquered by Burmese kings in the 18th century other kinds of rivalries with the AFPFL occurred. In western Arakan (Rakhine) - conquered 1785 - where civil war had broken out after the war led by Muslim and Buddhist groups, some eight or nine candidates had won their seats against AFPFL contenders They formed the Independent Arakanese Parliamentary Group (Kyaw Min 1958). Five Muslim candidates – among them a woman supported the League. ³⁴

The region of the Mon mostly living in soother Myanmar – their last kingdom with capital Bago was destroyed in by Alaungphaya, the founder of the last Burmese dynasty in 1757 - a small rebellion group called Mon National Defence Army in March 1948. As in the case of Arakan (Rakhine) the central government created a Mon State in 1974 with the enactment of a new constitution under the “Burmese Way to Socialism”.

10 Looking Back at the Future

The above note shows that the elections of 1951 can be seen as the beginning of the ongoing disputes around the question of how to connect the country’s ethnic diversity to the need to find an umbrella under which the different ethnic groups can peacefully live together.. Furthermore, the legitimacy of political rule in the country is still violently disputed and democracy has not yet been implemented in Myanmar in a functioning manner, despite three constitutions have been tried under which such aim should be achieved.

Such observations suggest that the elections of 1951 might be helpful to better understand why Burma/Myanmar has not yet become a country in which the people can enjoy a predominantly peaceful life under at least in principle generally accepted rules and regulations.

The quizzical remark of the Burmese historian quoted above hat the elections under review here might have been “too successful” and represented the “will of the people” point to the sentiment that the voters preferred some kind of “democratic dictatorship”, that is an elected parliament without any strong opposition. Such an assessment sounds strange in western ears but might be taken into consideration.

Maung Mung in his book about the first constitution describes the historical background of such a notion. Aung San and other young revolutionaries had “hated and fought” British democracy and admired Hitler and Mussolini. They were impatient whereas patience is what democracy demands.” I a manifesto written in Japan in 1941, Aung San had written:

What we want is a strong state administration as in Germany and Italy. There shall be only one nation, one state, one party, one leader, There shall be no parliamentary opposition, no nonsense of individualism.(Maung Maung 1959: 91-92)³⁵

The war and the fight against the “fascist Japanese” the opposition to which was highlighted by the name of Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League contributed to a chance of wording the new coalition that dominated Burma’s official politics and the AFPFL split in 1958. Furthermore, it was necessary to adopt elements of British-style democratic politics to achieve independence as quick as possible. However, such adaptation did not change the minds of the people fundamental. The “eternal principals” of justice, freedom and equality were inscribed in the preamble of the constitution, of 1947 but neither the terms “democracy” and “party” as designating a political group is mentioned in the constitution. Maung Maung who was to become the last president of socialist Burma for a short time in 1988 stated that there “is no party in the state socialism of Burma” (Maung Maung 1959: 93). This changed after 1988 at least formally.

34 The name “Rohingya” was not in use at that time but is used in retrospect, For details bout all Muslim MPs from Rakhine from the colonial period on see Ahmed 2009.

35 Gustaaf Houtman has doubted that the text was really written by Aung San (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/aung-sans-lan-zin-the-blue-print-and-the-japanese-occupation-of-burma>; accessed 22.11.2023.

The existence of a “socialist party“ within the AFPFL, the activities of dissident socialists as well as communists attacking the government both above-ground in the elections and underground by way of armed rebellion and the existence of factions within the non-Burmese ethnic groups show that the fundamentals on which a Burmese nation could be built were in a state of limbo. The elected parliament was just a fragile symbol of the independent state.

On this background, the rise of the Tatmadaw, the armed forces, as a political force can be assessed. It was the Burmese army that helped the electoral process prescribed by the constitution to come about. Already in early 1949, before the Karen rebellion had started, a majority of commanding officers had declared:

We the members of the Armed Forces, reaffirm regardless of class, creed, etc., that we stand behind the Constitution and the Government of the Union and that we will strive to the utmost to prevent any communal clash. (Callahan 1996: 397)

The development of the army was further enhanced by the occupation of large parts of the Shan State by Chinese Kuomintang troupes from early 1950 onwards. This resulted in a reorganisation of the Tatmadaw implemented under Ne Win’s supervision by Brigadiers Maung Maung and Aung Gyi and an enormous increase of manpower and government expenditure for the army to almost 40% of the budget. (Callahan 1996: 396). As a consequence, the army could not but become a main agency both protecting the internal political stability and defence against foreign aggressors.

Political and military matters were interwoven as shown by army commander Ne Win’s first short appearance on the political scene of independent Burma in April 1949 after the mass resignation of the socialist members of the cabinet. The armed forces were widely regarded as a decisive factor of preserving the unity of the country. It was based on a “Burmese” identity of the people against the temptations of foreign - communist and others - ideologies as the cartoon of Ba Gyan³⁶ who had become popular already during the colonial era shows.

These phenomena can be seen as results of the vacuum left by Aung San’s death who had incorporated the roles of Burma’s military and political leader. The unity of both realms impersonated by him fell apart after his death and could not simply be substituted by the institutions provided by the constitution in face of the non-acceptance of this constitution by the rebel groups. The constitution subordinated the armed forces under the parliament (section 97). Their role in



5 English text: Aung Kyaw Min

36 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/day-myanmar-lost-influential-cartoonist.html> (accessed 26.10.2020).

cases of emergency were however not defined (section 94). The conditions of post-independent Burma and the role of the armed forces in the independence struggles favoured the emergence of the Tatmadaw as an institution protecting the constitution and thus laid the foundation for the self-perception of the Tatmadaw as the guardian of a nation that however had yet to be created.

The two main functions that had made Aung San the "fourth unifier" of Burma after the three dynasty founders (Prager 1998: 272) - military and political leader - were now split and could not easily be rejoined, neither institutionally nor personally. The elections of 1951 show that Burma could be still called a "nation in waiting". The elected parliament was a symbol of this rather precarious state of affairs.