

## 27 April 1956: The Door Opener for a Part-Time Military Led Government

### 1 Introduction

In early 1957, Dr. Maung Maung - lawyer, writer, editor and Burma's last president of the socialist period – wrote an article entitled “Portrait of the Burmese Parliament” (Maung Maung 1956) for a British magazine that half a year later was reprinted in the *Guardian Magazine* founded by the author.<sup>1</sup> Referring to the six months between the first and the second publication, the reader of the Burmese paper was informed that “Parliament had become an increasing d y n a m i c assembly” and that “[p]arliamentary democracy thus begins to show signs of life.” This new phenomenon was attributed to three opposition politicians elected to the new House of Deputies whose contributions had “added much to the quality of debate.” Such dynamics had become possible because the elections of April 1956 resulted in a numerically recognisable opposition to the AFPFL. The 56 non-AFPFL members in parliament out of 250, Maung Maung wrote, is “not a big number but bit it is enough to keep the AFPFL members on their toes and to shake their belief that they would be in the Chamber for another 40 years” as Nu had predicted. (Maung Maung 1957: 27)

This statement suggests a positive development taking place after the 1956 elections that pointed to a rapprochement of the Burmese parliament to its British model. Polite Maung Maung had comforted his British readers in view of Burma's “rightly or wrongly” not joining the Commonwealth by telling them that “Britain should be proud that Burma chose to adopt parliamentary democracy of the British pattern”. Public opinion that had become “apathetic” for a long time due to the “suffering from war and civil strife”, so the article ends, must be “sharply reflected” in parliamentary debates. (Maung Maung 1957: 29) According to the statement in the Burmese magazine, this process had started between writing the article and its publication in Burma.

The emergence of a more active parliamentary opposition in parliament was not the only result of the 1956 elections. Another dynamic not mentioned in Maung Maung's article happened two months after the elections. Nu decided to leave his post as prime minister for one year to concentrate on a reorganisation of the AFPFL. On his behalf, defence minister and AFPFL deputy chairman Ba Swe took over the premiership. Nu resumed the post as head of government again in March 1957, some months before the end of the one year period announced shortly after the elections and the publication of Maung Maung's article in Burma.

These events indicate that Maung Maung's and Nu's evaluations of the elections of April 1956 contrasted. This point to a tension between the British-styled functions of parliament and the developments inside the League that had dominated the legislature since the elections of the Constituent Assembly in 1947. The two posts as leader of the League and head of government that Nu had inherited from Aung San after his assassination were now separated for some time.

This separation of functions had been preceded by a serious rift in the AFPFL leadership that two years later resulted in the split of political association that had ruled Burma for a decade after the independence celebrations. The split was made final by the outcome of the first no-confidence motion filed in the Chamber of Deputies on June 9, 1958 that was narrowly won by Nu's faction of the recently divided League. Few months later, Nu asked General Ne Win to take over the premiership for some time to organise the next elections that finally were held in 1960..

These events indicate that the elections of 1956 might have triggered the dynamics that resulted in the dominating role of the armed forces in the country's politics until today. The following narrative

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<sup>1</sup> The bibliographical information given about the publication of the article in January 1956 (<https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/X/2/204/1489776>; accessed 11,9,2020) is misleading because Maung Maung's article refers to the elections held in April of that year.

will shed some light on different aspects of the various tension that led to the split of the AFPFL and what followed.

The narrative presented in this chapter will therefore is divided in four parts. First come two contrasting observations on different understandings of parliamentary democracy in post-independent Burma (1) followed by some information on the procedure of the elections of 1956 (2). The next part will deal with some aspects related Nu's resignation, his relations to his colleagues in the AFPFL and the structure of the League (3). This part is divided subdivided in XX sections because the reasons for his decision might be a key to understand why the split of the AFPFL happened two years later that resulted in the installation of Ne Win as head of a "Caretaker Government". This transfer of power happening with the unanimous consent of parliament, later regarded as the military's "first coup" by Nu (Nu 1975: 342) and others, could be regarded as the door-opener for the decade-long period of military rule until today.

The length of this section dealing with the role of parliament in the League's split is comparatively extensive. Most details of what happened are rather well documented but differently assessed with regard to the role of the military personal involved. It can be expected that highlighting the role of parliament and the issue of holding free and fair elections in view of a severe political crisis might throw some new light on this crucial event and the following period of "military dictatorship" as it is stereotypically called in recent years. Section 4 deals The role of parliament after the split of the AFPFL and in the establishment of the "Caretaker Government" headed by General Ne Win, who headed the armed forces and the government (4). A short summary follows (5).

## 1 Various Views on Parliamentary Democracy

### 1.1 Features of a Not-so-dynamic British-styled Parliament

In his article, Maung Maung gives some details about the first Burmese post-war parliaments before the elections of 1956 "dynamised" the life of the legislative body in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> As before independence, the Chamber of Deputies was housed in a building within the large complex of the Secretariat (located between today's Bo Aung Kyaw and Theinbyu streets) whereas the less important Chamber of Nationalities held their sessions in a room of the High Court.

The main qualification of the first generation of people to be elected to the Constituent Assembly was their reliability with regard to fighting for independence in case of a failure of the constitutional process, Maung Maung writes. Most of the elected were in their twenties what made Aung San, born 1915, senior to many of them. After the fight for independence was won and the assembly



*The Chamber in session (Source: Wikipedia)*

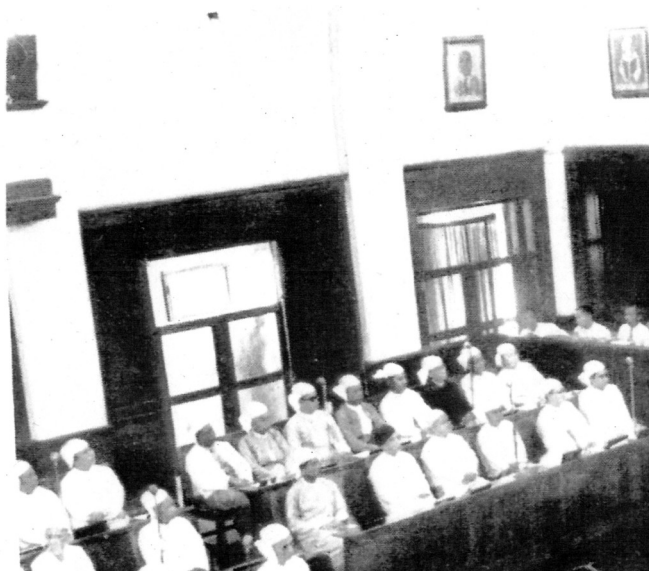


*The Chamber of Representatives after renovation showing the Burmese first post-independence flag (Source: CNN)*

<sup>2</sup> Besides the article of Maung Maung, see Tinker 1957: 84-86 and Furnivall 1960: 41-48) for details and assessments of the work of parliament.

became a parliament, a number of the MPs became ministers or took other posts in the new administration. Many others left parliament, some of them joining the communist rebels. The need for discipline that had always been there changed its shape considerably after the dominating figure of Aung San had been removed by a political rival.

In the absence of any party system in the western sense, institutionalising discipline along any party program was not possible. The revolutionary spirit that had helped to create an independent Burmese state had split both on the military and civil level. A variety of rebel groups had threatened to topple the government and a number of civilian political rivals had emerged aiming to replace the AFPFL as the organisation in control of the government. Parliament was mainly there to rubber stamp the bills introduced by the government and discussed in parliamentary committees, subcommittees and a large number of bureaucrats and employees.<sup>3</sup> (Maung Maung 1957: 27) The two chambers further served as symbols of the country's independence. The change happening after Independence Day was reflected in the new dress code. Instead of uniforms, "national dress complete with silk gaungbaung" was prescribed now for the sessions in parliament (Maung Maung ) In the Chamber of Nationalities, traditional clothing might have dominated but lively discussions happened even more rarely than in the Chamber of Representatives.



As a result of the dominating role of the AFPFL and its various sub-groups, a tendency towards corruption emerged that was attempted to curb.<sup>4</sup> The rather low sums paid to MPs – 300 Kyats plus some allowances after 1952, equivalent to 63 US \$ at that time<sup>5</sup> – and the influence of the ruling League in all sectors of society facilitated the trend towards identifying the interests of the individual politician cum AFPFL member with that of the state.

## 1.2 A Burmese Alternative: Village Democracy

In May and June 1954, elections were held in four Burmese districts for village councils according to the Democratic Local Government Administration Act adopted by the parliament in October 1953.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for the new law were explained by Home Minister Khin Maung Gale in an interview published in February 1955:

[B]ecause we are a democracy, there will be diversity in our unity for we will not tolerate regimentation, but we want that unity in diversity. You know the popular Burmese prejudice against 'government'. We were all taught that government was an enemy, an evil to be avoided as much as possible. We were told by our elders that there are five enemies to be wary of: Government; water in the form of floods [...], fire; thieves; those who do not love us. As you see, government tops the list,

3 It was guessed that in 1957 the ration of government employees to the whole population was 1: 58 (Furnivall 1960: 111).

4 From 1951 onwards, the existing laws were regularly amended. - For a speech given by Nu in December 1951 on the occasion of swearing in the members of the Bureau of Special Investigation on "bribery and corruption" see Nu 1953: 23-27.

5 For a list of salaries of parliamentarians, ministers etc. see Tinker 1967: 86 fn.. 2. - The exchange rate between US\$ and Kyat was 1 : 4,761.

6 The Act had already been adopted in February 1948, but implementation was not possible due to the civil war.

and is the first enemy of the people [...] Let the people take part in government, and then they will not only see that government is a necessity, but that it has its good points as well. (Khin Maung Gale 1955: 7-8)

The scheme aimed at changing the traditional attitude of the people towards government by establishing elected councils from the village level upwards<sup>7</sup> and at the same time revert the top-down system of village administration implemented by the British. “[The Act] returns to the people the handling of their own affairs and provides them with the duties, power and means to work for their welfare, peace and prosperity, so roughly appropriated from them under the Crostwaithe village system.” (Win Pe 1955: 8) Charles Crostwaithe was Chief Commissioner of Burma between 1887 and 1890. During his time of heading the administration in Burma, the function of the hereditary village headmen had been abolished. Elections were thus seen as a contemporary way of restoring the old system of local semi-autonomy.

Voting was made compulsory “to safeguard the interests of the people and to ensure the true representation of their will. The principle is being observed because where the more peaceful and well-disposed majority are not sufficiently induced to vote, power tends to pass into the hands of political factions which do not represent the true feelings of the people and are likely be oppressive and corrupt.”. However, it was only mandatory for everybody to go to the polling booth. Somebody who did not want to vote for any candidate could inform the officer-in-charge. (Win Pe 1954: 40)

The elected council was empowered to collect taxes and serve as the village court for minor crimes as well. Different from national elections, the candidates had to be residents of the village. The whole scheme was conceived as a counterpart to the economic *pyi-daw-tha* (“happy land”) program in the field of political administration. The comprehensive eight-years economic plan was launched with the assistance of an American agency in 1952. One of its main pillars was giving annual development grants to each township in the country and thus letting local communities participate in the program. It can be seen as the economic equivalent to the Local Democratic Government that was based on the assumption that “spiritual health and material well-being are not enemies: they are natural allies.” (Pyidawtha: 10)<sup>8</sup>



Both plans tried to encourage peoples’ participation on the village level where the majority of the citizens lived. Both were related to popular Buddhist culture, particularly with regard to the function of charity (*ahlu*) as a central element of social cohesion.. Since most of “politics” took place in Rangoon and was performed by people with some urban background, villagers were in special need to be taught about the new ideas of governing the country. Nu stressed the importance of the peoples’ participation in the new scheme at the inauguration of a village council in April 1955:

It will be a national calamity if it fails ignominiously due to the inefficiency of the people, the dishonesty of the people, the lack of courage of the people ... If it fails, then the people of the Union ... will be floating in the world’s spit, as the saying goes. (Tinker 1957: 150)

7 A similar scheme existed for towns starting at the level of wards. The village/wards council sent a representative to the township councils, delegates from these councils formed district councils. - For details of the scheme see Tinker 1957: 144-150.

8 For a review of the plan see Lex Rieffel and James W. Fox 20 Too Much, Too Soon? The Dilemma of Foreign Aid to Myanmar/Burma - particularly Appendix D (<https://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Nathan-Report-Final.pdf>; accessed 7.6.2020).

In other words: The success of the Local Democratic Government Administration Act was seen as decisive for Burma's future and depended on the character of the people as a whole not just on the actions and behaviour of the ruling class. Such a process of changing the peoples' attitudes at the "ground level" of society was seen as necessary to realise the basic guideline of the constitution that prescribed in its first chapter that "all powers, legislative, executive and judicial, are derived from the people". It further was extremely ambitious because it meant to "revolutionise" the minds both of the people and government holders as Khin Maung Gale had illustrated on the example of the proverb deeply rooted in Burmese tradition through the *lawka-niti* literature.<sup>9</sup>

A drastic illustration of this assessment is a short play entitled "Democracy" the text of which was published in October 1956 by *The Guardian Magazine* (Theippan Soe Yin 1956).<sup>10</sup> The play is about the introduction of the new regulations in a village. In the beginning, opinions are divided between old and young. Most elder villagers are against the new measures or indifferent. Only after a group of communist rebels try to bring the village under their control, the villagers, led by a young man who has studied in a town, elect a council and defend their decision in a Gandhi-like style of non-violent resistance by suffering to be beaten by the rebel leader with his gun and threatened to be all killed. The final sentences of the play that could have been entitled "Freedom from Fear" as well contains its moral:

Mg Shwe [the young man] - "This is Democracy"

Villagers - "Yes, this is indeed Democracy."

U Tha Po (a previous sceptic): "Now I am in favor of Democratic Administration". (Theippan Soe Yin 1956: 30)"

Here, as well as in other texts, democracy is depicted as a life-and-death matter of faith. The main enemy of the people is the armed communist movement trying to implement a wrong interpretation of socialism by the use of force.

## 2 The Elections<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1 The Campaign

The Burma Communist Party was outlawed in October 1953. The Burma Worker and Peasant Party (BWPP) that had been established after the split within the Socialist Party in October 1951 propagated a strict communist doctrine as well. At least in theory, it was organised according to the principle of "democratic centralism". The Arakanese Parliamentary Group, transformed into the Arakanese National Unity Organisation (ANUO) in 1955, opposed the AFPFL candidates in Burma's western province. Some other parties that had unsuccessfully participated in the 1951 elections continued to exist and participated in the election as the Burma Democratic Party (BDP) headed by veteran politician Ba Sein. A newcomer was E Maung, a former High Court Judge and member of the commission supervising the 1951 elections. He founded a new party after the model

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9 For details see Zöllner n.d.

10 Nu who in his early days had wanted to become the "George Bernhard Shaw of Burma", in 1950 wrote a play set in villages between April 1948 and March 1950, that is before the elections of 1951, dealing with the communist threat (Nu 1957 *The People Win Through* – with a long biographical introduction by Edward Hunter.. New York, Taplinger Publishing). It was not put on stage in Burma, but distributed through mimeographs, broadcast in weekly episodes and served as reading material in the country's middle schools. One of the core anti-communist messages of the play, highlighted by an American reviewer is: "I believe in only one thing: Governments should be made by elections, and unmade by election." (ibid.: 96). For the history of the play see Charney 2009.

11 The main sources of the following section are: a) reports from the Burmese newspaper *The Nation* founded in 1948 by Edward Law Yone. It became the most influential English language newspaper. In 1962, he was interned for five years, his newspaper was the first to be shut down by the Revolutionary Council. He moved to Thailand in 1970 and later to the United States. He translated Nu's autobiography *Saturday's Son*. b) Silverstein 1956. For further information see Taylor 1985.

of the British Liberal Party named “Justice Party” in November 1954. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the country’s acknowledged “political poet”, revived the *Dobama Asiayone*.<sup>12</sup>

Before the elections, a number of attempts were made to form alliances that could be able to challenge the supremacy of the AFPFL and their associated organisations in the former Frontier Areas. Finally, two blocs emerged, the National Unity Front (NUF) mainly comprising the BWPP and the Justice Party and the Burma Nationalist Bloc (BNB) under the leadership of Ba Maw. One week before the elections, the *Nation* newspaper provided information about the main parties and their “platforms”:

AFPFL – Specialist programme and Pyidawtha (all 250 seats). NUF – Peace and interim government (131 seats in Burma proper). BNB – Nationalism to solve the country’s problems (over 50 seats in Burma proper). BDP – Buddhist State (20 seats). Independents – Personal popularity Scattered around Burma proper and the States).<sup>13</sup>

The newspaper further commented on the issue if the elections would be free and fair:

No objective observer can answer “yes” to this question. - The elections are held in abnormal times, and while both sides have declared the importance of free and fair elections, conditions prevailing today make this virtually impossible. - On the one hand, the AFPFL has its pocket armies, its guerillas in one form or the other, on the other hand, the Communist Opposition has been openly declared support of the rebels. The Communists say that the pocket armies must get to make free and fair elections, yet the Government is correct in saying that there is intimidation from the rebels. Each side is partially justified in its allegations.<sup>14</sup>

The NUF promised to hold truly free and fair elections after forming an interim government after a potential election victory. This way, the issue of “free and fair elections” was made a central topic of the election campaign. Furthermore, the postponement of the elections in some constituencies was seen as a “dirty trick” of the ruling League to prevent a victory of the opposition.<sup>15</sup> Each side further accused the other of making “murder an instrument of policy” and the case of a student shot dead accidentally in course of a scandal happening after the National Seventh Standard Examinations were cancelled after a newspaper had published some of the questions (Tinley 1956: 180).

In order to counter accusations of attempts to manipulate the polls, the Election Commission had ordered tamper-proof steel boxes made in USA to hold the ballots. The electoral rolls containing 8.570.306 names could however only be finished in March. The opposition called the government’s order that the army should “act fairly” in ensuing clean elections as a further attempt to assist the League’s candidates. No objections are known against the provision that the voters’ forefingers were marked with green indelible ink after checking their identity to prevent a second voting.

Because of the first-past-the post-system the choice of candidates for each constituency was given special attention. All parties tried to secure that their top leaders would have a chance to win against the main rival group. One main aim of the formation of alliances was to prevent vote-splitting.. The AFPFL faced the problem to balance the expectation of actual parliamentarians with the necessity to bring in “new blood”.<sup>16</sup> It was further necessary to take special care in regions where local AFPFL committees were dissatisfied with the choice of candidates appointed by the League’s leadership. This choice was complicated by the necessity to negotiate the issue with the organisations affiliated with the League.

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12 In 1938, he had become the patron of the main wing of the association under Aung San’s leadership after the split, Ba Sein from the smaller faction tried a political comeback after the war with his Burma Democratic Party.

13 *The Nation* 20.4.1956: 9.

14 *Ibid*: 8.

15 *The Nation* 7.4. and 12.4.1956.

16 *The Nation* on 8.3.1956 reported that the League would field 10-15% new candidates.

Given the antithetical line-up, the election campaign concentrated on the issue if or if not the politics of the AFPFL had been successful. The opposition enumerated a series of failures: peace had not been achieved; the economy was in bad shape and supported by western capital that partly went into the pockets of AFPFL functionaries; the League resorted to suppressive means to secure its dominant role. On the other side, the AFPFL called upon the electorate to make a choice between dictatorship under the supervision of foreign – communist – powers and democracy or “the stooges on the one hand and genuine patriots on the other” as Nu worded it (Silverstein 1956: 181).

Both blocs held rallies at which their main slogans were shouted. The AFPFL stressed its achievements with a number of rhetorical questions and answers and the assertion that the league and the people were one:

“Who ended 100-years of colonial rule?” The AFPFL. Who brought independence to the country? The AFPFL. Who has rehabilitated the country and brought about the betterment of the working-class? The AFPFL.” - “The AFPFL is the Ludu [*Burmese for “people”*; hbz] and the Ludu is the AFPFL. We will give our vote for the AFPFL”.

The slogans shouted by NUF supporters pointed to the faults of the government policies with allusions to leftist ideology:

“Bring Down Prices”, “Do Away With Fascism”, “Release Political Prisoners”, “Preserve World Peace”.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, it was expected that the AFPFL would secure a clear victory. According to the assessment of *The Nation* published one week before this election, this was mainly due to the “gigantic organisational machine” and the “tentacles spreading in almost all corners of the country, into all classes of society”. The result would be a gathering of votes “with mechanical precision”. It was forecasted that the AFPFL would be defeated in 25 constituencies and might win narrowly in 15 others. The strength of opposition that held 33 seats in the previous Chamber of Representatives would be thus further reduced.

This however was regarded as a highly ambivalent outcome:

The Opposition which gets into Parliament will certainly be strongly dominated by the Communist group, and as such, will not be what the people want, nor will it be able to do any good for the country. [...] At the same time, hopes are dashed of a constructive group which can exert a beneficial check on the AFPFL, which will be thus more strongly entrenched, and more open to mistakes or blunders, in the absence of a strong, democratic group aiming at efficiency and the common good.<sup>18</sup>

The same newspaper that obviously adopted a “western” perspective in assessing the elections<sup>19</sup> reported about how the “AFPFL machinery” worked on election day in Rangoon by comparing it to a “steam-roller”:

With every wheel of the machine well-oiled days beforehand, the AFPFL organisers were still asleep in eight constituencies at 4 o’clock in the morning. Even at U Kyaw Nye’s house, the “Rear Command” of the election operation, there were no lights at that hour and only about four cars were standing by. The danger seat of U Tin in Kemmendine South,<sup>20</sup> was the only one where the AFPFL kept the midnight light burning, and by 5 a.m. around 100 cars were assembled at the Ahlone Circle AFPFL Headquarters, the nerve centre of the constituency. The machine started rolling between 6.30 and 7 o’clock when 150 to 200 cars turned up for duty in every one of the AFPFL constituencies

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17 *The Nation* 23.4.1956: 1.

18 *The Nation* 20.4.1956: 8.

19 Edward Law Yone, the newspaper’s editor, born in Myitkyina, worked as a civil servant for the British government and served in the British army prior to World War II. After escaping to India during the war, he resigned to serve as an officer in the U.S. Office of Strategic Services in the China-Burma-India theatre. After the coup of 1962, he was – like Nu – imprisoned for six years and left the country with his family in 1968.

20 The seat was contested by Aung San’s elder brother. The AFPFL won by a relatively small margin of 19,082 votes against 16,706 for his opponent.

while a reserve fleet of 100 jeeps, 29 cars and 4 trucks were standing by [...]. In each constituency, the AFPFL could call on an average of 2.000 active workers, in some constituencies the number was up to 3.500. [...] The Opposition vote however was somewhere in the city and it became obvious to the observer that the Opposition, unable to match the colossal machine, had decided to exploit it. There were undoubtedly many Opposition voters who went to the booths in AFPFL cars carrying AFPFL tokens [...] and then voted for the opposition.<sup>21</sup>

This report as others from this newspaper show that Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe, the two AFPFL deputies, supervised the League's election machinery. Chairman Nu seems to have not played any significant role in this regard. He concentrated on holding public speeches.

## 2.2 The Election Results

On April 27, the new ballot boxes had only been put up in 205 constituencies. Nine seats<sup>22</sup> could not be filled for security reasons, in 36 constituencies no voting took place because nobody had been registered to compete against the AFPFL candidate. Elections to Chamber of Nationalities were held one month later on May 22.

The voter turnout in the constituencies where polling took place can be estimated at over 50%. It is not clear how the registered voters – some 13% of the total electorate – would have assessed the performance of the AFPFL dominated government if they would have had a choice between candidates of the rival camps.

The result shows that the prediction of *The Nation* about the election outcome had been correct insofar as the AFPFL won the expected "landslide victory". It could be regarded as another convincing victory of the AFPFL and its regional allies. The 173 seats won made it possible to amend the constitution for which a two-third majority was necessary according to Chapter XI of the constitution.

On the other hand, the opposition won more than the 25 seats predicted by the newspaper analysts. An overview on the results published three days after the polls when the votes counted in 138 constituencies had been released shows that the AFPFL had won 107 seats and the NUF 26. The preview had correctly foreseen that a number of constituencies would be strongly contested. Some contests were decided by narrow margins, either in favour of

<i>Pro-AFPFL Parties</i>	<i>Popular Vote</i>	<i>Percent of Vote</i>	<i>Seats</i>
<b>AFPFL</b>	<b>1,844,614</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>UNPC</b>	<b>163,283</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>PECDO</b>	<b>49,203</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ASSO</b>	<b>41,940</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>SSPO</b>	<b>31,112</b>	<b>.8</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>KNC</b>	<b>30,837</b>	<b>.8</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Sub-total</i>	<b>2,160,989</b>	<b>55.9</b>	<b>173</b>
<i>Anti-AFPFL Parties</i>			
<b>NUF</b>	<b>1,170,073</b>	<b>30.4</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>BDP</b>	<b>113,091</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>BNB</b>	<b>77,364</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ANUO</b>	<b>38,939</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>UNPO</b>	<b>22,185</b>	<b>.6</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Sub-total</i>	<b>1,421,652</b>	<b>36.9</b>	<b>55</b>
<i>Other Parties (10)</i>	<b>40,405</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>0</b>
<i>Independents</i>	<b>239,166</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Undecided Seats</i>	<b>—</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Sub-total</i>	<b>279,571</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>3,868,242</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>250</b>

Source: Silverstein 1956: 182- (UCHPD [UNCP is a typo] - United Hill People's Congress; PECDO - People's Economic Cultural Development Organization; ASSO - All Shan State Organization; KNC - Kachin National Congress; BDP - Burma Democratic Party; UNPO - United National Pa-O Organization)

21 *The Nation* 28.4.1956: 1.

22 According to other accounts: 10 or 12.



the AFPFL or the NUF candidate. In Insein North, an electoral district not mentioned by the previewers as contested, the candidate of the League received less than 100 votes more than his competitor. The winner benefited from the votes given to a candidate of the BDP. Nu on the other hand received almost four times more votes than the member of the NUF contesting his constituency Rangoon East.

One may say therefore that the overall outcome had been expected but that there were many single results that came as a surprise. The most prominent leaders of the NUF won their seats, among them Thein Pe, a famous writer who propagated communist ideas and lawyer E Maung, founder of the Justice Party, who won in a district where it had been expected that “the working-class vote would defeat him”.<sup>23</sup> The “well oiled” AFPFL machinery did not produce the intended results at all places outside Rangoon. The opposition bloc did not only win in the regions where the NUF was well organised and could rely on the “jungle vote” influenced by the communist insurgency, but also in the delta region and in the south (Silverstein 1956: 182).<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the overall support of the League had decreased. According to the number of votes received by the AFPFL without the groups affiliated to the League was just 47,7%. This could be seen as a sign of voters’ discontent with the League.

Accordingly, the reaction of members of the League shows that a better result had been expected. The ‘poor’ performance was explained by a variety of reasons. Intimation of voters was named and the fact that the green ink used to prevent cheating might have been induced voters to put the ballots in the boxes of the NUF because the party used a green symbol (Silverstein 1956: 181).

On this background, it could hardly be expected that Nu on June 5, some days after the final results of the elections had been announced, resigned from his post as leader of the government. As a consequence, the question arises what might have caused U Nu to hand over the premiership to his deputy Ba Swe for one year and his announcement to concentrate on re-organising the League in that period of his “retirement” from the top government post. In early March 1956, the Information Minister had countered rumours that Nu “would either lay down the burden of office or be persuaded to make room for a younger man”:

We are going to win the elections and U Nu is going to be Prime Minister as long as the AFPFL remains in power. No one is going to take his place because no one is ambitious to be Premier. The esteem in which he is held by the people, the affection we have for him in the Party, his personal prestige and qualities of leadership are such that neither he nor we can think of parting company. Ours is not a temporary partnership of convenience like the Opposition alliance.<sup>25</sup>

Nu and the AFPFL seemed to be inseparable.

### 3 Aspects of Nu’s Resignation from the Premiership

The information minister’s claim was an attempt to counter rumours of an imminent resignation. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported that – different from earlier reports about Nu’s “threats to resign” – new reports suggested a “real possibility that the BSPP [Burma Socialist Party] may decide to dispense with U Nu.” (CIA 1956 b: 1) The wording reflected the general assessment prevailing both in and outside of Burma at that time that the main rivals of Nu were his AFPFL deputies Ba Swe, characterised as a leftist, and Kyaw Nyein, classified as a more rightist socialist.

The following sections of this part will provide information about some aspects of the events between the 1956 elections and the begin of Ne Win’s Caretaker Government in October 1958 with the unanimous support of the parliament that deserve to be given more consideration than they have received as yet. First comes some notes about changes in the standing of the AFPFL vis à vis the

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23 *The Nation* 29.4.1956: 1.

24 In Tavoy (Dawei) West, the NUF received 17,172 votes, the AFPFL candidate just 586.

25 *The Nation* 7.3.1956: 1.

role of the armed forces, the Tatmadaw, that had been a founding member of the League (3.1). Then come some observations on Nu's Buddhist orientation and its influence of his political agenda (3.2) followed by information about his strained relations with Kyaw Nyein (3.3.). Finally, the events leading to the split of the AFPFL officially announced in April 1958 will be outlined (3.4).

### 3.1 Changes in the AFPFL's Standing Within Burma's Politics

The particular quality of the AFPFL as a kind of coalition, the special role of the members of the socialist party and the mixed membership of individuals and members of a number of mass organisations has already been outlined in connection with the 1951 elections (**see above II b, pp. ...**). As the organisation leading Burma's political fight for independence, its self-perception was to represent the whole of Burma including the more or less loosely allied ethnic groups. As Nu's often quoted remark that the League would remain Burma's dominating force for forty years, such an assessment did not meet the concept of British-style democracy based on the principle of periodical power changes between different political parties representing and promoting different political ideologies.

The ideological anti-fascist orientation developed in the fight against the Japanese that had contributed to adopt "democracy" in a not clearly defined way had naturally faded away over the years. The new "anti"-attitude against the communists that could serve as a replacement however posed a number of difficulties. One of them was the problem to delimitate communist ideas from the socialism that had been propagated by Aung San as the foundation of the League as well as the constitution. Another problem was the civil war fought against the underground communist forces. Here, the army under Ne Win played a crucial role and unavoidably developed a political profile that was discussed annually at the commanders' conferences together with members of the government. Ne Win's participation in the government on the request of Nu in 1949 and the activities of his lieutenants Maung Maung and Aung Gyi who were instrumental to build up a professional Tatmadaw already in 1952 contributed to rumours that the military was about to take over the government. (Zaw Thein 2014: 61).

The Tatmadaw developed its own infrastructure including an efficient economic enterprise and a political department named the Psy-War Directorate. This can be seen as a logical consequence of its decisive role in the independence struggle and its role as one of the founding embers of the AFPFL and thus as a core agent of Burma's post war revolution as the title of Ba Than's early history of the Tatmadaw illustrates.. The directorate dealt with ideological issues and propagated them through magazines and other means mainly aiming at curbing the influence of communist views (Ba Than 1962; Callahan 1996). The Tatmadaw thus very early developed a structure that later became labelled as a "state in the state".

Like the military, the League exhibited a top-down structure but in a very different manner. It had a pyramidal structure. On top was the president, and some other leading functionaries. On the bottom were the members who numbered 1,287,290 in 1957 consisting of two groups, the mass organisations affiliated to the League (800,000)<sup>26</sup> and individuals (487,290). (Furnivall 1960: 115). Positioned between the top and the bottom were two semi-democratically elected bodies<sup>27</sup> the 250 member Supreme Council that elected the Executive Council consisting of 15 people. The former

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26 The greatest organisations were; The All Burma Peasants' Organisation (ABPO) headed by Thakin Tin with 500,000 members, the Federation of Trade Organisations (FTO) with 199,242 members, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) with 60,584 members headed by Ba Swe, the United Karen Organisation (KNO) under Mahn Win Maung with 31,559 members and the Burmese Women's Freedom League with 57,574 members. (Furnivall 1960: 115). Other smaller groups were the Muslim Congress, the and others that had been more or less disconnected from the League (Tinker 1957: 66-67).

27 Between December 1947 and January 1958, no national congress was convened. The choice of the office holders was a mixture of elections from below and appointments from above or a mixture of both (Furnivall 1960: 116) with a strong tendency towards top-down decisions (Tinker 1957: 56).

met from time to time, the latter regularly according to the requirements of the situation that required to discuss and decide actual issues. The two bodies paralleled parliament – comprising as many members than the Chamber of Deputies - and government. The AFPFL's Executive Committee could be seen as most important decision maker in Burma's politics.

The main task of the committee was to balance the diverse interests and ideological orientations within the League. Both the military and the AFPFL were “born” during the time of the independence struggle and dominated by Aung San. His two successors' personalities were very different as were their relations to the organisations they headed.

Ne Win's career had happened only in the military in which he had played a leading role both as a commander and a spokesman of the military. He had followed Aung San as leader of the army after the head of the armed forces had taken over the ministry of defence in Be Maws cabinet of 1943. Later, he became the undisputed and respected leader of the armed forces and together with his younger subordinates developed the army in a professional way.. During the time of the first phase of the civil war and the Kuomintang insurrection he had Ne Win was a rather mundane man, well known for his interest in horse racing and betting there, a custom not in line with Buddhist principles. In 1951 he was married to his third wife and seemed – different from some of his subordinates - to have no political ambitions (Taylor 2015: 185).

In his young days, Nu had dreamed to become a writer and had only reluctantly entered the field of politics, a notion he admitted openly (Nu 1975: 19). In his autobiography, he characterised himself as an “amateur in office” who had been forced to take over the top political post of the country. As a convinced Buddhist, he had vowed to live a celibate life after the war and had great difficulties to deal with the problem of using violent means to defend his country solved with a reference to a Jataka story about one of the Buddha's previous lives (Nu 1975: xiv). He was generally liked by the population and accepted in his role as the “Kogyi“(elder brother) by those politicians with whom he had cooperated in the turbulent years after the student strike of 1936, but had no real power base both in the AFPFL and the cabinet..

This was different with those politicians who headed the different mass organisations. Their importance as the representation of the different societal groups was emphasised through the provision that they could cast two votes - as members of their respective organisation and as individual AFPFL members a status that was automatically attributed to them. The largest of the association representing the peasants could thus muster one million votes and was in theory almost able to outvote all others. Given the heavy task to balance both the different ideological orientations represented by different AFFL groups, the influence of the versus mass organisations and the interests of the ethnic affiliates, Nu's task was rather heavy particularly in comparison to Ne Win's who could rely on the principle of order and obedience dominating the organisational structure of the Tatmadaw in which however tensions could be observed between the officers working at the headquarters and the regional commanders (Callahan 1996).

### 3.2 Nu, Buddhism, Politics and the Great Synod

In a press conference on June 5, Nu answered questions about his decision to quit his governmental post. One of the Q and A exchanges was:

What exactly is it you are going to reorganise? - Not the programme, which remains unchanged. But the personnel. Call it a purge. [...]

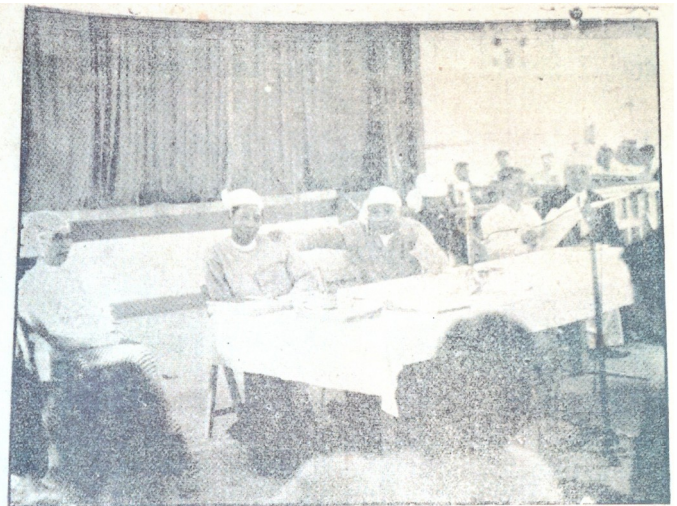
In the further course of the conference he was reported to have elaborated thus:

The Prime Minister dealt patiently with the complaint that he had gone around campaigning for the elections knowing all the time he was going to resign. It was true, he said, that he had made up his mind some time ago, but each time the thought came up it was attended by another thought, that his colleagues would be certainly object. It was only after the Sixth Synod had been completed, and he

was meditating in the Sacred Cave, that he felt all the barriers melt away, and then he knew he would carry out his resolve.

Then, it has nothing to do with the elections? - No. The elections are a fight. And I love a fight – always.<sup>28</sup> Nu thus confirmed his often quoted intention to resign from his post or being forced to resign as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported shortly after the elections. Allegedly, the socialists had put pressure on Nu after the losses of votes in the election to support a more “leftist” course of government (CIA 1956b: 4).

Nu's move can be called “personal” in a triple sense. It was rooted in his temperament which he himself called “short tempered” and “over-sensitive” before he decided to “exercise self-restraint”.-(Butwell 1963: 83-94) His intention to “purge” the AFPFL from “bad elements” further shows that he was convinced that “good politics” had to be performed by morally “good people”. Thirdly, he saw himself as a politician whose decision had to be accepted by his colleagues in the League’s Executive Council. He needed their “permission to resign” and had to “resort to an ‘extreme course’” before he had been allowed to do so. He was further quoted to have said before members of the League:



“THE MAN I TRUST”: U Nu gives the accolade to U Ba Swe. Seen left to right: Thakir Tin; U Ba Swe; U Nu; U Kyaw Nyein; U Tun Win and Premier’s Secretary U Thant. The proceedings began with U Thant reading aloud the speech which the Prime Minister had earlier made to

Even then, I am not free to set about my work to my heart’s content. They allow me one year to give undivided attention to political organisation. At the end of that year, if my calculation is found correct and my work is found to be beneficial to the country, then I hope that my colleagues will continue to accept my stand.<sup>29</sup>

Press Conference 5.6.1956 (Source: The Nation 5.5.1956: 1)

This assessment is confirmed by Nu’s statement in his autobiography that he had intended to give up politics completely in January 1957 but had given in to the requests of his colleagues and agreed to resume the post of premier after one year.

One can conclude that Nu’s main aim was to leave politics after having finished his worldly duties of a politician that had never been his main life goal. Instead, his motivation might have been based on his Buddhist beliefs according to which the spiritual sphere is by far superior to the mundane one.<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, he might have seen the successful performance of the Buddhist synod in May 1956 as the peak of his career. This assessment is confirmed by Nu’s statement in his autobiography that he had intended to give up politics completely in January 1957 but had given in to the requests of his colleagues and agreed to resume the post of premier after one year.

Nu’s reference to the Sixth Synod in the press conference might provide a clue to his wish to resign for some time from at least a part of his political duties. The holding of the synod to which he had invited Buddhists from other countries was one of his favourite projects. For the purpose, an artificial cave and the adjacent *Kaba Aye* (World Peace) Pagoda had been built in 1952 in preparation for the council. It began in May 1954 and ended with the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha’s entering the *parinibbāna* (after-death *nibbāna*) on 21 May 1956. The project was financially supported by the USA on the initiative of the its ambassador in Rangoon in

28 *The Nation* 6.6.1956: 1.

29 *The Guardian* (London) 6.6.1956: 7.

30 This conviction guided Nu’s early political activities during the independence movement in the 1930s (Zöllner 2002: 64-70 ). After the war, he at least seven times became a monk for a short time including a 45 day long retreat during the election campaign of 1964. (Butwell 1963: 64)

November 1951 as a means to counter communist influence.<sup>31</sup> Other authors referring to Nu's well known Buddhist inclination underscored his intention, "to lead his party and his country until the foundations of public efficiency and honesty are laid." (Tinker 1957b: 132)

This quote suggests that Nu's decision to clean the AFPFL during the time of his retirement from the premiership indicates that he regarded his position as head of the League as more important than the premiership. In his autobiography, he calls the AFPFL "His Life, His League." (Nu 1957: 313) The reference to the Sixth Buddhist Synod in connection with the religious connotations of the word "purge" might help to understand Nu's special logic that – particularly for western for observer – often seemed to be "irrational and petulant". (Taylor 2015: 207)

Foreign reports trying to identify reasons for Nu's decision argued that his step was related to the rise of communist votes. This might have been seen by Nu. It was argued, as a failure of his politics of neutrality between the Western and Eastern Blocs. Leaving the premier's office might for a year might have given him time "to think out a new philosophy for Asian people who want to live in peace."<sup>32</sup> Other reports simply stated that the reasons were "unclear".<sup>33</sup>

Journalist Law Yone, the translator of Nu's autobiography who was educated at a Christian school in the Kachin regions words the essence of the relationship of Buddhism politics as identified by Nu thus:

[Its] theme is perhaps that to be a good Buddhist is to be a good democrat, and that the guiding principle in the unavoidable use of force [...] is defined in the life of Mahawthada, the embryo Buddha, a model on which U Nu still strives to fashion his own life. (Nu 1975: xiv)

In his memoirs, Nu retells the story of this future Buddha in connection with the task of his government to fight the communist insurgency by force.<sup>34</sup> It helped him to overcome his scruples with the help of a vow to abide by the moral of the story to not commit any sinful action that was wrong "in the eyes of the Buddha, the gods, and holy men" for the sake of increasing his self-glory but just "to save king and country" as the future Buddha had done (Nu 1975: 147-149). One may conclude that for Nu the main yardstick for his policy was the teaching of the Buddha with regard to morality (sila) and virtue (parami).

Furthermore, the qualitative superiority of Buddhism over communist ideas – even those of Karl Marx whom he often quoted positively in his discourses on socialism – is exemplified by one of his statements often quoted by others<sup>35</sup>:

It will be our duty in to resort in no uncertain terms that the wisdom or knowledge that might be attributed to Karl Marx is less than one-tenth of a particle of dust that lies at the feet of our Lord Buddha. (Freeman 2017)

There is some evidence that Nu regarded the armed communist groups that had not accepted his calls for leftist unity as the "enemy of the people" for two main reasons. First: They used immoral means of coercion and bullied people as illustrated in the two political plays he wrote during his premiership (Zöllner 2022: 213-2469. Second, they aimed to build up a dictatorship in which power was held by just a few people (Nu 1955: 9-15).

31 (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951v06p1/d157> (accessed 11.9.2020).

32 *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY) 8.6.1956: 10.

33 *The Guardian* (London) 6.6.1056.: 6.

34 A wise man named Mahaw-thada was the sixth of the last ten incarnation of the Buddha. His story was made

popular through a play written by Kyin U, a famous writer living in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (for details see Htin Aung 1957 *Burmese Drama. A Study, with Translations of Burmese Plays*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 51-55). Nu tells that he found the story when he opened a book named "Ten Zat". The word "zat" means play. Nu had started writing plays already in the 1930s (for details see Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.) 2010 Nu, Early Plays and Ba Thaug, Adaptation of "An Enemy of the People". Passau, Department of Southeast Asian Studies: <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/myanmar-literature-project-20-working-paper-no-1017-nu-early-plays-and-ba-thaug-adaptation-of-an>; accessed 27.4.2020) and was therefore familiar with the story.

35 <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/myanmar/government-1948-62-3.htm> (accessed 2.12.2023).

This attitude had consequences for Nu's assessments of "good politicians" and thus the members of the League. In his speech at a congress of the still united AFPFL in January 1958, he named two criteria to be met:

- (i) Ability to restrain and discipline oneself, and
- (ii) A spirit of subordination of self, which keeps one always ready to make sacrifice for the good of others. (Nu 1958: 62)

Here, he referred to the Buddhist principle of *anatta* (no-self) and thus suggested that the AFPFL should be some kind of a Buddhist cadre-party the members of which were morally "clean". On this background, Nu's "Buddhist-shaped political temperament" could be a main key to understand his decision to resign from the premiership after the elections of 1956.

Other motives can however not be excluded given Nu's "volatile" character that he admitted often.. In the dedication to his wife in a political play finished in 1961 entitled "The Wages of Sin" (a quote from the Bible<sup>36</sup>), he states that he had intended to begin to write the play in 1956, but was involved in working on other commitments-

Nu's foreword to the play<sup>37</sup> however clearly defines his understanding of the fundament of the Burmese democracy:

Parliamentary democracy cannot endure, and must sooner or later perish in a country where those entrusted with its governance are:

- (1) addicted to spirituous liquor;
- (2) given to over-indulgence in such things as the pleasures of women;
- (3) in the habit of gambling;
- (4) unable to rise above bribery and corruption; and
- (5) guilty of misusing power for the sake of the Party.

May all those in power who revere Parliamentary Democracy take special note for this warning, and be enabled to uphold the law and the precepts to their utmost capacity. (Nu 1961: I)<sup>38</sup>

Here, the five Buddhist *silas* (precepts) are invoked as the guardians of parliamentary democracy and thus of those who participate in elections. They are to be observed both by candidates – and particularly the candidates of the AFPFL - as criteria for self-examination and voters as standards to choose the right person – notably regardless of party affiliation.

The foreword of journalist Law-Yone' – throughout his life was a staunch anti-communist – supports the imminent danger to the state by referring to the result of the 1956 elections:

In 1956, the AFPFL stood for Democracy and as opposed to Communism. The elections that gave less than one-fifth of the total number of seats to the Communists, but in terms of the popular vote the Communists polled 1,4 million ballots to the AFPFL's 1,7 million. The danger signal was up, the warning was clear: Democracy was losing ground and could be swamped at the next elections. (Nu 1961: iii)

Law-Yone interprets the "popular vote" of the elections in his own way. He diminishes the number of ballots in favour of the AFPFL from almost 1.9 to 1.7 million and does not mention the votes for the League's allies. He stresses the quality of the communist threat by manipulating the numbers and neglecting the fact that not all votes for the NUF candidates were given to communists.

All in all, it is very likely that Nu's "Buddhist beliefs" influenced his decision to step down from the premiership in 1956 in order to clean the AFPFL. It can however be doubted that his decision was

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36 The Burmese original refers to the four silas mentioned in Nu's foreword. The English title might have been coined by Christian-educated Law-Yone (for more details on the play and its presentation on a stage in the United States see see Zöllner 2022: 235-240).

37 Most likely, the play was never performed on a stage in Burma but

38 The full text of the foreword is reproduced in Blum 2010: 66.

not related to the outcome of the 1956 elections. An American scholar visiting Burma in 1956 at the time of the elections remembers that Nu

was thoroughly convinced that the successes of the NUF reflected genuine dissatisfaction among the people with the nation and local AFPFL leadership. Fresh from the inspiration on the Sixth Buddhist Council [...], he was prepared to get rid of all AFPFL "bad hats" and wipe out corruption and graft which, he felt, had contributed so much to NUF victories. (Trager 1948: 147)

This information correlates with the assessment of Law-Yone with regard to the 1956 elections. Most likely, Nu's decision was motivated by a number of reasons, but it can be safely assumed that his Buddhist beliefs strengthened by the successful completion of the Great Synod played a crucial role. It is further obvious that his move was disliked by many of his AFPFL colleagues.

U Nu tied democracy to the moral standards of the individuals who practise politics selflessly for the good of the country. As a consequence, the AFPFL had to be purged from "bad hats".

### 3.3 The Death of the AFPFL: Personal Mistrust and Political Differences

In the recollection of the AFPFL split in his autobiography, Nu focussed on his personal relations with Kyaw Nyein and traced the first "sign of a crack" back to late 1954 and a rice deal with China conducted under the supervision of his long time confidant that had taken place during the premier's visit in China. The bad quality of the rice might have caused Nu to lose face. Because of the "emotional being" that he was, Nu "exploded", he tells in his biography. Allegedly he accused Kyaw Nyein of dishonesty (Nu 1975: 515-516; Sein Win 1959: 17).

The dispute between the two men is documented by an exchange of letters happening in early July 1956, one month after Nu's resignation. The two rather long letters – Kyaw Nyein's is dated 3 July, Nu's 6 July – were published in 1958 by a Burmese newspaper. The texts were added to the Burmese translation of Richard Butwell's biography of Nu that came out in 2012.<sup>39</sup> An only recently completed English translation is added as an appendix to this chapter. The exchange of letters might provide some insight in the personal communication of the two leading members of the AFPFL, the reasons for the split and the relevance of personal communication for the procedure of Burmese politics in general that normally happened and happens behind closed doors.

Kyaw Nyein begins his letter with a reference to a meeting of the AFPFL's Executive Committee on 24 June. According to the writer, it was discussed, "that even good people are afraid of the Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI) law". Even Kyaw Nyein asked: "After a year, when you, the chairman, become the Prime Minister again, will I be at risk of being punished?" Shortly later, this expression of mistrust was broadened: "You, the chairman, are only finding faults with the socialist leaders. Especially finding faults with me. We know this and say it openly in the middle of the crowd." Kyaw Nyein concluded that Nu was about to "form a government with no socialist party members, in other words, a one-man dictatorial government after taking control of the AFPFL".

The charge was substantiated by a detailed explanation of Nu's alleged tactics and a number of events that had happened before since the student strike of 1936 in which both Nu and Kyaw Nyein had participated.

Nu in his answer dismissed Kyaw Nyein's accusations by telling his versions of the allegations put forward by the man who had cooperated with him for decades before and after the war.

#### **[Quotations]**

The letters display an atmosphere of mutual distrust and fear among the AFPFL leadership that was unleashed by Nu's announcement to retire from the premiership and concentrate on the purging the League. At the same time, the exchange of views illustrates that this climate had developed over

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39 The original English version was published in 1963. The letters are reprinted on pages 295-308 (Kyaw Nyein) and 311-322.

time. Corruption charges were tied to patron-client networks that was a basic element of the AFPFL's infrastructure. Personal relations were thus inextricably related to the question of how to administer the League and the government. One of the issues on which Kyaw Nyein and Nu held different opinions was the question of how to relate office holding in the mass organisations of the League and the cabinet. For both men, to influence the policy of the League had the first priority and thus a cause of severe tensions.<sup>40</sup>

The socialist party was more a "think tank" than a well organised party and extended its political influence through the mass organisations headed by their leaders like Ba Swe, Kyaw Nyein's "non identical political twin" (Cady 1965: 576). For a long time, he had been loyal to Nu without sharing his inclination to ground political principles on Buddhist beliefs. As a consequence, he viewed the AFPFL as a "mass and class party" advocating the interests of the "poor" in line with the socialist principles laid down in the constitution of 1947.

Not much is however known about Nu's concrete actions. A western observer wrote in 1957:

Details of the purge are not available, cryptic notices have appeared regularly in the Burmese press throughout the nine-month period reporting the demotion, expulsion or arrest of various district AFPFL officials, and the central headquarters of the party in Rangoon is said to be still reviewing reports on the activities of district leaders. U Nu is apparently satisfied with his purge. (Thomson 1957: 299)

One centre of Nu's activities was cleaning the AFPFL offices in Prome (Pyay).<sup>41</sup> A foreign journalist told Nu that the people there had told him during the election campaign that they liked him but would not vote for the AFPFL candidates because of the League's "record" in the region.<sup>42</sup> In the end, the League won only four of the eight seats contested in the region. (Thomson 1957: 312) The Burmese journalist who in 1959 published his account of the AFPFL resumes dryly:

[Nu's] attempt to clean up the League by the undesirables had failed [...], as a strict purge would practically eliminate the League itself (Sein Win 1959: 32)

An American scholar who visited Burma in 1958 and 1960 and talked to Kyaw Nyein argued that the main result of Nu's resignation was to let the government concentrate on the political day-to-day business and thus have less time to engage in "corrupt" practises. This could deprive some "leaders of their respective bases in the constituent organizations". He further noticed that Kyaw Nyein stated that the AFPFL deserved to be "thrown out" if it did not put its house in order – but that too had to be done in a different way than that taken by Nu<sup>43</sup> (Trager 1958: 148)

The problem was that any rivalry of persons belonging to one of the big "constituent organisations" caused tensions between the leaders of those mass organisations and other party leaders (Thomson 1957: 312-313). This might be one reason of the reported tensions between Tin who headed the influential peasants' organisation and Kyaw Nyein who did not lead any of the AFPFL mass organisations. He had however served as General Secretary of the AFPFL until June 1956 when he was replaced by Kyaw Tun (also referred to a Kyaw Dun), a leading functionary in the peasants' organisation headed by Tin and one of the "uneducated" socialists.

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40 Such tensions went along with ideological and political differences. Kyaw Nyein was a follower of Thakin Mya, the head of the Socialist Party, who was killed together with Aung San in July 1947. In Mya's footsteps, he concentrated on implementing socialist principals that benefited the masses of Burma, being it peasants or workers. As the first home minister of independent Burma in 1948/49 he was responsible to uphold law and order. As a result, he became unpopular among those on whose toes he had stepped (British Documents: 68). He further complained that he was compelled to take over ministries he did not like.

41 In his letter, Kyaw Nyein claimed that a number of socialists had been removed in some rdistricts in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

42 *The Montreal Star* 28.781956: 11. Thomson 1958: 132..

43 The American scholar noted that Kyaw Nyein was no less a good Buddhist than Nu but "did not make such a show of it." (Trager 1958: 147).



According to Sein Win, the chronicler of the 1958 split, tensions had existed between Tin and Kyaw Nyein. For some time Tin, born 1903, was a socialist as well but had not belonged to the group of students around Aung San, Nu, Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein. He – as well as Kyaw Dun - was regarded as belonging to the “uneducated” socialists. Politically, Kyaw Nyein advocated industrialisation as well as Ba Swe who chaired the Trade Union Congress. Sein Win illustrates the rift by two examples\_

Thakin Kyaw Tin told a reporter that persons on his side were uneducated but sincere. Only three men of them could make 7<sup>th</sup> Standard; while the opposite side had B.As. But were not sincere. Thakin Tin Maung Gyi from the same fraction [...] referred to the “exploitation by the educated of the uneducated class. (Sein Win 1959: 15)

It can therefore be assumed that personal as well as political differences connected to League's organisational structure constituted main causes of the rift between the two factions that later were called “Nu-Tin” and “Swe-Nyein”. Nu as the “independent” head of the AFPFL emphasised moral “sincerity” Nu put the emphasis on personal integrity of office holders. Kyaw Nyein might have stressed professional skills in making the “machinery” of the League function in the interest of the “masses”.

Furthermore, the core issue of corruption, had been “politicised” since the passing of the law establishing the Bureau of Special Investigation under the direct control of the prime minister. In general, from the beginning of independence onward, “‘justice’ in its abstract sense is unobtainable. The interest of the State transcends Law” as a Public Prosecutor worded it in 1943 (Tinker 1957: 140). Since the AFPFL represented the state to a great extent, the independence of the BSI could be always questioned.

Such issues were not to be openly discussed. Due to its complex organisation, the decision making process within the AFPFL happened behind doors that were neither completely closed or opened so that information transpired in form of rumours that reached the public through the work of journalists and other means. In the absence of a functioning “modern” media system<sup>44</sup> and in view of the many incidents of violence caused the civil war and the country’s manifold diversity, rumours created their own dynamics.

All this contributed to developments leading to Nu’s broadcast message in 1958 that the AFPFL had split into two factions. The following narration of what happened is mainly taken from Sein Win’s account published in 1959.

His return was preceded by an incident showing that Nu's colleagues were aware of the fact that it might be useful to continue the sharing of responsibilities that he himself had initiated by his resignation in June 1956. It further illustrates the difficulty of discriminating rumours and established facts because of the independent sources.

In early 1957 when Nu was on a pilgrimage to Ceylon, a meeting in Ba Swe’s, the actual prime minister’s, house took place to discuss military matters. Besides the host, General Ne Win, Kyaw Nyein, and Hla Maung, one of the 30 comrades, the nucleus of the BIA ambassador in China and a prominent socialist, were present. Tin was absent because of a treatment in hospital. The ambassador proposed the idea that Nu might not resume his post as premier but remain head of the AFPFL with the title of Chairman after the model of Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and leave the actual political work to a Burmese equivalent of Zhou Enlai, China's prime minister. Tin was informed about the idea and allegedly did not object. It was decided that Ne Win and Hla Maung should inform Nu about the proposal.

After his return to Rangoon, Nu was informed by the AFPFL’s general secretary Kyaw Tun that Tin wanted to see him immediately in hospital. According to Tin’s version, “Swe-Nyein had been

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44 The broadcasting was under government control and the newspapers reached only the people in the urban areas.

planning to keep [...] Nu permanently out of office.” (Sein Win 1959: 21). Nu got furious and decided immediately to resume the premiership earlier than announced. Later attempts of Hla Maung and Ne Win to explain that no “ouster” had been planned were to no avail.

According to Nu’s memoirs, he reacted thus:

In the seclusion of his home he wondered about the plot. He had publicly announced that he was retiring from politics in January 1957. Why they had done this to him? And why had the army been brought in if not as a threat? He felt insulted. His ire rose. (Nu 1975: 322)

Nu, in retrospect, suggests the plan of a “plot”, in which the military was involved after having traced back the genesis of the AFPFL split to his controversy with Kyaw Nyein. The contemporary observer Sein Win accentuates the rift between Kyaw Nyein and Tin and the long standing traditions of splits in Burmese politics that had affected the socialists with in the League as well. He further refers to the long standing tradition of “individuals personality” playing “role “playing an immense role in shaping the destiny of the nation” (Sein Win 1959: 59) that had already been deplored by Ba Khaing before the war.. One may conclude that the split that was officially announce by Nu on 29 April 1958 had already been a reality due to the controversies between Tin and Kyaw Tun on one side and Kyaw Nyein and Ba Swe on the other.

Finally, tensions were increased by Kyaw Nyein's intention to form a youth organisation under his chairmanship to strengthen his influence within the AFPFL and a number of arrests ordered by Nu in face of a rise of criminal cases in Rangoon and Insein. Shortly later, the premier took over the post of the home minister that had previously held by a member of Kyaw Nyein's faction. Tin and Kyaw Tun had claimed that more of their followers were arrested than supporters of the other fraction. This caused Nu to abandon his previous neutral stand and sided against Kyaw Nyein and the "educated" faction in favour of the "uneducated" one (Win Sein: 23-25; Furnivall 1960: 122-123). In his autobiography, Nu writes that the final decision to part ways were accusations by followers of Kyaw Nyein against Thakin Tun in his stronghold Insein that were “tantamount to a public declaration of war.” As a consequence, he decided to propose a peaceful way out of the cis-is and under special conditions – “pledges against liquor, bribery and corruption - join the group headed by Tin. As their leader(Nu 1975: 324) -

#### 4 Post-Mortem: The Way to Burma's First Government headed by a Soldier

The death of the AFPFL as Burma's dominating political body was proclaimed end of April 1958. Six months later, on October, parliament unanimously elected General Ne Win as the new prime minister of Burma. The main task of his government was to hold free and fair elections as a ways out of the political crisis caused by the split of the AFPFL. The last chapter of John S. Furnivall book finished in September 1958 on the "governance of modern Burma" is entitled "Post Mortem" and can be regarded as an obituary of Burma's post war history under AFPFL leadership. The following two section provide information about the sealing of the split through a voting in parliament, the second about the attempts to resolve the subsequent political deadlock by constitutional means.

##### 4.1 Peaceful Separation versus Controversial Power Politics Resulting in a Political Deadlock

Sein Win in his famous "Split Story" about the division of AFPFL informs about two meetings of the formally still united AFPFL that point to contradictory ways of how to deal with the decease of the political body that had dominated Burma's politics for one decade::

On May 3, the last meeting of the undivided AFPFL EC was held and formally decided upon the parting of the ways. A 4-man Committee of Nu, Tin, Swe, and Nyein was formed at this meeting to work out for a peaceful separation and for the equitable division of the assets of the AFPFL. In addition, the 4fourmen Committee was charged to draw up a Charter of Peace and Democracy, as suggested by U Nu.

Two days later on May 5, the last meeting of the Cabinet of the undivided AFPFL Government decided to summon a special emergency session of the Chamber of Deputies on June 5 for Parliamentary test of strength between the two factions. (Sein Win 1959: 27)

Two different ways of dealing with the split of the AFPFL are outlined here - "peaceful parting" and a confrontational "test of strength" the latter to take place in parliament. It was the latter style that dominated the events that resulted in what Sein Win called "Mutual Mudslinging". (Sein Win 1959: 29) The split affected the government as well because the majority situation in parliament was changed now. In early May, President Win Maung summoned an extraordinary meeting of parliament for June 8 to decide who should head the government in the future. Most of the AFPFL parliamentarians belonged to the Swe-Nyein faction. The NUF soon published its decision to support the Nu-Tin side. The chart shows that the outcome of the vote was very narrow and that the small majority that helped Nu to continue as premier was very fragile. As a result, new elections were a likely option to deal with the crisis.

The following events happening in the controversy of the two AFPFL factions indicate that a spirit of sharp contention dominated now. In May and early June, each group held separate meetings and expelled the members of the other party from the "their" AFPFL and thus claimed to be the "true" League. Furthermore, new names were coined to highlight such claims. The Swe-Nyein group chose the epithet "Stable" (or "Real"), the Nu-Tin rival the term "Clean" AFPFL. Both labels aptly characterised the quality of the respective organisation, not the contents of a political program.

After the vote of June 9, a new cabinet had to be formed. Nu chose members from the Clean AFPFL. The "leftist" NUF parliamentarians whose votes had helped to keep his post were not rewarded with ministerial. However, the liberal E Maung took over as Justice Minister in July 1958. The new government could however not be called a coalition. Nu depended on the NUF

<u>Groups</u>	<u>Nu-Tin</u>	<u>Swe-Nyein</u>
AFPFL	51	97
NUF block	44	1
Arakan group	6	-
Shans	16	9
Kachins	3	4
Chins	3	3
Kayahs	2	-
Karens	2	5
Total	127	119

Source: Furnivall 1960: 124

parliamentarians and tried to accommodate them. He started a peace initiatives, proclaimed a general amnesty and – partly successfully – brought some rebels “back to the “legal fold.” The communists under Than Tun however made demands that could neither be accepted by the government nor the military (Sein Win 1959: 48).

As a result, Nu could not rely on a stable majority in parliament. Most - former - AFPFL parliamentarians had sided with the Swe-Nyein faction. He depended on his new ally but was unable to make substantial concessions to the outlawed communist rebels. On the other side, the NUF would not be agree to dissolve parliament and call new elections because that would endanger their new role as a respectable supporter of government (Sein Win 1959: 54-55).

#### 4.2 The Dissolution of the Deadlock

It became soon clear that the unstable situation after the sealing of the split had severe consequences. in many ways. The split had affected not just the parliament but the mass organisations in central Burma as well as the groups in the former Frontier Areas affiliated to the AFPFL. New mass organisations sprung up and Nu named two ministers for the Kachin and Karen States that did not belong to the majority of the State Councils close to the Stable AFPFL. Such events contributed to a general sense of insecurity in the country and the spread of rumours about a

military coup. the mobilisation of people's militia and the police forces under the command of the government.

Concurrently to this deterioration of the political atmosphere, a dispute on the passing of the budget developed into a controversy on the interpretation of the constitution. Section 115 of the constitution provided that the national budget had to be confirmed by the parliament until September 30 of each year. It was uncertain whether the budget would be passed. After consultation with Nu, President Win Maung, an ethnic Karen chosen by Nu to succeed Ba U cancelled the convention of the two chambers on August 28 and September 15 respectively that had been summoned by Nu before. He proposed that the budget should be enacted by way of a presidential order. This proposal was strongly rejected by the Swe-Nyein group because it resulted in procedure was only to be employed in case of a state emergency that did not allow the chambers to convene (Sein Win 1959: 58-59). The move was regraded as a destruction of the constitution.

The political tensions gave rise to the rumour that the army would stage a coup. Nu, after returning from a visit to Upper Burma, decided to dissolve parliament on September 29, hold elections in November and to pass the budget by way of using the Emergency Provisions Act (Sein Win 1959: 62; Nu 1975: 326). That however did not happen after Nu had been visited by Aung Gyi and Maung Maung, two colonels and close confidants of Ne Win. After two talks with them, a way out of the crisis was found. Nu would resign and ask Ne Win to take over as premier and organise elections within six months. This was seen as the best way out of the crisis (Taylor 2012: 214-216). Nu drafted two letters, one written by him that asked Ne Win to take over and Ne Win's reply. (Sein Win 1959: 83-89) He announced his decision via broadcast after the second visit of the two officers in the evening of September 26, 1968. After that Ne Win started to assemble his cabinet of civilians regarded as non-partisan.

Because of the obvious involvement of the military, the transfer of government from Nu to Ne Win is often called "The first coup" preceding the second in March 1962.

One month later, an emergency session of the Chamber of Deputies took place on October 28, 1958. It commenced with a speech of Nu explaining his resignation and recommending Ne Win as the one to be entrusted with the premiership. Next, proposals of candidates had to be submitted to the President according to the regulations. 25 of them were submitted in the prescribed period of time all of them giving the name of Ne Win. According to section 56(1)<sup>45</sup> of the Constitution, the President appointed the general after this nomination procedure. Three days later, Ne Win made a speech in parliament, promised to "defend democracy", urged the member of parliament to do the same and pledged to hold elections until April 1959. He promised that his government would be neutral and he urged the civil servants to act accordingly (MP II: 120-121).

## 5 Conclusion

The AFPFL split has been assessed in different ways by contemporary observers. The Burmese journalist Sein Win summarised at the beginning of his "Split Story" published in 1959 that the main cause "was personal feuds" among former colleagues who had "succumbed to blind conceit and power corruption". (Sein Win 1959: 2) The American scholar Frank Trager who closely witnessed the events on the spot wrote: "The present split is the result of personal and organisational rivalries" and supposed that "the split was "contemplated, if not actually planned, with equanimity by Prime Minister U Nu [...] to create a new party." (Trager 1959: 145)

John S. Furnivall's commentary is particularly notable since he had tried to bring the political cultures of England and Burma together. He was 80 years old at the time of writing his "post-mortem" on the AFPFL in September 1958, had served as a member of the Indian Civil Service in

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45 Section 56(1) reads: "The President shall, on the nomination of the Chamber of Deputies appoint a Prime Minister who shall be the head of the Union Government."

Burma since 1904 and as an advisor to the AFPFL government. At the end of his "Post Mortem", he warns to follow the "insidious illusion" that

the present situation is due in any great measure to the personal defects of the leaders [...] They had human frailties, but they were faced with a superhuman task; and the optimism and enthusiasm, which were almost their sole assets, tempted them to go ahead too fast and too far. (Furnivall 1960: 131-132)

Furnivall suggests that the death of the AFPFL might have happened because of an a-historical illusion existing both inside and outside the country that was based on the "the magic of independence". This magic, it was falsely assumed "could [...] bridge the gap of four centuries separating Burma from the modern world". In other words: Patience was needed because it could not be expected that Burma would achieve what Europe had "harvested after four hundred years of bloodshed". (Furnivall 1960: 130; 131)

According to this view, Burma needed more experiences in governing a country. As an example, Furnivall could have argued, the country had adopted rules and regulations for parliamentary democracy from Britain, but no party system had been emerged that corresponded to these rules. The AFPFL had been a coalition under a single leadership, in the absence of parties in the British sense no traditions of forming coalitions in parliament had been established. The support of the NUF opposition to Nu's wing of the AFPFL did not result in any kind of durable alliance, it was just an ephemeral event to keep Nu as head of a government that lost its political base.

Furnivall hoped that

rival leaders brought more closely face to face with the perilous consequences of discord, may invent a formula for reconciliation and that, in a common effort to repair the damage, a rejuvenated AFPFL may rise like a Phoenix from the ashes.

The alternative was that the "insidious illusion" would continue to prevail and that it further

is stimulated by the recriminations of the rival groups, each trying to blame the other; and the charges and countercharges of will reverberate with growing vehemence in the general elections with which Burma is now faced. (Furnivall 1960: 132)

Furnivall left Burma on April 2, 1960 shortly before the next general elections and died three months later in England after having suffered a stroke.

In view of the focus of this narration, the 1956 elections show that it would have been a "superhuman task" to combine the principals of a British and Burmese political traditions. The former had resulted in a pragmatic mode of organising political conflict by way of a voting system and a competition based on an exchange of arguments under the unifying values symbolised by the Crown. In Burma, desire for national unity could not - yet - be balanced with the different versions on which fundament unity should be built. The unbridgeable contrast of a communist dictatorship and a Buddhist democracy propagated by Nu before the elections forms one manifestation of this problem, the conflict between Nu's and Kyaw Nyein's versions of organising the AFPFL is another example. A third conflict line just emerged on the political horizon, the difficulty to unite the different ethnicities under one national roof just became visible. The Rakhine parliamentarians formed their own group and the Chin, Kachin and Karen representatives of the people were split along the lines of the two AFPFL's.

One may conclude that the 1956 elections point to a structural weakness of the constitution of 1947. They opened the door for a direct participation of the military in the political process because there was no other institution available that could be called upon to solve country's internal problems. Personal rivalries played an important role for sure but just as a factor reinforcing tensions arising from a political system that had not time enough to mature in a long process of trial and error.