

Prologue to Part C: 1988-2021. Military Conceived Democracy . A Variety of Transitions between Two Military Coups

This last chapter of the trilogy on general elections held in Burma and Myanmar starts in the eventful year 1988. The proposal of Burma's outgoing strongman Ne Win to possibly return to holding multi-party elections again was taken up by his last successor as chairman of the BSPP. The election commission appointed by the last socialist administration continued its work after the coup of 18 September. The last elections of 2020 covered in this part might or might not mark the end of the period under review here. At the time of writing this prologue (April 2024), the constitution adopted in 2008 under which the polls between 2010 and 2020 were held is still valid. It has however lost its meaning for the majority of Myanmar's citizen who regard it just as an instrument of oppression that has to be replaced.

The State Administration Council (SAC) formed after the coup faces the challenge of a National Unity Government (NUG) working in exile that claims to control large parts of the country either directly through a number of People's Defence Forces (PDFs) that have sprung up after the coup and indirectly by way of alliances with ethnic armed groups that fight the government for decades. It is obvious that China will continue to play a key role in the further developments of the conflict, but any reliable prognosis of the outcome of the conflict is not possible.¹

In view of such dire situation, it seems obvious to connect the events happening before and after the coup of February 2021 to the previous actions taken by the Tatmadaw leadership in 1962 – or even before in October 1948 when Ne Win took over the post of Burma's premiership - and 1988. The main narrative tells that the ongoing military dictatorship is due to a power-hungry clique that clings to its economic privileges.² Without denying that such selfish motives might have influenced the country's politics, the following chapters highlight a number of events connected to the elections that have taken place between 1990 and 2020 and their respective contexts that contrast such mono-causal reasoning.

The very different situation before and after the coups of 1962 and 1988 supports such an approach. In 1962, the military ended the rule of a weak civilian government and replaced it with the announcement of revolutionising the country's politics by regenerating the socialist traditions that had been developed under Aung San's leadership. General Ne Win, the national hero's comrade-in-arms – had supervised the building up of a professional army that had saved the government from being ousted by communist and ethnic rebels. In 1988, facing protests against the one party rule adopted, Ne Win admitted that something had went wrong with the revolution and proposed to ask the people on how to deal with the situation by holding a referendum on the holding of multi-party elections. His idea was adopted by his successor but rejected by the protestors. The armed forces ending the protests by violent means continued the electoral process started by the last BSPP administration, but had neither a concrete plan for the future nor a competent leader. The name chosen by the junta, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), indicated the priority of the new government: Law and order came first.

SLORC Declaration 1/1988 quoted at the end of the last section named the next important goals: guaranteeing safe transportation, recovering the economy and holding multi-party elections. The last goal suggested that the junta viewed their takeover of power just as an interim measure. The announcement followed Ne Win's idea rejected by the party congress on 23 July. In practice, the work commenced by the last BSPP administration was just continued. This way, the constitution of

¹ For a recent analysis of recent events with a focus on China's role see <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china-myanmar/b179-scams-centres-and-ceasefires-china-myanmar-ties-coup> (accessed 20.3.2024).

² See <https://theconversation.com/myanmar-coup-how-the-military-has-held-onto-power-for-60-years-154526> (accessed 1.4.2024).

1974 a central element of which was prescribing one-party rule, was practically revoked, but it was not made public how the constitutional void was to be filled. Only some time later, it became clear, that the road to the next elections finally held ended in a legal black hole. The parliament finally elected on 27 May 1990 never convened.

Very differently from 1962 the coup of 1988 was a very bloody affair. The protests continued after the coup and junta had been formed. They were violently suppressed.³ Some of the younger leaders went underground, many moved to the border regions, joined the ethnic rebels there or built up new rebel forces. At the same time, the election process gathered speed and a new vision for the country's future emerged that over time became impersonated by Aung San Suu Kyi.

This vision was rooted in the tradition of student protests against freedom restricting measures from ruling authorities that had begun in the early 20th century and connected the events of 1962 and 1988. On 12 March 1988, a tea shop brawl took place near the campus of the Rangoon Institute of Technology between students and young people from the neighbourhood over the issue of what song should be played on a cassette recorder. Riot police was called in later and student Phone Maw was shot.⁴ He became the first martyr⁵ of the student led demonstrations in 1988 in the succession of Aung Gyaw who had died in December 1938 in an action against the British on the street named after him later neighbouring the Secretariat Building. A small monument had been erected after the war near the entrance to the university compound close to the Students' Union Building, constructed in 1929

This building was of a very high symbolic significance. It was seen as a landmark of the independence struggle because of the prominent role of students like Aung San and Nu who had worked there. In July 1982 it was demolished by the army in connection with another student protest in which a number of students were killed.⁶ This action was regarded as a sacrilege. In his farewell speech of 23 July 1988, Ne Win devoted one third of his speech to this event by explaining that he had not ordered the destruction but just accepted the responsibility later as the leader of the armed forces.⁷

One can conclude that in 1988 the students continued to act as the agents of Burma's civil society gains the oppressive authorities of the day represented by the law enforcement forces of the BSPP government, police and military. Over the years, the government had lost credit by isolating the country from almost the rest of the world.⁸ The former member of the Revolutionary Council, ex-general Aung Gyi, who had left the council in 1963 and had been imprisoned two times later advocated policy changes in three open letters to Ne Win.⁹ Most likely, it was not economic hardship that caused the students' and later the masses' protests but "the humiliation of a way of life

³ The exact number of casualties is not known. Western sources genteelly agree that "approximately 3,000 people had been killed in the uprising. Another 3,000 Burmese were put in prison, and some 10,000 activists had fled the country". (<https://www.npr.org/2013/08/08/209919791/as-myanmar-opens-up-a-look-back-on-a-1988-uprising>; accessed 1.4.2024). Their are as well news about violent acts by protestors like the beheading of policemen (*The Los Angeles Times* 14.9.1988: 88).

⁴ *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah) 193.3.1988: 4.

⁵ 13 March 1989 was named "Phone Maw Day" and "Human Rights Day" in 1989 (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199903/msg00269.html>; accessed 1.1.2024).

⁶ As usual, the exact figures are disputed. According to newspaper reports based on the official announcements of the Revolutionary Council, 17 students were killed and 41 wounded. Other sources claim that some 100 people were killed. (See the Wikipedia article on the event) The demonstration started as a protest against a 10 p.m. curfew on the student hostels (*The Gazette and Daily*, (York PA) 11.7.19612 2).

⁷ In his speech, he alleged that Brigadier Aung Gyi, his deputy on top of the Revolutionary Council, in 1962 had been involved in the suppression of the students' protests.

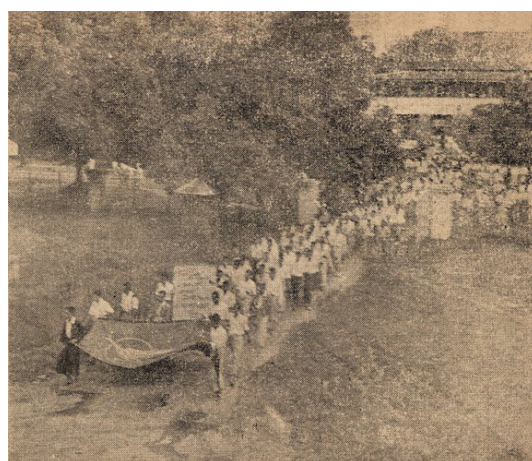
⁸ The two formerly fascist countries Japan and Germany made an exception. Japan built a number of factories, the Federal Republic of Germany provided development aid.

⁹ See <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/AungGyiLetters.pdf> (accessed 1.4.2024).

disfigured by corruption and fear” as Aung San Suu Kyi worded it in 1990 in her speech given in response to the Sakharov Prize awarded to her in 1990 entitled “Freedom of Fear.”¹⁰

During the first phase of the public demonstrations, the battle slogan of the students expressing their longing for freedom was “*Do-ayei*” echoing the pre-war “*Do-bama*” slogan. The phrase can be translated as “our task” or “our cause” and was already used by students in the colonial period.¹¹

Student demonstrators displayed other symbols connecting the present protest to previous events thus invoking history as a witness for their just cause. There was the three coloured *Do-bama* flag together with the Dancing Peacock, Burma’s national symbol from the royal times on. It was a symbol of the sun linking the Burmese monarchs to the “sun race” of the Buddha. This flag had been used during the Japanese period when the Thakins and Ba Maw’s party had formed coalition in their fight for independence.



1962 student protest on the university campus. The flag displays the fighting peacock symbol of the student movement since the colonial period (Source: Wikipedia)

Furthermore, the fighting peacock was evoked that had been created as the symbol of the student movement since the 1930s and displayed in the protests against the military regime in July 1962. It became of special significance later when it was chosen as the flag of Aung San Suu Kyi’s party together with the white star on a red background hat had been used as the flag of the AFPFL and the symbol of the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) founded at the end of 1988 at the Burmese-Thai border. Its armed wing fought the Burmese military and concluded a ceasefire agreement in 2015.

Moreover, the well-known portrait of Aung San was taken on the streets. His iconic pictures were abundantly available at government and many other offices. This way, the revered father of the military and the Burmese state became a symbol of resistance against the military backed government and the yardstick for any leader to replace Ne Win (Girke 2028: 154).

The pivotal role of the students in looking for a new face to lead the freedom struggle and replace Ne Win is shown by the fact that three days after the strongman’s surprising announcement of retirement, a famous artist and film director started to paint a large portrait of Aung San on the order of students. Almost one month later, on August 26, the picture was displayed at the western entrance of the Shwedagon Pagoda where Aung San Suu Kyi gave her first public speech before a big

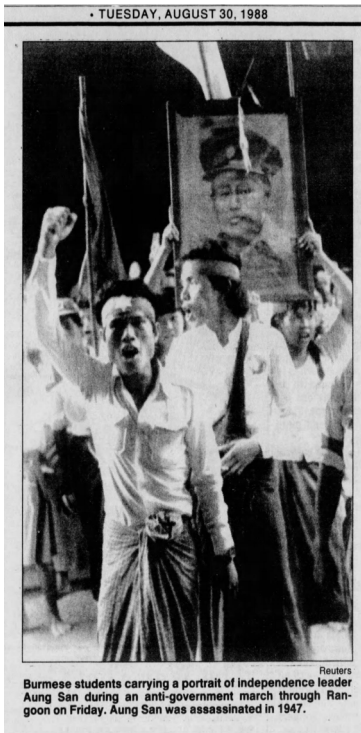
¹⁰ See <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/freedom-from-fear-1990/> (accessed 1.4.2024)..

¹¹ Interview with Chit Oo Ko Ko 3.4.2024.

crowd¹² estimated at half a million people. Many people had approached her and she had finally agreed to participate in the protest movement. The students had again emerged as the vanguard of the mass movements in the tradition that had been first highlighted by the strike in 1920 still celebrated as Myanmar’s National Day and later events.

The students thus acted as king-makers. This role is illustrated by the most prominent student leader who chose the pen-name Min Ko Naing usually translated as “Conqueror of Kings”.¹³ In an interview given after the coup in late October 1988 conducted after he had gone into hiding, he said:

I’ll never die. Physically I might be dead , but many more Min Ko Naing's would appear. As you know, Min Ko Naing can only conquer a bad king I f the ruler is good, we carry him on our shoulders. (Zöllner 2012:)33



Reuters
Burmese students carrying a portrait of independence leader Aung San during an anti-government march through Rangoon on Friday. Aung San was assassinated in 1947.



Aung San Suu Kyi at her speech on August 26, 1888. The banner below the stages informs that the meeting is about democracy (Source: onasia)

Aung San Suu Kyi’s appeal to the public was tremendous. The crowd that had assembled to see and hear her was much larger than any other mass meeting at which a prominent speaker gave an address. Fears that she might not be able to speak proper Burmese were dispelled. Most importantly, a new slogan was coined to express the public demands for change: “democracy”. Like many other foreign word imported during the colonial period, the term was – and still is – used in Myanmar as an English loan word transcribed in Burmese letters. (Tin Hlaing 2006). The banner on the platform on which she gave her speech told the public that the meeting would be about “democracy”. The master of ceremonies told the audience likewise. On the podium, Aung San Suu Kyi was surrounded by students who acted as her bodyguards on many occasions later as well thus highlighting the civil character of the new “democracy movement” as it was termed from then on.

The term “democracy” is mentioned nine times in her speech, most prominently in a quote of what her father said:

We must make democracy the popular creed. We must try to build up a free Burma in accordance with such a creed. If we should fail to do this, our people are bound to suffer. If democracy should

¹² On Au24 August 1988, the day on which martial law was lifted by Maung Maung, she had given a public address at the Rangoon General Hospital. (Zöllner/Ebbighausen 2018: 16-17).

¹³ For a different meaning given by himself see <https://www.britishcouncil.org.mm/life-stories/interviews/min-ko-naing> (accessed 17.3.2024).

fail the world cannot stand back and just look on, and therefore Burma would one day, like Japan and Germany, be despised. Democracy is the only ideology which is consistent with freedom. It is also an ideology that promotes and strengthens peace. It is therefore the only ideology we should aim for. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995: 194)¹⁴

Democracy is here defined as an ideology that contradicts fascism and has to be made a “popular creed”. It is implemented by free and fair multi-party elections held by a government in which the people trust. Therefore, the option of a referendum is rejected as well as the work of the election commission (**see chapter 14....**). The word quickly became the battle cry of the protestors in connection with the old phrase “do-ayei”. It I reported that two groups were chanting both slogans, one shouting “getting democracy ...”, the other responding “...is our cause!”¹⁵

Aung San Suu Kyi thus shared the common assessment of enmity against the BSPP government, The move of the party to appoint the under Maung Maung, the first civilian on top of the party who had been Chief Justice and justice minister for some time and had been elected top the party’s executive committee in 1976, a post from which he withdrew in 1985 because of poor health. As a man who was close to Ne Win and had written written a biography about him, he had no chance to be trusted by the protesters.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s attitude toward the Ne Win regime might have been influenced by her mother’s closeness to Nu (see above chapter 8) In an interview given three days after her speech, she argued that the people would have accepted a referendum on the issue of holding multi-party elections proposed by Ne Win, if the BSPP congress had followed Ne Win. Nor. Mung Maung’s proposal was “too little too late”. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995: 200). After the coup, she shared the public opinion that Ne Win was behind all “sinister” plans developed by the military junta (Zöllner/Ebbihausen: 87).

The following part is based on the assumption that the year 1988 can be seen as the beginning of a dichotomy characterising Myanmar’s political landscape and its representation in the international media. It was caused by two main factors. First came the resignation of Ne Win followed by SLORCs attempt to honour his suggestion to include the people in deciding about Burma’s political future without however relinquishing the military’s role as the warrantor of law, order and unity. On the other hand, Aung San Suu Kyi had entered the political scene promising to fulfil the legacy of her father in the name of implementing democracy. Aung San’s heritage was thus split. Furthermore, both sides were absolutely not prepared to undertake these tasks.

In addition, the dichotomy spread to the outside world making an end to regarding Burma as a political backwater. The conflict between a brutal military and a courageous leader of a democracy movement fascinated the outside world and helped creating the dualistic and fairy-tale-like contrast of the “Beauty and the Beast”.¹⁶ . The new modes of communication through the internet helped to inform the public around the world and thus become a protagonist in the emerging controversy. A number of solidarity associations mushroomed worldwide. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize contributed to elevating Aung San Suu Kyi an icon for democracy and human rights and to demonise her opponents, the military. George Soros’ Open Society Foundation started to report about the country in 1994.

¹⁴ The author could not find this quote in Silverstein’s collection of Aung San’s speeches and writings. (Silverstein1993). It contradicts Aung San’s early “Blueprint for Burma” written 1941 in Tokyo in which he criticised the “facade” of parliamentary government” that “gives chance to individualistic disrupters and obstructionists and delay the course of administration. What we want is a strong state administration as exemplified in Germany and Italy,. There shall be only one nation, one party, one leader.” (Silverstein 1995: 20). - For Aung San’s conception of a “Burmese Democracy”, see above chapter 9.

¹⁵ Inver view with Chit Oo Jo Ko 3.4.2024.

¹⁶ For details see Zöllner 2012.

On this background, the period after 1988 is generally divided into a dark period of military dictatorship lasting from 1988 - as a continuation of the period between 1962 - until 2011 when president and former general Thein Sein started to implement a series of reforms after the elections of November 2010. For some time, the antagonism was linguistically expressed by two ways of naming the country. The word "Myanmar" introduced by the generals to designate the whole country was shunned by Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers because the name change had not been legitimised by the people. After five years of "opening up" the country to political and economic reform, a new era started after the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership won the following general elections of 2015 by a landslide. From then on the "transition to democracy" became the favourite term to characterise Myanmar's promising development.

From the perspective taken here and in the light of what is happening after the last coup of 2021, the elections taking place between 1990 and 2020 can be seen as events highlighting the developments in a post colonial state that was torn in many respects from the first day of independence on.

In view of the elections held, the constitution adopted in 2008 is the most prominent event. It took twenty and not twelve years as after the 1962 coup to adopt a new constitution after the drafting process had already commenced in 19. Three elections took place under its provisions, this sequence did not result in any balancing of the antagonistic views and attitudes on the side of the unequal political partners. Besides covering these election and that in 1990 that ended in a dead-end, the by-elections of 1 April 2012 will be included. It is of special significance because of the first participation of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party in the electoral process under the new constitution.

All in all, one can say, the five elections covered in this last part of this trilogy are of very different kind and were followed by a number of unforeseen events. To take notice of such "continuation of surprises" might help to get an insight in some aspects of Myanmar's politics that deviate from the mainstream perception. Differently from the previous parts, much material is available for the period much of it however just highlighted by antagonistic moral judgement that might have helped to reinforce the often lamented sad state of affairs in Myanmar. The discussions around the Rohingya crisis after 2012 have very much contributed to such portrayal and overshadowed almost all other Myanmar related issues from 2012 onwards. In the eyes of the associations that had supported Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle for democracy the former heroine of democracy and human rights was now accused of covering up the atrocities of the military against the Muslims in Rakhine. The historical roots of the conflict going back to the time of Burma's independence were neglected. This issue however will not be discussed here at length.¹⁷

¹⁷ For some reflections of the author on the topic see <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/caught-between-the-crocodile-and-the-snake-contexts-of-the-rohingya-issue> (accessed 2.4.2024).