

POLITICAL CRISIS IN BURMA A RÉSUMÉ OF 1988 DILEMMA

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Burma (Myanmar) inherited a parliament system of Government from the British, in which the cabinet was collectively responsible to a popularly elected legislature. On March 2, 1962, the armed forces, under General Ne Win ousted the parliamentary regime in a coup d'état, suspended the constitution and placed supreme authority in a revolutionary council dominated by the military. The military regime introduced a one-party party (BSPP), backed by Tatmadaw (Burmese Army). The constitution, subsequently promulgated on January 4, 1974 declared Burma a socialist state.¹

Burma went through its most significant period of change for quarter of century in 1988, with the resignation of from the chairmanship of the ruling BSPP of the man who had been at the helm since 1962, Gen. Ne Win.² He stepped down in July 1988 accepting 'indirect responsibility' for disturbance in Rangoon (Yangon) and else where during the past five months. His place was taken by former Brigadier Sein Lwin who, for the first time since Ne Win retired as President in 1981, combined all three senior officer as Chairman of the party and Council of Ministers and State President. But Sein Lwin tenure was to be short lived. After a week of demonstration, on August 8, only seventeen days after assuming power, Sein Lwin resigned. Within a week the party elected Dr. U. Maung the only civilian in its civilian echelon as the president. Dr. Maung was failed to restore public tranquility. He was deposed by a coup d'état in September 1988.³

This whole 1988 dilemma was due to political pressures caused by internal problems, insurgencies and unrest that eventually forced these changes. This paper covers a bring survey of political turmoil in Burma, its causes and consequences which enable the readers to sum up the exact profile of Burma politics in 1985.

INTERNAL PROBLEMS:

Since independence the problem of national unity Socio-political unrest and insurgency have troubled the successive governments⁴. Following were the major reasons internal unrest.

- a) Struggle for political / democratic rights.
- b) Separatist trends among ethnic minorities.
- c) The local communists' attempts to subvert governments in Rangoon and to impose their own brands socio-political system.
- d) Chinese tacit support to the communist rebels and insurgent minorities.

INSURGENCY:

A number of ethnic factions are fighting separately and also together against the government for seeking autonomy.⁵ Some of the main insurgent groups are:

- a) **The Communists:** The Burmese Communist Party (BCP) draws its support from the Arakan and Pegu regions. After a fierce clash with government forces in November and December 1973, they were driven back. They were now actively engaged in the profitable drug trade to compensate for their loss of support from China. Present strength of BCP insurgents is estimated at 10,000 based at North-Eastern Shan State, along the Chinese border.
- b) **The Karens:** The Karens, who control major areas of Kawthoolei State adjacent to the Thai border, want a separate and independent state. While the government has unsuccessfully tried to end the secessionist aspirations of the rebels through military means, no real sustained victory has been achieved. The government has also tried to

strangulate economically by reducing their black market trade rife in the province, but the rebels have withstood all efforts. At present Karen insurgents' strength is estimated at 3700; they have made many parts of the state inaccessible to the government troops. The fighting is now confined to minor patrol clashes, ambushes and occasional pitched battles. Neither side is strong enough to win a major victory.

- c) ***The Shan:*** Rebel groups and drug mafia are active in the territory. Burmese government exploits differences between these groups with a view to promote internal fighting between them.
- d) ***The Kachins:*** Kachin is the largest state and its rebel elements are fighting for independence, the Kachin Independence Army, the largest of the groups is, however, no match for the regular Burmese, and has, therefore, resorted to a campaign of assassinations and local sabotage tactics.

In early 1986 the nine nationalist groups comprising the National Democratic Front (NDF) held a secret meeting with Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) near the Sino-Burmese border in the far north of the country. The meeting resulted in renewed cooperation among Burma's various ethnic groups struggling for autonomy from the ruling junta. Although their ideologies differed, their enemy was the same, i.e, military government. The NDF also forged an alliance with the Communist Party (CPB); Combined strength of the forces of the rebel groups was about 20,000, comprising 10,000 Communists, 6,5000 Kachins and 3,700 Karens.⁶

RECENT UNREST:

In March 1988, students and the youth initiated demonstrations in Rangoon protesting against 26-years despotic rule of Gen. Ne Win. The demonstrations, which were soon joined

by the public, spread to other major cities of the country and continued with increasing intensity resulting in a number of casualties.⁷ The Karen and Shah who were suppressed with the series of operation by the Burmese army in 1986, also renewed their activities in their respective areas killing civilians and destroying property. In May 1988, Amnesty International published a report accusing Burmese military government of committing brutalities, unlawful killings, torture and ill-treatment of the people.⁸ United Liberal front, a clandestine organization struggling to overthrow the military government, also appealed to foreign countries giving to Burma, particularly West Germany, to pressurize the government to restore democracy in Burma.⁹

Causes of the Unrest: Two major causes of the unrest were:

1. ***Economic:*** The main and immediate was the adverse economic conditions in Burma. The government tried to meet the challenge of by a pre-emptory demonetizations of 'Kyat' down to 25 Kyat currency not. This was the proverbial last straw that broke the people's back as 25 Kyat did not really buy anything. When people found that they were bereft of all buying power they rose in a revolt.¹⁰
2. ***Political:*** There was one party rule in the country while the people wanted a multi-party system including an effective opposition. For this reason, former Premier UNu formed an apposition party for the first time in 26 years, in defiance of one party constitution, to achieve a multi-party democracy of the western model.¹¹

Main Demands of the People: Various demands voiced by different groups at various levels / occasions included:

a) Political Reforms:

- 1) Dissolution of the ruling Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) and end of one party system.
- 2) Introduction of a new democratic constitution based on multi-party democratic system.
- 3) Free general election within six months.
- 4) Resignation of the cabinet and establishment of an interim government.
- 5) Non-Political Armed Forces.
- 6) Release of imprisoned dissidents / demonstrators and punishment to those responsible for the Killings.
- 7) Disclosure of full list of casualties and compensation to the families of those who were killed by the Armed forces during nation-wide demonstrations.
- 8) Freedom of expression, free press / news media.
- 9) Free student trade union activities.
- 10) End of corruption and nepotism.
- 11) Clean, efficient and more responsive machinery.

b) Economic Reforms:

- 1) Wide-ranging fundamental reforms to revive the collapsed economy.
- 2) Abolition of so-called 'Burmese Socialism'.
- 3) Free enterprise and overall transformation of Burmese shackled economy.
- 4) Control of smuggling.
- 5) Lower prices of rice and control of inflation / high price index.

MAJOR FORCES BEHIND THE UNREST.

- a) **Students Community:** Students who have formed an "All Burma Students Movement Committee", remained at the forefront of protests against the government and emerged as a formidable force in Burma¹².
- b) **Buddhist Monks (Religious Leaders):** Monks, especially the younger lot invariably led the demonstrations all over the country, exerting pressure on members of local government administration units to resign.
- c) **Armed Forces:** Armed Forces also did not support the government actions and some army battalions and Air Force squadrons reportedly pledged their support for protesters.
- d) **Official Elite:** Official from various ministries also took part in the demonstrations.
- e) **Non-Official Elite:** Lawyers (Bar Councils), doctors, teachers, well known films stars / signers also participated in the demonstrations.
- f) **Ethnic / Rebel Groups:** Various ethnic / rebel groups also registered their disapproval of government by taking part in the demonstration.
- g) **Muslim Role:** The Burmese Muslims also put their weight behind the opposition forces. They requested Diplomatic Missions in Burma not to offer cooperation or protection to any member of the Burma Socialist Program Party and not to provide political asylum to any of them.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE:

The government responded to the demonstration and protests by closing school and colleges, declaring Martial Law in major cities of the country and resulting to large scale arrests, repression and shooting at the demonstrations. However, the demonstration spread country wide and engulfed almost the whole Burmese society; Gen. Ne Win stepped down on 23 July 1988 in favour of Retired Brig. General Sein-Lwin, Secretary General of the Party. The change in the leadership was, however, not accepted by the people as Gen. Lwin was considered a member of Gen. New Win's coterie of power.¹³

Despite strict measures taken by the new leader the situation could not be controlled and demonstrations continued with increased intensity. At last, Brig. Gen. Lwin also stepped down and on August 12, 1988 the BSPP elected Dr Maung, a Civilian and former Attorney General, as the New President of the country and Chairman of the BSPP on 19th August, 1988. One of his first step was to withdraw the army from the streets of Rangoon. For a while at least, Killing stopped. Dr Maung announced the holding of general elections. But the students and demonstrators rejected the new government also and demanded its resignation and establishment of a caretaker national government which should introduce multi-party system and hold general elections to bring real democracy in the country. The situation continued to deteriorate and as anticipated, army seized power 18 September 1988.¹⁴

MILITARY TAKE-OVER:

Burmese Armed Forces Chief of Staff, General Saw Maung suspended the constitution, imposed military rule and announced the dissolution of the parliament, the presidency, and the cabinet. He set up an 18-member military council, which including the Army, Air Force and Navy Chiefs, to run the affairs of the country. Military regime changed the country's name of the "Union of Burma" from the "Socialist Republic of the Burma". A new party "National Unity Party" (UNP) has been formed in place of "Burma Socialist Program Party" (BSPP) with many of the

BSP's old guards as its members. It has also pledged to hold elections in May 1990. General Saw Maung, military regime, has for the time being succeeded in controlling the law and order situation and bringing back some semblance of respectability to the state apparatus. Mass political movement and disturbances have ceased but an uneasy calm prevails. People remain demoralized and are Skeptic about the future. The position political parties, whose number has soared to 162 during the disturbances, do not trust the military regime's promises of holding fair and free elections.¹⁵

FOREIGN COUNTRIES REACTIONS TO MILITARY TAKE-OVER:

Burma's relation with the out side world have under gone various permutations since 1988. After the military coup USA, West Germany, UK and Australia have not formally recognized the military regime and as a retaliatory step, stopped all economic aid to Burma, Japan also persuaded them¹⁶. They are also suspected to have backed the anti-government demonstration by providing large sums of money to the opposition political parties.

India has also not recognized the military junta, despite continual criticism of the government by All-India Radio and the absence of Indian Ambassador (in protest to coup), relations with India remained officially friendly. India is also suspected of supporting some opposition leaders / groups particularly the one led by UNu, former Prime Minister Ousted by Ne Win in 1962 and Aung San Sui Kye an emerging political leader and daughter of Burma's national hero Aung San. India has also set up refugee camps in the bordering areas to accommodate fleeing Burmese students and activities wanted by Burmese military authorities.

The USSR also reportedly provided limited financial support to the opposition political parties but did not play an active role in Burma.

China, a major trade partner of Burma, desires stability in the country and has recognized the military regime. They have at no stage supported the opposition political parties. Outside the country's immediate neighbors, relation remained largely

cordial;

In some important ways, Burma is different from other countries of the region. Since independence, the military has been seen itself as having a 'Central Role' maintaining Burma's independence and Sovereignty.

CONCLUSION:

Five times in the last five decades the Burmese Army, with Gen. Ne Win's participation, has assumed the power in the country. In the Burma Army (Tatmadaw) view, the Burma's Independence Army, liberated Burma from British rule with the help of the Japanese Imperial Army in 1941-42; the Burma Army held out against superior Karen forces in Defence of Rangoon while the country was under Martial Law in 1950; the Burmese Defence Services formed a caretaker government in September 1958; the army then staged a coup in March 1962 and formed a Revolutionary Government; and in September 1988 it brought an end to a summer of pro-democracy demonstration by replacing the civilian government it had installed with a junta called a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The military government of Gen. Saw Maung has presently controlled the law and order situation. However, political and economic problems of the country pose a serious threat to the continuity of this regime.

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