A HISTORY OF MODERN BURMA

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EVENTS of World War II and of the years following thereafter have rendered obsolete virtually all earlier interpretations of the modern history of Burma. The new situation has completely invalidated the older perspective, which usually called for describing the quaint life and folkways of the Burmese people or for portraying the somewhat painful progress of economic and governmental modernization of the country under British rule. Several prewar British students of Burma, notably John S. Furnivall and Maurice Collis, sensed the importance of ascertaining what colonial “advancement” was doing to Burmese society and of counteracting, if possible, the causes of growing social demoralization and political unrest. But Collis was a literary man who dealt in episodes, and Furnivall wrote as an economic analyst and a critic of contemporaneous British policy. Neither attempted to present a systematic account of political developments. Even the American author, John L. Christian, refused to take seriously Burmese aspirations for self-rule and political independence. World War II and succeeding events have forced the acceptance of a new perspective of renaissance Burmese nationalism and have resulted in the re-emergence of independent Burma among the free nations of the world. Perhaps the required reorientation may be somewhat easier for an American student to achieve than for Britons who may have been too closely identified with the prewar point of view.

The purpose of this book is to set forth in a systematic way what
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A basic practical difficulty was that the American aid program operated on a year to year basis, whereas commitments needed to be made for a longer period of time. The foreign aid appropriation usually cleared isolationist obstructions in the Congress at Washington in an atmosphere of cold-war tension which often stressed American self-interest in establishing its own security with regard to the world Communist threat and had correspondingly little relevance to Burma's own concerns and desires. The change of names from the original Economic Co-operation Administration (ECA) to the eventual Mutual Security Administration (MSA) in 1952 was in itself sufficient to precipitate a serious debate in the Burma Parliament and to elicit from both opposition leaders and cabinet ministers allegations that the United States was trying by its aid program to drag Burma into World War III. 38 Even the majority who voted to continue the assistance program objected to its possible military implications. Many were on the alert to detect any possible ulterior motive which might indicate that the United States was using Burma as a pawn in the world power contest with the U.S.S.R.

Nevertheless and in spite of all these oftentimes petulantly expressed suspicions and objections to the presence of some 100 American experts plus smaller numbers from the United Nations, Colombo Plan participants, and British joint-venture personnel, the foreign aid program was making a tangible showing in the direction of economic progress by early 1953. Those in a position to appreciate how much slack there was to take up realized that real gains in health, education, and economic well-being were in prospect. As late as January, 1953, Premier Nu praised the American aid program for speeding up Burma's recovery and denied as fantastic and untrue the opposition charge that the United States was using Burma in an attempt to establish an economic monopoly and a military base in Burma. 39 Similarly at the ECA Far Eastern Conference held at Bandung in February, 1953, Burma's representative, U Kyaw Myint, said, in reply to Communist charges, that U.S. aid to Burma had been without political strings, had embodied no slavery as alleged, and was much appreciated by the Burmese people. 40 Many high government officials and a large segment of the population were almost as stunned as was Washington at the sudden announcement in late March, 1953, that U.S. assistance was no longer acceptable after the close of the current year, on June 30. The pressing reason was found in the sharp disagreement which had developed since 1951 between Rangoon and Washington over the status of Chinese Nationalist refugee troops in Burma's easternmost Shan States. These differences were aggravated by America's implied encouragement of Chiang Kai-shek's Formosan regime in 1953 to renew the China civil war.

When the original two brigades of the Kuomintang 8th Army, plus camp followers, entered Burma's Kengtung state from Yunnan province in December, 1949, and early 1950, the Burma Government had been in no position to disarm them or otherwise to devote attention to them. During the ensuing year and a half the Kuomintang forces under General Li Mi developed a fortified headquarters near the Siamese border, built an airfield capable of receiving four-engine planes, and acquired from some quarter, presumably by purchase in Siam or by air from Formosa, arms, ammunition, and medical supplies. Serious trouble began in mid-1951, when the greater portion of General Li Mi's near-destitute forces began to move westward across the Salween River, where they preyed on the inhabitants. In 1952 addition Nationalist Chinese refugee troops crossed the unguarded border of Burma's northern frontier, at points some 300 miles distant from Kengtung. Other contingents of the Kuomintang forces made contact across the Southern Shan States with Karen insurgents to whom they sold recoilless rifles and other weapons of recent U.S. manufacture. The attempt of the two Chinese groups to join hands in late 1952 as well as their collusion with Karen rebels threatened to throw a vast area of northeastern Burma into turmoil at a time when all of the country's available military resources were sorely needed to restore order and transportation in the central valley region. River and railway transportation, pacification of the oil-field area, and resumption of teak extraction were all essential to economic recovery. The possible development, unmolested, of a center of Nationalist Chinese operations in northeastern Burma would also provide Peking's Mao Tse-tung with a ready-made excuse, whenever he needed it, to carry the Chinese armed struggle into Burma. The feuding between the two resident Chinese factions within Rangoon had already reached near violence.

During 1952, the Burma Government accepted repeated assurances

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of the Department of State that the United States was not assisting General Li Mi and was in no way responsible for his activities. Only the Burma Workers’ and Peasants’ Party and other pro-Communist groups at the time attacked American policy as being directly responsible for the situation.\(^{101}\) The growing seriousness of the Shan State crisis in late 1952, coupled with various statements and policy decisions on the part of the newly elected Republican administration at Washington in early 1953, caused the feeling of distrust and anger to grow in Burma. Many took offense at the suggestion made by America’s newly elected President, interpreted out of context, that Asians should fight Asians. Even more ominous appeared the action to step up American military aid to the French in Indochina and, above all, the decision to “unleash” Chiang Kai-shek’s forces in Formosa to renew their attacks on the Communist-held mainland while the American fleet protected the island from Red Chinese attack. It was against the background of such policy pronouncements that many Burmans professed to see in the Kuomintang problem a Machiavellian plot on the part of the United States, hiding behind its technical aid shield, to generate a situation of local tension with Red China which would drive Burma into an American-sponsored anti-Communist military alliance. The Burma Government was prevented with difficulty in December, 1952, from bringing the question of Kuomintang occupation of Burmese territory before the United Nations. It could not be dissuaded a few months later.

The break came in March, 1953, after official and unofficial Burmese appeals to Washington to control Formosa’s tactical operations and the alleged distribution of arms to the Kuomintang forces brought negative results. The submission of simultaneous statements by both Formosa and Washington that they were not responsible for arming and supporting General Li Mi was denounced by the progovernment press in Burma as collusion in a barefaced falsehood and as proof that Washington, in unholy alliance with the Kuomintang, was making a stooge of Burma. The angry editorial comment ran as follows:

The sooner the KMT are taken out of Burmese territory by the Formosa Government to whose designs the American Government is privy, the better it will be for Burmese-American friendship. Let another Asian country

\(^{36}\) The Burma Workers’ and Peasants’ Party in November, 1952, denounced the Kuomintang forces as stooges of American imperialism and offered to recruit volunteers to fight the Nationalist Chinese.

REBELLION AND RECOVERY

[Thailand] who has succumbed so easily to dollar domination provide the military footing which the Formosa Government . . . wants.\(^{102}\)

Rangoon’s decision of March 17, made public twelve days later, to the effect that further American aid would be declined after June 30, 1953, was accompanied by official expressions of appreciation for the technical assistance program itself. But Rangoon made clear that there could be no mixing of U.S. aid to Burma with Formosa’s plans to renew the civil war in China. The government’s paper declared that if, with the help of a powerful friend, the Kuomintang troops continued their provocative operations in the Shan States area the chance of Burma’s becoming a second Korea was very great.\(^{103}\)

The United States aid program was thus a casualty of America’s Formosa policy and Washington’s inability to control the use of military equipment provided to the island government. The Ford Foundation took up part of the assistance burden, the United Nations another share. More serious was the sowing of distrust and suspicion of American good faith, with the result that a multitude of Burmans who resented the Kuomintang affair began to credit as true all forms of anti-American propaganda.

The anti-American attitude generated in 1953 opened the door to more intimate Burmese relations with Communist China and the U.S.S.R. Diplomatic relations with the two leading Communist powers had been established in 1950 and 1951 following Burma’s prompt recognition of the Peking regime in December, 1949. Subsequent developments included the attendance of a Burmese delegation, led by Cabinet Minister U Tun Pe, at an economic conference held in Moscow in April, 1952. This was followed by a prolonged visit in both China and Russia from September to October, 1952, of a four-man delegation headed by Thakin Tin, president of the All Burma Peasants’ Organization and minister of land nationalization, for the study of collective agricultural methods.\(^{104}\) Burma’s relations with China were still

\(^{102}\) New Times of Burma, March 3, 1953; see also Feb. 3 and 5, March 6, and 26, 1953.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., March 27 and 29, 1953; Mende, pp. 153–154. A number of the American technical advisers were retained on special contract with the Burma Government after official aid ceased.

\(^{104}\) U.S. Information Service, “Review of Burmese Press Comment,” April–May, Sept.–Oct., 1952. The initial Burmese delegation to Moscow and China included two anti-Communists and two pro-Communists (see Nation, July 3–6, 1952). The Chinese were especially cordial to the delegation members.
clouded by the daily broadcasts from Peking by Communist Bo Aung Gyi in support of the Than Tun rebels and by the even more disturbing Chinese military “liberation” move into Tibet in October, 1952.106 The Chinese embassy at Rangoon meanwhile maintained correct political relations with the government and gave no discernible encouragement to the Communist rebel factions. The Chinese press in Rangoon tactfully condoned Burma’s UN vote on the Korean issue, at the same time condemning alleged U.S. aggression in Korea, Formosa, and Vietnam. It praised Burma’s support of Red China’s entry into the United Nations.106 It was Burma’s continuing concern to afford no provocation for Chinese military or political penetration along the extended and undefended China border.107 The unfortunate Kuomintang episode not only contributed a setback to Burma’s economic program; it also gave a different direction to its foreign policy.

106 Mende, p. 192; New Times of Burma, Oct. 29, 1952. Most of the Burmese press was seriously concerned over the Tibetan affair because it shattered the hope that China’s influence would be peacefully exerted.

107 Ouay, Sept. 10, 1950; New Times of Burma, Nov. 2, 1950. Only one Chinese paper in Rangoon, the Freedom Pao, remained pro-Formosan. Communist Thein Pe Myint urged a nonaggression pact with China, backed the “liberation” of Tibet, and praised Peking’s forbearance in not occupying Bhutan and Sikkim as well.


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Prospects and Problems

BECAUSE of the difficulty of achieving proper balance and perspective, a narrative account of political developments within Burma since 1953 is neither feasible nor desirable. It will perhaps suffice to define some of the basic characteristics and problems which appear likely to persist as factors of political significance and concern for the immediate future.

Political Leadership

Of primary importance is an understanding of the locus of political power and the fundamental problems of those who wield this power. The central postindependence figure was, of course, U Nu. He was until June, 1956, simultaneously Prime Minister of the government and the president of the A.F.P.F.L. He was the champion of democracy in Burma, the liaison between the sophisticated modernism of Burma’s younger generation and the traditional cultural values of old Burma, and, finally, Burma’s good-will salesman abroad par excellence. His personal rectitude and his reputation as an advocate of public welfare afforded him a vantage point from which he could denounce in measured terms the manifold shortcomings of both his government and his party. He became an enthusiastic lay defender of religious revival, which to him provided a kind of stabilizing reaffirmation of Burma’s national culture. He was also a patron of indigenous literary efforts and the chief supporter of the Burma Translation So-