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Abstract

By whatever statistics one relies on, Myanmar has a genuine ethnic and religious plurality. From a geographical perspective, about one half of the country is comprised of territory traditionally occupied by non-Burmese ethnic minorities.¹ Demographically, the Burmese (BaMa) make up 65% of the nation's 50 million population. A complicated picture of different religious allegiances also emerges. Although some of the minorities share Theravada Buddhism with the Burmese majority, there are as well substantial communities of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. These ethnic and religious minorities find themselves frequently marginalized. Few appear now to have the opportunity to join the armed forces, and with some notable exceptions, few can expect promotion in any government service, the domain of the BaMa Buddhist majority. Although other nations in the region have somewhat similar challenges of ethnic and religious minority challenges, Myanmar's case can be considered exceptional. It has also been historically problematic. The military government that took over Burma in 1962 justified its action as necessary to keep the state from fragmenting into ethnic and political secessionist blocs. The present generation of military government can also argue that a strong army is necessary to hold the country together. Despite several carefully negotiated cease-fires between the state and fractious minority groups in the last decade, ethnic discontent is still a serious problem. Further, an unyielding and patronizing Burmese cultural hubris prevails which continues to polarize the nation. Thus it can be argued that unresolved ethnic-religious tensions represent a greater threat to Myanmar's military government than any other feature, including the continuing presence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and National League for Democracy.

Introduction

'Myanmar' is a traditional Burmese word officially introduced in June 1989 as the name of the state to replace the old, alleged colonial nomenclature of Burma. It is comprised of two words: *myan* (quick) and *mar* (hardy). The introduction of this name (*Myanmar Naing Ngan* in full) is a story of importance on its own. The name Myanmar has a long and distinguished use among the majority Burmese or BaMa (Bamar) peoples, the term of choice used for generations when referring to their own

sense of collective identity. The problem was that the recently installed State Law and Order Restoration Council claimed the name was somehow representative of the multi-cultural nature of the country, thereby justifying its implementation. Offended ethnic minority leaders would have none of that, and accused the government of imposing a name on the state that was meaningful only to the majority BaMa people. They were right, exposing a frank political act which left the minorities even more alienated than they were prior to the name change. It has been argued that it was a move somewhat like one introduced in Ceylon seventeen years before, when the name Sri Lanka, historically identified only with the Sinhala Buddhist majority, was by fiat and without debate or referendum legislated for the country. Ceylon's Tamil community was not pleased, as has become well known. The name changes in both cases may in time be mere historical footnotes, but they still point to something significant: they exacerbated what was already a serious matter of ethnic minorities finding no comfort in a modern nation state largely defined by the cultural and political priorities of an overbearing majority.

I propose to review the topic of ethnic minority discontent in Myanmar from five perspectives. First, I offer a brief overview of Myanmar's demographic make-up. Second, some selected events from largely modern history need to be set down in order to give structure to the contemporary situation. Third, beginning in 1989, the State Peace and Development Council obtained seventeen cease-fires with various militant ethnic groups. We need to ask how durable these are, and reflect as well on the possible ramifications of the SPDC-Daw Aung San Suu Kyi talks for the future of Myanmar's minorities. Fourth, the paper considers the ramifications of a continuing policy of Burmese cultural hegemony ('Myanmarfication'). A fifth collateral subject is the reluctance and failure of the military government to work out acceptable concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism' in post-independence Myanmar. I argue that more than any other single factor, unresolved tensions between the junta and the ethnic minorities threaten the stability of the nation. Indeed, even whether Daw Suu Kyi has an adequate response to minority discontent, or any plans on how the minorities might fit into a new nationalism, remains unknown at this stage. Ethnic organizations remain deeply sensitive to their exclusion from whatever political process is evolving to work out Myanmar's future and destiny as nation and state.

Myanmar's demographic make-up

Myanmar's population is estimated to be 50 million, settled in seven divisions (populated largely by Burmese [BaMa or Bamar], in colonial times called 'Ministerial' Burma) and seven states (identified with certain ethnic groups, or 'Frontier' Burma). The latter terms 'ministerial' and 'frontier' have not been used since the September, 1947 Constitution, but they indicate something of the demographic arrangement nonetheless. From an ethnic perspective, about two-thirds of the population is BaMa. Theoretically, ethnic minorities comprise the rest. All sorts of problems enter at this point, however, due largely to the fact that Myanmar has experienced a great deal of inter-ethnic mingling over a period of centuries, if not millenia. Only in the remote hills could one expect to find an example of an aboriginal people untouched by migration and intermarriage.

To simplify this complex topic, eight major ethnic groups and 135 so-called 'national' or 'principal races' are sometimes identified.² The ethnic groups are BaMa, Rakhine, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kayin, Kayah or Karenni and Kachin. A 1931 census, which some maintain was the last to comprehensively attempt any kind of ethnic enumeration, gives an indication of the percentile size of these communities. Analysts and social scientists extrapolate from these figures (e.g., BaMa 65%; Karen 9%; Shan 7%; Chin 2%; smaller groups like the Mon, Kachin and Wa at 1% each; Indian 7%, though many have subsequently left the country).³ Others argue that two major races came into Myanmar, the Sino-Tibet and the Mon-Khmers, and from these dozens of what might loosely be called ethnic 'groups' or sub-sects emerged.⁴ Others again use a different classification in an attempt to accurately portray the social context of contemporary Myanmar. Martin Smith, for example, rightly notes that "few regional divisions are racially exclusive".⁵ He demonstrates the "considerable overlapping of ethnic groups" by showing how they frequently share territory. Smith has identified the following clusters: Tibeto-Burman (Burman, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, Naga, Lahu, Akha); Mon-Khmer (Mon, Wa, Palaung); Burman and Mon-Khmer; Tai (Shan); Burman and Shan; Karen (Pao, Kayan, Karenni); Burman and Karen.⁶

This is by no means a comprehensive list. Hundreds of dialects and languages, many locked into a small geographic zone, perhaps a ravine or hill tract,

have long been noted by anthropologists. These, and the peoples they represent, are not likely to retain aboriginal isolation or perhaps in some cases even identity for much longer, a fact portrayed by Richard Diran in his recent book, *The Vanishing Tribes of Burma*.⁷

Geography is an important collateral feature of the demographic question. Myanmar's river valleys and deep mountain ranges run north to south (thereby historically favouring the migration of peoples from China, but not India). They terminate in what Martin Smith calls a "rugged horseshoe" surrounding the central Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) valley, a range of mountains that has "historically proven a formidable barrier as much to rulers trying to unify Burma from within as to any invading armies".⁸ Paradoxically at the same time, this geographical peculiarity invites identification with one state or nation. Thus J.S.Furnivall (arguably the greatest 20th century scholar of Burmese society in the English language), could write in 1958: "Burma, secluded from the outer world by mountains and sea, appears destined for political unity by nature....anthropological relationships and economic circumstances reinforce the trend to unity. For the indigenous people are all of mongoloid stock and, at least remotely, akin".⁹

Added to this is the matter of religious diversity. Although the Theravada Buddhism of the BaMa majority is shared by the Rakhine and most Shans and Karens, Myanmar has large communities of Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Christianity is more often than not identified with tribal minorities, such as Chin, Kachin and Karen. It thus carries with it the stigmata of colonialism and close identity with the ethnic minorities. But Christianity has never openly identified itself with secessionist or politically revolutionary aims and so collectively maintains good relationships with the government. Further, although Christians generally cannot expect to rise beyond a relatively low rank in the army or civil service (there are important exceptions to this), they do not suffer the same kind of discrimination that the Muslims do.¹⁰ Roman Catholic and Anglican congregations are found in most of Myanmar's cities and towns (with some outreach to hill tribes), but by far the biggest and most important denomination is that of the Baptists, believed to comprise a million or more adherents.

Hinduism is of course associated with Indians (as is Islam), largely offspring of previous generations who came from the subcontinent during the British raj. The Hindu faith, however, is seen by the BaMa majority to be close to Buddhism. Hindu temples in Myanmar are not infrequently visited by Buddhists. Virtually all temples have an image of Gotama Buddha, the most famous son of the Indian Religious Tradition. Notwithstanding the recognition that the two faiths are branches of the same tree, racial discrimination, subtle and not so subtle, is in the air. Indians, whether Hindu or Muslim, are still regarded by many as *kala* or 'foreign', even if Myanmar born.

Much more discomfort confronts Islam. Probably comprising up to 13% of the population (the state claims only 3%), Muslims are found in at least four 'classes'. The largest group are the Rakhine Muslims (their name, Rohingya, is derived from the word Rakhine). There are likely over one million Rohingya in Rakhine State (the Arakan). Few have Myanmar citizenship. Myanmar's tough citizenship law of 1982 requires the applicant to prove that his or her ancestors were living in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese war in 1824, a virtual impossibility for a people who have no documents whatever. These are a stateless, citizenship-less people to whom I will return shortly. There are as well a few Burmese converts to Islam (whom Sir John Simon in a 1929 classification called 'pure' BaMa Muslims); some Indian Muslims settled since colonial days in Myanmar; Muslims born in Myanmar of two Indian Muslim parents and, finally, 'Myanmar' Muslims who are the offspring of mixed marriages between an Indian Muslim and a Burmese (usually the mother), sometimes called Zerbadees (now an impolite term).¹¹

Official statistics on the matter of religious identity (*Census of the Union of Myanmar*, 1983) are mistrusted by representatives of these faiths. Muslims may number between four and six million, Hindus 1.5 million and Christians about 1.6 million.¹² It should be noted that although there are Muslim and Hindu areas in the cities and countryside, for the most part they are not ghettoized communities, and live and work among the BaMa. Likewise, sizeable ethnic minority populations are found amongst the Burmese majority, sometimes as migrant labour, often as a long-settled people (e.g., Karens in Ayeyarwady Division).

Myanmar's modern history

How different must be the perspective of Myanmar's history from the homelands of the minorities in the hills — or from the eyes of an Indo-Burman — when compared to that of Yangon (Rangoon). Any account of Myanmar's traumatic experiences leading up to the present will inevitably involve differences of interpretation associated in part with ethnicity. After World War Two there was an immediate accelerated rise of nationalism, but without much time to work out what a nation and nationalism might best mean in Myanmar's peculiar circumstance. Regrettably, the British had done nothing to foster a sense of ethnic harmony or national unity. Indeed, Furnivall avers that British rule “stimulated sectional particularism...fostered racial antagonism and subverted the internal balance of power”.¹³ This unfortunate policy heightened the ‘primordial sentiments’ (to use the language of Clifford Geertz), particularly among the majority Burmese. As part of this, the architect of Burma's sovereignty, the Bogyoke or Major General Aung San, inherited a powerful tradition of Buddhist political activism. Figures like the Arakan monks U Seinda and U Ottama in the early 20th century, along with the Burmese monk U Wissera and the nationalist ex-monk Saya San in the 1920's and 30's, left a rich legacy as anti-colonial agitators. As Emmanuel Sarkisyanz has noted, “for some time, religion was the only unifying factor available, the only way Burmese nationalism could express itself”.¹⁴ Buddhist domination of what a sense of independent Burmese nationalism might represent did not interrupt Aung San's agenda, however. Intent on building a framework for a new union of Burma, he sidestepped the religious and collateral BaMa ethno-national claims to superiority, and met with key Shan, Chin and Kachin leaders in Panglong, a small town in Shan State. On 12 February 1947, the Panglong Agreement was signed, described not as an “incorporating document” but as “a general agreement providing for [so-called] Frontier Area representation in the government's Executive Council, and an agreement in principle... for the autonomy of the Frontier Areas in internal administration.”¹⁵ A further guarantee of the right to withdraw from this quasi-federal arrangement after ten years if it was found wanting eased its acceptance with skeptical signatories. A central weakness of the Agreement, however, was the conspicuous absence of the Karen, Karenni, Rakhine (Arakanese) and Mon. The Karen were the most problematic, still perceived by many Burmese

has having received “preferential treatment” from the British (the Karen remained loyal to the British in World War II and contributed several battalions of trained troops to the post-War Burma Army, soon to be disbanded by Gen. Ne Win).¹⁶ But whatever might be said about the deficiencies of Panglong, it remains an historic triumph of sorts, not yet to be duplicated.

Aung San’s assassination in July 1947, just months before Burma’s independence, immediately compromised the Agreement. His successor, Prime Minister U Nu, lacked the vision and capacity to carry the ethnic accord and infant federalism forward. In fact, in a well-meaning but disastrous step backward, in 1960 he even proposed a Union based in part on Buddhism as the state religion. Hindus and Christians accepted this proposed legislation, but the Muslims resisted. In a celebrated cautionary speech to the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (Parliament), Muslim spokesman U Raschid noted:

“Mr. Speaker, I am apprehensive that the adoption of a state religion will have a deep psychological effect on the Buddhists in the country. They will begin to imagine that they have a special role in the administrative, economic, social and educational life of the country...(this) will open the door to extremists to make more and more demands based on religion.”¹⁷

These were prophetic words that came back to haunt Myanmar in the 1990’s, when the ruling junta accelerated its public interest in pious ritual and merit-making. But U Nu’s Parliamentary period was short-lived (and with it much of the putative political authority of the Buddhist *sangha*). General Ne Win took over the country in 1962 with a regime that has, with a few *à la mode* name changes, remained in place ever since. Ne Win’s image as an effective, pro-democratic administrator (projected during his role as the caretaker Prime Minister from 1958 to 1960) was initially welcomed in a country rapidly sliding into disorder.¹⁸ But more ominously, the Ne Win *khit* (era) is marked by several unsavory features pertinent to the ethnic and religious minorities. Among these were the post-1963 exodus of approximately 300,000 Indians and 100,000 Chinese, most with more or less just the clothes on their backs. This arguably racially motivated event represented a late backlash against foreign domination of the colonial economy. It may have temporarily eased certain xenophobic pressures, but it severely damaged the country’s economy, already reeling

under army-run 'socialist' economic policies. Anti-government forces multiplied in every corner of Burma. Some were ideologically motivated (e.g., Communists), some ethnic nationalists (e.g., Kachin). An estimated twenty-five groups in two blocs put up to 30,000 armed men into the field. One of these blocs was the Burma Communist Party (BCP), 15,000 cadres strong, which had some roots among the BaMa people as well. The other bloc (the National Democratic Front) represented ten ethnic organizations struggling not so much for independence as for the hint of federalism promised by Aung San. And, as Martin Smith observes, "caught in the middle of these upheavals were the long-suffering Muslims of Arakan" who were to experience pogroms of varying severity many times in the course of the next four decades.¹⁹ Nor did the BCP come to the aid of ethnic organizations. Some, like the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), at times entered into alliance with the BCP, but there was no long-term commitment here. The repressive scorched-earth and 'Four Cuts' tactics of the Sit Tat or army seemed to work. Burma did not fly apart. The army even had some Chin, Kachin and Karen troops. But it increasingly came to represent only the BaMa majority — a solemn harbinger for ethnic peoples aspiring to find a place in what passed for a Union state. A new Constitution in 1974 referred to the 'national races', but there was no provision for federalism, and the huge Muslim Rohingya was not even mentioned, much less included.

Several events of maximum significance for this story occurred between 1988-1990. The first was the vast, sometimes unruly and essentially unpredictable pro-democracy demonstrations that continued for the summer of 1988. Although this came to a brutal end, with thousands of activists killed and thousands more made to flee the country, Martin Smith correctly avers that because of the uprising, "something has broken in the mould of Burmese politics".²⁰ From here on, dialogue with the democratic opposition was at least a possibility. Second, in 1989, the BCP suddenly mutinied against its leaders. The collapse of the BCP led to its immediate fragmentation, with 15,000 armed troops now specifically identified with Wa, and Kokang and ethnic armies controlling virtually the entire northeast — a huge terrain that included border areas with Thailand and China. Thirdly, the National League for Democracy's (Aung San Suu Kyi's party) electoral victory in 1990, though never translated into political office, was a powerful reminder to the military rulers that their

authority came only from the muzzle of a gun and not from the loyalty of the masses. Despite the acknowledged moral triumph of this event, the elections gave little place for the expression of ethnic aspirations. So striking and immediate were the political problems confronting the majority BaMa in the heartland of the nation that regional and ethnic issues became sidelined. Once again, at a critical hour, important ethnic constituencies, needs, wants and ambitions went unrepresented.

The leading issue of cease-fires between the State and ethnic organizations

A phenomenon of great importance during the 1990's was the remarkable success of government initiatives (largely associated with the current State Peace and Development Council Secretary 1, Lt General Khin Nyunt) to enter into cease-fires with various ethnic rebel forces. A partial list indicates this began with the Kokang and Wa in 1989. (In the case of the Wa and their United Wa State Army, the terms of a cease-fire permitted them control over much of the lucrative but dangerous and corrupting border narcotics industry, providing them a maverick autonomy they will not likely ever willingly surrender.) The process went on to include the Pao and Palaung in 1991, the Kayan in 1992, the powerful Kachin Independence Organization in 1994, the drug-lord Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army and the Karenni National Defence Army in 1996, and finally the Mon Mergui Army in 1997. The key to these agreements was the caveat that rebel arms could be kept, at least for the time being.²¹ Large armouries of weapons must exist, therefore, squirreled away throughout the immense interior hill country.

There are also 'non cease-fire' hold-outs, though few are big enough to provide much of a threat to Myanmar's well-armed 400,000 strong *Tatmadaw* (an honourific for the *Sit Tat* or armed forces). Among these groups are several from Rakhine State (all but one Muslim), notably the Rohingya National Alliance (Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and Rohingya Solidarity Association); the Lahu National Organization; certain elements of the Karen National Union (KNU); the National Socialist Council of Nagaland; and the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA). The latter, sometimes identified by the name of a principal town (Lwei Maw) when Khun Sa dominated it, now prefers to style itself by the 'cleaner' name of Shan State Army (SSA, though note that the political wing of the original organization made

peace with the government). Currently it is headed by Col. Yard Serk (Chao Yodsuk or Ywe Sit). To engage this and other rebel bodies, the *Sit Tat* makes use of allied ethnic forces when it can. Thus the SSA finds as its chief opponent the United Wa State Army, a proxy of the government, and the KNU confront the bizarrely-named pro-government Democratic Kayin (Karen) Buddhist Army.²² Periodically those anti-government forces strike at the flank of the massive Myanmar army, indicating they are still around and not to be taken for granted. For example, many will recall the sad story of the little Htoo brothers, Johnny and Luther, putative leaders of a marginalized group of Karens displaced by the Yadana natural gas pipeline. They came into prominence in January 2000 after an attack on a near-by Thai provincial hospital, ostensibly to bring attention to their collective plight. Much more serious is the ongoing struggle between Yard Serk's 2,000 strong Shan United Revolutionary Army and the 20,000 armed cadres of the United Wa State Army in the eastern Shan state, a conflict which periodically overflows into Thailand (as it did in February and March, 2001), precipitating much international fuss.²³ Likewise, as recently as 6 March 2001, a unit of the KNU struck at the Wegali (Wekalay) dam site 120 kilometers south of Mawlamyine, and attacked a government security camp at nearby Thanbyuzayat. Five soldiers and a captain died, hostages were taken, hundreds of forced labour conscripts apparently released, and much industrial equipment destroyed. There has been retaliation, of course, but attacks like these are likely to continue, an unnerving prospect for any government that sets itself up as the agent of the much-touted "people's desire".²⁴

To sum up: the various cease-fires are no more than that. No final agreements have been struck with the co-operating organizations. These groups theoretically can still call off the cease-fire that pertains to them and take up arms in their possession. But analysts seriously question the ability of any ethnic group to do this with the single exception of the United Wa State Army. The latter now represents a de facto autonomous region that will not likely surrender its lucrative control over the narcotics industry in the Wa and Shan states. Elsewhere in Myanmar's seven ethnic states, there is a ubiquitous, visible and strong Myanmar army presence (in western Arakan, apart from the army, the NaKaSa or border para-military units also keep the Rohingya under strict control). This is particularly visible in Kachin and Kayin

States, and in the Taninthayi (Tenasserim) Division. For example, a day's drive west and south of Myitkyina in Kachin State to Mogaung, Hopin and Indawgyi, will pass many army camps, large and small, that simply were not there before the 1994 KIO-SPDC cease-fire agreement. No rural uprising would be successful under these circumstances of occupation by so many light infantry battalions. The countryside is literally one vast, strung-out garrison. One can determine the sensitivity of an ethnic area as well by the number of check points. Again, by way of example, in the Pa-an and Thanbyuzayat areas of Kayin State, these are not less than every fifteen kilometers, indicative of a tense area indeed. Large parts of Myanmar endure similar strict travel and transport conditions.

It is important to note that the cease-fires were accepted by the various ethnic organizations in part because they promised a process of economic development and political dialogue. Regrettably there is little of the former and none of the latter. This will likely compromise the integrity and durability of the cease-fires. It is true that roads and bridges have been built in frontier areas. For example, a high-quality metaled road suddenly appears between Mawlamyine and Thanbyuzayat, and on to Dawei in the Tenasserim. Is it cynical to conclude, as some have done, that this and other engineering ventures are there more for emergency use by the army rather than to spur rural economic development? If development is quantifiable by the number of viable projects or employment opportunities in any given area, Myanmar has little to show the minorities that they are being taken seriously in this regard. This is a particularly sensitive issue in Kachin State, where the cease-fire has not brought any of the promised economic benefits, and where, as noted above, one of the former most powerful ethnic armies is precipitously surrounded by dozens of *Tatmadaw* units, units which would have had no chance at all of establishing their presence here prior to a cease-fire agreement.

In this regard, the ethnic states are also sensitive to the fact that their traditional homelands or territories are the best endowed in terms of natural resources, notably timber, minerals and hydro-electric potential. These riches continue to be taken away, but there is little trickle-down for local residents who increasingly resent seeing both their environment haphazardly used, with substantial profits accrued by outsiders who claim monopoly of the state's natural commodities.

The unresolved question of Burmese cultural hegemony

Despite ethnic discontent over their state of affairs (ethnic frustrations are never legally permitted to boil over into demonstrations, but remain quietly and widely voiced), the military government insists on a ‘Myanmarfication’ program that ignores the integrity of tribal, aboriginal and other ethnic cultures. Most importantly, education programs give little place to indigenous languages other than Burmese. But BaMa ethnic nationalism (what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls a “surrogate religion”) appears in many forms. Sometimes Buddhism is engaged — albeit not very successfully — in proactive tribal mission work where Christianity has long had a dominant presence.²⁵ It is not just language and religion that’s at stake here, but a severe, patronizing attitude from the heartland of the ethnocratic state, from Rangoon. Even Rakhine Buddhists, who share many of the same cultural features of the BaMa, sometimes harbour simmering, if not serious resentment at the fact they have no senior representation in the SPDC. Powerful regional *taing hmus* or regional army commanders are almost always BaMa, a clear indication of cultural as well as military hegemony.

The cultural arrogance of an ethnic majority is of course problematic in many parts of the world, not just Myanmar. It has long been identified by political philosophers as among the most serious of issues confronting multi-ethnic countries (e.g., Ortega y Gasset’s *beateriá de la cultura* or Jurgen Habermas’s *Kulturnation* are both expressions used in Western literature to express this phenomenon). Many of Myanmar’s neighbours have ethnic challenges similar to those confronting Yangon. The question now is whether an interim or democratically-elected government could make the transition from BaMa domination to something more ethnically and regionally balanced, to what Charles Taylor calls a ‘politics of equal recognition’.²⁶ Ethnic spokespersons are concerned that their anxieties are not being addressed constructively anywhere, including the assumed on-going private conversations between the SPDC and Daw Suu Kyi. Indeed, some aver that Daw Suu Kyi shares many of the same priorities of the SPDC when it comes to defining nationalism. She is said, for example, to agree that the Rohingya are not a bona fide ethnic people in Myanmar (I have found no quotation from her works to substantiate this sometimes encountered claim). In some ways, the Rohingya bring Myanmar’s minorities

challenge to a focus. Although more vulnerable and open to human rights abuse than other ethnic minorities, at one million strong they are not just going to fade away. But nor will the Kachin or Mon, the Karen, Chin or Shan, the Wa or Rakhine, the Lisu, Palaung, Naga, Lahu, Akha or any number of smaller tribal groups. They will always challenge the center to respect their cultural and therefore associated political rights, however defined. No future government of Myanmar can feel secure until it has worked out an acceptable system, as Aung San started to do so over half a century ago. His labours remain in cold storage to the detriment of the nation.

Burmese nationalism and the challenge of re-definition

A collateral feature of Burmese cultural dominance is the vital question of its effect on a commonly embraced sense of nationalism. Myanmar's current understanding of nationalism hardly fits the mold of a multicultural and religiously pluralist state. As William Duiker, Nicholas Tarling and others have argued, nationalism can be a disintegrative as well as an integrative force.²⁷ Yangon's propaganda efforts to the contrary, the BaMa-focussed nationalism engendered and promoted by the SPDC is perceived by many to be the wrong one for the times. Although it is true that a rightly proud Burmese nationalism based on a common language, religion and culture survived the British period, the inclusion of the frontiers into Burma during the raj encouraged rival nationalisms as well. Ideally, these aspirations could be accommodated in a federal state, but Myanmar with its traditionally highly-centralized polity and what some would refer to as a Burmese 'garrison nationalism', is unable to make the leap necessary to embrace this notion.²⁸ In this regard, for example, there is very little awareness of what 'federalism' might mean in Myanmar. This complex notion (there are many types of federalism) is not part of the traditional cultural or political language. Just as in Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka, where there is no Sinhala equivalent of the word 'federal', so too in Myanmar, there is no Myanmar word that translates this quite foreign concept. Thus any suggestion that a Western-style federalism is Myanmar's political answer to ethnic pluralism is simplistic. Some other kind of language might be used to arrive at the same power-sharing, decentralized political model, but the word 'federal' is unfortunately and irrevocably tainted.

Conclusion

In his leading work on Myanmar's politics of ethnicity, Martin Smith notes, "what is most remarkable about Burma is the total absence of political dialogue and failure even to acknowledge the scale of the problem...clearly a new Panglong agreement will one day be needed to restore the spirit of the union".²⁹ But is the first part of this assertion entirely correct? I aver that the junta deserves some credit for at least having skillfully negotiated short-term cease-fires with so many ethnic organizations. Because of this, it could be argued that Myanmar has made a partial shift from ethnic minority exclusion to what David Brown calls co-optation, "away from the politics of autocracy and towards the politics of corporatism" (where the state does what it can to bring together a 'dis-aggregated' or pluralist society, "and then disguises it as the organic community").³⁰ Further, for whatever it was worth at the time, the State Peace and Development Council's National Convention for a new constitution was engaged in exactly this process from January 1993, until brought to a standstill in 1996. One possible reason for this abrupt closure of proceedings may be the National League for Democracy boycott of the National Convention (which it declared a farce) in November 1995. More likely was an accelerating problem with ethnic minority representatives, though nothing official has ever been made public. In fairness to the State Peace and Development Council, however, it should be noted that there is provision in the preliminary architecture of this constitution for two houses in the legislature. One is the numerically-based parliament of first-past-the-post elected members. The other calls for an ethnic or regional upper house. The seven States and seven Divisions would also have their own legislatures. There is even legislative basis for impeachment of the head of state. Yet despite these overtures to democracy and quasi-federalism (though avoiding that term), the National League for Democracy could at the time hardly accept a continuing Indonesian-style *dwifungsi* function for the *Tatmadaw* (the army would retain one quarter of the parliamentary seats, and the Ministries of Defence, Military, Border and Home Affairs). Likewise unacceptable was the proposal that the head of state could by personal action and without consultation appoint a non-elected cabinet, and appoint or dismiss all state and division Chief Ministers.

A return to these constitutional talks still seems a long way off. In the meantime, the prospect of an ethnic break-up of Myanmar, possibly a Sri Lanka-style communal up-rising, continues to haunt the government — as evidenced in part by the huge expansion of armed forces, overwhelmingly BaMa in composition. There are some who maintain that a “tide of nationalism and ethnic passions is still rising in a wide arc from central Europe to the heart of Asia”.³¹ Others aver that in societies that are highly divided along linguistic and cultural lines, “the evidence that democracy almost never works in is overwhelming”.³² Countries that find such tribalism frightening are not likely to give into minority insurgency or secessionist demands. Perhaps the junta is counting on more international understanding of Myanmar’s predicament in this matter. But it must be kept in mind that except for one or two minor fringe groups (e.g., the Arakan Independence Alliance), Myanmar’s minorities are not agitating to break away from the state. Their claimed goals are simply more regional autonomy and better representation. Ultimately Myanmar cannot be held together as a police state and expect a sustainable, decent prospect. David Brown is surely justified in averring that nationalism is “always ideologically and politically constructed, but it is the disguise of the ‘constructed’ as ‘natural’ which gives it its power”. So far, the ‘disguise’ of the national flag (with its five stars encircling the single star of the state), or that of the cease-fires, is not enough to bring to birth the lasting prospect of a viable new sense of nationalism where, to use the eloquent language of Benedict Anderson, “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.³³ When change comes to Myanmar, as it inevitably will, perhaps its ethnic diversity will be seen as one of its great assets rather than the detriment it has become under the long siege of military rule. But only if it prepares now before the poison of autocratic military and cultural hegemony makes impossible the dream of a true Union of Myanmar.

NOTES

1. According to J.S.Furnivall, 'Burmese' refers to those who speak Burmese (BaMaLo) as their mother tongue, and 'Burmans' to inhabitants of Burma (Myanmar) in general. *The Governance of Modern Burma*, N.Y: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1988, p.4.
2. Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London: Zed Books, 1999, p.31.
3. *EIU Country Profile 2000 Myanmar*. London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, p.13. Rakhine Buddhists are usually included with the BaMa, but some insist on separate identity (5% of the population). The subtle question of facial features gives a unique identity to the Rakhine. From a cultural perspective, this can also be seen in the unusual faces of the Rakhine Buddha image, with its sharp, pointed nose.
4. U Min Naing, *National Ethnic Groups of Myanmar* (Trans. by Hpone Thant). Yangon: Thein Myint Win Press, 2000, p.2.
5. Smith, op cit, p.30.
6. Ibid., Map 2, p.xix.
7. Richard K. Diran, *The Vanishing Tribes of Burma*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997.
8. Smith, op cit., p.31.
9. Furnivall, op cit., p.3.
10. Examples of Christians who currently hold senior office are Brig.Gen. David Abel in the SPDC Office, and U Aye Lwin, Director General ASEAN Affairs, Foreign Ministry.
11. Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1972 p.58. It should be noted that Islam reached northern Burma as early as 860 CE from Yunnan, China. In the south it came with Arab, Persian and Indian traders as far back as the 16th century, during the Moghul era (though the Rakhine kings of Mrauk U strenuously resisted Moghul expansion into the Chittagong, a region then under Rakhine control). Islam's growth in the Rakhine came later after the fall of the Rakhine state to the BaMa in 1784. Reference is made to the 1929 Royal Statutory Commission of Sir John Simon. Indian Muslims in this era were also registered in Burma by their place of origin, viz., Patani, Punjabi, Cholia, Lebbaais, Moplah, Kaka, Telugu, Deccani, Gujerati, Soorti and Chittagong. Burmese Muslims were further classified as Arakanese, Zerbadees, Kamans. and Myedu.
12. My last attempt at securing reliable statistical data on this question indicated one million Baptists, 400,000 Roman Catholics, 48,000 Anglicans, 18,000 Methodists, 30,000 Presbyterians and about 68,000 'independent' Christian denominations, mostly associated with a particular ethnic community. By extrapolation, these numbers could be modestly increased to meet five years' growth. B. Matthews, "Religious minorities in Myanmar — hints of the shadow". *Contemporary South Asia*, 4, no.3, (1995) p.287.
13. Furnivall, op cit, p.21. "The object of British policy was to develop the material resources of Burma by throwing it open for free enterprise to all the world on equal terms...Industry and commerce passed into the hands of foreigners". (p.22).
14. E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist backgrounds of the Burmese revolution*. The Hague: M.Nijoff, 1965, p.206.
15. R.H.Taylor, *The State in Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p.90. The new Union of Burma reflected in the 1947 Constitution, based on four federating states (Shan, Karenni (Kayeh), Kachin, Kayin and the Chin Special Division). It provided for a titular president whose office rotated among the ethnic groups. Two houses in the legislature included a Westminster-style elected *Pyithu Hluttaw*, and a

- Chamber of Nationalities, the latter giving special representation to the various ethnic groups.
16. In fact, as Martin Smith rightly notes, British policy did little to advance minority aspirations. The Karens, like other ethnic groups, were economically neglected and their homelands treated as “mere reservoirs of untapped resources”. Smith (op. cit.), p.48.
 17. D.E .Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1965, p.267.
 18. Writing on Ne Win’s interim government leading up to the 1960 election, John Seabury Thomson noted: “for all the General Ne in is a man dedicated to parliamentary democracy as he has seen in emerge in Burma, his conception of the Prime Minister’s role was one of leadership and direction...[but] the strongest similarity between the Ne Win regime and the political administration before him was the deep sense of national identity.” Furnivall, op cit., p.137.
 19. M. Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, p.219.
 20. Ibid, p.452.
 21. The exception being the Mong Tai Army which reportedly traded “arms for peace”. Bertil Lintner gives a good review of the cease-fires and their consequences. See “Drugs and Economic Growth in Burma”, in *Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State?* Ed. Morten Pedersen, et al. Adelaide: Crawford house, 2000, p.172. A comprehensive list of seventeen “Armed National Groups that have achieved peace with the Government”, with “dates of entry into the legal fold”, armed strength and names of leaders is found in Yan Nyein Aye, *Endeavours of the Myanmar Armed Forces Government for National Reconsolidation*, Yangon: (no press indicated). 2000, p.108.
 22. A good review of the DKBA is found in “Facets of a Buddhist Army”, Parts 1, 2. *Burma Issues*, (Bangkok) 8, no. 7 & 8 (1998).
 23. Shan leader Chao Yodsuk has recently claimed a force of not just 2,000 but 10,000 armed cadres. *Bangkok Post*, 25 March, 2001.
 24. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the military government uses the model of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths (*ariyasaccani*) in their propaganda statements. These are almost always enumerated as four points, viz., People’s Desire (consisting of four instructions to oppose or crush anyone who disagrees with the junta), the Four Social Objectives, the Four Economic Objectives and the Four Political Objectives.
 25. In 1990, Religious Affairs was made a separate Ministry (*Tharathanar ye-Wungyi Htar-na*), with two directorates, one for the administration of all religions in Myanmar (*Tharathanar-ye Oo Si Htar-na*), and one for the ‘Promotion and Propagation of the Buddhist Sasana’ (*Tharathanar Htunkar Pyantpwar ye Oo Si Htar-na*). The skeptical observer might observe that the latter reflects the government’s interest in reaching out to ethnic minorities, especially tribal peoples, as part of its Myanmarfication strategy. A new Theravada International Buddhist University in Rangoon has also been opened, with all Myanmar graduates who are monks required to do mission service after graduation. But Buddhist missions (*dhamma duta*) have not been very successful in proselytization for several reasons. Foremost is a traditional paradigm of Buddhist ministry based on devotees serving the monk to make merit (*kutho*). This is exactly the opposite of what Christian missions have been engaged in for many years in the same territories, where the pastor goes out to serve the people. An example of the contrast is vividly set forward by a very large sign on a busy thoroughfare (in English) stretched across the front of a prominent Mon Baptist church in Mawlamyine. The biblical quotation reads: “The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister unto others”. (Observed in January, 2001.)

26. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
27. See, e.g., Nicholas Tarling, *Nations and States in Southeast Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.75.
28. David Brown, *Reconstructing Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. Western Australia: Asia Research Centre on Social, Political and Economic Change, Murdoch University, 1996, p.4.
29. M. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, pp.79, 324.
30. Brown, op cit., p.7.
31. Gidon Gottlieb, "Nations Without States", *Foreign Affairs*, 73 no. 3 (1974), p.102.
32. Michael Lind, "In Defense of Liberal Nationalism", *Foreign Affairs*, 73 no. 3 (1974), p.95.
33. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991, p.6.

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