

Farzana Hossein

AUTHORITARIANISM AND PROSPECT FOR DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

Most of the countries of South-east Asia at the time of their independence had chosen democracy as the system of government. Gradually, however, in many of these countries, the democratic system was replaced by authoritarian regimes, the military being in most cases at the apex.

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), which became independent in 1948, began with a democratic form of government. However, its democratic experience lasted for a brief period as the military took over in 1962. Nearly thirty years of autocratic rule since then has left a once prosperous country's economy in shambles. Ethnic strife, exacerbated by the policy of divide and rule used by the regime as a weapon for weakening the opposing forces and ban on socio-economic and political freedom, subdued any prospect of return to democracy. Moreover, long years of self-imposed policy of international isolation had prevented developments elsewhere in the world from having any substantial impact on its domestic arena. However, pressures from within the country became considerable in more recent years. In 1988 a popular movement for the restoration of democracy began. The impetus was provided by the presence of Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San who is regarded as the Father of independent Myanmar. Demonstrations continued till 1989. This

uprising opened a new chapter in Myanmar politics. It forced the government to hold elections in May 1990, in which the NLD (National League for Democracy) came out victorious. However, the ruling junta has refused to hand over power to the NLD and has further consolidated its power and grip over the country. The presence of Suu Kyi came as a threat to the military regime. They have tried their utmost to prevent her from staying on in Myanmar. They not only prevented her from taking part in the 1990 elections but placed her under house arrest for over two years.

In this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to bring into focus the role of the military in Myanmar's politics and to analyse the potential for change. In the first section an attempt is made to review the background of Myanmar's political developments. The second section highlights the 1990 elections and its aftermath. Finally, the paper focuses on the factors that pose as impediments to the establishment of a democratic government in Myanmar and prospect for change.

I. MYANMAR'S POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Pre-Independence Political Developments

The Myanmar armed forces was formed with the help of the Japanese during World War II. The army was essentially an indigenous group led by Aung San. They were trained for the purpose of helping the Japanese to fight against the British in South-east Asia, particularly in Myanmar. After its formation this army changed its name thrice from "Independence Army" to "Defence Army" in late 1942 and finally to "National Army" in 1943 when Myanmar was

granted nominal independence by the Japanese.¹ The period of nominal independence proved important because of two important developments. The first one was the formation of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). This party was formed by Aung San, one of the "Thirty Heroes" and the leader of the Myanmar Army, along with others. There were two primary objectives of this party, (a) The removal of the Japanese from Myanmar soil; and (b) The formation of an independent Myanmar.

The second important and interesting development was the revolt by this army against the Japanese in 1945, and their joining the allied forces to fight against the Japanese.

Talks on Myanmar's independence began soon after the Japanese vacated Myanmar soil. an Executive Council was formed in 1946, with Aung San as its Chief Councilor, including six other members of the AFPFL and three independents.² Elections were held in April 1947 in which AFPFL came out victorious and were given the responsibility of promulgating a new constitution, and formation of a new government.

At the time of its independence Myanmar had no significant or dominant political groups apart from the AFPFL. However, during the British rule several groups emerged strictly along ethnic or religious lines. Their objective was not only to overthrow the British but also to do away with the Indian, Chinese and Pakistani minorities, living and working in Myanmar. The first such organisation was the

1. Josef Silverstein, *Burma : Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977, p. 17.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBA) formed in 1906 by the European educated Burmese youths. Later it changed its name to General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA).³ It was the political activity of this organisation that gave birth to future political parties. This process began in the nineteen-thirties and the foremost party was 'The Sinyetha' or the 'Poor Man's Party', founded by Dr. Ba Maw. It called for the reduction of taxes, compulsory education and the protection of the farmers from money lenders⁴ who were mainly South Indians.

An offshoot of the political party *Dohbama Asiayone* (We Burmans Association), formed in 1929 by Rangoon University Students, was the Thakin Party.⁵ This party called for the revival of Burmese-Buddhist cultural tradition, opposed the British educational system and propounded socialism, inspired by the Buddhist perception of equity and justice and also by the fact that Myanmar's economy was in the hands of foreigners, thereby encouraging xenophobia. The members of the party included students, teachers and other intellectuals. Among its most important members were U Nu and Aung San. Later on the Thakins broke into three factions. Just before the outbreak of the Second World War the Thakins, along with Dr. Ba Maw's party and other nationalist and Buddhist organizations, formed a new organization called the "Freedom Bloc".⁶ The result was the arrest of Dr. Ba Maw and other Thakin leaders. Soon after, the Japanese invaded Myanmar and drove out the British. This successful

3. P. Sharan, *Government and Politics of Burma*. Metropolitan Book Co. Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1983, p. 15.

4. D. R. Sar Desai, *South-east Asia : Past and Present*, Vikas Publishing House, New Dehli 1981, p. 282.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

move and the Japanese slogan "Asia for the Asiatics" led the Myanmar populace to believe that their cooperation would give them immediate independence. But when nominal independence was granted instead of full independence in August 1943 to Myanmar, an anti-Japanese resistance movement began. This movement was spearheaded by the AFPLF (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League). This reversal of Myanmar attitude from warmth to that of total repulsion towards the Japanese was not without reason. The invaders had total disregard for Myanmar culture, tradition and religion, reflecting their arrogance and highhandedness. Soon respect for the Japanese dissipated. The Myanmar then turned to their previous adversary, the British, for help to drive the Japanese out of Myanmar. Therefore, by mid 1944 all political formations, including communists, socialists, and various nationalist parties, grouped under the newly founded AFPFL. They had one common objective, namely, driving the Japanese from their country. Than Tun, a long time communist leader, became its (AFPFL) Secretary General while Aung San, leader of the 'Thirty Heroes', Commander of the BNA (Burma Nationalist Army) and master-mind of the revolt against the Japanese, became its President.⁷ The AFPFL led the revolt against the Japanese in March 1945 and by May 1945 the Japanese withdrew from Yangon. Soon after that they vacated the whole country. With the termination of the Second World War Aung San demanded immediate and complete independence from Great Britain. This process was accelerated by the British decision to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent.

In April 1946 Aung San and his associates were appointed to the Council of Ministers by the British. The following year an election to the Constituent Assembly was held in which the AFPFL won an

7. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

overwhelming majority. This was Myanmar's first step towards parliamentary democracy. However, with the assassination of Aung San three months after the elections in July 1947, this process suffered a temporary setback. The AFPFL now had a new leader, U Nu.

Post-Independence Political Developments

With Myanmar's independence in January 1948 U Nu became its first Premier with a Shan chief, Sao Shwe Thaik, as the President. This new government ruled democratically for nearly ten years from 1948 to 1958. However, it soon began to face challenges to its authority. The first challenge was the armed insurgency by its ethnic minorities and the communists. The minority communities, such as the Karens, Shans, Mons, Arakanese, Kachins, Chins etc., had enjoyed protection from the dominant ethnic group - the Burmans. In the absence of the British they now hoped to form separate autonomous states. This invited the second challenge, which came from the army. The army had been sent to suppress these insurgencies. While operating in those areas they gave more importance to the authority of the civilian officers against the local AFPFL politicians thereby undermining the authority of the local AFPFL politicians. This ploy by the armed forces resulted in strained relations between them and the ruling party (AFPFL).

The third challenge came from within the ruling AFPFL party itself. In 1958 the AFPFL split into two. The underlying causes were: (a) In 1950 the AFPFL expelled a pro-Soviet group from the party because it criticised Myanmar's policy during the Korean War. This group renamed itself as the Burma Workers Peasants Party' (BWPP) and assumed the role of opposition in Parliament. (b) Another factor was U Nu's attempt to reunite rival leaders of the AFPFL. It was a last attempt to revive and strengthen a party which had become

corrupt and weakened because of party infighting resulting from differences in outlook and policies as well as personal ambition and personality clashes. However, his mission of salvaging a politically fragmented party failed. He, therefore, gave up further efforts and joined forces with Thakin Tin and Kyaw Tun. Their Party became known as the "Clean AFPFL" while the other faction came to be called the "Stable AFPFL" led by Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein. This breakup of AFPFL into two parties was taken advantage of by the Communists who began a countrywide insurrection. They also extended their help to ethnic dissident groups, such as the Karens and the Shans, to revive their demand for a separate state.

(c) Another challenge was that soon after the AFPFL split, U Nu, in order to settle the dispute, called for a special session of the parliament to decide which faction would govern. U Nu won the vote of confidence. But in order to rule he had to take the support of the NUF (National Unity Front) and the representatives of the minorities in parliament as his party did not have the majority seats. In enlisting the support of the communists and the minorities he lost the confidence of the people and the army. This was so because the minorities did not trust each other and the dominant Burmans. On the other hand, the army feared that secession of the minority areas would make Myanmar vulnerable and threaten its security. This chaotic turn of events created a situation of anarchy in the country. Therefore, U Nu, refusing to face the regular session of the parliament, requested the head of the army Ne Win to take over the reins of the Government. This move installed the first caretaker government in Myanmar. In its eighteen months in office the caretaker government adopted some severe and direct measures, aimed at ending insurgencies, modernizing the administration, etc. It also amended the constitution by which the feudal chiefs of the Shan and Kayah states would not

be able to hold their seats automatically in the parliament's Chamber of Nationalities and paid them large sums of money to surrender their hereditary political rights in their states.⁸ Its final task was to hold fresh elections, which was held in February 1960. In this election the Clean AFPFL of U Nu won an overwhelming majority.

The restoration of constitutional democracy was supposed to remove all the problems that Myanmar faced - ethnic, economic, social and political. However, it was quite the opposite. U Nu's intention of establishing Buddhism as the state religion led to widespread protests by the non-Bhuddist minorities. Crime rate increased as the law became lax and the ruling party threatened to split as conflict of opinion and ambition surfaced. Taking advantage of this anarchic situation a powerful and influential section of the armed forces, which was against the return of the parliamentary democracy, took over in 1962. The military junta, headed by General Ne Win immediately dissolved the parliament, arrested its leaders, and abrogated the constitution of 1947.

Political Developments after the 1962 Coup

The military coup of 1962 was left challenged; in fact, the people accepted the change calmly. Several reasons can be attributed to this. They are as follows: *Firstly*, Myanmar had begun its independent life with a political army which played a very important role in the independence movement. They had included the "Thirty Heroes" trained by the Japanese, and later on they had helped to form the Burma National Army, and then to form Myanmar's first organised political group. General Ne Win was one of the "Thirty Heroes" and

8. Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

he too had played a significant role, along with others, to win independence. Therefore, Ne Win was not unfamiliar to the people.

Secondly, the government of U Nu alienated many of its supporters by implementing policies that were interpreted by the people and particularly the armed forces as not being conducive to Myanmar's security. His policy of catering to the ethnic minorities by giving them political concessions is cited as an example. According to the 1947 Constitution of Myanmar the Shan and Kayah ethnic minorities were given the right to secede if they wished to do so after ten years.⁹ In early 1962 U Nu actually entered into negotiations with those ethnic minorities who wished for secession. In fact, one of the principal causes for the coup of 1962 was the Shan's threat to secede. *Thirdly*, the image of Ne Win had been bolstered immensely because of the smooth and efficient functioning of the caretaker government installed in 1958, for a brief period of eighteen months.

After assuming power the military junta put forward their programme. First of all they formulated a national ideology contained in two documents' — The Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS) and The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment (SCME).¹⁰ According to the BWS, both the economic and political systems must be altered before tackling other problems that were facing the country. The SCME ideology rests on three basic principles: change, revolution and socialism. Its ideas are drawn from a variety of contradictory sources, namely, the Burmese Buddhist tradition, marxism, socialism, humanism and pragmatism¹¹. The military then adopted a strategy to

9. B. N. Pandey, *South and South-East Asia, 1945-1979: Problems and Policies*. The Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1980, p. 85.

10. Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

11. *Ibid.*

deal with the chaotic situation prevailing then in the country. This strategy consisted of three elements.¹² The first was the formation of a cadre based party. This initiative was taken to win the support of the people by giving the coup a democratic facade. The Burma Socialist Programme Party was thus born with Ne Win as its first Chairman.

The second element was the adoption of measures to help build a self-sufficient economy. This was again based on three tenets. (a) The belief in the moral superiority of socialism over capitalism; (b) The fear of peasant revolt and possible support for the continuing insurgency of the Burma Communist Party; and (c) the fear that Myanmar's neutralist foreign policy and its growing ties with China would be hampered and undermined if it sought the cooperation of Western industrial countries for economic development.

The third element was the adoption of measures, aimed at redefining ethnicity, in an attempt to undermine the position of separatist minority groups. According to the BWS, the new Myanmar, like the old would incorporate all the indigenous people. It was further stated that in Myanmar there would be a place for everyone in the society. Moreover, the right of everyone to preach and practice religion, etc., was said to be a fundamental goal of the Ne Win regime.

The army felt that these tenets, based on a strong belief in Myanmar nationalism and sovereignty, could only be safeguarded by them. However, these policies over the past thirty years have earned Myanmar the status of a least-developed country. Also, Ne Win's attempt to give his authoritarian regime a democratic form through the BSPP proved to be a failure. This was so because the bulk of its members were from the armed forces, and Ne Win continued

12. *Strategic Survey* 1988-1989, IISS, London, p. 134.

to be its Chairman. Although a new constitution was promulgated in 1974 and nominal state power was given to an elected People's Assembly, Myanmar was still being run by Ne Win and his men. On the other hand, the government's efforts to build an autarkic economy also collapsed because of lack of capital for investment, refusal to impose taxes on the peasantry for political reasons, refusal to accept foreign investment and finally the acceptance of nominal foreign aid and borrowing which was not sufficient. Moreover, black marketing and opium smuggling into Thailand, illegal border trade, etc., increased. These factors have further eroded any chance of economic revival.

General Ne Win realizing after 25 years that his strategy was a failure declared in 1987 that his country's economic policies would be changed. Keeping in line with this declaration private traders were given the permission to resume domestic trade, and trade with foreign countries was also considered. However, these policies failed to rejuvenate the economy and as the crisis deepened Ne Win resigned and called on the BSPP to hold a national referendum on whether one party system should continue. This, however, was rejected by the BSPP. Ne Win was succeeded in July 1988 by General Sein Lwin whose violent repression of demonstrators earned him the title the "butcher of Rangoon".¹³ He was soon forced to resign, and was succeeded in August 1988 by Dr. Maung Maung. However, his tenure in office lasted a little over a month, after which the Minister of Defence, General Saw Maung, staged a coup on 18th September 1988 and took over, under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The main cause of the 1988 military coup, as it will be clear from the following discussion was the failure of Sein Lwin and

13. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Maung to prevent ceaseless demonstrations by the people that were threatening the authority of the army over the country. The army also felt that the prevailing chaotic situation all over the country would be taken advantage of by the rebels fighting for autonomy and against the regime. This, it felt, would threaten Myanmar's security.

II. THE 1988 MILITARY COUP, 1990 ELECTIONS AND THE AFTERMATH

The pro-democracy movement, which took place in Myanmar in 1988, had been one of the factors that precipitated the military coup which brought Saw Maung to power. The demonstrations had been participated by people from all walks of life. It soon became spontaneous and widespread. The demonstrators demanded (a) the restoration of democracy and a multi-party system; (b) the resignation of the military government, (c) the dissolution of the BSPP and (d) the formation of a neutral interim Government to oversee the election and transition to democracy.

The new government, headed by Saw Maung who took over in September 1988, replaced the BSPP by the National Unity Party (NUP) and conceded to the demand of holding a multiparty election. Behind Saw Maung's pledge to hold free and fair elections was the fact that such a move would appease the people for the time being. Because by that time Aung San Suu Kyi had given hope to the people that democracy could be restored once again. Secondly, the military junta wanted to prevent further imposition of sanctions by the Western countries and Japan. They had imposed nominal sanctions against Myanmar following the massacre of at least 3000 demonstrators¹⁴

14. *Time*, June 11, 1990.

by the military junta. In fact, it was a move to improve its image abroad rather than actually establishing a democratic government in the country.

The election, held in May 1990, proved to be a great disappointment for the ruling authorities. Out of 485 seats in parliament the NLD (National League for Democracy) secured 392 seats while the NUP (National Unity Party), backed by the government, bagged no more than 10 seats.¹⁵ This landslide victory of the NLD has virtually become unacceptable to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). They have constantly refused to hand over power to the NLD.

According to the ruling authorities power will be transferred to a civilian government after a constitution, acceptable to all the people of Myanmar, had been drawn up and approved. This new constitution would guarantee the rights of all the 135 diverse ethnic minorities and groups in Myanmar. Despite such promises the ruling Junta has adopted several measures to further delay the transfer of power to civilian hands. The measures adopted are as follows :

(a) Many NLD leaders have been arrested and imprisoned. The Secretary General of the NLD, Suu Kyi, has been placed under house arrest since 1989. The detention has been extended for another three years. Tin Oo, the chairman of the NLD, has also been imprisoned. Diplomats in Myanmar say that as many as 80 NLD officials have disappeared or been detained.¹⁶ Some opposition leaders have also gone into exile. (b) In July 1991, Myanmar amended its election laws. According to the amendment an election candidate can be debarred

15. *Dialogue*, Dhaka, July 19, 1991.

16. *Asiaweek*, October 25, 1990.

from participating in any future election, depending on the seriousness of the crime he or she may have committed. A candidate can be disqualified, sentenced to death, exiled, banned for five to ten years or for life from participating in the elections. The offences justifying such penalties may range from moral turpitude to that of high treason that may endanger the security of the state. This amendment has affected majority of the parties that had participated in the polls, particularly those who won seats. The NLD is the most affected as 89 of their members have been arrested, tried and convicted.¹⁷ Because of this law the number of successful NLD candidates will decrease by the time the Election Commission submits its report to the SLORC.

(c) The government has stepped up its operations against the insurgent groups. This action has been undertaken as some elected MPs joined students and other activists in Manerplaw headquarters of minority Karen guerrillas, who have been fighting for a long time for self-rule. Many students have also joined the Mon National Liberation Army.¹⁸

(d) In another recent development, the junta has fired 10,000 civil servants for corruption while 5,400 others were cashiered, demoted, or transferred for having non-conformist political views. This move came after all ministers were given order to warn their subordinates that their continued opposition in words, deeds, behaviour and thoughts, despite warnings having been issued, will no longer be tolerated.¹⁹

17. *Dialogue*. Dhaka, September 20, 1991.

18. *Asiaweek*, October 25, 1991.

19. *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, October 10, 1991.

Response of the Opposition

The Myanmar dissidents have not taken these government measures easily. Apart from the revolutionary group called the "All Burma Federation of Students Union", the dissidents have responded by forming a coalition - "The Democratic Alliance of Burma".²⁰ It is a combination of 23 dissident and insurgent organisations. Groups have also been formed in exile by dissident Myanmar with the purpose of mobilizing international support for their cause. One such group is called the "Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma".²¹

Myanmar's dissidents have also formed a provisional government in exile. They have also challenged the country's seat in the General Assembly and have appealed to the United Nations to impose economic and military sanctions²² with the hope that such measures might hasten the exit of the military and restore democracy in Myanmar.

Many students and politicians as mentioned before have joined armed insurgents to bring about political changes in the country. In 1990 two Myanmar students hijacked a plane to India in order to focus on the plight of the Burmese people under military rule and obtain support from India and other countries that practice democracy.

Despite all these attempts at bringing about an end to the military regime in Myanmar the SLORC, it seems, is determined to stay in power. It (SLORC) has nullified, through the ammendment of election

20. *Dialogue*, Dhaka, October 11, 1991.

21. Shew Lu Maung, *Burma: Nationalism and Ideology: An Analysis of Society, Culture and Politics*, UPL, Dhaka 1989.

22. *Time*, June 11, 1990.

laws, the results of the May 1990 election and has stated that it intends to remain in power for another five to ten years.²³

III. PROSPECT FOR CHANGE

The post-1990 election developments in Myanmar have shown that the military does not feel compelled to hand over power to the NLD as yet. They have chosen to ignore requests from different countries to release Suu Kyi from detention. They have also intensified their operation against the opposition. Such developments obviously give rise to a most pertinent question, such as, what are the prospects for change in Burma? In answering this question the following factors are to be taken into consideration.

Problem of National Integration

Myanmar had begun with a democratic government headed by U Nu. However, his policies, particularly those catering to the minorities battling for secession, embittered his relations with the army and many of his colleagues. There were several reasons behind this policy of U Nu. In 1947 before his assassination, Aung San convened a conference at Panglong in Shan state to gather support for a united independent Myanmar. In this conference the Shan, Kachin and Chin leaders agreed to join the proposed Union of Burma. However, some minority groups refused to concede to the Panglong agreement. Moreover, Myanmar's first constitution, promulgated in 1947, had safeguarded some minority interests. It included a clause which provided for the right of secession of the new Union's Shan and Karenni states if they wished to do so even after ten years. But, Myanmar's nationalists, in their attempt to forge unity among its

23. *Far Easten Economic Review*, October 3, 1991.

people, denied the existence of separate ethnic, cultural and territorial divisions among the different peoples in Myanmar by stating that it was the British who had made these artificial distinctions. Among those who adhered to this view and became its proponents were some top military leaders, including General Ne Win. The minorities, however, did not agree with this polemics, instead they started a rebellion soon after Myanmar became independent.

It was the Karens who started their rebellion in 1949. Considering the Burmans as their traditional enemy they embarked on an armed struggle for an independent state. Similar rebellions began among the Paos, the Mons and the Muslim Mujahids in Arakan state. On the other hand, the Burma Communist Party (BCP) began their armed insurrection against the government. The BCP infact, began to encourage those minority groups already involved in an armed struggle to continue and strengthen their struggle.

During 1960-62 a federal movement developed among the minority groups and the Shan leader Shew Thaike submitted a proposal to further loosen the federal structure outlined in the 1947 constitution. In fact, the Shans had begun their armed insurgency for greater political autonomy in 1959. Despite the government's attempt to curb these insurgencies they continued to expand. The Kachins also joined in similar armed insurrection. The army, who had been called in to quell these rebellions, perceived these activities to be a threat to the nation's unity. Therefore, taking advantage of this chaotic situation the military in 1962 stepped in. Although insurgencies have continued till today the insurgents have not been able to make much of a headway in their attempt at overthrowing the military regime or in achieving their objective of autonomy. In fact, the military, being the most cohesive force, has so far been able to keep control of the state. Even though some insurgents control the border areas in the north and east of

Burma they are divided. As a result, the army has been able to use them whenever the opportunity has been provided.

Insurgency by different ethnic groups has been one of the most bedevilling problems since Myanmar became independent in 1948. It has also become a problem for the achievement of democracy. Today, apart from the Chins all of Myanmar's ethnic groups are involved in insurgency. Although they gave up their previous demands for secession in 1987, they have continued their struggle. In retaliation throughout nearly thirty years the government's approach has been to suppress the rebellions by force of arms. Although the policy has failed to completely end the insurgency, it is still believed that force is the only means to contain it. Democracy, the army leaders feel, will further enhance the possibility of fragmentation of the Union into small states, as it was during a democratic regime that the insurgencies started. It was during the rule of U Nu's democratic government that a nationalities seminar was to be organized to discuss the future status of the frontier areas. But it could not take place. The army had felt that it would pave the way for the breakup of Myanmar. They still fear that any attempt by a democratic government for a political solution would only threaten Myanmar's security and lead to its breakup.

However, if one looks closely into the matter it can be seen that the use of force has not helped any one of the sides; none, whether the government or insurgents, have gained much. In fact, the military's policies of replacing federalism with rigid central control and employing harsh methods, and the pronouncements of incorporating several cultures into one national culture have further eroded any possibility of reconciliation, Myanmar has never been a nation in terms of allegiance to a common set of values, beliefs and goals. It is a nation primarily on the basis of loyalty to a polity that transcends their loyalty to race, religion or place of origin.²⁴

24. Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

Lack of national cohesion encourages adversaries, whether domestic or foreign, to exploit the disunity among different ethnic groups in a country. Any movement, intended to overthrow the enemy therefore, becomes fragmented and weakened. This can be said of Myanmar. National unity in this country has been non-existent since its independence. It was due to the charisma of Aung San that some of the minorities had agreed to join the proposed Union. The military takeover in 1962 eroded any possible reconciliation with the minorities, which had already become strained during U Nu's tenure in office. Soon, the minorities intensified their armed struggle against the military junta.

Different minority groups themselves do not have cordial relations with each other and remain fragmented. Each minority group is concerned only with the furtherance of its own interests. These problems have worked in favour of the army who have skillfully exploited them. While the common objective of the minorities is the overthrow of the military junta, their separatist intentions act as a catalyst for keeping the military in power. This situation dims further prospect for change in Myanmar, for the present.

External Factors

It has been seen that movements for the restoration of democracy around the world have been successfully accomplished when major powers, both regional and global, have extended their full-fledged support to them. Usually pressures are put on the ruling authorities by, inter alia, imposing economic embargoes, which in recent years have been important factors in bringing about socio-political changes in some countries such as Nepal, South Africa etc. So far, Myanmar's case seems to be different. In 1988 when thousands of demonstrators were killed the US withdrew its US \$ 14 million annual aid package.²⁵ Moreover, protest notes were issued by Australia and West Germany both of which suspended aid, and by most members of

25. *Dialogue*, December 13, 1991.

the EC, Sweden and even the former Soviet Union.²⁶ However, after the Yangon government introduced an "open door" economic policy for promoting investment and joint ventures, many countries of the West, particularly the USA, have invested in the Myanmar economy. The Amoco oil company of the USA has signed production sharing agreements. The Pepsi Cola International has also opened a factory near Yangon. Australia is investing in the hotel business.²⁷

The most interesting reaction regarding the developments in Myanmar has come from Japan, the ASEAN countries and China. Japan, Myanmar's main aid donor from the mid 1950s, cut its aid in the aftermath of the 1988 killings. However, in February 1990 it changed its policy, recognised the SLORC and partially restored financial assistance. The following year it urged the junta to hand over power to the NLD.²⁸ Japan's dilemma regarding its policy towards Myanmar, it seems, is a legacy of history.

Japan had helped to hasten the independence in Myanmar. The "Thirty Heroes," trained by Japan to carry out acts of subversion against the British during the Second World War had formed the 'Burma National Army', Both Aung San and Ne Win belonged to the "Thirty Heroes". As Japan had contributed to the rise of nationalism in Burma and largely to their independence movement strong emotional links remain between the two countries.

There also exists in Japan an influential Myanmar lobby.²⁹ For many years the lobby was led by Nobusuke Kishi, who was Prime Minister of Japan during 1957-60, and Shintaro Abe, who was its Foreign Minister during 1983-86. Japan's ambassador to Burma, Tabashi Ohkata and his wife, who is Chairman of the Japan-Burma

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 11, 1991.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

Association, belong to this group. Member of the Japan-Burma Association are associated with all the 11 trading companies allowed to operate in Yangon and also with various companies involved with aid projects in Myanmar. One of the principal reasons behind Japan's recognition of the SLORC is that Myanmar's debt to Japan is nearly half of its staggering US\$ 5.3 billion foreign debt. In 1990 Myanmar made its first debt repayment to Tokyo and was supposed to make a second repayment in 1991. Moreover, when during the social unrest in 1988-1989 Japan's 19 aid projects in Myanmar came to a halt, the Japanese Government was pressurised to resume economic assistance by the companies involved in the projects. These companies are supported by Japanese war veterans and the Myanmar lobby in Japan. apart from these, other Japanese companies also continue to do business with Myanmar. Japanese oil company Idemitsu, along with Japanese jewellery and timber merchants, continues to trade with Myanmar.³⁰ Japan's leaders believe that being friendly with the SLORC will diminish its human rights abuse and gradually help to bring about democracy. How far this is going to be of help is a matter of speculation. At present Japan's intention of keeping good relations with Myanmar emanates from its overriding economic considerations and the lobby pressures at home.

All six ASEAN countries have continued to trade with Myanmar. Thailand has fishing and logging rights in Myanmar while Singapore has served as a conduit for all sorts of arms.³¹ In 1991 Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace. However, this honour was not received with enthusiasm by Myanmar's South East Asian neighbours. A Singaporean diplomat described it as a non-event.³²

30. *Time*, October 28, 1991.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

South Korea also continues to trade with and invest in Burma.³³ These countries have stressed instead the value of quiet persuasion. According to experts, leaders of these countries are reluctant to extend support to the NLD for they fear that change in Myanmar would also pose a challenge to their authorities.³⁴

China is another country which has continued to extend support to the military junta. Myanmar is rapidly emerging as China's closest ally in South-east Asia. In 1991 Beijing gave Yangon US \$ 9.3 million interest-free-loan for unspecified economic projects and to build a television station in Myanmar. It has also provided Myanmar US \$1.4 billion worth on weaponry.³⁵ China has also emerged as Myanmar's most important trade partner. An agreement was signed on 6th August 1988 to open official cross-border trade between these two countries. Moreover, it is believed that the Burmese depend on the Chinese for advice on diplomacy and propaganda. The relations, therefore, between the two countries are excellent. It was further cemented by General Saw Maung's visit to China in August 1991, hailed as a big event by Beijing.³⁶

The international donor agencies have also extended economic help to Myanmar. The Asian Development Bank has provided project loans, while the World Bank is hoping to finance rehabilitation of textile and pharmaceuticals, industries, irrigation schemes and a comprehensive restoration programme for transport and communication links.³⁷

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 3, 1991.

36. *Dialogue*, Dhaka, August 9, 1991.

37. *Ibid.*

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has undertaken millions of dollars worth of projects in Myanmar. It is providing funds for the development of border areas, for strengthening the national commission for environment and also for development of private sector. The favourable disposition of the donor countries and agencies is the outcome partly of the fact that the Myanmar government has become a signatory to the 1988 UN convention against traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.³⁸

Unless the donor countries and agencies stop aid and trade with Myanmar the SLORC will not be compelled to hand over power to the NLD. Trade, aid and investment have long been perceived as the means for sustaining governments despite their unpopularity. As long as the countries involved get benefit they invest in and trade with the country. In the case of Myanmar both regional and extra-regional countries are profiting from both legal and illegal trade in such items as rice, precious stones, teak, minerals, etc., in which Myanmar is rich. These commercial interests are helping to nurture the autocracy in Myanmar.

The Armed forces and the People

Another interesting factor that has proved to be an impediment to the achievement of democracy in Myanmar is the relation between the armed forces and the people. After taking over power, the representatives of the military had felt that it was necessary to establish contact with the people and win their loyalty. Therefore, the coup leaders, in order to gain the support of the people, urged all political parties to join them. However, they failed to merge different political

38. *Ibid.*

groups, except the National Unity Front (NUF).³⁹ Thus the BSPP was formed with the NUF and its membership was open to all citizens, who would be willing to accept the authority of the party, adhere to its ideology and carry out its tasks loyally. However, as recruiting was under the control of the military the bulk of the recruits were drawn from the armed forces and the police compared to peasants and workers. Gradually, the army had become the core of the BSPP. Therefore, the soldier, as a member of this party, wielded great influence over his clan, family, etc. If a member of his family, relative or clan opposed the government it was the duty of the soldier to persuade him to give up his anti-government activities. But if he failed to convert the recalcitrant person the soldier would immediately become a subject of scrutiny by the military intelligence. This in turn pressurised the family members and relatives to urge the rebel to give up his anti-government activities. If this succeeded the rebel was then rewarded with a job, or other facilities.

The BSPP, which has now been dissolved, was said to have over two million members. All army personnel also had to become its members. It is still widely felt that being member of the junta's party secures one's present and future. Therefore, to keep it as such, all the members faithfully abide by party rules, even if it endangers the security of their families. This is how the government has tried to control dissent among citizens. Even though the ruling junta's grip sometimes slips leading to mass demonstrations, it has been able to keep a hold on the people so far.

After the 1988 coup the BSPP has been replaced by the NUP. This, however, has not changed the status of the army. They are still the privileged class in the Myanmese society. They are the government and they control the economy, and hence the fate of the

39. Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

people. Therefore, they will not give up their privileged position easily and go back to the barracks. The people, on the other hand seem to be keeping a low profile for the time being. In spite of Suu Kyi being kept under arrest and the SLORC's refusal to transfer power to the NLD sporadic demonstrations took place in December 1991. But it was nothing compared to the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations.

On the other hand, the SLORC is trying to improve relations with powerful neighbouring countries, particularly, China. It has also chosen Ohn Gyaw, one of the few civilians in Myanmar's top leadership as Foreign Minister. This is again Myanmar's attempt to improve its image abroad, tarnished by years of autocratic rule.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The world-wide wave of democratic transition coincided with the anti-autocracy movement and pressures for change in Myanmar. There have been heightened expectations within and outside the country about the prospect of democracy in that country. Democracy, as experienced in different countries around the globe show, has been earned in long processes and through immense sacrifices and sufferings of the people. Myanmar will also be no exception. In 1988 when the people demonstrated it was not just for multi-party elections but for the ideals and norms that make up a democratic state. It was a movement to restore basic human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, economic reforms, a better standard of living, etc. The people of Myanmar irrespective of their ethnic divergences must unite to help restore these lofty ideals of democracy. A flexible democratic system will help accommodate the grievances of all ethnic groups. The only way they can hope to protect their legitimate interests is through constitutional guarantees similar to the 1947 constitution, possible only in a democratic system.

In the vast majority of the developing world authoritarian governments are no longer attractive to the new generation of educated and politically mature population. These people believe in greater popular participation in the political and socio-economic process, and have manifested the preparedness to struggle for establishing the democratic system. In case of Myanmar too, the role of the youth and students have been very significant and in all likelihood, would also be so in any future popular pressure on the autocratic regime.

The role of the international community, particularly the donor countries that have leverages on Yangon, will be significant too. So far there have at the best been some hesitant pressures. The awarding of the Noble Peace Prize to Suu Kyi was instrumental in drawing more international attention on internal political developments in Myanmar. Such efforts need to be followed up by specific measures to put more direct pressures on the Yangon Government.

The SLORC may for the moment seem to be invincible and in no mood to relinquish power. However, its policy of violent suppression of opposition has greatly increased its unpopularity. The SLORC must realize that the use of force has not united the country but has reinforced the cleavages. It has also isolated the military from the people. Growing unpopularity will prove to be disastrous for their survival in power. In the long-term, therefore, the SLORC may have no option but to accept the reality and gradually make room for democratic transition. Present indications, however, suggest that this will happen only at the cost of further sacrifices on the part of the people of Myanmar.