

NE WIN'S BURMA - AFTER NE WIN

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"Ne Win's Burma - After Ne Win": Many people may resent this title claiming that the "era after Ne Win" has not begun as yet because the now probably 71-year-old [1] U Ne Win may have stepped down as President of State but still retains the (more?) powerful position of Chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the one and only legitimate party in the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma. There are good reasons in such a claim. Nevertheless, I think that the era after Ne Win has eventually started with Ne Win retiring from day-to-day politics and that there is a good chance that the transition of power may be as smooth as Ne Win expects it to occur.

But let us follow the events more closely. In his speech at the closing session of the Fourth Congress of the BSPP, the Ex-General, who had assumed power in Burma after a bloodless coup d'état on March 2, 1962, declared that he would not stand for re-election to the new "Pyithu Hluttaw", the Burmese parliament under the new Constitution of 1974 [2]:

Esteemed Chairman, members of the Panel of Chairmen and Party Congress delegates, the first thing I wish to tell you is that I am going to relinquish the post of President. ...

I shall explain why. Firstly, it is because I wish to establish a tradition within the Party for smooth and efficient handing over, at the right time and under the right conditions, of the great responsibilities which have to be borne.

... No human being can escape getting old, becoming sick and eventually dying. In awareness of this it is best that work being done is handed over smoothly when the time comes. This is one reason.

Another reason is linked to the first. Of the three laws, I have already reached the first, that of old age. Not only that, I have also entered the second period, that of sickness and ailment. This being so, it would be most

improper if I am to relinquish my responsibilities only on death.[3]

In the following, U Ne Win explains that his "comrades have asked (him) to continue to watch their work, to give advice and to guide them". In complying to this request, he would continue to shoulder the responsibilities of a Party Chairman, the position to which he was re-elected a few days before.

Observers did not hesitate very long to suggest that U San Yu "will be little more than a ceremonial head of state"[4]. They generally regard him as a politician without sufficient charisma and standing of his own to blossom out into a genuine leader. In the past, Ne Win always tended to oust possible rivals or mighty heir-apparents such as Brigadier Aung Gyi (in February 1963), Brigadier Tin Pe (in 1970) or Brigadier Tin Oo (in March 1976). The ousting of Tin Oo first appeared to be a victory of San Yu, one of the members of the Revolutionary Council of 1962. He scored another victory in February 1977, when he emerged ahead of Ne Win in the Third Party Congress' voting to the Central Committee. But at that time Ne Win retaliated. At an Extraordinary Congress the right order was re-established and the supporters of San Yu purged. "Although he was retained as party general secretary on the central executive committee, he became, in the words of one source, 'meek, quiet and obedient.'"[5]

The fact that the now 63-year-old San Yu has been elected, on November 9, 1981, Chairman of the Council of State and thus President of State may indicate a come-back. The coming months and years have to reveal whether U San Yu will be able to effect his own policy line or whether he must be compared at the end with a junior boss dreading at every action the frowning of the retired senior boss who still occupies a room on the top-floor. The actual power distribution could well work against San Yu. In my analysis of the new Constitution [6] I wrote in 1976 as to the position of the President:

The position of the Chairman of the Council of State and the President of the Republic within the state's structure remains curiously undefined in the Constitution. ...

In view of the descriptions of his tasks, the President does not seem to play any major role. But it would hardly have corresponded to the political self-assessment of Ne Win to take over the tasks of a figure-head. ...

Thus, the Chairman of the State's Council has the function to destine the guiding principles for the work of the Council of State. In view of the latter's extensive rights and duties he influences, indirectly, the whole policy and administration of the country - a function which U Ne Win will, no doubt, exercise to the same large extent as he did as Chairman of the Revolutionary Council. Only the future will reveal up to which degree the exercised power is actually based on the Constitution or whether it is only an emanation of the personality of present President U Ne Win.

In principal, this analysis still holds, I think. However, it did not take into consideration the then double position of Ne Win as Chairman of the State's Council and of the BSPP. When these functions were separated, Ne Win surely retained the more influential one. According to Article 11 of the Constitution, "The Burma Socialist Programme Party is the sole political party and it shall lead the State". Thus, party officials range above their counterparts in the respective People's Councils. The same has to be expected for the relation between U Ne Win and U San Yu. To this constellation, a personal control of San Yu's actions is added: The new Secretary-General of the BSPP, U Aye Ko [7], surely a man trusted by Ne Win and acting in his interests, has become the new Secretary to the Council of State, thus holding the two previous positions of San Yu who himself does not have a position in the party anymore.

It is hard to say whether Burma will profit from this power-sharing and whether Ne Win's withdrawal from day-to-day politics will loosen his grip and allow delegation of decisions to others. Such a delegation seems necessary because Burma has problems enough awaiting a new approach and thus, perhaps, solution. Today's most urgent problems are the economic situation, the multi-coloured insurgency which is complicated by opium trafficking and foreign support and directly connected to the third problem, the still aspired-toward unity.

Out of these three problems, the Burmese economy is presently the only one already showing promising signs. Whereas during the first two, perhaps too ambitious, Four-Year-Plans the growth rate of the economy fell, partly considerably, behind the targets, these targets were reached or even exceeded in the last years:

The growth rates of the value of the net output and services (GDP) at constant prices, achieved during the

first three years of the Third Four-Year-Plan period, were 6.5 per cent in 1978/79, 5.4 per cent in 1979/80 and 8.3 per cent in 1980/81. The performance of annual plan targets of 1978/79, 1979/80 and 1980/81 were 99.6 per cent, 99.3 per cent and 100.9 per cent respectively.[8]

The progress was mainly due to good results in the agricultural sector (105.2% target fulfillment or 14.6% growth rate compared to 1979/80) whereas the processing and manufacturing and the power sectors reached considerable growth rates (11.3% and 11.4% respectively) but still fell behind the targets (93.1% and 93.9% plan fulfillment). The mining sector had a disappointing 3.3% growth rate (i.e. 83.8% plan fulfillment) in 1980/81. In the meantime, however, it provided for the most relieving news: Just in time for the third meeting of the BSPP Central Committee, preceeding the first session of the new Pyithu Hluttaw, Prime Minister U Maung Kha was able to announce the discovery of new on-shore oil fields which nearly doubled the known Burmese oil reserves:

1. Myanma Oil Corporation of the Ministry of Industry No.2 discovered three new major oil fields successively during the period June to October 1981. These discoveries are Htantabin oil field, Kyontani oil field and Pagan-Tuyintaung oil field. The reservoirs of Htantabin and Kyontani oil fields are limestones whereas the reservoirs of Pagan-Tuyintaung oil field are sandstones. ...

11. The total recoverable reserve from Htantabin, Kyontani and Pagan-Tuyintaung new oil fields is 1403 million barrels of oil and 1878 billion cubic feet of gas which is equivalent to 314 million barrels of oil. The total oil equivalent amounts to 1717 million barrels of oil. The future recoverable reserves from currently producing fields are 738 million barrels of oil and 3280 billion cubic feet of gas which is equivalent to 546 million barrels of oil. The total oil equivalent amounts to 1284 million barrels of oil. The overall total recoverable reserve of the whole country, therefore, amounts to 2141 million barrels of oil and 5158 billion cubic feet of gas which is equivalent to 860 million barrels of oil. The total oil equivalent therefore amounts to 3001 million barrels of oil.[9]

In his speech to the same BSPP meeting, U Ne Win warned his people to exploit the new riches slowly and cautiously lest the fields dry up too quickly, leaving Burma - in spite of good perspectives for further discoveries - without her own energy resources:

In short, it is necessary to make prudent use of what we have already found in a most beneficial and profitable manner. It will not do to be extravagant in anticipation of future finds. Further discoveries must also be utilized wisely. We must calculate whether we will use it only by ourselves or also export it. ... Calculation will have to be made for the long-run.[10]

The principle of cautious exploitation reigns Burma's economy since 1962 and was regarded by superficial observers mostly as laziness and bad management on the side of the Burmese. However, the Burmese exerted over all those years, e.g., a forestry policy which could serve as an example for many countries. They did not cut down their teak and their other hardwood forests but in a measure allowing timely reforestation. (Unfortunately, the insurgents do not keep to this rule when they cut trees and smuggle them across the border.)

This policy does not comply in the same degree to the mineral resources. Here, the Burmese are eager to find new mines to supplement or even replace the old sites. Burma still seems rich in valuable mineral resources (tin, tungsten, silver, zinc, antimony, jade, and gems), but many mines are situated in the jungle hills of the border regions and mostly too small to yield a good profit when transport ways have to be constructed and security has to be maintained for the roads and mines at the same time.

We thus have encountered an impact of the multicoloured insurgency in Burma; multicoloured, as it covers the whole spectre from the pro-Chinese Burma Communist Party (BCP) to the rightist "Karen Nation Union" (KNU) of Bo Mya. However, to me, the only underground movement with a genuine ideological aim is today the BCP whereas all the others only wave the banner of autonomy and separatism to blind the people in their region so that they can execute their smuggling business at their best. And smuggling is indeed the way these insurgents earn their living. That the smuggled goods, on the other hand, are also improving the conditions in Burma herself, has been conceded tacitly even by the Government which does not raid the well-stuffed black market places anymore.

Thus, we have the paradoxical situation that so-called separatist insurgents supply the Burmese economy at the lower levels with badly needed goods and with all kinds of luxuries and that they buy then, with the income earned, arms

to harrass the Burmese army which, therefore, has to draw heavily on the budget, spending money urgently needed to further develop the country. However, there is hardly a chance to escape from this diabolic circle: The insurgent are active in the border jungles where they can hide well or even escape an army attack by crossing to the other side. On the other hand, these regions are economically not important enough to justify large scale operations. Otherwise the government would surely stage operations similar to those at the beginning of the 1970s when it successfully cleaned the Irrawaddy Delta and the Pegu Yoma, the hill region in Central Burma, especially of Communist insurgents. More recently, the army also enforced, for economic reasons, its sovereignty over the Kengtung area (eastern Shan State) so that this region now exports again rice to the rest of the country.

This government success may have been also due to the fact that the insurgents have expanded the trade of a product which grows even on the steep slopes of hills and mountains and yields enormous profits: opium. Some insurgent groups have grown and smuggled opium for many years. The BCP has joined their club around 1977/78 (the government ranged the BCP among the "opium-trafficking insurgents" for the first time in September 1978). This step was evidently caused by a considerable cut-down in the financial aid of the Chinese who wanted to further improve their relations with the Burmese government. In this situation, the BCP more or less had to turn to opium smuggling and even opium growing (through the allied local tribes) to maintain their activities. According to observers, the BCP is well established in this thriving business in the meantime.

The only major insurgent group which had, up to now, refrained from dealing with opium was the KNU. But recently one of the main opium routes is supposed to pass through their territory, thus enabling the KNU to levy taxes on this product. As to their own possible active involvement in the drug scene, there are obviously informations - "unconfirmed as yet, however", as the Director-General of the People's Police Forces stressed when I could discuss opium problems with him in Rangoon recently - that the Karens have started growing Marijuana.

It would need another article or even a detailed study to really deal with the history of opium growing in Burma and all the events which have created the present scene mark-

ed, on the side of the government, by an earnest desire and strong measures to clamp down on the opium production. However, Burma still has to go a long way to eradicate opium growing - and insurgency.

In spite of the fact that all insurgent groups, with the exception of the BCP, wave the banner of autonomy or separatism, or even just because they are able to do that to get followers and support among their tribal brothers, the unity problem will remain Burma's central political problem for the next years. Only when this problem is solved, will peace spread in Burma, after about fifty years of more or less continuous fighting and rebellion, from the central regions to the border areas of the minorities. Thus it is not astonishing at all that U Ne Win has set himself the task to reconcile the Burmese minorities with the central government - a task for which he will probably not have too much time anymore. When U Ne Win, as President of State and Chairman of the Council of State, declared on May 28, 1980 an amnesty "as a token of joyously honouring the successful conclusion of the First Congregation of the Sangha of All Orders for Purification, Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana and thereby to promote the unity and peace" [11], most observers not only regarded the Sangha conference as a political master-piece, but also considered the amnesty as a proof that the socialist Ne Win in his old age turned to be a true Burmese Buddhist trying to acquire merits for his future life. The amnesty may indeed have been caused partly by this purpose, who knows. However, it served first of all as an initial step in a straightforward political strategy aiming at strengthening unity between the Burmans and the minority groups. Looking back from now, we can recognize that this aim threads several events, from the amnesty through the creation of the "Naing Ngant Gon-Yi", the new national order of merit, and the peace talks with some insurgents down to U Ne Win's last speech as President.

Therefore, let us follow those events more in detail. When declaring the amnesty, President Ne Win mentioned previous contacts with some opponents formerly or still in the underground. Altogether 2,189 insurgents accepted the government's offer and returned "to the legal fold" [12]. Characteristically for the overall situation, there was only one high-ranking Communist among them: Bo Thet Tun, BCP Central Committee member for Arakan, a region where the BCP evidently could not build up a stronghold over the last years [13]. However, well-known politicians returned from abroad: First of all U Nu, the ousted Prime Minister who

had led an underground group from 1969 to 1972 [14]; then, e.g., Jimmy Yang, the former Sawbwa of Kokang and a notorious opponent to Ne Win [15]. And Thakin Soe, from 1947 to 1970 unchallenged leader of the "Red Flag" fraction of the Communists and in 1974 condemned to death, was released from prison.

Together with the amnesty, a new decoration was instituted: the "Naing-Ngant Gon-Yi" title, destined for "persons who had served the country with genuine cetana" [16]. To make the reconciliation with former opponents complete, President Ne Win "had an intimate and friendly meeting and gave a luncheon to his colleagues of the Freedom and Revolutionary struggles on the morning of 11 August 1980" [17]. The newspapers documented this event with pictures showing U Ne Win side by side with U Nu, Bohmu Aung, U Ba Swe, Thakin Chit Maung, Thakin Tin - all prominent politicians of the period before 1962. At another occasion he greeted Thakin Soe, formerly accused of anti-Buddhist crimes and blood-thirstiness, in a most cheerful way.

Today, U Nu has a black Toyota at his disposal, similar to those of the ministers, and works on an accurate English translation of the entire Buddhist scriptures; and wedding receptions are honoured by the appearance of his friendly beaming moonface. Others, too, drive in black cars and live in good houses - but probably only if they are still valuable for fostering reconciliation and unity. Thakin Soe, on the other hand, does not seem to be such a man: With the pension connected with the decoration he will have got as well, he lives now in a flat in a government housing estate - an old broken man, desparately trying to rearrange the bits and pieces of his shivered ideas, for which he had fought all his life, in a way that they would fit the present political line.

Shortly after the deadline of the amnesty, the government held secret peace talks with some insurgent groups. U Ne Win himself met, probably during his visit to China, the BCP Chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin. A second round of talks at a lower level followed, but the two parties could not agree to a common base as the conditions of the BCP were not acceptable to the Burmese government [18]. Talks with other groups followed and perhaps even continue. However, no announcement has been made as yet that one of the groups would lay down arms.

There remains the hope that U Ne Win will reach his final aim and establish durable unity for Burma. Perhaps, his

strategy that the opponents of former days could serve as middle-men will reap a reward. If not, there is an imminent danger that a civil war might erupt in Burma as soon as U Ne Win definitely disappears from the political scene - a civil war to an extent which has been avoided all those years.

Notes

- 1 It is difficult to define the age of Ne Win as there are different dates for his birthday in the literature. A comparison and analysis of these dates indicates that he should have been born on Tuesday, May 24, 1910 (for details see Klaus Fleischmann, *Die neue Verfassung der Union von Birma*, Hamburg 1976, p. 342, note 1).
- 2 As to the composition and the tasks of the Pyithu Hluttaw see Fleischmann, *Die neue Verfassung*, op.cit., pp. 208-226.
- 3 *The Working People's Daily*, August 9, 1981, supplement p.A.
- 4 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 25, 1981, p. 26.
- 5 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 25, 1981, p. 25.
- 6 *Die neue Verfassung der Union von Birma* (see note 1); the following quotation is a translation from pages 203-4.
- 7 U Aye Ko, 59 years old and an Ex-Lieutenant-General, was elected to the post of Joint Secretary General in August 1981 and succeeded then U Thaung Kyi who suddenly died of heart failure on November, 9, 1981. U Thaung Kyi (59) was regarded by some observers as a possible contender for power, i.e. a successor to Ne Win after an interim reign of U San Yu.
- 8 Report to the Pyithu Hluttaw on The Financial, Economic and Social Conditions of The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, ed. by the Ministry of Planning and Finance, Rangoon 1981, p. 18; the following data are taken from the pages 18-19. As to Burma's economy see also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 16, 1981, pp. 89-92.
- 9 *The Working People's Daily*, November 7, 1981, pp. 1 and 8. As to the oil situation in Burma before this announcement see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 9, 1981, pp. 62-64.

- 10 The Working People's Daily, November 7, 1981, p. 4.
- 11 The Working People's Daily, May 28, 1981.
- 12 The Working People's Daily, September 5, 1980.
- 13 Bo Thet Tun surrendered on July 16, 1980 (The Working People's Daily, July 18, 1980). He was "given a job in the Ministry of Agriculture planning national parks and has permission to travel overseas" (Far Eastern Economic Review, September 25, 1981, p. 25).
- 14 For this activities see my article "U Nus Come-Back-Ver-such", Saeculum, vol.23, no.2, 1972, pp. 203-220. In the light of recent events, the thesis of this article that there was some secret understanding between U Ne Win and U Nu acquires new probability.
- 15 For Jimmy Yang's activities in the underground see Alfred W. McCoy, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, New York 1972, pp. 339-343.
- 16 The Working People's Daily, May 28, 1980.
- 17 The Working People's Daily, August 12, 1980.
- 18 On June 14, 1981, Thakin Ba Thein Tin published a "statement to the people" over the BCP's clandestine radio station "Voice of the People of Burma", presenting his version of the talks and the difficulties met in their course (for the text see Summary of World Broadcasts).