

Comment: Burma or Myanmar?

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In the German magazine, *ASIEN* (No. 58 of January 1996), Annemarie Esche wrote a "research note". In support of her article that the country hitherto known as Burma should now be called Myanmar, she has researched into historical origins, "where and by which persons and in which connection the word Burma has been used", and "whether the use of the words Burma and/or Myanmar is a question of the Myanmar people or not". There is another very important reason that she has failed to address, and that is, *why*?

I will not dispute her historical source in quoting Dr. Than Tun, who wrote in 1988 "A Mon inscription of 1101/02" why it is historically correct to call the country "Myanmar". Dr. Than Tun is an authority on stone inscriptions and ancient Burmese languages such as *pyu*. The timing of the appearance of the article is, however, suspect. I think the military government used Dr. Than Tun. The article came out just prior to the name-change.

Annemarie Esche suggested that "Burma" is a foreign version of the spoken Burmese word "Bamar" and it was probably the British who coined this word "Burma" from "Bamar". On that basis, she suggests it is not correct to call the country "Burma". She also seems to suggest that because the use of the term "Myanmar" is associated with *Myanmar Sarpay* or *Myanmar Sa* which the Burmese refer to their literature, it is more appropriate to call the country by that name. However, she seems to have ignored the fact that with usage and the passage of time, spoken and written words can be one and the same. Furthermore, I checked with a very learned Buddhist monk and scholar, well-versed in English, Burmese and Sanskrit, who is the chief resident Burmese Buddhist monk of the Buddhist Vihara (monastery) in London, whether Myanmar is the correct name to be called for Burma, and Bama (Bamar) is strictly a colloquial term.

The learned monk's answer is that "Myanmar" is the correct term for the country historically. As for the word *Bama (Bamar)*, it has been colloquial used by the Burmese people for so long that it has entered into the arena of Burmese literature for quite some time now, especially in the wake of Burmese nationalism and the rise of the modern Burmese novel in the 1930s, concurrent with nationalist movements like the *Do Bama Asiayon*.

As Ms. Esche pointed out in her article that the Thakins called their organisation *Do Bama Asiayon* for its better "mass effectiveness". The young Thakins which included Aung San (architect of Burma's national independence and national hero) and U Nu (Burma's first Prime Minister), discussed whether to use "Bama" or "Myanmar" and decided on "Bama" not only for reason of mass effectiveness but also because they wanted nationalists of indigenous minorities to join in the movement.

One of the reasons that the Burmese nationalists wanted members of all indigenous races to join in the movement was territorial. The indigenous races live mostly along the peripheral areas of Burma (except for the Karens who live intermingled with the Burmans in the southern Irrawaddy delta region). All these areas were once part of pre-colonial Burma since the first Burmese empire was founded in the 12th century. It was also the same area which the British ruled as British Burma. Because Burmese nationalists wanted Burma back intact when it became independent, they wanted all indigenous races to join in the struggle for independence. The nationalists were well aware of the British policy of *divide and rule*. The fears of the nationalists were confirmed when the British indicated that they might give independence only to "Burma Proper" where the majority Burmans lived even after the signing of the Aung San-Atlee Agreement of January 1947 for a peaceful transfer of power and end of the British rule. The British hoped they might be able to hold on to parts of Burma where minorities lived if they refused to join a new independent Burma. Aung San had to convene a conference at Panglong, a small town in the Shan state to forge national unity. He was able to bring in all the indigenous races, through their leaders, to join in a new and independent Burma. The historic agreement was reached on February 12, 1947. This day has been celebrated as Union Day since then. The most notable of the minority leaders that joined the nationalist movement of Aung San were, the Sawbwa of Nyaungshwe (a Shan), Sama Duwa Sin Wa Naung (a Kachin), Mahn Ba Khaing (a Karen), U Dingra Tang (a Chin), Mahn Win Maung (another Karen), to mention a few. They did not mind Aung San's choice for the name of the country. Incidentally, Mahn Ba Khaing became member of Aung San's "cabinet" - part of the team that drafted Burma's first 1947 constitution, and he was assassinated along with Aung San on July 19, 1947. Sawbwa of Nyaungshwe became the first president of the Union Burma - a titular head of the state. A Burman was the second president. Mahn Win Maung became the third president of Burma. Sama Duwa Sin Wa Naung was designated to be the fourth president of Burma under the 1947 constitution but he never had the chance because Ne Win seized power in 1962 when Sama Duwa Sin Wa Naung was to be the President.

The name Burma (in English as in the *Union of Burma*) and Myanmar (in Burmese as in *Pyidaungsu Myanmar Nainggan*) was given at Panglong in 1947 (to answer Esche's question "where") by Aung San (to answer Esche's question "who"), in the capacity as Prime Minister-Designate of Burma (to answer the question "in which position"), in forging national unity and building the modern state of independent and united Burma (to answer Esche's question "in which connection"). So right from the beginning of independent Burma both versions, Burma and Myanmar, have been interchangeably used.

The Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) was formed after SLORC took power in Burma in September 1988. It was headed by the Karen National Union (KNU) leader "General" Bo Mya, and included all opposition and armed insurrectionist minority groups like the Kachins of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the students that fled Rangoon and joined the Karens for military training and protection (about 5000), the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, formed by elected representatives of the NLD who also had to flee Rangoon, and a

host of insurgent organisations, like those of the Shans, the Mons, the Wa the Pa-o, the Palaung and so on. The KNU (Karens) in the south, and the KIO (Kachins) and the Shans in the north were the strongest in terms of military strength. None of them objected to being called the Democratic Alliance of Burma. In all my readings, I have not come across any indigenous group making the name "Burma" an issue.

In September 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) came to power with Ne Win's blessing. SLORC members are nothing more than a new and younger generation of military officers, all loyal to Ne Win. In less than a year in power in June 1989, they changed the name of the country from "Burma" to "Myanmar". The reason given was "to avoid the racial connotation of the previous name Union of Burma which implied the population were all Burmans, while in fact it included many racial groups." This is the official translation of the statement made over the state-controlled radio by a senior military officer at the time of the name-change.¹ This is in direct contradiction to the position taken by its predecessor's military government magazine called *The Guardian* (February 1971) wrote that "the word Myanmar only signifies the Burmans whereas Bama signifies all the indigenous nationalities".²

As to Esche's third point as to "whether the use of the words Burma and/or Myanmar is a question of the people of Myanmar or not", she wrote that she "discussed this question with a lot of people, with scholars as well as with the man in the street, with housewives and with businessman, with people in line with SLORC and with those who are against SLORC". The conclusion arrived at was that the Burmese people generally prefer their country to be called Myanmar and implies that the people she interviewed were representative of the general Burmese opinion.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) announced on May 17, 1996 that they were going to hold a conference for the first time since their leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was released from house arrest in July 1995. Since then, SLORC began arresting representatives of the NLD. The NLD won a landslide victory in the general elections of 1990. They represent the people of Burma. In two cases, the BBC TV News of 21 May 1996 reported that two of the wives of the NLD men were arrested because their husbands could not be found. I wonder who the housewives were Esche talked to. Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize laureate never used the word "Myanmar" for Burma in her many interviews given to the international news media since her release.

In a report to the UN Commission on human rights, the rapporteur on Burma Professor Yozo Yokota wrote that "I continue to be concerned about the serious restrictions imposed upon the enjoyment of civil and political rights. The people in Myanmar today do not enjoy the freedom of opinion, expression, publication, public assembly and association".³

1 Linter, Bertil (1994) on Myanmar/Burma in *The Irrawaddy, Independent News and Information*, Vol.2, No. 4, 15 May 1994, Silver Spring, MD, U.S.A., The Burma Information Group Publication.

2 Ibid.

3 *Reuters*, 16 April 1996, Geneva.

If the name of the country were a cause of concern for national unity, Ne Win had the chance to change the name of the country in 1962 when he staged a *coup d'etat*. He seized power, according to him "to prevent the country from falling into an abyss" because the discontented minorities, especially the Shans, were openly talking of seceding from the "Union". The Shans and the Kayahs were guaranteed the right to secede ten years after independence if they feel that their way of life and cultural traditions were not properly protected under the 1947 constitution. Ne Win had another chance to change the name of the country in 1974 under a new constitution drawn up by his own Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). He did change the official name of the country to the *Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma*.

Burma news hit headlines of the international media for the first time in August and September of 1988 after a news black-out of nearly 25 years. The scale of news coverage might not be as substantial as that of events at Tiananmen square in China in 1989 but it was enough to alert the international community of the cruelty and brutality of the military in Burma. As much as ten thousand unarmed civilians were shot dead in August and September of 1988. SLORC would rather dissociate themselves with the name "Burma" because "Burma" has become synonymous with oppression and abuse of human rights. The changing of the name of the country became an obsession with them. They went to great lengths for "Burma" to be referred to as "Myanmar" in the days and months that followed the name-change. The mail of people of Burmese origin to their families and friends in Burma were not delivered if addressed as "Rangoon, Burma", instead of "Yangon, Myanmar".

SLORC not only changed the name of the country, but also the names of rivers, towns, administrative divisions and "states", and even the names of the indigenous races, to Burmese colloquial terms. Rangoon, Bassein, and Pegu (all towns) became Yangon, Patheingyi and Bago. The famous town of Pagan, seat of the first Burmese empire and a place of many pagodas, has now become Bagan. The minorities, Karens are now called Kayahs, and the Arakanese are now called Rakhines. The famous river Irrawaddy is now the Ayeyarwady.

Since independence Burma has been known by its name internationally and recognized as such as an independent sovereign state. The name-change is just a political gimmick of SLORC that has created a problem out of a no-problem situation.