# BURMA'S ZEALOT WUNGYIS: MAOISTS OR ST. SIMONISTS

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Two years ago in this annual *Survey* Burma's new military government was described as a nexus of socialism and two political traditions. Both the monarchial and colonial traditions of rule seemed to be pushing the leftist advisers (wungyis) of General Ne Win towards a unique form of national socialism. With the perspective of nearly three years of Revolutionary Council government, however, one can now see clearly that the colonial governmental tradition has been nearly obliterated. The men of commerce, the civil service, the law schools and Sandhurst were the source of support and means of rule for the British colonialists, as well as the AFPFL. Such men govern India and Pakistan today. But in Burma we are witnessing the recreation of a new Burman dynasty. The "king" may not long survive—many dynastic fathers were removed by their own sons—but the warrior counter-elite he is creating will not soon be destroyed.

The sanction for a new Burmese monarch was once his appeal to the occult power of astrologers, Brahman prophets, and the Law as set forth in the dhammathats. Today the sanction for the Revolutionary Council in Burma, as in many of the new states, is Science. St. Simons' technocrats could not have been more devoted to the ideal. This is a regime that asks of its educated youth dedication to their specialized field of knowledge, unless it is a non-Marxist social science, and expects them to serve their country with that knowledge in accordance with scientific principles of society as revealed by Gautama Buddha and Karl Marx. If these revelations seem a non sequitur to the reader, think of the problem facing the ordinary Burmese citizen.

Evidence for the zealousness of a commitment to radical "scientific" change is overwhelming. Ne Win has stated at least twice in public addresses this past year that "We are not at war with people (or 'ludu' as he said in an address to peasant leaders), but against the system."[1] Firstly he is against the system of foreign economic influence. An estimated 300,000 Indians fled Burma in 1963–64; as petty traders and private manufacturers they had been "nationalized." The anti-Indian pressure became unbearable in May when a demonetization scheme decreed all bills of more than 10 kyat ($2.00) denomination illegal unless turned into the government banks. The fact that many Burmans would suffer from the scheme was foreseen by

[1] Quoted by S. C. Banerji, "Peasant Seminars," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, XLV:5 (July 30, 1964), 204. Also see *Forward* (Rangoon), II:12 (Jan. 22, 1964), 6–11.

Colonel Chit Myaing who lost his post in the Cabinet and Revolutionary Council, but meanwhile the twin "problems" of Indians and the petty bourgeoisie were solved.[2]

In the field of education the regime has been equally dramatic in changing the system. The universities were closed for ten months and reopened in November 1964 only after the administration and educational content had been sharply modified. In the words of Education Minister Han, himself a doctor-cum-colonel trained at Rangoon Medical College:[3]

> An education system equated with livelihood and based on socialist moral values will replace the system which was a legacy of the capitalist colonial past. Education for education's sake does not fit in with the spirit of socialist economy. We must provide the country with adequate numbers of trained and educated personnel with the capacity to help promote production, health, education, and culture of the working people. The liberal concept of education by which students had the right to choose their own subjects of study, is not longer valid.

To implement the new policy the universities are reorganized around institutes and specialized fields. Vocational and science courses now have preeminence and students enter their specialty immediately after high school. The congeries of faculties are given greater autonomy from one another, but are also weakened as a potential source of opposition to the government. The Rangoon and Mandalay University Senates no longer exist. Courses in political science have been replaced by two subjects "of great importance to the syllabus": "The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment," and "Marxist Philosophy" which is sub-titled Historical Materialism. Finally, the number of students admitted "will be determined according to the needs of the socialist plans and the number of teachers available." The freshman enrollment in Arts was reduced by half while science and technology institutes now have nearly half the students at university level.

It is from the peasants that the Revolutionary Council's most leftist wungyis, Brigadiers Tin Pe and Than Sein, seek their support. One observer noted that in 1962–63 the government loaned 700 million kyats to farmers so that they might have sufficient capital to pay for more fertilizer, better seeds, and the use of more government tractors (the government imported 1,000 Czech tractors, doubling the country's total). This year Ne Win castigated peasant leaders by repeating the old saw that every Burman would ride an elephant if he could borrow enough money to buy one. In 1963–64 the government loaned only 400 million kyats to the farmers, because a significant proportion of the previous loans were defaulted. Also a portion of the 1963 monetary harvest reportedly reached insurgent hands, and an excessive amount was used for consumption rather

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[2] Reported in *Seikai Shuhōō* (Tokyo), April 21, 1964.

[3] *Forward,* see the following issues: II:18 (April 22), 4–5; III:1 (Aug. 15, 1964), 2; III:2 (Sept. 1, 1964), 2.

than for capital purposes.[4]

Of greater importance is the decline, rather than increase, in agricultural production and exports during the past year. Floods and ill-timed rains destroyed some of the crop around Pegu, but increasing rural resistance to the militancy of the regime may have accounted for the bulk of the decline, which may be 10% below the 1962 high. The government tried to face up to the agricultural problem by calling two giant peasant seminars in January and March at Mt. Popa and Kabaung village near Toungoo. There was some frank interchange, for an irascible villager carefully spelled out that it cost 680 kyats to cultivate ten acres of paddy land which produced only 930 kyats, giving him a net income of $53 for the year.[5] The significance of the problem is clear. Three-fourths of Burma's population is engaged in agricultural activities, and the average land holding is less than ten acres. Over four-fifths of all rural families own less than 20 acres.

The problem of agricultural production now must seem lucidly defined for the Marxist Burmese leaders. New techniques (fertilizer, more irrigation, credit) have had no perceptible impact. Industrial production constituted too small a proportion of the GNP to be a possible source of rapid economic gains. Therefore the productive methods of agriculture must be modified if the economy is even to keep pace with the two percent growth rate. The collectivization of rural plots rather than an incentive system is the likely solution that the estatist colonels envisage, but the political risk in such a step is profound.

Should the government pursue a Maoist line in agriculture, it will face a three-fold barrier not present in Communist China. Their political cadre, the Burma Socialist People's Party, has not developed a mass base nor popular support as did the Chinese Communist Party during the war. Secondly, the Burma army has lost its identity as a purely national organization and is now the focus of all the partisan pressures that once beleaguered the AFPFL. Within the military are divisions between hard-line and soft-line socialists, urban-rural loyalties, the Burman-communal division, and factionalism caused by ambitious senior officers who use the army's power to further their own junior officer groups. Finally within Burma the military faces an opposition organization, the Buddhist Sangha, capable of mobilizing mass public opposition to any government policy that the Sangha leaders can claim is anti-Buddhist and thus anti-nationalist.

The Sangha in Burma is certainly not the organized hierarchy it once was, but the yellow robe is the one symbol of Burmese nationalism that has never been successfully flaunted in the modern era. In April the Revolutionary Council decreed that all Buddhist organizations must register and vow to engage in no political activity. In May the order was rescinded following a pongyi's immolation.

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[4] John Ashdown, "Do-Bama Nationalise," *Far Eastern Economic Review,* XLV:11 (Sept. 10, 1964).

[5] *Forward,* II:12 (Jan. 22, 1964), 6–11.

In short the Burmese military does not command the nationalist, unified, and moralist support that the CCP had when it overturned the traditional agrarian system. Furthermore, most Burmese peasants traditionally owned their land and would scarcely support a policy whereby they would lose it. The possibility of collectivizing agriculture is therefore not a strong one if the leadership is at all sensible; more likely is increased Burman resentment if the government does not introduce some form of an incentive system.

Meanwhile the government continues to spend major resources to placate the minorities, at the expense of the peasant aid program in Central Burma. Two years ago it appeared that the Revolutionary Council was set upon a course of Burmanization among minorities. Shan and Kachin leaders were imprisoned, the plans to create autonomous Arakanese and Mon states had been scratched, and Burman officers from Central Burman districts held the reins of power in the mountainous Shan and Kachin areas. In 1964 Ne Win demonstrated more sensitivity to the danger posed by communal factionalism. He negotiated successfully with the Karens and after 16 years terminated the Karen National Defence Organization's private war against the Rangoon regime. Southern Burma was at least temporarily at peace.[6]

The situation in the Kachin and Shan states had deteriorated sharply after the arrest of their key leaders in March 1962. A Kachin Independence Army (KIA) asserted control over most of the mountain area north of Myitkyina, and raids down below Shwebo became commonplace. Shan insurgents, moving from towns in northern Thailand and in villages along the border between Kengtung and Kayah State, worked with opium smugglers to finance their operation and controlled most of the backlands except when the Burma army made strong forays. Smugglers with private armies of a thousand men, armed with the newest automatic weapons, roamed uncontrolled.

Recently the Revolutionary Council has approached the indigenous minorities with inducements rather than violence. In November 1964 the long delayed Chinese aid program was expanded with many of the projects opened not in Rangoon or Central Burma as in the past, but in Karen, Shan, and Kachin areas. A sugar factory near Thaton and a plywood mill near Moulmein, new bridges across the upper Salween, further technical training for those in silk, printing, and related crafts, a public health program operated by young medical school graduates, all are being introduced among Shans and Karens. In the Kachin state the army follows the same patient policy as U Nu pursued in Central Burma a decade ago when the Communist insurgents controlled the countryside. Towns and transport lines are strongly protected and generally the army is well disciplined. The object is to gain the support of the townsfolk and gradually force the

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[6] Kawthoolei State, the former Karen State, is to be enlarged to include all areas where Karens form a "predominant majority." *Forward,* II:16 (March 22, 1964), 3–6.

villagers for economic reasons to shift their loyalty to the town centers and away from the rural based insurgent leaders. The KIA remains active but the edge of Kachin rebellion seems to be dulled.

The Revolutionary Council continues to control the countryside in much the same fashion as I described two years ago. Village, township, district, and division security and Administrative Councils form a hierarchy of communication and command which has proved effective thus far. The military has recruited influential rural leaders to serve on their local security, which are usually chaired by a military officer, or a police representative. The civil service has been increasingly bypassed as specialized functions of government are turned over to "experts" directly responsible to one of the Councils. At the lowest level, teachers, police, public health assistants, and agricultural agents are the government's contacts. The Revolutionary Council has encouraged the ordinary villager to complain to the local or township council if any of these functionaries fail to perform well. If this policy is successful it will go a long way toward solving a problem the AFPFL never overcame—recurrent corruption among petty government officials and even village teachers who would occasionally pad their enrollment figures to receive higher salaries.

Potential opposition from those groups that supported the now illegal political parties has failed to materialize. In January 1964 Bo Set Kyaw, a leading right wing socialist and long time financial angel for the AFPFL, fled from Burma via the Shan States and appeared in Washington and Paris seeking support for an alleged following that included the Sangha, ex-AFPFL members, and most of the educated community in Burma. Concurrently, at the peasant seminar near Mt. Popa, Ne Win warned the Western powers that support for Burma's "counter-revolutionaries" would be considered an act of aggression by the government.[7] Neither the United States nor France needed the General's warning, however, for the rebel leader received no official welcome or recognition. The British government refused him a visa, demonstrating an even cooler attitude towards opposition to the Revolutionary Council.[8]

*Foreign Policy:*[9] The twin factors of U Nu's forced retirement and Nehru's death are the most basic causes for change in a foreign policy that otherwise is similar to that of the AFPFL and the caretaker government. Relations between Ne Win and the Chinese leaders, particularly Chou En-lai and Chen Yi, are as warm as U Nu's and Nehru's once were. The Chinese and Burmese leaders have visited one another every few months

[7] *Forward,* II:11 (Jan. 7, 1964), 5.

[8] Evidence of British sympathy for the government, incidentally, was dramatically proved by the return of the court regalia in November 1964. This 150 piece set of monarchial splendor, seized in 1886 at Mandalay, was returned to Ne Win, who was in London for medical attention, immediately after the Labour Party victory.

[9] Documentation for this section can be found in my chapter, "Sino-Burmese Relations," in Abe Halpern, ed., *China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, forthcoming).

this past year, and apparently have a mutual respect for one another's internal affairs. Chinese propaganda from their consulates in Lashio and Mandalay has ceased as the consulates were closed, as was the Burmese consulate in Kunming. Burma has been slow to develop the $81 million loan and aid program that both countries agreed upon three years ago; however, thirteen projects were to be started or were under way by the end of 1964. In relations with the West and other Asian powers Burma has demonstrated independence of Peking. Burma's Foreign Minister, U Thi Han, pushed for and signed the test ban agreement against China's opposition, and at the recent Cairo Conference of Non-Aligned Powers, Burma supported the minority position of India, Yugoslavia, and the UAR which sought to condemn China for intransigeance in the nuclear issue.

Relations with the United States and Britain have not cooled further than they were two years ago. Unlike Indonesia and Cambodia, Burma has steered clear of the Sino-American conflict as much as possible. American military aid is still accepted, the Rangoon-Pegu road project is finally to the point where ground will be broken early in 1965, and British-American educational propaganda is still permitted in diluted form through the British Council and USIS libraries in Rangoon and Mandalay. This is not to say that American-Burmese relations are warm, but they have not worsened which is significant in a time when the Vietnamese and Malaysia-Indonesian confrontation problems have seriously affected U.S. relations with most other Southeast Asian states. Japanese reparations, Soviet and Yugoslav irrigation projects, and Colombo Plan aid continues. Although Israeli aid has been cut, Burma supported Israel at the Cairo Conference when the UAR raised the now customary charge of aggression.

One of the surprising outcomes of Burma's policy, the harsh treatment of alien Indians, has been the relative equanimity with which Premier Shastri has accepted Ne Win's program. In effect, India has had to accept an additional third of a million people on her relief roles, most of them in Calcutta. Yet the Indian government did not lodge a formal protest against their treatment by Burmese custom officials in which emigrants were often stripped, searched, their valuables seized and permanently confiscated at the airport. On May 22 the Indian Embassy assumed responsiiblity for safeguarding the jewels and gold, but under pressure from the Burmese government the offer was cancelled. Two possible explanations for India's passivity are that India is in no position to further strain her relations with Burma in view of Sino-Indian rivalry in the entire frontier area; and secondly, India had no Ambassador in Burma for nearly two years, until mid-May, when R. D. Katari was appointed. With no Ambassador it was undoubtedly difficult to develop a positive Indian policy within Burma.

Burma has continued to avoid involvement in other Asian problems. Laos, the Malaysia-Indonesian conflict, Vietnam, even the presence of American and Soviet navies in the Indian Ocean has failed to arouse a sense of crisis within the Revolutionary Council. The Burmese under Ne

Win, far more than under U Nu, play an international role in issues only directly related to their immediate interests. Ne Win has focused most of his attention upon internal problems. Highly trained Burmese are active in international organizations, and Burma sent three delegates to Peking's Science Symposium late in August; but these activities are all specialized professional roles and only indirectly related to politics. Indeed, it can be argued that they fit in well with the Revolutionary Council's basic commitment to the idea of Science.

The Burmese continue to set an untried path for themselves as they push on with the search for a solution to the problem of modernization. In foreign affairs they are part of no power bloc, and in domestic affairs they have utilized the communist method of socialist dictatorship, but have imprisoned or outlawed their local Communists. The leadership believes itself to be rationally pursuing their highest value, the application of the "scientific method" to the solution of socio-economic problems. Their techniques have often been radical and have caused great hardship to foreigners and natives alike. The jails are filled with political prisoners: journalists of all ideological stripes, politicians, army officers, businessmen and any others considered a threat to the regime. The distribution system lacks efficient bureaucrats who can replace the entrepreneurs who kept the economy moving in the past. Evidence of the problem's severity are the queues which are now commonplace for such basic commodities as cooking oil and fish.

As one casts over the past year for portents of the future, there seems to be none more significant than that the government was able to retain power in spite of the drastic measures introduced and the earlier alienation of the older educated elite. Emergence of a counter-elite in Burma, the military who have transformed themselves into bureaucrats, politicians, and "educational philosophers," is a parallel phenomenon to that which many communist states experienced where party members seized the apparatus of influence in all fields. But Burma remains independent of any communist bloc and its overt scientism suggests that its leadership may have taken a page from the St. Simonists' theory of socialism, rather than Mao's or Stalin's. If Burma is to modernize, the society and economy must be transformed and that is obviously the goal of the present regime. That many are disenchanted with the method of rule is irrelevant as long as the majority of the Burmese public, the peasants, tolerate the changes. To date no measure taken by the military has so jarred the potential opposition groups among the Sangha or within the military that they have found themselves compelled to fight against the radical government. Burma's modernization revolution, long delayed by insurrection and a search for means to mobilize the rural leaders, may finally be under way. If not, the Burma's economy which has the lowest growth rate of any of its neighbors except Laos, is very likely to be the undoing of the Revolutionary Council.

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