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Far Eastern Survey, Vol. 18, No. 17. (Aug. 24, 1949), pp. 193-197.

Stable URL:

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Far Eastern Survey

AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PACIFIC RELATIONS

Communism and Nationalism in Burma

Burmese Communism, usually an alias for nationalism and economic unrest, may collapse if the government's agrarian reform program is successful.

BY J. S. FURNIVALL

AMERICANS FREQUENTLY QUESTION ME about Communism in Burma, and I am always tempted to reply that there is no Communism in Burma. In view of the fact that there is at present a Communist uprising against the government of Burma, such an answer may seem ridiculously inaccurate. Yet it is very nearly true—nearly, but not quite. There is a Communist Party, but in the party there are very few Communists. I do not wish to minimize the danger of the movement; it is dangerous—not, however, because it may produce a Communist state but because it may produce a state of anarchy. There is little danger that Burma will go Communist, but great danger that it may go to pieces.

Burma is so far away and by American standards such a little country that one cannot expect people here to have any keen interest in its problems or its future. Yet a concern for little countries is one mark of a great people and one of the responsibilities of world leadership. American policy may indeed prove a decisive factor in the future of southeast Asia, and the course of events in Burma will certainly have reactions extending over the whole region. It should be well then for people here to realize that what passes for Communism in Burma now is in fact little more than an extreme and impatient nationalism. But if the people in America confound Communism and nationalism, they may end by transforming nationalism into Communism. Let me try then to disentangle them.

Mr. Furnivall, who recently visited the United States, is a distinguished British authority on southeastern Asia and the author of numerous volumes, the most recent being *Colonial Policy and Practice*. He spent twenty years as a colonial administrator in Burma, and is now adviser to the government of Burma.

First of all it is necessary to realize that in Burma, as in many other parts of southeast Asia, though not in India, modern nationalism has deep roots in national sentiment. Burma has an area of 260,000 square miles, about the size of France. Cut off from the outer world by mountains and the sea, it forms a natural political and economic unit. The population in 1941 was seventeen million, including 1.25 million foreigners. In racial origin the native population is akin to the Chinese and very different from that of India. In modern usage all the native peoples are referred to comprehensively as Burmans, leaving the term Burmese as a racial epithet for the major people from whom the country takes its name. The Burmese number about two-thirds of the total population, and it was under Burmese rule that national unity was first achieved. This happened in the eleventh century, almost exactly at the same time as the Norman conquest of England. Even before then the prevailing religion was Buddhism, and now practically the whole native population is Buddhist except for about

AUGUST 24, 1949 VOL. XVIII NO. 17

IN THIS ISSUE

• **Communism and Nationalism
in Burma**

by J. S. Furnivall

• **ECA and US Policy in China**

by Dorothy Borg

• **Japanese Trade with China**

by Arthur N. Feraru

750,000 primitive animists and 250,000, mostly Karens, who have recently been converted from animism to Christianity. The Burmese occupy the plains and the minor tribes live mainly in the hills and have never been wholly assimilated by the Burmese. Yet they have long recognized Burmese suzerainty; they have derived from the Burmese their civilization and religion, and about two-thirds of them speak the Burmese language with facility. Thus all the Burman peoples share with the Burmese a common national tradition extending over many hundred years, and despite the imperfect assimilation of the hill tribes, there is a national sentiment that is not solely confined to the Burmese.

Under native rule Burmans had little contact with the outside world and they developed a civilization, backward in some respects but with many attractive features, and very different from that of India, notably in the absence of caste, the freedom of women, and a widely diffused but elementary literacy. About the beginning of the nineteenth century the expansion of Western civilization brought Burma into contact with British power in India, and it could no longer stay aloof from the modern world. By a succession of conflicts it was absorbed piecemeal into British India; in 1826, 1852, and, finally and completely, in 1886.

British rule introduced the rule of law and the principle of economic freedom. It supplemented and partly replaced the old monastic schools, in which all the boys had learned their letters, by Western schools where they could qualify for posts in the administration. Burmans could rise to high positions as magistrates and judges and for the past thirty years there have been Burman judges in the High Court. A Burman acted at one time as governor of the whole country. There was a remarkable development in the export of rice, teak, oil, minerals, and other local products and in the import of cotton goods, machinery, and so forth.

Sources of Discontent and Unrest

But the loss of independence was a blow to national feelings and in the course of economic progress Burmans were left behind. They had no experience in modern industry and commerce, and under the conditions of unrestricted competition the latter were developed almost exclusively by foreigners—Europeans, Indians, and Chinese. These grew rich on the development of the country and there was practically no opening for Burmans in business. Naturally this occasioned discontent among those who had been educated in Western schools. Outside government service Burmans could find a livelihood only in agriculture. But in the new commercial economy the cultivators became heavily indebted to Indian moneylenders and much of the best rice land in the country passed into Indian hands. Indians in

general have a much lower standard of living than Burmans, and landowners could obtain higher rents and cheaper labor from Indians than from Burmans. Thus over a large part of the country Burman cultivators were transformed into rack-rented tenants and landless laborers, while the surplus agricultural population was debarred by Indian competition from finding employment even as unskilled labor in the business world. This gave the masses grounds for discontent.

The British government could disregard national sentiment because its power rested on the army of occupation, partly British, but mainly Indian with a few units recruited from the hill tribes. Not infrequently there were petty local risings, but the educated classes, who recognized their futility, took no part in them. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, beneath an apparently placid surface, an inflammable mixture of national sentiment, economic frustration, and agrarian distress needed only a spark for an explosion.

As elsewhere in the East, it was the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 which lit the fuse. It taught the classes educated in Western schools that they might hope by Western methods to rid themselves of Western rule. In the first instance they looked to national education, teaching modern science and economics. But there was no market for Burmans trained in modern science, for Indians were more readily and cheaply available as engineers and doctors. And, as there was no demand for Burmans in commercial offices, it was useless for them to study modern business methods. The possibilities of advance through education were limited by the economic environment.

Then, after the first World War, the wave of democratic sentiment led to the introduction of quasi-democratic machinery in Burma, and Burmans hoped to regain freedom by their numerical majority. But the new institutions, like the educational system, were conditioned by the economic environment. Burma possessed a plural economy, with its modern sector dominated by foreign enterprise. Burmans therefore found that their numerical majority was ineffective as an instrument of political control.

The great depression of the 'thirties intensified political and economic unrest. Some Burmans began to look to Japan for help. But some of the younger men at the university became interested in Russia, which seemed to have survived the depression better than the Western powers and was reported to be doing great things for underdeveloped people in Central Asia. There was great activity in translating from the English various Marxist pamphlets, and Marxist doctrines about capitalism and imperialism found sympathetic disciples. But all this was little more than a fashionable cult among the younger intelligentsia; Marxism was up-to-

date, the latest thing in politics. Even those who were attracted by Marxist economic doctrines recoiled from the materialist attack upon religion and, although one lad earned some notoriety by breaking with a young lady "because she said her prayers," few took their Communism so seriously.

When war began to threaten Burma, some Burman leaders, probably most of them, regarded it as a favorable opportunity to regain independence by peaceful negotiation with Britain as a condition of support. Some, enticed by the promise of co-prosperity, preferred to join forces with Japan. A few, not more than three or four, put their faith in Russia. The British government impartially interned the leaders of all three groups. But even in jail the most enthusiastic Communist, Thakin So, urged that Burma should support the Allied cause "without conditions and without reserve."

An Alias for Nationalism

This gave birth to Communism as a political force in Burma. But it gave birth also to the resistance movement against Japan. As Burmans shed their illusions about Japan, more and more joined in the resistance, and the underground army was recruited largely through the efforts of the handful of Burman Communists. Thus the armed forces and the people as a whole came to identify Communism with nationalism. But Communism was in fact merely an alias for nationalism.

The Japanese occupation confirmed the general dislike and distrust of foreign rule and strengthened nationalist sentiment, but at the same time it taught the people to dislike and distrust totalitarian forms of government. Most Burman leaders, apart from the very few Communists, had no greater liking for Russia than for Britain or Japan. Some, as pious Buddhists, were repelled by the anti-religious element in Communism, and realistic politicians understood that in Burma Marx would have to come to terms with Buddha. Accordingly they began to call themselves Socialists and built up a Socialist Party distinct from but in close alliance with the Communists. Both these parties worked together in the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which after the surrender of Japan prepared to assert Burma's claim for independence. The leader of the AFPFL was Aung San, who commanded the League's armed forces. His personal relations were mainly with the Socialists, but his chief lieutenant was Than Htun, the most able of the Communists.

At the end of the war Aung San and the Socialists believed that they could obtain independence on satisfactory terms from the socialist Labor Government in England. Thakin So, as an enthusiastic Marxist, believed only in violent revolution, and with a small band of followers took up arms against the British government.

Next Issue: Comment on White Paper

The next issue of the FAR EASTERN SURVEY will be devoted to a discussion of the State Department's newly-released White Paper on United States policy in China. Analysis and comment by Professor John K. Fairbank, Harvard University, and Professor Paul M. A. Linebarger, School of Advanced International Studies, will follow a resume of the document prepared by Lawrence K. Rosinger.

Most Communists, however, led by Than Htun, supported Aung San with a view to gaining independence first and working for Communism later. These came to be known as the White Communists, as distinct from the Red Communists, led by Thakin So. Aung San, however, began to suspect Than Htun of plotting to convert the AFPFL into a purely Communist party, while Than Htun on the other hand charged Aung San with subservience to Britain. This led to the expulsion of the Than Htun group from the AFPFL.

Negotiations with Britain proceeded, and in January 1947 Burman and British leaders agreed on a plan for transferring power to Burman hands. In the subsequent elections for a Constituent Assembly the Socialists gained an overwhelming victory. The assassination of Aung San in July brought the present Prime Minister, Thakin Nu, to the head of affairs, but it made no material change in the political situation.

Hence at the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly on January 4, 1948, when Burma gained its independence, the few Communist members could do no more than register their dissatisfaction. Their main grounds of complaint were the recognition of Burma's debts to Britain, the payment of compensation for the acquisition of foreign enterprises, and the acceptance of a British military mission for advice on national defense. Their real strength lay, however, in popular support for immediate measures of agrarian reform. In this matter the Communists merely wanted the government to do at once what it was trying to do as fast as possible. Meanwhile the Red Communist rising was fading out and in March, when Thakin So was arrested, many held that Communism was no longer dangerous.

But in the same month Communist delegates from Burma attended a conference in Calcutta and evidently received instructions to stir up trouble. For some time the government maintained its policy of conciliation to promote national unity. It soon appeared, however, that the use of force was unavoidable, and the government moved, reluctantly, to suppress the Communists.

This step immediately revealed the structural weakness of the government. It stood on two legs, the Peasants' Union and the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO). The former was a nation-wide organization of cultivators, both small landowners and tenants, supporters of the Socialist Party against the Communists. The latter consisted mainly of landless laborers who had joined the resistance army during the war. When the British government returned it had no use for these ex-soldiers, but Aung San retained them as a volunteer militia to strengthen his hand while negotiating terms of independence.

On gaining independence the new Burmese government proposed to disband the PVO. But no arrangements had been made to provide work for them and the government agreed to postpone disbandment until the new cultivating season, apparently under the impression that the agrarian reforms which it had instituted would enable them to obtain land or employment. The reforms, however, while relieving the cultivators, did little or nothing for the laborers. This created a rift between the Peasants' Union and the PVO and tended to alienate the latter from the government, for the PVO had a natural sympathy with their former comrades of the resistance movement.

When the government decided to suppress the Communists, one of the two legs on which it rested gave way. The PVO broke into two sections: the Yellow PVO, which continued to support the Government, and a larger group, the White PVO, which formed an opposition party that within a few weeks crossed the border line between constitutional opposition and rebellion, though without formally joining the Communists. At the same time some units of the regular army, recruited from the same source and under the same impulse as the PVO, mutinied and joined either the White PVO or the Communists.

This left the government largely dependent on the Karen regiments. There seemed good reason to trust the Karens, as the Commander-in-Chief was a Karen and so also was the head of the air force, while other Karens held high positions in the army, air force, and navy. These for the most part remained loyal to the government, but for various reasons there had long been tension between Karens and Burmese, and some Karens incited their people to take advantage of the critical position of the government and raised a separate rebellion. Since then there has been a general and confused civil war, with the government fighting Communists and Karens, Karens fighting alongside or sometimes against the government either with or against the other factions, sometimes seizing a town in the name of the government and then holding it against the government. According to the latest news the gov-

ernment is making some headway against the Karens, and, if it can settle the Karen problem, it should be able to deal with the two PVOs and the Communists. But pacification and resettlement will be a painful, slow, and costly process.

Future of Communism in Burma

How far is it likely that in the course of this process Burma will go Communist? How far has Communism made any real headway in Burma? In my opinion it may safely be asserted that it has made no real headway and is unlikely to go further. Communist leaders can attract popular support by demanding agrarian reforms and denouncing capitalism and by appealing to impatient nationalism. But as soon as they try to introduce collectivism by totalitarian methods of government, Communism in Burma will collapse.

The progress of Communism in Burma, since independence, is mainly due to the need for agrarian reforms and the difficulty of providing employment for the PVO. As regards the PVO there have been suggestions on the part of the government to convert them into pioneer regiments for reclaiming land that has relapsed into jungle, with the prospect of becoming landholders. This is probably the best solution, and it is unlikely that the Communists can offer them more attractive prospects. On the whole the PVO would prefer to fight for rather than against the government, but what they chiefly want is more loot and less discipline, and on these terms they will fight for anyone.

The Communists have managed to win over some of the peasantry by promising the immediate abolition of landlordism and private money-lending. But the government is pressing forward with a similar program and any national government of whatever color would have to do very much the same. Agrarian reforms are long overdue and for the past fifty years have been under discussion by the British government. Unfortunately it never got beyond discussion. The main reason for the delay was a fear of prejudicing foreign interests, the Indian moneylenders in particular and foreign commercial interests in general. Thus the demand for agrarian reform is closely linked with nationalism. A cultivator need not be a Communist to be seduced by the promise of no rent, no usury; and the Communist leaders, without the responsibility of government, can add the further attraction of no taxes. But if they should try to enforce collective cultivation they will encounter resistance which they will be unable to subdue.

The denunciation of capitalism is another popular item in the Communist program. But this again is only one aspect of nationalism, for hitherto there has been no capital in the country but foreign capital. The policy of the present government is so far as possible to raise

and employ domestic capital, and this would be the aim of any national government. It implies of course that the government must play a leading part in industrial and economic life. But this has always been necessary where there is a shortage of private capital, and in most European countries, long before Socialism was respectable, the construction of railways had to be undertaken by the state. If the resources of Burma are to be developed without excessive and dangerous dependence upon foreign capital, the state will have to do much that in wealthier lands can be left to private citizens. Yet there will still be a need for foreign machinery and technical skill, and even a Communist government would have to come to terms with foreign capital.

In any case the Communists cannot attain power without an army, and even if they could defeat the Burmese forces of the present government, they would still have to reckon with the hill tribes. Once they had attained power they would, like the present government, be faced with the problem of maintaining themselves in power without sufficient force behind them. And they would need a much stronger force to impose a totalitarian regime than the present government needs for a rule based on the principle of toleration.

Doubtless the Communist leaders have been encouraged by the recent Communist victories in China, but these have been welcomed by most Burmans on nationalist grounds. If, as is very improbable, the Burman Communist leaders should invoke the assistance of outside military force, whether Chinese or Russian, there would soon be no Communists in Burma except the foreign

troops. In Burma as elsewhere in southeast Asia, the people are fearful of domination by foreign orientals. Burmese Communism would then be revealed in its true nature as a form of nationalism. On the other hand, any attempt to use foreign troops to eradicate Communism would be the best, if not the only, way to ensure its ultimate success.

There may, however, be a possible middle course. The troubles by which Burma is now beset are almost certain to break out in other countries of southeast Asia when they attain independence. Similar developments have appeared in Indonesia, and are not unlikely in Thailand. They might be prevented if an international police force were available, not to suppress Communism as such, but to help any government resting on popular consent against unconstitutional attempts, whether by Communists or non-Communists, to overthrow it by force of arms. Any such project is, I fear, a utopian dream, but, if it could be given substance, Burma might collaborate with Western countries without fearing to compromise its new-won freedom.

Meanwhile foreign countries can do most to stave off, not Communism but anarchy, by helping the government of Burma to strengthen its administration and develop the resources of the country on nationalist lines. One cannot promise immediate returns, but a policy directed along these lines should help to restore peace in Burma, prevent the spread of anarchy to other countries of southeast Asia, and lessen the likelihood of another world war, and in the long run it should be profitable on strictly economic grounds.

ECA and US Policy in China

It is said of China: "You can't put much in, and you can't take much out."
The ECA report and UNRRA's experiences explain our limited aid program.

BY DOROTHY BORG

SINCE 1948, MUCH OF THE ACTIVE China policy of the United States has been channeled into the operations of the Economic Cooperation Administration. *Economic Aid to China*,¹ the official report of these operations, is therefore significant.

Dr. Borg, author of *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925-1928*, recently returned from China, where she was correspondent for the *Far Eastern Survey* and research associate of the Institute of Pacific Relations.

¹ *Economic Aid to China* (under the China Aid Act of 1948), issued by the Economic Cooperation Administration, Washington, February 1949. See Harlan Cleveland, "Economic Aid to China," *Far Eastern Survey*, January 12, 1949.

Unfortunately the opening sections of the report promise more than they are able to produce. At the outset they seem prepared to answer the harsh criticisms of those who denounce the State Department's policy in China as a needless as well as a disastrous failure. Such critics contend that if the United States had provided the Chinese government with large-scale assistance, it might have won the civil war; they believe further that large-scale assistance should still be forthcoming.

Discussing the background and purposes of an ECA program in China, the opening chapters state in substance that the Administration in Washington was convinced that no outside help would materially benefit the Chinese government unless it introduced essential reforms. The most practical method of aiding Nationalist