

## **Burma in 1988 – a crisis of authoritarian rule**

A research essay for the Stage 3 University of Auckland paper POLITICS332: Comparative Regime Transition.

### ***Abstract***

From 1962 to 1988 Burma was ruled as a one-party socialist state, with a cohesive narrow military base at its apex with a high degree of insulation from society. Poor economic policy led to economic collapse and social unrest and mass desire for change in the late 1980s. Started by students, protests broke out in 1988 that spread throughout Burmese society and led to the collapse of the socialist order. From amongst the turmoil emerged a new set of counter elites but despite desire on many sides for a new democratic government it did not come. Instead, in September 1988 the military intervened and retook control of the state. The failure to achieve some form of pact can be explained by Burma's lack of any suitable semi-societal organisations, or skilled political actors that would have facilitated pact making between the different sides. It was the strong sense of "national security" ideology held by the Burmese armed forces instead, which ensured their cohesiveness and return to rule.

### ***Marker's comments***

Need to codify [the introduction] in a research question – a problem or enigma that needs solving/explanation otherwise you run the risk of being purely historical/descriptive.

Well researched, but most of this reads like a history essay. Your description of events is good and thorough, but you need to go beyond this and locate these events within a more rigid theoretical framework.

### ***Grade - B***

### ***Feedback***

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## ***Burma in 1988 – a crisis of authoritarian rule***

In 1988 Burma experienced a popular unrest to a degree unlike any seen before. In this essay I seek to explain the uprising and the resulting transition from a one party socialist state to a bureaucratic military regime. I begin by describing the socialist state as it was before 1988 and the economic crisis leading to mass mobilization which pressured the elite to change, whilst simultaneously giving rise to counter elites. I will then argue why a pact between the elite and counter-elites was not possible and what factors affected the military's role in events.

### ***Burma 1962 – 1988 : The Socialist State***

The state order in Burma as it was in 1998 had its origins in a 1962 Tatmadaw (military) coup. Burma has never been an ethnically homogeneous nation, but consists of several major ethnic groups, the majority being the Bamar. The issue of national unity has been a problem in the political milieu since Burma's independence from British colonial rule in 1948. In 1962 political negotiations for increased regional autonomy in some of the ethnic minority states motivated General Ne Win's coup.

The 1962 coup established the Revolutionary Council (RC), and vested all executive, judicial and legislative powers into the hands of the RC Chairman Ne Win. With no legislature or electorate, the RC was accountable only to itself, or more precisely, to Ne Win who began to rule more through his own power than his position of office in later years (Maung 1990, 606).

The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was created soon after the coup and a non compulsory mass peasant based organisation attached to the BSPP was created to co-opt what was then the most powerful internal group (Taylor 1987, 300). The organisation united peasants with the new political order. Leadership at all levels consisted of both elected peasants and government appointees from the BSPP and the bureaucracy whilst military leaders coordinated the organisation from the top with Ne Win as chairman. Similar worker and youth organisations were created. The apparent role of the mass organisations was to draw members into controlled political activity, create a popular base for the military in power, and control the articulation of interests and aggregate only acceptable demands (Silverstein 1977, 108). Armed struggle and unlawful protest became the only ways of making demands and articulating interests, to which the state's response was violence (Yawnghwe 1997). Overall state autonomy vis-à-vis society was high.

The RC was aware of the utility of a state ideology around which the public could focus their beliefs and loyalties, and how it could be used for mobilization. The first step towards the building of such an ideological project was the RC policy statement *The Burmese Way to Socialism*. Later, the BSPP disseminated its worldview, an eclectic mix of Buddhist tradition and Marxist dialectics outlined in *The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment*. Taylor describes the rhetoric of the BSPP ideology as not being phrased to mobilize one class against another, but instead to unite the entire nation (1987, 296). The party was not the leader of a single class, but rather the vanguard of all the people, except those who exploited others (Silverstein 1977, 86).

A program of nationalisation was instigated in 1964 that saw virtually all foreign and domestically owned companies coming under the control of the state. Nationalisation led to a mass exodus of foreign businessmen and capital, which coupled with the expulsion of international organisations such as the Fulbright and Asia Foundations and Ne Win's xenophobia meant overnight Burma became one of the most isolated and hermetically sealed countries in the world (Smith 1991, 200). Nationalisation and other policy measures also undermined the entrepreneurial class that had developed in the later years of parliamentary rule. The average growth rate of real GDP from 1962-1974 was just 2.8 per cent, which although comparable to recent industrialised nation growth was poor for a country starting with the economic base Burma had at the time (Than 1997, 181).

A majority of the RC's leading personnel were military. This determined the style of the RC and in turn the characteristics of the state tended to adopt the army style of command and planning (Taylor 1987, 298). Likewise, throughout its life the BSPP maintained its strong connections with the military. In the beginning BSPP administrative districts were set up to run parallel to the divisions of the Tatmadaw command. Ten years after the coup, over half of its full members still came from the army or police (Smith 1991, 200). Thus the state and party were highly malleable to military leaders and Ne Win, and being so tightly fused to the military its coercive powers were strong. The narrow military base that constituted the top echelon was centred around Ne Win who maintained its cohesiveness through purges of potential rivals (Yawnghwe 1997).

The strength of the BSPP state in its cohesive narrow military base, its high degree of insulation from society, and its control over the repressive state apparatus. However, being so autonomous from society, it was unable to resolve problems in constructive ways, gain broad based legitimacy, or build an elite consensus that extended beyond the military power base. The broad lack of legitimacy would mean that when the protests of 1988 could not be repressed the regime collapsed, in large part due to non-military elements of the state deserting their posts (Yawnghwe 1997).

### ***Economic crisis and questioning of the political regime***

The unrest of 1988 was the outgrowth of an economic crisis that had emerged as a result of the BSPP's autarkic policies which had generated little growth and state revenue, and saw Burma's debt service rise to over fifty percent of the national budget (Boudreau 2004, 192). The problems were exacerbated by specific events such as declining international prices for Burma's exports, and a threat by Japan, Burma's largest donor, to cut funding. In August 1987 Ne Win called for a complete rethink of the economic and political order. Market orientated reforms followed, including the deregulation of rice and basic commodity prices. But without the financial cushioning of a structural adjustment loan the result was rapid inflation. This was followed by a surprise and unexplained demonetisation in September 1987 without compensation, which destroyed the public credibility of the government (Taylor 1991, 135-136).

Students responded at the time with a riot, which set the stage for further protests in March and June 1988 in which students were killed by authorities. In response to the March and June unrest, Ne Win called an extraordinary session of the BSPP Congress

in July 1988. He claimed responsibility for the deaths, restated his August 1987 reservations and announced his resignation. He also mooted the idea of a national referendum to determine whether the people would prefer a multi-party system instead. This and his previous announcements on a rethink officially sanctioned the call for change and may have served to delegitimise the political regime. His suggestion of multiparty democracy was immediately taken on board by the student movement leaders, who from that point on had a clear rallying point (Boudreau 2004, 200). The BSPP accepted his resignation, and he was replaced by Sein Lwin, but the idea of national referendum was rejected.

The September 1987, March 1988, and June 1988 protests only involved student mobilization. By August the student movement had grown and a nation-wide general strike including workers was executed on the auspicious 8-8-88, August 8 1988, and was matched by repression from the army (Boudreau 2004, 201). On August 12, Sein Lwin stepped down and was replaced on August 19 by a civilian moderate Dr Maung Maung who announced a Commission to study 'the economic, political and social wishes of the people' (Burma Names a Civilian as New Leader 1988). The regime appeared to be changing tack and taking a more conciliatory approach, but it failed to stop protesters who continued to demonstrate and called for a referendum on multi-party democracy (Smith 1991, 5).

### ***Counter-elites and elite manoeuvring***

On August 24, Maung Maung withdrew the army from the streets of Rangoon. The withdrawal of the army lowered the repression costs of protesting and led to millions of people joyfully rallying across the country (Ferrara 2003, 309). Workers, housewives, artistes, clerics, religious communities, professionals, intellectuals and other sections of society all came together to press demands for democracy in a "popular upsurge" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 53). At the same time Maung Maung promised a BSPP congress on September 12 to decide on whether to have a national referendum on a new multi party system (Leader of Burma Ends Martial Law 1988; Smith 1991, 5). Despite having their previous demands met, the movement continued to push the regime with the new demand that the BSPP step down and be replaced by an interim government (Smith 1991, 6).

At this stage four prominent counter elites, separate from the student leaders who had been organising the protests, emerged and began to consolidate personal support at outdoor rallies. They were Aung Gyi, previous number two in the RC but ousted in 1963 for pragmatic policies, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San Burmese independence hero and father of the military before his assassination, Tin Oo former army chief of staff under Ne Win but ousted in 1976, and U Nu, prime minister of Burma from 1948-56 during the democratic parliamentary period. Aung Gyi, Suu Kyi and Tin Oo were more cohesive whilst U Nu struck out on his own and declared a parallel government on 9 September with himself as prime minister.

The promised congress session was brought forward two days and held on September 10. In what again appeared to be a major concession to the opposition movement, delegates voted to skip the plans for a national referendum, establish an election commission and move straight ahead to multi-party elections in three months (Smith 1991, 13; Burma Chief Vows Elections To End Single-Party Rule 1988). Aung Gyi,

Suu Kyi and Tin Oo's response on September 12, was a joint statement demanding the immediate resignation of the BSPP and formation of a neutral interim civilian government to organise the elections, although Aung Gyi was initially prepared to accept the BSPP offer (3 Opposition Leaders in Burma Reject Election Plan 1988; Smith 1991, 14).

### ***Military resumption of power***

Any group hoping to rule the state would have needed to have the support of the military, and they had been ominously silent since their withdrawal on August 24. However, they soon made their move. On September 16 the BSPP announced that the armed forces were no longer party members (Burmese Ruling Party Ends Forced Membership Policy 1988). On September 18 the military, under the leadership of the General Saw Maung, moved into place, killing protesters and taking up all powers of state whilst promising to retain the election commission and hold multi-party elections in the future (Burmese Military Officially Takes Reins Of Power 1988). Described by some as a coup, other observers said it was merely a 'reshuffling of the pack' because the military behind the party was always in power (Smith 1991, 15).

Ferrara argues that the removal of the supply of social order, through the withdrawal of the army on August 24, was an intentional tactic by the regime to create disorder and pave the way for a coup (Ferrara 2003). At the beginning of September a student union newspaper published a document whose authenticity was never verified (Smith 1991, 12). Describing a secret meeting of top government officials at Ne Win's residence on August 23, the document outlined a tactical strategy to remove the opposition. Criminal elements would be let loose and military personnel would be sent out throughout the country to create conditions of anarchy so that sooner or later the people would need to turn to the military to restore order. Following events unfolded exactly as described by the document. Between August 25 and August 31 the regime reported riots in prisons and the "escape" of prisoners. At the same time the regime chose this moment to release 4800 prisoners nearing the end of their sentences (Ferrara 2003, 9; Smith 1991, 12; In Burma, a Rising Chorus Warns of Coming Anarchy 1988). Intelligence agents were found attempting to sabotage protests and incite disorder (Lintner 1990, 120-123). On 18 September the military stepped back in, and this time with the population facing a choice between anarchy and dictatorship, repression succeeded in bringing an end to the protests whereas it had failed in previous attempts (Ferrara 2003).

### ***Explaining the failure to achieve a pact***

Political transition scholars note that lasting democratic regimes are seldom, if ever, brought about by mass popular action (Huntington 1984, 212). Instead, the historical record shows that transitions that include a pact made between elites, whilst inherently undemocratic, are more favourable to democratic outcomes. Why did the uprising in Burma in 1988 fail to move from a "breakdown" into a "transaction" whereby an elite pact could have been negotiated between the counter elites and elites (BSPP or military), which could have lead to a "founding election" and the stabilization and institutionalization of political democracy (Than 1997, 187; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 57; Share 1987)?

Zhang argues that successful political pact making depends on certain institutional conditions. He suggests that there are two general conditions for successful political pact making. The first is the ability of the elites to exclude the mass from direct participation in the transition process. The second is the ability of elites, especially the opposition, to enforce those pacts on the popular sectors (Zhang 1994, 112).

These two general conditions require the existence of strong societal institutions that are able to both represent and control the masses. For successful pact making the elites from these institutions must be able to represent their people, whilst at the same time control them from being able to participate directly in the process and then later enforce the pact on them. Such institutions ideally are semi-official and semi-societal, they cannot be mere extensions of the regime and therefore not represent society, but neither can they be pure societal institutions with no control capabilities (Zhang 1994, 112).

It is necessary for opposition elites to be able to exclude the masses so that they have the political space to be able to manoeuvre, in other words bargain and compromise. Mass demands may be radical and populist, and therefore unlikely to be acceptable to an outgoing regime. Opposition demands must be pragmatic and politically feasible for a pact to be sealed. Secondly, if the opposition elites are unable to control their popular sector, the outgoing regime has no guarantees the demands they seek in the bargaining process, such as amnesty for crimes committed, will be adhered to by masses who may continue to seek further retribution.

During the BSPP era the peasant, worker, and youth mass organisations were the sole source of interest expression and were controlled by the military. Burma had a small middle class, a cohesive state and a fragmented civil society. Hence the counter elites that arose during the Burmese uprising did not have an institutional basis. Instead, the different counter elites' power come from support they were able to consolidate from appeals made to the population at mass open rallies. The only other potential groups of power were student leaders, who had been organising since September 1987 and had some limited control over their own groups, and the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), a group with some organizational, as well as armed, capacity but who showed little interest in the democracy movement (Lintner 1994, 286; 1990).

Without the control features of a semi-societal organisation the counter elites had little way of enforcing any deal they might have been able to secure. In addition the masses were able, and did, make strong demands that could not be tempered by the counter elites. Instead the counter elites tended to merely reflect these demands. Such a position gave the counter elites little power in any negotiation they may have wanted to conduct with the failing regime or the military, and hence was not conducive to pact making.

In contrast, Spain and Brazil are countries that have experienced successful transitions. Both countries before transition had official state corporatist institutions, created as forms of social control, particularly of the working class, but later evolving into semi-societal institutions with social representation functions. These official structures were infiltrated and turned into opposition institutions which participated in elite pact making. Their control abilities gave the elites high confidence that deals could be implemented and thus facilitated the pact making (Zhang 1994, 118).

In addition polarized Burma did not have the benefit of institutions or individuals who were above partisanship and could command the moral authority to bring sides together and facilitate a pact. Neighbouring Thailand is a case in point. The Thai King Bhumibol, not only the head of state but a symbol of national unity, in May 1992 managed to force compromise between fighting sides and defuse the violence in the streets (Steinberg 1992). However it should be noted, that whilst conducive, this condition is neither necessary nor sufficient for a successful transition.

Finally, whilst it may not have been obvious then, looking back now it can be said that the authoritarian regime simply lacked the ability to implement a transition. It seems strange to consider that from the September 10 congress onwards, the failing BSPP and the opposition had the same stated goal of multi-party democracy, and yet it failed to materialize. However, as Share notes, this should not be so surprising, for whilst a regime may be willing to implement a transition, and assuming the BSPP elite was, it may lack the capacity to do so (1987, 533). Had Maung Maung been a more capable state manager, comparable to say Suárez who managed the Franco Spanish regime transition successfully, things may have been different.

### ***Explaining the military's role in events***

Why did the military decide to make its own move, instead of either siding with the BSPP, the opposition, or even splitting? The Tatmadaw's actions can be explained in part by its view of itself.

The military has created a role for itself as the guardians of the state and the 'national' interest. It sees itself as the only institution capable of maintaining independence and unity of the state in the face of subversive elements and opponents – imperialists, communists, secessionists – as well as inept and disunited politicians. This 'national security' ideology, extending beyond purely national defence duties, developed out of its historical experience as a political movement dedicated to regaining Burma's independence from the British and the Japanese (Yawngwe citing Garretón 1989, 68-83). It also has its roots in the lack of integration among Burma's many ethnic groups, with only the most fragile of political arrangements having been created between central Burma and the minority areas by successive regimes (Callahan 2000, 35). Since independence, the military saw itself as playing a key role in defending the state against the BCP and ethnic minority armies (Taylor 1991, 137). Partisan historical publications such as *The Roots of Revolution* have highlighted the army's role in Burma's national liberation struggle (Smith 1991, 199).

With an ideology of "guardian of the state" and an institutional position closely linked to the state and dependent on its resources, the military is only a step away from taking over the state if it perceives the state's existence is threatened (Yawngwe citing Feit 1972, 18). The "guardian" of the nation becomes the "saviour" of the nation (Yawngwe 1997). In an interview given after the 1988 coup, Saw Maung claimed he had "saved the country from an abyss" (Than 1997, 210). In addition, the coup leaders claim the army is the only force in Burma historically incapable of political bias, and thus it is only institution qualified to be a neutral arbiter in political disputes such as the 1988 uprising (Smith 1991, 198).

During the upheaval there were calls for the army to back the uprising. Aung San Suu Kyi expressed respect for the armed forces in a public speech in which she didn't openly seek their support or condemn them, but she hoped for a split (Kyi 1991, 201; Boudreau 2004, 43). However, unlike the external political interference that split the Philippine Armed Forces during the mid 1980s and played a key role in leading to the demise of the Marcos regime, or the internal rivalries (central vs outer island commands, finance generals vs professionals, service branches against one another) that divided the Indonesian military, the Tatmadaw remained cohesive (Boudreau 2004, 213). Although a few units in the navy and air force joined the demonstrators during the upheaval, the core including the infantry, intelligence corps and senior officers of the navy and air force, remained united and continued to follow orders from above (Taylor 2001, 8).

Why was this so? Whilst also legitimising itself to the world, the national security ideology of the Tatmadaw is directed just as much to the rank and file (Callahan 2000, 45). It serves an ideological purpose of maintaining unity within the repressive state apparatuses. The fact that the armed forces did not split serves to illustrate the power that the ideology held in the face off, if it was not in fact strengthened by, the popular upsurge. Thus the military's "national security" ideology not only gave it the impetus to act, but the strength to act cohesively.

The events of Burma in 1988 had their outgrowth in the nature of the Burmese socialist state from 1962 to 1988. The key players in the events were student leaders, four counter elites arising from a purely popular base, the remains of the BSPP elite, and the military. Whilst both the incumbents and the opposition had similar stated goals for a multi-party democracy, a pact did not eventuate that could have paved the way to democracy in large part due to structural factors resulting from the socialist era. Instead the military, perceiving, or perhaps deliberately creating, an increasing anarchic situation intervened in a way consistent with its "national security" ideology.

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