

Democracy in Myanmar: The failure of another Asian democracy in late modernity

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Received: 22 April 2023; **Accepted:** 28 August 2023; **Published:** 13 October 2023

Can Myanmar ever become a genuine democracy? It appears that ever since the exit of the British forces in the post-WWII era, any form of genuine democracy remains an impossible dream for that naturally wealthy regime. Democracy does not appear to be synonymous with Burma or what is now called Myanmar. On August 27, 2023, the Myanmar Junta expelled Timor-Leste's ambassador over allegations of authoritarianism, calling the locally-based anti-coup shadow government a sham. The two Southeast Asian states have been at loggerheads since early 2021 due to widespread clashes in Naypyidaw over the National Unity Government (NUG) [(1):746]. The Southeast Asian nations have been locked in a crisis since the Myanmar military seized power (again) in February 2021 after another failed (and mostly public) experiment with democracy that had led to widespread political violence. The official Myanmar news agencies that remain the voice of the *junta* have condemned the anti-coup demonstrations. Most ASEAN states-Vietnam, Laos, Singapore, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei-have failed to attempt to broker any compromise that could solve the problem. Only Thailand and Timor-Leste have attempted to resolve the political violence. Jakarta tends to remain "neutral" or uncommitted to any arguments over Timor-Leste (and in this case the expulsion of the Timor-Leste Ambassador to Myanmar in late August 2023) because Indonesia (under Suharto) had not only annexed Timor-Leste under Suharto but also was committed to the widespread use of political violence and other human rights' atrocities by the Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus) against the largely peaceful Catholics and Christians under former rebel leader Xanana Gusmao. The current crisis Napidydaw now faces invites many human rights observers and Amnesty International advocates to raise questions about Myanmar's poor record since the British left after the post-WWII era. The paper attempts to explain why democracy remains a problem in Myanmar. It uses a seven-question democratic framework to determine feasibility of democracy in Myanmar today.

Keywords: Myanmar (Burma), democracy, authoritarianism, military junta, Aung San Su Ki, political science, Southeast Asia

Method

The framework for analyzing democracy in Myanmar uses seven questions in its method: (1) Are there regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country? (2) Are there external or foreign observers of the elections? (3) Are the ballot boxes stuffed openly or secretly? (4) Are the voters bribed in any way before or during the elections? (5) Is the vote secret? (6) Are there secret police operating beyond the law? (7) Are there Opposition parties

that can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry?

Introduction

Ancient Burma was the traditional land of the Mon and Pyu who adopted a strong belief in Theravada Buddhism. They occupied the large and long Irrawaddy delta valley tight up to the creation of the Pagan Kingdom during the late

Bronze Age and Middle Ages. After the fall of Pagan, the Mongols left the tropical Irrawaddy delta for the Mongolian Steppes as the Pagan Kingdom was irreparably broken up into several small kingdoms. While the Mongols raided Burma for its gold and silver they eventually retreated as stated. Thereafter, a local series of kings established what came to be known as the Toungoo dynasty (1510–1752) which was the largest empire in the history of Southeast. This was followed by the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), which restored the kingdom, and continued the Taungoo reforms that increased central rule in peripheral regions and produced one of the most literate states in Asia. There were also a series of wars with Ayutthaya that ended with the latter's sacking and complete destruction in 1775 to 1776. The result was a tipping of the scales of victory into the hands of the Burman. The Shan and Tai tribes nevertheless challenged the Burman people for political control of their destiny sometimes allying themselves with the ancient Siamese and at other times invading Siamese territories. Recall that the early history of Burma was anything but clear and in fact, it was actually obscure at the very least beginning with the creation of the Tagaung in 850 B.C. and the earliest records based on Sanskrit and Pali writings as well as the (rather questionable) observations of the Greek historian Ptolemy. Most modern historians however do agree about the aggressive nature of the early Burmese. The local Burmese were notorious for war-mongering. The Burmese people also went to war with all its other Southeast Asian neighbors and attempted invading Siam several times over two centuries. The colonial British won the three main Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–1885) that would eventually help establish British colonial rule in mainland north and northwest Southeast Asia. While the British invasion and wars brought political, economic and social stability, the people, especially the Shan and the Tai people, were mostly unhappy with the foreigners.

The annexation of Burma

J. S. Furnivall, a former Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer (who was at the apex of the elite British bureaucracy and also covered Malaya and India), would give up his career to turn to writing history. Indeed, he wrote the history of British rule in Burma (1824–1948) ironically claims that the British colonial officials established a liberal administration that involved transforming the Burmese economy into a capitalist one. The reality was that the British did not and could not have achieved such a feat but instead depended on the King of Burma and the Burmese elite to create what in fact was already a pre-capitalist economy in a kingdom that was far more culturally and politically complex than Furnivall had anticipated.

When the King of Burma moved the capital from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1857, he brought much hardship to the people and it would take half a century to resolve the

shift of the national capital. This situation worsened after the death of the King and the erosion of traditional trade and commercial activities in the ensuing British period [(2):270].

The illegal annexation of Burma by the British in 1886 weakened the traditional Burmese royalty. British colonial policy in Burma was based on the following four factors: (1) changing opinions of foreigners and the Burmese of the colonial British, (2) the halting of the slavery trade and a new renaissance for liberal ideas, (3) the Japanese occupation of Burma, and (4) the rise of anti-British and anti-Japanese Burmese nationalist movements [(3):120].

The annexation of the Kingdom of Burma in 1886 also saw a rise in Buddhist identity that challenged the British and western religions including the Rohingya Muslim minority [(4):98]. Because of the sudden British annexation, many Buddhist-led rebellions and insurgencies occurred. The colonial masters that ruled Britannia failed to pacify the unhappy Buddhist nationalists. Burmese nationalist sentiments were instantly aroused and represented the Kingdom's strong Buddhist sentiments.

The post-colonial British era led to the latter's economic failure due to the rejection of the impoverished economic structures of colonial rule by the Burmese themselves. Another two reasons were poor rice yields and inchoate Burmese entrepreneurs and the withdrawal of South Asian capital and commercial enterprises after independence [(1):725].

Early democracy

Though not part of Burmese traditions, there were already early forms of democratic-like grassroots activities around the 1920s and early 1930s by student activists, the local vernacular media, the Buddhist Sangha (*pongyis*), and the fractional Burmese party-political system. The situation was worsened by the implementation of the *Riots Inquiry Commission Report* (1939) and the liberal position of the *Emergency Press Act* (1947–1949).

There was doubtlessly an unexamined Burmese culture in its littoral cities in the lower Irrawaddy delta region. The congestion and failure of the British to protect those littoral assets resulted in what some believe to be a staggering failure of British foreign policy in Southeast Asia. But for others it was merely about the imaginary import of the great Britannic idiom [(5):23].

Many locals died from malnutrition while building the infamous Death Railway when the Japanese arrived. After the relatively brief Japanese occupation, independence was declared in 1948 and the civil wars prompted the rise of several warlords who formed the basis of the first military junta.

Burma officially came under military rule from 1962 to 2010 and again from 2021 to the present. Yet, Burma or Myanmar with its capital at Naypyidaw remains one of the

poorest nations in Southeast Asia with zero prospects for liberal democracy to take root given what the junta has done to its most prolific democratic leader, Aung San Su Kyi. She broke the decades-long military junta's grip on political power when her National League for Democracy (NLD) party won elections in 2015 [(6):243]. She was still placed under house arrest. She continues to battle General Ne Win and his gangster army as well as its nefarious *junta* to no avail. Even the United Nations is unable to intervene due to complications involving China (on the Security Council with its veto vote), Cambodia (the stooge of China), and ASEAN with its general policy of non-intervention [(7):5].

On the whole, the Burmese people showed themselves to be highly militant and easily angered and aroused to political violence. The fledgling democratic process was all but absent given their treatment of Aung San Su Kyi, some say because she had married an Oxford don. He was a foreigner named Michael Vaillancourt Aris, who died in 1999 but never played any significant role in Burmese politics except perhaps to antagonize her people and the ruling junta and its gangsters.

Conclusion

The possibilities for democracy in Myanmar today are remote as they were during the so-called liberal era laid out by the British colonial masters. In fact, the possibilities for conversion to a genuine democracy were squandered during the 1920s and 1930s due to the unfortunate interruption and sad intervention of the perverse deprived Japanese Imperial Army's invasion of Burma. We have seen the potential for Myanmar to have become led by a great democratic leader in the form of the aging but still beloved democratic leader Aung San Su Kyi. The chances for the NLD to lead Myanmar into a democratic age are stymied by internal conflict created by the fact that Aung San Su Ki also has no potential "heir," and the likelihood of her continuing her struggle is culturally

infirm and politically weak. Her shabby treatment by General Ne Win's *junta* and the lack of sufficient political will among the Burmese elite is one part of the problem, the other part being that the resource-rich ASEAN state is continuously being raped of its resources by the junta, their relatives and the Burmese elite themselves.¹ The General Elections (GE) are held regularly but are neither free nor fair; there are no external observers who are themselves independently watched by the junta; no evidence of ballot box stuffing does not imply that there are none; the vote may appear secret but that is difficult to determine because of the presence of the junta's secret police who work within and outside of the law while Opposition parties apart from Aung San Su Kyi's party have faced high barriers to entry. My analysis is that the possibilities for democratic growth in Myanmar are indeterminate and as far as the Irrawaddy River is long.

¹ Interviews with five Burmese professionals working in Singapore who escaped torture and death after their homes were destroyed by the army in late December 2021. See also, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-juntas-worst-massacres-of-2021.html>.

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