

Since the 1922 introduction of a “legislative council” election to Burma, the notion of elections has always been suspect to the Burmese populace.

This is not surprising, for Burma’s ballot boxes have never served their purpose—the electing of people’s representatives whose constitutional mandate can change or enforce government’s policy. Under both the British colonial administration and subsequent post-colonial governments, Burma’s elections have never translated into genuine political change.

In the 1920s, the dyarchy in which 80 members of the 130-member legislative council were elected and the rest were appointed by the British fractured the Burmese nationalist movement.

While moderates sought to change the system from within, radical nationalists in the movement called for “home rule”—a separation from British India—before they articulated independence for the country. The dyarchy election law disenfranchised most people in the peasantry since the suffrage for 44 constituencies in rural areas was based on the payment of taxation.

Out of a Burmese population of 12 million in 1922, there were only 1.8 million eligible voters. The voter turnout was very low, only 6.9 percent of eligible voters participated in Burma’s very first election.

The legislative council hopefuls were labeled “sellouts” to the British. Intimidation of the would-be voters by elections boycotters, nationalist monks and agitators was not uncommon. In fact, little effort was really needed to dissuade people, who had never known an election, from voting.

The second legislative council election in 1925 saw a 10 percent increase in voter turnout: 16.26 percent of the qualified voting population. The increased political participation was explained by the elected representatives’ success in making amendments to controversial laws, such as the 1907 Village Act of Burma and the 1920 Rangoon University Act. The attempts to encourage people into political participation by the elected politicians and the increased number of political parties also contributed to the increased voter turnout.

In 1927, the Simon Commission, chaired by Sir John Simon who was appointed by Westminster, started probing the possibility of “self-governing institutions” in Burma. British colonialists thought it expedient to keep Burma away from “the disturbing influence of Indian politics.” The 1930 Simon Commission report recommended that Burma be governed separately from India.

It took five years for the British to come up with the Government of Burma Act to implement the recommendations of the 1930 Simon Report. The constitution of 1935 discarded the dyarchy and added 33 new constituencies, increasing the number of ethnic Karen constituencies from five to 12.

By the time the 1936 election was held, all features of multi-party politics, from factionalism and forming coalitions to switching allegiance, flip-flopping, politicking, character assassination, party thuggery and boycotting of the electoral process were no longer new to the Burmese. The populace, by and large, learned to despise their politicians as much as they hated the British colonialists. The year also saw the Rangoon University strike and the emergence of the student activists Aung San and future premier Ko Nu as leaders of the hugely popular nationalist “Dobama Thakin” (“We Burmese Masters”) movement.

The thakin were not keen on “legislative politics” and downright rejected the 1935 Constitution. Yet the 1936 election on the offer was seen as a political opening by some dobama leaders. In the end the thakin belatedly founded the Komin-Kochin Aphwe (Our King, Our Affair Party) and fielded no less than 30 candidates to contest in the election. Ironically, one of their avowed aims was to disrupt the legislature's proceedings. Only three thakin were elected to the constituent assembly in 1936.

Fabian Ba Khine, one of the witnesses at the time, noted that the three elected thakin attended the assembly meetings with their adopted aim to revoke the 1935 Constitution and always sided with the party in opposition. They consistently opposed the government. It also meant that the thakin could not take up ministerial posts.

Senior politician Dr. Ba Maw, the founder leader of Sinyetha (Proletariat Party), became the first premier of Burma under the 1935 Constitution as he cleverly maneuvered different political forces to form a coalition government. Having formed her own government, Burma was finally separated from British India in 1937.

In the latter half of the 1930s, the ascendancy of Marxist politics in the Dobama movement naturally led to the consideration of “independence by any means” and extra-parliamentary activities to overthrow the British. Perhaps the thakins’ failure in parliamentary politics also contributed to the strategy formulation of the Dobama. In 1938, the Marxist-Leninist thakin spearheaded a general strike to paralyze the British administration, but failed.

As most thakin leaders were jailed or outlawed, Burma nationalist movement took an unexpected turn at the onset of the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of Burma, assisted by the thakin-led Burmese army, from 1942 to 1945 was as devastating as it was elsewhere in Asia.

The worst thing that had happened to Burma during the Japanese occupation was the exacerbation of the ethnic conflict, especially that between the Burman and the Karen, fuelled by the war. As the British reoccupied Burma following the Japanese defeat, parliamentary democracy was reintroduced. The Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), a broad alliance of nationalists dominated by the thakin who had turned against the Japanese, became the most formidable opposition party in the post-war years.

In April 1947, an election to the constituent assembly was held under the 1935 election law. The AFPFL claimed the election was a British attempt to defuse the post-war political tensions in the country to prolong their colonial rule. To the AFPFL, which had the largest mass following in Burma at the time, 1947 was an opportune moment to become involved in legislative politics in what Aung San called “a transition to independence.” The AFPFL entered the election to the echoes of its slogan, “Independence within one Year!”

But many politicians who had been influential in prewar parliamentary politics—such as Dr. Ba Maw from the Maha-Bama (Great Burman) Party, and U Saw of the Myochit (Patriotic) Party, as well as many former thakin, such as Thakin Ba Sein (Dobama Party) and Thakin Soe (Communist Party of Burma “Red Flag”)—boycotted the election for different reasons. The Karen National Union also stayed away.

The remaining opposition parties, including the Communist Party of Burma (Thakin Than Tun’s “White Flag”) and the Karen Youth Organization, could only field less than 30 candidates for the 255-member assembly.

The result was predictable, but it had been made certain by the widespread intimidation of voters by pro-AFPFL militia, the People's Voluntary Organization (PVO), which came into existence as the result of the post-war British retrenchment of the Burma Independence Army.

British scholar Shelby Tucker notes: "Armed PVO units dragooned voters and escorted them to the polling booths that were guarded by other armed PVO units, while League supporters manned the government-provided electoral information facilities."

It was customary for the political parties in Burma to have an armed wing, but the PVO was the biggest armed group that could be turned into a nationalist army against the British. The League won more than 95.3 percent of the seats and dominated the constituent assembly without much opposition. In June 1947, the assembly approved Aung San's motion that an independent Burma should exist outside the Commonwealth. It also approved a draft of what would be known as the 1947 Constitution, proposed by Aung San.

Postwar Burmese politics were dominated by the AFPFL and its charismatic leader, Aung San, who was only 32 in 1947. Widely considered to be asocial and rash, he was unable to convince his senior political rivals to swing his way.

Consequently, most of Aung San's opposition was effectively excluded from the parliament and from the policymaking process that would determine Burma's future as an independent nation. The assassination of Aung San and six of his cabinet members in July 1947 left the entire country in mourning.

Aung San's colleague U Nu (formerly Thakin Nu) took over the AFPFL and delivered Aung San's promise of "Independence within one Year." In January 1948, Burma became independent under U Nu and his government; they were undoubtedly apprehensive, but the country rejoiced and there was an air of hope for the future.

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