

If the colonial design and intent had deprived the majority of the population from voting in pre-independence Burma, the disfranchisement of much of the population in newly independent Burma (1948-62) was rather accidental. It was caused by the civil war. The nascent Union of Burma's parliamentary democracy, which was in the hands of politicians whose hallmarks had become corruption, infighting and megalomania, foundered under the pressure of the civil war. A few good men, if there were any, could have done nothing to save the country.

As if to prove that Burma's independence was a not a sham, Premier U Nu's social democracy-oriented Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government, began nationalizing land, forests, inland water transportation and many other public services. The mass deportation of all non-Burmese bureaucrats and technocrats, "senior administrators, engineers, doctors, and experts in finance, agriculture, and forestry" and even "many Anglo-Burma subordinates in the railroads, customs, and other services," left the country a huge administrative vacuum, never to be refilled efficiently.

Within months of Burma's independence in 1948, both the "Red Flag" Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the "White Flag" Burma Communist Party (BCP), which had grassroots support in rural areas, went underground. The communists' "armed revolution" for "genuine independence" was followed by the various ethnic peoples' quest for self-determination. In 1948 alone, the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO), Mon National Defence Organization (MNDO), Pa-O and Arakan armed groups and even some units of the Burmese military joined the insurrection.

As the Karen peoples revolted, the commander-in-chief of the Burmese army and police forces, General Smith Dun, a Karen soldier whose position reflected the League's pre-war pledge that the Union of Burma should be equally represented by all ethnic peoples, was forced into an early retirement. He was replaced by his deputy, Ne Win.

Things came to a head when much of the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), which had been an armed wing of the AFPFL, joined countrywide revolts. The availability and abundance of arms, ammunition and other weaponry left over from the Burma theater of the Second World War and numerous unpaid militia units "who were looking for a cause" all over Burma fed the war. Caught in the crossfire, tens of thousands of internally displaced people, especially in the Irrawaddy delta where the communists had strongholds, sought shelter at temples and monasteries.

Toward the end of 1949, the remnants of the Chinese nationalist force Kuomintang, who fled from the communist victory in China, spilled over into part of Shan State in northeastern Burma. Under overwhelming challenges in civil, economic, administrative, foreign affairs and, above all, defence matters, the AFPFL's democratic governance suffered.

Due to security reasons, the very first election in independent Burma was held in three phases at different areas of the country over a six-month period from June 1951 to January 1952. Less than 20 percent of all eligible voters cast ballots. Civil war meant that polling was available only in the government-controlled, and therefore, the AFPFL-dominated, areas. Despite this, the AFPFL won only 60 percent of all votes. However, the first-past-the-post voting system rewarded the League with 180 out of 233 seats in Parliament.

In response, a coalition of opposition parties led by Dr. Ba Maw charged that the election was a sham and demanded justice by filing a report of voter intimidation, fraud, political assassination of opposition party members and the partisanship of the military in some areas. Premier Nu set up an investigation commission, but it took three years for his government to account for "less than half a dozen cases" out of more than 300 complaints and 200 letters filed by the commission.

A similar pattern of electoral irregularities, voter intimidation, fraud and murder of opposition party members was repeated in the 1956 election. The AFPFL, now weakened by factionalism, also faced a more formidable alliance of opposition—the National United Front (NUF), which ran on the platform of "immediate peace talks with the rebels."

In the run-up to the 1956 election, Thakin Lwin, an NUF candidate, demanded the election be postponed as four of his delegates were murdered in his constituency, Min Hla, in Pegu Division. Ba Yin, another NUF candidate, campaigned for the disbanding of the Pyusawhti militia, the League's pocket army established by reforming the PVO troops who did not go underground. Pyusawhti intimidation had become too much for the opposition since its formation in 1955.

Continued insecurity in the country meant that only 3.6 million voters, an estimated one-fifth of the country's population, voted in the 1956 election. The AFPFL scored more than 1.7 million votes and the NUF more than 1.1 million votes. The League lost more than 36 seats to the

opposition, but remained a majority in the parliament with 144 seats.

In retrospect, Nu recognized that elections had never been fair during his time. He admitted that they had been “free” because the opposition was free to participate in the elections, but they had not been “fair” because candidates from his ruling party had been privileged with government funding, security guards and free use of the government radio station for their campaigns.

He acknowledged his “undemocratic way” and attempted to correct the lopsided electoral system for the 1960 general election. By that time, however, the League had been in power for 15 years. When Nu half-seriously said he would like the AFPFL to rule for 40 years, no one read it as a joke.

A month after the 1956 election, U Nu handed over the premiership to his senior colleague Ba Swe, so he could concentrate on party reorganization. Ba Swe’s priority was to restore peace and order in the country. By the time Nu returned to power a year later, neither he nor Ba Swe succeeded in their missions—the strengthening of the League and the restoration of order respectively.

By March 1958, bitter infightings had already split the League into two factions: “the Stable AFPFL” led by Ba Saw and former Home Minister Kyaw Nyein; and “the Clean AFPFL” led by Nu. The campaign for the control of the parliament by the two warring factions of the AFPFL was bitterly waged in the parliament, in the media and even in the streets. Nu realized that general elections scheduled in November 1958 would lead to more bloodshed and party disintegration.

In September 1958, Nu said on the radio that he had postponed the elections and invited Gen Ne Win to organize free and fair elections by April 1959. After the power transfer, Nu publicly dispelled claims that he had been robbed of his power at gunpoint. Ironically, the very first purpose of the Burmese military in politics in independent Burma was to oversee the elections as instructed by an elected politician.

Ne Win dissolved the parliament and managed to hold elections only in 1960 when again there was a vicious struggle between the two factions of the AFPFL. Out of about 9.9 million eligible

voters, the voter turnout was 59 percent. The Clean AFPFL, entering the election with a ticket to make Buddhism state religion in Burma, won 159 seats, and the Stable, 42 seats.

As many of its leaders were behind bars, the third party NUF was marginalized and did not manage to win a seat, but they supported the “Clean.” As before, there were reports of vote-rigging and intimidation, but more disturbing was some military officers’ partisanship with the Stable AFPFL. Some six officers, including Briga-Gen Aung Shwe, who would become the chairperson of the National League for Democracy in the 1990s, were forced to resign due to their alleged partisanship.

In March 1962, Burma’s troubled parliamentary politics were ended in a military coup led by Ne Win, in the pretext of “non- disintegration of the Union.” Immediately after the takeover, Ne Win’s “Revolutionary Council,” set out to silence all opposition, and embarked on a project called the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” Ne Win convinced himself that the “legislature politics” in Burma was tried and failed. He was never to allow any opposition party during his rule of the country from 1962 to 1988.

This article is the second in the series of three articles by Ko Ko Thett on Burma’s past elections. See the first article, “[The Ghost of Elections Past](#)” [May 31, 2010]: