

Burma has produced a bewildering assortment of political parties over the past century, but most have been short-lived

Throughout Burma's modern history, political parties have come and gone. Some have split up and formed new organizations or alliances; others have simply vanished. None has outlived the era that produced it.

Since the first modern election was held under British rule in 1922, Burma has undergone numerous political transformations, each one dominated by a different cast of leaders representing a complex array of interests. Many commentators have pointed to the sheer diversity of political forces in Burma as a source of weakness, but the real tragedy has been the lack of continuity in the country's political evolution.

No political party in Burma has ever survived more than a few elections, partly due to infighting and internal dynamics, but mostly because of external factors: British colonial interference, World War II and, worst of all, nearly half a century of military rule.

Burma's first modern political organization emerged in 1920 and was itself the product of a split within the increasingly politicized Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), formed in 1906. The General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) was founded by younger, more radical members of the YMBA intent on furthering their nationalist agenda.

The GCBA in turn divided over whether to participate in the 1922 election, which was part of the British colonial effort to establish a diarchy system of limited self-rule for Burma's people (albeit with ultimate authority remaining in the hands of the governor).

The election was won by the Twenty-one Party, led by Ba Pe, a journalist and former GCBA leader. The party captured 28 out of 58 seats, just short of the majority required to form a Cabinet. However, Ba Pe refused to enter into a coalition with the pro-British Golden Valley Party, led by Sir J.A. Maung Gyi, who went on to head the new government.

This situation repeated itself in elections held in 1926 and 1928: Ba Pe's party (now called the People's Party) won the most votes both times, but was unable to form a government or win any positions in the Cabinet because the British favored the Golden Valley Party. By this time, the Burmese realized that the diarchy system was a sham.

In the following decade, however, a new generation of nationalist leaders decided to try again to use British reforms to achieve their ultimate goal of Burmese independence. In August 1936, the Dobama Asiayone ("We Burmans Association"), led by Aung San, created the Komin Kochin Party to contest the election held in November of that year.

This election was held under the 1935 Burma Act, which separated Burma from British-controlled India and established a House of Representatives and a Senate. Besides the Komin Kochin Party, other participants included the Ngar Pwint Saing Organization, led by Chit Hlaing, a former GCBA leader who had advocated boycotting the elections of the 1920s, and the Poor Man's Party, led by Dr Ba Maw, a prominent advocate of Burmese self-rule. There

were also a number of individual candidates.

Ba Maw's party won the election, and in 1937, he became Burma's first prime minister. He served until 1939, when he resigned because of his opposition to Burma's entry into WWII. In August 1940, he was arrested for sedition and imprisoned. He remained behind bars until he was released by the Imperial Japanese Army, which overran Burma in early 1942. He later became the head of a puppet government and was arrested in Tokyo in 1945 for his role in supporting the Japanese.

During the war, Burmese political aspirations became secondary to the larger geopolitical conflict that was changing the global balance of power. However, under the leadership of Aung San, Burma's nationalist movement remained a potent force, and at the end of the war, the Burmese were finally in a position to demand complete independence from Britain.

Aung San's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), an umbrella organization consisting of no fewer than 10 political groups, including the Communist Party of Burma and the Socialist Party, spearheaded the final push to end colonial rule. In a constituent assembly election held in April 1947, the AFPFL won by a landslide.

The assassination of Aung San in July 1947, just six months before Burma was to regain its independence, and deep ideological divisions did not prevent the AFPFL from forming successive governments over the next 15 years. Its chief political rival was the National United Front (NUF), formed ahead of the April 1956 general election.

Like the AFPFL, the NUF was ideologically diverse. It included an array of smaller parties: the Burma Workers and Peasants Party, the Justice Party, the People's Unity Party, the People's Progressive Party and the People's Peace Front, as well as several youth organizations and ethnic groups. Both the AFPFL and the NUF brought together groups spanning the political spectrum from left to right, as well as powerful individuals and interest groups, including students, war veterans, peasants, workers and ethnic minorities.

In 1958, the AFPFL split into the "Clean" faction led by Prime Minister U Nu and Thakin Tin and the "Stable" faction led by Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein. In June of that year, U Nu's government survived a no-confidence vote by eight votes with the support of the NUF (which had also divided along factional lines). Facing growing instability, U Nu invited Gen Ne Win to form a military caretaker government.

Ne Win handed power back to U Nu in April 1960, two months after the "Clean" AFPFL faction, now transformed into the Pyidaungsu [Union] Party, won a landslide victory in a general election. But Burma's brief era of parliamentary democracy was soon to end for good when Ne Win mounted a coup in March 1962.

Although the internal power struggles of Burma's political parties had left many Burmese confused and disillusioned, what followed was far worse. For the next 26 years, a single party, Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), ruled without any challengers. In March 1964, the ruling military council decreed the Law Protecting National Unity, abolishing all

political parties except the BSPP.

In 1974, a one-party system was formally established under a new constitution approved through a sham referendum. Political persecution became the norm, and all dissenting views were ruthlessly suppressed. Far from fostering unity, the Ne Win regime exacerbated divisions, prolonging conflicts with ethnic minorities and Communist insurgents by using military might, rather than political dialogue, as a means of resolving differences.

By 1988, growing resentment of Ne Win's misrule forced the BSPP to give up its monopoly on power. A nationwide uprising resulted in the collapse of the government, and a new military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, took over, promising a return to multiparty politics. On Sept. 27, 1988, just over a week after seizing power, the regime issued the Political Parties Registration Law. Under this law, the BSPP reconstituted itself as the National Unity Party (NUP) and became just one of 236 parties registered by the Multiparty Election Commission.

Among the other parties that came into existence at that time: the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi; the League for Democracy and Peace, led by U Nu; the student-led Democratic Party for a New Society and the Students' Revolutionary Party for Democracy; and ethnic-based parties such as the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Arakan League for Democracy.

The nation went to the polls on May 27, 1990. Even after the Election Commission disqualified 143 parties for various reasons before the election, there were still so many remaining that none was expected to win the election outright—that, at any rate, was the junta's calculation.

In a major upset of the regime's plans, however, the NLD won a stunning 392 out of 492 seats, earning it the right to form the next government. But that never happened, because the junta refused to honor the results. Nearly 20 years later, it continues to detain many of the NLD's leaders, including Suu Kyi, along with elected members of parliament from other parties.

At present, there are just 10 legally registered parties in Burma, including the NLD, the SNLD and the NUP. More will be formed ahead of next year's election, but it remains to be seen whether they will be permitted to reflect the diversity of Burmese society or the overwhelming desire of most Burmese citizens for a return to genuine democracy.

For nearly a century, political parties have played a key role in the effort to define the common goals of Burma's people while allowing them to express their differences. Since colonial times, they have struggled for independence, ideological influence, democratic change or ethnic rights.

By suppressing them, the military has not only eliminated what it regards as a cacophony of clashing voices; it has also robbed Burma of much of its vitality, with disastrous consequences.

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