

**ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT
IN MYANMAR
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KUKIS**

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Paoliental Haokip

**Division of Southeast Asia and Southwest Pacific
Centre for South, Central, Southeast Asian
And Southwest Pacific Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi – 110067
India
1999**



JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI - 110067

Centre for South, Central
Southeast Asian and
Southwest Pacific Studies


School of International Studies.


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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled "**Ethno-nationalism and Democracy Movement in Myanmar with Special Reference to the Kukis**" submitted by **Mr. Paoliental Haokip** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other University and this is his own work.

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PROF. NANCY JETLY
Centre for South, Central, Southeast Asian and
Southwest Pacific Studies
(CHAIRPERSON)


PROF. GANGANATH JHA
(SUPERVISOR)

*Dedicated to
the cause for the twin- ideals of democracy
and self-determination in Myanmar*

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PREFACE

Burma (Myanmar) as a land fascinated me as a child. I remember being told tales of its riches, that grains of gold can be sifted off the silts of its rivers and pearls and diamonds picked from its pebbles. I knew it also as a land of Sorcery and Martial Arts. The next thing I learnt about it was that the Army had brutally crushed the people's aspirations for democracy and that it has been using force to contain the minorities' struggles for self-determination. The urge to learn more about that 'land' has always been alive in me.

The reclusive regime of that country having been a hindrance to indepth research, enquiry has been largely inhibited as precedent works are limited in availability and inevitably lacked depth. However, this work has sincerely attempted to add to the body of knowledge concerning Myanmar through first-hand research and reference of accumulated pre-existent knowledge. The objective of this work is to assess the relationship between the movements of ethnic nationalities for self-determination and the democracy movement, commonalities and differences between the two and their problems and prospects. It has also attempted to bring to notice the ethno-nationalistic aspirations of a particular ethnic people, the Kukis, who have remained largely obscure hitherto. I am pleased to present the work for expert evaluation and constructively critical examinations.

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Humble as the work may be, it would not have materialized but for the much needed guidance and assistance from many to whom I owe deep gratitude.

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Above all, to the Almighty, from whom all things flow, my undying gratitude and unflinching adoration.



Paoliental Haokip

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, the closest Southeast Asian neighbour of India, has one of the most complex of ethnic mixes of the world. With a population of 47.5 million people (1991 census), the country has seven ethnic minority states, the Chin, the Kachin, Karen, Kyah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. These states however represent only those minority groups, which have a politically significant demographic representation in the country's population. There are many other ethnic minority groups, such as the Was, the Palaungs, the Lahus, the Rohingyas, Pa-o, Nagas, Kukis, etc. who are too less, or atleast considered to be so, to have states of their own but are no less determined in striving for one. Moreover, these ethnic groups are further sub-divided into ethnic sub-groups. For example, the Chin or Kuki-Chin ethnic group, though they make up only some 2 percent plus of the total population as per official census records, is further sub-divided into 44 groups on the basis of dialectic variations.¹ This happens similarly in the case of most other ethnic groups as well.

Another significant dimension of diversity in Myanmar is the linguistic variations which is remarkable in itself. Over a hundred

¹ Smith, Martin; *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity.*, Zen Books Ltd., London and New Jersey, 1991, p.30.

but in certain cases cut even into the unity of an ethnic group. So, in terms of engendering divisions within the Burmese society it certainly is a potent factor and second only to the more vital ethnic diversity that the country's population embodies.

But ethnic and religious diversity in Myanmar, though not parallel, worked in tandem towards shattering the feeling of oneness or nationhood. They are mutually reinforcing factors that promote minority insecurity and alienation from the Burman majority. This is evident in the perception by the minorities of the state as an agency of domination, politically, in the hands of the majority community, i.e. Burmans, and the religions of the majority community as a threat to their cultural identity and socio-religious independence.

However, the multi-ethnic complex being the primary focus of this study, religious divisions shall at best be treated as a supplementing factor wherever and whenever inevitable and not as complimentary to ethnic diversity in creating divisions, dissension's and disharmony in Myanmar.

Most studies on ethnicity and ethnic nationalism either consciously or otherwise gave an implied connotation to the term 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' as an exclusive or primary reference to minority communities. Even after refined researches and works on ethnicity have highlighted the fact that the term is not related to numbers and thus not primarily connotative of minorities, the common perception

that an 'ethnic group' essentially refers to a minority community still lingers on. This conceptual disclarity or rather miscomprehension can be a big hurdle in understanding ethnic nationalism as well as majority-minority relations in a given state.

The present study on Myanmar is therefore purposely tuned to fit with the more universal connotation of the term. Accordingly, in attempting to present an overview of the multi-ethnic picture within Myanmar, the Burman majority will feature as an ethnic group and will be treated at par with other ethnic groups, as having their own exclusive goals, aspirations and ideals etc., the pursuance of which often came to clash with those of other ethnic groups, generating in the process tension, conflict, disharmony, mistrust, rebellions and finally, separatist tendencies.

Owing to the assimilationist ethnocentric state in Myanmar, a manifestation of Burman ethnic designs of domination over other ethnic groups, up-to-date information on the ethnic breakdown of the population is not available. The 1931 census, the last available to attempt to give any kind of detailed ethnic breakdown, had to be relied upon and projections made on that basis. But even this is believed to be deeply flawed in that it downplayed minority numbers and also categorized communities on the wrong bases.⁴

However, in the absence of better alternatives, this need to be

⁴ n-1., p.30.

reckoned, if necessary, with the recognition that some inaccuracies are to be presumed in drawing information from the data.

In a population of 14,647,497 the census, in a set of figures many minorities believe are deeply flawed, put the major ethnic families such as the 'Burman', including Rakhine, at approximately 65 percent; the Karen at just over 9 percent; the Shan at 7 percent; the Chin and Mon 2 percent each; the Kachin, Paluang-Wa and Chinese at just over 1 percent each; and the Indian, many of whom have since left Burma, at around 7 percent.⁵

Compounding the complexity of ethnic representation in the country's population is the myth about the accurate numbers of these ethnic minorities. This has also become a point of contention between the majority Burmans (as represented by the state racial statistics) and the minorities who maintained a separate statistics of their numbers. The gravity of the problem and the wide differences in figures propped up by the two sides can be seen from the following:

"No reliable figures have been collected or released since independence and those that are published appear deliberately to play down ethnic minority numbers. This is particularly true of the Karens, probably Burma's second largest ethnic group, ... the 1931 Census... calculated the total Karen population of Burma, including the various related sub-groups such as Pa-o and Kyah, at 1,367,673, but when

⁵ Ibid., p.30.

languages have been identified in Burma.²

The languages spoken by the country's population can be broadly divided into six groups such as Semitic, Tibeto-Burman, Malayo-Polynesian, Miao-Yao, Mon-Khmer and Tai. These groups are further composed of sub-groups, which totalled to around 25 linguistic groups/sub-groups. Some of these sub-groups still have sub-divisions on the lines of dialect. For example, the Karen language/linguistic group which is a sub-group under the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group is further subdivided into Pwo, gaw, Bre, Karenni, Pedaung and Pa-o sub-groups.

In short, the ethnic diversity of Burma is overwhelming in its complexity, and the linguistic variations within these groups are even more pronounced. Even accurate figures on ethnicity are lacking.³

Added to this un-Nation State diversity on ethnic and linguistic lines is the religious diversity that is found in Burma.* Though Buddhism is made the state religion other religious groups such as the Muslims, Christians, etc. are also present.

Religious diversity does not go parallel to the ethnic divisions

² Ibid., p.30.

³ Steinberg, David I.; "Constitutional and Political Bases of Minority Insurrection in Burma", in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S.; ISEAS; Singapore 1984, p.51.

* Burma has been renamed Myanmar by the SLORC in 1989, but for the present work, it is used interchangeably with Myanmar for convenience.

during the Second World War the Japanese conducted their own survey, they came up with a figure of 4.5 million. The difference, in part, can be attributed to British survey methods, which would have recorded many Buddhist Karens as Burmans, but it is also due to the sheer inaccessibility of many Karen-inhabited areas in the eastern mountains and the number of Burmese speaking Karens in the Delta. Today most neutral estimates calculate the Karen population at some three to four million with another 200,000 living across the border in Thailand. But by contrast, at the time of the 1988 democracy uprising the BSPP government did not put the Karen population at even two million, while leaders of the KNU today estimate the true number of Karens, in line with the growth in Burma's population, at some seven million, including Pa-o's (Taungthus), Kayahs (Paduangs) and Karennis.... By the same token, leaders of the other main ethnic minority communities estimate the Shan and Mon populations at approximately four million each, the Buddhist Arakanese (Rakhine) at 2.5 million, the Muslim Arakanese (Rohingyas) at one to two million..., the Zo or Chin at two to three million, Kachin at 1.5 million, and Paluang Wa at one to two million. All figures, particularly the Mon, need treating with great circumspection, ... being projections based largely on ancestral records or regions of habitation, rather than on accurate count of present day communities. It is impossible therefore, to compare one set of figures for accuracy against another. Intermingled in different communities across the country there are also an estimated one million Chinese,

Tamils and other minorities of Indian origin.”⁶

While it can be taken that the racial figures lack accuracy, even a more accurate enumeration would in itself do precious little to illuminate the complexity of ethnic politics in Myanmar. Few regional divisions are racially exclusive and ethnic minority states like the Chin, Kachin and Karen are, strictly speaking, just collective names for the various ethnic sub-groups within each other, while the Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan are the names of only the majority ethnic groups in each territory.⁷

In the diverse ethnic insurgencies which have plagued the country since independence, traditions of cultural and political independence have continued to be claimed by minorities not identified in even the present political structure. Ethnic Naga and various Muslim fronts, for example, remain active in the north of Burma, while in the strife torn Shan state various Pa-o, Kayan, Paluang, Wa, Kokang and Lahu armed forces all continue to pose as serious a challenge to the Shan rebel fronts as to the central government. In fact even the 20 or so ethnic sub-groups of the Karens are represented by four different armed nationalist movements today, the mainstream Karen of the KNU (predominantly Sgaw and PWO), the Karenni of the Kayah state, and the Pa-o and Kayan of the Shan state, and these too have been beset by

⁶ Ibid., p.30.

⁷ Ibid., p.31.

ideological and factional differences.

Further the Chin, which is composed of 44 sub-groups are represented by armed nationalist organizations such as the Chin National Liberation Front (CNLF), Chin National Front (CNF), Chin National Vanguard Party (CNV), Zomi National Front (ZNF – representing the Zo-subgroup) and lately the Kuki National Army (KNA) and its political organization Kuki National Organization (KNO) – representing the Kukis who are also classified as a sub-group of the Chin or Kuki-Chin ethnic group. That they are now determined to carve out a separate identity while acknowledging their close bonds with the Chin is a different matter.

The Kuki initiative to detach themselves politically from the Chin; if not socially and culturally, was mainly spurred on by the fact that they mostly inhabit areas in the Kabaw-Valley, West of Chindwin, in Sagiang division outside the Chin state and also, have dialectical differences with the mainstream Chin.

But more importantly, the failure of the Burmese government to grant a separate Kuki state, at the time of territorial restructuring, which they think they are entitled to and about which will be dealt in greater detail in the latter chapter, is what the present leaders felt needs to be corrected.

The state, or more precisely, the Burman policy of assimilation

through the state-backed agencies of language and religious policies added to the complex ethnic web that is proving hard to untangle. Much of the Burman population in Lower Burma consists of assimilated Mons and Karens. In such a situation, loyalties are also sometimes pilfered especially when loyalty to a particular group can bring about certain disadvantages.

The geographical distribution of the various ethnic groups being nowhere near compact, and with no ethnic minority states being racially exclusive, the task of understanding the territorial spread of these various ethnic groups proves to be very demanding and perhaps unrewarding in the sense that it adds little to the fuller understanding of the complexity that has otherwise also been established. But this ethnic scatter in the population certainly augmented the complexity of the ethnic politics in Myanmar.

For one, it weakened the solidarity of the ethnic groups and consequently boosted the state's assimilationist designs. This in turn further aggravated the states's relation with the affected groups.

Secondly, spheres of influence of the various ethnic groups often overlap territorially, sometimes leading to inter-minority antagonisms.

These and other disadvantages of the scattered ethnic inhabitations, such as economic and social inhibitions faced by those in a minority in a particular area, are strong enough to prevent the unity

and strength of the minorities to change the political state of affairs in their favour, though again not enough to strengthen the state to easily achieve its objectives of building a 'nation'. Hence it created a situation wherein the present state of conflict can prolong itself to the detriment of both parties.

Thus, Myanmar rightly has often been called an anthropologists' paradise and D.G.E Hall's description of Southeast Asia, in his work, *A History of Southeast Asia*, (London. Macmillan, 1968) as "a chaos of races and languages" can be aptly applied to Myanmar as a nation. Much remains to be done before the untangling of this complex ethnic endowment is complete.

The past had witnessed the changing of hands over authority/power as suggested by the eras of rule of the Karens, the Mons, the Burmans, etc. and it remains to be seen if history gets repeated and once again lands the mantle of political authority, atleast over themselves, in the hands the minorities who are presently reeling under what they called a legalized and modernized colonial rule of the Burmans.

CHAPTER II

GENESIS OF THE ETHNIC CONFLICT

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

Having grasped the magnitude of ethnic diversity and the nature of the state in Myanmar, it is no surprise to note that since independence the country had been deeply embroiled in battling currents of ethnic insurgence and minority armed separatist movements. The factors responsible for such widespread ethnic uprisings and the goals and objectives of these movements will be the primary focus of the present chapter.

Though the nature of the work inhibits an exhaustive and elaborate study of all the ethnic movements with all the organizations representing these movements which would require a field study, an attempt has been made to analyze the various causes of insurgence in general and the goals and objectives of atleast all the major and most representative organizations representing each minority ethnic nationalist struggles.

At the conceptual level the problems of minority or ethnic nationalism comes under the framework of centre-periphery conflict,¹

¹ Paribatra, M.R. Sukhumband and Chai-aman Samudavanija, "Factors behind armed separatism: A frame work for analysis", in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, Ed. By Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984, p.30.

which otherwise may also be viewed as a conflict between state-nationalism that is invariably espoused by the dominant ethnic community, who usually control the authority of state power, and that of other ethnic groups who found themselves within such a state and aspire to either have autonomy or have nothing to do with that state.

This centre-periphery conflict can be divided in stages, primary and escalatorial or secondary. These will be dealt with in detail later.

As the subject matter being discussed will require the repetitive use of terms like state, nation, nationalism, ethnic group, separatist movement, et al, a working definition of these terms will be useful and necessary for a better understanding of the subject.

A STATE will generally mean "an independent autonomous political structure over a specific territory, with a comprehensive legal system and a sufficient concentration of power to maintain law and order."²

A NATION will mean "a relatively large group of people who feel that they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more such traits as common language, religion or race, common history or tradition, common set of customs, and common destiny. As a matter of empirical observation, none of these traits may actually exist; the

² Mustafa Rejai and Cynthia H. Enloe, as quoted by Paribatra, Mr. Sukhumband and Chai-anan Samudavanija; "Factors behind Armed Separatism: A framework for Analysis", in *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S., Institute of SEAS, Singapore, 1984, p.31.

important point is that people believe they do.”³

NATIONALISM will mean “an awareness of membership in a nation (potential or actual), together with a desire to achieve, maintain, and perpetuate the identity, integrity, and prosperity of the nations”, or “a state of mind, a psychological condition in which one’s highest loyalty is to the nation...and which involves a belief in the intrinsic superiority of one’s own nation over the other nations.”⁴ It will also connote “an ideology which asserts the right of a given nationality to form a state and aspires and mobilizes a potential movement comprising nationality conscious people to attain, safeguard, and strengthen that state.”⁵

An ETHNIC GROUP will mean “collectivities of individuals who feel a sense of belonging based on cultural traits—usually some combinations of religion, language, and social mores – and a notion of common ancestry. The boundaries that separate ‘we’ and ‘they’ are not necessarily territorial. They consist of perceived bonds of shared loyalties and perceived differences from outsiders.”⁶

SEPARATIST MOVEMENT would refer to “attempts by ethnic minorities on the periphery of state power to attain political autonomy

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p.32.

⁵ Parribatra, M.R. Sukhumband and Chai-anan Samudavanija, “*Factors behind Armed Separatism: A Framework for Analysis.*” In *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia*, Ed. Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S., ISEAS, Singapore, 1984, p.32.

⁶ Guy J. Pauker, Frank H. Golay, and Cynthia H. Enloe, as quoted by Parribatra and Samudavanija in, *Armed Separatism in Southeast-Asia*, ed., Joo-Jock, Lim and Vani S. ISEAS, Singapore, p.32.

from the governing power at the centre.”⁷ The governing power at the centre here invariably implies the dominant community within the state.

It also has to be noted that “although the concept of NATION is usually applied to relatively larger entities and that of ethnic group to smaller ones, the differences between the former on the one hand and a politically motivated, nationalistic ethnic group on the other may ultimately be just a question of semantics; for example the Shans to the government in Rangoon may be an “ethnic group” but to themselves a great “nation.”⁸

A differentiation between a nation-state and a state-nation and the identification of the country under study as belonging to either category would also help in better understanding the problem of ethno-nationalism. A nation-state is one where the boundaries of state are coterminous with those of nation and there within the state is obtained a more or less homogeneity of nationality. A state-nation on the other hand is where the boundaries of state and nation are not coterminous and the state endeavours to create one nation out of diverse ethnic groups living within its political confines. Myanmar essentially falls within the latter category, i.e., a state-nation, where-in state nationalism seeks to create a nation out of the many ‘nations’ within its state boundary.

⁷ Chalmers Johnson, *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁸ n-1, p.32.

It is most often in these kind of countries that the greatest incidences of rise of ethno-nationalism or sub-nationalism are found. The result usually is a geometrical corollary of conflict between the central authority and the ethnic forces.

Now, coming back to the before-mentioned stages of central-periphery conflict, the primary or formative stage is where a specific conflict between the two come into existence and conditions are laid for possible outbreaks of violence in the relationship between the two. This stage involves two processes simultaneously at work.

One is the process of differentiation. Modernization induces certain changes in traditional societies. Social mobilization began to transform local, diffused and apolitical sentiments and loyalties into more aggregated, focussed, articulated and politicized ones.⁹ This process while setting in motion the wheels of modern nationalisms and evolution of national identities, its effects do not remain confined to the 'macro' or national level alone but trickle down to the ethnic group levels where a sense of group identity, group interests, group aspirations, etc. emerged. Often this latter effect, viz., Ethno-nationalism, may obstruct the development of a national identity, as is the case in Myanmar.

This is because of the fact that ethnic groups often have greater cohesiveness, geographically are remote, isolated and far away from effective control of central governments. The very process of

⁹ Ibid., p.33.

modernization with its implications of cultural uniformity, increasing intercourses with and interferences from “inferior” and dreaded outsiders, etc. which often provoke protest and reaction in traditional ethnic societies is also a factor responsible for the growth and strength of ethno-nationalism.¹⁰

With the process of differentiation also often comes fragmentation of values within the body politic which increases the potentiality for conflict and its escalation. Also, there often emerge divergence of interests with each ethnic group demanding its “rightful” share of resources and representative shares of positions of power and authority. In such situations, the opportunities of foreign intervention increases adding confusion to the puzzle. Besides, the central government’s threat perception often increases making them more assertive and often coercive vis-à-vis the ethnic groups.

This lead to the second process of the primary stage of centre-periphery conflict, i.e. the process of subordination. Developing countries are faced with problems of low levels of economic development, political and socio-economic cleavages within, and existence of external threats. Added to these, most countries in post-colonial Southeast Asia, except Vietnam, suffered the geo-political impact of colonialism which created ethnic heterogeneity as a common feature among these countries. Many ethnic groups are forced to live

¹⁰ Ibid., p.34.

separately in two or more states, bringing forth fears of national disunity.

Under the circumstances the national governments often seek to achieve national unity which can supercede ethnic divisions and which they consider is the **only** way to ensure the state's survival and strength. This pursuit then causes the national governments to see ethnic allegiances as **problems** with which they must firmly deal.

In order to deal with such situations, the central governments in such countries often set their policy priorities to "safeguard and increase national security in an environment of constant internal and external threat, "promote economic development in a direction which serves to strengthen the existing power structure in an environment of resources scarcity", "foster national identity and 'macro' nationalism in an environment of ethnic heterogeneity", and "seek to consolidate, or, if necessary, enforce legitimacy in an environment of fragmented values."¹¹

When these goals gets reflected in the government policies, they invariably appear to the ethnic groups at the periphery as packages of internal imperialism meant to strip them of their freedom in all the concerned spheres, i.e. social, economic, political etc. The result is an obvious clash of interests. These strategies of subordination in order to succeed needs a strong centre, that too, provided the peripheries are weak and passive. But in Southeast Asia (and specially in Burma), the

¹¹ Ibid., p.35.

central governments are burdened with the problems of inadequate resources, geographical limitations and bureaucratic inertia as well as institutional corruption and thus generally found the application of their power greatly circumscribed.

Further, "far from being passive, the periphery has tended overtime to become increasingly mobilized, with ethnic nationalism having grown more intensive in many areas"¹² of the region. This process of subordination or internal imperialism, especially if backed by force, may provoke countervailing responses from the ethnic groups in the peripheries. Such reaction in turn could make the governments take firmer steps setting the stage for a "spiral of action and reaction."¹³

The secondary stage of the centre-periphery conflict is reached when organized peripheral or ethnic groups, considering their lot under the central governments' imperialistic rule intolerable, came to the conclusion that secession is the only alternative to ensure their security, well-being and progress. The transition from the primary to the secondary stage may be "difficult to discern and perhaps impossible to measure empirically or predict with absolute certainty."¹⁴ This may come about as a result of the intensification of the process of action and reaction mentioned earlier resulting into violence or a

¹² Ibid., p.36.

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.37.

conflagration following a spark generated by such incidents as assassination of leaders, accidental armed clashes, famines, chauvinistic governments coming to power, foreign interventions, etc.

FACTORS BEHIND ETHNIC SEPARATISM

Keeping this framework of analysis which identifies the causes of ethnic separatism as processes in mind, we can now proceed to identify the factors, historical, constitutional, political, etc. which are generally responsible for the high incidence of ethno-nationalistic separatist movements in Myanmar.

HISTORICAL: The Burman-Minorities conflict in Myanmar is as old as the country's history itself. There has always been an atmosphere of contention between the Burmans on the one hand and one or other or even all of the ethnic Kingdoms such as the Mon, Shan, Karen etc. on the other, since historical times. Whatever might have been the causes of these conflicts, the mutual antagonisms between them is what remains today. Most ethnic groups in Myanmar today claimed that they had traditionally enjoyed full autonomy over their affairs and accused the Burmans of trying to deprive them of that historical pride which they have so jealously guarded through the ages.

With British colonial occupation, this Burman-Minorities divide was widened further by the introduction of separate administrative

arrangements for the plains and the hills. Estrangement between the two sides intensified when the British began to give patronage to minorities such as the Karens and Chins in matter of recruitment into the civil and military services. This while serving their divide-and-rule policy, also helped the proselytization process.

The Burman Kings throughout Burmese history had been contemplating the control of non-Burman areas. But due to the lack of proper bureaucratic means to prolong a strong centralized rule in the peripheries, periodic assertions of central authority are inevitably followed by chains of revolt. This historical picture is summed up by David I. Steinberg thus:

“In times of weakness of the central Burman authority, various groups revolted to regain power over their areas, and indeed over the Burman regions of the Irrawady and Sittang River valleys. History is replete with examples, but during the nineteenth century alone illustrations include the Mon and Arakanese revolts of the early part of the century, Karen revolts in the middle of the era, the insurrection and independence of the Karenni states in 1875, and the southward advance of the Kachins that was only stopped by the British conquest of Mandalay in the third Anglo-Burmese war 1885-86.”¹⁵

The colonial interlude could possibly have a very profound effect on the nature of the centre-periphery conflict in Myanmar. If before

¹⁵ Steinberg, David I.; “Constitutional and political bases of minority insurrections in Burma,” in *Armed separatism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Joo-Jick, Lim and Vani S., ISEAS, Singapore. 1984, p-56.

that period wars were fought between the Burmans and any of the many significant minorities, it was purely over such matters as territorial control, control of populations or trade routes, etc., without any presumptions of authority by one over the other. But when colonial Burma gave birth to a modern state with fixed boundaries, the Burmans, who by virtue of being the largest ethnic community in the new state virtually manned all positions of authority, began to presume the state as primarily belonging to them, to the degree of failing to recognize the need to acknowledge the 'national' diversity necessary to ensure the unity of such a 'state-nation'.

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This attitude was reflected in the Burman perception of themselves being the legitimate unifiers of Burma, their consideration of their role in the anti-colonial struggle as primary and their tendency towards promoting Burman cultural symbols and Burman way of life as national.¹⁶ It was the creation of the state that brought about or facilitated this assumption of legitimacy by the Burmans over the minorities. In Burma, instead of promoting national feeling, it intensified the estranged relations that had existed historically.

The Burmans, with state authority at their disposal, became more assertive, and even coercive, in trying to build a Burmese nation. On the other hand, the minorities, perceiving this as legitimized imperialism, were ever more determined to resist it to maintain the freedom they enjoyed in the past. The issue no longer remained just

¹⁶ Ibid., p-54.



about control and authority but has changed into something which is more like a struggle between colonial powers and the colonies.

During the struggle against the colonial rule, the leadership of the national movement was primarily Burman, natural in view of their numerical dominance, and this led to the use of Burman symbols and appeals to past Burman glory and heritage as means of arousing the patriotism of the masses. But this inadvertently alienated the minorities to a large extent. They felt a sense of losing their identity under the rule of the dominant Burmans. They began to develop group consciousness, cohesion and unity which they think are vital for their existence as a unique 'us'. This sense of alienation grew stronger and stronger as the state increases its efforts to build a 'nation'.

In this regard, Steinberg has precisely noted: "Although a 'Union of Burma' as a state was titularly created, a union of people as a nation was not."¹⁷ The result of this is what is being witnessed in today's Myanmar, a scene of unceasing ethnic rebellions.

Yet another historical factor behind the rise of ethno-nationalism in Myanmar is the manner in which its boundaries were drawn. It was drawn as a "result of neither logic nor a single accepted tradition, but rather were determined by contradictory historical patterns of British colonial policy, the weaknesses of Burma's quasi-independent neighbours – China and Thailand – and the traditional expansionist

¹⁷ Ibid., p-49.

inclinations of Burman monarchs.”¹⁸ Ethnic groups in the frontier areas were indiscriminately separated. This in turn make them more insecure and feel victimized besides inviting external destabilizing interventions. This is one potent factor behind the strength of many ethnic nationalist movements.

POLITICAL: Prior to the British colonial rule, Myanmar was never a single political entity. It was a land of many kings and chiefs who hardly interfered into each other’s affairs except for the occasional wars they fought against each other. There was never a Burmese nation nor any feeling of oneness amongst its people. Even in the earlier phases of the nationalist struggle, political unification of the frontier areas with the rest of Burman did not figure on the nationalist agenda.

The leadership of the struggle being dominantly Burman, the scope of the movement was largely limited to and within Burma proper, i.e., the lower Burma region inhabited dominantly by the majority Burmans, and the social base of the movement also was accordingly primarily Burman.

It was only after 1930 that the British argument – “historically the area (the frontier/hill areas) were separate from Burma proper and that only British rule had joined them under a single government with

¹⁸ Ibid., p-50.

power to act anywhere in the territory”¹⁹ – came to be challenged by the nationalist leadership.

This lack of breadth of scope of the nationalist movement was a consequence not only of the Buddhist Burman character of the leadership but also, perhaps the lack of past association – political, social, economic, etc. – between the Burmans and the peripheral communities.

The nature of the British administration was also responsible to a certain degree in shaping the course of the nationalist movement towards being predominantly Burman in orientation. The division of the country into two administrative areas, Burma proper and the hill areas; (the former of which consisted of the central river valleys and deltas as well as portions of upper Burma where Burmans were the majority and was governed directly by the British, and the latter comprising of areas in the mountainous border regions inhabited mostly by ethnic minority groups such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Shan, etc. and were under the control of a separate indirect administration); augmented by colonial promotion of the minorities as a source of support against the majority population boosted the prevalent divisions in Burma.²⁰ Besides, the colonial patronage of the minorities in matters of recruitment into the services, protection of their customs and traditions, local autonomy, etc. made the Burmans

¹⁹ Ibid. p-56

²⁰ Thomas, Curtis N., “Political Stability and Minority Groups in Burma”, *The Geographical Review*, Vol.85, No.3, July, 1995, pp.272-73.

feel more victimized, more colonized and exploited than any other community in Burma. These feelings reflected themselves in the wave of nationalism that rocked the colonial ship by being conspicuously Burman than Burmese.²¹ This however does not imply that the minorities did not suffer under the colonial rule and were contended with it, but only that a cleavage of some sort had been effectively chiselled affecting the national unity of Burma. This cleavage widened over the years and culminated into sharp differences of values and ideals giving rise to competing nationalisms within the state.

The political history of Myanmar prior to the colonial onset exhibited the existence of ethno-regional political entities which were, as stated earlier, independent of each other in so far as they have no common allegiance to an overarching authority. The lack of national feeling was to such an extent that a "divide-and-rule policy was unnecessary, because Burma was divided long before the British arrived."²²

So, once the post 1948 state of Burma emerged on the horizon, two divergent political perceptions divided the people in the new state. On the one hand were the dominant group i.e. the Burmans, who perceived the emerging state as a legitimate device which restored to them their 'natural right' to man the leadership and positions of authority which they felt belong to them by virtue of being the

²¹ n-15, p.49.

²² Ibid., p.273.

dominant community, while on the other the minority groups perceived the state as an imposed institution that served as an agent of domination and assimilation in the hands of the Burmans.

Under the circumstances, it should only be obvious that all nation building efforts by the former came to be perceived as internal imperialist advances by the latter, culminating into conflicts, rebellions, repressions and separatist tendencies.

The colonial experience also impregnated the politics of Burma, as in all colonies, with the idea of nationalism. But the effects of nationalism did not limit itself to the macro-level.²³ It filtered down to the ethnic levels and engendered a wave of ethno-nationalism stronger than nationalism at the national level. This is because, at the ethnic levels certain structural factors such as smaller numbers and hence, potentially greater cohesiveness, geographical remoteness, and ineffective central governments' instruments of control, etc.,²⁴ are favourably at work.

As Burman nationalism grew, so also Karen, Kachin, Shan, etc., nationalisms. This downward filtration of nationalism having caused enough damage to the national integrity of Burma had seeped deeper down to affect even the unity of the ethnic 'nations' as evidenced by the sub-divisions within ethnic groups. To cite an example, the Kuki ethnic nationalist assertion of which will be dealt in detail later, is a

²³ n-5., p.32.

²⁴ Ibid., p.33.

movement for a Kuki national identity separate from the broader categorization under which Kuki is placed, i.e. Chin or Chin-Kuki.

The unity and integrity of multi-ethnic states like Myanmar depends to a large degree on the recognition and acknowledgement of its ethnic diversity.

The political future of Burma was largely shaped by the triumph of the Burman chauvinist elements with the assassination of Aung San and most of his pre-independence cabinet members on 19 July, 1947.²⁵ This pro-Burman sway began perhaps with the formation of the Burma Independence Army, the Burma Defense Army, and the Burma National Army during the second world war all of which were primarily Burman with only a small minority representation compared to the dominance of the minorities that had previously characterized the Burman Army.²⁶

The Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL) party which was founded in August 1944 in Pegu under such federal minded leaders as Aung San succeeded in limiting the damage done by the chauvinist nationalists for sometime and laid the foundations of Burmese unity by effectively countering the Burman claim that "the peoples of Burma were one" with the argument that there were differences and that the minorities had the right to protect their own uniqueness.²⁷

All these was in the face of minority groups such as the Karens

²⁵ Sharan, P.,; *Government and Politics of Burma*, New Delhi, Metropolitan, 1983, p.21.

²⁶ n-5, p.50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.58.

who are determined to have a separate Karen state. Aung San and his AFPFL went as far as signing the Panglong Agreement in February 1947 with the minorities. The agreement, detailed provisions of which is given in appendix 1, by giving the minorities full autonomy in domestic affairs and granting them fundamental democratic rights as well as assistance from the revenues of Ministerial Burma²⁸ brought them within the Burmese state and established the principle of national unity for all peoples of Burma within its natural geographical limits.

But the absence from the conference of some ethnic groups such as the Karen of Salween District, the Chins of the Arakan, the Nagas, the Was and the Kukis of Kabaw valley etc. limited its unifying impact. Besides, the agreement was an achievement largely personal of Aung San who was more or less the lone voice in the Burman dominated AFPFL advocating the principle of unity in diversity. Thus, when the leadership of the party passed into the hands of U Nu after Aung San's assassination, the tendency towards a unitary state of Burma picked up momentum and prevailed to shape the character of the emerging state into one that is ethnocentric, centralized and assimilationist.

Now, with independence and the reigns of government passing into the hands of U Nu and his AFPFL who are "committed to the idea of Burma as a unitary, cohesive and assimilated society in which there

²⁸ n-25, p.20.

was no place for ideas of minority rights”²⁹ the positions of authority especially at the higher levels became primarily Burman in composition. But the development of a state structure dominated by ethnic Burman personnel and values did not of itself precipitate the ethnic rebellions. It was only when the state began to try to expand its control beyond the core areas of the colonial ‘Burma proper’ that those in the hill areas began to feel that ‘Burmanization’ constituted a threat.³⁰

The assimilationist character of the state became revealed in its various policies such as language and education, culture, religion, etc., accompanied by centralization of the administration. Thus, “the perception of the assimilationist implications of state penetration has provided the focus, at the level of consciousness, for the minority ethnic rebellions.”³¹

The minorities were moved by their “common fears of Burmanization, loss of cultural identity, interference in their affairs by the national government and a belief that the Burmans were creating an internal colonial system in which they could not share the wealth of the country, the growth of the economy and the right of self-determination”³², - (Silverstein). In other words, the political shift towards a unitary state and away from a ‘Union of Burma’ envisaged in

²⁹ Brown, David; *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p.46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

³² *Ibid.*, p.50.

the Panglong Conference after the death of Aung San and the consequent unitary policies of the emergent ethnocratic state and its resistance by the minorities lies at the root of the ethnic nationalist movements in Burma.

In short, if the historical lack of identity as a unified political entity served as the basis of ethnic conflict in Myanmar, it is the political factors as are identified above which added fuel to and blowed the smouldering tensions aflame.

CONSTITUTIONAL FACTORS:

The political system of a state is determined and shaped by the constitution of that state which is the basis of its governance. A constitution which takes into account the needs and aspirations of the entire population of the country and adequately provides for their realization under normal circumstances would ensure a strong government and a harmonious, unified society.

This state of political order and social peace is aspired for and cherished by every newly established state whether they be nation-states or state-nations. In Myanmar too, efforts made on the eve of the drafting of the 1947 constitution are largely tuned towards this goal. Consequently, a Union of Burma, comprising diverse territories possessing certain specific features which entitled them to a large

measure of autonomy³³, meaning a federation of states, was what the 1947 constitution of Burma finally gave to its people.

But, more than the provisions it is the manner in which the constitution is worked/operated that ultimately determines its success or failure.

Thus, the 1947 constitution which was operated largely by Burman politicians and personnel, despite its reassurances of minority autonomy through its various provisions could not come up to the expectations of the minority communities. The states system and the legislative structure which seemingly were designed to protect minority interests were merely titular and theoretical.³⁴ This is vivid in the following statement:

“None of the states could afford to govern themselves without subventions from the central government, the amount of which latter became the topic of much recrimination, and they had, theoretically, considerable latitude in passing laws on such matters as local taxes. They also controlled the local police, transportation, health and local government. Education was also under their authority, but university, higher level technical training, and professional education were excluded for a period of ten years, unless the national government provided otherwise. This, in fact meant that training within ... Burma for access to power and authority, except through the hereditary

³³ n-5, p.29.

³⁴ n-15., p.60.

Sawbwa system, had to be in Burmese and under Burman auspices, which undercut the limited autonomy that the states held.”³⁵

Thus, the 1947 constitution, as summed up later by the constitutional advisor to the Assembly was “though in theory federal, is in practical Unitary.”³⁶ This naturally prompted rebellion and separatist initiatives amongst the minorities who were “designated as a minority in someone else’s homeland rather than inhabitants of their own...labelled as subordinate groups having the marginal status of ‘second class’ citizens...” and were “... subject to policies which led to the deprivation of their region and community.”³⁷

In another perspective, what the 1947 constitution attempted was to reconcile the contradiction between the Burman ethnic aspirations of legitimizing what they considered their natural right to govern the land, and the minorities’ determination to retain, protect and preserve their traditional autonomy.

However, the two sides were aware of the temporary nature of the compromise and also were equally dissatisfied with it. Under the circumstances, radical elements from both sides began to gain influence. The inevitable result was increasing centralization coupled with a reactive intensification of ethnic rebellions.

Following a confusing ‘merry-go-round’ change of government

³⁵ Ibid., p.60.

³⁶ Ibid., p.61.

³⁷ n-29., p.51.

between the civilian and military leadership both of which have evidently failed to bring about any form of political order and stability, Burma was prepared to draft a new constitution in the early 1970's under the supervision of Ne Win and his military administration. This finally resulted in the adoption of the 1974 constitution which by brushing aside the wishes of the minority groups, established a Unitary state. Under the new constitution, whatever limited freedom were undercut by the overwhelming importance given to national security and unity.

By establishing a single party system, the constitution ensured that all political activity must be carried out through the Burma Socialist Program Party structure and since the party has been under the military dominance with the leadership of the military firmly in Burman hands, the net result was a constitution tuned to ensure Burman domination in all spheres. Steinberg summed it up thus:

“The result of the constitution have been clear: The constitution has thus effectively codified the dominance of the Burman majority throughout all the organs of state power, and the effects of this shift can only exacerbate the tensions that have been built up between the Burmans and the minorities over the past three decades of independence.”³⁸

Thus in Myanmar, the constitution which is supposed to embody the political, social and economic aspirations of all its people, by

³⁸ n-15., p.65.

reflecting a pro-Burman inclination has become a factor which is, if not the root cause, serving fuel to an ethnic-based political turbulence giving rise to widespread ethno-nationalist movements in the country.

Besides, there are also other factors such as foreign or external stimuli to the ethnic nationalist struggles in Myanmar. For example, the Muslim separatist movements in the Arakan, although predating the rise of Islamic nationalism, have been given new ideological vigour by that movement; Chinese support for the Burma Communist Party as well as its occasional support for elements of the Kachin rebels; the United States' support for the Kuomintang troops in the Shan state; British, and later Thai involvement with the Karens³⁹ are a few such cases.

In certain cases, like that of the Kukis and the Karens for example, the Burmese boundary have separated them from their people in the neighbouring countries – India and Thailand respectively, and the consciousness often inspired a national movement for unity or for atleast a better deal within the states within which they found themselves, with overwhelming support from their cousins across the border.

³⁹ Ibid., p.69.

OBJECTIVES OF ETHNIC NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS:

Before dealing with the goals and objectives that motivated the various insurgent organizations, a differentiation has to be made between the ethnicity-based ethno-nationalist-insurgents and ideology based insurgents who are devoted to the overthrow of the central government. The present work being one devoted to ethnic-nationalist movements rather than insurgency as such, the focus will be solely on the former category of insurgency.

The demands put forth by the various ethnic movements ranges from increased recognition and autonomy in the political system to open separatism or independence from central authorities for their region or nationality.⁴⁰

At present, there are about thirteen ethnic groups whose political discontent and demands to the central government are expressed through rebel organizations. A particular group may have more than one organization claiming to represent their political will, though the demands of one faction hardly differs from the others in substance. Factions emerge mainly upon disagreement over the means to a common goal. And as the focus here is on the 'ends' rather than the means, the existence of factional organizations in an ethnic group should not be a matter of much concern. The ethnic groups with rebel organizations are "the Shan, Lahu, Arakanese (Rakhine), Karen, Kayah

⁴⁰ n-20., p.270.

(Karenni), Naga, Mon, Palung, Pa-o, Wa, Kachin, Chin”,⁴¹ and Kuki. The Kukis are featured here as a separate ethnic group despite the official classification of Kuki as a sub-group of Chin because they are now seeking an identity separate from the Chin and as such a separate political destiny.

In an attempt to identify the goals and objectives of the various nationalities’ movements, they are being given a closer look separately in an alphabetical order in the following paragraphs.

ARAKANESSE: In the first place it had to be noted that the Arakanese are divided into Buddhist- Rakhine and Muslim-Rohingya. Accordingly, they are represented separately by different rebel organizations with different political objectives. For the ‘Buddhist-Rakhine’ Arakanese, the main political goal is to achieve an independent Arakan state.⁴² They are represented by rebel organizations such as the Arakan National Liberation Party (f-1960), Arakan Peoples Liberation Party (till 1958), Arakan Independence Organization (f-1970), Arakan Liberation Party (founded 1972), and Arakan Liberation Organization.

As far as the Muslim-Rohingyas of Arakan are concerned, the movement is Muslim Mujahid in nature, is represented by Rohingyas Patriotic Front and various Mujahid Fronts. Their main political goal is

⁴¹ n-15., p.52.

⁴² Smith, Martin; “Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity.” London and New Jersey, Zen Books Ltd., 1991, p.64.

“to take the old Mayu Division out of Arakan and into the newly created Muslim state of East Pakistan”⁴³ now Bangladesh. These divisions still remains today.

CHIN: The Chin ethnic nationalist movement is rooted in the belief that “Chin land was an independent country with its own administration, religion and culture since time immemorial”⁴⁴ before the British annexed it in 1890. But, perhaps due to their wisdom about the impracticability of their existence as a fully sovereign independent state for reasons that are economic, geo-political et al, they had decided to join the Union of Burma under the terms of the Panglong Agreement signed on 12 February 1947 between the representatives of the minority Shan, Kachin, Chin and U.Aung San. But when later Burmese governments discarded the terms of the Panglong Agreement; its purpose being to facilitate the speedy achievement of freedom by the Shans, Kachins and Chins by their immediate co-operation with the interim Burmese government and its terms providing full internal autonomy as well as a right to secession after ten years;⁴⁵ the Chins felt betrayed and colonized. This grievance had been expressed through rebel movements by various Chin rebel organizations like the Chin Independence Army, the Chin National Liberation Party, the Chin National Vanguard Party and lately the Chin National Front with its

⁴³ Ibid., p.64.

⁴⁴ Zo Tum Hmung, “My Vision for Chinland” *Chin National Journal*, Publicity and Information Department, Chin National Front, 1997, p.108.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.108-109.

armed wing the Chin National Army formed in 1987.⁴⁶

Their main political goal as represented by their latest rebel organization, the CNF, is for “self-determination”⁴⁷ which can be exercised to either remain within a federal Myanmar or to opt out of it.

KACHIN: The ethnic Kachins were also, like many indigenous tribals, without any state structure before the British rule, nevertheless they have never been totally under the rule of any power. Kachin nationalism took birth under the patronage of Christian educated youths and expressed itself in the demand for an independent Kachin state on the eve of the British withdrawal. But they were persuaded to join a federal Union of Burma under the Panglong Agreement, which provided for their internal administrative autonomy as well as a right to secede after ten years. But when the Burman dominated Burmese governments abrogated the agreement, the outraged Kachins rebelled. They are chiefly represented “by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), founded on 5 February 1961.”⁴⁸ Their main political goal is to establish a separate independent Kachinland which could upon the will of its people become a part of a loose federation with other ethnic states of Myanmar.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.110.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.110.

⁴⁸ n-41., p.191.

KAREN: The Karen ethnic nationalist struggle is the oldest continuous, ethnic revolt in the world.⁴⁹ Their political objective is clearly summed up by Dr.Sam C.Po, who is widely regarded as the father of the Karen nation, when he wrote, “It is their desire to have a country of their own, where they may progress as a race and find the contentment they seek.”⁵⁰ The Karen National Association (KNA) and the Karen National Union (KNU) are their main political bodies.

KARENNI/KAYAH: The Kayah nationalist struggle is based on the claim “that they have never agreed to inclusion in Burma”⁵¹ and seek to restore Kayah independence as per the terms of an agreement signed on 21 June 1875 with the British which recognized Kayah independence under British protection.⁵² The largest National organization is the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and its military wing, the Karenni Revolutionary Army (KRA). Others include Karenni state Nationalities Liberation Front (KSNLF) and Kayan New Land Party (KNLP).

LAHU: The Lahu uprising which began in late 1972 under the leadership of Pu Kyaung Lon, an aged Lahu chieftain (also known as

⁴⁹ n-20., p.274.

⁵⁰ n-41., p.51.

⁵¹ Minahan, James; Nations without States: A Historical Dictionary of Contemporary National Movements; Westport, London, Greenwood Press, 1996, p.294.

⁵² Ibid., p.293.

the 'man-god'),⁵³ is spearheaded by the Lahu National United Party (LNUP). They mostly inhabit the Southern part of Shan state and thus have no political status. This deprivation of even a separate state within the Burmese state and the Burman attitude of subordination are perhaps the main political grievances they seek to redeem themselves from. Lahu National Organization (LNO) which emerged much later is their main political organization at present.

MON: The Mon ethnic group inhabiting the Southern part of Burma are interspersed with the Karens. In the earlier days of independence, their main political objective was the creation of a Mon state within the Union of Burma. When the 1974 constitution formally created the present Mon-state, the ethno-nationalists cried foul at the lack of autonomy. Represented by such armed outfits as the Mon National Defense Organization, Mon United Front and Mon People's Front, the last of which was founded on 27 March 1953,⁵⁴ the Mon nationalist struggle is aimed at establishing a Mon-state with complete internal autonomy.

NAGA: The Nagas in Burma are found in the Somra-tracts, North-West of the country, separated by the Indo-Burma border from their cousins in the Naga Hills of India. The Naga movement is basically aimed at

⁵³ n-41., p.347.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.153.

attaining sovereign status for the territories inhabited by the Nagas whether within India or Burma. The Naga National Council (NNC) established in the late 1960's,⁵⁵ and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), a faction of the former NNC are their main political organizations.

PALAUNG: The Palaungs inhabited South-east Shan state and are thus without a state of their own. The Palaung National Force, formed on 12 January 1963, which in 1976 became the Palaung State Liberation Party is their main political, armed outfit. Their objective is obtaining an autonomous Palaung State within the Union of Myanmar.

PAO: The Pa-o are a tribal people inhabiting Southern Shan state. Promised local autonomy, they remained part of Shan state when Burma gained independence in 1948. Soon after independence, the Burmese government abrogated the autonomy statute. This led to the Pao ethnic insurgence as early as 1949.⁵⁶ Initially their demand was for autonomy, but faced with indiscriminate suppressive attacks from the Tatmadaw, the Pao leaders in 1972 put aside demands for autonomy and proclaimed the ultimate goal of independence within a federation of states which would replace Burma's brutal military government.⁵⁷ The Pao National Organization is their main political body.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.252.

⁵⁶ n-50., pp.438-39.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.440.

SHANS: The Shans were granted the rights to secede after ten years in the 1947 constitution as per the Panglong Agreement. But when in 1957 the Shan State Unity Party tried to lead the Shans out of the federation constitutionally, the central Burmese government denied them the liberty. This led to the formation of the Nook Sukhan or Shan State Independence Army in 1958 as a secessionist movement.⁵⁸ The 1962 coup provoked more open insurrection. The basic objective of Shan insurgency movement is achievement of Shan national autonomy from the expansionist state.⁵⁹

WA: The Was, divided between China, Thailand and eastern Shan state are a marginalized people.⁶⁰ The Wa movement is faction ridden. The main organizations include Wa National Army, United Wa State Army, Wa National Organization, etc. Their movement is basically a fight to retain their traditional right over land and for local autonomy in governance. The Wa nationalist feeling is reflected in the statement of their leader Maha San when he said. "When we were United, even the British could not control our land."⁶¹

KUKIS: The Kuki movement has not been included in the present alphabetical ordering of ethnic nationalist movements and their

⁵⁸ n-29., p.58.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.59.

⁶⁰ n-41., p.349.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.350.

objectives/goals as this will be dealt in detail as a separate chapter. For now, suffice it to say that they are, like the Was, divided between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh and are thus greatly disadvantaged, politically, in all these countries.

Summing up, it is clear from the above observations that the objectives of the ethnic nationalist movements in Myanmar ranges from local autonomy to complete independence within a federal Burma which will replace the present military government. Also, the changing political situations had exhibited an increasing radicalization, i.e. movements which started off with demands for local autonomy, after being brutally suppressed and brushed aside by the central government, often upgraded their demands to statehood and finally to independence within a confederation of states.

CHAPTER III

DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT AND THE MINORITIES

THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

Myanmar, which gained independence in 1948 (on 4th January) adopted a democratic form of government. However, its democratic experience lasted only till 1962 when the military under General Ne Win seized power in a coup, following widespread disturbances across the country. Since then Myanmar had been under the rule of the military Junta. After thirty years of autocratic rule, which temporarily left in 1988, it was realized that they had turned once a prosperous economy into shambles.¹

The state of the economy, which was indicative of the failure of Ne Win's Burmese way to Socialism and its corollary isolationism, in early 1988 is thus summed up:

The economy...was in decline. Jobs for university graduates were non-existent. Inflation was growing, and, because of government incompetence, rice and other food shortages existed in the cities and some rural areas.²

¹ Hossein, Farazana: "Authoritarianism and Prospect for Democracy in Burma", *BLISS Jr.*, Vol.13, No.1, 1992, p.51.

² Silverstein, Josef: "Civil War and Rebellion in Burma", *Journal of SEAS*, Vol.XXI, No.1, 1990, p.123.

Under these circumstances, discontent was widespread and disillusion with the government grew by the day, making the mood of the masses ripe for revolution and needing just a spark to explode. This necessary spark was triggered by a trivial 'town and gown' brawl. On 12 March 1988, a fight between students from Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) and townfolk at a teashop continued into the next day and ended with a policeman shooting dead a young student from RIT.³ This led to student protests the following days wherein attacks on government owned buildings and property were reported. The government replied severely, bringing into the streets tanks besides the security forces led by the feared Lon Htein riot police, and clamped down the protests with horrifying force. Such brutal police reaction resulted in escalating violence leading to hundreds of civilian deaths. The universities and colleges were shut down.

At that point, the situation could have been contained by discussions among university officials, student leaders, and senior military officers. But "apparently unwilling to show leniency for fear of its being taken as a weakness, the government refused talks and treated the student demonstrators as criminals in violation of security laws."⁴

Though the violent response of the government cowed down the students for sometime, protests soon resumed after the campuses

³ Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*; London, Zen Books Ltd. , New Jersey, 1991, p.2.

⁴ Haseman, John B., "Destruction of Democracy: The Tragic Case of Burma", *Asian Affairs*, Vol.20, No.1, Spring, 1993, p.18.

reopened in early June. The government stuck to its repression. The government's crack-down and restrictions on movement exacerbated the worsening shortages of supplies in the shops, and the prices of essential goods, such as cooking oil and medicine, continued to rocket dramatically. The price of rice was estimated to have risen by 400 percent since the start of that year alone.⁵ The worsening economic scenario and the police brutality on unarmed student protestors meanwhile had turned the primarily student protest into a mass political outrage against the regime.

Sporadic mass protests and brutal police reactions occurred in increasing frequency during June. In July, the 'bursting forth of political frustration' expressed by the mass outrage directed at the government and 'bursting of the economic bubble under the mounting pressure of inflation and economic stagnation'⁶ put tremendous pressure on the regime.

To calm the situation, Ne Win called a special meeting of the ruling party, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) on 23 July, asking it to consider creating a multiparty system and at the same time announced his resignation as party Chairman.⁷

Coming from Ne Win, the military strongman who almost single-handedly ruled Burma since 1962, it took the people by surprise and

⁵ n.3, p.3.

⁶ Maung, MYA; "The Burma road from the Union of Burma to Myanmar" *Asian Survey*, Vol.XXX, No.6, June, 1990, p.165.

⁷ n-2, p.4.

the “unexpected event had left many citizens puzzled and skeptical, but nonetheless hopeful that some return to democracy was at last possible.”⁸ This feeble hope turned into widespread popular outrage and violence reached a peak when General Sein Lwin, known as “the butcher” for his – ruthless killings, was chosen to succeed Ne Win. Demonstrations began in Rangoon and quickly spread to most other major cities.

As people flooded back into the streets, the call for restoration of multi-party democracy became the main rallying cry for the, as yet, unfocussed protest movement and the main target of their anger was the hated Sein Lwin.⁹

Sein Lwin declared martial law on 3rd August. The students defied him and called for a general strike on 8th August, (the date 8-8-88 being chosen auspiciously). In response to the massive peaceful demonstration demanding the ousting of Sein Lwin, the release of all the political detainees, the restoration of democracy and an end to human rights abuses, the military opened fire on an unarmed public to disperse the demonstration once and for all. The casualty was high and the brutality horrific. Final figures will never be known, but reliable diplomatic observers estimate that approximately one thousand people were killed and more than two thousand wounded in the five days of carnage that followed.¹⁰

⁸ Mathews, Bruce, “Myanmar’s agony: The struggle for Democracy.” *The Round Table*, 325; 325, Jan.93; p.38.

⁹ n-3, p.4.

¹⁰ n-4, p.18.

On 12 August, Sein Lwin resigned and seven days later was replaced by Dr. Maung Maung. A civilian lawyer-scholar and close friend of Ne Win, he immediately ended martial law, released the men arrested and spoke about political changes to be carried out in a peaceful and legal manner.¹¹ The new President's conciliatory approach, featuring establishment of a commission to look into the people's genuine opinion on the prevailing political, economic and public administration conditions, and specifically at the issue of multi-party democracy failed to stop the protests as there was still no mention of elections or a referendum and all powers of decision making still effectively lay with the BSPP.¹² His apparent positive responses to public demands were too late and the protests grew in size and number.

President Maung Maung also announced that a special BSPP congress would be convened on 12 September whose main purpose would be to decide whether to hold a referendum to choose between a one-party and multi-party system of government. This, however, again failed to satisfy supporters of the democracy movement which in the five short months had achieved a remarkable momentum of its own. Upto this point, the movement was without apparent leaders and organizations which was due mainly to the prohibition of political opposition since Ne Win seized power in 1962.

In the general excitement, the previous demand for a national

¹¹ n-2, p.125.

¹² n-3, p.5.

referendum was virtually forgotten and many activist instead urged the country to go straight to the polls. To oversee and organize these elections another spontaneous demand emerged, that the BSPP should step down completely and be replaced by an interim coalition government.¹³ This is reflective of the unplanned nature of the revolution as well as its lack of any ideological basis other than the vague demand for democracy.

The students who had been spearheading the democracy movement by leading the anti-government protests from the very beginning did not even have a proper organization as such till late into August 1988. On 28 August, they formed the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) as a broad front to coordinate their activities. It was led by Paw U Tun, who used the alias Min Ko Naing, a name used by other students also to confuse the authorities. Also, the All Burma Students' Democratic Association (ABSDA) led by Min Zeya emerged around the same time with a largely similar general program.¹⁴

Despite the largely uncoordinated and incoherent nature of the movement, which will be dealt in more detail later, the general support for change grew and broadened. Air force and Navy personnel joined the popular rallies. On 15 September, at a rally in front of the Ministry of Defense, individual soldiers and whole units began to talk to emerging popular leaders about joining the demonstrations. Two days later, at a large demonstration before the Ministry of Trade building,

¹³ n-3, p.6.

¹⁴ n-2, p.125.

some of the soldiers on guard surrendered their weapons voluntarily during discussions with the demonstrators.¹⁵

The increasing strength and popularity of the democratic movement began to really ring the alarm bells within the military clique when even soldiers under them began to take part in the demonstrations. In fact this was what brought about the next act in the revolutionary drama, as clearly stated by Martin Smith: "...perhaps what was finally to force the army's hand was the increasing appearance in the streets of young military personnel marching in support of the opposition's demands."¹⁶

Thus, the plan to use Dr. Maung Maung, a civilian, to pacify the supporters of democracy having failed, the "old guard"¹⁷ of Ne Win's military struck. At 4 P.M on 18 September, just seven days after the BSPP had voted to usher in a new era of democratic reform, "Saw Maung, the Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff, replaced the government of Dr. Muang Muang and established a nineteen member-all military leaders - State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)"¹⁸ in what was widely described by the foreign media as a 'coup' but really was more of a change of faces or a 'reshuffling of the pack'¹⁹ by the military old guard.

The SLORC seized power statedly to "halt the deteriorating

¹⁵ Ibid., p.126.

¹⁶ n-3, p.15.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.15.

¹⁸ n-2., p.126.

¹⁹ n-3., p.15.

conditions all over the country and for the sake of the interests of the people.”²⁰ Saw Maung in his first press statement promised that multi-party elections as voted for by the BSPP on 12th September would still go ahead but stressed that the SLORC’s first priority would be ‘to restore law and order and peace and tranquility.’²¹ This pledge, as corroborated by later actions of the SLORC, in effect embodied the army’s intention to crush the opposition democracy movement once and for all. It was also clear that, “whatever wild predictions had been circulating about army mutinies and dissertions, all the key commanders had stayed loyal.”²² This is vividly summed up by Haseman thus, “Transferral of the instruments of power to General Saw Maung and the nineteen-man SLORC was merely a cosmetic change in the formal structure filled by the generals that had ruled Burma since 1962.”²³

Even after the SLORC had seized power, demonstrations continued in the vain hope of the government stepping down to make way for an interim government which will end 26 years of rule by the Burma Socialist Programme Party and oversee a multi-party democratic election. Students were jubilant as they marched through the streets calling for democracy.

However, the Saw Maung government swiftly swung into action on the 18th of September itself by declaring a 10 P.M curfew. The

²⁰ n-2., p.126.

²¹ n-3., p.15.

²² Ibid, p.15.

²³ n-4., p.21.

following several days witnessed scenes of the most horrific violence and countrywide bloodshed as the Tatmadaw came down heavily on the protestors.

In Rangoon, “in the first three days alone, 1000 people including schoolgirls, monks and students, were reported to have been killed.”²⁴ The death toll in the year’s violence is today generally estimated to have passed the 10,000 mark.²⁵

Added to this were thousands injured while “another 10,000 students and political activists from the cities”²⁶ fled to liberated zones controlled by the country’s diverse rebel armies.

By October, though it was yet unclear whether the army had really crushed the opposition democracy movement, with many of the leaders of the democracy uprising either jailed or forced underground, it was certainly clear that the first stage of the army’s plan to restore its authority had been completed.

All the while, the political turmoil had made any possibility of workers attending to their daily tasks almost nil. Besides, the brutal violence of the military invoked sanctions from Burma’s few foreign aid donors such as West Germany and Japan. The economy was thus in total disarray, forcing SLORC’s new Minister of Trade, Col. Abel, to “announce a complete about turn in economic strategy and a new ‘open

²⁴ n-3., p.16.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

door' policy to open up the country to foreign investment and trade."²⁷

Despite the hardships, Saw Maung remained undeterred and pushed ahead with preparations for the promised elections. While night curfews were imposed and meetings of more than five people was banned, the government at the same time invited new political parties to come forward and register themselves with the Election Commission. While the entire opposition is united on the goal of a democratic multi-party Burma, they were hopelessly divided in striving for it. This got reflected when 234²⁸ parties had registered by the end of February 1989, the deadline for registration set by the SLORC.

On 1 March, a draft of the new election law was published, which called for elections to be held in May 1990. However, the specific date of election was announced only in November fixing 27 May, 1990 as the D-Day.

The announcement for the election was in keeping up with the pledge made by the military to respect the people's wishes for free elections once law and order had been restored to Burma. Other than this, they had no real intention of giving up power to an elected body, as their later actions would come to reveal.

Once the run-up to the election began, the junta kept a tight reign on the parties. Arrests and disappearance of prominent opposition leaders and their followers increased as the months rolled by. On July

²⁷ Ibid., p.19.

²⁸ Ibid., p.20.

17 and 18, 1989, SLORC promulgated two new orders which gave judicial power to certain military commanders and authorized them to hold summary trials in order to enforce security and law and order and authorized penalties of no less than three years up to death for those convicted.²⁹ International human rights groups reported that up to 6000 persons may have been arrested by September that year, against the SLORC's figures of 1,376.

Under the circumstances, only a few parties managed to emerge as serious contenders for future leadership of the country. One of the most obvious contender was the NUP (National Unity Party), formed on 24 September, which was in fact, the former BSPP disguised in new clothes without any serving military members.³⁰ The National League for Democracy (NLD), headed originally by Aung Gyi, former General Tin U and Aung San Suu Kyi was another. Behind these two is the Democracy Party (DP), led by friends of U Nu, as a vehicle for the latter, if he decides to seek power in the election. Also, there is the United National Democratic Party (UNDP) of Aung Gyi, (who was expelled from the NLD in December 1988 after he accused Suu Kyi of being surrounded by communist advisors),³¹ which has yet to prove its popular base.

The rest of the registered parties were small or personal groups, based on ethnicity, religion, locality etc. and weren't serious

²⁹ n-2, p.129.

³⁰ n-3., p.20.

³¹ n-2., p.129.

contenders. Of the more than 200 parties, ninety-three parties ultimately participated in the election.³²

Opposition party leaders were given less than a fair deal when they were put under either prison terms or house arrests while the approaching elections demand that they should be out there campaigning.

Their condition is thus summed up: "As for the three foremost opposition leaders, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo of the National League for Democracy were put under house arrest on July 20, and the latter sentenced to three years at hard labor on December 22. U Nu and his colleagues were put under house arrest on December 29. The only opponent remaining free was Brig. Aung Gyi who has been playing a safe game by praising the benevolent actions of the army and the SLORC."³³

Another important aspect of the political condition in the run up to the proposed free and fair election was that in the electoral arrangements, neither the country's diverse ethnic insurgent fronts nor the students, now underground and who had led the democracy movement from the beginning, had any place. An offer of peace talk by the National Democratic Front (NDF) representing most of the ethnic fronts was publicly rejected.³⁴ All were forbidden by law from registering with the election commission, so the real political picture

³² n-8., p.38.

³³ n-6., p.619.

³⁴ n-3., p.22.

in Burma was hardly complete. Besides, the gates around all universities and colleges of higher education (were the democracy movement had started) were still firmly shut.

A year after the August uprising of 1988, and on the eve of the promised elections, little else had been changed for the better in Burma's politics except, of course, the impending elections itself. This is vividly portrayed by Martin Smith thus: "In just one year, therefore, the stage had come full circle and Burma had returned to virtually the same divisions that had existed at the beginning of the uprising. Of course nobody seriously expected things ever to be quite the same again and if Ne Win's *Burmese Way to Socialism* was not exactly buried, it was most certainly dead. And yet on the surface little had changed. The Army remained in power, insurgents were active in the jungles and Burma's fledgling political parties were still struggling to come to terms with the aspirations of the people. It is the kind of statement that could have been written in 1968 or 1958, or even 1948, the year of Burma's independence, for that matter."³⁵

Then, in the midst of all this confusion and state of uncertainty, Saw Maung surprised everyone in an address on 9 January 1990 to what he said would be the last meeting of senior army commanders before the promised elections by avowing that the army would stand by the election result and hand over to the elected government. However, this pledge is ambiguous about whether state power or constitution making

³⁵ Ibid., p.23.

authority was to be handed over, for the purpose of the elections were never classified, as Smith observed: "Indeed at no time was it made exactly clear what the election was for, a constituent Assembly, it appeared rather than government, meaning the army would still remain in power."³⁶

Despite all the uncertainties, ambiguities and unresolved issues, the process for the elections began, and though curfew and restrictions on public gatherings constrained political activity, campaigning began in early 1990. Notwithstanding the fact that key opposition political figures were harassed and restrained, as in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi who, besides being put under house arrest was also debarred from contesting the elections, SLORC allowed a "considerable amount of travel and campaigning by civilian political candidates."³⁷

Now, having taken what it considered to be enough measures against the potential winning of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD and U Nu's Democracy Party, the SLORC held the promised 'free and fair' multi-party election on May 27, 1990, with major cities still under martial law. The general assumption was that the election would be a farce since the military regime had prohibited international monitoring and the arrival of foreign reporters, and it held major opposition leaders under house arrest or in jail. In theory, 93 political parties and independents competed for 486 electoral seats of the non-existent

³⁶ Ibid., p.21.

³⁷ n-4., p.21.

parliament. The expected result was a 'managed' victory for the SLORC backed NUP, an eyewash of an exercise aimed at legitimizing the "old guards" hold on power. But to the surprise of all including General Saw Maung and his military Junta, NLD candidates won almost every constituency. Of the 486 seats in the assembly, they won 392 with 72 percent of the vote.³⁸ The government backed NUP won only 10 seats. Six independents also won. The rest 78 seats have been shared by 26 political parties, mostly representing ethnic groups. Sixty-five political parties could not win any seats.³⁹

Though the election was held on May 27, the results were officially declared in early July, but the Army could not transfer power to the National League for Democracy even in late 1990. General Saw Maung, head of the Burmese ruling military junta place a number of conditions for handover of power to the newly elected representatives/parliament. These were:

1. A new Constitution be drafted by the new National Assembly.
2. The constitution is approved by a referendum.
3. Fresh elections are held in the country.
4. A strong civilian government is formed.

To these, Saw Maung added that after completion of the above

³⁸ n-8, p.38.

³⁹ Bhattacharya,S.S., "Political Crisis in Myanmar" *Strategic Analysis*, January 1991, p.1129.

mentioned conditions, if the authorities felt that by transferring power there would be no danger to the national security, integrity and sovereignty of Burma, then only would power be transferred to the new Parliament.

A brief extract from a publication by Lt.Col Hla Min reproduced below “justified” the delay in the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the 1990 election. Explaining the SLORC’s action, he says, “... on the political sector priority was given to an emergence of a new constitution which will be compatible with the multi-party Democratic System and which will also ensure peace and stability among the national races in the country. With this in mind the 1990 election was held with the sole objective of electing the representatives to draft a new constitution. Unfortunately, after the election the party winning the majority of the seats, instead of meeting its obligations changed her tune and demanded for the immediate transfer of power” He continued:

“Logically the country at that time had no constitution in place thereby the military as a traditional and a caretaker government ran the country by imposing a martial law. But for a political party to run the country imposing a martial law would not only be inappropriate and even the very basic questions posed by people from all walks of life went unanswered. These were:

- (a) How would the NLD party form a government?
- (b) For how many years will the NLD run the country as a government

in the interim period?”⁴⁰ He also went on to cite the fluidity of political situation created by insurgents as another factor prompting SLORC’s continuance in power.

This ofcourse is an explanation given some 5 years after the elections and cannot exactly be interpreted to embody the SLORC’s rationale and or gameplan then in 1990.

Quite contrary to this, there are people who argued that “the SLORC leadership, aware of the fact that it might fare poorly in an election, carefully worked up a period of civil disorder following the event...” which “...would warrant the re-imposition of the authoritarian regime.”⁴¹

Whatever be the reasons or the arguments, the fact remains that the SLORC did not hand over the affairs of government to the representatives elected by the people in May 1990. The forces of democracy had been stalled if not entirely defeated, crippled if not dead.

The steps taken by SLORC to remain in power started with a decree (1/90) on July 27, 1990⁴² that stated that the elected members of the assembly were not after all a parliament or ‘Pyithu Hluttaw’ but merely a body which would be involved in drafting a new constitution.

Further, SLORC maintained that it alone had legislative,

⁴⁰ n-8., p.39.

⁴¹ n-8., p.39.

⁴² Diller M.Janelle; “Constitutional Reform in a Repressive State: The Case of Burma.” *Asian Survey*, Vol.33, No.4, April, 1993.

administrative and judicial legitimacy.⁴³ In July 1991, Myanmar amended its election laws according to which a candidate can be debarred from participating in any future elections if convicted in a crime. A candidate can also be disqualified, sentenced to death, exiled, banned for five years to ten years or for life from participating in the elections. The offenses for such penalties may range from moral turpitude to that of high treason that may endanger the security of the state. This has affected most parties that had participated and won seats in the election.⁴⁴ More than 100 elected MPs, primarily those belonging to the NLD (89 of them)⁴⁵, have been disqualified by purported criminal offenses, sentenced to imprisonment, or death.

The SLORC had continuously held that its three 'causes' were the "nondisintegration of the Union, nondisintegration of national solidarity, and ensuring the perpetuity of the sovereignty", to which ends they had in the past downplayed the issue of ethnicity in all international fora.⁴⁶ Now, after the elections, in order to prolong their hold on power, they seemed to remember the 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar suddenly, when the SLORC wanted all these groups to have some say in the new constitution which they said should represent the 'unanimous' will of all the assorted peoples in Burma.

This new found interest on the representation of ethnic

⁴³ For Eastern Economic Review, 15 Nov.1990.

⁴⁴ n-1., p.64.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Steinberg, David I; "Myanmar in 1991" The Miasma in Burma; *Asian Survey*, Vol.32, No.2, Feb.1992, p.147.

minorities was but a populist act, critics claimed, to gather support for their next move to continue in power, which is the convening of a National Convention to draft a new Constitution. According to Diller, “SLORC’s announcement that a National Convention would frame constitutional guidelines accompanied other recent efforts to polish its tarnished image while maintaining power.”⁴⁷

On October 4, 1991 U Ohn Gyaw, Foreign Minister in the junta, in an address to the UN General Assembly had announced that, after the final report of the Election Commission was accepted by SLORC, SLORC would call a National Convention to be attended by the representatives elected in the May 1990 elections, political party leaders, leaders and representatives of “national races” and “respected veteran politicians.” Based upon the consensus arrived at in the convention, the elected representatives would then draft a new constitution for the country with “all necessary assistance” and – “suggestions” from the SLORC “in the best traditions of the Myanmar Defense Services.” SLORC would continue to govern the country until “a strong and stable government” is formed in accordance with the new constitution.⁴⁸

In pursuance of this, the SLORC summoned a National Convention which first met on 9 January 1993. But by “closely controlling the numbers and members of the National Convention and submitting its own version of a new Constitution to the Convention for

⁴⁷ n-42., p.397.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.399.

approval”,⁴⁹ the SLORC intends to keep itself in power with only minimal concessions to democratic institutions.

Predictably, after the two days of meetings, the Convention was dismissed, “apparently because even some of those closely controlled delegates dared to speak out in opposition.”⁵⁰ As many as 90 delegates – reportedly those from the NLD – expressed dissatisfaction with the Junta-proposed objectives for the Convention,⁵¹ prompting its dismissal. The six objectives include:

1. Non-disintegration of the Union;
2. Non-disintegration of National Solidarity;
3. Perpetuation of Sovereignty;
4. For a genuine multi-party democracy system to flourish;
5. For values such as justice, liberty and equality to flourish;
6. For the Tatmadaw to be able to participate in national political leadership role of the future state.⁵²

The Convention recognized in February 1993, and as it resumed deliberations, an editorial in the state owned *Working People's Daily* carried a SLORC warning to the delegates to “unswervingly take (as a guide in their deliberations) the six objectives as specified by the military” – one of which is that the constitution must provide a leading

⁴⁹ n-4, p.24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ n-42., p.400.

⁵² ‘Basic Facts on the Union of Myanmar’ Public Relations and Information Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Union of Myanmar, September 1996, p.9.

role for the military in politics.⁵³ A series of articles published in the same daily stated “that political parties, which are only involved in “power politics” must take a secondary role while the military provides the real leadership.⁵⁴

As per a published statement by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of Union of Myanmar in 1996, “upto the present, 71 National Convention Plenary Sessions have been successfully held.”⁵⁵

The SLORC’s designs to continue in power despite its claims of providing only a transitional government are evident in its efforts to improve its image, internal as well as external.

On 24 April 1992, General Saw Maung was replaced as SLORC Chairman by General Than Shwe. On the 28th, the SLORC declared a cease-fire on Karen insurgents. Aung San Suu Kyi’s family, for the first time in nearly two and a half years, were allowed to visit her on two occasions in 1992. Some 534 political prisoners were gradually released by the end of September and others followed – based on Declaration 11/92 of April 24. Martial law was ended on August 24 and the curfew was ended on September 10, colleges and universities were reopened on August 24.⁵⁶

These are followed by rejoining the NAM from which it had resigned in 1978, signing of four articles of the 1949 Geneva

⁵³ n-42., p.400.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.401.

⁵⁵ n-52., p.9.

⁵⁶ Steinberg, David I., Myanmar in 1992; “Plus Ca Change?” *Asian Survey*, Vol.33, No.2, Feb.1993, p.177.

Convention on treatment of civilians in wartime, and allowing foreign reporters and academicians into the country,⁵⁷ all of which are measures aimed at polishing the regime's tarnished image and to lessen pressures for its early handover of power.

While the SLORC engaged itself in consolidating its hold on power, the democracy movement had not remained idle either.

As early as November 1988, a parallel provincial government known as the 'Democratic Alliance of Burma' had been declared consisting of 23 dissidents and insurgent organizations including the ABSDF, NDF etc.⁵⁸ Groups have also been formed in exile by dissident Burmese with the purpose of mobilizing international support for their cause. One such group is the "Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma."

Many students and politicians had joined armed insurgents to bring about political changes in the country. In 1990 two Burmese students hijacked a plane to India in order to focus on the plight of the Burmese people under military rule and obtain support from India and other democratic countries.⁵⁹

A Burmese government in exile was announced on 18 December 1990, initially comprising seven NLD MPs who had escaped arrest. As the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) it later came to consist of exiled parliamentarians and representatives of

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.177.

⁵⁸ n-1., p.65.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.65.

the other opposition parties such as Party for National Democracy and DAB. The NCGUB is headed by a 'Prime Minister', Sein Lwin (a cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi) and a shadow cabinet.⁶⁰

Despite all these, however, the SLORC managed to stay in power, claiming it is involved in drafting a new constitution for the country.

The SLORC's intentions to prolong its rule on the pretext of giving the country a constitution on the basis of which power will be transferred is further exposed by the fact that the NLD was ready with an interim constitution in July 1990 when the election results were announced. As if in anticipation of SLORC's use of the constitution making process as a tactic for delaying transfer of power, the NLD issued its Gandhi Hall Declaration on July 27, 1990, and a modified 1947 constitution agreed upon by delegates was tabled as an interim constitution for the elected 'Pyithu Hlittaw' to employ immediately.⁶¹

By 1995, the constitution writing National Convention already has adopted guidelines granting the military "a leading role in the future political life of the state" and eliminate the possibility that Aung San Suu Kyi could hold office.⁶² The NLD had also been severely weakened by five years of arrests, repression, and defections. It was the confidence of the SLORC generated thereby that made it release

⁶⁰ n-8., p.43.

⁶¹ n-42., p.398.

⁶² Callahan, Mary P., "Looking Beyond the release of Aung San Suu Kyi" *Asian Survey*, Vol.36, No.2, Feb.1996, p.159.

Aung San Suu Kyi on 19th July 1995,⁶³ after 6 years of house arrest.

The release of Suu Kyi had worked favourably for the regime, bringing down talks of sanctions from other countries to a whisper, while discussions of aid restoration by Japan began within hours of her release.⁶⁴

Suu Kyi's approach after her release had been purely conciliatory, urging a 'dialogue' with the regime rather than the 'utter devastation' that could result from confrontation. However, Junta leaders are firm that any dialogue regarding the country's future would occur only in the National Convention, where the regime intended to control the nature and range of discussion.

The conciliatory approach proving to be frustrating in the face of a stubborn Junta, the NLD moved to a strategy of outright confrontation on November 28, 1995, the day that the adjourned Convention was to reopen. Suu Kyi announced that NLD delegates would boycott the Convention and noted that "the people of Burma do not support this national convention."⁶⁵ SLORC responded by expelling the NLD from the Convention and positioning armed, uniformed soldiers outside the party leaders' homes.

SLORC meanwhile had created a nominally non-partisan civic group, Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) in 1993, which may be converted to a frontal political party for the military if

⁶³ Ibid., p.158.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.160.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.160.

the generals finally seek to put a civilian face on their rule.⁶⁶

In the days following the NLD's withdrawal from the Convention, SLORC activated local cells for the USDA to rally in "unanimous support for the successful conclusion of the National Convention."⁶⁷

These actions of the SLORC worked in favour of the democracy movement in that SLORC's short-term gains following Suu Kyi's release began to wane internationally. The expulsion of the NLD from the Convention prompted a statement from President Bill Clinton and a nonbinding resolution from the U.S Congress denouncing SLORC's threats against the NLD. More importantly, the Japanese government responded to the stalemate by postponing scheduled Yen loans to Burma until 1996.⁶⁸

Internally, inspite of the SLORC's all out attempt to make the people accept its rule as necessary for the nation's unity, integrity and progress, using the controlled media as a propaganda machine, very few people seemed to have been convinced. Student protests recurred persistently. In 1996, the Yangon University students protested to demand an officially recognized Student Union.⁶⁹ It resulted in the closure, yet again, of the University.

⁶⁶ Burma: Country in Crisis, Pub. By: The Burma Project Open Society Institute, New York, 1998, p.2.

⁶⁷ n-62., p.160.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.161.

⁶⁹ Jose Manuel Tesoro; "The Young and the Restless", *Asiaweek*, Feb.13, 1998, p.24.

Hundreds of people still flocked to the weekly speeches of Aung San Suu Kyi after her release despite the staunch vigil the army kept on such meetings.

The Junta continued to claim that they are “a transitional government trying to put the country on the democratic path” and that they “haven’t reached that stage yet.”⁷⁰

Meanwhile the SLORC has also taken another of its image building actions. On November 15, 1997, the SLORC was replaced by a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Explaining the move, a Minister, Abel, gave the official line that SLORC had completed its task of restoring law and order and are now planning to bring peace and development.⁷¹ But the critics claim that the change is just cosmetic and aimed at the twin objectives of getting rid of the reviled acronym SLORC and to impress the international community, while no substantial changes takes place within the government.

On May 27, 1998, the NLD gathered at Suu Kyi’s residence to celebrate the eighth anniversary of its 1990 election victory. There the party’s ageing leadership came under pressure from the young turks who advocated a more proactive agenda opposed to the non-confrontational one adopted so far. Consequently “an audacious deadline of August 21 was set for convening a parliament in Yangon of

⁷⁰ Susan Berfield and Roger Mitton; “The General vs. ‘The Lady’”, *Asiaweek*, Nov.6, 1998.

⁷¹ Roger Mitton; “Country in Limbo”, *Asiaweek*, Feb.13, 1998, p.18.

those MPs elected in 1990.⁷²

In pursuance of this programme, Suu Kyi set out on July 24 from her Yangon home to meet her colleagues in the provinces. Military officials halted her after about 30 Kms and told her to turn back. She refused and began a sit-in protest inside her car parked on a wooden bridge, refusing food and medical attention. On the 29th, she was forcibly driven back to Yangon. She had attempted such journeys twice before, one on the 7th and second on the 20th.⁷³ This once again drew world attention on the struggle for democracy in Myanmar. Five of ASEAN's ten dialogue partners – Canada, the U.S, the E.U, Australia and New Zealand – criticized Myanmar for restricting Suu Kyi.⁷⁴

The car sit-in protest also disproved the critics that Suu Kyi and her NLD had stagnated. It once again highlighted the determination and the grit within the ranks of the pro-democracy opposition. And at the same time it provided foreign Ministers in Manila – (gathered for ASEAN Summit) – from the ASEAN and its dialogue partners – an excuse to speak if they desired.

There, the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright produced a long list of complaints about Myanmar*: “Arrests aimed at decimating the opposition continue. The economy is falling apart. And a whole generation of young people is being lost as universities, and now even

⁷² Roger Mitton; “Playing a Game of Hardball”, *Asiaweek*, August 14, 1998, p.31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁷⁴ Tim Healy and Antonio Lopez; “Waiting to move ahead”, *Asiaweek*, August 7, 1998, p.24.

* Myanmar had been admitted to ASEAN in July 1997.

high schools, stay closed for fear of unrest.”⁷⁵ Earlier in early June, Thai Foreign Minister Swein Pitsuwan in a speech suggested a review of the non-interference principle of the ASEAN, which is widely interpreted to imply a reference to the need for interference in Myanmar in order to speed up the country’s democratization. Also the Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Saigon, in what amounted to a call for revolution in a fellow ASEAN state, “openly suggested that Myanmar exiles return home and emulate the Filipinos’ 1986 people power uprising.”⁷⁶

Both the Junta and the NLD are working towards making Burma a democratic country. Under the circumstances, a dialogue between the two to sort out their differences could possibly work out for the better, one may say. But talks are not to be. The generals in the SDPC said Suu Kyi cannot take part in any talk, while the NLD insist she must be allowed to participate.

An offer of talks came from the Junta’s leader Khin Nyunt during Suu Kyi’s second car sit-ins in July (1998) to the NLD Chairman Aung Shwe. At their meeting Khin Nyunt agreed to consider releasing detained NLD members. But it never happened because the NLD announced it would convene a parliament. On the move to convene the parliament, Suu Kyi said, “We are not provoking any sort of confrontation. We are only asking for what is due, not to the NLD,

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.24.

⁷⁶ n-72., p.31.

but to the people of Burma.”⁷⁷

The NLD could not go ahead with its move to convene a parliament as the announcement was followed by a round-up of the NLD members.

Both parties in Myanmar’s political drama are sticking to their guns, the NLD bent on starting over from the 1990 election results, while the SPDC is all set to hold on to power until a transfer of power becomes possible as per the new constitution they have been drafting. A political stalemate had thus resulted. According to a diplomat; “It has become a matter of personalities. Issues, policies, the national interest, the good of the Myanmar people, they are secondary. For leaders on both sides it is personalities now, me against them. No surrender.”⁷⁸

Much had transpired since August 1988, but little has changed as far as the prospects of the success of the democracy movement is concerned. Virtually the same situation prevails. The Junta, albeit under a new name SPDC, is still in power, ready to prevent any unrest or protests with force if necessary and the democracy movement under the NLD still as helpless as it was in 1988. In short, Burma/Myanmar’s struggle for democracy, sadly, is far from over.

⁷⁷ n-70., p.39.

⁷⁸ n-70., p.41.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND HER LEADERSHIP:

The unchallenged and pre-eminent leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi in the struggle for democracy today can be gauged from the fact that it has become virtually impossible not to mention the movement while talking about her and equally impossible not to talk about her while discussing the democracy movement in Myanmar. However, her rise to the present position of leadership had not been unchallenged.

The democracy movement in Myanmar, as earlier mentioned, had not been a planned one. In fact, it was sparked off by a street fight involving some students of the Rangoon Institute of Technology. Unplanned as it was, it lacked any ideological basis except the vague demand for democracy, nor does it have a definite programme of action. Added to this, it was, in the initial stages, a revolution without any leaders who could lead from the front. It was the general grave discontent against the regime, which spurred the students on to spontaneous revolt. But to credit the students with leadership of the movement, they themselves were without even a proper organization worth the name. Even then, the revolution was kept alive by the intense desire of the people for change, their anger against the authoritarian regime and their fascination for democracy.

It was only after a month or so from the August 8 uprising that some form of leadership emerged. But once it came, it was again one too many.

First came the leaders of the different political coalitions and parties from the past. One such was the former prime minister and 81 years old U Nu, who had been Burma's leader during the era of parliamentary democracy until he was overthrown in 1962 by Ne Win. Next came army dissidents led by 70 year old retired Brigadier General, Aung Gyi, Ne Win's former deputy. He was arrested during Sein Lwin's 18 days of power following Ne Win's resignation because of the letters he wrote to Ne Win criticizing the BSPP. He thus have a popular public image. Another popular figure to surface was retired general, Tin Oo, who had been imprisoned in 1976 for apparently failing to report a plot on Ne Win's life. After his release under Amnesty in 1980, Tin Oo had studied law and now, during the exuberant mass rallies in Rangoon, was quickly to build a reputation as an articulate and persuasive orator.⁷⁹ But these were all old names in Burmese politics and the students read elements of political opportunism in most of them.

Even the new names that appeared have the same striking historical connections. Aung San Suu Kyi herself was the daughter of General Aung San, the father of the Burmese nation. But even in this category, she was not unchallenged. A number of sons and daughters of other prominent figures from the past started to come forward. These included Daw Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein, daughter of U Kyaw Nyein, the late leader of the defunct Socialist Party, and Dr. Tin Myint U, son-in-

⁷⁹ n-3., p.8.

law of the late UN Secretary-General, U Thant.⁸⁰ With this mushrooming of leadership, the movement suffered divisions despite the common objective.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Oxford educated and married to a British Academic named Michael Aris, happened to be in the country visiting her ailing mother. Her rise to leadership is favoured by a combination of factors such as chance, devotion, her father's legacy, her foreign connection and not the least, her own charisma. Chance, because the uprising happened to coincide with her visit; devotion in that in her marriage she reached an understanding with her husband that she should be able to serve her people if called upon by circumstances; her father's legacy, in that it gave her instant acceptability to the masses owing to the high esteem in which his father was held; foreign connection in that this made her an instant focal figure to the foreign media; and her inherent charisma without which even her father's legacy couldn't have done much to endear her to the masses.

Aung San Suu Kyi first stepped into the struggle on August 26, 1988 in the midst of the popular peaceful revolution, when she addressed a huge 50,000 strong rally on the slopes of the Shwedagon hill. She became "The instant darling of the crowds and the immediate focus of the Western media's attention".⁸¹ Until then, very few people in Burma knew who she was. She has not been previously involved in politics, but her very name seem to have 'magic' among the public the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.9.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.9.

moment she moved into the political arena.

Burma is a land where there are no real cultural impediments to a woman becoming a leader. But historically, despite instances where women attained certain positions of power influences, they have never achieved leadership in their own right.⁸²

It is in view of this historical fact that the rise of Suu Kyi to leadership evokes interest as well as speculation. There are certain factors besides the inherited legacy of her father which are behind her meteoric rise to prominence as well as sustain her in the political arena in her own right.

First is her intelligence and her good education. After primary schooling in Burma, she continued her education in India and later in Britain where she earned a degree at St.Hugh's College, Oxford. She had been a visiting scholar at Kyoto University, a fellow at Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, New Delhi, and had produced scholarly works on modern Burmese history besides several books.⁸³

Secondly, she is widely travelled. In 1969 she went to New York and worked at the UN Secretariat, lived in Bhutan where she conducted research on Bhutan's history, (after her marriage in 1972 to Michael Aris, a British Scholar), went two year later to England where her husband got an appointment at Oxford as Professor of Tibetan and

⁸² Silverstein, Josef; "Aung San Suu Kyi: Is She Burma's Woman of Destiny" *Asian Survey*, Vol.30, No.10, October 1990, pp.1008-1009.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.1010.

Himalayan Studies.⁸⁴ These experiences equipped her well for the role she took up.

Third is her charisma – a warm smile, strong facial features and piercing eyes, direct speech, and a commanding presence.⁸⁵ Besides she had, from the outset, sensed that the people wanted something new and different and thus refused “to join either U Nu or any of the other older politicians who sought to head the leaderless revolution.”⁸⁶

Aung San Suu Kyi, like her father, firmly believed in democracy, and more importantly, its achievement through peaceful means. This gave her the political moral strength while winning the moral support of all democratic countries worldwide. Her sharp attacks in her speeches on the murder in the streets of non-violent demonstrators, the increased violation by the military of human rights, the tactics of intimidation and repression coupled with her call for peaceful change through free and fair elections manifested her courage in which the people saw hope and progressive leadership.

It was these very qualities that also won her international recognition as a leader committed and working to restore democracy in a country under military rule. This recognition came in the form of awarding her the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace.⁸⁷ Sanctions imposed by several countries on the military regime are also manifestations in

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp.1010-11.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.1011.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ n-42., p.393.

support of her and the cause for which she stands.

However, her rise to pre-eminence from amongst the many who rose to offer leadership to the movement became fully formalized and apparent only after her party, the NLD – which she helped found in 1988 and served as its General Secretary – swept the 1990 elections by winning 392 out of 486 seats. It was her popularity with the masses that won the NLD so many seats in the face of competition from other parties, which also stood for democracy. It was again her popularity and the loyalty of her followers that pulled her through the many trials of leadership that she had to encounter. On the personal level she had to sacrifice her family. Politically, she was put under house arrest on 20th July, 1989 without any formal charges or trial. Earlier in December 1988, she was deserted by Aung Gyi, a co-founder of the NLD, who accused Suu Kyi of being influenced by the Communists.⁸⁸ On February 17, 1990, she was disqualified from contesting the elections by the Junta, citing her foreign connections, her British citizenship, her residence in London, her contacts with the minority insurgents⁸⁹ - all interpreted to suit the Junta's cause – as reasons for her disqualification.

When the NLD won an overwhelming victory in the 1990 elections to the surprise of all and despite the measures taken by the Junta to curb its success, it was widely expected some change would occur. But the SLORC refused to hand-over power for reasons of their

⁸⁸ n-3., p.21.

⁸⁹ n-40., p.14.

own and Suu Kyi continued to stay under house arrest. Even then, her popularity with the masses did not fade. When she was finally released on 19 July 1995, she took up her addresses to the people forthwith. Despite the strict military vigil around such meetings / gatherings, the people showed their support by turning up in large numbers. In fact, the Junta's containment policies towards her, worked in her favour on certain occasions. To quote Silverstein, "By not allowing her to run in the first free election since 1960, the military may have inadvertently helped to raise her stature with the people. The coup leaders' inability to give her freedom after completing the initial year long sentence, or expel her from the country, or take any action other than the continuation of her house arrest can only be seen as a further example of arbitrary rule. It will strengthen her ties with the people who overwhelmingly chose her party to represent them in the future democratic government of *Burma*." ⁹⁰

Thus it is now beyond dispute that from amongst the leaders of democracy in Burma / Myanmar today "no other person... has achieved her status, love and respect among the people of Burma and the support from foreign government who have appealed on her behalf." ⁹¹

With the unchallenged leadership however comes the daunting challenges also. Writings on the many challenges before her, Silverstein noted, "She stands to inherit more problems than her father imagined; and although she is intelligent and informed about Burma,

⁹⁰ n-82., p.1018.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.1018.

she has given no clear answer to questions of how democracy can be institutionalized, how national unity can be achieved, how the economy can be improved, or how the violations of human and political rights by the military in the past and the present will be rectified.”⁹²

How Suu Kyi would face these challenges and whether she would succeed in handling them is a matter of speculation which can only be judged when she has been given a formal position of responsibility. Until then, she will remain the leader of the Burmese people who believe that she is the one who can set them on a new course.”⁹³

MINORITIES AND THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT:

The 1998 uprising in Burma was a display of mass outrage against the military regime. It was a spontaneous revolt in as much as it was unplanned, and revolutionary in so far as the changes were radical and emanated from the people. The cry for democracy that rocked the country was the bursting forth of accumulated discontent engendered by the grave shortcomings of the military regime in economic and administrative management as well as its inhuman brutalities committed in the name of law and order. The unity of the people of Burma in their hatred for the Junta can hardly be gainsaid judging from the fact that the people themselves propelled the revolution without any leader worth the name to lead from the front.

⁹² Ibid., pp.1018-19.

⁹³ Ibid., p.1019.

However, common hatred simply does not presuppose a common effort by the people to fight a common enemy, it seemed, and what transpired in Myanmar since the 1988 uprising was no exception.

Besides the competing opportunistic leaderships that emerged later in 1988 and caused some divisions within the democracy movement, the minorities, i.e. ethnic nationalities, who with their insurgent armed forces "operated in or loosely controlled anywhere between one quarter and one third of the country"⁹⁴ can hardly be said to participate in the August revolution. They were, if united, a force to be reckoned with and could have turned the tide against the military regime had they joined forces with the democratic agitators early on. But the sheer number of insurgent groups in Myanmar itself suggests the differing interests afloat and mocks at the prospect of achieving an all inclusive unity among these groups on the one hand and the democracy movement, which itself was divided, on the other. Numbering some 25 groups in all, the insurgent ethnic armies could largely be divided into two major blocks, one headed by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the other under the National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of about ten ethnic minority armies demanding formation of a federal union of Burma.

The CPB on 26 August, 1988 issued a statement identifying with the aims and objectives of the opposition movement and extended its praise and felicitations to the students and people on their victories.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ n. 3, p. 10

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

But despite Saw Maung regime's efforts to play up the CPB's role to justify the suppression of the uprising by portraying it as a Communist gameplan, the real degree of CPB's influence was at best minimal.

Assessing the lack of cooperation between the ethnic forces and the democracy activists, Silverstein noted:

"Why did the Civil War and the revolution remain separate? There is no definite answer. The NDF was aware of events in Rangoon and issued several statements announcing its support for the revolution and calling upon the people to join it in forming a truly democratic Union, once popular rule was established. But militarily, the people in Rangoon neither asked the NDF to launch an offensive nor increase its pressure on the army; more importantly, if it had been asked it was in no position to respond fully. Its strongest force, the Karens, was locked in battle, at that very moment, with an NDF member, the Mons, over control of trade in the Three Pagoda Pass area. This internal fight was only resolved on 24 August, well after the revolt in Rangoon developed. There were reports that Brang Seng, the Kachin leader, called for military action against the army to support the revolution, but there was no response. Only after the military coup, did the Burman students and Buddhist monks seek help from the minorities in revolt."⁹⁶

The ethnic separatists also indirectly weakened the democracy movement as their secessionist demands gave the military the pretext

⁹⁶ n-2., p.126.

to hold on to power so that the unity and integrity of the state is protected.

However, in the aftermath of the military coup, some form of cooperation developed when in November the NDF leaders met and formed the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) which, composed of the minorities, students expatriates and Buddhist monks was truly a national coalition. But again, with the DAB unable to compete in the 1990 elections, and the NLD victory manifesting the existence of a strong people's force against the regime, it became apparent that the NLD- led democracy movement and the DAB had emerged as separate if not opposing forces. Once again, the movement for democracy now primarily represented by the NLD no longer had any formal alignment or cooperation with the DAB, which included in its fold many insurgent groups.

The emergence of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) represented an important political step by the minorities to join in the shaping of the country's future course of destiny. The DAB did not replace the NDF, which continues to exist and remains in control of its own territory and armed forces, but in goals and tactics, it went beyond the NDF. It was "the first step, since 1962, to create a coalition of national forces, attained once before, under the leadership of Aung San..." and had "...hoped to lead an all-party coalition in the restoration of democracy, peace and the writing of a new federal

constitution.”⁹⁷

This opportunity for attainment of cooperation amongst the entire spectrum of national forces was lost when the DAB was debarred from the 1990 elections and the NLD's emergence after the election as the new rallying point for the democratic movement despite its inferior minority representation compared to the DAB. This however is not to say that the NLD did not get any minority votes in the election. In fact, despite the absence of any formal agreements a large junk of votes polled by the NLD came from the ethnic minorities which reflected their great inclination towards democracy. This minority support was largely at the individual level. The organized leadership of the ethnic nationalities remained alienated from the democratic movement led by the NLD owing to the refusal by Aung San Suu Kyi and other top leaders of the NLD to enter into a Panglong-type agreement with the minorities which should spell out political, social and economic provisions for the minorities once democracy is achieved.

While such an arrangement could have resolved the civil war and unite the entire nation in its struggle for democracy, the NLD's stand on the question is reflected by a public statement by Suu Kyi that the question of the minorities only can be resolved after democracy is restored and a civilian government in its place.⁹⁸

In a country with a history of ethnic strife and mutual mistrust

⁹⁷ n-2., p.127.

⁹⁸ n-2., p.130.

on ethnic lines writ large, the NLD's stand is largely interpreted by the ethnic minorities as containing elements of Burman chauvinism which could surface once democracy is restored and prolong the Burman majority domination under a new democratic regime which would then be harder to oppose given the greater international support such a government would enjoy. This inherent but largely unexpressed fear hindered the total identification of the minority political leaderships with the democratic struggle. This perhaps could well be the greatest weakness of the democracy movement.

This vital link between the democratic revolution and the ethnic civil war could well be provided by the students. Silverstein stated that "with student organizations both on the border of Burma and inside the country and with students willing to risk danger to reach each other and the people between them, they are a genuine bridge between the Civil War and the revolution."⁹⁹ The students who fled to the liberated zones under the control of minorities' armies had come to know what the reality is and what the minorities' aspirations are, unlike the times when they were fed by the Junta's propaganda about the minorities. Their witness may do more to unite the peoples of Burma than any other factor.

As the struggle for democracy, the end of the ethnic wars, national unity and economic improvement are all linked together, the close cooperation between the forces of democracy and the ethnic

⁹⁹ n-2., p.132.

nationalities are imperative for the attainment of these goals, and unless both sides are willing to see the commonalties of their interests and work towards joining forces, their future will remain dim and the prospects of their success elusive given the Junta's determination to hold on to power.

Thus, despite their genuine aspirations for democracy, the role of the minorities in the struggle is largely circumscribed by the overriding ethno-political distrust between the Burmans on the one hand and the minority nationalities on the other. This curse of ethnic politics which thrived under the military's chauvinist regime could be contained and finally eliminated only when the Burman dominated democracy movement and its leadership, by uniting all the national forces behind it, put an end to the military regime. And for it to attain such unity and strength, it has to recognize the need to reassure the national minorities of their political future by committing itself to a draft agreement which contain unambiguous provisions that fulfill the aspirations and interests of the minority ethnic groups.

CHAPTER IV

KUKIS AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN MYANMAR

BACKGROUND

In order to fully understand the rise and incidence of ethno-nationalism among the Kukis of Myanmar, an introduction into their ethno-political history would be imperative for any serious pursuer of the subject.

First, the usage of the term 'Kuki' as representing an ethnic group has to be put into perspective. Most post-colonial writers on Burma, e.g., Martin Smith, Silverstein, etc., often place 'Kuki' as a sub-group under 'Chin'. Earlier writers like C.A.Soppitt (Assistant Commissioner, Burma, Assam) writing in around 1898 referred to the same stock of ethnic groups as "The Kuki-Lushai Tribes" in his book by the same title. An inference that can be drawn from this fact is that the two terms, i.e. 'Kuki' and 'Chin' could be parallels adopted by different writers in reference to the same ethnic group, the choice of a particular writer being determined by factors such as the region in which the writer came into contact with the group (contactual), the name given to the group by the neighbouring settlers, etc. This contention found corroboration in the fact that this group of people were referred to as 'Chin' by their Burman neighbours in North-West Burma (The Chin Hills) while a little North-east and North-west from

there in the Manipur hills and Assam-Tripura regions in India, they were called 'Kukis' by the Bengalees.¹

Therefore the two terms could well be used as parallels, though with regional significance and usage, in reference to a common ethnic group recognizing the 'Contactual' origin of the two terms. In fact, it has been so all along though little realised. Alongwith usage, acceptability or rather acceptance by the people of the two terms also have over the years become regional and, augmented by variations in spoken dialects between the different regions, loyalties have developed around each of the two terms. Thus, those in the Chin Hills favoured the use of 'Chin' as their ethnic identity while those inhabiting areas a little north, inside India and in the Kabow Valley and Somra Tracts in Myanmar, preferred the term 'Kuki' despite their being the same ethnic stock and their recognition of the fact.

This in fact has developed to the extent that today, the terms 'Kuki' and 'Chin' are generally considered to be separate ethnic entities altogether. The misconception as well as the loyalties had been further enforced by the division of this people and their contiguous territory into Burma and India by the cruel historical experience of colonialism and the subsequent ethnically inconsiderate determination of borders.

The division of the Chin-Kuki ethnic group into 'Kuki' and

¹ Vumson; Zo History, Aizawl, Mizoram, Undated. P. 1.

'Chin' loyalists is also perceivable on clan and tribe lines. This is perhaps inevitable because the pattern of settlement or the region of habitation has been largely determined on those lines. The element of clannish or tribal inclination towards a particular choice of nomenclature, which have steadily become more and more demarcated over the years, had in turn resulted in the destruction of the regional purity of loyalties as migrations took place incessantly amongst the various tribes and clans. A particular village, tribe or clan, living in the Chin Hills region or its adjoining areas in Burma today may prefer 'Kuki' as its identity while another living in what was demarcated as 'Kuki-area' earlier may subscribe to 'Chin' as the accepted ethnic identity.

Also, as different regions become subject to different influences of the environment, experiences and other socio-economic and political conditions, cleavages of interests and divergence of ethos began to set off a process of delineation which resulted in the growing distinction and widening demarcation between the "Kukis" and the "Chins". Thus, the Chin-Kuki people today are politically divided despite their ethnic oneness. They have emerged as two more or less different and fairly distinguished ethnic groups with different interests and separate if not conflicting political aspirations.

Prior to the advent of British colonial rule, the Kukis have had a well established political institution of chieftainship where the Chief is the head of the village with powers equal to that of a king. Since

authority in the Kuki society was linked to lineage and also since Chiefship is hereditary, a number of Chiefs with Common lineage would generally owe obedience and tributes to a common clan-head who himself is a Chief of a particular village. Such Chief or chiefs functioned like emperors within their areas of influence. A number of such Chiefs with demarcated territorial as well as influential spheres existed, and as equals, forms the entire Kuki polity.

Over these chiefs, there is no evidence whatsoever of an overarching authority comparable to the modern state ever being in existence, with the chiefs ruling like kings or emperors within their respective chiefdoms. But these chiefs were all bound together by kinship ties of one or other form as well as their consciousness of being one people and generally unite when faced with any alien threat. As the primary focus here is not on the political institutions or systems of the Kukis as such but an attempt to give a general historical background of their political existence aimed at putting into perspective their present political condition and aspirations which is the primary focus of the chapter, suffice it to say that they had a distinct political system with which they had governed themselves freely and efficiently.

The Kuki economy was primarily based on agriculture. Jhum or subsistence cultivation had been the mainstay and largely remains to be so even today. Settled agriculture or permanent farming of land had in recent times began to gain in importance but is limited to the plain

areas with irrigable lands.

Traditional trade was basically based on barter and on the self-sufficient village mode. But in recent times, the money economy had gained importance under the influence of the modern state and its market economy under which they have inevitably found themselves. Handloom and handicrafts, smithy, woodwork or carpentry formed the limited industrial activity. Wealth was measured on the number of cattles and other culturally valuable items such as the gong, necklaces, pots, etc. besides rice and maize. Poultry and piggery were taken up both for domestic consumption and exchange. Overall, the Kuki economy was self-sufficient but weak by modern standards.*

Before tracing the origin and growth of the Kuki ethno-nationalist movement, a brief look into their political history would be in order. This is particularly so because the Kuki nationalist movement as we will see later on in the chapter draw heavily from their political history and their perception of it.

The Kukis, with their efficient institution of the chief and a self-sufficient economy, had been living oblivious of the world outside enjoying un-administered freedom until the British conquest of Indo-Burma and the subsequent induction of the areas into the modern state system and its administration. The Kuki chiefs until then had the final

* For a detailed study of the political and economic history of the Kukis, *The Kukis of Manipur – A Historical Analysis*, by T.S.Gangte, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, may be referred.

say in the land and their word was the law. They know only of other chiefs who are their equals but not of any authority to which they owe common obedience and are thus subordinate to it. To the people, their chiefs were the highest earthly authority to which they owe utmost loyalty and in turn secure their safety and welfare.

To such a people, an intrusion into their world by the colonial conquest must have been most unwelcome. Alarmed though they must have been, the Kukis showed no signs of resistance and continued to live in their own world for so long as the British left them to themselves. However, when in 1917 the British tried to assert their authority in recruiting labour corps from among the various tribes in the Indo-Burma region, they were faced with stiff resistance from the Kukis who fought the Britishers for two long years till they were finally subdued in May 1919.

The cause of this war, which came to be known as the Kuki Rebellion (1917-1919) and the extent to which the Kukis valued their freedom, is vividly portrayed in the following:

“Labour Corps had been raised for France in 1916 amongst various clans of Nagas, Lushais, and others, who willingly came in, having in many cases done this sort of work for government before in border expeditions, and knew the work and good pay. Such had done extremely well wherever they were sent, but in 1917 more were needed, to supply which it was necessary to tap other resources, viz. the

various Kuki clans inhabiting the hill regions of the native state of Manipur, a people who had never left their hills and knew but little of us and our ways. Optimism too strong with the higher authorities soon showed the fallacy of trying to induce these people to leave their country for the unknown, and the chiefs, with whom the first attempt was made, declined to send men. A further effort on the part of the Political Agent only produced angry refusals. This Political Agent was then sent to France with Labour Corps and another officer took his place, who was directed to explain to the chiefs the reasons why their men were wanted, the nature of the work required of them, pay to be received, etc. to which he arranged for a Durbar and invited the Kuki chiefs to attend. To this the principal recalcitrant chiefs...returned insolent replies, refusing to attend and stating that if we used force to compel them to do what they had no intention of doing, they would also use force against us.”²

Further, the identity of the Anglo-Kuki war and its spread can be gauged from the following extract from the same British author’s work quoted above:

“In mid December 1917 the outbreak of Kuki Rebellion obliged a stop being put on the dispatch of drafts to the Army, as it soon became apparent that all available men in the Force would be needed to deal with this trouble and to co-operate with Military Police columns from

² Shakespeare, Col.L.W.; History of the Assam Rifles. Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1929, pp.209-10.

Burma, that province also suffering from the rising.”³

The spread of the Kuki Rebellion to Burma is significant because the labour recruitment drive was primarily limited to the Manipur Hills. This suggests the integrated interest of the Kukis in opposing the British despite their being placed under different administrations.

The Kukis valued their freedom and the preservation of their existing political structure. The war was therefore fought on issues deeper than a mere distaste for sending men for the labour corps. It was on the issue of retaining their freedom, preserving their culture and their institutions. Gautam Bhadra wrote, “The war was meant to preserve the condition in which the political structure and economic basis of the chiefship might survive.”⁴

As noted earlier, the war went on for about two years. But owing to the overwhelming superiority of the British in arms and resources, the Kukis were defeated after two long years of intense warfare across vast frontiers. Harsh post-war provisions were imposed on the Kukis. The principal chiefs were deported elsewhere and their bravest men jailed. The heroes of the war became legends in Kuki folk stories and were glorified in folk-songs, which are immensely popular among the Kukis today.

³ Ibid., p.203.

⁴ Bhadra, Gautam; *The Kuki (?) Uprising*, Man in India, March, 1975, p.37.

The strain in their meagre resources that the war had caused shattered their economy. Added to this, the defeat and the consequent deportation of their powerful chiefs and bravest of generals drained the morale of the Kukis from which they found it hard to recover.

In the early 1940's, when Subhash Chandra Bose and the INA surfaced on the Burmese front backed by the Japanese forces, the Kukis joined the INA in large numbers. A number of them were fresh recruits while others were soldiers in the Burmese and British Armies who deserted their ranks to join the INA. The Kuki youths who joined the INA "were much helpful when the INA landed in Manipur"⁵ as they were thoroughly familiar with the area. Many of these Kuki soldiers died fighting the British forces and were instrumental in the advance of the Japanese and INA forces into Indian territory. Today, some of the living war veterans receive INA pensions from the Indian government. Their counterparts inside Burma though are not as lucky and they remain in oblivion.

In the second half of the 1940's, the independence granted to India and Burma found the Kukis separated by the border between these two countries. The administratively determined and ethnically inconsiderate Indo-Burma border suddenly restricted their movements and interactions as a people. A feeling of dissatisfaction among the Kukis brewed since then.

⁵ Freedom Fighters of Manipur. Published by Freedom Fighters Cell. M.P.C.C. (1), Manipur, 1986, p.4.

Thus, against this historical background may be seen the rise of the Kuki Political movement in Myanmar which began to take a formal shape in the late 1980's with the formation of the KNO, Kuki National Organization, in 1989.

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE KNO/KNA

The deep sense of disillusionment with the state lay at the root of ethno-nationalist aspirations among the Kukis. The consequent feeling of alienation from the mainstream, the Burman attitude of neglect and domination, the lack of economic development, tatmadaw patrols' brutality and the indifference of the state towards social welfare in their areas led the Kuki leadership arrive at the conclusion that their hopes and aspirations as a people could only be realized under self-rule. The dormant political dissent the Kukis harboured against the successive governments that have altered their political destiny was activated by their harsh experiences under the Burmese military. The elites in the Kuki society are unanimous in their conviction that Kukis had been deserving of a territory of their own since historical times and their present sufferings are primarily due to the absence of a Kuki-state.

The ferment of ethno-nationalism which had been brewing for decades finally took a definite form in the late 1980's among the Kukis. Two prominent Kuki-nationalists, namely, Thangkhonun Haokip

and Vipin Haokip (the former with a Burmese origin and the latter of India) took up the initiative of mobilizing youths to fight for the political redemption of their people by spreading awareness and the message of nationalist revolt. When they have gathered around them some 80 volunteers, they led these volunteers to Kachin state where they were given training in guerilla warfare by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). After about a year long training, they returned in 1989 to the Kuki areas in the Indo-Burma border region. Before they could set up a proper organization and a camp of their own, they were hosted by the NSCN Khaplang group with whom the Kukis were in good terms. This is evident in a press report which says "...the NSCN faction led by S.S.Khaplang, a Pangmei Naga from Myanmar, has often said the KNA's first batch of activists, about 80 in number, were guests at its camp in Myanmar for about a year after they returned from Kachin in 1989."⁶

With 80 well-trained and well-equipped volunteers under their command, the two leaders exhibited rare wisdom and humility by recognizing the need to organize a political body representative of all the Kukis besides making it clear that they wanted such a body to be able to give political direction and guidance to the force they had raised. Consequently a conference of selected leaders and nationalists was held in Moreh, Manipur, sometime in early 1990. The conference,

⁶ Phanjoubam, Pradip: *Crisis in Manipur*; The Telegraph, 29 August 1993.

after several days of discussions, resulted in the formation of the Kuki National Organization (KNO) with its armed wing the Kuki National Army (KNA).

Thus, the Kuki movement began as a military body. The movement later developed its political body the KNO which then give it a clear shape to its ideology, goals and objectives etc.

Modelled on a Presidential set up, the structure of the body and the incumbents of the various positions in what became known a the Provincial Government of Kukigam-Zalen-gam is as follows:

President: Sokholun Haokip alias Hanglen. A Burmese citizen by birth and Burmese educated Kuki nationalist.

Vice-President: Paotong Doungel

General Secretary: Selangki Chothe

Home Secretary: Rothanglian (a former MLA in Manipur Assembly)

Foreign Secretary: Nehlun Khongsai

Defense Secretary: Vipin Haokip

Information Secretary: Lamcha Kipgen

Intelligence Secretary: Rommel Henzou

Organizing Secretary: S.Ng. Haokip

Finance Secretary: Roko Haokip

Commander-in-Chief of KNA: Thangkholun Haokip.*

* Secured from an interview with present KNO President, P.S.Haokip

The immediate task of the thus formed KNO was to increase its strength by recruiting and training more youth volunteers and to acquire more arms to enhance its fire-power. An interesting fact is that the KNO/KNA first gained public recognition through their involvement in the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict in Manipur and not for the primary goals they set themselves, though they were deft enough to immediately clarify themselves later. The Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict in neighbouring Indian state of Manipur came about when the NSCN (IM) began to launch a programme of ethnic cleansing on the Kukis in pursuance of their efforts to establish a Greater Nagaland** whose territorial concept overlaps Kuki inhabited areas.

Embodied in the distracting ethnic war where the Kukis of India are engaged, the KNO could not make much head way in its political tasks within Myanmar. Meanwhile, the “gathered” leadership the Moreh Conference has thrown up began to show individual colours, trying to abuse the KNO for their vested interests. Factionalism crept in and resulted in the assassination of no lesser than the C-in-C Thangkholun Haokip in early 1994, followed by a series of deaths. The President and the General Secretary as well as various other Secretaries under them are largely believed to have hatched the conspiracy.***

While all these chaos were taking place at the Moreh camp, the

** The Naga demand of an independent Nagaland consisting of all Naga-inhabited areas of India and Myanmar.

*** Interview with P.S.Haokip.

Defence Secretary cum Vice C-in-C. Vipin Haokip was at the Molvailup camp. On hearing the death of his C-in-C and friend, he instantly suspected foul play and declared a Military Council outside the President's authority.

A lot of lives and a great setback to the KNO was the heavy cost the Kukis had to pay for a few vested interests which had successfully injected factional ideas into the body.

Reconciliation came about through the efforts of P.S.Haokip, a devout Christian Kuki leader. As both sides are unwilling to accept the other side's leadership and are poised for an all out fight to the finish but are ready to accept the leadership of P.S.Haokip, he was sworn in as the new President of KNO on the 21st December, 1994 after a series of long drawn meetings and debates. The KNO/KNA was a united body again. A new cabinet came to be constituted under the new President, which hold office to this day. The Cabinet membership is as follows:

President: Pu. P.S.Haokip

Vice-President: Khaikholun

Home Secretary: Richard Hangsing

Defence Secretary cum C-in-C: Vipin Haokip

Organizing Secretary: S.Ng. Haokip

Information and Special Secretary: Anton Haokip

Finance Secretary: Robert Haokip.*

* Interview with the present KNO President.

As noted earlier, as soon as P.S.Haokip took up the leadership as President of the KNO/KNA, a new Cabinet came to be constituted. The new team, far more an educated lot compared to the earlier top brass, injected a sense of organization into the ailing movement. The new leadership recognized the importance of being heard for its political voice and not just the sound of its guns. They began to publicize the political content of their cause through books and pamphlets and have been able to effectively communicate their ideals and objectives. This clarity on their ideological content and the disciplined conduct they have exhibited has won them the willing support of the masses in general and of the elites within Kuki society in particular, both of which are vital for the strength and survival of any political struggle.

The intense military pressure inside Burma making their operations there difficult, the KNA is largely based in bordering areas inside India, which severely handicapped their effectiveness militarily. Compared to other ethnic armies such as the Karen, the KNA is relatively a much smaller outfit though its ranks has been steadily growing. Under the new leadership, a fresh recruitment drive was launched to strengthen its military capability. As of today, the President claims a military strength of 2000, out of which around 1200 are fully armed regulars spread out in various camps.

Presently, the drive to unify the various clans and tribes of Kukis and to mould them as a cohesive and supportive mass ranked high in the priorities of the KNO/KNA. This in fact has been behind their

restraint on the military front. Besides, the organization wants to make sure it has time to grow strong enough before taking on the might of the Junta which they have the wisdom not to underestimate.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES: The political objectives of the KNO either has undergone a process of radicalization with the change in the leadership after the brief factional crisis it faced or has been tactically revealed in stages for the organization now professes the establishment of an independent sovereign nation for the Kukis as different from the earlier demand for a state for the Kukis to be carved out of Sagaing division of Burma.

Reporting in 1993, Pradip Phanjoubam wrote, "The KNA is actually a Myanmar-based organization fighting against the government. Their manifesto states they are not against the Union of Myanmar, but oppose its present political set-up. They demand a separate state for the Kukis carved out of the Sagaing division and say they have no interest in Indian territory. They claim they have come to India only to help their "cousins" across the border fight the Nagas."⁷ The creation of a Kuki-state within Myanmar and a change in the political set-up of the country from a totalitarian military regime to a federal democracy was the primary political objective of the KNA under its founding leaders.

⁷ Ibid.

But a change of leadership apparently had effected a change of chords towards a broader and more radical goal. This can be discerned from the writing of P.S. Haokip, the incumbent President of the KNO.

He wrote: "The Spirit of Zale'ngam* is however very much alive and its territorial boundary is indelible in the hearts of its people. The sufferings and the legends of our forefathers are a source of our strength and guidance. The retrieval of Zale'ngam's territory is imminent. Accordingly, the Kuki National Organization (KNO) has been established with the avowed aim of hoisting the flag of Zale'ngam amongst the flag of all other free nations. The Kuki National Army (KNA) is the defense wing of KNO, and it is committed to pursue the resurrection of Zale'ngam as a nation."⁸

The attainment of independence and the "ressurrection" of a sovereign Kuki nation to be called 'Zale'n-gam' evidently is the ultimate goal of the KNO. This Kuki-state or 'Zale'n-gam' as claimed by the KNO, constituted of all territories inhabited by the Kukis whether in Burma/Myanmar or India. This has been implied in the reference to Eastern and Western Zale'n-gam, which are Kuki inhabited areas in Myanmar and India respectively, by P.S.Haokip in his book, Zale'n-gam – the Kuki Nation.

While this is the ultimate political goal of the KNO, they have at

* The name of the Kuki-State that the KNO claims existed in the past and is seeking to reestablish.

⁸ Haokip, P.S; Zale'n-gam: The Kuki Nation, Published by KNO. Zale'n-gam, 1998, pp.11-12.

the same time continued their demand for a creation of a state for the Kukis within Myanmar. This is evident from the KNO Presidents letter to General Than Shwe, Chairman of SLORC, on 7th August 1996 where he, after a long note on the Kuki plight, concluded: "... it is the Kukis' demand that the Rangoon Government should remind itself of its commitment to democratic principles, its commitment of non-discrimination against ethnic communities in the country; and for the provision of justice and rule of law throughout the land. It is also our demand that the Kale-Kabow Valley of eastern Zale'n-gam be declared an autonomous state for the Kukis to administer themselves and to seek their own self-development."⁹

However, the temporary nature of this demand is hinted in an earlier sentence in the same letter wherein he wrote, "The Chins and Kukis share the common predicament of being divided/scattered between two countries – India and Burma (Myanmar). We are, however, for the time being reconciled to live in peace and to work for progress in whichever country we have found ourselves in." The use of the phrase 'for the time being' is significant in view of the earlier stated goal of setting up a sovereign nation for the Kukis.

That the KNO now has political ambitions beyond the boundaries of Myanmar too and are projecting themselves to represent the Kuki 'nation' as a whole is also evident from its President's letters to the

⁹ Ibid., p.292.

Indian Prime Minister during the ethnic clashes in neighbouring India involving the Kukis and the Nagas. He wrote, "The recent events have shown that the Kuki tribes can protect themselves and work for peace and development only if a separate statehood is created for them. It will only be in a statehood that they can have their own machinery to look after themselves or is the Prime Minister waiting to see us all eliminated or expecting us to suffer quietly. If that is so it will be a grave mistake, as suffering does not remain quiet. The cries of widows and orphans will not be forgotten and the Prime Minister will realise his mistake only too late and we will have to sever ourselves from India and seek complete independence."¹⁰

The KNO is also, as evident from this letter, demanding the creation of an Indian state for the Kukis living in India. Though the KNO leadership felt shy of publicizing their political goals in clear and unambiguous terms, their demands for Kuki-states under Burma and India coupled with their cry for Zale'n-gam while presenting attainment of sovereignty for Kukis as their ultimate political objective seem to reveal an unstated political strategy, i.e. creating Kuki-states in both countries and merging them afterwards.

Does the Kuki movement have any ties with the democracy movement? Perhaps this is best answered by referring to the earlier discussion (in the previous chapter) on the relationship between the

¹⁰ Haokip, P.S, Letters to Shri P.V.Narasimha Rao, Hon'ble Prime Minister of India. Dated October, 1995.

National minorities and the Democracy movement. The Kuki leadership as represented by the KNO leaders share the hopes, fears, degree of allegiance, etc. of the other minority leaders in dealing with the issue of democracy movement. While expressing their general support for the movement and in fact demanding the replacement of the military regime with a democratic one, the KNO or the Kukis as a group fall short of taking active part in the struggle for democracy.

The KNO support for the Democracy movement is expressed in a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi by its President wherein he wrote, "I would like to express our support for you and your work towards establishment of democracy".¹¹ However, a conditionality in the support was placed in the same letter where he wrote: "... and we hope that the elusive statehood for the Kukis within Burma will be realized under your leadership. In return you will always have our faithful support if and when ever required."¹²

The conditionality attached to the statement of support is significant in that it shows the primacy of the Kuki interest over the support for democracy movement as far as the KNO is concerned. On being queried on this question the KNO President said; "That the Kukis are denied a state within Burma is an injustice and our fight is against this injustice. So, if the democracy leaders can give us a written contract for the redressal of this injustice, we are ready to do all in our

¹¹ n-2., p.271

¹² Ibid., p.272.

power to bring about democracy in Burma. But if, even after a democratic transition, the injustice is going to continue, we will fight till justice prevail.”¹³

Further, the KNO has so far not made any formal ties with any group or grouping of ethnic insurgents though a general sense of camaraderie prevails between them by virtue of having a common enemy and sharing a common objective of ending the Junta’s authoritarian regime. Asked to highlight on the subject, the KNO President said, “I have deliberately delayed entering into a formal alliance with our ethnic brothers for various reasons, but we are always working together in a friendly manner. Whether the DAB or NDF, they are ready to open their arms to us anytime we are ready.” The President also went on to say that the KNO is still young compared to the other ethnic movements in Myanmar today and thus need to first secure it’s ideological and organizational moorings besides generating awareness among its people.

In this context it would be proper to look into the ideological base of the KNO.

As briefly hinted earlier the Kuki movement in Burma draws heavily from history. The Kuki Rebellion (1917-1919), the INA movement and Kuki support for it and the separation of Kuki inhabited

¹³ Interview with present KNO President, P.S.Haokip (Translated from Thado-Kuki).

regions of Indo-Burma on the independence of India and Burma are the major historical events of import to the Kukis.

An examination of the interpretation of these historical events by the Kukis as represented by the KNO would reveal the ideological foundation of the Kuki movement in Myanmar. A book titled "ZALE'N-GAM - THE KUKI NATION" written by P.S.Haokip, President of KNO and published by KNO, adequately present the Kuki perception about the historical events mentioned above.

Referring to the Kuki Rebellion (1917-1919) as the First Kuki War of Independence (1917-1919), he wrote: "The First Kuki War of Independence (1917-1919), fought by Kukis, in defence of Zale'n-gam cannot be dismissed as a mere skirmish or a sporadic uprising by a section of tribesmen in the eastern corner of India. In fact this war was very much a part and parcel of the ongoing First World War, in which the Kukis as a part of the German and Japanese 'alignment' were fighting against the British who were a part of the Allied Forces.... The most tragic outcome of the war was: a) Zale'n-gam was forcibly occupied, b) it was further divided between India and Burma."¹⁴

(The details of the war had been discussed earlier on in the chapter. Here, suffice it to say that the Kukis feel they have been deprived their independence and freedom by their defeat in this war, draw inspiration from it to resurrect their 'Zale'n-gam' which is the

¹⁴ n-8., pp.184-187.

ultimate objective of their present political struggle).

Writing on the Kuki participation in the INA movement under Subhas Chandra Bose, which have been dealt earlier in some detail, P.S.Haokip says: "Under British rule, the Kukis were subjected to innumerable hardships, but they refused to remain suppressed for long. They started making contacts with like-minded leaders from Bengal and Germany. When the Second World War broke out in Europe in 1939, the Kukis took up one cause with the INA forces under the leadership of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. The Kuki fighters formally joined the INA and Japanese forces in Rangoon. They signed a pact under the leadership of Pu. Onkholet alias Pakang as their Commander in chief.... The Kukis joined the Japanese forces on the agreed and signed conditions of a formal war pact. The pact included the liberation of Zale'n-gam occupied by the British. The agreement was solemnized according to the Kuki traditional custom of taking vows by biting tiger tooth (Humpi-HA) by the Kuki chiefs and the Japanese officers present. The Kukis were then trained in the use of Japanese weapons. The Kukis' knowledge of the topography of the area was of great help to the INA and Japanese forces."¹⁵

The defeat of Japan in the war and consequently of the INA and therefore the Kuki cause is considered by the Kukis today as a failure of their attempt to rebuild their lost nation. The KNO/KNA is

¹⁵ n-8., pp.195-96.

purported to accomplish this “unfinished task”, as the KNO President puts it.

Later, when on the eve of Burmese independence, the Kukis living there having reconciled for then to accept their fate, committees for the re-organization of states were formed under the constitution committee on June 19, 1947 under the stewardship of the AFPFL, two states committees materialized, one “dealing with the Shan states and the other dealing with the Kachin state comprising of 16 and 8 members respectively.”¹⁶ According to the Kukis, their claim to a state should have been considered then. They claim a Kuki delegation was indeed invited but told to wait and the matter left pending. In this regard P.S.Haokip, the KNO President wrote in his book thus: “...at the time of re-organization of an independent Burma, a committee was formed for the formation of a Kuki state in Sagaing Central Division. Somkhothong and Ngamjang represented the Kukis in this committee alongwith Jasocho and Tobee from the Somra Tribes. Due to conflicting views between the two tribes, the committee could not conclude and the matter remained pending.”¹⁷ According to him the very fact of inviting the Kukis and the Somra tribes (Nagas) together for consultation on the question of a Kuki state was a concerted policy to dismiss the issue by the Burmans on the pretext of internal conflicts within the parties concerned.*

¹⁶ Gyi, Maung Maung: Burmese political values – The Socio-political roots of authoritarianism, Praeger, New York, 1983, p.100.

¹⁷ n-8., p.21.

* Interview with the President, KNO.

Elaborating further on their politico-historical grievances, P.S.Haokip also wrote "... In 1949, the proposal to amalgamate the Kuki areas of Sagaing Division with Chin Hill (State?) fell through, as the Kukis insisted in their demand for a separate autonomous state. The Burmese government has not only been hesitant to grant autonomy to Kukis in Burma, but there appears to have been a concerted policy of dispossessing the Kukis of their land, by sending settlers of other ethnic Burmese into the region."¹⁸ Mr. Haokip went on, "It was very unfortunate that the government of Revolutionary Council, headed by General Ne Win, in 1967, severely punished 20,000 Kuki people under U Maung's 'Khadawmi Operation', under the excuse that they were holding bogus 'National Registration and Family registration cards', which resultantly compelled many Kukis to leave Burma even though they were the aborigines of the country."¹⁹

In an interview with him, the KNO President also highlighted me on the lack of any initiative to implement welfare programmes in Kuki areas in Myanmar today. According to him, there are no schools and colleges, hospitals or dispensaries, or for that matter any worthy government office to look after civic welfare in the Kuki areas. The Kukis had been subjected to utter neglect and efforts are on to Burmanize them through the settlement policies of the Junta. Their religion is also under threat and incidences of Churches being burnt

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and church leaders arrested and tortured without rhyme and reason sans any legal trials are common. Reflecting on the entire situation, P.S.Haokip surmised; "Kuki areas do not belong to anyone but the Kukis. They (Burmese and Indian governments) know this and cannot be blamed if they refuse to develop these areas. But equally, they have no right to rule over such land and people. We are here to relieve them of the trouble as Kuki country can best be governed by Kukis themselves."²⁰

This statement perhaps forms the core of the KNO's political reasoning or ideology. The KNO too accuse the state of indulging in internal imperialism, as is the case generally with this kind of movements based on ethnicity.

Thus, it is on these historical and political foundations that the KNO based its claims to a Kuki Sovereign state. Their demands for states within Burma and India are a step in the process of attaining their ultimate goal, viz. the re-establishment of an independent Kuki nation comprising all Kuki inhabited areas in Myanmar and India which they claim once belonged exclusively to the Kukis.

The present political status of the Kukis in Myanmar as an ethnic group, their consciousness as a group, their claim of having existed independently in the past, their grievances against the majority Burmans and the military rule and their present armed movement

²⁰ Interview with P.S.Haokip, President, KNO. Translated from Thadou-Kuki.

demanding self-rule are all characteristic of ethno-nationalist struggles in multi-ethnic states such as Myanmar. The transnational character of their movement which sprang from their trans-border contiguity of habitation in Myanmar and India and their aspiration to establish one nation for the entire Kuki people is highly similar with the case of the Karens in Myanmar.

An objective assessment of the future prospects of ethnic nationalist movement in Myanmar can be attempted by briefly examining the relative strength of the state vis-à-vis the minority forces. The SPDC or State Peace and Development Council, the successor to SLORC, is firmly established with most of the ethnic insurgents having been relatively contained through cease-fires and military operations. The SDPC is also beginning to build a more positive image of the regime internationally, thereby reducing international pressure for a change of government. The passing of a new national constitution with a clause ensuring a primary role to the military in the future politics of Burma and the imminent adoption of such a constitution is yet another dose of energy to the central government.

On the other hand, the ethnic insurgents, except a few of them, are beginning to lost their mass base due to the long drawn sufferings. They also lack cooperation between them due to reasons ideological as well as geographical. The improvement of relations between Myanmar and its neighbours have made their operations more and more difficult.

Besides, factionalism always remained a potent problem with insurgent outfits.

Given these circumstances, the prospects of success for the various ethnic nationalist movements cannot be too high. The prospects even of a compromise being worked out between the ethnic demands for independence or autonomy on the one hand and the unitary commitments of the military regime are growing bleaker by the day as both parties have invested too much to give up by now. The only hope lay perhaps in the eventual triumph of democracy under which a compromise can be worked out between the Burmans and the peripheral people on the lines of a loose federation. This can alone ensure an honourable compromise which would perhaps amount most closely to the realization of every concerned party's goals.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The discussions in the foregoing chapters have facilitated the emergence of certain conclusions that can be drawn on the questions of diversity, ethno-nationalism, and the movement for democracy in Myanmar.

First of all, it became apparent that the ethnic diversity and the complexity of ethnic relations in Myanmar is a historical endowment upon which the historical experience of British colonial rule and the subsequent emergence of Burma as an independent state had added another dimension, viz., the unification of the diverse peoples under one political structure, which led to the worsening of tensions through increased and inevitable interactions between these diverse ethnic peoples.

Secondly, the root causes of the widespread ethno-nationalist struggles in Myanmar lay in the twin factors of Burman chauvinism and ethnic-traditionalism, by which is meant; 1) the ethnic nationalities' wish to retain their traditional systems of self-government,

2) their desire to protect their culture and identity from outside domination and assimilationist forces,

3) and their resistance to changes which threaten to disrupt their traditional way of life coupled with their preference for slow self-

development to outside directed development which inevitably involve elements of exploitation and dangers of domination.

Thirdly, despite the loud clamour for independence raised by the various ethnic insurgent fronts out of their hatred for the Burman dominated authoritarian military regime, most of them are manifestly ready to settle for largely autonomous states in a democratic and loosely federated Burma, perhaps recognizing the unfeasibility of their existence as completely independent sovereign entities for reasons which are economic, geo-political, etc. In this context it may be mentioned that ethnic groups such as the Karens, Kukis and Nagas, whose areas of inhabitation spread beyond the Myanmarese borders may prove to be the exceptions to reconciling to a federated democratic Myanmar.

Fourthly, it became clear that despite the universal desire of the Burmese citizens for establishment of democracy, the movement is largely inhibited by the predominantly and almost exclusive Burman base it enjoys and the lack of complete identification by the minorities with the movement. This is an outcome of the element of historical mistrust between the Burmans and the peripheral communities which can only be overcome by recognition of the fact and acting on ways to remove it. One possible means identified is for the Burman leaders to enter into a Panglong-type agreement with the minorities which should spell out the provisions for the protection of minority interests in clear and unambiguous terms.

This, in other words, is to say that the minorities could not fully identify themselves with the democracy movement because they are not sure if democracy can ensure their freedom from the threat of Burman domination and exploitation given the relative inferiority they have vis-à-vis the Burmans in terms of numbers, culture, economic development, educational advancement, etc.

Also, it became clear from the study that the weakness of the democracy movement is linked to this ethnic complexity as is the chances of its success, for a resolution of this inherent relationship of mistrust alone can integrate interests, goals and resources of the Burmese people which is indispensable for the success of the struggle against the determined authoritarian regime. It may also be concluded that unless this mistrust is amicably resolved before the coming of a democratic regime, if at all it did come, the military government's argument that the country will face the danger of disintegration under democracy could find some credibility. Unless the secessionist aspirations of the minority ethnic groups are first laid to rest on the basis of mutually agreed provisions securing the interests of all the parties concerned, a rushed transition to a democratic system may spell doom for the unity of Myanmar as a nation for a democratic government will be at a much less favourable disposition to effectively check secessionism compared to a military regime which can resort to brute force without much qualms about it.

The military regime, by taking up measures to improve its international image in earnest, have succeeded to a considerable extent

in reducing international pressure for a change of government in Myanmar. Besides, the impending adoption of the new constitution which, while assuming an apparent democratic guise, ensures a permanent and prominent role for the military in the future politics of Myanmar have the potentials of sidelining the democracy movement for good. But such a development on the other hand could only mean a continuation of the civil war as such a constitution is most unlikely to meet the aspirations of the ethnic peoples.

Finally, it became fairly clear that the ideals of democracy and self-determination have to be simultaneously achieved for Myanmar to experience political stability, and also that achievement of one without the other would be difficult and perhaps even impossible given the determination and strength of the adversary. Integration of the twin ideals as well as their forces is imperative for their success.

Myanmar can hope to overcome its decades long instability and political turmoil only when the Burmans and the ethnic nationalities recognize the need for mutual co-existence in an atmosphere of equality. For this, the Burmans need to compromise on their designs for domination and primacy while the ethnic groups have to give up their aspirations for a complete severance of ties with the rest of Myanmar.

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APPENDIX - I

THE PANGLONG AGREEMENT

The members of the Conference, believing that freedom will be more speedily achieved by the Shans, the Kachins and the Chins by their immediate co-operation with the interim Burmese Government accordingly agreed as follows:

- (i) A representative of the Hill Peoples, selected by the Governor on the recommendation of representation of representatives of the Supreme Council of the United Hill Peoples shall be appointed a Counsellor to the Governor to deal with the Frontier Areas.
- (ii) The said Counsellor shall also be appointed a member of the Governor's Executive Council, without portfolio, and the subject of Frontier Areas would be brought within the purview of the Executive Council by Constitutional Convention as in the case of Defense and External Affairs. The Counsellor for Frontier Areas shall be given executive authority by similar means.
- (iii) The said Counsellor shall be assisted by two Deputy Counsellors representing races of which he is not a member. While the two Deputy Counsellor should deal in the first instance with the affairs of their respective areas and the Counsellor with all the remaining parts of Frontier Areas.
- (iv) While the Counsellor, in his capacity of member of the Executive Council, will be the only representative of the Frontier Areas on the Council, the Deputy Counsellors shall be entitled to attend meetings of the Council when subjects pertaining to the Frontier Areas are discussed.