
BURMA 1978: THE THIRTIETH YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE

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AMONG THE COUNTRIES in Asia that regained political freedom from a colonial power in the nationalist aftermath of World War II, Burma is among those few that, on the whole, have fared poorly. Burma is basically a moderately well-endowed country. The largely literate population of approximately 33 million should be able to enjoy their reasonably rich resource base of land, water, and mineral wealth. The population growth rate is a comparatively moderate 2.2% per annum. For better or worse, in good times and bad, Burma, a centralized, in part federalized republic, has had only two sets of leaders since independence in 1948—the one civilian, 1948–1962 and the other military, 1962 to the present—both stemming from the same anti-colonial, nationalist struggle for independence.

These favorable factors—proportionate, ample resources; moderate density and growth of population; relatively high literacy rate; continuity of leadership; ethnic diversity within a dominant, homogeneous, Buddhist culture; pursuit of what has been rightfully called “its own version of economic nationalism with almost total singlemindedness;”¹ proper membership in the United Nations, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank; and careful avoidance since shortly after independence of any international political alignment—should have made Burma what many Burmese have called their country: *The Happy Golden Land*. Gold here represents not only the precious metal with which the Burmese adorn their many religious shrines but also the hundreds of miles of ripening golden-hued rice spreading across

¹ Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, *Southeast Asian Affairs 1977* (Singapore, 1977), p. 34.

Problems in the Arakan

From the early days of the British Raj the border area between the Bengali Muslim society of Chittagong/Dacca (Bangladesh) and the Buddhist Arakanese at Akyab and the Naaf River Estuary has been, and continues to be, the locus of a law-and-order and illegal immigration problem. Either the Bengali Muslim population seeks better times in the Arakan or the Burmese Arakanese seek political relief across the border in what is now Bangladesh. At this writing, it would appear that hard times in Bangladesh substantially increased the Muslim population of the Arakan and led to new measures of immigration and alien control from Rangoon.

Beginning in 1977, the Burmese government initiated a Kyats 140 million (US\$20 million) project, code-named the *Naga Min* (Dragon King) operation, to update its demographic information in Arakan, Chin, and Kachin states and in Mandalay and Sagaing divisions. More specifically, this was an attempt by the Immigration and Manpower Department in Rangoon to register all residents, classify them categorically as either Burmese citizens or foreigners, register them, and issue them with certificates of registration. Reportedly the operation began in the Kachin and Shan states in May 1977, followed by surprise checks in parts of Rangoon and the Mon state in the south. The operation reached Arakan in February 1978 when sections of Akyab township came under scrutiny.

On February 11, 1978 it appears that some 200 immigration officers, having been dispatched from Rangoon, entered the Muslim areas of Akyab. One estimate claims that some 1734 persons were arrested that evening and moved into an improvised detention center. Less than a week later an opposing demonstration was reportedly forcibly suppressed, resulting in widespread panic among the Muslim populace.¹⁰ As the operation was extended forward north of Akyab, the Muslim population was seen to move increasingly hindwards to the Naaf River Estuary. During the next several months, prior to a Burmese naval and army blockade along the river in late May, it was unofficially estimated that some 200,000 refugees had crossed the border into Bangladesh and were camped in makeshift centers relatively near the Burmese border. The principal refugee camp was at Cox Bazaar, a beach resort some 95 miles southeast of Chittagong.¹¹ Responding to the problem and most particularly to the intolerable conditions within the camps, the UN launched a six-month contingency assistance program.

¹⁰ William Mattern, "Burma's Brand of Apartheid," *FEER*, July 14, 1978, p. 31. This, however, conflicts with an earlier report in *Far Eastern Economic Review* (May 26, 1978) which stated that all went well when the urban population was checked. Trouble erupted when officials moved into some 66 villages in late March (p. 30).

¹¹ Eleven other camps, some at Gundhum, Nhila, and Whaikyaung, were hastily set up along the sixty mile road south of Cox Bazaar.

With the situation becoming more unbearable as each day passed and fearing that a major religious clash might ensue involving some of the Islamic nations of the Middle East, Foreign Secretary Tobarq Husain of Bangladesh led a delegation to Burma in early June. On July 9, 1978 an agreement on repatriation was finally reached between Burma and Bangladesh. In essence the agreement provided that Burma would repatriate the refugees in various stages. During the first stage repatriation was to be extended to all those with National Registration certificates.¹² The remaining, including those without papers but who could provide evidence of residency, were to be returned at a later date. Eleven staging camps were to be set up and the return of the refugees was scheduled to commence on August 30, 1978. Early reports, however, indicated that the repatriation program was not working well. The small number of returnees was considered attributable not only to a certain degree of bureaucratic mismanagement within the reception and transit camps, but also to a prevalent fear among the Muslim population that the Burmese authorities were intent upon eliminating them in the Arakan.

This fear, real or imaginary, is in part attributable to the still unconfirmed reports of brutality and atrocities waged against the Muslim population during the early stages of the evacuation. The Rohingya Patriotic Front, on the one hand, accused Rangoon of "religious persecution, racial discrimination and systematic apartheid,"¹³ while, on the other hand, Rangoon retorted that the refugees were victims of their own self-induced panic.¹⁴ Was it panic or was it systematic apartheid and terror? We concur with William Mattern that the answer most probably lies somewhere between these two contradictory claims.¹⁵

In a related development, two high treason trials, one of which involved a conspiracy to create a separate Arakanese state and government, were formally concluded in late February 1978. The defendants were all found guilty of treason. The alleged leader of the plot, U Htein Lin, a former township unit BSPP chairman in Arakan until 1975, and Mahn Ngwe Aung, a Karen national, received the death sentence, while the three remaining defendants received terms ranging from life imprisonment to ten years at hard labor.

¹² Some observers say that 100,000 have registration cards, while others put the figure much lower. See *FEER*, July 21, 1978, p. 20. The situation is further complicated in that the refugees claim that neither registration cards nor foreign registration cards have been issued since 1962. See *FEER*, July 14, 1978, pp. 30-32.

¹³ *FEER*, November 3, 1978, p. 32.

¹⁴ *The Working People's Daily* (Rangoon) for July 12, 1978 stated: "The present immigration problem arose not because of any religious or social discrimination but because of the instigation of unsavoury elements who were against the collection of data being carried out for the purpose of implementing the social system." See also *Forward* (Rangoon), XVI:11 (August 1978), pp. 10-11 and 14-15 for further Burmese views.

¹⁵ William Mattern, "Burma's Brand of Apartheid," p. 30.

The War on Opium

The latest Burmese antidrug offensive, code-named Operation Mohein (Thunderbolt) IV, began on April 12, 1978. Essentially an assault upon opium refining camps, the main target appears to have been the Loi Lem area, about 50 miles due south of Mong Hsat, which hugs the Thai-Burmese border. From all indications it would appear that this military offensive went well.¹⁶

More significant, however, has been the growing cooperation between the Thai and the Burmese in the control of the drug traffic. Prior to his visit to Burma in May 1978, General Kriangsak Chamand, Prime Minister of Thailand, issued orders demanding that certain groups and organizations leave Thai territory. Among those excluded were the Karenni Independence Army, the Palaung National Liberation Organization, the Lahu National United Party, the Kokang State Forces, and the forces of the opium warlord, Khun Sa. Furthermore, Thai-Burmese cooperation was strengthened with the announcement that both countries would activate their Joint Border Committee and open channels for a regular exchange of information on narcotics.

Economy

In last year's survey article we cautiously expressed the possibility that the "new flexibility" in investment matters may finally get Burma on the way to a more effective economic performance.¹⁷ Although complete economic data for 1978 are not yet available, there have been some continuing, small signs of improvement in the current and previous year of the Second Four Year Plan.

In February 1978, various governments and institutions concerned with development assistance to Burma met in Paris under the chairmanship of the World Bank. Among those in attendance were representatives of Australia, Canada, France, West Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Finland, the Asian Development Bank, the Commission of the European Communities, OECD, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations Development Program.

The Burmese delegation was headed by U Tun Tin, Minister for Planning and Finance. In his initial report he set forth the government's main economic objectives, strategies, and plans as outlined in

¹⁶ *The Working People's Daily* (Rangoon) of May 23, 1978 claims that 10,312 acres of poppy was destroyed between December 10, 1977 and April 30, 1978. On October 25, 1978 *The Working People's Daily* claimed that more than 10,000 acres of poppy were destroyed in the Shan State. It was further stated that Burmese military forces flushed out some 500 insurgents of the Shan State Revolutionary Army, the Shan United Army, the Kachin Independence Army, the KMT, Wa, Lahu and Kokang rebels.

¹⁷ Trager and Scully, "Burma in 1977," *Asian Survey*, XVIII:2 (February 1978), pp. 143-147.