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Title:

BURMA: MILITARY RULE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A
DESPOTIC ORDER

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A M A S T E R ' S T H E S I S O U T L I N E

TITLE: Burma: Military Rule and the Construction of a
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B A C K G R O U N D

Burma has been neglected by the outside world for quite some time, and as a result, the awareness and knowledge of its political system and politics is scanty, and worse, out-dated and marred by stereotyped images. For example, there still persists in writings on Burma, in academic journals even, the perception of the military as modernizers, although such a view has long been seriously questioned and even discredited in the literature of third world military intervention.

Burma's isolation and the subsequent neglect of Burma by scholars is, however, not accidental. It is due mainly to the wishes of and steps taken by its military rulers to keep out prying eyes and ears. These measures include restricting the movements of foreign diplomats and personnel of international

agencies, putting a time and access limitation on tourists, barring the entry of journalists, disallowing research by foreign scholars in Burma or variously restricting their freedom, and so forth. As well, Burma's military rulers have isolated the people inside by such measures as the imposition of restriction on foreign travel, restricting local access to foreign publications, the imposition of internal censorship and tight control on the inflow of information, the frequent harassment of those Burmese perceived of as being too close to foreigners and diplomats, the censoring of foreign mail and tapping of long-distance calls, and so on.

This isolation of Burma and its insulation from the world at large, particularly since 1962, has, strangely enough, not been judged by foreign observers as sinister nor seen as reflecting the despotic and arbitrary grip on and exercise of power by the country's military rulers. On the contrary, it has been attributed by many charitable outsiders to the laudable desire of Burmese leaders and people to create an indigeneous political order and a genuinely Burmese society free of undesirable contamination; and attributed to their desire to maintain neutrality and avoid super power alignment, to preserve Burmese culture and fend off cultural and other pollution, and to avoid overdependence on external resources.

As a consequence, because of their sympathy for the attributed goals of Burma's rulers, most foreign observers and scholars have, until 1988, not seriously questioned the premises

behind these goals nor the positive views held concerning military rule in Burma. As well, due to the barrier erected, scholars have not had the opportunity to investigate the self-portrayal of Burma's military rulers as socialist modernizers and their claims to have not only kept an ethnically fragmented country together against great odds, but to have, as well, preserved its cultural integrity, self-reliance, neutrality and independence.

In 1988, there appeared a country-wide protest movement, composed mainly of ethnic Burmese or the Burman segment of the population, calling upon the country's military ruler to restore democracy and multi-party politics in Burma. In response, the regime turned the streets of Rangoon, Mandalay, Prome (Ne Win's hometown), and other towns into killing fields and thousands of peaceful protesters were shot down in cold blood in full view of foreign observers and diplomats. The protest and the following bloodbath of 1988 indicates that behind the beautiful Burmese lacquer screen, there lies a harsh and unpleasant reality, at least for the people living behind it; a serious dysfunction and a grave political problem which requires a closer scrutiny.

T H E O U T L I N E

This thesis is therefore an attempt to look more closely and critically at Burma's military rulers, their origin,

goals, the form of state constructed by them, and the methods and formulas employed by them to stay in power and to, as it were, "keep the country together".

The central focus of the thesis is the military rulers of Burma who, it will be shown, are not merely the rebellious soldiers of the third world, but who began their political life as members of what could be described as the first generation of nationalists. The formulation of a theoretical framework based on the analysis of the group's actions, strategy, ideology, methods, and various outcomes, will be the center-piece of the thesis.

Looking at Burma from the outside, the picture which emerges is that of a relatively stable polity. Its supreme ruler, Ne Win, has been in power for over twenty-six years; there have been no recurring coups which is the usual scenario in the third world where there are military takeovers; there exists a stable power structure in that the military or its elites have, from 1962 onwards, controlled all the commanding heights of the state and the economy (despite the adoption of a new constitution in 1974 which installed a "civilianized" one-party state); and because of the regime's longevity and an appearance of mass participation in political life as orchestrated by the ruling BSPP (Burmese Socialist Program Party) party, there exists a perception that a degree of legitimacy had been gained by the military regime. As such, it has even been argued by some Burma specialists such as R.H.Taylor, among others, that there exists

in Burma (especially prior to 1988, that is), a favorable configuration of factors in Burma which could propell it onto the path of modernization and economic development. This configuration includes a strong leader, a loyal army, a powerful state, and a modernizing and nationalistic military elite espousing egalitarian and socialist ideals in control of such a state.

On the other hand, however, despite the Burmese lacquer screen and the various rose colored lenses, there is easily discernable just beneath the perceived surface of stability, a number of discordant and contradictory features. Firstly, there is an occurrence in Burma of frequent challenges mounted against the regime by other societal actors, and the existence of protracted and vigorous resistance on the part of non-Burman ethnic segments whose historic homelands comprise more than half the area of the country. In other words, the failure of the military rulers to gain the acceptance of society at large of their right to rule is very much in evidence.

Secondly, and related to the first, is the absence of any other responses on the part of the regime or state leaders to the protests, challenges and resistance other than the use of coercion and the application of state terror. That is, it is evident that the military rulers in Burma have been unable to set up even the most rudimentary mechanism for political exchange and communication with the populace within the polity.

Thirdly, there is clear evidence in Burma of economic stagnation, a drastic decline in the standard of living, and the general and growing impoverishment of both the people and the country as a whole. This forced Ne Win in 1987 to request the United Nations to grant Burma, a potentially rich country by any standard, a LDC (Least Developed Country) status. It is evident from this that the military rulers of Burma, unlike military rulers of Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia, for example, have failed dismally to bring about what one could even call superficial modernization defined in terms of economic growth and development.

The contradiction as outlined above is a central one and various explanations, such as the lack of resources, the inexperience and lack of management skills on the part of military officers, bad planning, various acts of God (flood, drought, bad harvests, etcetra), the chronic insurgency, and so forth have been variously offered by the regime and by outside scholars. It is contended in this thesis that such explanations do not explain the problem.

The thesis will argue that the state and the political order which the military constructed in Burma was not intended to bring about modernization or socialism, but was aimed, instead, at the maintenance of power through the employment of coercion and terror. It is posited that the maintenance of power and the imposition of control through the process of terror, or the construction of a despotic order, is not anachronistic nor

abnormal, or for that matter, illogical or irrational. Under certain circumstances and conditions such as when there is a crisis of integration, or when there is a need to resolve severe social tensions, to assert dominance, to maximize power or minimize accountability, to impose homogeneous unity on a heterogeneous society, to terminate conflict or to impose what is perceived of as stability and order, some rulers will choose to construct a despotic order based on the process of terror.

The thesis will attempt to show that despite the rhetoric of modernization and socialism employed by Burma's military rulers, they have in reality chosen to create or construct a despotic order similar in many ways to the pre-colonial absolutist state; that they have chosen to cope with the crisis of integration, social tension, conflicts, and to counter societal resistance to their rule by the application of coercive force; and that they have chosen to maintain control through the process of terror. The result of these choices has been the establishment of a despotic order and the construction of a highly autonomous state where state leaders are able to act on their own preferences free from societal constraints but which has, on the other hand, proved incapable of and unequipped for modernization.

It will be asserted in the thesis that state leaders presiding over a despotic order as in Burma, will not be inclined towards, and are incapable of modernization. This is because modernization involves some degrees and forms of accommodation

and political exchange with other societal forces and this, in turn, threatens despotic stability and diminishes the power of the despot and his terror staff.

In Chapter One, or the introduction, an introductory comment will be made on the long neglect of Burma, the first country to gain independence from the British in Asia, and the sad effect of this on our knowledge of not only the country but also of an interesting political phenomenon which has taken place in Burma since the military coup of 1962 i.e., the phenomenon of a powerful and highly autonomous state where rulers rule without legitimacy and without the ability to govern effectively. And in the first section of the first chapter, the salient features of the military regime in Burma, its character, and the form of state constructed by the military will be outlined.

The military in Burma has, following its capture of power in 1962, transformed the state into one in which the military rulers imposed their will on society without accountability and without reference to other non-state actors and social forces. It is an absolutist state based entirely on the support of a special class of men, the army, which, in turn, is organized around the principle of personal loyalty to Ne Win, the ruler or despot around whom the state revolves.

A further notable characteristic of the post-1962 state in Burma is the fact that Ne Win and those constituting the military elites of Burma were members of the armed wing of the anti-colonial Dohbama or Thakin movement which enjoyed its first

taste of power under the wings of the Japanese Imperial army as a consequence of World War II. This means that from the outbreak of the war up to the present, i.e., from about 1942 to 1989, a period of forty-seven years, the politics of Burma have been dominated by a single set of elites, the Thakins or members of the Dohbama movement. In other words, the coupmakers of 1962 in Burma were not merely rebellious third world soldiers, but were, in effect, a clique of the first generation of nationalists diverted into the military sphere during the "independence struggle". This clique possessed its own political formula for the construction of a state and its own agenda for the creation of a political order in Burma. It was this military wing of the Dohbama that seized power in 1962 and proceeded to put in place its "revolutionary" blueprint for the country which it had nurtured and developed while it served as the coercive agency of the pre-1962 state in Burma.

The central focus of the thesis therefore is this elite group, the military wing of the Dohbama. The formulation of a theoretical framework based on the analysis of the group's actions, strategy, ideology, methods, and the various outcomes, will be the center-piece of the thesis.

In discussing and analyzing the military regime in Burma and the strategies and methods it used in constructing the state, consolidating its power, and holding the country together, a theoretical framework pertaining to the construction of the state, methods of control, and leadership strategies will be laid

down, and some propositions formulated. Theories and concepts dealing with the autonomy of the state vis-a-vis society at large or other non-state actors will be brought in and examined. This is done in the second section of this chapter.

The second chapter is entitled "The Political Legacies". It will examine briefly the legacies pertaining to the concepts and organizational structures, and other salient features of statehood inherited by the new rulers and nationalist elites of Burma in 1948, or which influenced them. The legacies examined are the precolonial state, the colonial state, and the very brief Japanese sponsored (or the Burmese Manchukuo) state.

The third chapter is entitled "The Inheritors". It traces the emergence, the growth and development of the dominant nationalist Thakin or Dohbama movement, and their actions, reactions, and role in Burma. As well, the role and actions, the dominance or decline, as the case may be, of the various Dohbama factions, but with attention focused mainly on the military wing of the Dohbama, will be examined and analysed against the background of the sequence of events which unfolded and shaped Burma's current history.

The fourth chapter is entitled "The Despotic Order of The Burmese Way to Socialism". This chapter will analyse the post-1962 state in Burma, its organizational structures, the relevant features of the one-party regime, and will investigate the outcomes of and reactions to the establishment of a such despotic order.

In the fifth and concluding chapter, some conclusions will be drawn from the investigation and the hypotheses which have been formulated.

The tentative hypotheses for this thesis are: (a) that the military in the third world in some instances can be captured and transformed into a feudal-like personal instrument of one man or a group of men at the top; (b) that military rulers, under certain circumstances or by choice, may oppose modernization and may choose instead to construct a relatively simple political system supported by state terror and the application of violence, a system similar to premodern despotism; (c) that for there to be a successful construction or reconstruction of a form of premodern despotism, the role of the military (or a body of armed men formally organized and recognized as such) is essential and crucial; (d) that once the military or military rulers have constructed and stabilized a form of premodern despotic order, the likelihood of any forms of modernization taking place will be minimized, mainly because despotic stability and power preclude changes; (e) that in such a form of premodern despotic order, it is possible for rulers, or a despot, to maintain control and perpetuate power, even more or less govern, without the need for internal legitimacy so long as the interests of the praetorian guards are catered to, and their privileges preserved and protected; (f) and that a high degree of state autonomy, especially within a third world context, most

likely indicates repression, stagnancy and even regression in the form of political decay and economic decomposition.

With regard to Burma, the sad but inescapable conclusion is that because of the long period, over twenty-six years, of political decay under the despotic order of the military, the best which can be hoped for is the appearance of an enlightened despot following Ne Win's physical demise. This could perhaps lead to the gradual dismantling of both the despotic order and the feudal-like power structure, and to the reorganization of the military or the army as a modern subordinate agency of the state.

On the other hand, however, the probability of even such a modest hope becoming a reality is, in the short run, not very likely. In other words, it requires less skill, and it is more convenient and much simpler, and, more important, less costly for Burma's military rulers, to maintain control and perpetuate power through the process of terror and violent repression than for them to initiate reforms, or to dismantle the despotic order already in place for over a quarter of a century.

A R E A O F R E S E A R C H

In discussing military rule in Burma and analyzing the emergence of a powerful and highly autonomous state, but one characterized by many premodern features and based on the

maintainence of a despotic order through the process of terror, the work of E.V. Walter in this area will be extensively used and referred to. The control model of conflict resolution expounded by Ian Lustick will also be incorporated into the analysis.

Works by H. Wriggins, H. Crouch, R.H. Jackson and C.G. Roseberg, dealing in leadership strategy and personal or patrimonial rulership will be examined for theoretical and conceptual support for the thesis's theoretical framework. Further, discussions on state autonomy relative to other societal actors and social forces as dealt with by E. Nordlinger, G.A. Heeger, Paul Cammack, T. Skocpol, N. Poulantzas and others will be brought in to clarify the theoretical perspective underlying the direction or thrust of the thesis.

With regard to the historical and political data on Burma, special attention will be paid to works by Burmese or Burman scholars and participants such as Ba Maw, Maung Maung Gyi, U Nu, Ba U, Maung Maung, Htin Aung, Daw Mya Sein, Michael Aung Thwin, and so on. Pertaining to the military and the political system of Burma, ancient and modern, works (books, papers, journal articles) by E. Sarkisyanz, R.H. Taylor, V.B. Lieberman, David. I. Steinberg, J. Silverstein, M. Lissak, Father Sangermano, Sir J.G. Scott, L.W. Pye, E.R. Leach, D.Guyot, R. Butwell, J.Badgley, J. Wiant, and so on, will be consulted. As well, standard authoratative texts on Burma by J.F. Cady, H. Tinker, F.N. Traeger, G.E. Harvey, J.S. Furnivall, J.L.

Christian, and others, will be investigated and referred to where and when required.

In addition, pertaining to the post-1962 developments in Burma, articles in periodicals and newspapers such as the Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek, the Bangkok Post, the Nation (Thailand), and so forth will be looked into. Also documents from various sources, those published by the Burmese government and by opposition groups and organizations, and archival materials, and information obtained through personal interviews and letters will, where needed, be referred to.

Political science literature on military intervention and rule, and military withdrawal in the third world such as works by S. Finer, S.P. Huntington, A. Bebler, C. Clapham, E. Nordlinger, E. Feit, H. Bienen, P. Lyon, C.E. Welch, and others, will be applied as conceptual tools to frame the discussion on the military in Burma wherever required and appropriate.

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