



## Myanmar under the Military Rule 1962-1988

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### Abstract

*The paper is an attempt to analyze the military rule in Myanmar from 1962-1988. Myanmar gained its Independent from British Empire in 1948 under Burmese Independent Army. The root of military in Myanmar has been associated with the struggle for independent. The first military rule began in 1958 and direct military rule started when Ne Win captured power through a military coup in 1962 lasted for 12 years, in the claim to save the country from disintegration. During this period there was some democratic landscape in the form of election, giving rights to the citizen to elect and to stand for election. The paper argues that democratic landscape in Myanmar was only in theory. In this paper the period from 1962-1988 is divided into two phase, the phase of direct military rule and the phase of constitutional dictatorship. The paper further tries to find out the foreign policy during military regime.*

**Keywords:** Military in Myanmar, democratic landscape in Myanmar, election in Myanmar, foreign policy during military rule.

### Introduction

Myanmar, the largest country in Southeast Asia is located at the meeting point of South and Southeast Asia. It is bordered with five nations, China, Laos, Thailand, India and Bangladesh. Myanmar gained its Independent on January 4, 1948 from British Empire under the leadership of General Aung San under Burma National Army. In July 1947, Aung San was assassinated by rivals under the leadership of U Saw, but achieved independence in January 1948 under U Nu. Since its struggle for Independent, the armed forces known as the 'Tatmadaw' played an important role in gaining Independent and it was under the Burmese Independent Army that Myanmar got its independent. The Army in Myanmar had gained respect in independent Myanmar at the initial stage and perceived as protector of the country. The military claims itself as the founder of the Union of Burma, and the main force that held the country together during the civil war and also claimed that it has prevented the country from disintegrating<sup>1</sup>.

After the independent, a constitutional government was formed and U Nu was nominated as the first Prime Minister of Independent Myanmar. However the newly formed civilian government under U Nu, failed to maintain the unity of the country facing with domestic problems, ethnic issues, insurgency, corruption, mismanagement, and the ethnic insurgencies which took up arms against each other. And in 1958 a split within the AFPFL threatened to provoke a coup from field officers. In order to settle the situation U Nu invited the military to form caretaker Government. In 1958-60, "caretaker government" under Ne Win was formed. The caretaker government initially appeared to be interested in building state capacity. It reduced corruption, improved

bureaucratic efficiency, and managed to deal with the pocket armies<sup>2</sup>. Military junta announced to held election in 1960. After the election in 1960, U Nu party formed a civilian government. But the civilian government under U Nu could not solve and improve the situation rather threat the national integration of the country leading to the coup on March 2, 1962 under General Ne Win. The main reasons for the coup were a mix of political infighting, policy gridlock, multiple insurgencies on a massive scale, and a declining economy. After the coup, the military government arrest members of the Government, suspended the constitution and appoint a Revolutionary Council (RC) to Govern Myanmar by decree<sup>3</sup>.

The coup on 2 March, 1962 led the end of democratic form of government and the beginning of direct military rule in Myanmar till upto 1974. During the period of military rule under General Ne Win, the country was shaped into one-party socialist state under the army led party called as Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) till 1988. And the year from 1962-1988, can be marked as the era of Ne Win. The period from 1962-1988 can be divided into two phase. The first phase is the period of direct military rule from 1962-1974 and Constitutional Dictatorship phase from 1974-1988.

### Direct Military rule in Myanmar 1962-1974

The period from 1962-1974 is the period of direct military rule under the Revolutionary Council (RC). In 1962 General Ne Win staged military coup and overthrown the civilian government and captured. After the coup the military established Revolutionary Council (RC) which composed entirely of military officials loyal to him. This coup in 1962 marked the end of constitutional democracy and the beginning of direct

military rule in Myanmar. After the coup in 1962, General Ne Win under Revolutionary Council (RC) imposed order, and universities were one of the first targets. Ne Win quickly rescinded U Nu's declaration of Buddhism as the state religion. The democratic institutions were dismantled and concentrated powers in the hands of Revolutionary Council under General Ne Win, which comprise of the group of senior officers led by General Ne Win. The military replaced the civilian leadership with members of their own organisation. The Constitution was suspended and became inoperative in areas where the Revolutionary Council issued decrees and promulgated orders<sup>4</sup>. In form and theory Myanmar remained a federal state but in practical the military junta treated the country as a unitary state<sup>5</sup>. On April 30, 1962 the Revolutionary Council under Ne Win announced a new national ideology called 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' to guide the country<sup>6</sup>.

The military coup in Myanmar since 1962 has failed to address the country's on-going governance problems and made things worse<sup>7</sup>. In June 1962, RC under Ne Win formed a cadre party called as Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to reshape Myanmar into one-party state and to remake Burmese politics and society into a socialist mould guided by an ideology known as the Burmese Way to Socialism (BSW), which consist of Buddhism, nationalism and Marxist philosophy<sup>8</sup>. At the beginning of the formation of BSPP, membership was allowed only for military personnel, but the 1970s party membership was open to all and not joining carried negative consequences.

During the period from 1962-1974, the country was transformed into a socialist one-party state under the leadership of General Ne Win's and military was declared as the supreme authority. After the coup, the Constitution was suspended, dissolved the Parliament, abolished the state councils and took control over the state. All political parties, associations and unions were illegalized, banned the formation of political party, protests were brutally suppressed. From 1964, the BSPP under Ne Win refrain from involved in international conflicts and isolate Myanmar from the outside world. Visas to foreign visitors were restricted only for twenty-four hours and restricted to Rangoon. Diplomats were required to seek official permission to move outside the capital. Foreign agencies were also expelled from the country. The military Junta adopted Burmanization Policy, nationalize land, Banking sector, oil wells, foreign trade, the insurance sector, shipping, wholesale trade, etc. Private schools, banks, industries and large shops were nationalized. Land and wealth were also redistributed. By taking state control, the military also returned the business run by Indians and Chinese to the indigenous Burmese. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Indians and Chinese left the country and this policy on the other hand affects the country economy. Independent associations were either absorbed by the government or forced out of existence. The military also brought all aspects of governance including economy under its control. In March 1964, Ne Win under the Revolutionary Council demonetized 50 kyat and 100 kyat leading to huge economic impact to the

people and make the people penniless. The military regime also imposed a government controlled Burmese language curriculum. Foreign missionaries, scholars and western foundations were forced to leave. Political parties were banned and only military formed Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was declared legal. Independent trade unions were outlawed. From 1966, schools were brought under the closure control of the Ministry of Education, economy became worst, and there were emergence of black market and corruption increases. Informal economy emerged giving opportunity for military corruption, and rice production decreased, could not afford even the country. Ne Win's model of state led development leads to ruin the economy. Military under Ne Win faced with huge criticism. But the beginning of 1967 shows some effort from the military junta for political liberalization. The junta under Ne Win released several hundred political prisoners including U Nu. By 1967, the country faced with widespread shortage of rice, cooking oil and other basic commodities leading to rise of black marketing and corruption<sup>9</sup>.

In July 1971, the military junta announced the intention to draft a new constitution and announced that election will be held according to the new constitution and also promised that the power will be transferred to the elected civilian government after the election. In the same year BSPP transform into a mass party at the First Party Congress. Most of the senior military retired, continued as government and Ne Win remained Prime Minister. In April 1972, Ne Win and 20 other senior commanders retired from the army and become civilian members of the government. Ne Win became Prime Minister proclaiming the end of the revolutionary Government. In 1974, the first general election was held, the new constitution came into effect, RC was dissolved, and Ne Win's direct military rule came to an end. This year marked the end of direct military rule and the beginning of constitutional dictatorship phase in Myanmar.

### **Constitutional Dictatorship: BSPP Rule: 1974-1988**

The second phase of military rule i.e. 'Constitutional Dictatorship phase' began in March 1974. Revolutionary Council which ruled Burma directly since 1962 dissolved in 1974. In this year, Ne Win introduced a new constitution called the 'new basic law' and the first national election was held. After the election in 1974, military junta fulfilled the promised of handling power to the elected and thus transferred power to the newly elected government. Actually, the transferred of power was only from General Ne Win to U Ne Win i.e. to himself. The military continued to rule the country legally and so concentrated all the power under his party. Two national elections were also held from in 1978, and in 1981. This period shows unrest and demonstration towards democratisation in the country.

In December 1974, riot broke out over food shortage, corruption, and declining economy<sup>10</sup>. In 1976, demonstration

also broke out by the students against the declining standard and condition on the University. In January 1978 second national election was held, but it did not change the national leadership and its policies. At the end of the 1980s the “Burmese Way to Socialism”, led to a severe economic crisis. In 1987, in an attempt to save the economy and combat the black market, the regime illegalized the currency notes 25, 35, and 75 kyat and replaced with 45 and 90 kyat notes on September 5, 1987. By this year Myanmar was already within the fold of Least Developed Countries (LDC) status<sup>11</sup>. This action could not solve the problem but leading to public outcry and provoke the students and the masses to demonstrations in Rangoon and other part of the country. In July 1988, after 23 years as unelected ruler Ne Win decided to resign. The military regime after his resignation transferred power to senior officers General Sein Lwin. But the new successor was not accepted and did not give satisfaction to the masses because Sein Lwin was involved in the brutal suppression of demonstrations in 1962. In August 1988, students called general strike and forced Sein Lwin to resign and replaced by Dr Muang Muang. He ended martial law, released political prisoners, political parties were allowed to form, and permission was also given to form All Burma Students’ Union. But this does not end the demonstration. The demonstration which was started in Yangon become broadened and includes Buddhist monks, professional classes, and spread to other cities and towns, including the northern urban centre of Mandalay. The military takes up brutal action against the masses killed thousands of protestors, and managed to reconsolidate its power in August 1988 and announced the election to be held in 1990. The armed forces led by Gen. Saw Muang seized power on September 18 and formed ‘State Law and Order Restoration Council’ (SLORC) which comprise of 19 senior military officers. But Ne Win even after retirement was believed to control and influence over the new leaders including Saw Muang<sup>12</sup>. The coup in 18 September 1988 by the SLORC brings back direct military rule in Myanmar for the second time and continued to be ruled for about 21 years till 30 March 2011.

### Impact on democratic landscape

The military regime is a special form of authoritarian rule. And it is different from democracies and other authoritarian rule. According to Dahl, democracy constitute of four key attributes: free and fair election, universal adult franchise, protection of civil liberties of freedom of speech, press and association and the absence of non-elected tutelary authorities<sup>13</sup>. Myanmar after the independent adopted parliamentary democracy and continued with that system of government until the coup d’état in 1962 by General Ne Win. After the coup, the military abolished the constitutional democracy. In 1974, the military created a new constitution wherein the military accepted both democracy and civilian supremacy and through Revolutionary Council engaged in nation and state building exercises. Under 1974 constitution, the military build a socialist democratic social order. Under Article 14 of the constitution the organs of state power at different levels were to function in consonance

with democratic principles and practices. Under Article 15 (a) every citizen was given the right to elect and to be elected to the organs of state power. During the year from 1962-1988, three national elections were held in 1974, 1978 and in 1981. But even though there was democratic element during the military rule in Myanmar, it was just for the name and the military continued to rule. In reality the military still dominant and the election was only for namesake.

### Myanmar foreign policy during military rule 1962-1988

Myanmar has traditionally relied on strict neutralism. After the independent in 1948, the newly independent Myanmar faced with internal domestic problem, economic crisis, and ethnic and communist insurgency demanding for autonomy and separate state from the Union. So the country opted for a foreign policy that sought to protect the economy, and save country from disintegration. During this period, Myanmar pursued a policy of non-alignment and neutrality in world affairs and joined the British Commonwealth. Myanmar supported the UN, and in 1961 Myanmar became a founder member of the Non-aligned Movement. The government at the initial stage of Independent during the civilian government of U Nu refrain any political, military or economic alliances with any country, but trying to maintain “friendship with all countries”. The country did not go for any political or military alliance. It tried to increase foreign trade but limited to natural gas and agricultural products and accepted assistance for development efforts<sup>14</sup>. Foreign trade was limited to the export of. Myanmar during this period of military rule from 1962-1988 disappeared from international affairs. The regime resisted all elements of external influence and continued to emphasize independence and non-alignment. External link were cut, bank, business and economy were nationalized, foreign practices and cultural institutions were banned, diplomatic activities were curtailed, and travel visas were also limited to a 24-hour stay. The military also isolate the country from the foreign as well as regional affairs. This policy managed to keep Myanmar out of super rivalry and threat from neighbours during this period. This policy on the other side has cost Myanmar<sup>15</sup>. From 1970s onwards military were aware of the importance of foreign contacts and investments for development. They sought to open the county to the west without undermining government authority. From the mid 1970s onwards, the country received large amounts of official development assistance (ODA) from the United States, Japan, and West Germany. During this period, there was no state policy on competition and development except some commonly recognized rules. State banks were controlled by the military leaders.

### Conclusion

Military in Myanmar has played an important role since early period. Myanmar gained its independent from the British Empire under the Burmese Independent Army led by thirty

comrades in which Ne Win was one of them. The military claims itself as the founder of the Union of Burma, and the main force that prevent the country from disintegrating. Military in Myanmar politics after independent has entered for the first time in 1958 when U NU invited General Ne Win to form care taker government. But direct military rule began in 1962 when the military under Ne Win captured power in 1962 lasted for 12 years. Direct military rule end in 1974 when a new constitution was held and nation election was held for the first time. The end of direct military rule led to the beginning of indirect military rule in which General Ne Win still control the government and lasted for 14 years upto 1988. From 1988 onwards the movement for democracy started throughout the country.

During the period from 1962 to 1988, many changes have brought to Myanmar. The military formed new constitution and transformed the country from constitution democracy of 1948 to direct democracy in 1962 and then to constitutional dictatorship in 1974. Not only with these changes, with regards to foreign policy the military closed down the linked with external affairs and isolate the country from the foreign as well as regional affairs. Some elements of democracy were also seen during this period. Three national elections were held; new constitution was formed, and under the new constitution rights of the citizen to elect and to stand for election was also given. But in practical election was only for namesake and it was not fair. The military wants to maintain power and so even though people are not giving votes to the military in the election they declared that they won and formed the government. So it can be said that, the military give space for democracy only theory or in paper only. And the act of military, its own policy led to its own end and the rise of movement for democracy in the country.

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