

Nationalist Movements of Myanmar in Colonial Period

Chit Ko Ko

Department of History, Meiktila University, Myanmar

Abstract

At the beginning, the nationalist movement had developed within the Buddhist cultural traditions, exemplified by the establishment of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (Y M B A) and their efforts to promote the national interest. The Y M B A was reorganized into the General Council of Burmese Association (G C B A). It soon developed into a political movement for constitutional reforms. Thus, British Government agreed to a constitutional reform by which Dyarchy Administration was introduced. And then, We Burmans society was established. The struggle for independence became the goal of We Burmans society. Many Nationalist movements arose in Myanmar. Myanmar Nationalist leaders had chosen the way for armed-resistance against the British administration. Thus, Nationalist leaders sought the way to obtain external help for the armed resistance movement against the colonialist.

Keywords: Nationalist movement, administration, Y M B A, G C B A, We Burmans Association

Introduction

Among the nationalist movements of the colonized countries, Myanmar's struggle for independence was noteworthy. At the very beginning the nationalist sentiment had developed within the Buddhist cultural frame. Thus, the young men's Buddhist Association emerged.

It soon developed into a political movement struggling for constitutional reforms. The nature of Myanmar nationalism and its transformation from moderate ideas to a struggle for armed-resistance were discussed in some detail. When the second World War broke out, leaders of nationalist movement sought the way to obtain external help for the armed resistance movement against the British and the outbreak of World War II paved the way for the Japanese invasion.

Review of the Relevant Literature

This paper makes use of published books in English, and published books in Myanmar.

Purpose or Rationale of the Paper

According to the literature, the aims of imperialism included at least three main factors: to overwhelm the religion, economy and politics of other countries including Myanmar. Most of the young people were sympathetic to nationalist movements in Myanmar during the colonial period. This paper will seek to identify important historical events in international and Myanmar politics, and political leaders concerned with Myanmar's struggle for independence.

Methodology

This research paper uses reports and records as primary and secondary sources, selected to allow comparisons between different ideas from a historical point of view.

Nationalist Movements of Myanmar in the Colonial Period

The British annexed Upper Myanmar and deposed King Thibaw in November 1885.¹ After the fall of Mandalay, some princes, ex-gentry leaders and servicemen and ethnic chiefs of hilly regions simultaneously revolted against the British. The patriotic resistance of rebel armies shocked the British policy-makers. Owing to the massive resistance of the people, the British government deployed over 40,000 British and Indian troops and military police in 1886-87. Many of the prominent officials and members of royal family who would become potential leaders of future rebellions were either

deported or sent in to exile.² On the other hand the British government accelerated the construction of roads and railways for political, economic and social motives. During the ten years span of the restoration of law and order and of the establishment of colonial administration, Myanmar was put under the administration of a Chief Commissioner.³

Although the early armed resistance of the people against British imperialism had collapsed, the gradual deterioration of Myanmar cultural identities under British government brought about anxiety among the people of Myanmar. There was an influx of foreigners and introduction of new economic and education systems. Monastic schools declined under the influence of western education systems, along with moral discipline and the ethical value of Buddhist education. Therefore, some influential *Sanghas* and national enthusiasts sought the way to buttress the Buddhist religion and national culture brought about the reawakening of nationalism.

Reawakening of nationalism in early twentieth coincided with the Japanese v victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 which inspired the nationalist sentiment of Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries which had been colonized by the western powers.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a young Myanmar elite who were able to study at western universities where they noticed the liberal ideas, nationalism and democratic ideas. When they returned home, they were not satisfied with the lack of self-determination of the country and naturally wanted to change the conditions under which they lived. The emergence of an educated elite and the anxiety of Myanmar people on the waning situation of Myanmar culture and religion resulted in the establishment of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in 1906. At the beginning, YMBA was devoted to the discussion of religion, culture, social welfare and related subjects. Later, particularly at the end of World War I, YMBA changed its focus to self-determination inspired by the constitutional reforms in India by the British Government. YMBA tried for constitutional reform through sending delegations to London. Its immediate successor - General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) was organized with a political purpose.

The main objective of GCBA was to struggle for Home Rule. The movement of GCBA was influenced by the Indian nationalist movements and Gandhi and Indian National Congress, Civil Disobedience movement, *Swa-raj* or Home Rule movement and non-cooperation movement of India, which all attracted the nationalists of Myanmar. Owing to the organized demands for constitutional change, the British government in 1922-23 experimented with constitutional reform in the shape of dyarchy.⁴ Under the dyarchy Myanmar representatives had the right to take part in the legislative council. Some ministerial posts known as "transferred subjects" were put under the Myanmar ministers. The

ministers responsible directly to the Governor continued to control the important ministries known as 'reserved subjects'. In addition, the Jurisdiction of the scheduled areas such as Kayinni, Shan States, Kachin and Chin tribal regions were controlled by the Governor alone. Most importantly the Governor was empowered to veto decisions of the legislative council. Thus the dyarchy did not meet the demands of the people of Myanmar. Some leading figures of GCBA decided to enter the election. Then a serious difference of opinion arose among the leaders which brought about the collapse of GCBA.

When the General council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) split into a number of smaller groups led by various prominent politicians, a group of young men from Yangon University founded their own party to struggle for independence. In the latter part of the decade it successfully called a nationwide general strike, with the cooperation of the Yangon University student's union, following which it gained the confidence to change its tactics and became the political party that challenged the British Government to grant Burma full independence. The Do-ba-ma Asiayone (We Burman Association) would remain the primary source of the revolutionary forces in the struggle for independence.

The year 1930 saw the revolutionary nationalist movement with the establishment of Dobama *Asi-a-yone*. The founders of Do-ba-ma *Asi-a-yone* assumed the title of Thakin master.⁵ They broke away from the moderate principles of YMBA and GCBA and set up the objective to struggle for complete independence.

The manifesto of Dobama *Asi-a-yone* known as Reform series No.1 reveals the theme of *Asi-a-yone* "Burma (Myanmar) for the Burmese (Myanmars). The struggle for independence became the ultimate goal of *Ais-a-yone* and it was vividly showed in the year 1931 when the British government canvassed the attitude of the people of Myanmar on whether to separate from British India. A debate was held under the auspices of the Yangon University Student Union on "whether or not Myanmar should sever its ties with India".

In the 1930's the British Government determined that Burma should separate from administration as part of India to gain a more representative and liberal constitution. This new constitution, same as that granted in India, was called the Government of Burma Act, 1935 and was implemented on April 1, 1937.⁶ Although it provided for the country's constitutional status under the Dyarchy Government, it fell considerably short of the expectations and demands of the political parties and people of Burma. All of the Burmese political parties had demanded freedom for Burma. Many political leaders were quite willing to accept gradualism in constitutional development but the ultimate objective had to be full independence for Burma.⁷

The political parties in the legislature at this time were left over from the fragmentation of the original nationwide independence movement. However, there now appeared two new parties, the Do-ba-ma Asi-a-yone and the Sinyetha Wun-thanu Aphwegyi, which supported the general nationalist aim of independence for Burma.

The Sinyetha Wunthanu Aphwegyi was commonly referred to as Dr. Ba Maw's party. Dr. Ba Maw's group had been the most powerful party within the council. Dr. Ba Maw had managed to gain his main support from this group in the 1932 elections by adopting an anti-separation policy and for the 1936 elections he reorganized it as the Sinyetha Wunthanu party, which won the support of the agriculturists and peasants of the countryside. The revolutionary changes of the war years under Japanese occupation seem to have swept the old GCBA spirit completely from the people's minds. But in the late 1930s, the ideas represented by the GCBA and Wunthanu still had popular appeal, and Dr. Ba Maw's party could be regarded as reasonably strong despite a lack of cohesion in political organization.

There were many other parties, but none strong enough in the legislature. These political parties owing allegiance to individual political leaders, still retained the old GCBA title. After the General council of the Sangha Sameggi Aphwegyoke (GCSS)⁸ had fragmented beyond recognition in the latter part of the 1930s, there appeared two important, politically active Sangha organizations, the Marmaka Rahanbyo Aphwe and the Mandalay Rahanbyo Aphwegyoke. At this time young monks developed into a political organization with substantial mass support in Mandalay. Having gained public support for their non-violent campaign against the Muslims, they went on to strengthen their popularity by leading mass demonstrations during the student strikes and the General strike, against the orders of the administration.⁹ The attempt did not fare well, but the organization was to play a more dynamic role later.

The students, although not organized into a real political party, nevertheless exerted a very great political influence. In the history of Burma's political movements and activities during the 1920s and 1930s, students regularly participated in anti-government activities.¹⁰ In the 1930s they were a very compact and strongly organized body under the leadership of the Yangon University Students Union and the all Burma students union. During December 1938 and early 1939, the students, under their own leadership, went to the aid of a failing industrial strike led by the Thakins and triggered nationwide school strikes.

From the beginning to the end of the 1930s, the Myanmar political landscape was dominated by the turbulent struggles against British colonialism. At the end of 1930, a peasant uprising led by *Saya San*

broke out. It was followed by the second university student strike in 1936 under the leadership of new executives of the student Union comprising Ko Nu, Ko Aung San, etc.

Quite apart from constitutional problems, the years 1938 and 1939 were as distressing as the early part of the decade. Labor strike began in December 1937 in the oil fields, dragged on through 1938 and ended after nationwide general strikes, involving all students, peasants and workers. Furthermore, anti-Muslim riots, originally instigated for political ends by supporters of politicians in the legislature, overflowed into intermittent anti-Indian disturbances in Yangon. The coming of the war and the retreat of British forces caused more difficulties and losses for the Indian community. In the 1940s, the Burmans never ceased their struggle for independence.

The year 1938 was a quite remarkable in the nationalist movement which began with the oilfield worker's strike and was followed by the Myanmar-Muslim Communal riot, third University student strike and the occurrence of mass demonstrations in Mandalay in which 17 martyrs comprising sanghas and people lost their lives after the police action. The outbreak of a series of anti-government disturbances, known as *Htaung-thon-ya-byei Ayei-daw-bon* Upheaval of 1300 (M.E), resulted in the ousting of Dr. Ba Maw's Coalition Government. Meanwhile factional rivalry broke out between *Thakin* Thein Maung and *Thakin* Ba Sein, leading figures of *Dobama Asi-a-yone* and finally led to the split of the *Asi-a-yone* into two groups; one under *Thakin* Kodaw Hmaing and other under *Thakin* Tun Ok. Both of them continued to embrace their aim for complete independence.

After the Split of *Dobama A-si-a-yone*, some leaders began to be convinced that armed-resistance against the British was the only means for independence. Since 1938, *Thakin* Tun Ok and some colleagues made contact with Japanese Embassy in Yangon, to obtain assistance from the Japanese if necessary for armed-resistance. When World War II broke out in Europe, many *Thakins* believed that time had come for the struggle for independence.

Thakins took the opportunity on the outbreak of World War II and organized Burma Freedom in accord with the slogan "the British difficulty is Myanmar's opportunity. The Freedom Bloc was established by the political parties and groups. Meanwhile, *Thakin* Aung San and *Thakin* Mya established the underground organization known as the People's Revolutionary Party to seek the every possible means to obtain foreign assistance for armed resistance. Between 11 and 13 May 1940, the annual conference of *Dobama Asi-a-yone* was held at Thayawadi. Following announcements were made by the conference.

1. Myanmar should not assist the imperialist war of the British.
2. Call the government to summon the constituent assembly to prepare independence,
and
3. To make preparation for close relations with the neighboring countries for independence.

The above decisions of Dobama Asi-a-yone were accepted by the freedom Bloc which held a meeting on 9 June at Jubilee Hall as a sequel of Dobama Conference.

Meanwhile *Thakin* Tun Ôk group decided to seek the Japanese help for armed resistance against the British. A series of meetings were held by them. At the fifth meeting held at Phaypon in May 1940, the group of *Thakin* Tun Ôk reached an agreement to make contact with Japanese Political Leaders. After the Phaypon meeting *Thakin* Tun Ôk returned to Yangon and arranged a secret meeting at Jubilee Hall on June 1940. Later, the British authorities noticed the movement of *Thakin* Tun Ôk and Japanese.

During the late July 1940, *Thakin* Aung San, *Thakin* Soe, *Thakin* Hla Pe, *Thakin* Kyaw Sein discussed with the student leaders Ko Ba Swe, Ko Ba Hein, Ko Hla Maung, etc. at the University Student Union to take foreign assistance and to make propagation for independence. Another problem was the British government's rush to arrest the prominent leaders - *Thakin* Nu and *Thakin* Lay Maung.

Finally, a plan was made by *Thakin* Hla Pe from China Town to dispatch *Thakin* Aung San to Amoy, China by sea. Meanwhile, an agent of the Chinese Communist Party from Shanghai suggested to take care of *Thakin* Aung San's Trip to Amoy where the Japanese military police firmly controlled the town. However, as the plan was already set up. *Thakin* Aung San and *Thakin* Hla Myaing left Yangon on 8 August 1940.

When they arrived at Kulangsu Island, *Thakin* Aung San and Hla Myaing found themselves in the midst of difficulties such as running out of funds. *Thakin* Hla Myaing wrote back to Yangon asking for funds. Meanwhile, the leaders of Freedom Bloc got in touch with the Japanese to arrange to proceed *Thakin* Aung San and *Thakin* Hla Myaing to Tokyo. When they arrived in Tokyo on 12 November 1940, Colonel Suzuki managed to discuss with the Japanese authorities to prepare for armed-resistance against the British. They provided necessary military training and equipment for the struggle for independence of Myanmar.

After an agreement was made, *Thakin* Aung San went back to Myanmar and arrived at Yangon on 3 March 1941. Soon after his arrival, a meeting was held by *Thakin* Aung San, *Thakin* Mya, Ko Ba Swe, U Kyaw Nyein, *Thakin* Chit and Mr. Suzuki. They agreed to carry out following schemes.

1. collaboration of two Dobama *Asi-a-yones* and other political parties,

2. extension of the underground movements,
3. accept financial and arms assistance from the Japanese,
4. dispatch young men to Japan for military training,
5. self-struggle for independence and
6. recognition of Japanese on independence of Myanmar.

Points of Discussion

From this paper future generation will understand Myanmar nationalist leaders attempts against the colonial administration, generally known as colonial rule denying freedom to Myanmar people, who were faced with worsen cultural, economic and political conditions, leading to widespread nationalist movements in our country.

Conclusion

Myanmar nationalist movement began in religious premises. The deterioration of Myanmar cultural identities under colonial government brought about anxiety among the people of Myanmar. Therefore, the formation of YMBA by young intellectuals was mainly intended to lift up public awareness for the restoration of Myanmar culture, literature and social values of monastic education. Ten years after its establishment, the YMBA was reorganized as the General council of Burmese Association (GCBA) on 29 October 1920. In 1939, Myanmar nationalist movement was led by Do-ba-ma A- Si-a-yon was formed with a group of young Burmans. Their attempts brought about the reawakening of nationalism. The founders of Do-ba-ma-A-Si-a-yon had a strong nationalist sentiment, and the goal of the movement became complete independence.

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Notes

1. Thibaw Min, the last king of Koungboung dynasty in 1885.
2. Some Myanmar princes were Myinzaing, Sawyan Naing and Saw Yan Paing, Shwegyobyu, Kyimyindine, setya princes. They were opposed to rebel against colonialism.
3. Administered by the chief commissioner under colonial Rule. Sir Arthur Phayre was the first chief commissioner of British-Burma. He was responsible to the Governor General of India.
4. Dyarchical Rule was administered jointly by British and Myanmar officers. Under the Dyarchy system, law and order, finance and revenue were controlled by the Governor. Some subjects such as education, agriculture and forests were transferred to the Myanmar ministers. The Governor could exercise a veto. Thus, some Myanmar leaders were not satisfied, they knew that they were cheated by Dyarchy Rule.
5. The Do-buama A- Si- a- yon was formed in the early 1930's. The founders of Do-bama A-Si- a-yon were intellectual groups. They called themselves Tha-kin of intellectual groups. They called themselves Tha-kin or Tha-kin Ma (for women)
6. Myanmar demanded full responsible government and separation from India. The Government of India Act 1935 legalized the separation. It came into effect on April 1937.
7. On the origins of the Do-bama A -Si-a-yon and the Sinyetha Wonthanu Aphwegyi, U Maung Maung, *The Rise and fall of the Buddhist Sangha in Burmese politics, 1920-1940*, 1976, pp.123-130 and pp. 604-613.
8. General council of the Monks united League, We called the General council of the Sangha United of the sameggi APhwe gyi (GCSS). Monks' activities become important in Myanmar politics during the colonial period.
9. U Maung Maung, *The Rise and fall of the Buddhist Sangha in the Burmese politics; 1920-1940, 1976*, PP. 321-326.
10. Ibid, pp 424-425.

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