



MILITARY AND DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

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Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to India in November, 2012 has opened a new chapter in Indo – Myanmar relations. India has been an active supporter of pro-democratic movement in Myanmar had earlier tried to engage the Military junta through her look 'Look East Policy'. By allowing it the ASEAN membership, India not only prevented the complete isolation of Myanmar but also saved it from falling prey to non-democratic governance model. This visit of the opposition leader can be seen as a positive development for the future of both the countries. The problem that arises is that in the coming years India has to choose between the pro-democratic forces and the present military regime. It is in this context the study of Myanmar's militarised democracy becomes important in understanding its relations not only with India but also with other democratic countries.

Today, the country faces an uninterrupted military rule and people's protest against the system. Since independence, Myanmar continued to dither from democracy and stayed in clutches of military rule. During this period the government created a chaotic situation, unrest and human rights abuses were at its apex. It is noteworthy that in the six decades of independence for almost two decades the country was governed without a constitution and governance was by a decree. Due to such conditions the ethnic groups who were denied the basic rights of self-determination, picked up an armed struggle and indulged in skirmishes with the ruling army. Slowly and steadily these conflicts grew in size and got people's support for their cause and developed their own regional armies. This development has immensely influenced the social, political and economic infrastructure of Myanmar's society.

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The Demographic Matrix

Demographically, the country is divided into various ethnic groups. 68% population comprise of Burmans which dominate the central low land region. The other important ethnic groups are Shan, Karen, Mon, Karenni, Kachin, Rohingya, Wa, Chin and Rakhine which are confined to high land periphery. Their share in population are 9%, 7%, 2%, .75%, 1.5% .15% .16%, 2.5% and 3.5%, respectively.

With the departure of the Britishers from Myanmar, an agreement, known as Panlong Agreement, was signed between the government under Aung San and the representatives of Shan, Kachin and Chin on 12 February 1947. It agreed on the principle of "full autonomy" in internal administration for the Frontier Areas" and the creation of a Kachin State by the Constituent Assembly.

After the assassination of General Aung San, his successor, U Nu had to face serious problems from the communist rebels. These developments led to various ethnic uprising for autonomous provisional authority. The situation deteriorated when Buddhism, at the cost of the Muslim Rohingya, Christian Karen, Chin and Kachin, was made the official religion. Furthermore, to make the matter worse, split in the party forced U Nu to call on the military to form a transitional government in conducting a fresh election. The election was held in 1962 and

General Ne Win came to power but even the new ruler could not solve the problem of insurgency.

As a result a number of new insurgent groups mushroomed and the country was smitten with armed conflicts. Each ethnic group regarded the protection of their individual languages, customs,

culture and natural resources important to their national identity. At the same time, the government forces steadfastly believed that a “crisis of the minorities” – which was one third of the population, could undermine the country’s stability. Hence, they continued to use their might to suppress them.

Main Armed Groups Operating in Myanmar

By 1949 a number of serious insurgencies had broken out in various parts where the ethnic population lived. Most of the ethnic groups had formed their political parties and their military wings emerged which started to target the government armed forces. Many ethnic groups took up arms to protect their states from Burman rule, demanding autonomy, ethnic rights and an inclusive democracy. Though initially, the country’s armed forces were weak and divided but soon built up strength to tackle the widespread unrest in the country.

The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) took up arms in 1949, almost immediately after the British left Myanmar.¹ The KNLA is the military wing of the Karen National Union (KNU). The Kachin rebels formed the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the military wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). The Karenni Army (KA) was created after the Burmese government incorporated Kayah State into the Union of Burma in 1951. Karenni leaders argued they had not agreed to incorporation. The KA is the military wing for the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). The Chin National Front (CNF) was founded in March 1988 as a coalition of several Chin opposition groups to push for greater autonomy. The New State Mon Party (NSMP) established an armed wing that has fought the government since 1949, when military forces entered Mon territory. The Arakan Liberation Army (ALA) was first set up with the help of the KNU in the 1950s but soon became defunct after most of its leaders were arrested. In the 1970s it reassembled, but is still one of the smallest ethnic armies. The Shan State Army (SSA) was formed in 1964 as Burmese military began to move into Shan State. The SSA later split into two factions, creating the Shan State Army-North, which signed a ceasefire with the government in 1964, and the Shan State Army-South, which continued to fight the state until an initial ceasefire in December 2011. The United Wa State Army (USWA), created after the fall of the Community Party Burma in 1989, is one of

the country’s most powerful ethnic armies and receives military resources, infrastructure and support from neighbouring China.²

The Political Tussle

Myanmar’s tryst with democracy since its independence has been extremely tenuous. The Britishers left the country under a weak democratic rule. This constitutional government stayed in power till 1962 that too, amidst a civil war, insurgency, corruption and mismanagement. Thereafter, the armed forces who had already tasted political power for 18 months during elections, staged a coup, arrested many members of the government, suspended the constitution, and ruled by decree. From 1962 onwards, Myanmar was a one-party ruled state under General Ne Win. After Gen Ne Win’s withdrawal from politics there was an economic crisis which provoked popular unrest.³

In the summer of 1988, the people of Myanmar revolted against the ruling military government. This development is what is sometimes called the “8888 Uprising.” The name refers to the tragic events of August 8, 1988, when soldiers opened fire on the civilian protesters, killing an unknown number of people and started a brutal crackdown on opposition groups and their leaders. When the 19-member State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) assumed power on September 18, 1988, it promised to hold multiparty democratic general elections. This promise was welcomed at home and internationally. The elections finally took place in 1990 and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi won absolute majorities of votes and seats. The SLORC refused to recognise the results of the election, and instead it continued its repressive rule, held Ms Suu Kyi under house arrest and suppressed the democratic aspirations of the people.⁴

Human Rights Violations

The era post-1990 era has been the darkest period of the country’s history with rising cases of Human Rights violations. It was obvious that the people would be deprived of their democratic rights and the military rule would stay for more years. A number of countries (EU, USA and Canada) slammed economic and cultural sanctions. In 1997 the SLORC was replaced by a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but this did not represent a change in the senior leadership nor in the

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repressive nature of the regime. A fresh Constitution was formed under this Military rule which gave tremendous powers to the military. As per the new constitution only 75% of the seats for the parliament were contested, rest 25% were nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's Military forces).⁵

Iron Hand of Tatmadaw

At the time of Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Tatmadaw was weak, small and disunited, but, with passage of time it has become a force to reckon with. It has not only succeeded in influencing the political development but also has been able to keep the growing unrest of the ethnic rebels under control. After a major modernization plan mostly with assistance from China and Russia the Tatmadaw grew in stature and might in the 1990s.⁶ It soon tightened an iron fist towards the ethnic groups. In due course, with the rise of regional ethnic groups, the military *junta* proposed that the groups which accept cease-fire be converted into "border guards". But the most of the ethnic armies opposed this move. At this juncture the Tatmadaw displayed its might and routed the Kokang Rebel Army in 2009.

Today 3,50,000 strong Tatmadaw are not only well embedded in the political stage of the country but also effectively engaged in tackling its internal and external frontiers. Another interesting factor is that the Union of Myanmar is always finding itself sandwiched between the strategic interests of major power - China in the north, and a South-Asian power, India, in the west. There are reports that China is helping Myanmar with development of Military Bases at Coco Islands at Myanmar's southern which are just about 20 kilometres from the nearest islands of Andaman group of islands (India). There are also unconfirmed reports that China is developing a Communication Base on one of the three islands with a view to keep the Indian ocean region under effective surveillance. If the reports are correct then it is a matter of serious concern for India.⁷

Transition towards Democracy

Two decades of military rule coupled with widespread sanctions from economic giants like USA, Canada and EU, has brought the country's economy to an abysmally low level. The economy not only requires investment in vital sector like heavy industry, health, banking, communication but also needs loans for its internal

infrastructure development. For this purpose establishment of democracy and conducive environment was a pre-requisite. Probably realising this factor the country saw the formation of its third constitution in 2008. Though it can be termed as Constitution epitomising Militarised Democracy, as it gives tremendous participation to military representatives. As per this constitution elections were held in the country in 2010. Though a number of opposition parties boycotted the elections, yet they realised that the Military can run up the required reforms effectively and institute much required sustainable development measures.⁸ Ultimately, the by-elections of 2012 saw

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a larger participation of political parties and their better representation in the *Pyithu Hlutaw* (lower house of parliament). It undoubtedly showed acceptance of this form of democracy by one and all. The political parties of Myanmar have probably realised that in the present circumstances it is important to take assistance of the astute rulers and the *Tatmadaw* to keep them aside and experiment with power alone.

The Road Ahead

What is needed today, is that instead of militarised democracy, democracy in its true form, which is necessary for growth and development, as seen in the western countries and India. Such kind of democracy should be based on the following principles.

- The non-disintegration of the Union
- Non disintegration of the national solidarity
- The perpetuation of the national sovereignty
- The emergence of genuine multi-party democratic system
- The development of universal principles of justice, freedom and equality
- As in the case with other democracies in the world, the army in Myanmar may be subservient to the national politics.

However, the country has shown some positive indicators like, the removal of the press censorship, release of over 1000 political prisoners and lifting of entry ban on many others, permission to its prominent political figure and nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to travel abroad and alterations in the foreign investment law. Right now there has been no reaction from the

Tatmadaw towards these reforms probably because Myanmar needs proper political, economic and social development so that the country can move in the right direction. These steps have been welcomed by the democratic neighbour India and also the western countries.

Though some thinkers feel that history is testimony and military rulers do not let the powers pass off easily, but others feel that this could only be a transitional phase to a full fledged democratic set up. However, Aung San Suu Kyi and the President of Myanmar's visit to the USA and India, concurrently, is a mute testimony to the beginning of this symbiotic relationship of military and the democracy in Myanmar. As of now for the road to development both India and Myanmar need each other, but in future, what will be needed is the development of the country as secular and democratic nation, built on the concept of peoples participation in national politics and the minimization of the military role.

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Notes

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