

## **Why Is Myanmar headed the way it is now?**

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The events in Myanmar that everyone seems to want to know about are the coup of 1 February 2021, the arrest and trial of Aung San Suu Kyi, the CDM and now civil war, the Ethnic Armies, and the NUG, and the relationship of the situation in Myanmar to the Great Game now played between the US and the PRC as well as India and Russia, and in addition how the older Rohingya crisis is going to be resolved.

As complicated as all of this is, there are many more things that are work that you will have heard less about, including the quasi secession of Rakhine under the Arakan Army, that are essential to understand what is going on.

However, I don't have space to adequately tell you what happened, but hopefully by explaining why things have happened I can help answer some questions.

Scholars in different disciplines will focus on different aspects of the same developments. A political scientist will point out that ethnic group diversity makes it difficult to ethnonationalism is more divisive than unifying.

A geographer will say Myanmar has ethnic group diversity because of its inverted horse-shoe topography divided into uplands and lowlands. A historian will tell you that royal traditions of absolute rule along with the imprint of Theravada Buddhism and public belief that this life is suffering and you deserve the lot because of the poor store of merit you have from bad things done in this life or the low station you were born into in this life due to bad behaviour in a previous life.

What I would like to emphasize, however, today, is the place of three empires in the making of the problems today in the longterm and why things have wound up where they are.

First, I'll look at the Burmese kingdom and its rule in and around the Irrawaddy Valley.

Second, British rule in Myanmar.

Third, Myanmar's relationship with the US during the Cold War.

If I have time I may mention a fourth, one that has begun to absorb Myanmar already.

These imperialisms are overlapping and their effects are layered and inter-act and the problems too complicated actually for anyone to easily resolved.

## The Kingdom of Myanmar

In Myanmar, since the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Kingdom of Pagan, the predecessor of the modern Myanmar state, converted to Theravada Buddhism and connected political power with religious belonging, all the non-Buddhist peoples who have fallen under Burmese control have been treated as heathen who needed to be converted and it is one of the reasons that the Rohingya were attacked in 2017 by the Burmese Army and why they remain in refugee camps in Bangladesh today.

But while the lowlands would see the spread of Theravada Buddhism it's reach into the highlands, the area of difficult topography, was uneven, often absent, and so Buddhism brought unity to the lowlands under the Myanmar state but made for problematic relations with highland states—the kingdom was always trying and failing to convert highlanders to their version of Theravada.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries, partly because they at least officially did not represent the state, made greater headway and so many of the highlanders today are Baptist and these groups are fearful of being within a state that is extremely Buddhist without constitutional protections and federalism.

Worse, the rise of the Myanmar empire meant not only a dominant lowland culture that was Buddhist but one that spoke the main Bamar language of the chief power centre became the standard core culture of the kingdom and Bamar ideas, manner of dressing, their culture, their laws, their peculiar sense of history, all these things became the “official” standard.

Like other proto-bureaucratic states, Myanmar was adept at massive record keeping and the production of state histories. These became the official ways to understand the past particularly when non-Bamar records were destroyed in campaigns of conquest.

Histories are never neutral and most records preserved and available are those a state does not see threatening.

As a result of these records, many Bamarers genuinely believe that Myanmar has always been Buddhist, that Bamar rulers were descended from King Mahasamata, that the Buddha visited Myanmar on the path to Enlightenment, that Muslims are a phenomena of the colonial period, and the Rohingya a post-colonial invention.

So, ethnics are viewed by these records of state as second-class citizens, subjects of the main Bamar group that is portrayed as being the majority of the population.

I return to the factors I mentioned earlier, a political culture emerged which

--favored absolute royal power, a kind of Myanmar social contract in which the population served the ruler in exchange for security and stability

-- the idea that might was a consequence or a measure of morality, and that with power came wealth—political power was the only way to ensure the stability of control of wealth

--the belief that whatever they get or don't get in life is deserved and if they suffer through the bad times and remain good, they will get a better life the next time around.

--Moreover, the idea that if the leader fails, such as Ne Win in 1988 or Min Aung Hlaing now in his efforts to win the civil war—bad karma or a poor store of merit means he shouldn't rule and he is vulnerable to being replaced by the leader who can demonstrate success.

--if resistance doesn't replace him, the tatmadaw will, if things continue to go badly.

### **British Rule**

The second imperialism was that of the British who ruled different parts of Burma from 1824 to 1948 with the hiatus of WWII, but importantly for the majority of Barmans, effective British rule last only from the late 1890s to 1942, barely two generations, and direct influence or engagement was very much limited to elites.

The British did a lot of things that have shaped the practice of governance today.

They introduced censuses that cemented in place largely a Bamar way of viewing the population and its ethnicities.

They introduced the bifurcation of civil and military authority and the idea that in times of emergency the military held sway along with a large number of laws designed to keep order.

They also introduced under pressure from Barmans, who had followed the Indian anti-colonial example political parties, notions of popular sovereignty, elections, and western-defined universal liberal values.

But again, the brief and circumspect reach of British influence meant that often the vocabularies were borrowed but the meanings of Democracy, rights, and freedoms had not permeated—ideologies were borrowed in form but not content, and we wound up with liberals who were not really liberals and communists who were not really communists, as understood in the West.

It is why Aung San Suu Kyi could present herself as a liberal democratic leader and really seem to only implement the FORM of liberal democracy and compromise on the civil rights that were usually connected with it—this by the way has nothing to do with the oft-cited limitations of the military's guaranteed powers under the 2010 constitution.

This interaction of pre-colonial Bamar Buddhist privilege with colonial concretized ideas of ethnic and indigeneity with a shallow commitment to political inclusivity meant that she came to power during the so-called transition to Democracy, there was majority rule and little else.

And it explains why she did not appear to be motivated to do anything about the Rohingya.

The absolute nature of political power in Bamar political culture did not lend itself to cultivating younger leaders, so when the military took power away from Aung San Suu Kyi a little over a year ago, there were no middle ranking leaders in the NLD who could emerge to take her place.

Apparently, the autocratic nature of her control of the party drove many aspiring leaders to leave the NLD and join competing parties such as the Democratic Party for a New Society that would place a big role in leading the CDM.

The unequal distribution of wealth under the British also seemed to justify the existence of stark economic inequalities on the basis of who held political power—not necessary political officer.

The British were wealthy because they controlled Myanmar, the Bamars were poor because they did not.

Having power and gaining an keeping wealth was a lesson carried into the future.

### **The United States**

We could argue that independent Myanmar under U Nu and Ne Win and other military leaderships was another kind of imperialism, but there is nothing new that it did that fundamentally added to what had already been by the precolonial and colonial empires.

Independent Myanmar merely saw a contestation of the legacies of both that never really worked themselves out successfully and explain the political and economic failures of Myanmar in the last half of the twentieth century.

Instead the third imperialism I view as more consequential was the more prolonged and subtle global impact of the new superpower, the United States, which had a reach that far exceeded that of the Soviet Union, because it was the centred of the world capitalist system, controlled the major international organisations for much of this period, and had its fingers everywhere including in Myanmar's backyard during the civil war.

The US was important in so far as its existence and fear of being drawn under another imperial power led Myanmar to make decisions that were not the best ones for its reconstruction after WWII or for its economic, social, or political development.

The US role in supporting the KMT in Myanmar, fears the US was trying to topple the government of U Nu, and fears that US would draw Myanmar into the Cold War, in the context of a growing civil war at home, meant that Myanmar sought to remain neutral, non-aligned, and isolated throughout much of the last half of the twentieth century.

Bamars and ethnic minorities did not see the kind of influences, good or bad, that accompanied globalisation, they did not have extensive experimentation during this period with Democracy, there was a military regime in place effectively from 1962 even when it changed names to the BSPP and the latter's façade of Democratic centralism.

Myanmar's experience with Democracy and freedom was very close to that experienced by different Eastern European states, such as Belarus and Hungary which today still enjoy Democracy more in name than in substance.

Avoiding US dominance meant continued poverty, a long delay in human development, and a lack of economic infrastructure.

This was guaranteed in 1988-1990 when military rule cracked, change was promised, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD rose, won an election, and then the military ignored the results, put her under house arrest, and international sanctions were put in place.

The Cold War had also ended at the same time and the military needed to find a way to reform but still hold onto power because there were fewer options now and would have to engage with the West if they wanted to enrich themselves, but the West was of course demanding political change.

The military took twenty years to do so, wrote a Constitution that guaranteed it had a veto and kept control of certain ministries, and would not be prosecuted for past crimes.

The military meanwhile also brought about ceasefires with different ethnic insurgencies, their armies were often left in place to be turned into border guards.

But the military did not relax its military control in many ethnic areas—because these possessed the wealthy resources and commodities they could sell once the sanctions were lifted.

Nevertheless, they had done enough for the West, sanctions began to be rolled back, investment surged, and everything was good for Bamars.

The legacy of this third imperialism that we have seen until the last few years was that the military's position was entrenched, they could feel secure to allow some transfer of power in the form of a dyarchy with the NLD.

This development came under tension though when the military attacked the Rohingya in August 2017.

This event and Aung San Suu Kyi's defense of the military's actions destroyed Aung San Suu Kyi's liberal democratic credentials with Western organisations that had been fighting on her behalf in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Many foreign governments were critical.

It did help to strengthen her appeal to domestic Bamar anti-Muslim protestors and organisations, but this went along the lines of feeding into the strength of precolonial political culture.

One good thing the opening up did secure though was an open door to civil rights training from INGOs and others—it was a mixed bag, but there was a broader politicization towards liberal democracy amongst a wider group of younger people who would play a big role in the CDM

## **We might be seeing a 4<sup>th</sup> Imperialism now under the PRC**

The BRI had been intersecting with Myanmar early in the 2010s but under Aung San Suu Kyi we started to see some transfer of sovereignty regarding the BRI.

The close relations between ASSK and the PRC really picked up in August 2017 when targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military slowly began to emerge again, making the military less comfortable with their collaboration with Aung San Suu Kyi, and international alienation made ASSK more dependent on the PRC

As ASSK seemed less Western oriented and more palatable as a leader than the military to the PRC, the military was concerned.

When the NLD swept the November 2020 elections, the military was afraid that her domestic popularity and the outcome would empower her to change the constitution, not that it would make it more liberal, but that it would remove the military's guarantees of control.

They were afraid that change would make Aung San Suu Kyi a more powerful authoritarian leader backed by the PRC and so they demanded a do-over or approval of the steps that would lead to that.

ASSK refused to budge, and on 1 February 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing moved.

The CDM that emerged was very revealing.

Smaller numbers were in favor of returning the Democratic space but the NLD turned this into protests about support for ASSK herself.

When the military clamped down, however, increasingly Barmans many of whom had supported the military during the Rohingya crisis clicked on the idea that a bad military was bad for everyone and changed their stance.

But not everyone-- the old leadership, NLD parliamentarians who then formed the NUG, were less open to change on this issue and still biased towards a Bamar-directed Myanmar.

Where we are right now is the result of the three historical imperialisms and perhaps the emerging fourth in Myanmar.

The ethnic armies have mobilised against the military again

The army is trying to find a way to prevent permanently Aung San Suu Kyi's potential to complete for power, which is why the jail sentences are so important to them

The economic decline under sanctions and the political chaos is a demonstration that the military does not have the moral power to rule, so we have a fragmented country

Other leaders have not been able to emerge to replace Aung San Suu Kyi to the same degree

Everything is in a deadlock and almost irresolvable I argue because of the shadow of the different imperial heritages

My prediction for the future is that I think the different options for what happens to Myanmar in the future will be constrained or widened a lot by the geopolitical readjustments following the resolution of the crisis in the Ukraine.

We might see Aung San Suu Kyi or not again, but either way Myanmar will not have genuine Liberal Democracy as understood in the West and instead regardless of who is in place, we will see an even shallower façade for continued military control.

We might see an unstable divided Myanmar that can't progress towards an end to the civil war like many fragile states and we forget sometimes that this was normal for much of post-independence history, 50 years of ongoing civil war with the control roughly split in half between government and everyone else.

We might even see Myanmar finally breaking up permanently, as we see with Rakhine at the moment, in the style of the Balkan in the late twentieth century.