

Forum: Political Committee

Issue: The question of political representation in Myanmar

Student Officer: İrem Kaki

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is a country located in South East Asia, bordering Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand. It was formerly a British and later a Japanese colony, until 1948, when it became an independent state with U Nu as Prime Minister. However, a majority of its time as an independent state has been restless with political crises. The government led by Prime Minister U Nu was overthrown in a military coup in 1962, and the state was officially governed by military junta until 2010, when the first “real” elections since the 1962 coup took place. Myanmar has since begun its process of reform, but still has a huge path ahead, filled with issues to tackle such as the situation of the ethnic and religious minority groups, the excessive power the military possesses, corrupt judiciary system and so on.

Definition of Key Terms

Political representation: According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, political representation is “*the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions, and perspectives 'present' in public policy making processes.*” This definition simply refers to the people in the government.

Military coup: If a military coup takes place, it means that the military of a sovereign state has overthrown the government by the use of military force and claimed the governing positions.

Military junta: A military junta is a form of government that consists of military officers rather than civilians, and is usually a dictatorship.

Ethnicity: If a group of people have the same ethnicity, they belong to a group which has common ancestry, language, social or cultural background.

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw: It is the bicameral legislative branch of Myanmar, which means that it consists of two sub-bodies. Its English translation is Assembly of the Union.

General Overview

Myanmar's demographics play a vital role in understanding the main problem lying beneath this issue. The ethnic groups residing in Myanmar are presented as 68% Burman, 9% Shan, 7% Karen, 4% Rakhine, 3% Chinese, 2% Indian, 2% Mon and 5% other by the World Factbook. In terms of religion, the state again proves to be very diverse with statistics showing 87.9% Buddhist, 6.2% Christian, and 4.3% Muslim. Many of the minority ethnic groups live in the border regions of Myanmar.

After gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar had a very short period of somewhat peaceful ruling for 14 years. In the early 1960s, the military started to express its concerns with the government in office, which was led by U Nu at the time. Prime Minister U Nu was highly tolerant of separation and often promoted the idea that Buddhism should be the official religion of the state. Although it was believed that the implementation of this idea would bring a sense of national unity to the country, it would also marginalize the minority ethnic groups who do not believe in Buddhism, such as the Rakhine and the Karen Muslims. As a result of his promotion of this particularly non-secular approach, Prime Minister U Nu's government was overthrown by the military led by Ne Win in 1962.



Picture 1: Map of the ethnic groups in Myanmar

Burmese Way to Socialism

The state was led by the only present political party, Burma Socialist Programme Party, from 1962 to 1988. "Burmese Way to Socialism" was accepted as the ideology of the state. This ideology aimed to nationalise every institution and decrease foreign dependency. As a side attempt to tackle the developing black market, the government tried demonetizing a huge portion of the money that was in circulation. The results were, unsurprisingly, disastrous, as described by many sources. Myanmar rapidly became one of the least economically developed countries in the world, and as the people rioted, the government

oppression increased. Police brutality became common practice in order to silence the anti-government groups, especially students.

In 1988, there was a series of protests in the state, called the 8888 Nationwide Popular Pro-Democracy Protests in which Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the former independence hero Aung San, emerged as a political figure and led the formation of the National League for Democracy (NLD.) There had been stirrings in underground communities and anti-government notions were being spread especially by workers and Buddhist monks since the early 1980s, which led to the events themselves. The protests, after a long and bloody period, resulted in estimated thousands of civilians' deaths, were ended by the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was just a name change of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. The media was further suppressed and several members of the NLD were arrested due to the fact that they were "endangering the state."

1990 and 2010 Elections

In the aftermath of the 1988 protests, SLORC released a statement that they would allow an election to take place in the near future. This election was held in 1990, and the elected party was the NLD. However, the government simply ignored this result and refused to hand over the governing power to the NLD. After two more decades of military oppression, there came 2008 and the Cyclone Nargis. The natural disaster resulted in thousands of deaths and an estimated number of 1.5 million people severely damaged according to the UN. During this incident, many countries from all around the world extended humanitarian aid to the suffering people of Myanmar, which was delayed and in some cases, even not accepted by the government of Myanmar. This particular incident and some other factors caused an outrage in the public, which then led to another election taking place in 2010. Many military officers resigned from their military positions in order to be able to place their civilian candidacies, which was a step towards a democratic election, however small and manipulative it first seems. This was one of the reasons why the NLD also protested this election and did not participate in it. Nevertheless, the outcome of the 2010 election was highly doubted to be fully democratic, since the winning party was the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was the party favored by the military.

2015 Election

The elected civilian party USNP held governing position for five years, with Thein Sein as prime minister. During the 2010-2015 period, the situation in Myanmar showed significant improvement. Some developments included the release of political prisoners, mostly members of the NLD, and steps taken to recover from the drastic effects of the Burmese Way to Socialism had on Myanmar over the course of five decades. Naturally, this period was also not a period of full prosperity, concerning the system had been corrupted for such a long time. However, with the NLD winning a supermajority of the seats in the 2015

general elections, Myanmar started its journey on the path to full democracy and that by itself should be considered a success.

Present Day

Although the progress done in the last decade must be recognised and congratulated, there are still many aspects of the government of Myanmar which prevent the state from being ruled by sheer democracy. The country now runs on the 2008 Constitution, which was constructed during the reign of military junta. This constitution provides the military with extensive power: The Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services is authorized to appoint approximately 110 of the total 440 representatives of the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives), and 56 of the 168 representatives of the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), the two lower houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union.) This authority leaves the government-elect without protection from a possible military coup.

Moreover, with the government starting to stabilise, however not ideally, the issues with the minority ethnic and religious groups started to rise to attention. There are many minority groups in Myanmar, since it is a very diverse country, as specified at the beginning of this part of the research report. Some of these groups are not being recognised by the government and their humanitarian rights are being severely violated, like the Rohingya Muslims. As a response to the violation of their rights, Rohingya Muslims have consulted bearing arms and engaging in armed conflict with the government officials. The United Nations has and will always discourage armed conflict; however, it must be acknowledged that the situation of the

Rohingya Muslims is a grave concern to human rights.



Picture 2: A representation of «The Golden Triangle»

Setting aside the responsibilities the government fails to fulfil towards the minority groups, the minority groups also often fail to aid their country in terms of peacebuilding. The Golden Triangle of the Southeast Asia is the region that consists of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, where a substantial amount of drug, specifically opium trafficking takes place. The rural areas where these trafficking operations take place are populated and managed by

armed minority groups, which puts them in a position of power on the country's economy, which already heavily relies on black marketing of illegal items. If there is to be a sustainable period of peace in this area, dealing with the drugs issue is essential, since it can always reiterate.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

National League for Democracy (NLD)

Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, this party was formed as an anti-government and pro-democracy group during the 1988 protests during which thousands of civilians lost their lives. Members of this party have been frequently arrested and neutralised for anti-government propaganda. They are currently governing the state, with Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor and Htin Kyaw as President.

State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)

This is the final phase of the military government, which started as the Burma Socialist Programme Party in 1962. The party then became State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) during the 1988 protests, and after some time, was renamed as the SPDC in 1997. Even though the name has changed a few times, this party has always remained as the party backed by the military, and ruled the country for five decades.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

This organisation operates in the Southeast Asia with the purpose of bringing the states of the region together and ensuring collaboration between them, hence the name. ASEAN is often accused of being too passive on the issues Myanmar is experiencing and not providing as significant help as expected from it.

Timeline of Events

4 January 1948	Formerly a British and then a Japanese colony, Myanmar (then Burma) gains its independence.
2 March 1962	The government of Prime Minister U Nu is overthrown by the military.
March – September 1988	8888 Nationwide Popular Pro-Democracy Protests took place.
27 September 1988	The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, is

	found.
1989	Martial law is declared in the country, and the name of the country is changed from Burma to Myanmar.
1989	Aung San Suu Kyi and many other NLD leaders are arrested, due to becoming “concerns for the security of the state.”
May 1990	The military junta allows an election to take place. The results of this election indicate the NLD, however, the junta simply ignores the results and refuses to act upon them.
May 2008	The Cyclone Nargis happened, leaving 1.5 million people severely damaged, as estimated by the UN.
7 November 2010	The first democratic elections since 1962 are held, but the results are received suspiciously, because the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party has won.
30 March 2011	State Peace and Development Council is officially dissolved by a decree signed by Senior General Than Shwe.
8 November 2015	Another general election takes place. This time, the National League for Democracy wins a supermajority of seats and begins to govern Myanmar.

UN Involvement

The United Nations, especially the Human Rights Council, has drafted many resolutions on the issue. The arrests of political figures, most importantly Aung San Suu Kyi, has been condemned countless times. The United Nations Development Programme recently contributed to the reform process of Myanmar with the Myanmar Country Programme Action Plan, but then retracted the funding of the program, preventing its prolongation, which was very well needed.

Relevant UN Documents

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America: draft resolution (12 January 2007, S/2007/14): This is a draft of a Security Council resolution that calls for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and many other political prisoners, as well as the lifting of the restrictions on international humanitarian organisations that request to work in Myanmar. It was vetoed by China and Russia, and therefore not put into action.

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (7 March 2008, A/HRC/7/18)

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, mandated by resolution 6/33 of the Human Rights Council (7 March 2008, A/HRC/7/24)

Progress report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana (10 March 2010, A/HRC/13/48)

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar (15 September 2010, A/65/368): This report is in regard to the human rights issues seen before, during and after the 2010 elections. Some examples include the lack of freedom of speech and assembly. It is the most recent report including such evaluation.

Treaties and Events

Myanmar Country Programme Action Plan 2013-2017: This action plan is one of the many Country Programme Action Plans administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP.) It was put into force in 2013, and being a 3-year action plan, ended in 2015. According to a press release by the UNDP, this action plan *“aims to strengthen institutions of democratic and local governance, environment and disaster risk management and to support government’s efforts for poverty reduction during three-year period.”*

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The main approach in the global community has been to condemn the military junta, which is unfortunately the best that can be done by third party actors without interfering with the sovereignty of Myanmar. The United States has taken the condemning one step further, and placed economic sanctions on Myanmar. Although this application has affected Myanmar’s economy, it was not as influential as intended, due to

the fact that the main reasons for the impoverishment of Myanmar are irrelevant to international trade. Nevertheless, the Obama administration has lifted these sanctions in 2016, which also raised questions, since this could not have been done without Aung San Suu Kyi's approval and it is believed that she stood by the sanctions because they put pressure on the military figures of Myanmar.

Internally, Myanmar has actually succeeded in holding democratic elections and currently is being governed by the elected National League for Democracy. Nonetheless, becoming a fully democratic state after being governed by military junta for approximately five decades is not work to be done in a single day. Myanmar is making progress, but there are still many issues to tackle.

Possible Solutions

There are many non-governmental organisations all around the world that can help Myanmar with the humanitarian issues it is trying to tackle right now, but these will mostly be in effect to the results of the political problem, rather than addressing the problem itself. Being a mostly domestic problem, the issue of political representation in Myanmar cannot be fully solved by third party states and organisations. The best the United Nations can do would be to help the country in its humanitarian issues such as the lack of freedom of speech and assembly, separation due to religious beliefs, and so on. Moreover, if the situation deteriorates and the democratic progress that has been done is not upheld, then the Member States can re-consult ways of condemning the presumed non-democratic government that they have consulted before.

Notes from the Chair

The United Nations is an organisation that has devoted itself to maintaining peace amongst and within the countries of the world. However, this does not mean, by any means, that it has the right to interfere with the sovereignty of any Member State. The delegates are asked to specifically pay attention to respecting the sovereign status of Myanmar while proposing solutions to this particular issue.

Additionally, the United Nations recognises the state at hand with the name Myanmar rather than the name Burma. It is asked of the delegates to keep this in mind, and refer to the state as Myanmar at all times in order to avoid confusion.

Bibliography

- Alagappa, Muthiah. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995. Print.
- Bosc, Igor. (n.d.): n. pag. United Nations Development Programme, 8 Apr. 2013. Web. 10 Feb. 2017. <http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/Documents/UNDP_MM_CPAP_%20JULY%202013.pdf>.
- Boudreau, Vincent. *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia*. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- "Burma." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 12 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/burma>>.
- Charbonneau, Louis. "UN Says 1.5 Million People Affected by Myanmar Storm." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 08 May 2008. Web. 08 Mar. 2017. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKSP48798._CH_.242020080508>.
- Dovi, Suzanne. "Political Representation." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 02 Jan. 2006. Web. 9 Feb. 2017. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/political-representation/>>.
- Fisher, Jonah. "Surprise as US Ends Myanmar Economic Sanctions." *BBC News*. BBC, 16 Sept. 2016. Web. 10 Feb. 2017. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-37375829>>.
- Holmes, Robert A. "Burmese Domestic Policy: The Politics of Burmanization." *Asian Survey* 7.3 (1967): 188-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/2642237?ref=search-gateway:49de72bd09267888874839ca78f21f6d>>.
- Map of Myanmar's Main Ethnic Groups. Digital image. *Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts: More Process than Peace*. The Economist Newspaper, 19 Jan. 2015. Web. 8 Mar. 2017. <http://cdn.static-economist.com/sites/default/files/images/print-edition/20150221_ASM940.png>.
- "Pyidaungsu Hluttaw." ပြည်ထောင်စုလွှတ်တော်. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.myanmarparliament.gov.mm/en/hluttaw/pyidaungsu-hluttaw.html>>.
- "UN Documents for Myanmar." *UN Documents for Myanmar*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. <<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/myanmar/>>.
- United Nations Development Programme. *Myanmar Opens a New Chapter of Partnership. Myanmar Information Management Unit*. UNDP, 9 Apr. 2013. Web. 10 Feb. 2017. <http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/RefDoc_UNMyanmar_UNDP_Myanmar%20open%20new%20chapter%20of%20partnership.pdf>.
- Weaver, Matthew, and Peter Walker. "Timeline: Burma." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 27 May 2008. Web. 10 Feb. 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/25/burma.matthewweaver>>.
- "The World Factbook: BURMA." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, 12 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>>.
- "World Report 2012: Burma." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 02 Nov. 2015. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/burma>>.