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History of the Bamars from the Kingdom of Pagan to the end of socialism in Burma (1988)

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The Bamars are the majority of the multiethnic Myanmar of today. The author of the article depicts what the Bamars' origins in the territory of today's Myanmar are, how they won the advantage and became the dominant ethnic group. The information on their history during the colonization of Burma by the British Empire was also included. The events that followed the regaining of independence in 1948 and the times of socialism in Burma have not been forgotten. The outline of the history of Bamars is important as it has a huge impact on the current political and social situation in Myanmar and on the conflict with the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Keywords: *Bamar people, Burma, Myanmar, Ne Win, U Nu.*

The issue of ethnicity in Burma is difficult to define. An ethnic group shall feature common culture, history, and language. Often people become part of a group because of the improvement of their status. They then take on the history of the group and treat it as their own. It is also common for weaker groups to assimilate into stronger ones. An example of this is the situation of the Mon and Tavoyan men, who by marrying a Burmese woman become part of the dominant Burmese group. The Burmese language itself is also problematic as it lacks a distinction between race and ethnicity. In the census of 1983, the Ne Win regime assigned the population to 135 indigenous ethnic groups, despite the many inaccuracies involved in defining certain communities. The Rohingya were not included in these ethnic groups [1].

The question still remains – who are the Burmese (Bamars)? Originally, the Bamar territories reached as far north-west as China, and some of the sources even mention northern areas of Mongolia. An equally disputed issue is the date when the Burmese reached the Bay of Bengal. Some researchers estimate that the Bamars arrived in Southeast Asia as early as about 2600 years ago. The more common date of arrival of this Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group is the 9th century [2].

As early as a few centuries B. C., the Mon people arrived at the territory, which is now Myanmar, and settled near the Sittaung River. They made a good living in this new area, growing rice and exporting teak to Arabia and Indochina. Shortly afterwards other Burmese-Tibetan tribes (such as the Pyus, who were the first to establish the Pyi kingdom and were Buddhists) appeared in what is now the Irrawaddy region. A few centuries later, the Mon took control of the territory. This situation benefited the Bamars, who strengthened their position in the region. In 847 the city of Bagan was founded. The Bamars of today are the descendants of the Mon and Pyus [3].

The first important and crucial moment in the history of the Bamars was the establishment of the Pagan Kingdom and the reign of King Anawrath (1044–1077). He formed the Kingdom of Pagan (Ragan), which lasted until 1287. King Anawrath was the first ruler to unify most of Burma. Of great importance for the development of the kingdom was the conquest of the Mon kingdom – this provided

the access to a rich cultural heritage. Another important ruler of the Pagan Kingdom was Kyanzittha (1084–1112). He began his activities by building the Ananda temple, which still has high cultural and religious importance. Kyanzittha paid special attention to the economic affairs of the kingdom, which resulted in numerous contacts with other countries, such as China. The prosperity of the kingdom was interrupted by the Mongol invasion in 1287 under the leadership of Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan [4].

After the Mongol invasions, the Shans took power in the region, thus removing the Bamars from power. An interesting process that took place in the 14th century was the process of burmanization of the Shans, who went to Upper Burma and there fully assimilated with the indigenous inhabitants. This was the point at which the Bamars began to regain their position in the region again. The last uprising of the Shans took place in 1507, when they attacked the Bamars and forced them to flee from the capital of Ava. The retaliation did not have to wait long, and as early as 1555, the Bamars attacked the Shans, recaptured Ava, and introduced the doctrine of Theravada [5].

In the 16th century one of the most important figures in the Burman history came to power. We are talking about King Bayinnaung, who established (in 1551) the Second Bamar Empire. His great success was the defeat of the Mon in Lower Burma and the unification of all of present-day Burma (including the lands east of Chiang Mai and the Shan territories). Bayinnaung's wisdom was reflected in the fact that he did not destroy the culture of the Mon people who lived in the territory, but adapted it to the cultural system of the new empire. Moreover, Buddhism became the dominant ruling religion in the empire. King Bayinnaung showed great tolerance, allowing the Shans to cultivate their pagan customs. On the other hand, he became a great supporter of Buddhism, which manifested itself in the construction of pagodas in the newly annexed territories, and he conducted an extensive campaign to convert the infidels. The disadvantage of the king was his constant desire to conquer new areas, which often caused suffering, bloodshed, and famine. After his death, his son took over. However, unlike his father, he did not manage the empire well, and it lost much of its influence [6].

Burma had to wait for more than 100 years for another great ruler. Alaungpaya came in the mid-18th century, who founded the Konbaung dynasty and was the founder of the Third Burmese Empire. In 1752 Burma became the target of attacks by the Mon. They reached Upper Burma and tried to impose their power on the local population. Alaungpaya defended himself against the invaders. Obeying Alaungpaya's orders, the local people rebelled against the Mons, causing them to cease offensive operations as early as October 1752. Two years later Upper Burma came under Alaungpaya rule. In 1755 Burmese troops reached Lower Burma and occupied the then Yangon (today Rangoon), which was an important port centre. Another important city that was absorbed by the Burmese Empire was Pegu (1757). Alaungpaya himself was a wise ruler, but also ruthless to his enemies and traitors. He tried to strengthen his position by insisting that his royal position was the embodiment of the Buddha's protectorate. He tried to form a good opinion of himself not only among his subjects but also among foreign traders and envoys. Alaungpaya's victory streak ended in 1760, when his army was halted in Siam and forced to retreat. He himself died during these actions. After his death, Burma was no longer as strong as before [7].

Alaungpaya's successors showed great expansive aspirations. A good example is Alaungpaya's grandson, Bodawpaya, who attacked the Manipur and Assam region in India. The British felt threatened by them and decided to stage a counter-offensive [8]. The East India Company declared war on Burma on 5 March 1824. This was the First British-Burma War. The Burmese army was led by Maha Banduli, but his actions were quickly pacified by the British. The Burmese troops were driven

out of the provinces of Manipur and Assam, and British troops under Archibald Campbell entered Burma. Shortly afterwards (in February 1826) a peace treaty was signed between the two sides, in which, among other things, the Rakhine region came under British protectorate [9]. The year 1824 is considered by most researchers and scholars as the beginning of the colonisation of Burma by Great Britain.

Less than 30 years later, the situation between Britain and Burma had deteriorated considerably. The reason for the conflict was the imposition of penalties on two British captains by Governor of Rangoon. In retaliation, the British governor in India demanded compensation from the Burmese government. Because the demands were not met, a British army was sent in and quickly took control of Lower Burma, and by 1852 most of southern Burma had become a British colony. This war became known as the Second British-Burma War. It was a huge blow to the Burmese as they lost their richest and most fertile territories [10].

The Third British-Burmese War of 1885 has become a black mark in Burmese historiography. A crisis in relations between the two sides occurred in 1883, when the British government learned of plans to purchase French arms for Burma. The turning point came when the Rangoon government imposed a fine on the Indian company. In October 1885, the Indian side issued an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of the legal proceedings concerning the fine imposed, as well as the acceptance of the British representative and the renunciation of Burmese sovereignty. After the Burmese side rejected the demands, hostilities began on 9 November 1885. British troops marched into Mandalay province located in Upper Burma. The ruler of Mandalay province was forced to surrender and after abdicating on 29 November 1885, the people of the province were exiled to India. By these actions they were able to conquer Upper Burma. Early the following year Burma was officially recognised as part of the British Kingdom. A few months later there were small Burmese uprisings, which were quickly put down (e.g. by killing anyone with a gun) by English and Indian troops. By 1890 they had managed to calm the tense situation in Burma [11].

From 1886 Burma became a British colony incorporated into the British Empire. Burma was divided into a lowland part, which was mainly inhabited by the Bamars, while the rest of the territory, which was on the periphery of the state, was inhabited by ethnic minorities. The British model of governance was characterised by two features. In the territory inhabited by the Buddhist Bamars, the British Empire introduced direct rule. The situation was different in the periphery of the state inhabited by ethnic minorities. Here the imperialists introduced a colonial system of government in which local politicians ruled. It should be noted that the two zones were not administratively integrated with each other. This division between centre and periphery was also reflected in the attitude of the British towards the ethnic groups in the periphery. From then on, ethnic minorities were able to get an education and, consequently, better jobs. The cultural identities of ethnic groups then began to take shape [12]. The *Minority Rights Group International* report shows that ethnic minorities were not particularly privileged. Peoples of the periphery (such as the Karens and the Chins), were often conscripted into the colonial army. The periphery itself was very often divided and underfunded despite large profits from rice sales. The privileging of ethnic minorities and the exploitation of labour and raw materials by the British was frowned upon by the Burmese, who were stirring up nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments [13].

Returning to economic issues, it is important to note that the British Empire, along with labour from India and other neighbouring countries, boosted the Burmese economy. The coloniser needed manpower to make the economy grow even more vibrant. This resulted in a massive influx of people

from Burma's neighbouring countries. This resulted in the growing discontent of the Burmese opposition. Initially, the opposition demonstrations were initiated by radical Buddhist monks and later joined by groups from Rangoon University (1920, 1936, 1938). One such group was the Union of 30 Companions (1941) headed by Aung San, the future leader of Burma. It was they who called on the Japanese authorities to help in the cause with the British Empire [14].

The arrival of Japan on the Bay of Bengal was a turning point in Burma's history. The main founder of the strong resistance movement was General Aung San. He and his colleague Thakin travelled to the Chinese city of Xiamen in 1940, where they reached an agreement with the Japanese military to help them regain their independence and offer them rice and oil in return. Japanese Colonel Suzuki Kenji recruited the Burmese, who later formed the Thirty Companions faction (with Aung San at the head). With the help of Colonel Suzuki and Aung San's troops, the Burmese Independence Army was formed in Bangkok. The first actions took place in December 1941. Valiant army units quickly occupied important Burmese cities such as Rangoon (in March 1942), and most of Burma was in Japanese-Burmese hands by mid-1942. The British Empire was forced to withdraw to India. After the British fled Burma, another problem arose, namely Japan, which had no intention of leaving the resource-rich lands. Burma gained independence on 1 August 1943 as a member of the *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere*.

However, independence was a sham and Japanese officers did not take the new authorities seriously. No one in the international arena respected Burmese independence, and the Barmars themselves were not free from pressure from the Japanese and British governments. It could even be said that they sowed terror by arresting and killing suspected individuals. They also treated citizens inhumanely. An example of this is the approximately 100 000 victims (including many Burmese) who died during forced labour on the construction of the Thailand-Burma railway. After the defeats of the Japanese army in India (1944), the Burmese National Army (which had been transformed from the Burma Independence Army in 1943) became stronger. On 27 March 1945, Aung San ordered the Japanese to leave Burma as a symbol of victory against the fascist Japanese. By May 1945 the Burmese had retaken Rangoon and the Japanese had retreated to Thailand [15].

With the retreat of Japanese troops from Burma, the British decided to return to their former colony. They ensured the independence of the Bamar people, but demanded that ethnic minorities, such as the Karen and Rohingya, be granted autonomy. Various ethnic groups, such as the Chins and Shans, were invited to joint talks. The purpose of these meetings was to determine whether they wanted to be part of Burma. In February 1947, a conference took place in the town of Panglong in which an agreement was signed between the Burmese government (the work was chaired by Aung San) and the Chins, Shans, and Kachins. The agreement entailed granting them full autonomy in the internal administration. Aung San's death in July 1947 derailed further plans and work on the Panglong Agreement [16].

Gaining independence (1948–1962)

After World War II, the British Empire lost its strong position in South East Asia. After granting independence to India in 1947 and seeing hordes of armed and well-trained Burmese nationalists, the British did not see their further chance to colonise these territories. In January 1947, an agreement was reached between Aung San and Clement Attlee in which the Burmese side pledged to establish independence within a year. Unlike the Sham independence of 1943, this one gave independence and autonomy. The Panglong Agreement of February 1947 convinced the British of good cooperation

with other ethnic groups. The weak British Empire had to leave Burma under pressure from Bamar nationalists. On 4 January 1948, Burma regained its independence and finally freed itself from dependence on other countries [17].

Shortly after obtaining independence, the government of Prime Minister U Nu had to pass its first test. In March 1948, the Communist Party of Burma began to take action against the new government. Along with the communists came the first unrest among ethnic minorities including the Karen, Mon and Muslims of northern Rakhine. The Burmese armed forces, under the command of General Ne Win, gradually restored the government authority [18]. When the situation in the country became more stable, parliamentary elections were held. The winners of the 1951 elections were the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) [19].

The first conflict already occurred in 1957 and escalated a year later. The years 1957–1958 were symbolic of the ten years since the adoption of the Constitution. On the basis of sentiment, the old demands of the Shans were awakened. Their first action began with a conference in April 1957 in which the Shans demanded secession from Burma. The issue was resounded again in December that year. This resulted in numerous separatist uprisings, e.g. by the Karens and the Shans. The tense situation also had an impact on the break-up of the coalition between the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League and the Socialist Party. A serious disagreement had already occurred at the party's congress in December 1957, in which the president of the AFPFL stressed the difference in ideology compared to the socialists. Another reason was the failure to come to an agreement on who should take over the office of AFPFL chief secretary. In March 1958, Prime Minister U Nu ordered the arrest of all those who opposed the AFPFL party's activities. Over 50 people were arrested in Rangoon alone and 400 in other regions of Burma. This led to the eventual collapse of the coalition between the Socialists and the ruling party. In September 1958, the former general, Ne Win, was appointed Prime Minister. The government of the new prime minister brought order and led to elections in 1960 which were won by the U Nu party [20].

U Nu saw great danger from Ne Win and the military troops. In February 1961, U Nu ordered the removal of nine brigade commanders, including Commander Maung Maung. Mary P. Callahan suggests that Maung Maung's removal was due to his collaboration with the US. An official statement was issued announcing that the reason for the dismissals was his disobedience to General Ne Win. This situation did not please not only the military but also the public. In mid-February, representatives of the ethnic minorities, the Shans and the Karens (who were guaranteed the possibility of seceding from Burma), were invited to talk. However, it was not possible to reach an agreement. This situation was a good opportunity to seize power. The coup d'état took place on 2 March 1962. At the start of the coup, the armed forces of the Tatmadaw appeared on all the major communication and transport routes and took control of the state. More than 50 ministers and government officials were also arrested. Ne Win was keen to reconvert Burma's territory. Unlike the coup d'état of 1958, this one was focused not only on the capital, military troops seized control in all of Burma's major cities. Ne Win's coup marked the beginning of more than twenty years of socialism and a period of military junta rule [21].

Socialist times (1962–1988)

The most important demands of the 1962 coup were maintaining the integrity of Burma and preventing secession, e.g. by the Shans; introducing elements of a socialist economy; and strengthening the position of the military in the structures of the state. As a result, none of these

demands were met, and what is worse, the crisis in the state deepened. After 1962 the country was governed by the Revolutionary Council, a military junta consisting of 17 officers headed by General Ne Win. An important organ of power in Burma became the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which was founded on 4 July 1962. The first violent act of the new government was the bloody crackdown on 2000 students who took to the streets on 7 July 1962 to demonstrate their discontent. According to unofficial sources, around a hundred people were killed at the time, although the government side only reported fifteen. The university in Rangoon was also destroyed and blown up by the army [22].

The doctrine of the “Burmese Road to Socialism”, published on 4 July 1962, sought to isolate the state and introduce internal orders, mainly related to other ethnic groups. The junta dismissed the movements of the Mon and Arakanese seeking autonomy. The governments of other groups and regions, such as the Shans and the Karens, were also abolished. This was a clear process of de-ethnisation of state administration. Between 1963 and 1964, peace talks were held with, for example, the Rohingya, Shan, and Rakhine, but they were counterproductive in terms of the growth of liberation movements. The response of the authorities in Rangoon was to develop a “four cuts” strategy. This involved defining rebel areas as black zones, brown zones as unsettled areas, and white zones as those belonging to the state. The black zone was cut off from food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. In order to diminish the black zones, rural communities were resettled in the white zones. This resulted in a halt to the spread of the rebels [23].

The poor economic situation forced the rulers to relax controls in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s Burma, after years of isolation, began to open up to contacts with foreign companies. Support from the World Bank (1972) and the Asian Development Bank (1973) was also helpful and led to cooperation in oil extraction. At the same time, work was being done on the creation of a new constitution. A successful referendum in December 1973 contributed to the introduction of a new constitution already in January 1974. In the same month, elections to the National Assembly took place, and in March 1974 they took power in Burma after the dissolution of the Revolutionary Council. In terms of economy, performance continued to be poor although an improvement in economic indicators was noted. In the 1970s, efforts were made to reform the important rice sector of the food market. Thanks to an increase in public prices, the use of modern varieties and methods, and strict state supervision, between 1970 and 1982 Burma had some of the best growth rates in rice cultivation in Asia [24].

In the early 1980s, the National Assembly decided to normalise citizenship issues. On 15 August 1982, the Citizenship Act was created based on three categories. The first category of citizens were Barmans or other members of indigenous ethnic groups who proved that their ancestors had inhabited Burmese territory before 1823. The second group were those who obtained citizenship in 1948–50 under the Union Citizenship Act. The third group were those who were “naturalised” after 1950. The latter could lose their citizenship if they showed a lack of loyalty to the state or if they revealed state secrets. People in the second and third groups could not be employed in public administration or in the army [25].

1988 was the end of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In September 1987, after two decades of gross mismanagement of the Burmese economy, General Ne Win ordered the demonetisation of all 25, 35, and 75 kyat notes as a solution to curb rising inflation. Over 70% of the country's currency was eliminated, including savings and livelihoods of the rich and poor. This event provoked a widespread protest movement culminating in the famous 8888 uprising (named after the date it

occurred on 8 August 1988). As a result, over 3000 demonstrators were murdered between 8 August and 12 September 1988. Since the 8888 uprising, power in the state was taken over by the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) which was a military government and over the next dozen years led the state into economic ruin and isolation [26].

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История бирманцев от королевства Пагана до конца социализма в Бирме (1988)

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Сегодня бирманцы составляют большинство в многонациональной Мьянме. В данной статье показано, каково их происхождение на территории сегодняшней Мьянмы, как они одержали верх и стали доминирующей этнической группой. Также была включена информация об их судьбе во время колонизации Бирмы Британской империей. Не были забыты события, последовавшие за восстановлением независимости в 1948 году, и времена социализма в Бирме. Очерк истории бирманцев важен, потому что он оказывает огромное влияние на текущую политическую и социальную ситуацию в Мьянме и на конфликт с мусульманским меньшинством рохинджа.

Ключевые слова: бирманцы, Бирма, Мьянма, Не Вин, У Ну.

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