

NATIONALISM AS POLITICAL PARANOIA IN BURMA

AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORICAL PRACTICE OF POWER

Mikael Gravers

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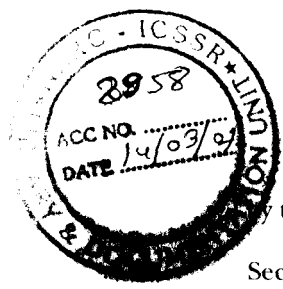
**NATIONALISM AS POLITICAL PARANOIA
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Map 1: Burma

INTRODUCTION

Since 1988 Burma has gained notoriety for the extreme violence used by its military regime. The country has long been in Amnesty International's spotlight, while refugees tell of unimaginable torture, rape and killing of civilians. The Nobel Peace Prize of 1991 was therefore a well-placed tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi and the fight for democracy through non-violent methods. Unfortunately, it was also a reminder of the widespread breaches of human rights which take place in Burma. We are sadly reminded of George Orwell's description of the colonial era in his 1936 novel, *Burmese Days*, which includes scenes that point prophetically to the present situation with foreboding accuracy.

But why has this beautiful country, synonymous with Oriental exoticism, turned away from the world and isolated itself in gratuitous violence which, in the media, has been compared to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Pol Pot's Kampuchea and Ceausescu's Romania?

In many of their reports, observers have referred to the fact that the country's problems are self-created. These problems are defined in such stereotypical terms as military dictatorship, socialism, and totalitarian one-party rule. The comparison made with the above-mentioned regimes is telling and simple, yet explains nothing about the specific conditions in Burma's historical, social and cultural development that have brought about the current situation. Many wondered how Buddhists, with non-violence as their ideal, could perpetrate so many acts of cruelty. Typically, reporting has focused on pseudo-psychological explanations in the treatment of how non-violence and non-confrontation bring about an accumulation of aggressive feelings, which in turn find expression in an almost volcanic eruption of violence.¹ On the basis of such theories and superficial

1. For example, D. D. Gray's article in the Danish newspaper *Information* (9 September 1988), entitled 'De fredelige buddhister kan være både politisk aktive og voldelige' [The peaceful Buddhists can be both politically active and violent] (Associated Press).

comparisons with other violent regimes, there is a pressing need for a detailed examination of the background of this development, especially at this point in time when nationalism, ethno-religious conflict, and the division of states capture our attention through the carnage left in their wake.

The initial explanation of Burma's present situation must be sought in the legacy of the colonial era, or rather in the nationalistic paranoia which was generated by developments following independence in 1948 – a politically orchestrated paranoia linking fear of the disintegration of both union and state with the foreign takeover of power and the disappearance of Burmese culture. In this way the legacy of the colonial era has been used as the rationale for isolation and the use of violence.

Burma has been gripped by a strong, almost religious nationalism which has retained the expunging of the colonial heritage as its key motivating force. This belief, which has legitimated the army's autocratic regime under General Ne Win since 1962, has not allowed the creation of a more democratic society. Foreign influence must be kept out with force and violence. Thus, the colonial era's model of society seems to have stunted the country's development since the regime has focused on this model in a manner bordering on paranoia. During the last thirty years of military rule, this strategy has equated all foreign presences with colonialism and imperialism, as reflected in state propaganda. At the same time the regime has sought to keep Burmese traditions within what could be called a modern version of the traditional autocratic political structure.

This strategy has generated fear of change and fear of all foreign influences and imported ideas. Aung San Suu Kyi describes this deadlock: '[the] fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it', and adds that the population's fear and feelings of humiliation must be counteracted if change is to be possible. She uses Buddhist concepts in her criticism of the regime, such as the four selfish qualities (*agati*) which corrupt thought and thereby obstruct 'the correct path': corruption by desire, hatred, aberration due to ignorance, and fear. Corruption and fear are important elements in the relations of power in Burma, and Aung San Suu Kyi says that these negative qualities must be fought by all and in all individuals. She tries to inculcate civil courage in a population that has been subdued by 3,000–5,000 killings, imprisonment, violent torture,

and the forced removal of entire areas of Rangoon.² She is therefore seen as the politician who stands purely in her nationalism in opposition to Ne Win 'the Culprit' (as she describes him) who is the symbol of corruption, the abuse of power and violent oppression. She symbolises the spirit of her father, Aung San. The regime accuses her of being in collusion with 'foreigners', namely the British colonial power amongst others.

In this book I shall attempt to identify the relationship between some of the factors contributing to this complex historical process: Burmese nationalism's fear of foreigners; a colonial era marked by violence; the role of Buddhism in nationalism; the ethnic minorities; and an autocratic political tradition. In analysing these historical conditions, I intend to apply a simplification in the form of abstract models and condensed descriptions. (The theoretical concepts are outlined in Appendix 1.) This is at the risk of reproducing colonialism's and nationalism's one-sided understanding of the 'essence' of development. Essentialisation is precisely the primary function of nationalism by producing a simplification of a historical process. Its theory and historical memory collapse complexities into a monolithic and primordial model of the past in the present. Repeating the rhetoric of nationalism runs the risk of making the same simplification. But there is need for a more abstract, theoretical analysis of the generative elements and contradictions of the processes. Such analyses are often absent in the typically voluminous works on Burma, wherein the dominant elements of Burmese development tend to be buried by detail.³

Whether or not it is possible to pin down some of the ingredients of nationalism and the strategies of power will become evident on closer examination of the country's history. Initially the social hierarchy can be considered by using 'the club' as a symbol of colonial society. The club was not only a representative symbol, it was also a model of the fundamental properties of the colonial system: a division of labour and power based on race, class and culture as natural criteria of division.

2. Aung San Suu Kyi (1991: 180–185).

3. See M. Smith (1991: 492) – an extremely important and very detailed document.