Burma's Struggle for Independence: The Transfer of Power Thesis Re-Examined

Author(s): Hugh Tinker

Source: *Modern Asian Studies*, 1986, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1986), pp. 461-481

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/312533

Modern Asian Studies, **20**, 3 (1986), pp. 461–481. Printed in Great Britain.

Burma's Struggle for Independence: The Transfer of Power Thesis Re-examined

HUGH TINKER

University of Lancaster

ON 3 May 1945, British–Indian forces landed in Rangoon. The Japanese had pulled out. The city was liberated. On 16 June there was a victory parade, though the final victory over Japan was still distant and most of their conquests were intact. Admiral Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, took the salute while detachments representing the one million men under his command passed by in massed array. Famous regiments from Britain, India and Nepal; the Royal Navy; the Royal Air Force; men from the United States Air Force. It was an impressive sight, though the ceremony took place in pouring rain. Amongst them all was a somewhat ragged band representing the Burma National Army which, having been raised by the Japanese, had fought for three months alongside the British.[1] Watching the parade from the central dais was a young man dressed in the uniform of a Japanese Major-General, though he also wore an arm-band with a conspicuous red star. The outfit was incongruously crowned by a pith sun-helmet—a topi. Probably most foreigners present assumed he was a Chinese officer. He was actually Bogyoke Aung San, commander of the BNA.

When the parade was over, Mountbatten entertained dozens of the

This is the text of the Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture given on 6 November 1985.

[1] Arrangements for the inclusion of a detachment of the Burma National Army on the parade, and the attendance of Aung San were made in signals between Mountbatten and his British commanders. They are included in the voluminous SEAC papers located at the PRO in various series collectively identified as WO 203. Those reproduced in this paper are all from *Burma: the Struggle for Independence, 1944–1948; Documents from Official and Private Sources*, ed. Hugh Tinker, (2 vols, HMSO, 1983/84). Besides series in the PRO, the sources used were in the Burma series in the India Office Records, as well as the Mountbatten papers in the Broadlands Archive. A few documents came from other sources. The exact location of each document is indicated in *Burma: the Struggle for Independence* (hereafter cited as *Struggle*), and the reader is asked to refer to this work from where he can locate the original documents. Vol. I of *Struggle* is subtitled 'From Military Occupation to Civil Government, 1 January 1944 to 31 August 1946': this first note relates to vol. I, p. 319.

0026–749X/86/0100–0907 $05.00

Rangoon notables at Government House. When they had dispersed, he held a meeting with Aung San, his principal military supporter, Bo Ne Win, and his two chief political associates, the Communists Than Tun and Ba Hein.[2] Removing his topi, Aung San revealed a Japanese army shaven skull (*maru cōzu*). He had prominent bone structure, but most conspicuous were his intense, staring eyes. This was the man Mountbatten recognized as holding the key to the political and military future of Burma.

The meeting was very much at variance with the policy in London, and also that of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the civilian Governor of Burma who had been in exile at Simla. Until recently, Aung San and his soldiers had been known to the British as the Burma Traitor Army. Mountbatten refused to accept this reading of the situation even though it represented the view of the Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff, his own C. in C. Allied Land Forces South East Asia, and his own staff at Kandy concerned with military government. He was very conscious that the task of driving the Japanese out of South East Asia had only just begun. He needed a secure base for the hazardous assault upon Malaya. He could not risk a guerrilla rebellion in his rear. More profoundly, Mountbatten perceived that imperial high noon had passed away, with imperial sunset soon to follow. He recognized the urgency for the British to establish friendly relations with the younger generation of Asian nationalists. In these views he was encouraged by a man whose only standing among the massive SEAC staff was that of private friend and confidant—Peter Murphy, an adherent of the Communist Party from his Cambridge days.[3]

To make his position quite clear, Mountbatten issued an instruction on 'Policy to be adopted towards the Burmans'.[4] This was regarded as very dubious by many of the Civil Affairs Officers, but the Supremo made it clear that anyone who 'sabotaged' his policy could expect to be court martialled. He had already replaced the head of Civil Affairs by a new man flown out from England, Major-General H. E. Rance, who accepted his chief's line whole-heartedly.

The approach of the Cabinet was markedly more cautious. In the statement presented to the House of Commons on 17 May 1945, emphasis was placed on the physical destruction suffered by Burma, and when military government was terminated (not expected then for at

[2] *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 331–4.

[3] Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (Collins, London, 1985): see pp. 51–2, 314–15, also Leslie Glass, *The Changing of Kings: Memories of Burma, 1934–1949* (London, 1985), p. 185.

[4] *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 311–13, also p. 335.

least another year) there would be three years of direct rule by the civilian governor before elections were held under the existing 1935 Act.[5] The legislature would then be invited to frame a new constitution, though even then HMG 'would have continuing obligations after the establishment of full self-government in Burma'. Clearly, even under the most optimistic interpretation of this timetable the Burmese would not attain self-government for five to six years, and then the Frontier Areas would still be 'subject to a special regime under the Governor'. This programme had been finalized by the India Committee of the Cabinet whose chairman was Attlee and it continued to command his support after the Coalition was dissolved one week later.

The Burmese politicians, even the most moderate, were dismayed. The Japanese had granted them independence (after a fashion) in August 1943. At the hour of liberation almost all political elements were included in the newly formed Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. Their Supreme Council, meeting on 16 May, had demanded 'that the right of national self-determination shall be applied forthwith to Burma'.[6] How could this be implemented? The overwhelming strength of the British military forces was obvious to all. Hence, Than Tun as Secretary-General of AFPFL issued a directive headed 'Why we should not continue to revolt'. British policy was broadly known from newspaper reports, yet Than Tun argued with prescience that British economic and military strength had been weakened by five years of war. Imperialism would wither. The AFPFL did not directly challenge the British but simply reiterated the demand for 'immediate complete self-government'. In the same document there was a claim that the BNA be incorporated in a new Burma army. Than Tun concluded: 'The Revolutionary Council believes that we will achieve our freedom at the most within two years'—a prediction considerably more accurate than the British government's timetable.[7]

Mountbatten professed himself reassured by these and other reports, though British intelligence showed that in many places the BNA and AFPFL constituted a strong challenge to restored British administration, still lamentably thin on the ground. Mountbatten chose to play down these reports. In order to placate Dorman-Smith who was despatching agitated telegrams to London he arranged for the governor to meet Burmese leaders, both young and old, in HMS *Cumberland* in

[5] *Burma: Statement of Policy by His Majesty's Government, May 1945*. Cmd. 6635, in *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 262–4. The wartime Coalition was dissolved on 23 May 1945.
[6] *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 258–9.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 291–7.

Rangoon river.[8] Until he took over, the governor must not set foot on Burmese soil.

At the meeting with Aung San and the others on 16 June, Mountbatten insisted that they must attend the *Cumberland* conference. Putting his own construction on the White Paper of 17 May he declared: 'It offered Dominion Status to Burma within less than three-and-a-half years' (which manifestly it did not do). Mountbatten ventured into the delicate matter of the collaboration of the BNA with the Japanese—if guilty, some might have to stand trial for criminal actions. Though it was not mentioned, this included the case against Aung San who had taken part in the execution of a headman when the Japanese first entered Burma in January 1942. Aung San took all this in his stride, and according to Mountbatten's own version, the meeting 'broke up on a friendly note'.

The *Cumberland* conference went off to the satisfaction of Dorman-Smith. All the politicians present came up with a unanimous demand for 'the inauguration of a new Provisional Government to be nominated by AFPFL', the governor's powers to be 'minimized in every field except defence'. A Constituent Assembly should meet within a year and a new constitution to replace the White Paper scheme introduced. It was made clear that the prewar leaders—including that Vicar of Bray of Burmese politics, U Ba Pe—were fully behind the AFPFL proposals. Nevertheless, Dorman-Smith, whose capacity for self-deception was almost infinite, told London that Ba Pe and the old guard 'will play with us alright'. The new men, although 'sincere' were inexperienced: only Than Tun was capable of taking office. While anticipating 'a very uneasy year or so' he was in accord with the meeting in urging an early end to military government and early elections.

In the following months, Rance as military governor endeavoured to liquidate the BNA. Its members were offered enlistment in battalions under British control with demobilization for those deemed unfit. Meeting succeeded meeting, but Aung San always produced reasons why they could not proceed immediately. The BNA (now renamed the Patriot Burmese Forces by Mountbatten's decision) was their major asset in any coming struggle against the British. At one meeting on 11 July the senior Burmese member of the ICS, U Tin Tut, sat beside Aung San, and the official record noted 'Throughout the conference U Tin Tut spoke for Bo Aung San who concurred in all he said'.[9] This represented a new and formidable combination.

[8] The official version of the *Cumberland* meeting is in *ibid.*, pp. 339–40, and Dorman-Smith's own version on pp. 345–52. [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 363–5.

On 15 July Mountbatten joined the discussion. Aung San proposed (and this was accepted) that the reorganized regular army would have two 'wings', one formed of ex-BNA soldiers with their own officers, though under British command, and another wing of battalions raised from the tribal levies—Kachin, Chin, and Karen—who had fiercely harassed the retreating Japanese.[10] Dorman-Smith was persuaded to accept this arrangement, in part because Tin Tut spoke so persuasively about Aung San. Dorman-Smith noted 'It is impressive how unanimous everyone is . . . in testifying to the integrity of this young man'.[11] However, while falling in with this proposal of the Supremo, the governor argued for an early return to civil government in areas cleared of the enemy. In his polished manner Mountbatten promised cooperation. Then he left to attend the Potsdam summit. Mountbatten was one of the very few who expected Labour to win the election, but until he reached Potsdam he had no inkling that the Far East war would be transformed by a new super-weapon, the atomic bomb. As Japan collapsed, Mountbatten was suddenly confronted by the extension of SEAC's boundaries to include Indonesia and Indo-China.[12] Of more immediate concern, Dorman-Smith bombarded the new Labour government with demands for the resumption of civil government in Burma. He stated he would tender his resignation if refused. This was to be the first ultimatum of several.

The Burmese also were quick to respond to the new situation. Than Tun stepped up the propaganda campaign to get rid of military government. A conference was convened to formulate fresh demands. Some 5,000–6,000 attended and the Rangoon shops were closed for the day. Aung San made the main speech, emphasizing the Burmese contribution to allied victory, pointing to Labour's electoral triumph as a sign that imperialism was on the way out, and warning that '99 per cent of the PBF would be unwilling to serve in the fighting forces of a country that was not free'. Tongue-tied when speaking in English, Aung San was an eloquent orator in Burmese. Than Tun followed, presenting a manifesto 'World Peace and Free Burma', in which he proposed the immediate setting up of a Provisional Government with full powers over

[10] *Ibid.*, see pp. 380–1.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 381, also pp. 384–5; 'Aung San is the most important figure in Burma today' (Dorman-Smith to L. S. Amery, 25 July 1945: his last letter to the outgoing Secretary of State).

[12] Ziegler, *Mountbatten*, pp. 299, 312. See also *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943–45*, HMSO, 1951, B. Strategy and Operations, May to September 1945, paras 634–6.

internal and international affairs.[13] The two young leaders were supported by politicians of the older generation, such as Ba Pe, as well as ethnic minority leaders, including the Karen, Saw Ba U Gyi.

In the midst of growing pressures, Mountbatten endeavoured to solve the twin problems of the procrastination of Aung San and the importunity of Dorman-Smith by summoning a high-level conference at Kandy, attended by his military top brass, senior British civil servants (and also Tin Tut) and a Burmese delegation (still mainly in Japanese uniforms) led by Aung San and Than Tun. It was a sign of the times that Tom Driberg, newly elected Labour MP, was also present. Things were not made easier by the refusal of Dorman-Smith to sit in the same room as Aung San. General Slim bluntly observed that 'the root of the trouble lay in the fact that the Burmese distrusted us'.[14]

However, a programme for an early handover to civil government was agreed with Dorman-Smith, followed by a detailed plan to embody PBF officers and men into the new Burma army. This was spelled out in the 'Kandy Agreement' signed by Aung San and Than Tun on 7 September.[15] One item was the appointment of a Burmese Deputy Inspector General along with one representing the ethnic minorities, both under a British Inspector General. Simultaneously, Mountbatten offered the post to Aung San with the rank of Brigadier. He was far too shrewd to be sidetracked in that way, though the gesture was appreciated. The new Secretary of State, Pethick-Lawrence, advised the Prime Minister that they should speed up the return of the civil. Attlee was only half convinced, observing: 'There is an obvious risk in moving so fast', but somewhat reluctantly he agreed.[16]

The stage was now set for Dorman-Smith's return. A member of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, a Cabinet Minister under Chamberlain, he alternated between authoritarian aloofness and occasional flashes of insight into the new mood of Burmese nationalism. His real fault was that he operated a 'crony' system of government, listening to advisers, British and Burmese, who were quite out of touch with the new mood. From time to time the real world impinged on his consciousness, but invariably one of his cronies persuaded him to stick to a do-nothing policy.

He announced that he would go further than the White Paper, setting

[13] *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 398–401, and 408–10. This came to be known as the Naythuyein Mass Meeting.

[14] The Kandy Conference is reported at length in *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 432–56. Slim's pithy comment is on p. 433.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 456–9.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 479.

up an advisory council. An invitation went out to AFPFL. They claimed to nominate a majority of members of the Council. This claim was rejected, and Dorman-Smith formed a Council of his cronies (Sir John Wise, Sir Paw Tun, and Sir Htoon Aung Gyaw) and such politicians as he could lure away from AFPFL.[17] He was confident that the League would split into factions. Already there were hints of tension between Aung San and his supporters and Than Tun and the Communists. The policy was to play for time.

The governor's equivocation was displayed in relation to the 1942 murder case involving Aung San. The matter was referred to the Cabinet and in November the India and Burma Committee (with Stafford Cripps in the chair) sanctioned a prosecution. Having been given the go-ahead, Dorman-Smith dropped the matter. No further action was taken.[18]

Also in November 1945, a meeting in New Delhi took a decision which was later to prove the key factor at a critical moment in Burma. British–Indian troops had been sent to Java to rescue POWs and Dutch civilians. They clashed with Indonesian nationalist forces. In Surabaya on 29 October, Brigadier Mallaby was killed and a month of bitter fighting followed.[19] Wavell, as Viceroy, Auchinleck, as Commander in Chief, India, and Mountbatten as Supreme Allied Commander were all agreed that the repercussions on Indian public opinion could be 'very serious'. Suppose that a similar conflict occurred in Burma, where some 79,000 Indian troops were stationed—what then? Mountbatten insisted that the handover to the civil had been premature; the situation was 'deteriorating'. They could not permit Indian troops to be used to suppress a popular rising. Henceforth, Indian soldiers in Burma were embargoed from intervening in a political confrontation.[20] Neither the AFPFL nor the Cabinet in London knew of this. AFPFL felt that their inability to communicate with Labour in London was a barrier. They asked to send a delegation: this was turned down, on Dorman-Smith's advice.

Three battalions of Burma Rifles had been created out of the PBF

[17] Dorman-Smith reported the breakdown of negotiations with AFPFL and the decision to select his Council from the old guard on 27 October, *ibid.*, pp. 522–5.

[18] Communications from governor, 7 and 14 November (*Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 531, 538–9), permission to go ahead given by Cabinet, 19 November (pp. 548–9).

[19] For the situation in Java, see *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, Post Surrender Tasks* (HMSO, 1969), paras 50–79. By mid-December, British Indian forces had suffered over 1,000 casualties. See also Louis Allen, *The End of the War in Asia* (London, 1976), p. 93.

[20] Minutes of Inter-Command Conference, 7 November, *Struggle*, vol. I, pp. 531–3.

with former BNA commanders (Bo Ne Win and Bo Zeya) designated as commanding officers. However, the remainder of the former BNA did not simply become civilians: they were organized in the People's Volunteer Organization (*Pyithu Yebaw Tat*: army of comrades) wearing military uniform under their old officers. They continued to drill and bear arms (of which there were thousands 'underground' throughout Burma). Dorman-Smith dismissed these activities: 'Aung San is a tired and deflated little man', he told London.[21] His report was sent on the eve of another major demonstration below the Shwe Dagon pagoda in January 1946 with 1,200 delegates and a total attendance estimated even by the British at 20,000 to 30,000. Aung San condemned the existing regime, which he described as 'Economic Fascism': the governor was 'the Dictator of Burma'.[22] Than Tun was still General Secretary and drafted AFPFL pronouncements but Aung San had become the undoubted political leader. There were signs that he intended to distance himself from the Communists.[23]

Like lightning out of a clear sky came a denunciation of Aung San as a murderer by a witness of the event (Tun Ok), who was himself under fire in the House of Commons, because in 1942 he had ordered the public display of the severed heads of British soldiers. Dorman-Smith informed London that he would prosecute Aung San 'at the first convenient opportunity'.[24] His telegram (24 March) arrived just after Pethick-Lawrence and the Cabinet Mission reached India. Attlee was in charge of the affairs of India and Burma personally, and for the first time acquired real knowledge of what was going on. The Prime Minister was increasingly perturbed by Dorman-Smith's vacillations and tergiversations. In Burma, the governor was advised by his own senior officials, as well as by the military not to press charges.[25] He held back. But the widow of the dead man petitioned for justice and he then urged that 'we must let law take its course'.[26] Attlee accepted that there was no alternative, but when Pethick-Lawrence was informed he strongly

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 608 (20 January 1946).

[22] Presidential Speech, 20 January, *ibid.*, pp. 608–13; for the governor's assessment of numbers, etc, see *ibid.*, pp. 624–5.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 676–8, statement published 9 March: Aung San explained why he joined the Communist Party and why he left when he disagreed with Thakin Soe and his 'sectarianism'.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 694.

[25] C.f. Conference at Government House, 27 March (*ibid.*, pp. 703–6) and advice by Chief Secretary, 30 March: 'Whether we like it or not the prosecution of Aung San for murder is off' (*ibid.*, p. 716).

[26] Petition dated 8 April (*ibid.*, p. 728) and telegram from governor, 13 April (*ibid.*, pp. 731–2).

objected: this might have repercussions on their delicate negotiations with the Congress. Dorman-Smith was told to stay his hand. There was a frantic exchange of telegrams between Rangoon and London with the governor switching the emphasis to a new political initiative, based upon various combinations of political rivals. This increasingly focused upon U Saw, Prime Minister of Burma on the eve of the Japanese invasion, when British code-breakers discovered his intention to collaborate with the Japanese, and he was interned in Uganda. Dorman-Smith had always liked Saw and now put him forward as the man to challenge AFPFL. However, on 6 May he surprisingly announced that Saw and Aung San were ready to cooperate, declaring 'The iron appears to me to be hot. With what force do you think I should strike?'[27]

Trying simultaneously to keep abreast of the complex negotiations in Delhi, Attlee drafted an exasperated message to Pethick-Lawrence: 'I have received another long and incoherent telegram from Dorman-Smith. It is obvious that he has lost [his] grip. He changes his position from day to day . . . I am convinced he must be replaced'.[28] When the governor was asked to spell out all the factors in the situation with more precision he replied wildly that he was 'filled with dismay'. There was a 'magnificent opportunity' which he could only explain if he came to London: 'In the alternative I must ask to be relieved of post'. He had played into Attlee's hand, and was asked to return at once.[29]

Meanwhile, in ignorance of this closet crisis AFPFL were putting on pressure. A second meeting of the Supreme Council, 16–23 May, launched a Freedom Fund and called for a one million membership drive. In case their demands were not met, an Executive Committee was set up to prepare for 'the struggle that may lie ahead'. While the Council made its plans, the PVO marched and drilled openly. On 13 May, members of the PVO were arrested at Tantabin, forty miles from Rangoon. On 18 May a procession of 1,000–1,500 marched in protest. The police opened fire: there were several casualties, three being fatal.[30] The governor interviewed Aung San, and those arrested were set free. Despite the explosive atmosphere, no rising followed. Perhaps Aung San believed the situation was drifting his way: certainly the senior British officials felt the governor had been too weak. However, for Dorman-

[27] Governor to Prime Minister, telegram dated 6 May (*ibid.*, pp. 769–70).
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 773 (telegram dated 7 May).
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 783 (telegram dated 11 May).
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 799. An inquiry by British officials and Burmese politicians disagreed over who provoked the firing: see *Struggle*, Vol. II, pp. 515–18.

Smith, time had run out. On 11 June he handed over to a temporary governor and left for London. Soon after arrival he learned he would not return.

The new man was Sir Henry Knight, a senior civilian from Bombay with special experience in food procurement. In the two-and-a-half months he was in Burma he raised the flagging efficiency of the administration. He also invented a formula which skilfully eliminated the dilemma of the charge against Aung San.[31] However, Attlee was looking elsewhere for a permanent replacement. After some delay he yielded to the urging of Mountbatten to offer the appointment to the former military governor, Rance, who was recommended as 'thoroughly straight' and 'refreshingly quick on the uptake'.[32] What was he expected to do? Instructions received just before departure were 'To secure within the scope of the White Paper and the Act of 1935 an Executive Council . . . broader based and to include if possible a representative team from AFPFL'. As regards any timetable 'there is no advantage in fixing paper dates' while 'we should in general continue to avoid the term "Dominion Status" as the constitutional goal'. As for 'Independence': 'no reference should be made to it'.[33] Bearing these unpromising instructions, Sir Hubert Rance was sworn in on 31 August 1946.

Within one week reality burst in upon him. The Rangoon police went on strike. They had serious grievances; their pay had fallen far behind inflation. Rance rapidly discovered that his present Executive Council was useless and his senior officials out of touch. The strike threatened to spread, and AFPFL moved to exploit the possibilities. On 9 September Rance told Pethick-Lawrence 'I am playing a lone hand here': he demanded the resignation of the members of the Council he had inherited and started consultations with Aung San and AFPFL.[34] He did not let them have all they wanted, but they formed a solid bloc in the new Council. One innovation was to designate Aung San as Deputy Chairman (almost at the same time Nehru assumed the same position with Wavell). Tin Tut took charge of finance, while among non-AFPFL members U Saw became Member for Education and Planning, a post he neither desired, nor filled with any competence.

[31] For Governor Knight's ingenious solution, see *Struggle*, Vol. I, pp. 895–6.

[32] Rance was kept waiting, expecting the offer, from about 11 to 27 July. The War Office commendations are in *ibid.*, p. 897, n1.

[33] 'Line of Policy for Sir H. Rance as Governor of Burma', circulated to Cabinet, 29 August (*ibid.*, pp. 970–2).

[34] Private letter in *Struggle*, vol. II, 'From General Strike to Independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948', pp. 6–7.

Aung San successfully negotiated a settlement with the strikers, though at considerable cost. The Communists controlled the All-Burma TUC and sought to exploit the strike situation. The Working Committee of AFPFL struck back: the Communists were expelled. Aung San had to prove that he was just as strongly opposed to imperialism. Within four weeks of taking office the AFPFL on the Council pressed for wider powers.[35] When Rance informed Pethick-Lawrence of their demands the reply was a restatement of the position under the 1935 Government of Burma Act.[36] The Council pressed their case in a detailed memorandum by Tin Tut. They now had the service of one as familiar with the 1935 Act as any in the Burma Office. In effect he demanded that Burma's political advance should keep pace with that in India, where the Interim Government was functioning and a Constituent Assembly was due to be convened.

Rance insisted to Pethick-Lawrence: 'we cannot deal with the present situation piecemeal': he was putting together new proposals. The unhelpful response was 'do your best to put the brake on'.[37] The AFPFL countered with demands made public on 13 November: the British Government must announce before 31 January 1947 that Burma would be free within one year, and simultaneously the Executive Council must be recognized as a national government. Although the Burma Office disliked making concessions to what they called 'a caucus with no electoral mandate', they advised the Cabinet that the situation was 'deteriorating rapidly' and recommended (following Rance's proposals) that a delegation from the Executive Council be invited to discussions in London. This was agreed in principle.[38] Rance transmitted the invitation informally and the reception in Council was favourable.[39] However, after further consideration the AFPFL told Rance that before they could agree to the delegation they required an announcement by HMG that the purpose of the visit was to prepare for an 'Interim Government with full powers', and that the forthcoming general election was not to restore the partial parliamentary set-up under the 1935 Act but to elect a Constituent Assembly 'for the whole of Burma'. This claim was justified because India had been given exactly similar

[35] Text of statement (handed to governor 23 October), *Struggle*, vol. II, pp. 94–7.

[36] Telegram dated 5 November, *ibid.*, pp. 113–14.

[37] Rance to Pethick-Lawrence, 8 November, *ibid.*, pp. 129–30. Pethick-Lawrence to Rance, 9 November, *ibid.*, 131–2.

[38] Note by Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, 16 November ('caucus'), *ibid.*, p. 147, and Memorandum to Cabinet, 22 November ('deteriorating'), *ibid.*, pp. 153–7. Acceptance of delegation proposal signalled, 26 November (*ibid.*, pp. 163–4).

[39] Transmitted by Rance as received, 5 December, *ibid.*, p. 174.

terms. A worried Rance reviewed the demand with Aung San and Tin Tut. He told Pethick-Lawrence that just as the 'White Paper was out of date, so I also consider that the time for equivocation is past. In my opinion HMG must now be prepared to be definite or accept the consequences'. This was strong stuff: too strong for the Cabinet. They fell back on another stalling device: 'to frame a statement not perhaps as specific as that made to India'.[40]

A more blunt appreciation of the gathering crisis was despatched by the GOC in C, Burma to the War Office. He reminded London that AFPFL 'having taken office, and taunted as traitors by Communists . . . must justify themselves . . . hence demands on HMG'. If there was a refusal, then AFPFL would resign, the police and other public services would strike, and there was 'chance of widespread rebellion'. If there was an embargo on the use of Indian troops, then his only resource was three weak British battalions. Massive British reinforcements would be required, including 'very considerable administrative tail'.[41] Rance's comment was that if anything this estimate 'was on the low side'. While the Cabinet hesitated, the governor had to report 'the price has hardened': there were now 'more extensive demands'.[42] When the India and Burma Committee met on 19 December 1946 they first listened to an appreciation from Field Marshal Montgomery. He informed them bleakly that if there was widespread rebellion in Burma 'the situation might require up to two [British] divisions; these did not exist'. The Cabinet were still reluctant to agree; several ministers supported A. V. Alexander in regretting that they had come under pressure: 'There was a danger that His Majesty's Government might find themselves in a humiliating position'. But gradually they all faced up to the inevitable: what was the point in 'attempting to hold the country for a period of years by force' when they were agreed on the eventual goal? 'If the principle of independence was sound for India it was also sound for Burma'.[43] They had left themselves no leeway. Parliament was to rise for Christmas next day, so Attlee had to make an announcement then. His statement effectively put paid to the White Paper. They would 'hasten forward the time when Burma shall realise her independence, either within or without the Commonwealth'. Churchill expressed incredulity at this volte face, but he could only fume

[40] Telegram, Rance to Pethick-Lawrence, 7 December, *ibid.*, 175–7; seen by Attlee, 8 December; Cabinet agree to temporize, at meeting, 10 December, *ibid.*, pp. 182–3.

[41] GOC Burma to War Office, 13 December, *ibid*, pp. 189–90.

[42] Rance to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 December, *ibid.*, pp. 201–3.

[43] India and Burma Committee of Cabinet, 19 December, 10 a.m. *ibid.*, pp. 203–6, Cabinet Meeting, 11 a.m., *ibid.*, pp. 206–7.

ineffectually at the prospect of giving up the territory which his father as Secretary of State for India had annexed in 1886.[44]

Events now moved rapidly. The delegation to visit London, led by Aung San, would include Tin Tut, Ba Pe, Thakin Mya (Home Member), U Saw, and Ba Sein, formerly mentor of Aung San but now a minor rival. Except for their leader, aged thirty, all were men in middle age. The British negotiators were led by Attlee, with Cripps, Pethick-Lawrence, Lord Listowel (soon to take over as Secretary of State), and A. V. Alexander. They were joined by two of the postwar recruits, Arthur Bottomley and Christopher Mayhew. The talks lasted from 13 to 27 January, with ten formal sessions.[45] Each side began to trust the other and a degree of compromise appeared, though the concessions were mainly on the British side. A sticking point seemed to be the Burmese demand that the Frontier areas participate in the constitutional process while the Attlee team clung to the established position that the Frontier peoples were their special responsibility which could not be abandoned. Eventually agreement was reached on a basis approved by Rance: that a committee of enquiry equally representative of the plains Burmese and the hill peoples should ascertain what the latter wanted. A draft agreement was produced by Cripps with his customary skill in steering around difficult corners and a meeting to finalize the agreement was convened at 5.30 pm on Sunday evening, 26 January 1947.

The British expected this to be smooth going, but the Burmese tried to depart substantially from the agreed approach. The British dug their heels in. With unaccustomed bluntness Cripps stated 'unless agreed conclusions were reached there was no point in negotiating', and Attlee added: 'Until this point had been settled it was useless to consider any . . . amendments'. Surprised to find that this time raising the stakes did not work, the Burmese withdrew and returned announcing that they would endeavour to join in agreed conclusions. The meeting dragged on, though now only details remained outstanding. Just as they were all through, and midnight was approaching, U Saw and Ba Sein broke their previous silence to repudiate the agreement. 'United Kingdom Ministers expressed their astonishment'—they had all along been led to believe the delegation were in accord. Cripps told Saw contemptuously that 'He wished to accept the benefit of the agreement without the responsibility for it'. Aung San exclaimed scornfully: 'Let them resign and say they do not agree with the final statement and do not accept any

[44] H.C. Debs, vol. 431, cols 2343–5, in *Ibid.*, pp. 209–10.

[45] The Burma Conversations, together with memoranda exchanged between the two sides, are reproduced in detail in *Struggle*, vol. II, pp. 257–354.

responsibility for it'. By this act the two dissidents excluded themselves from any political future in the new situation.

Next day Attlee and Aung San formally appended their signatures to the 'Conclusions'. Burma had taken a massive stride towards independence.[46] Although Pethick-Lawrence assured Wavell that these changes did not 'put the Interim Government of Burma in any way in advance of the Indian Interim Government, which might be embarrassing for you' this was not the reality.[47] In India, the question of unity or partition was still quite undecided: in Burma the 'early unification' of plains Burma with the Frontier areas was now 'the agreed objective'. And whereas in India the Viceroy was to preside over the meetings of the Interim Government right up to the transfer of power, henceforth in Burma the governor would only be present at meetings involving his special powers, such as the manner of the phasing out of the Secretary of State's services. On all other occasions, Aung San was in charge. Effectively, power had been transferred. All that remained was to legitimize this by Treaty and Act of Parliament.

The London negotiations had continued longer than watchful spectators in Burma expected, and some misinterpreted this as meaning there was no progress. The Communists accused AFPFL of a sell-out, and organized a mob invasion of the Secretariat. As a form of reply, AFPFL under the direction of Thakin Nu, acting as Aung San's locum, embarked on strikes among workers in public utilities in Rangoon (though not among the police) and in a few remote places up country there were armed outbreaks where local leaders assumed the Freedom Struggle had begun. It was all an indication of how close to the abyss they had come.

The return of Aung San bearing the news that independence was now assured had a calming effect. Among the Frontier leaders the more shrewd and realistic quickly grasped that there was a new game to be played. Within ten days of the delegation's return a conference was held at Panglong in the Shan States where the leaders of the Shans, Kachins and Chins made a deal with Aung San. They would be represented on the Executive Council by their own Counsellor (Shan) assisted by two Deputy Counsellors (Kachin and Chin). An autonomous Shan state would be formed and also a new Kachin State, within a unified

[46] The Sunday evening meeting extended into two sessions (recorded as 8th and 9th Meetings), *ibid.*, pp. 361–72. The 10th meeting next morning was a formality to witness the signing of the 'Conclusions' by Attlee and Aung San, (*ibid.*, pp. 376–7. This was issued as a White Paper, Cmd. 7029, *ibid.*, 378–82.

[47] Secretary of State for India to Viceroy, telegram 27 January 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 377–8.

Burma.[48] This agreement was not recognized by the Karens, the largest indigenous minority, whose spokesmen were hopelessly divided over their prospects in the new, unfamiliar AFPFL-dominated politics. Most wanted a separate state, but this was difficult as only one-third of them lived in the hills: the majority dwelt in the Delta surrounded by the Burmese population. No Karen had accompanied the mission to London though two members of the community were members of the Executive Council. A sense of resentment against both Burmese and British began to possess them.

Aung San realized that if he was to succeed in attaining his objective of an independent, unified Burma he must keep ahead, maintaining the initiative he had won. The Karens were restive; the Communists were a menace. There were armed men everywhere.

The next hurdle to be cleared was the general election, held on 9/10 April. The pre-war parties realized the futility of trying to compete. Only the Communists contested the elections on a party basis, and although they commanded solid support in the rural areas of central Burma they were successful only in three of the 91 general constituencies: otherwise it was a clean sweep for AFPFL. The main Karen organizations boycotted the election, thus providing a walkover for the minority of Karens who adhered to AFPFL. Assured of the support of 204 of the 210 elected members of the Constituent Assembly, Aung San could go ahead with the immediate presentation of his proposed constitution.[49]

Before then the Panglong Agreement had been processed (there is no more adequate term) by the Committee of Enquiry set up under the Attlee–Aung San agreement. The Committee went beyond their terms of reference as defined to recommend that Frontier leaders be chosen to take part in the Constituent Assembly. To speak for the hill peoples, 45 members were recruited. The Karens were represented on the Committee and gave evidence but with the confusion of purpose which attended all they did they failed to clarify their demands.[50]

With everything falling into his hands, Aung San proceeded to tidy up the political scene before raising the curtain on the last act. Ba Pe, 63 years of age, the only old guard politician to have survived into the new era of mass politics, was dismissed from office. Aung San informed Attlee

[48] Text of Panglong Agreement, with signatories, *ibid.*, pp. 404–5.

[49] Analysis of the election results is given in *ibid.*, appendix, pp. 919–21.

[50] Report of the Frontier Areas Enquiry Committee (signed 24 April 1947), *ibid.*, pp. 483–90. An emergency Karen Congress passed resolutions on 26 April (*ibid.*, pp. 494) and thereafter a steady stream of Karen statements appeared, e.g. 6 May, *ibid.*, p. 512.

that he must announce a date for independence 'early in 1948'. Then he revealed details of the new constitution to an AFPFL Convention assembled in Jubilee Hall (named in honour of the old Queen). The form of the constitution came as a complete surprise to Sir Hubert Rance, while in London the Secretary of State learned about it from *The Times*. Indicating that Burma would be a republic, Aung San effectively gave notice that his country would leave the Commonwealth: for in May 1947 the notion of accommodating a state which did not accept the Crown as its head was beyond the constitutional considerations of Whitehall.[51]

Meanwhile, events in India were moving unexpectedly fast: on 3 June it was announced that the choice for separation was to be given to the Muslims, and soon after came the news that—because the Indian leaders accepted Dominion Status, at any rate for a period—independence would be granted in mid-August. Rance desperately tried to persuade the Burmese that they, too, should accept the Dominion Status formula as a means of moving faster. There was no response, apart from an ingenious suggestion that they might be a Dominion for a few weeks or months until the constitution had been ratified. Listowel rejected the proposition: 'It would make a laughing stock of Dominion Status and be unfair and discourteous to the [existing] Dominions'.[52] Rance sensed they were all boxed in by out-of-date convention. If Burma left the Commonwealth, might not Ceylon, and eventually Malaya take the same course? 'The time seems ripe for a new conception of association within the Commonwealth not necessarily owing allegiance to the Crown, especially for those countries who have no ties of blood, culture, or religion.' He received no encouragement from London but he was permitted to repeat his ideas to Mountbatten and to Malcolm MacDonald, Governor-General of the Malayan Union. Mountbatten was too occupied to respond but MacDonald sent a powerful plea to the Colonial Secretary supporting Rance, adding 'If British influence slips [in South East Asia] some other external influence will inevitably take its place'. This might be America, but it was more likely to be a Communist China.[53]

[51] Aung San to Attlee, 13 May, *ibid.*, pp. 519–20). Draft constitution, adopted by AFPFL Convention, 20–23 May, details, *ibid.*, pp. 527–9. See also *The Times*, 20 May 1947, 'A Republic for Burma'.

[52] Listowel to Rance, telegram 7 June, *Struggle*, vol. II, pp. 566–8 (Listowel took over from Pethick-Lawrence as Secretary of State on 23 April 1947).

[53] Rance to Listowel, telegram, 9 June ('time seems ripe'), *ibid.*, pp. 574–5; Rance to Mountbatten, 11 June, *ibid.*, pp. 581–2; Mountbatten to Rance, 12 June, *ibid.*, pp. 584–5; Malcolm MacDonald to Creech Jones, 26 June, *ibid.*, pp. 615–18.

The Burmese were determined to assert their position of parity with India by gaining some additional advantage. Thakin Nu, now President of the Constituent Assembly, was despatched to London on a goodwill mission.[54] Among the AFPFL leaders Nu had been the most suspicious of British intentions, but the response of the Labour leaders had changed his mind. Now, in conversation with Attlee he emphasized his desire for close relations, but he insisted that his government could not sell the idea of Dominion Status even to their own supporters: 'He therefore suggested that the British Labour Government should take the initiative in creating a political federation based on the integration of Socialist parties throughout the world'. Such a scheme might have been expected to appeal to a Socialist Prime Minister. Far from it: Attlee retorted: 'The proposal that a number of countries should be linked through the organisation of a single political party was a totalitarian concept and would not be regarded as desirable or feasible by His Majesty's Government'.

Nu was left to propose mainly cosmetic changes. Aung San should henceforth be recognized as Prime Minister and Members of the Executive Council as the Ministers of a Provisional Government. When Listowel referred these proposals rather doubtfully to Rance he replied in his commonsensical way: 'I must confess that I am unable to appreciate the objection to the phrase [Provisional Government] . . . . Full power already rests with the Executive Council.'[55] Nu returned with some concessions to present.

The Attlee Cabinet conducted a postmortem on Burma's decision to leave the Commonwealth: they reached the comfortable conclusion that everything possible had been done. Cripps did suggest that the door be kept open by inserting a provision in the forthcoming treaty permitting Burma to apply for readmission to the Commonwealth within twelve months of independence. Even this modest innovation was not incorporated in the actual treaty.

All this while uneasy sounds were emanating from the Karen community, but apart from urging Nu to try hard for agreement neither the Cabinet nor the governor took any initiative. Three small Karen states (Karenni) had the same formal status as the Indian princely states. With an absence of realism soon to be replicated in India the Karen chiefs boycotted the Constituent Assembly, which of course progressed quite unconcerned.

On 19 July 1947 occurred the event which might have destroyed the

[54] Burma Goodwill Mission, 1st Meeting, 25 June, *ibid.*, pp. 607–10.
[55] Rance to Listowel, telegram, 29 June, *ibid.*, pp. 631–2.

realization of independence by constitutional means. Aung San and his deputy premier, Thakin Mya, his Shan Counsellor, his most loyal Karen colleague, together with five others, were shot as they were assembled in Council. Thankin Nu was also on the death list but his intended assassin found himself unable to press the trigger. When gunned down, the Council were considering the arrest of U Saw who was known to be plotting violent action. Arrested later the same day, Saw was found with an ample stock of arms and ammunition, all drawn from British army depots on false police indents. Rumours of a British plan to kill Aung San and substitute U Saw began to circulate, even among responsible politicians. Rangoon was astir with private armies and the countryside was thick with weapons, Japanese and British, in the hands of self-styled freedom fighters, half bandit, half rebel. It was a highly explosive situation, defused by the prompt action of Rance. With no delay he asked Thakin Nu to form a new AFPFL government. Installed in office, Nu publicly repudiated rumours about British involvement in the assassinations, specially emphasizing the 'close understanding between HMG, HE the Governor, and the Burma Government'.[56] By the end of July the crisis had blown over, though many suspicions remained (and remain to this day).

One by one the landmarks signalling independence were reached. On 29 August a Defence Agreement was concluded between Britain and Burma.[57] On 24 September the Constitution was finally adopted by the Assembly at the end of its third sitting. Nu declared that Burma would be 'Leftist', dedicated to the welfare of the common people. He averred that 'we are now united', and that the various ethnic groups 'have shed the past and are becoming more united than ever before'.[58] It was a brave affirmation, but in truth the Karens were discontented, increasingly alienated from the government, while one section of the Communists (the so-called Red Flags) had already gone underground and their rivals, the White Flags, were only awaiting the best moment to revolt. Also, the PVO and certain of the former BNA army units, now deprived of their commander, Bogyoke Aung San, were increasingly flexing their muscles.

It was far too late for the British to influence developments. Almost all the British administrators and those in the police had already left the

[56] Press Communiqué issued by Council of Ministers, 25 July, *ibid.*, p. 685.
[57] Britain–Burma Defence Agreement, text in *ibid.*, pp. 734–6.
[58] Constitution of the Union of Burma (Extracts), *ibid.*, pp. 759–67; Nu's speech, 26 September, *ibid.*, 769–71.

country. The few remaining British army units were packing up, as were their Indian army comrades. Best to keep up a brave face.

On 17 October a treaty was signed at 10 Downing Street by Attlee and Nu in the presence of Bevin, Cripps, and many others, British and Burmese. Article I read 'The Government of the United Kingdom recognises the Republic of the Union of Burma as a fully independent sovereign state'. This set the tone for the rest of the treaty.[59] Last of all, parliament endorsed the treaty through the Burma Independence Bill. Whereas the Conservatives had not opposed the India Bill—largely because of the Dominion Status formula—Churchill led his depleted followers into the opposition lobby on Burma. The Bill passed by 288 to 114 votes. The Liberals, and also three Conservatives supported the government and a number abstained, including R. A. Butler and Harold Macmillan.[60] Nothing now remained but the final obsequies. The astrologers selected 6 January 1948 as the most auspicious day—then changed their minds and asked for 4 January, naming 0.420 hours as the moment when the new six star flag should be raised.[61] (Later, when things went wrong, it was asserted that neither the timing nor the stellar pattern of the flag were properly calculated).

Sir Hubert Rance departed with dignity. The new state was launched (Dorothy Woodman was among those there). And Thakin Nu assumed his heavy burden with a humble sense of duty and a saving sense of humour.

* * *

This account has tried to demonstrate that the 'Transfer of Power' concept does not fit the realities of the British exit from Burma. Capitulation of power would be a more fitting term. Recent works by Kenneth Harris and Kenneth Morgan have sought to give legitimacy to the version popularized at the time—that the Attlee government carried out a carefully planned programme of decolonization.[62] The reality

[59] Treaty Between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Provisional Government of Burma, text, *ibid.*, pp. 794–8.

[60] H. C. Debs, vol. 443, cols 1836–1960.

[61] Tin Tut to Laithwaite, telegram, 4 November, notifying new auspicious date, in *Struggle* vol. II, pp. 806–7.

[62] Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London, 1982) devotes a chapter to Burma and India. The Burma section (pp. 355–62) contains numerous errors; the most egregious being to refer to Aung San as 'Aung Sang' throughout. His verdict—'From start to finish he [Attlee] moved steadily and unshakably, coolly and adroitly, according to his plan' (p. 386)—bears only a limited resemblance to the reality. Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–1951* (Oxford, 1984), reviews the process of decolonization very briefly. He observes

seems to be that Labour did accept the early attainment by India of full self-government (though far too long underestimating the problem of Pakistan). The plan for Burma, Ceylon and Palestine envisaged a much less compressed timetable. Labour's leaders still accepted the Burkean concept of trusteeship whereby a colonial people should be held in tutelage until they had demonstrated their political maturity. The new generation of Burmese leaders, like the Jewish leaders in Palestine, blew Labour's programme apart.

We may argue about exactly when the Burmese took over: one of the most perceptive of the British administrators involved asserts that Britain surrendered power at the end of September 1946, fifteen months before the formal withdrawal.[63] Definitely, in the wake of the London talks the British capability to control events expired: 6 March 1947, when W. I. J. Wallace the last British Chief Secretary handed over to U Ka Si, marks the date beyond which even the governor had only as much knowledge of what was about to happen as the AFPFL leaders chose to tell him.

If these were the circumstances, how do they affect our assessment of the chief actors in the drama? What of Attlee, whose posthumous reputation, like his performance in government, appears to maintain a steady level. We must acknowledge that while he cautiously waited on events he did not hang back beyond the point of recovery. Even though he finally accepted the inevitability of speeding up Burma's constitutional progress ahead of the 1945 White Paper programme only twenty-four hours before his momentous announcement of 20 December he did decide, like the competent chairman he was, just in the nick of time. He got it right in the end. That is what matters in politics: and matters to the historians.

What do we say of Aung San, the country boy who had a rendezvous with fate, a rendezvous with death. He did not choose any particular route to gain his country's independence: whether as student activist, conspirator, strutting Japanese general, spell-binder of the masses, tough across-the-table negotiator, and finally martyr, he symbolized the Burmese revolution. Forty years after his death he remains the most potent force in his country's political mythology.

What an oddly matched couple Attlee and Aung San were! The one

that the record in India was 'a kind of triumph' (p. 218) but his only reference to Burma is as follows: Labour was 'morally committed to speed up the process of independence for India and perhaps for Burma and Ceylon as well' (p. 219). One cannot quarrel with that.

[63] *Struggle*, vol. I, personal memoir by F. S. V. Donnison, Chief Secretary February–November 1946: see specially p. 1010.

defusing the most awesome confrontation of all its drama: the other injecting an atmosphere of menace and intensity to almost every encounter. It was not surprising that he made the running and secured his objective over apparently improbable odds. Yet history (or so it seems to this observer) prefers the ordinary to the extraordinary. Attlee has been awarded his slot in history as the man who 'gave' India and Burma their independence, and outside Burma is far more widely remembered than the man who wrested independence from him.