

# Ne Win's echoes: Burmanization policies and peacebuilding in Myanmar today

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## Introduction

There is a strong polarization in Myanmar between the majority lowland Bamar (or 'Burman') population and the many minority groups in the remote highlands and border regions. Decades of war and separatism have exacerbated this polarization, amplified through an army and government dominated by Bamar. 'Burmese identity' is central to both the majority Bamar and the minority groups, who typically define themselves in opposition to the Bamar. Ne Win's Burmanization<sup>1</sup> policy of the 1960s is one of the key reasons why the government of independent Burma/Myanmar cannot easily resolve decades of tensions even after the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

This chapter looks at the principles and practices of Ne Win's nation-building or 'Burmanization'. This includes Ne Win's policies of supremacy of the Burmese Buddhist culture, a centralized economic system, and his quasi-military<sup>2</sup> government. These policies intensified the ethnic tensions and prolonged the violent conflicts which had already begun in 1949–52, but which had effectively been subject to a ceasefire until 1962, when General Ne Win seized complete power. Ne Win resumed military operations in the geographically peripheral areas of Myanmar where ethnic minorities live, with many people being deported or fleeing to Thailand, China and India over the next sixty years.

General Ne Win (1911–2002) is regarded as one of Myanmar's historical figures. He was one of the 'Thirty Comrades' who fought against the

British and with the Japanese in 1942. He was commander-in-chief of the army during U Nu's civilian premiership (1949–62) and leader of the 1962 coup d'état which brought his Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to power and made him prime minister and chairman of the BSPP. To sustain his power, he assumed the ancient Burmese policy of pursuing Burmese hegemony, which is now known as 'Burmanization'. In doing so, he drew on the traditional understanding of Burmese kingship rooted in Buddhism, the majority religion of the Bamar. Traditional Burmese monarchs believed that being a Buddhist king was a sign of being a *bodhisatta*, that is, a Buddha to be (Maung Maung Gyi 1983: 20). They had absolute power to rule their people. By drawing on traditional Burmese values and policies, Ne Win attempted to influence Burmese Buddhist people. In order to consolidate his power, he reformed the economy, political structures and ethnic relations in a way shaped by Burmanization policies.

Burmese historians<sup>3</sup> have studied Ne Win from different points of view. While most historians have focused on his use of the military and the strategies that he employed to sustain his regime, only a few scholars have analysed Ne Win's ethnic and economic policy. Yet, understanding how and why Ne Win engaged in his Burmanization policy explains one important reason for Myanmar's persistent armed conflicts; in other words, it points to a significant obstacle to lasting peace in Myanmar: the habitus left by Ne Win's decades of Burmanization.

Ne Win justified his coup by pointing to the need to stop the ongoing civil war, which was reported by major English newspapers around the world. Yet, in Ne Win's own reading, there was more to it: his coup paved the way for his 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. This Burmese Way to Socialism, Ne Win's concept of unification, was codified in the 1974 constitution, which replaced the 1947 constitution. The driving force was Ne Win's insistence on a process of Burmanization that incorporated military rule and socialist economic policies facilitating military rule. In the name of Burmanization, Ne Win's regime nationalized the business sectors and expelled foreigners from Burma. He strengthened the monocultural Burmese army while seeking to defeat the ethnic armies, dozens of which were and still are present in the mountainous peripheries of Burma.<sup>4</sup> The dominance of the ethnic Burmans in Burmese politics was legitimized by tracing this dominance back to the ancient Burma kingdoms. According to Ne Win's historians, all the ethnicities living on the periphery had once been under the control of the Burmese Buddhist kingdom defeated by the British in 1885 (Kyaw Thet 2015). The expulsion of the British

in 1947 and the re-establishment of Burmese rule were therefore presented as a kind of restoration of the past. Ne Win's Burmanization policies emphasized that his military government was a continuation of the previous Burmese dynasties,<sup>5</sup> and presented the government as a kind of 'fourth dynasty'.<sup>6</sup>

Understanding Ne Win's regime, its structure and its Burmanization policy is necessary to see the flaws in the current efforts at peacebuilding in Myanmar. In order to analyse the negative impact of Ne Win's regime on Myanmar's present situation, we need to focus on the 'three pillars' of Burmanization policy:

1. National identity is formed by the Burmese Buddhist culture.
2. The national economy needs to be a centralized system, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'.
3. The national government has to be a quasi-military government, in which the Burmese army plays the central role.

These foundational principles led to a process of assimilation, accommodation and alienation for the one-third of Myanmar's population who were not Bamar. These policies were continued in the 1970s when Ne Win attempted to present his regime as a patriotic institution which had actively prevented the disintegration of the country after independence (P. Kyaw Han 2012: 14).

The liberation of Burmese Buddhist society from British rule had been the ambition held by young Burmese nationalists in the colonial period. As Houtman (1999: 29) has shown, these nationalists considered Mussolini and Hitler as their heroes. After independence, they became national leaders, and Ne Win, also known as *Thakin*<sup>7</sup> Shu Maung, was one of them. According to Kyi Sein Win (2020: 154), it was Ne Win who finally fulfilled Aung San's plan for a free Burma. One of Ne Win's comrades, Senior General Saw Maung (1928–1997), created a link between the Burmese army and the ancient Burmese kings by placing Aung San in their tradition (Ministry of Information 1991: 75). But Aung San was assassinated shortly after independence, and Ne Win's supporters regarded him as the true successor of Aung San, who had brought the country together like the ancient kings (Steinberg 2001: 29). According to Houtman (1999: 94), Ne Win himself attempted to prove that he and his family were of royal descent in order to give legitimacy to his politics of Burmanization. In his efforts to link his regime to the Burmese Buddhist past, Ne Win created a modern nation state in the sense of Anderson's (1983) and Thongchai's (1994) concept of an 'imagined community'.<sup>8</sup>

## Ne Win's creation of a historical narrative for a new Burma

Historians and political scientists have argued that nationalist ideologies embed their concept of 'nation' in an account of the past that gives the modern nation a specific identity and the desired legitimacy (e.g. Anderson 1983; Thongchai 1994; Waters 2005). The narrative created by the nationalist ideologies evokes the emotions and patriotism needed to maintain the modern state. According to Anderson (1983: 9–10), the force and function of this mechanism can be seen, for example, in the erection of monuments such as cenotaphs and tombs of the unknown soldier. They represent the national spirit, calling on citizens to defend their nation even to the point of death.

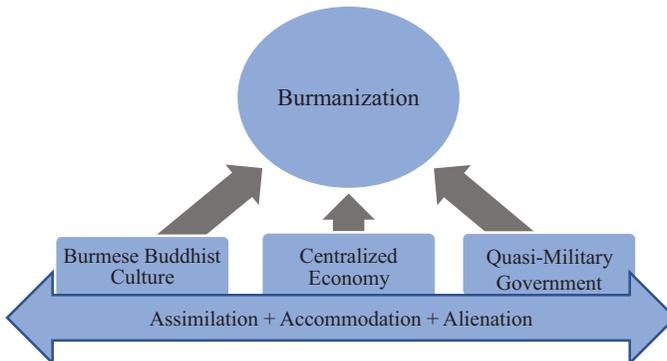
For example, in present Thailand, the Commission for National Identity has defined the Thai nation as consisting of eight elements: 'territory, population, independence and sovereignty, government and administration, religion, monarchy, culture, and dignity' (Thongchai 1994: 4). Similar features can also be applied to Ne Win's concept of the Bamar (or Burmese) nation. The creation and promotion of a specific cultural heritage rooted in the Burmese Buddhist past became a necessary catalyst for nation-building through Burmanization. The imagination and representation of Ne Win's regime as a new empire with ancient roots – the fourth Burma dynasty – reflects what Thongchai calls the 'geobody theory'. In Ne Win's case, this involves historicized ideologies regarding the preferred religion, that is, Buddhism, the dominance of Bamar language, culture and history, an ethnic-based concept of citizenship, independence and sovereignty, government and administration and especially the leading role of the military.

Ne Win's historians tried to find support for their historical narrative in the works of some historians from the British period. In the early twentieth century, both Western and Burmese historians called attention to the so-called Glass Palace Chronicle (*Hmannan Yazawin*), a work composed between 1829 and 1832, during the rule of King Bagyidaw of upper Burma, that focused on the kingdom of Bagan. Ne Win's historians were intent on asserting the work's 'Burmese-ness', even though the Chronicle itself does not mention any specific ethnic name in its description of eleventh-century Bagan (Shwe Lu Maung 1989: 70). The Chronicle mentions the kings' genealogies and their activities, including their military operations. It describes the city states, regions and dialect, but not ethnicity (Than Tun 2003: 109). Moreover, it actually indicates that the ancient people of Burma, especially in the Bagan era, reflected an

Indian type of civilization Bode (2011). But, in the narrative promoted by Ne Win's new historians, the golden days of supposedly Bamar kingdoms comprise all three previous dynasties leading up to the final unification of Myanmar under Ne Win (Myo Oo 2018: 48–59). This kind of nationalist historiography is almost 'hagiographic' in that it ignores the presence of many other kingdoms and princedoms coexisting with the so-called Bamar kingdoms or dynasties in the territory of later Myanmar. In fact, these kingdoms were linked to each other in a range of semi-feudal relationships with varying power relations and have little connection to modern ideas of ethnicity.

### The three ideological foundations of Ne Win's regime (1962–88)

Ne Win named his new military government 'the Revolutionary Council', but in practice he exerted personal dictatorial power. It seems that he initially lacked a clear ideology. He chose some military allies to create his regime and to operate the levers of power. Yet, a default ideology gradually emerged,<sup>9</sup> one based on three principles: a central Burmese Buddhist culture as the nation's cultural identity, a centralized economic system and a centralized quasi-military government. These principles translated into a politics of assimilation, accommodation and alienation (see Figure 3.1). I will now explain this structure in more detail.



**Figure 3.1** Ideological Foundations of Ne Win's Regime.

## **Building a single culture as national identity (Burmese Buddhist culture)**

Ne Win introduced new administrative divisions. The number of non-Bamar states was changed from five to seven (with the creation of the Mon State and the Arakan State), and, in order to balance these, another seven new divisions (or 'regions') were created in the Bamar-speaking areas (see Clarke et al. 2019: 23; Khine Lin 2015: 73). This new map reflected the essence of a We-self vs. Others attitude as described by Thongchai (1994: 169–72) for Thailand. In Burma, the 'we-self' was constituted by the two-thirds of the population living in the Bamar heartland of the seven new divisions, who could plausibly align themselves with Ne Win's definition of Bamar/Buddhist identity in terms of heritage, family and culture.

In Ne Win's post-1962 Burma, nationalization became increasingly equivalent to Burmanization. The ethnic-national, mother-tongue-based schools in the ethnic states were nationalized, that is, placed under the centralized Ministry of Education in Yangon (Taylor 2015: 275–6). Burmese supplanted Karen, Kachin, Shan and other languages to become the language of all schools, government offices and other institutions. Under the new regime, all school textbooks were based on Burmese culture and language, effectively erasing ethnic cultures and languages from the national curriculum (Yay 2018: 201). Nationhood was reimagined as Bamar with no other identity or essence. This cultural construct reflected Ne Win's personal vision that decolonizing Burma meant restoring the ancient Bamar culture as the essence of a unified country, which had to be restored after the British policy of divide and rule.

Buddhism was important to Ne Win's new ideology. In the colonial period, Buddhism had lost much of its political influence. The British stopped government subsidies of the temples and the *saṅgha* (the Buddhist order) because they wanted to separate religious organization from the state, while Christian missionaries proselytized to native people through their schooling system (Kyi Win Sein 2015: 2–3). After 1948, Buddhism moved back to the centre. U Nu supported an independent Buddhist order and fostered Buddhism, but also permitted the practice of Christianity and Islam (Kyaw Win et al. 2011: 89). Ne Win, however, viewed the religious diversity of Burma with more suspicion. In 1962, he asserted control over the Buddhist order, with its potential for revolt, forcing all monks to register. The monkhood was brought under military rule (Charney 2009: 119) and ultimately became an ally. Making Burmese Buddhism a central feature of national identity also sharpened the demarcation between 'us

and them'. The 'we', the in-group, became the people who lived under the light of Buddhism, the legal people, while the 'they', the insurgents, lived in darkness. Ethnic, religious and political dissenters constituted the out-group irrespective of their ethnic background.

### **Centralization of the economic system**

Under U Nu's rule (1948–62), economic policy can be characterized as *laissez-faire* market capitalism protected by licensing regimes. State-controlled economic activities hardly existed. Foreign-owned companies from Britain, the United States, overseas China and India ran their businesses in post-independent Burma as a legacy of British colonialism, particularly those dealing with rice production, teak production, gems, oil and the exploitation of natural resources. In accordance with his newly created 'socialist' economic plan, Ne Win nationalized the foreign companies, many of which were controlled by Chinese and Indians (Kyi Win Sein 2020: 186, 192). Nationalization was also applied to non-governmental institutions supported by foreign countries, especially to the extensive Christian missionary system of schools, hospitals, social work and churches (Myanmar Baptist Convention 2012; Kyi Win Sein 2020). Foreign Christian missionaries were expelled. One of the many reasons given was that some missionaries were working as foreign agents (*ibid.*: 37–8). Whereas 'the departure of foreigners and missionaries did not have much effect on the Baptists for most Baptist church members and leaders were ethnic people ..., the nationalization of the church's properties and the implementation of the new socialist system created several unexpected troubles for the Baptists as well as the non-Baptists' (Saw Augurlion 2017: 78).

Ne Win equated capitalism with the colonial system, which is why he felt it was necessary to eliminate both. While he believed that the nationalization of corporations would not have an effect on the different ethnic people because they were mostly farmers and blue-collar workers, he designed the socialist economic plan to promote Burmese businessmen (San Nyein and U Mya Han 2012: 39, 45). As a result of the nationalization programme, both foreign companies and foreigners left the country. Ne Win took the alienation of the country one step further by debarring its citizens from travelling to other countries without official permission. Simultaneously, his centralization, with its focus on Burmese language, Burmese-speaking society and Burmese Buddhist values, inevitably increased animosity between ethnic Bamar and the other ethnic peoples of

Myanmar, despite the fact that most were farmers. Ne Win intended to create a nation centred on the Burmese race, which he regarded as superior.

### **Quasi-military government**

The most important change introduced by Ne Win was perhaps the dominance of the Burmese-speaking military. In the Ne Win regime, almost every cabinet member had a military-service background and connections established at the military academy after independence. Retired military officers with loyalties to Aung San's 'Thirty Comrades' and the Burmese Independence Army were promoted (Taylor 2015: 259), while the veterans of the anti-Japanese King's Karen and Kachin Rifles were drummed out of the military. In designing his dictatorship, Ne Win only trusted men with a military background in the Burma Independence Army and a few ethnic leaders who were there as puppet figures.

Ne Win also appointed government officers for the ethnic states. Even though there were putatively seven non-Bamar states in the Union, all the administrative officers from the governor down were appointed by the central military government in Rangoon (Yangon). Bamar-speaking officials typically had a military background and most were ethnic Bamar, thereby creating a Bamar privilege system (Walton 2012).

Underpinning military control was Ne Win's ideology of Burmese Supremacy (*Mahar Bamar*), which was effective in uniting the seven 'divisions' of central Burma. But this unity was to the disadvantage of the non-Bamar ethnicities in the seven states. The creation of the ideology of Burmese Supremacy privileged the Ne Win regime, since the concept of 'Burmanization' is generally understood to be the result of a 'centre-towards-peripheries' process (Boutry 2016: 105–6). In response, the ethnic armed groups promoted their own vernacular, thus reinforcing the idea of 'we-self vs. others' from a non-Bamar perspective. The crack was so deep that it led to a disintegration in Burma politics and to open revolt in the highlands.

### **The core procedures of Ne Win's regime**

As has been said above, the three ideological foundations of Ne Win's politics translated into three core procedures (assimilation, accommodation and alienation).

### **Assimilation (Taing Yin Thar See Lone Nyi Nyut Yae)**

In his speeches, Ne Win emphasized the myth that all ethnic people in Burma emerged from the same Burmese root. On this basis, he asserted the unifying potential of a 'Burmanized spirit' and presented this spirit as being necessary to establish a united socialist country (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964a: 14–19). The result was a politics of assimilation based on the promotion of Burmese Buddhism in the non-Bamar ethnic states, and the replacement of 'foreign missionary education' with state schooling taught mainly in Burmese.

Ne Win's closure of the country was part of his Burmanization agenda. He effectively stopped any foreign support for the Christian Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Chin – support that had developed during the British colonial period (1823–1948). Most of the schools for these ethnic groups were church-based, with the leading staff being missionaries from the United Kingdom and the United States, who also provided healthcare, social welfare and a livelihood. The exodus of Christian missionaries after 1962 decimated education conducted in local languages and English, as teachers and administrators departed. State-sponsored Buddhist missionaries then became active in the ethnic areas. These so-called highland missions (*Taung Tan Tharthnar Pyut*) preached not only Buddhism but also an anti-Western and anti-communist ideology known as Dhamamyal (Pyi Daung Su Thar 1959).

The Ministry of Education in Yangon developed a socialist education curriculum for the whole country. The Burmese Translation Association played an important role in translating English textbooks into Burmese. Promoting the standardized Burmese language (*Bamar Sar*) effectively prevented non-Bamar persons from teaching in formal education unless they could teach in Burmese. This policy reinforced Ne Win's explicit assertion that ethnic people living in border regions lacked proper education and were backward (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964a: 31). However, many actually had instruction in their home language through the Christian schools (in the case of the Karen, Kachin, Chin, etc.) or through the older system of Buddhist temple schooling (in the case of the Mon, Shan, etc.). But, in Ne Win's Burmanized world, development and modernity were measured by how well a person spoke Burmese and his or her level of education in a government school.

Ne Win's administration prioritized the Bamar community, and equated trust and loyalty with the government education system (News Editor, *MyanmarAlin News*, 12 December 1979). Non-Bamars, but also Christians and Muslims, were considered outsiders. In contrast to U Nu, Ne Win did not appoint any ethnic

leaders to his government. According to Rogers (2015), Christian military officers will not be promoted beyond the rank of major, because they are considered as possible threats. As has been stated by the Burmese scholar Tharaphi Than (2015: 27), the idea that non-Buddhist or non-Bamar people pose a threat to Burmese socio-religious and socio-economic life is deeply embedded in the Burmese mind.

### **Accommodation (Nay Yar Pay Ah Thi Ah Hmat Pyut Chin)**

Broadly speaking, the politics of 'accommodation' means establishing who belongs to Ne Win's new nation and who does not. In 1982, Ne Win's government introduced the Burma Citizenship Law, which reduced the number of legitimate ethnic groups in Myanmar to 135. Any group not on the list was deemed foreign or foreign-related and deprived of its rights.<sup>10</sup> Historians, social anthropologists and linguists still debate what factors are decisive in determining an ethnic group in Burma (e.g. Tonkin 2018; Ferguson 2015; Steinberg 2001). As I will argue below, linguistic, biological and historical aspects do not lead to clear-cut distinctions. Thongchai and Anderson have both emphasized the cultural construction, that is, the 'imagined' nature, of the concept of 'nationhood'. Thongchai is somewhat critical of Anderson's tendency to give too much weight to such an imagination 'over the operation in human practices', such that 'the newly imagined community seems to be created out of the frictionless propagation of new ideas like inscribing a new language on a blank sheet of paper' (Thongchai 1994: 15). Nonetheless, Ne Win's description of ethnic groups in Burma could indeed be seen as an act of sheer imagination. Its primary foundation seems to lie in serving his political agenda and cementing his political power. This is why, after Ne Win assumed political power, all ethnic groups in Burma were depicted in governmental publications (so-called blue socialist books) in accordance with his ideology of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. After 1965, the project of ethnic classification continued and was assigned to the Rangoon Arts and Sciences University (today: the University of Yangon) and especially to the departments of history and anthropology, under the supervision of Ne Win's government (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1967).

In terms of classification by language, Ne Win's linguists recognized only three basic groups: Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman and Tai-Chinese (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964b). But Ne Win's regime recognized eight 'national races', the Bamar, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Bamar, Rakhine and Mon, effectively

excluding Chinese and Indian groups from Bengal and elsewhere. This categorization was not based on linguistic criteria. In fact, 'the focus on eight major nationality races tended to obscure and confuse the significant diversity that exists within and between non-Bamar communities' (Clarke et al. 2019: 24). Among these groups, only the Mon ethnic group has a single dialect that is used widely. Chin people speak more than fifty different dialects. Karen people also have a large number of dialects, which are divided into eleven groups. Kayah people share the same language group with Karen, but are counted as a different ethnic group. Kachin ethnic groups mostly speak the same dialect, while the Rawang and Lisu speak different languages, but are nevertheless listed as Kachin and distinguished as different clans (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964b: 39). The same inconsistency applies to Bamar (Sino-Tibetan) languages. The state did not recognize Danu people, Inthar people or Dawei people as ethnicities on their own but considered them to be ethnically Bamar even though they live in Shan State and the Tanintharyi region, respectively, and speak languages that are not intelligible to each other.

From a biological point of view, the problem of Ne Win's categorization of eight different ethnic groups can be seen in the example of the Shan and the Bamar. Shan State has ethnic groups, such as Pa-O, Wa and Ta'ang, which are considered as Shan but are not related biologically or linguistically to other Shan people. Linguistically, the Pa-O dialect is closer to Karen, but the ethnic group is not included in the Karen group. The language of the Wa and Ta'ang belongs to the group of Mon-Khmer languages, that is, to the same group as the language of the Mon. Regarding the Bamar, there is an ethnic group known as Moken (or Salon) people (also known as 'sea gypsies'), who live in the southern Burma Archipelago and are considered Bamar. This is despite the fact that their language is an Austronesian language, unrelated to the Bamar language, which itself belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group. Biologically and culturally, the Moken are different from the Bamar (Boutry 2016: 114–17), but they were classed as a proto-Burman group.

Particularly problematic is the attempt to base the categorization on historical arguments. According to Ne Win's regime, some ethnic groups are deemed not to belong to Burma because of their historical roots, as, for example, the Rohingya in Rakhine State (now called 'Bengali' by the government), who are of Indian origin. According to the regime's official categorization in 1965, the Rakhine group includes the Mro (Khume), Kaman, Thet, Maramargyi and Rakhine. They have different dialects and biological features, but were categorized as 'Rakhine' because they had presumably lived in the Rakhine Kingdom in the distant past. For example,

the majority of Kama are Muslims of Arab descent, who served Rakhine kings as archers. Mro and Khume speak a Chin dialect, but they are counted as Rakhine because they had lived in Rakhine since the beginnings of the Rakhine Kingdom. Maramagyi are Buddhists, but, despite having similar physical features to Indians, they were also included in the Rakhine group. Similar inconsistencies are found in the ethnic categorization of the Shan. Some Chinese people living in Shan State were not listed in the ethnic group (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1967 34–5), while the *Shan-Tayouk*, who are also Chinese, are classified as a sub-ethnic group of the Shan (News Editor, *Botataung Daily Newspaper*, 23 February 1973).

The questionable nature of ethnic categorization can also be seen in the persistent variations in numbers. In 1973, Ne Win's government classified 144 ethnic groups. This was changed in 1973, and then again in 1982, when it was fixed at 135 (Kyaw Nay Min (Myo Pya), 2020: 157, 181). However, in 1990, the military government again made some changes to the list, while keeping the number to 135 (News Editor, *Working People Daily Newspaper*, 26 September 1990).

The categorization of ethnic groups in Myanmar is clearly based not on language, biology or history but on political intentions. It served Ne Win's political agenda, as was made explicit in 'The Revolutionary Council's Policy on Ethnicity in Burma', which asserted that ethnic people had been living in Burma since ancient times and were descended from the Tibeto-Burman group (Burmese Socialist Programme Party 1964c: 33–4), that the divisions were the result of British colonial policy (ibid.: 55) and that the time has come to reunify and rebuild the country (ibid.: 69). The other side to accommodation was necessarily alienation, however. People who were not accommodated became foreigners, and regarded as enemies who could not be trusted. This is why, for example, the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi married a foreigner still prevents her from becoming president. It is well known that Ne Win was xenophobic. However, the creation of enemies was also instrumental in his attempt to create a unified Burmese Buddhist nation.

### **Alienation (Khwe Char Nyin Pae Chin)**

The policy of alienation was implemented from the very start of Ne Win's regime for those groups who did not accept the government's new Burmanization policies, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). The government used structural and cultural

violence, military oppression and exclusion from the development plans against these established regional political parties, who were then seen as state enemies or – as in the case of the Rohingya – were not regarded as proper citizens.

‘Insurgents’ (as they were called by the government) or ‘ethnic armed groups’ (as they were called by foreign diplomats) have mostly operated in states on Myanmar’s periphery, where the authority of the central government was never fully accepted or implemented. The armed groups resist the government’s Burmanization policies as much as the Burmese army fights against them as part of the Burmanization strategy. After all, ‘making wars means making the maps’ (Thongchai 1994: 14). Where possible, Ne Win’s regime used forced labour, relocation, isolation and psychological techniques to Burmanize people. In the 1970s, Burmanization turned into the military’s much feared ‘Four Cuts Policy’, which meant cutting communication, cutting rations, cutting transportation and cutting recruitment for enemies of the state (Than Tin 2009: 347). In practice, it often meant the isolation, invasion and destruction of highland villages.

The Rohingya in northern Rakhine State have been subject to extreme structural, cultural and physical violence since the 1970s. People living there were required to have travel permits from the army to move from one place to another, even within the same region (Berlie 2008: 54). State surveillance was increased and their cultural practices and religious beliefs were labelled as threats to the state. Beginning in 1978, force was used to seize control of northern Rakhine and to Burmanize the Rohingya population, and programmes promoting state education, health and economic and social development were not implemented or supported. Denial of citizenship followed, which was used to rid the country of unwanted people. Operations were undertaken to expel them to Bangladesh (Po Kan Kaung 1992: 90–9).

In other government-controlled areas, people perceived as rebels were arbitrarily imprisoned without trial (Berlie 2008: 55). Those released were placed under surveillance, and their livelihood activities restricted. The citizenship law was used to ensure the ‘purity’ of those remaining. In 1982, the Ne Win government announced a *ius sanguinis* law to define Burman citizens and to distinguish them from foreigners. So-called mixed-blood people were not deemed full citizens and received at best only temporary residential cards (Khin Maung Kyaw 1971: 114–19). While some of those affected by this law were of Chinese origin, the majority were late descendants of Indian immigrants who had come to Burma to work in the colonial state

at the invitation of the British colonial power between 1824 and the 1930s (ibid.: 28–43).

## The negative effect of Ne Win's policy on peacebuilding in today's Myanmar

Ne Win's politics still resonate throughout Myanmar (U Aung Htoo 2014: 71–5). Ethnic armed groups are reluctant to enter peace deals with the military and the state government, whom are still thought to follow many of the Bamar-centric features of Ne Win's policy. They believe that ceasefire agreements in 'ethnic-controlled areas' would still serve the military's Burmanization principles (Win Tint Tun 2017: 538–46). To them, ceasefires often appear as attempts by both Burma's military and the new NLD state government to continue diluting the political demands made by ethnic people for autonomy in language policy, school administration and the provision of justice, land policy and other public services.

The handful of trust-building exercises between the government and ethnic armed organizations during the Ne Win years are now seen as pipe dreams that never lasted more than about three years and were brought to a halt by the 'Four Cuts' operations (Maung Aung Myoe 2009: 27–9). Peace talks initiated by the military and the government inevitably failed, leading to the resumption of Burmanization policies, such as the nationalization of schools, the confiscation of lands and the placement of Bamar-speaking military officers in positions of authority. This experience is still vivid in the memory of ethnic people and explains why ethnic armed groups continue to suspect that peace talks are merely strategies to defeat the ethnic opposition. General Ne Win never seriously sought to attain real peace in Burma. Rather, he used 'peacebuilding' as a strategy for his own political agenda. And, despite the fact that this strategy did not succeed during his regime, the military continues to pursue it today. Like a domino effect, Ne Win's insistence on a superior Bamar 'race' led to an increase in ethnic discrimination: ethnic issues of Bamar versus non-Bamar, the perceived 'main' ethnic group vs the sub-ethnic group, the centre vs the periphery. In Ne Win's imagined community of a Bamar-centric nation rooted in the ancient Burmese kingdoms, even such inequalities and acts of discrimination functioned to sustain the imagination. As Anderson (1983: 22) says, the nation 'is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'

making people 'willing to die for such limited imaginings'. The more the Bamar saw themselves as the main and salient group, the more the other ethnicities emphasized their own identities as different and separate from the Bamar and resisted any attempts to be subjugated to the majority group. 'While the dynamics of division and distrust were certainly present prior to Ne Win's takeover in 1962, they reached new heights under military rule' (Clark et al. 2019: 24). But such 'division and distrust' also grew among the non-Bamar groups themselves. Encouraging this division among ethnic minorities was implicitly part of the 'divide-and-rule' strategy used by the Bamar military from when General Ne Win took over the new country's army in 1948, and particularly after his coup in 1962.

Ne Win's policies also created xenophobic prejudices towards Christianity and Islam, and towards the ethnic groups associated with them. The promotion of Buddhism as the dominant religion was an integral part of his hegemonic politics. Irrespective of history, the Buddhist majority consider Buddhism to be the original, indigenous religion of Burma (Historical Research Committee 2017: 12–15). Other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and even Hinduism, are regarded as 'foreign'. The merger of Buddhism with Bamar nationalism in Ne Win's policies fuelled inter-religious tensions.<sup>11</sup> Such tensions still echo in current (2019) conflicts such as between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in Rakhine State, and between the armed organizations of the KNU (led by Christian Karens) and the DKBA (led by Buddhist Karens) (South 2008: 58). The widespread mistrust among the different religious communities of Myanmar makes peacebuilding all the more difficult (see also Ye Hein Aung 2019).

When Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) seized power in 1962, the momentum of Ne Win's political agenda gave many people much hope. But that hope ended when Ne Win transformed the military from a professional organization into a body that protected and implemented his political agenda. The three foundations of his politics – Burmese Buddhist culture, a centralized economy, and military rule – led to the ill-fated policy of one nation, one language, one culture. These three foundations underlay the system that supported militarism in Burma, including the brutal 'Four Cuts' policies of the 1970s. Ne Win's strategies still resonate in the continuing war with the Kachin Independence Army, the expulsion of the Rohingya to Bangladesh in 2017, and the conflict with the Arakan Army in 2019. His Burmanization strategy created conflicts at the time, and still does so today. The flaws in Ne Win's three foundations underlie the seemingly unending tensions and conflicts in the country.

## Notes

- 1 The term 'Burmanization' refers to the domination of other ethnic groups by the Burmese. According to Carol Ann Boshier (2018), the terms 'Burmanized' or 'Burmanization' were first used in *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan states* in 1899.
- 2 I call it a quasi-military government because Ne Win constructed his government with military officers whom he could fully trust, but also appointed some civilians.
- 3 Several Burmese historians such as Maung Maung Gyi, Thant Myint-U, Dr Maung Maung, and Shwe Lu Maung have already written about Ne Win and his regime. According to Maung Maung Gyi, Ne Win and his counterparts adopted monarchical values to build their government. Thant Myint-U focused on modern Burma, where Ne Win's legacy continued with the system of military government. Dr Maung Maung sympathized with Ne Win and asserted that Ne Win's policy was suitable for the country, whereas Shwe Lu Maung held that Ne Win's policy and system created civil war.
- 4 Since 1949, Burma's periphery has been controlled off and on by dozens of ephemeral ethnic militias and the forces of the Burmese Communist Party and has endured the presence of permanent militaries, such as the Karen National Defence Organization, the Kachin Independence Army, the Mon New State Party, the Shan State Army and colourful rebels (*Young Sone Thabone*).
- 5 In Burmese historical accounts, the Bagan kingdom is counted as the first dynasty (eleventh to thirteenth century), the Taungoo dynasty (sixteenth to eighteenth century) as the second and the Konbaung dynasty (eighteenth to nineteenth century) as the third dynasty, which was followed by British colonial rule.
- 6 Ne Win's regime was not officially called the 'fourth dynasty'. Yet, the idea was in the air as a result of the attempts to link the Ne Win state to the previous three dynasties. This can also be seen in the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi's followers have continued the narrative by claiming that she is the founder of the fifth Burmese empire, a claim found in various NLD songs and in the speeches of various party members.
- 7 The title 'Thakin' ('master') referred to the members of the Doh Bamar Association. It carries symbolic meaning in the sense of rejecting the British 'masters'. The real masters of the land are the Burmese people.
- 8 While differing in theoretical nuance, the two works are complementary. Thongchai's reflections on Thailand also help to understand the recent history of Myanmar.
- 9 A few of his trusted people were called to design the appropriate ideology, which had to differ from U Nu's ideas and from communist ideology (Kyi Sein Win 2020).
- 10 The Rohingya are the most obvious example. Considered as one of the ethnic groups of Burma under the U Nu government, they were erased from the list of ethnic groups under Ne Win.

- 11 In colonial times, religious tensions were largely based on anti-colonialist sentiments. Under Ne Win, religious tensions were deliberately fostered. The anti-Islam book *Ah Myo Pyauk Mar So Kyauk Hsayar* was printed and distributed among government servants in Burma during the time when Ne Win controlled the press and publications department and similar ideas were disseminated in the state newspaper (see Ye Hein Aung 2020: 40). Another book supported by the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was *Shwe Pay Lwa*. For example, the lie was spread that Muslim men would receive a reward if they married Buddhist women (see Kyaw Nay Min 2020: 185).

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