

Department of Humanities, Northumbria University

Honours Dissertation

The Process of Decolonization in Burma:

Managing the Transition from Colony to Independent State

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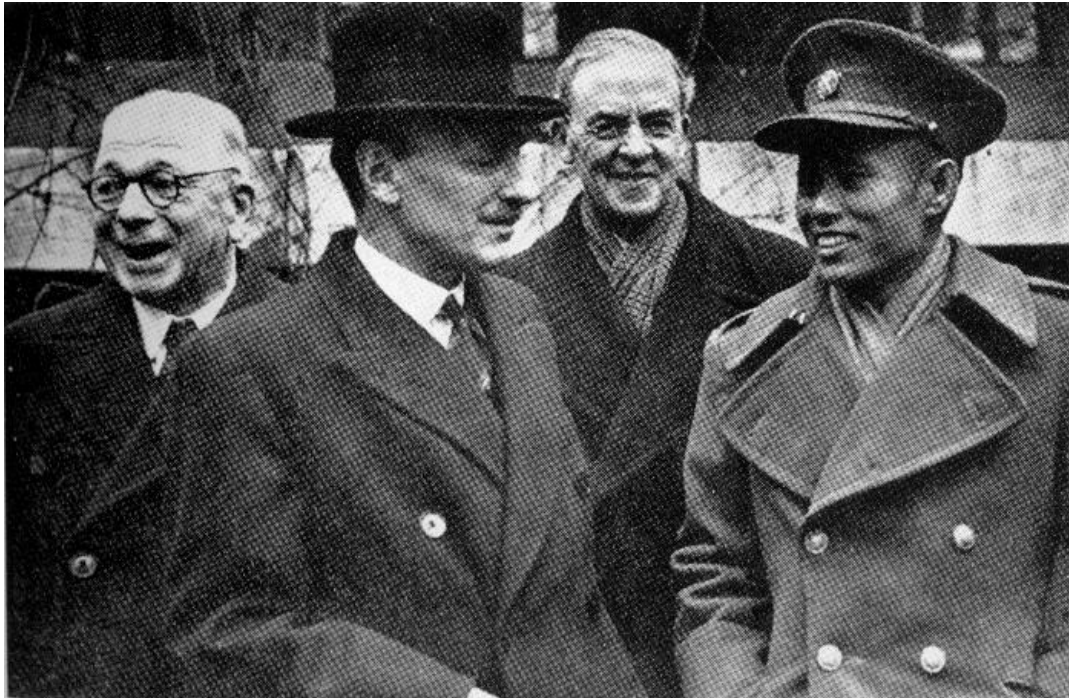


Figure 1 Aung San and Clement Attlee during negotiations leading to the Aung San-Attlee Agreement, January 1947.

From Hugh Tinker, *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948: Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I (London: H.M.S.O, 1983-1984), p. 795

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List of Abbreviations

AFO – Anti-Fascist Organisation

AFPFL – Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League

PVO – People’s Volunteer Organization

BNA – Burma National Army

HC – House of Commons

Introduction

Eventual self-rule for Burma had been a long term objective of the British ever since the 1930s, just as it had been for India. Evidence of this can be seen in the creation of the Burma Act of 1935 which saw the partitioning of Burma from India. The Secretary of State in Parliament stated in 1931 that 'the constitutional objective after separation will remain the progressive realisation of responsible Government in Burma as an integral part of the Empire'.¹ Decolonisation is not just a result of the actions of colonial powers, the process is also subject to other pressures. This dissertation will explore the pressures that the Burmese applied upon British policy after World War II. It will examine the influence that the Burmese had in transforming the long term British objective for self-rule within the Commonwealth into full independence outside of the Commonwealth in less than three years of Britain returning to the colony.

On 4 January 1948, sixty three years since the Burmese monarchy was driven out by the British, Burma finally achieved its independence.² Burma's battle for independence was a long and bloody campaign. Discussing the period from the Second World War to independence, this study will concentrate on the final years of the independence struggle. Hugh Tinker, one of the leading scholars of Burma's transition to independence commented that, 'Power was surrendered by the British to the Burmese long before the Union Jack was lowered on 4 January 1948'.³ This idea will become central to this study which will argue that strong Burmese opposition saw British policy cower in the face of it. Certain historians highlight the parallels between Burma's and India's independence struggles, and these will be addressed throughout the essay.

¹ Hansard, HC Deb, 05 November 1947, Vol 443, cc1836-961

² Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 83.

³ Hugh Tinker, *Burma: Power Transferred or Exacted? Reflections on the Constitutional Process in British Policy and the Transfer of Power in Asia Documentary Perspectives*, ed. R.B Smith and A.J. Stockwell (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987), p. 24.

Tinker, alongside Nicholas Tarling, has contributed greatly to the range of literature devoted to the history of Burmese independence. Tinker noted in 1988 that the number of Western academics producing work on Burmese independence can be counted on the fingers of one hand.⁴ However more recent scholars such as Michael Charney offer an additional recent perspective on the subject. These combined with numerous works published by Burmese historians such as Maung Maung and Balwant Singh have allowed this dissertation to bridge the gap between British and Burmese perspectives of events during the independence of Burma. The Burmese accounts offer an evidently Burmese national perspective of the period; however by intertwining these with the British narratives this study hopes to produce a neutral outlook of the events in the period. The main source of this dissertation is over one thousand British Government documents and papers published in the volumes of Hugh Tinker's *Burma, the Struggle for Independence: Documents from Official and Private Sources*. These two substantial volumes give an insight into the affairs of British Burma as well as offering a large range of documents such as Burmese newspapers, letters and telegrams from Burmese politicians as well as war documents and demands made to the British by revolutionary parties. Tinker notes that by bringing these archival documents together in these two volumes he has attempted to 'listen to the Burmese voice' as much as possible.⁵ In addition to this, political memoirs, cabinet papers, war papers and a variety of newspaper reports have allowed this dissertation to create an arrangement of both British and Burmese primary documents to combine with the secondary literature, helping to create a unique perspective on the transition of power in Burma.

This dissertation will explore these immediate post war years, observing Britain's attempt to preserve Burma as a colonial possession from a fighting Burmese nationalist spirit demanding their independence. The first chapter will examine the necessary background knowledge to understand the independence movement in Burma. The history of nationalism in the nation will

⁴*Ibid*, p. 20.

⁵*Ibid*, p. 25.

be briefly addressed, as well as the events of Japanese occupation during World War II. As the British returned to the war torn nation, they had to concentrate their efforts on restoring order in the face of thriving nationalism.⁶ On their return to the colony, the British still under the war-time Churchill government, issued a White Paper proposing their policy for rule for the near future. This post war objective for Burma was for eventual self-governance within the Commonwealth, which will be addressed at the end of the chapter.⁷ The Burmese disagreed and wanted independence with a given date and on a short time scale.

Under the organisation of Aung San, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League became a realistic political force in Burma possessing support from over ninety per cent of the Burmese people.⁸ Aung San was a character in Burma who had a massive support of the population, and their trust in him to achieve independence for their nation. The second chapter introduces this key Burmese personality and also addresses a debate in the British camp over the dependability of this character. The governor during this period, Dorman-Smith, disagreed with Admiral Mountbatten over the political future for Burma. This chapter addresses this debate between the two individuals which caused an obstruction to the progress of Burma's political negotiations. In addition to this, the reaction of Burma's leading politicians to Britain's proposed policy for the colony is addressed. They entered a 'war of nerves' with the British in an attempt to gain political autonomy.⁹

The situation was not straightforward for the British. They feared the financial losses that may follow the loss of Burma; however they had neither the resources nor the power to quash the growing nationalism. It was important to avoid confrontation with nationalists in the

⁶ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 15.

⁷ Nicholas Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 351.

⁸ 'Anti-Fascists in Burma. Interview with Than Tun', *The Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1945.

⁹ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 20.

aftermath of World War II; they had to negotiate carefully.¹⁰ The third chapter observes the replacement of the British governor and the effect that this had in negotiations with the Burmese in the face of nationwide strikes and rebellions. The new Governor, Hubert Rance, was influential in altering the course of negotiations with Burma toward a faster transfer of power. He, with the assistance of the Attlee administration proposed a new workable policy for Burma which catered to the demands of Burma's leading politicians, the AFPFL. A significant section of this chapter will address the House of Commons debates that followed this reviewed policy. It will highlight the debate that occurred amongst many Labour and Conservative politicians over the speed and direction of negotiations over independence.

An agreement was made between the two parties and a delegation of the AFPFL headed by Aung San departed to London to formalise independence. The untimely assassination of the influential Aung San several months prior to the transition of power in 1948 ultimately altered Burma's future. All of these events will be addressed in the final chapter.

¹⁰ John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-war World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), p. 102.

Chapter I

The Second World War and After: From Colony to Independent State and Back Again

'The East Wind'.¹¹

This chapter will discuss the events in Burma prior to the independence process, giving an insight into the political background of the nation. In doing so, it covers the period from the inter-war years to June 1945. It is important to understand the significance of Burma's political events in the 20th century which spurred the growth of nationalism. The character of Aung San was greatly influential to this nationalism and the independence movement which emerged, as well as contributing to events in Burma during World War II. These events, as well as the first stage of independence negotiations will be addressed in this chapter, which is all necessary to introduce the discussion of Burmese independence.

Nationalist Roots

Throughout the world, the Second World War acted as a significant test upon European colonialism. The British in Burma was no exception to this. The collapse of British power in South-East Asia in the face of Japan prompted a resurgence of nationalism and desire for self rule in Burma.¹² Burmese nationalism can be traced back to the end of the 19th century. British presence prompted various cases of scattered rebellion and these were quashed by the British, who banned political activity.¹³ The 20th century marked the awakening of political awareness amongst the Burmese, with the dream of self-government.¹⁴ The delegating of 'responsible self-government to India' by the British in 1917 stirred national pride towards demands for Burma's

¹¹ 'Nationalism in Burma', *The Times*, 31 May 1945.

¹² Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 195.

¹³ D. I Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar – What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: OUP USA, 2013), p. 35.

¹⁴ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 1.

own political freedom.¹⁵ Saya San rebellion in 1931 was the next major political outburst; it protested the authority of the British and their removal of Burma's national monarchy and was one of the most significant anti-colonial movements in South East Asia. The student activists who became so influential and important in Burma's independence process all drew inspiration from this revolt where 3000 Burmese became casualties of a brutal quashing of protest.¹⁶ Saya San became a national hero for the Burmese people and this event undoubtedly prompted the British to apply India's form of early self-governance to Burma also.¹⁷ Shelby Tucker perceives that 'the countdown to independence began not in 1945, but in 1931, when Westminster effectively gave an undertaking that constitutional advance in Burma would mirror that in India'.¹⁸ This parallel with India will be a central theme to this dissertation. The Government of Burma Act 1935 brought Burma to the end of a century old subordination to the Government of India.¹⁹ This meant that Burma could have their own early substantial form of home rule, with presidential elections beginning in 1936.²⁰ Despite this, the Act allowed the governor to exercise all powers in an emergency.²¹ This was the first sign of self-governance in Burma, however they had a long battle before this was fully achieved.

Aung San – 'Architect of Burmese Freedom'²²

Before discussing the events of World War II, it is important to address Aung San and the significance of his character in the fight for Burmese independence. Aung San was the 'architect of Burmese freedom' and it would be impossible to write the history of nationalism and the fight against British colonialism without mentioning him.²³ Aung San's grandfather was killed when

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 36.

¹⁷ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Tucker, *The Curse of Independence*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Maurice Collis, *Last and First in Burma* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 209.

²² Angeline Naw, Preface to *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence* (Silkworm Books, 2001)

²³ *Ibid*.

fighting the British in the early colonial days of Burma; Aung San would continue this fight.²⁴ The first phase of this came when Aung San conducted a strike at the University of Rangoon in 1936.²⁵ This was alongside a group of fellow radical students who would go on to be the leaders of the independence movement as well as the new government.²⁶ A leaflet created for the university strike claimed they were 'focused upon a military liberation of their country from foreign rule'.²⁷ It was from this point on that the strike became the key weapon for politicians in Burma.²⁸ A *Daily Mail* article from 1947 highlights the influence of Aung San over the nation, 'Aung San's prestige as the man who twice liberated them kept him as the strong man of the country'.²⁹ Aung San and his actions become a central theme running through this dissertation, as he became an important figurehead of the movement for self-governance in Burma, keeping immense pressure on the British government.

World War II – Battle for Burma

The next period of Burmese history necessary in understanding the fight for independence is the Japanese occupation during World War II. It was not possible for the British to fight a battle for survival in the West whilst staying strong in the East, and Rangoon fell on 7 March 1942.³⁰ For the Burmese, the occupation of their nation damaged the illusion of British invulnerability.³¹ Aung San amongst others received military training from Japan prior to Japanese invasion, and subsequently helped to expel the British.³² Nationalist sentiment was strengthened when witnessing the defeat of the British, and it gave confidence to Burmese officials that independence could be achieved under Asian control rather than British.³³ With the Japanese

²⁴ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 37.

²⁷ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 'What's behind this shooting in Burma', *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1947.

³⁰ Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 194.

³¹ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 36.

³² Jr. Don Lehman, *Colonialism to Independence: Southeast Asia (1511-2014)* (Lulu, 2015), p. 166.

³³ Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 195.

overseeing, the Burmese began to fill the administrative vacancies that the British had left.³⁴ On 1 August 1943 Burma was issued the status of independent state by the Japanese.³⁵ It became a joint Japanese-Burmese administration.³⁶ This was significant because when the British eventually reclaimed Burma, they returned the nation to a regressive state of government. During Japanese rule, Aung San was given the rank of major-general as well as becoming minister of defence.³⁷ However, the army in Burma became restless, and anti-Japanese feelings began to develop.³⁸ Forced labour of the indigenous population to work on the Burma-Siam railway where death rates were as high as 80,000 a day, combined with the harsh governance from the Japanese saw the Burmese grow angry.³⁹ Meanwhile, Aung San was creating the Anti-Fascist Organisation alongside many revolutionaries in Burma.⁴⁰ This is an important political group that later developed into the AFPFL, who would become decisive in the political battle against the British after the war. As the Allied Forces began their re entry into Burma, agreements were made between the AFO and the British.⁴¹ In the first few months of 1945 wireless operators were dropped into Burma and were acquired by the AFO without the knowledge of the Japanese Fourteenth Army.⁴² The Burmese National Army marched out of Rangoon, with, the Japanese believed, the intention to fight the allies. However, they instead scattered into the jungle and Aung San issued the cry 'we are now at war'.⁴³ The allied effort with the help of the Burmese and AFO recaptured Rangoon, the Japanese pulled out on 23rd April.⁴⁴ *The Times* reported a month after the expulsion of the Japanese that, 'Among the members of the Anti-Fascist Organisation are probably the most hopeful elements for a new Burma'.⁴⁵

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ 'The Japanese In Burma', *The Times*, 14 December 1943.

³⁶ 'Burma under Japan', *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 August 1942.

³⁷ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 11.

³⁸ Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, p. 61.

³⁹ Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 195.

⁴⁰ Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, p.64.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 65.

⁴² Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ 'Nationalism In Burma', *The Times*, 31 May 1945.

The British Return to Burma

The battle over Burma compromised the largest land operation against the Japanese in the war, and some scholars believe it had suffered more from the war than any other part of South-East Asia.⁴⁶ Burma had been fought over twice, in 1942 from south to north and in 1944-1945 from north to south.⁴⁷ Burmese per capita income levels did not reach that of before World War II until thirty years later.⁴⁸ Britain's role in the world was changing and it became impossible to deny that it was declining as a world power.⁴⁹ Rejection of British influence was arguably rife in Burma than anywhere else in British Asia; the nationalism that brewed in the first half of the century came to life during the war.⁵⁰ Charney observes that Japanese occupation cleared the political field in Burma for Aung San, reducing any competition he may have had by the time the British returned.⁵¹ The atmosphere as the British returned made it clear that the Burmese were prepared to drive the British out of Burma, just as they had done with the Japanese.⁵² After the issuing of independence under the Japanese, the new Prime Minister Ba Maw issued a Declaration of War aimed toward the British,

‘They have destroyed our freedom. They have taken away our wealth. They have turned upside down the whole of our history, our civilization and our culture’.⁵³

This gives an indication of the Burmese spirit at the time of re-occupation by the British, and foreshadows the stubbornness with which they would advance into post-war negotiations. This fighting spirit of a whole nation distinguished Burmese nationalism from that of other colonies

⁴⁶ Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, pp. 195-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 195.

⁴⁸ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 35.

⁴⁹ John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-46* (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 145.

⁵⁰ Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 98.

⁵¹ Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.46.

⁵² Paul Webb, *Peacock's Children: The Struggle for Freedom in Burma 1885- Present* (Orchid Press, 2009), p.98.

⁵³ ‘Declaration of War. Ba Maw’, 1 August 1943. Document 17 in Hugh Tinker, *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948 : Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I (London, H.M.S.O, 1983-1984), p. 35.

after World War II. Attlee later commented upon the issuing of the Independence Bill in 1947, that the events of the war 'gave increased impetus to the already strong urge of the peoples of Asia for self-determination'.⁵⁴ This awareness of the Burmese people's desire for freedom was understood by many British officials at the time; however it would take a significant number of events over the following years to speed up this granting of independence. With rising nationalism over the globe, combined with the weakened state of Britain after a global war, the re-thinking of colonialism occurred amongst many. The Labour Party in Britain published in 1943 its views on post-war colonial policy.⁵⁵ In addition to this, America to whom Britain was now greatly indebted had clearly vocalised its anti-imperialist ideologies. However America's anti-Communist rhetoric succeeded over their anti-imperialist opinions and for the time being the British Empire had an extended lease on its existence.⁵⁶ The Secretary of State for India and Burma, L.S. Amery stated to the governor in a telegram that Churchill has an 'instinctive hatred of self-government' in any form.⁵⁷ Despite this, the post-war intentions for the colony were announced by L.S. Amery, as seen in a *Guardian* report from 2 June 1945, 'the restoration of the wide measure of self-government which Burma enjoyed before the Japanese invasion and then the attainment of full and complete Commonwealth status'.⁵⁸ The Burmese however rejected the British intentions of the governor resuming direct rule on return, and believed a popular government should be established to ensure the freedoms of the people and the efficient rebuilding of their nation.⁵⁹ Pressures for independence and calls for freedom would not go quietly. Tarling notes that 'between September 1945 and early 1948, Burma was the only territory

⁵⁴ Hansard, HC Deb, 05 November 1947, vol 443, cols 1836-961.

⁵⁵ A.N. Porter, A.J. Stockwell, *British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-64*, vol. I (Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), p. 39.

⁵⁶ Judith Brown and Louis Wm Roger, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. IV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 331.

⁵⁷ 'Telegram L.S. Amery to Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith', 15 April 1943. Document 13. In Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 26.

⁵⁸ 'Dominion Status ultimate aim for Burma', *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 June 1945.

⁵⁹ Josef Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side of Burma's Struggle for Independence', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 58, (1985), p. 101.

where the former colonial power failed to secure its position even in an informal capacity'.⁶⁰ This dissertation will explore how this occurred, and draw attention to the Burmese actions which resulted in this British failure of re-acquisition of power after World War II. For the Burmese there was a shift from the battlefield into the political arena to finish their fight for freedom.⁶¹

Proposing the White Paper

The first important political event to discuss as Britain returned to Burma is the issuing of the White Paper aboard the HMS Cumberland two weeks after the defeat of the Japanese in Rangoon.⁶² This meeting on 20 June 1945 between Burma's political leaders and Governor Dorman-Smith saw the Churchill Government issue a conservative agenda in the form of the White Paper. The document declared eventual elections and full Burmese independence within the Commonwealth, which met the demands of the AFPFL and Burma's potential future politicians.⁶³ However, the White Paper conflicted with their demands in that there was no predicted date for elections or independence, and that during the immediate reconstruction period of Britain returning to Burma the governor would assume direct rule in accordance to section 139 of the 1935 Act for a minimum of three more years.⁶⁴ The Government of Burma Act 1935 was a century old delegation of power to the government of India.⁶⁵ Section 139 explains that the governor can at any time 'assume to himself all or any of the powers vested in or exercisable by anybody or authority in Burma'.⁶⁶ This frustrated all who were concerned with Burma's political negotiations as it essentially meant Burma had to return to her previous status of governance, after being separated from the government of India in 1937 as well as being issued

⁶⁰ Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, p. 353.

⁶¹ Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, p. 68.

⁶² Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, p. 351.

⁶³ White Paper on Burma Policy, War Cabinet Burma Office, 9 May 1945, p. 11, (<http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-66-65-wp-45-290-40.pdf>) date accessed: 23/04/2016.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Government of Burma Act 1935, section 139, p. 53. April 2002, ([http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/1935_Constitution\(en\).pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/1935_Constitution(en).pdf)) date accessed: 23/04/2016.

independence by the Japanese during occupation in 1943.⁶⁷ Lehman wrote that Independence under the Japanese 'only gave them a taste of freedom'.⁶⁸ A section of the Declaration of Independence issued under Japanese occupation read, 'The years of British occupation were indeed sorrowful for Burma. She entered into a long bondage... while British greed and tyranny kept the fire in every Burmese heart raging'.⁶⁹ This certainly indicates the position the Burmese held towards the British, it was unlikely that they would cower to British post-war terms in the White Paper.

Burmese officials could see no clear end with the conditions of the White Paper, resulting in a stale-mate in negotiations which continued well into 1946. It was thenceforth the duty of Governor Dorman-Smith over this period to try to keep happy Aung San, the AFPFL, the Burmese people as well as his superiors in London. In addition, the Burmese also had an issue with the White Paper excluding the 'Scheduled Areas' (hill territories) from the independence of 'Burma proper', which constituted half of the total area of Burma.⁷⁰ Maurice Collis explains that the British adopted a non-negotiable policy towards the White Paper, and declared that 'the future was unpredictable'.⁷¹ However it is important to note the armed military force behind Aung San which prevented the British from simply quelling Burmese nationalism.⁷² In addition to this, events in India meant that the British could not deploy Indian troops and the post war Labour government which arrived in 1945 were under serious pressure to remove conscription from the British army.⁷³ These factors are what make the negotiations with the nationalist movement in Burma so interesting, and the following chapter will address these negotiations regarding the terms of the White Paper.

⁶⁷ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 242.

⁶⁸ Lehman, *Colonialism to Independence*, p. 166.

⁶⁹ Declaration of Independence, Rangoon Nay-Pyi-Daw, 1 August 1943, (http://www.drbamawlibrary.org/Documents/historicPieces_2_DeclarationOfIndependence_English.pdf) date accessed: 23/04/2016.

⁷⁰ White Paper on Burma Policy, p. 11; Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 243.

⁷¹ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 250.

⁷² Lehman, *Colonialism to Independence*, p. 166.

⁷³ Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, p. 350.

This chapter was intended to deliver a background into the politics of this British colony, and how World War II escalated nationalist sentiment in the nation. The political bargaining regarding the White Paper is discussed in the following chapters but it was clear from the outset that the Burmese would settle for nothing less than independence. From the perspective of the Burmese the eviction of the British was the only way their freedom could be achieved; however as long as the British refused to change their stand little progress was made.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side', p. 101.

Chapter II

The Period of Stalemate: from Dorman-Smith to Rance

'I respectfully suggest that the approach to the problem should have been more positive than was attempted in the White Paper'.⁷⁵

As addressed in the previous chapter, the situation that the British returned to in Burma was one of vast destruction territorially and politically as war had devastated much of Burma's infrastructure and industry.⁷⁶ The clash of ideas of rule and demands between the Burmese and the British can be assessed in the negotiations in the immediate post-war period. This chapter will also draw particular attention to the clash of personalities and ideas of Mountbatten and Governor Dorman Smith. Their pursuing of different objectives, as well as two attempts by the governor to arrest Aung San, undoubtedly impeded the negotiation process. This chapter focuses on the period from June 1945 to August 1945; it thus examines major events in the development of a British policy that favoured the Burmese in the Aung San-Attlee agreement in January 1947. Finally, the effect that a new governor had on advancing negotiations in August 1946 will briefly be observed.

Burma in Disarray

Political tension was high as the BNA who had assisted in clearing the Japanese out of the colony demanded physical progress in the nation's independence campaign in the form of the political party AFPFL. The occupation of Burma by the Japanese signified the beginning of the end for British colonialism and according to Steinberg 'spurred the development of nationalism'.⁷⁷ These issues combined with the seriously weakened condition of Britain and her empire in the closing years of the Second World War and with Indian independence on the horizon essentially meant

⁷⁵ 'Letter from U Saw to Lord Pethick-Lawrence', 19 February 1946. Document 399 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol I, p. 652.

⁷⁶ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

that the hands of the British were tied in terms of negotiations with the Burmese. The issuing of the White Paper in May 1945 declaring the possibility of a Burmese self-governed general election by December 1948 was progress, but ultimately it did not meet the persistent demands of the Burmese.

AFPFL Reaction to White Paper

The White Paper was to become the major setback in Burma's political development, and would continue to be an obstacle in negotiations for over a year until it was reconsidered by the British.⁷⁸ Previous British optimism for a commonwealth Burma became uncertain as AFPFL demands in January 1946 turned hostile towards the idea, stating 'we will not be satisfied with Dominion status or any other status within the framework of British imperialism'.⁷⁹ The persistence in disagreements between the two parties continued and is further highlighted in 1946 in the *Resolutions of the Second Session of the Supreme Council of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League*.

The national demand for Burma is complete national independence. A General Election be held within six months from now at the latest, based on universal adult franchise. The repeal of all emergency law and the Defence of Burma Act. It is highly desirable to declare the Independence of Burma and all those states (i.e. hill territories).⁸⁰

In 1946, a year after the White Paper was issued, the grievances of the AFPFL had evidently not altered and it is clear to see that their patience was running short. With a very real threat of widespread armed revolt and the potential for a major breakdown in negotiations it is interesting to assess why it took the British over a year, a new government, a new prime minister, and a new governor of Burma, just to meet the demands of the Burmese which were clear from

⁷⁸ Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 17.

⁷⁹ 'Complete Independence For Burma', *The Times*, 22 January 1946.

⁸⁰ 'Resolutions of the Second Session of the Supreme Council of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League', 16-23 May 1946. Document 506 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, pp. 789-791.

the outset.⁸¹ The AFPFL's stubbornness and 'war of nerves' with the British has to be admired.⁸² The claim from Silverstein that 'the gulf that separated the two sides was never bridged so long as the British refused to alter their stand' was clear to many British officials throughout the negotiation period.⁸³ Dorman-Smith had virtually guaranteed to the Burmese aboard the HMS Cumberland in June 1945 a complete self-government, so therefore it was his responsibility in the British interest to postpone this inevitability for as long as possible.⁸⁴ This chapter will now assess the actions of the governor during this stale-mate year. It will observe how he attempted to satisfy the AFPFL the best he could despite knowing they would never meet the demands of the White Paper, whilst simultaneously following his orders from Churchill of not committing to dates, and not stepping off their own terms.⁸⁵

Dorman-Smith and Mountbatten Reaction to the White Paper

In addition to the conflict that emerged between the British and the Burmese over the details of the White Paper, a conflict within the British camp began to emerge which only further stunted progress in negotiations. The claim from Tinker that 'proposals to arrest Aung San alternated with plans for bringing him into the government' neatly identifies the conflict which emerged between British officials.⁸⁶ The Governor of Burma, Dorman-Smith, and Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia held similar views in regards to a generous approach to meeting the Burmese demands.⁸⁷ As men on the ground, and both with previous experience in Burma prior to the war, they understood that the British demands from London in terms of the White Paper were unrealistic. Despite Dorman-Smith feeling a sense of duty to return the British colony to its reasonably affluent pre-war condition, as well as a sense of duty to his officers and

⁸¹ R.B. Smith, 'Burma: the Struggle for Independence 1944-48', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1985), p. 182.

⁸² Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 20.

⁸³ Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side', p. 101.

⁸⁴ 'Letter from U Saw to Lord Pethick-Lawrence', 19 February 1946. Document 399 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol I, p. 652.

⁸⁵ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 209.

⁸⁶ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p.22.

⁸⁷ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 215.

subordinates who were in his service prior to the Japanese occupation, he believed the issuing of self-government at some point was necessary.⁸⁸ Mountbatten controlled the forces that helped to expel the Japanese from Burma, and thus felt his own sense of duty in the negotiations that followed. These two men had a respect for the Burmese officials and understood that they were going to settle for nothing less than full independence after helping to expel the Japanese from the British colony.

Question of Aung San

It was however the issue of Aung San and the AFPFL which divided them. Mountbatten, who took the salute of one million men who marched through Rangoon as the British returned to Burma, viewed Aung San as the man who held the key to the future of Burma both militarily and politically.⁸⁹ Dorman-Smith on the other hand held a significantly opposing stance toward Aung San, stating that 'it would be a disaster to give even semblance of recognition to Aung San or any organisation styling itself Provisional Government'.⁹⁰ This however was not the belief of the governor from the beginning, as his initial attempts to form an executive council with Aung San demonstrated. Tucker implies that it could have been the cautious nature of Whitehall which created this uncertain approach towards Aung San.⁹¹ Dorman Smith even initially rejected calls for the arrest of Aung San upon grounds of treason and collaboration with the Japanese, therefore it is necessary to assess the events which made him back-peddle on this policy.⁹² Dorman-Smith's meeting aboard the HMS Cumberland with the potential Burmese leaders to explain the terms of the White Paper was described by Silverstein as a point in time where 'the rift between the governor and the Supreme Commander regarding the AFPFL was so wide it could not be

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 211.

⁸⁹ Hugh Tinker, 'Burma's Struggle for Independence: The Transfer of Power Thesis Re-examined', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1986), pp. 461-462.

⁹⁰ Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side', p. 102.

⁹¹ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 114.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 115.

bridged'.⁹³ This rift in opinion continued to be an obstacle in negotiations and peaked nine months later in a private letter from Mountbatten to the governor regarding the potential arrest of Aung San for murder, which will soon be addressed. Therefore the remainder of this chapter will observe the hindrance in negotiations that this dispute caused, and how Dorman-Smith's pursuit of arresting Aung San eventually resulted in him being replaced as governor.

Personal Dispute

It seems that Mountbatten, Dorman-Smith and the AFPFL all held similar views towards the White Paper, the governor is even quoted as saying 'It is very difficult to see how anything short of handing over complete power to a Provisional Government could ease this tension'.⁹⁴ Therefore it seems it was the governor's perception of the AFPFL and Aung San which caused tension within his relationship with Mountbatten, and not policy. We can see from entries into Mountbatten's personal diary how his frustration and disagreement with Dorman-Smith extended over such a period of time. In regards to a meeting between British officials in May 1945 relating to Aung San and the BNA (later the AFPFL) in which Dorman-Smith was overruled, Mountbatten writes 'Damn it all, I'm governing Burma-not he, whatever his title'.⁹⁵ In the same month, Mountbatten declares in a telegram relating to Dorman-Smith that 'On NO account will Aung San be placed under arrest'.⁹⁶ A final noteworthy entrance into his diary is, 'Where Reggie Dorman-Smith metaphorically kissed me on both cheeks and gave me an effusive welcome, greatly at variance with the remarks he has been making about me and my Burma policy to some of my senior officers!'⁹⁷ This then highlights the personal aspect of the feud between the British officials which

⁹³ Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side', pp. 105-6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 105.

⁹⁵ Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten, 1943-46*, edited by Philip Ziegler (London: Collins, 1988), p. 209.

⁹⁶ 'Supreme Allied Commander Southeast Asia to Advanced Headquarters ALFSEA', 9 May 1945. Document 134 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 238.

⁹⁷ Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten*, p. 275.

was hindering negotiations. However, what is significant is that a month later, Dorman-Smith again attempted to pursue an arrest for Aung San, this time for murder.

Murder Charge

The governor of Burma was personally contacted in early 1946 by a widow who alleged that Aung San had brutally murdered her husband during the war.⁹⁸ Dorman-Smith adopted the attitude that the law should take its course and that Aung San should be tried for murder; however this greatly conflicted with the view of many officials in the British camp. These officials believed that Aung San, the national hero and only stable potential leader, was the sole person to be trusted in Burma when it came to the transfer of power and therefore that the accusation should be ignored. It was not however, and the governor acted to attain the authority for this arrest, despite warnings from Mountbatten and the Prime Minister, amongst others. The following extract is from a brief private letter from Mountbatten to Dorman-Smith, and could be seen as the height of the conflict between the two.

Although I have no longer any responsibility for Burma I still take a close interest in its future as a result of my period of military governorship. I am therefore most perturbed at this proposal to arrest Aung San. Aung San's antics may be disturbing but there is no doubt in my mind that he played the game by me and in view of his youth he is bound to be a leading figure for some years to come. In my opinion we would do better to concentrate on showing him and his friends the paths in which we think the true future of Burma lies. I therefore wish to go on record that I consider the arrest of Aung San at the present time the greatest disservice which could be done towards the future relationship of Burma within the British Empire.⁹⁹

This dispute over Aung San was the last thing that the British needed at this stage in the negotiations, as almost a year after the issuing of the White Paper the AFPFL were becoming restless with the stand-off in negotiations and the threat of widespread revolt was very real. After

⁹⁸ 'Letter from Governor of Burma to Secretary of State for Burma', 13 April 1946. Document 455 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 731.

⁹⁹ 'Letter from Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia to Governor of Burma', 26 March 1946. Document 431 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 697.

months of failing to find alternative political leaders to the AFPFL, the governor had resumed his pursuit of the arrest of Aung San and if it were not for the actions of Mountbatten, would most likely have succeeded.¹⁰⁰

Incompetency of Governor

As events progressed in 1946, the majority of the British representatives adopted Mountbatten's philosophy that collaboration with Aung San was crucial to attain a peaceful settlement.¹⁰¹

Evidence of this can be seen in a note from the under-Secretary of State for India, Sir Gilbert Laithwaite claiming that 'clearly the AFPFL are the people who matter' and that for negotiations to advance the charges against Aung San must be 'liquidated'.¹⁰² Dorman-Smith's new obsession with the arrest of Aung San was viewed as dangerous and his superiors and colleagues around him conspired to remove him from his duties, in the interest of peaceful progression. After a large series of letters to the Prime Minister regarding the necessity and urgency of the arrest, on the 7th May 1946 Attlee wrote to his Secretary of State for India and Burma.

'I have received another long and incoherent telegram from Dorman-Smith. It is obvious that he has lost his grip. I am convinced he must be replaced'.¹⁰³

This then was the final straw in Dorman-Smith's Governorship. In a separate letter to his Secretary of State a few days later, Attlee is quoted as saying 'we cannot take the risks of leaving this important and difficult change in the hands of a sick man'.¹⁰⁴ It was not until his realisation that he had put his job on the line that the governor agreed that it was time for 'an entirely new approach' towards Aung San, and he talks in a lengthy letter to the Prime Minister of adopting a

¹⁰⁰ Silverstein, 'Review: The Other Side', p. 103; Smith, 'Burma: the Struggle for Independence', p. 182.

¹⁰¹ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 239.

¹⁰² 'Letter from Sir Gilbert Laithwaite for Sir David Monteath and Arthur Henderson', 5 June 1946. Document 555 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, p. 840.

¹⁰³ 'Letter from Clement Attlee to Lord Pethick Lawrence', 7 May 1946. Document 489 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, p. 773.

¹⁰⁴ 'Letter from Clement Attlee to Lord Pethick Lawrence', 30 May 1946. Document 538 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, p. 821.

Burmese characteristic trait to 'forgive and forget'.¹⁰⁵ This was all too late as enquiries into replacements for the governor had already begun. Perhaps Dorman-Smith had become too emotionally attached to his governorship position, after all he was in charge of the country when it became occupied by the Japanese for three years. Or perhaps it was the personal conflict with Mountbatten that contributed to his obsession with finding a more suitable group of leaders than the AFPFL. Either way, evidence suggests his incompetency to advance negotiations successfully, proposing that he was not suited to his position in post-war circumstances. His last minute acquisition of dysentery helped Attlee convince him to come home and perhaps saved him the embarrassment of being forcibly removed from office.

On his withdrawal from Burma in June Dorman-Smith left a note for his successor praising the personality of Aung San.¹⁰⁶ This proposed successor was Sir Henry Knight, and Attlee made clear to him that the most important aspect was to 'hold the position in Burma in terms both of law and order and of security and of political change'.¹⁰⁷ However, Knight developed an illness which meant that Brigadier Hurbert Rance, a close friend of Mountbatten's was chosen for the position in August 1946. Contained in private letters between Rance and Mountbatten is a repeated recognition that Mountbatten was greatly influential in the governor's appointment.¹⁰⁸ The departure of Dorman-Smith and the arrival of Rance as Governor provided the opportunity for him and Attlee to step away from the White Paper issued under Churchill and the Conservative government and re think the situation. This will be addressed in the following chapter; however it is important here to understand Attlee's background in colonial affairs, particularly India and Burma. In 1927 Attlee became a member of the Simon Commission, designed to explore the possibility of Indian self-rule. Within this he also became decisive in the affairs of Burma and

¹⁰⁵ 'Letter from Dorman-Smith to Clement Attlee', 7 May 1946. Document 490 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 773.

¹⁰⁶ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 278.

¹⁰⁷ 'Letter from Clement Attlee to Sir Henry Knight', 29 June 1946. Document 584, in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, p. 867.

¹⁰⁸ 'Letter from Brigadier H.E Rance to Lord Louis Mountbatten', 18 July 1946. Document 618, in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. I, p. 902.

influential in the separation of Burma from India, demonstrated in the Burma Act, 1935.¹⁰⁹ This highlights the significant experience that Attlee had within this section of British colonial policy and perhaps explains why advancements for independence in both India and Burma were pursued under his government. When discussing the Burma Independence Bill in November of 1947 he stated that Burma's partitioning from India in 1935 was 'a pledge to the people of Burma that whatever advance to India should equally apply to Burma'.¹¹⁰ This statement delivered five months after India's independence gives recognition to the claim of Shelby Tucker that 'change in India usually begat change in Burma'.¹¹¹ It is necessary to observe the parallels that occur between these two nations during the independence process and how their development is unsurprising considering Attlee's experience within the Simon Commission and in the field of self-rule of these two nations.

The intention of this chapter was to assess the significance of the White Paper policy and the impediment that it caused in negotiations as well as how a conflict between two of the most influential officials in British Burma further hindered these negotiations in all the major events in this immediate post-war period. Within the immediate period of Rance's governorship a change of policy was adopted which accelerated negotiations. A number of bloody demonstrations occurred as well as a nationwide strike. Rance's Governorship played an important role in the final phase of the independence process, as did a number of other crucial milestone events, all of which will be addressed in the following chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A life in Politics* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), p.145.

¹¹⁰ Hansard, HC Deb, 05 November 1947, Vol 443, cols 1836-961.

¹¹¹ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 37.

Chapter III

Independence Becomes Inevitable Under Threat of Rebellion

'Public Support for Police Strikers'.¹¹²

Sir Hubert Rance's appointment as Governor dramatically sped up negotiations with Aung San and the AFPFL. Attlee's perspective of Burma with Rance as Governor brought a new policy for the nation. However this new policy was only brought into effect after the threat of a national strike. This strike and the pressure Aung San applied on the British eventually prompted Attlee to invite the Burmese to London to discuss terms for independence. The Aung San-Attlee Agreement, which was a consequence of this, set in motion the wheels of genuine independence. The present chapter discusses these developments, covering the period from September 1945 to January 1947.

Burma Strikes

Aung San ignited a friendship with Rance, a fellow soldier who was warmed to by the Burmese in a way that Dorman-Smith never achieved.¹¹³ However it was the Rangoon police strike beginning on 5th September 1946 six days after Rance's appointment, which really initiated the negotiations.¹¹⁴ Tinker regards this police strike as sounding 'the knell of British rule in Burma'.¹¹⁵ The history of striking has great national significance in colonial Burma. It can be seen in the student agitation movements of the 1930s and Aung San's Rangoon university strike in 1936. Tucker claims that for this group of students involved, many of whom would become influential in the independence movement, 'the strike was the master weapon of politicians in Burma'.¹¹⁶ Aung

¹¹² 'Burmese Unrest', *The Times*, 12 September 1946.

¹¹³ Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 118.

¹¹⁵ Tinker, 'Burma: Power Transferred or Exacted?', p. 24.

¹¹⁶ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 118.

San was re-using his previous technique, this time on a national scale. The demands of the striking police in Rangoon in 1946 concerned increased pay to meet the costs of living; the strikes showed a very real threat of spreading across the country.¹¹⁷ The concerns of the Burmese public are captured in an article from *The Times* a few days into the strike, 'Public resentment against the composition of the present Executive Council, the apparent neglect of Burma by the British Government, and the proposals in the Burma White Paper of 1945'.¹¹⁸

AFPFL Power

Singh relates the British reluctance to declare independence to the AFPFL taking advantage of the situation and proving 'its hold on the people by organizing a series of strikes'.¹¹⁹ The idea that the AFPFL were instigating the strike is reiterated in a telegram from the governor to Pethick-Lawrence on the 6th September,

'My definite impression now is that AFPFL are behind this and are playing for time, intending to make a show of strength by creating a general strike'.¹²⁰

In Rangoon the police were out on strike, the postal departments followed, along with the railways and eventually secretarial staff.¹²¹ The demonstration escalated from a police strike consisting of a couple of thousand Burmese, to 20,000 people by 4th October.¹²² With the PVO, the AFPFL's private army policing Rangoon whilst the police were on strike, there was a clear demonstration of AFPFL power aimed toward the British.¹²³ It was essential that the British tread carefully to avoid escalating the situation and risking the advancements of the negotiations over

¹¹⁷ Hansard, HC Deb, 04 November 1946, Vol 428, cc170-1.

¹¹⁸ Burmese Unrest, *The Times*, 12 September 1946.

¹¹⁹ Balwant Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma, 1945-1952: the Turbulent Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 47.

¹²⁰ 'Telegram from Rance to Pethick-Lawrence', 9 September 1946. Document 4, in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. II, p. 4.

¹²¹ Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma*, p. 47.

¹²² Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 100.

¹²³ 'Telegram from Rance to Pethick-Lawrence', 6 September 1946. Document 2 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. II, p. 1.

the previous year. The concerns of the AFPFL can be clearly observed in an extract of their manifesto printed in the 'People's Forum' on 18th September.

We, the AFPFL, which is the representative of the masses, should give all-out support in the "fight" for all classes of people. Hence, the third demand of the AFPFL which has the confidence of the people of the country is "The Formation of a National Government".¹²⁴

Stockwell describes the situation thus: 'the principle factor was the strength of AFPFL's challenge to British authority, coupled with Britain's military incapacity to maintain control at a time of impending civil war'.¹²⁵ Hyam echoes Stockwell's argument that maintaining government via military force would have been greatly difficult, adding concerns about what it would have done to its 'international prestige'.¹²⁶ A Cabinet meeting quote from Attlee confirms this idea: 'Indian troops could not be used for this purpose, and British troops could not be made available without serious consequences elsewhere'.¹²⁷ The hands of the British were once again tied in this war of nerves, and there was little alternative for the newly appointed governor than to pursue the speeding up of negotiations with the AFPFL.

Executive Council

The Attlee government were reluctant to make any concessions within the empire, especially Burma where it was seen that appearing frail would damage British authority in other colonies such as Ceylon and Malaya, where the process of self-governance was not as ripe.¹²⁸ However the strength of AFPFL's nerve and their willingness to fight for freedom, combined with the dangers that sending troops entailed prompted a change in policy for Attlee. Pethick-Lawrence, as Secretary of State for India and Burma, said that 'our military position in Burma doesn't allow us

¹²⁴ 'Manifesto by AFPFL, Extract from the People's Forum', 18 September 1946. Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. II, p. 43.

¹²⁵ Brown and Roger, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Volume IV, p. 483.

¹²⁶ Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 119.

¹²⁷ The National Archives, CAB/128/6, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 19 December, 1946.

¹²⁸ Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 100.

to take a strong line'.¹²⁹ In a conversation between the Governor and Attlee, the Prime Minister became convinced of the importance of Aung San and that 'The White Paper had become unworkable and a new policy was required which would bring in Aung San without fail'.¹³⁰ In the words of the governor, Britain could not 'afford to concede by force later what they could concede with dignity now'.¹³¹ Consequently on the 26th September, Rance went on air in Rangoon to announce the new cabinet headed by Aung San, a position which remained subject to the governor's power.¹³² The meeting between the governor and Aung San had agreed that no disciplinary action was to be taken against the strikers and the period would be compensated by full pay for the Burmese.¹³³ Aung San accepted Rance's offer to become Deputy-Chairman of the Executive Council and six of the nine seats went to the AFPFL.¹³⁴ Aung San describes this interim Government with Rance in an interview for a Burmese newspaper, as a 'compromise between Burmese nationalism and British imperialism'.¹³⁵ The general strike made clear that the AFPFL as Charney claims essentially had 'de facto control of the colony', and the change of British policy confirms this.¹³⁶ Tucker concludes the situation by writing that 'just as the League had demonstrated its authority by inciting the strikes, it now reaffirmed its authority by ending them – but only as a temporary relaxation of the pressure on HMG'.¹³⁷ Tinker notes that here Aung San was 'virtually Prime Minister', and on the 2nd October the strike was ended, the process of independence was now in motion.¹³⁸

¹²⁹ The National Archives, CAB 195/4/83, Record Type: Cabinet Office Notebook, 10 December 1946.

¹³⁰ Collis, *Last and First in Burma*, p. 281.

¹³¹ Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, p. 119.

¹³² Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma*, p. 47.

¹³³ Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 101.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*; Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 118.

¹³⁵ 'Reuter interview with Bogyoke Aung San', 16 December 1946. Document 139 in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. II, p. 194.

¹³⁶ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 71.

¹³⁷ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 118.

¹³⁸ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 21.

Attlee Administration Reviewed Policy

Tarling writes of the Rangoon police strike that it showed Britain's political initiative slipping from their grasp; the following months are regarded as a winding up of British rule.¹³⁹ Tinker adds to this idea by claiming from this point on it was 'the Burmese who are speaking and the British who are listening'.¹⁴⁰ By December the PVO were still patrolling the streets and Aung San was once again unhappy with the speed of negotiations; he demanded independence, threatening an AFPFL rebellion.¹⁴¹ Darwin notes that the situation in Burma meant that, 'the AFPFL had become indispensable to British control'.¹⁴² In response to these new threats, Attlee's reaction was to invite a delegation of the Executive Council to London to discuss the grievances of the Burmese and negotiate the terms of independence. Aung San's reaction to this proposal can be seen in a telegram from Pethick-Lawrence on the 18th December. He would accept the proposal to send a delegation to London if 'they accepted in principle the four main demands of the Party', specifically 'including the demand that Burma should be free to choose whether she should remain within the British Commonwealth'.¹⁴³ In the same telegram Pethick-Lawrence informs the cabinet that the police intended to strike again in January, unless a delegation was sent to London.¹⁴⁴ Aung San would not agree to the meeting in London, unless the situation over the Commonwealth question was confirmed; the British were once again in a stalemate situation. The position of the governor and Pethick-Lawrence is made clear in the telegram that states:

'I see no alternative but to go as far as we possibly can to meet the views of AFPFL and in particular to give the assurance asked for regarding the right of the Burmese after the Constitution has been framed to leave the Commonwealth'.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, pp. 351-2.

¹⁴⁰ Tinker, 'Burma: Power Transferred or Exacted?', p. 25.

¹⁴¹ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 22.

¹⁴² Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 99.

¹⁴³ The National Archives, CAB 129/15/31, Pethick-Lawrence, Record type: Memorandum, 18 December 1946.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The Debates that Followed (HC)

The demands were clear, and two days later Attlee presented to the House of Commons a new policy for Burma. On this announcement of a reviewed policy, Attlee also informed the HC that he had invited a delegation of the Executive Council to London the following month. Attlee's statements to the HC is as follows;

His Majesty's Government propose to invite a representative group of Burmans from the Governor's Executive Council to visit this country in the near future for discussions... [In regards to the White Paper] His Majesty's Government think that that plan requires reconsideration...We do not desire to retain within the Commonwealth and Empire any unwilling peoples. It is for the people of Burma to decide their own future...His Majesty's Government are of the opinion that the Burmese Government should exercise a full measure of authority in Burma...But for the sake of the Burmese people it is of the utmost importance that this should be an orderly-though rapid-progress.¹⁴⁶

Attlee's statements were unsurprisingly met with some opposition. Labour and Conservative attitudes towards empire were in some ways similar, neither wanted to see Britain's world power status decline. Stockwell claims that oil, rice and timber all meant that the loss of Burma could be a significant economic forfeiture.¹⁴⁷ This idea is refuted by Tarling however, who notes that Burma was maintained as an appendage of the Indian empire.¹⁴⁸ Adding that with the Attlee administration's decision for an early withdrawal from India, Burma could be re-examined with efforts concentrated on a stronger economic asset in Asia such as Malaya.¹⁴⁹ The conservation of Britain's world power status was a crucial objective of the Attlee government.¹⁵⁰ However exhausted by the war, holding onto territories ravaged by nationalism appeared an impossible task.¹⁵¹ As men on the ground, Rance and Mountbatten were Attlee's most reliable informants,

¹⁴⁶ Hansard, HC Deb, 20 December 1946, Vol 431, cc2341-6.

¹⁴⁷ Brown and Roger, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, p. 338.

¹⁴⁸ Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, p. 353.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Ritchie Owendale, *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments, 1945-1951* (Leicester: Leicester University Press. 1984), p. 89.

¹⁵¹ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 41.

both of whom were 'sympathetic to Burmese national aspirations'.¹⁵² Therefore Attlee became convinced of the opinion that 'if the principle of independence was sound for India it was also sound for Burma', subsequently issuing his reviewed policy in the HC.¹⁵³ Silverstein writes that both Churchill and Attlee should share the blame for the initial failure of policy towards Burma, however 'credit must finally go to Attlee who, as a result of direct involvement in the day-to-day affairs in Burma, saw the need for a new policy'.¹⁵⁴ The opposition towards Attlee's statements in the HC were led by Churchill, who even after the death of Aung San, continued to deride him as a 'traitor rebel leader'.¹⁵⁵ Churchill regarded the speed of the independence process in Burma after the re-occupation as 'appalling', stating that 'Scuttle is the only word that can be applied'.¹⁵⁶ He expresses that under the Labour government 'The British Empire seems to be running off almost as fast as the American Loan'.¹⁵⁷ Attlee's response to this was, 'He has also forgotten that when I made my statement on India in this House, there was no opposition in this House, there was no opposition in the country. I think he was the only objector'.¹⁵⁸ It is clear to see that members of Parliament still failed to see eye to eye on the Burma issue, with Churchill fearing that 'Independence would bring the same kind of disaster as the partitioning of India'.¹⁵⁹ However, overwhelmed by the arguments of Attlee and that Aung San could become a reliable enemy towards communism, ministers approved the AFPFL delegations concessions.¹⁶⁰ Membership of the Commonwealth now became Britain's only hope to refashion relations with Burma.¹⁶¹

Aung San to London

Upon Parliament approving the concessions of the AFPFL delegation, *The Times* printed that:

¹⁵² Brown and Roger, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, p. 338.

¹⁵³ Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, p. 119.

¹⁵⁴ Silverstein, 'Review: the Other Side', p. 107.

¹⁵⁵ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 63.

¹⁵⁶ Hansard, HC Deb, 20 December 1946, Vol 431, cc 2341-6.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 104.

¹⁶⁰ Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 100.

¹⁶¹ Stockwell, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, p. 338.

It is officially announced that the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma have accepted the invitation of the British Government, foreshadowed in Mr. Attlee's statement of December 20, to send a representative group to visit this country in the near future for discussions.¹⁶²

Speaking in Rangoon prior to his departure to London, Aung San who was leading the delegation said 'we wish to gain our freedom as peacefully as possible', adding 'I hope for the best, but I am prepared for the worst'.¹⁶³ Tinker writes that it was perhaps from this visit 'that his attitude to the British changed from one of enmity towards co-operation'.¹⁶⁴ The Aung San-Attlee agreement created on January 27th 1947 was the result of ten sessions of negotiations in London over two weeks.¹⁶⁵ The significant sections of the agreement concluded that,

The following agreed conclusions as to the methods by which the people of Burma may achieve their independence, either within or without the Commonwealth, as soon as possible:

A Constituent Assembly shall be elected...The Executive Council of Governor will constitute the Interim Government of Burma...The Executive Council will be treated with the same close consultation and consideration as a Dominion Government.¹⁶⁶

A summary of the agreement is that Burma was to have its independence in twelve months time. There would be a general election in April 1947 to elect a Constituent Assembly, in the meantime the Executive Council would form the interim government of Burma.¹⁶⁷ This bringing forward of the deadline for British departure demonstrates how dominant the Burmese had become in the negotiations with the British. The situation had played out in their favour and they successfully bent British terms to favour themselves. In the lead up to elections for a Constituent Assembly in Burma, Aung San is quoted as saying, 'The Constituent Assembly may yet turn into a

¹⁶² Burmese Delegation to London, *The Times*, 02 January, 1946.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*; Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁴ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁵ Webb, *Peacock's Children*, p. 101.

¹⁶⁶ Aung San-Attlee Agreement, 27th January 1947 (<https://burmestar1010.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/44172419-aungsan-atlee-agreement.pdf>), date accessed: 24/04/2016.

¹⁶⁷ Tucker, *Burma: the Curse of Independence*, p. 120; 'Basis of Independence for Burma', *The Times*, 29 January, 1947.

Revolutionary Council. We may have to fight for freedom still'.¹⁶⁸ This fighting spirit of Aung San and the AFPFL is exactly why the Burmese were successful in the 'war of nerves' with the British.¹⁶⁹ In the debates on 28th January the day following the Agreement, Attlee read out a summary of his agreement with Aung San. This concluded with a statement on the Commonwealth question, 'We shall welcome them if they decide to remain members of it, and we think that will be to their interest, but in any event, they will carry with, I believe, the good will and good wishes of this house'.¹⁷⁰ Churchill's response to this was, 'Does this statement mean that we pay and we go, or only that we go?'¹⁷¹ Churchill's criticisms of what he calls a 'dismal transaction' demonstrate the divided opinion towards independence in Britain at the time.¹⁷² It also displays the difficult situation that was posed to the Attlee administration that was faced with both extreme internal and external pressures. The position of the national press in Britain at the time called for the reaching of an agreement 'regardless of party bias and with the welfare of the Burmese people kept centrally in view'.¹⁷³

A date was set for Burmese independence, and their fight against the British was almost complete. Divisions and conflict emerged in Burma's political scene and the Commonwealth question was just one of the important discussions that emerged over the remainder of the year until independence was eventually granted. This, the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet and independence will be addressed in chapter four.

¹⁶⁸ Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, p. 81.

¹⁶⁹ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁰ Hansard, HC Deb, 28 January 1947, Vol 432, cc 777-82.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ 'Burma', *The Observer*, 12 January 1947.

Chapter IV

The Death of a National Hero

'Began the struggle between the Burmese and the Burmese'.¹⁷⁴

The Aung San-Attlee agreement was undoubtedly a success for the Burmese delegation. The British had recognised the massive support the AFPFL had of the people and had initiated the process of a peaceful transition of government.¹⁷⁵ In the aftermath of the agreement, Aung San is quoted as saying in regards to having the option of entering the Commonwealth that, 'The choice is ours. The way is open for us to march to freedom'.¹⁷⁶ Maung Maung writes that during the negotiations the Burmese distrust of the British began to fade, and Aung San began to see the advantages that would come with remaining in the Commonwealth.¹⁷⁷

Despite the divided opinion towards the granting of self-rule to Burma, the British hoped to see Burma enter the Commonwealth under Dominion Status. From the Burmese perspective however, many on 'both the legal and illegal left' would see a transfer of power under Commonwealth status as a false sense of independence.¹⁷⁸ Attlee believed that it was likely that Burma would have remained in the Commonwealth, if it were not for the untimely death of Aung San.¹⁷⁹ This chapter analyses the assassination of Aung San and the impact of his killing. In doing so, the discussion covers the period from 1947 until independence.

¹⁷⁴ 'What's behind this shooting in Burma', *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1947.

¹⁷⁵ Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma*, p. 48.

¹⁷⁶ Maung, *Burma's Constitution*, p. 78.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁸ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 45.

¹⁷⁹ Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, p. 119.

The Liberator Eliminated

At 10.40 am on 19 July 1947 gunmen stormed a meeting and assassinated Aung San and his Executive Council; this was to alter the course of Burmese history forever.¹⁸⁰ The *Daily Mail* reported on 21 July 1947 in relation to the promising to Burma to decide their own future that,

‘It ended the struggle between Burmese and British, which had been the one common denominator of all sections of political thought. It began the struggle between Burmese and Burmese’.¹⁸¹

Alongside seven others, U Saw, the Prime Minister of British Burma prior to Japanese invasion was found guilty and executed for the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet.¹⁸² The politicians of Burma, who gathered under the AFPFL during the war, now began to split with a clash of ideologies.¹⁸³ With the loss of Aung San, the man with whom the majority of the nation could unite under, Burma’s future looked fractured. However after Aung San’s assassination, the steps to independence progressed quickly.¹⁸⁴ The assassination of Aung San destroyed any chance of closer links with Britain in terms of Commonwealth membership.¹⁸⁵ U Nu, who had escaped assassination, assumed office intending to continue the march of Burma’s independence.¹⁸⁶ Tinker notes how Aung San had fought for independence under the Japanese, then successfully fought for an independence from the British, adding that he held no responsibility for the decades of civil war that ensued.¹⁸⁷

‘Burma Is Free, “Friendly to Britain”’¹⁸⁸

A treaty was signed on 17 October 1947 in London known as the Nu-Attlee Agreement and the Burma Independence Act was passed on 10 December.¹⁸⁹ Sections of English officials regarded the

¹⁸⁰ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 27; Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 69.

¹⁸¹ ‘What’s behind this shooting in Burma’, *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1947.

¹⁸² Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire*, p. 205.

¹⁸³ ‘What’s behind this shooting in Burma’, *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1947.

¹⁸⁴ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁵ Brown and Roger, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, p. 484.

¹⁸⁶ Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma*, p. 57.

¹⁸⁷ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, pp. 27-8.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Burma Is Free, “Friendly to Britain”’, *Daily Mail*, 18 October 1947.

assassinations as evidence that the Burmese were unprepared for independence.¹⁹⁰ However, the Act was approved against significant Conservative opposition and the Constituent Assembly decided against joining the Commonwealth.¹⁹¹ Churchill led the opposition to the Independence Bill in the HC, and he ‘foreshadowed “savage slaughter” this time in Burma’.¹⁹² This was unfortunately not an inaccurate prediction for the future as with their leader gone, confusion rose in the nation and Burma was driven into one of the world’s lengthiest civil wars.¹⁹³ The ‘Union of Burma’ would ‘cease to be part of the British Commonwealth of Nations’, however it was a Treaty created on ‘friendship’ between the two nations.¹⁹⁴ Attlee draws particular attention to the ‘great services’ exercised by Governor Rance in co-operating with the Burmese people and peacefully guiding the country through the process.¹⁹⁵ Rance noted in his memoirs that he believed the violence that followed Burmese independence would not have occurred if it were not for the death of Aung San.¹⁹⁶ Churchill continued to deride Aung San after his death calling him a ‘traitor rebel leader’ who has hands dyed ‘with British blood and loyal Burmese blood’.¹⁹⁷ These arguments stood in stark contrast to those of Attlee, who remained convinced that if it were not for his untimely death Aung San would have led Burma effectively, claiming that ‘the so-called experts had been wrong about Aung San’.¹⁹⁸

Nevertheless, at 4.20 on 4 January independence arrived, almost sixty three years to the day that King Thibaw was exiled by the British.¹⁹⁹ Singh wrote that ‘The English sun, which had not

¹⁸⁹ Tinker, *Union of Burma*, p. 31.

¹⁹⁰ Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 57.

¹⁹¹ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 71.

¹⁹² Burma Out Of Empire, Daily Mail, 06 November 1947.

¹⁹³ Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, p. 71.

¹⁹⁴ Hansard, HC Deb, 05 November 1947, Vol 443 cc1836-961.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ ‘Hubert Rance memoirs’ in Tinker, *Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. II, p. 874.

¹⁹⁷ Hansard, HC Deb, 05 November 1947, Vol. 443 cc1836-961.

¹⁹⁸ Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A life in politics*, p. 300.

¹⁹⁹ Maung, *Burma’s Constitution*, p. 83.

set over our country for a hundred years, finally went down'; Burma's fight for freedom was complete.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma*, p. 67.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the AFPFL had significant influence in dictating British terms to favour Burmese independence as soon as was physically possible. By closely assessing the major events of the transition of power from both a Burmese and British perspective, this has allowed the dissertation to attempt to explore Burma's independence taking a distinctive approach. The argument presented is that the weakness of British power upon the return to the colony becomes exploited by an evidently strong willed nationalist spirit in Burma. This fortitude of the nation in its pursuit of independence has to be commended as after a prolonged struggle Burma became the first country to exit the British Commonwealth since America in 1776.²⁰¹ The arrival of the post-war Labour government was significant in increasing the speed and direction of negotiations towards independence, as they recognised that the White Paper had become unworkable and that the future of the nation lay with the AFPFL. However Aung San and the AFPFL still had to apply a considerable amount of pressure combined with the threat of a national strike to encourage Attlee and the new Governor Rance to meet their demands. Despite all the blood that was shed on Burmese soil in the Second World War, the transition of power was a relatively peaceful process. The same unfortunately cannot be said for the decades following Burmese independence.

The material made available by the historian Hugh Tinker was essential to this study. His publishing of official documents combined with his literature on the topic helped to guide this dissertation and his work is highly regarded in the majority of secondary literature on the independence years. This study has attempted to further the claim from Tinker addressed in the introduction that Britain surrendered their control and power of the colony to the Burmese long before independence was finally achieved.²⁰² This idea is reiterated by Steinberg who claims that

²⁰¹Tinker, *Burma: Power Transferred or Exacted?*, p. 20.

²⁰²*Ibid*, p. 24.

the period after World War II was a 'lingering' before the inevitability of independence in Burma, which was finally achieved in 1948.²⁰³ This study has attempted to further develop the arguments of these historians, however with a more specific focus upon how Burmese will and negotiation during the period shaped British post-war policy to favour their demands. This argument was possible to pursue due to the variety of primary documents available as well as secondary literature covering both British and Burmese perspectives on the topic, helping to create a comprehensive account. The dissertation highlights the distinctive transfer of power that occurred in Burma and how the strong resistance that the British faced in attempting to re-assert their power undoubtedly impacted how decolonization was subsequently addressed within the British Empire. Darwin notes how Britain had failed to see the devastating effects of the war in Burma and how this obstructed the creation of an Asian dominion with a maintained British relationship.²⁰⁴ Burma was one of the few British ex-colonies that did not join the Commonwealth, Britain had lessons to learn from the transfer of power in Burma if they wanted to maintain relations with their other overseas territories who had a desire of self-rule.

Tinker notes that the end of British rule in India and Burma 'is the last great imperial drama for which the historian' can be certain 'all the available evidence was preserved and is forthcoming'.²⁰⁵ This was one of the motivations for choosing the topic and also what has allowed the study to examine perspectives from both parties during the struggle, which may have failed to be as effective in another nations' independence episode. The limitations of this dissertation meant that it was not possible to investigate the complex aspect of the hill territories in Burma and their influence in the independence process. In addition to this it would have been interesting to explore the split that occurred within Burmese nationalism, notably socialists, communists amongst others and how their demands for independence differed. However these were not within the capabilities of a study this size and instead this dissertation attempted to approach

²⁰³Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, p. 36.

²⁰⁴Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, p. 101.

²⁰⁵Tinker, *Burma: Power Transferred or Exacted?*, p. 27.

Burmese independence from a unique angle incorporating both Burmese and British accounts of events.

The result of two campaigns in Burma in the space of less than five years meant that Burma was littered with weapons from both allied and axis powers. This combined with an unstable government and a deceased national hero saw the nation delve into a bloody civil war and a period of military rule from 1962-2011. Political events in Burma (now Myanmar) seemed to follow the writing of this dissertation and in March 2016 Htin Kyaw became the first democratically elected president in Burma since military rule began in 1962. Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, was sworn in as State Counsellor, with President Htin Kyaw allegedly acting in a puppet role under her direction.²⁰⁶ Burma's constitution had banned her from the presidential role after decades of house arrest for speaking out against military rule. Just a few months into her position as State Counsellor there is great hope within the nation that the popular Aung San Suu Kyi will be the leader to solve Myanmar's many problems.²⁰⁷ At present as one of her first political acts she is attempting to free up to five hundred political prisoners as Myanmar emerges from decades of military rule.²⁰⁸ She has fought for and reclaimed the freedom and democracy that her father struggled for over half a century ago.

²⁰⁶Oliver Holmes, 'Aung San Suu Kyi set to get PM-type role in Myanmar government', 01 April 2016, (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/01/aung-san-suu-kyi-set-to-get-pm-type-role-in-myanmar-government>), date accessed: 24/04/2016.

²⁰⁷'The Guardian view on Myanmar's new government: a hard row to hoe', 31 March 2016, (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/31/the-guardian-view-on-myanmars-new-government-a-hard-row-to-hoe>), date accessed: 24/04/2016.

²⁰⁸'Myanmar political prisoners to be freed - Aung San Suu Kyi', 07 April 2016, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35987069>), date accessed: 24/04/2016.

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