



**HAL**  
open science

# The London Conference and Beyond: Negotiating Burmese Independence

Lauriane Simony

► **To cite this version:**

Lauriane Simony. The London Conference and Beyond: Negotiating Burmese Independence. Humanities and Social Sciences. 2013. <dumas-02184580>

**HAL Id: dumas-02184580**

**<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-02184580v1>**

Submitted on 16 Jul 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

**THE LONDON CONFERENCE AND BEYOND:  
NEGOTIATING BURMESE INDEPENDENCE**

*Lauriane Simony*

*M1 Etudes Anglophones – ENS de Lyon*

*May 2013*

*Under the supervision of Mélanie Torrent*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b><u>I. ACCELERATING THE PROCESS: “INDEPENDENCE WITHIN A YEAR”</u></b>               | <b>14</b> |
| <b>1. PRELIMINARY DEMANDS: ESTABLISHING A POSITION OF STRENGTH</b>                    | <b>14</b> |
| A. THE AFPFL’S STATEMENT ON THE 23 <sup>RD</sup> OF DECEMBER 1946                     | 14        |
| B. PRESSURE AND THREATS   | 16        |
| <b>2. A NECESSARY REDEFINITION OF THE WHITE PAPER PROGRAMME</b>                       | <b>18</b> |
| A. THE WHITE PAPER PROGRAMME  | 18        |
| B. INTERIM GOVERNMENT   | 19        |
| C. THE DATE OF INDEPENDENCE   | 20        |
| <b>3. THE INFLUENCE OF INDIA’S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE</b>                          | <b>22</b> |
| A. BURMA AND INDIA’S SHARED HISTORY   | 22        |
| B. KEEPING PACE WITH INDIA  | 23        |
| <b><u>II. INDEPENDENCE, STATE AND NATION: DEBATING BURMESE IDENTITY</u></b>           | <b>27</b> |
| <b>1. THE BIRTH OF A NEW STATE: STRUGGLING FOR SELF-DETERMINATION</b>                 | <b>27</b> |
| A. THE FORM OF THE NEW STATE: CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY VS. LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY           | 27        |
| B. OBTAINING FINANCIAL AUTONOMY   | 29        |
| C. THE ELECTIONS OF APRIL 1947  | 31        |
| <b>2. THE FRONTIER AREAS AND THE UNION OF BURMA: REUNITING PLAINS AND HILLS BURMA</b> | <b>32</b> |
| A. THE ETHNIC MINORITIES ISSUE  | 32        |
| B. THE PANGLONG CONFERENCE  | 35        |
| C. FAILED UNITY?  | 37        |
| <b><u>III. DRAWING THE OUTLINE OF BURMA AND BRITAIN’S FUTURE RELATIONS</u></b>        | <b>41</b> |
| <b>1. SECURING DIPLOMATIC TIES WITH BURMA</b>   | <b>42</b> |
| A. BURMA: A REGION OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE?   | 42        |
| B. SETTLING DEFENCE AND MILITARY MATTERS  | 44        |
| C. EXTERNAL AFFAIRS: OBTAINING INTERNATIONAL REPRESENTATION                           | 45        |
| <b>3. THE END OF BRITAIN’S INFLUENCE?</b>   | <b>46</b> |
| A. THE DIFFICULT NEGOTIATIONS AROUND BURMA’S COMMONWEALTH MEMBERSHIP                  | 46        |
| B. BURMA BECOMES A SOVEREIGN INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC OUTSIDE THE COMMONWEALTH            | 48        |
| C. FRAGILE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE NEW STATE?   | 50        |

**CONCLUSION** **52**

---

**APPENDICES** **58**

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** **63**

---

## INTRODUCTION

*“In all these matters, it is the desire and intention of His Majesty’s Government to hasten forward the time when Burma shall realize her independence, either within or without the Commonwealth, but for the sake of the Burmese people it is of the utmost importance that this should be an orderly – though rapid – progress. It is because of their anxiety that they should be in a position to continue to help the people of Burma in that progress that His Majesty’s Government have invited the Burmese leaders to come here for discussions.”*

*Clement Attlee*

*“Statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons”, December 20, 1946*

*Hansard, HC Deb, vol. 431, pp. 2343-5*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, a Burmese Delegation led by Aung San, the Deputy Chairman of the Executive Council of Burma, arrived in London and was met by Prime Minister Clement Attlee along with other members of the British government. From the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, a series of meetings (which came to be known as the London Talks or the London Conference) was held in the Council Room at the India and Burma Office, with the purpose of negotiating the terms of Burmese independence. For the first time, the leaders of the two countries were gathered. The Burmese Delegation was mostly composed of members of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, the main political party at the time: it included AFPFL’s President Aung San, Tin Tut, Ba Pe and Thakin Mya, along with former Prime Minister U<sup>1</sup> Saw and the Socialist Leader Ba Sein. The AFPFL was formed in August 1944 during the Japanese occupation, and was first known as the Anti-Fascist Organisation: it brought together the Communist Party of Burma, the People’s Revolutionary Party led by future Prime Minister U Nu and the Burma National Army behind Aung San. While its primary purpose was to oust the Japanese from the country, it then engaged in a political struggle against British colonial rule. On the other side, the British negotiators included Prime Minister Clement Attlee, future Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Stafford Cripps, Secretaries of State for India and Burma Lord Pethick-Lawrence and Lord Listowel and Minister of Defence Albert Victor Alexander. The discussions alternated between ten major sessions

---

<sup>1</sup> U is an honorific.

between the two sides and “private” meetings in which the British and the Burmese met separately to discuss their common line of action. In his introduction to *Burma: the Struggle for Independence*, Hugh Tinker emphasizes the unprecedented event that the London Conference represented: “considering all other urgent problems – domestic and foreign – which were clamouring for the attention of the Prime Minister and his senior colleagues, the amount of time they were prepared to devote to the future of an imperial possession not of the first rank seem[ed] exceptional.”<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the Second World War, the British Empire was irreparably weakened: Britain had been defeated on several fronts in Asia between 1940 and 1942 and Burma had been lost to Japan in 1942 and fully recaptured in July 1945. Even though it managed to regain most of the lost territories at the end of the war, its prestige and wealth did not recover. In this context, there was a revival of protest in the Asian colonies which had been mobilised in the war effort. Notably, as soon as the war was over, negotiations for Indian independence started again. In early 1947, Britain officially decided to organise the transfer of power to India and the country became independent in August 1947, a day after its partition with Pakistan: India’s independence initiated the long process of the decolonisation of the British Empire in Asia, with Britain’s last colony, Hong Kong, being handed over to China in 1997. Britain was thus further weakened by the decline of its Empire: it was no longer fit to compete against the two new powers that had emerged from World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union. In the context of the Cold War, another threat worried the British: as the Soviet bloc started growing more and more influential in Asia, the British became aware of the need to counter the rise of Communism by offering their colonies an alternative model of self-government, while preparing their independence.

If the negotiations which took place during the London Talks have often appeared as the final step towards independence, the Burmese struggle for self-government had started long before this. By the end of the Second World War, after the Japanese forces had almost completely withdrawn from the country, Burma’s Governor Sir Dorman-Smith came back to Rangoon with the White Paper which advocated a return to the 1935 Burma Act - the Burmese Constitution which marked the separation of Burma and India. The White Paper program proposed a three-year period of direct rule by Burma’s Governor at the end of which elections would be held and Burma would be able to “attain complete self-government as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Tinker, *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-48: Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 2, ‘From general strike to independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948’, London, HMSO, 1984, XXI.

member of the British Commonwealth.”<sup>3</sup> However, the AFPFL had something different in mind: they wanted to preserve the illusory sense of freedom they had tasted under the Japanese occupation and to obtain the right to self-determination for Burma. Upon the formation of an Executive Council, the situation reached a deadlock: Sir Dorman-Smith and the AFPFL did not manage to agree on the terms of the provisional government, and the AFPFL was eventually excluded from any participation in the Executive Council. Moreover, the Governor tried to obtain support from other Burmese politicians, such as Thakin Tun Ok who advocated peace and tranquillity, and to defeat the AFPFL by encouraging the formation of alternative political parties. Yet, far from being weakened, the AFPFL leaders started touring the country and organizing meetings in order to gain mass support. Anxiety grew in the British ranks: Supreme Allied Commander (South-East Asia) Lord Mountbatten had underlined that the British troops stationed on Burmese soil would be insufficient to intervene, should a Burmese armed uprising occur.

In 1946, “the year of Aung San’s most intense struggle against colonial government”<sup>4</sup> according to Angelene Naw, the question of self-government became an urgent matter. During the Supreme Council of the AFPFL, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, Aung San announced that he was going to launch a “freedom struggle” and threatened to resort to what he called “extra-legal struggle”, that is to say (according to his own definition) “mass civil disobedience combined with mass non-payment of taxes and mass strikes”,<sup>5</sup> if the British government was not prepared to listen to the AFPFL’s demand for complete independence for their country. Sir Dorman-Smith was left with no other choice but to reconsider the policies of the White Paper. His relations with the British Prime Minister deteriorated rapidly as he kept changing policy: on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1946, Clement Attlee sent a telegram to Lord Pethick-Lawrence stating that he should be replaced, as he “had no clear policy” and “ha[d obviously] lost grip”.<sup>6</sup> The Governor was eventually dismissed from his position on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1946 as the Burma Office in London deemed he was no longer fit for the job. With the new Governor, new solutions to the unrest going on in Burma were envisaged by the British Government. The situation was tense: when new Governor Rance arrived in Burma in September 1946, he was faced with a major strike in all public services that was immobilising

---

<sup>3</sup> Great Britain, Burma Office, Information Department, *Burma – Policy of HMG, Statements of Policy and Official Speeches*, “Return of Civil Government to Burma”, P/V 2250, 1945, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Angelene Naw, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2011, X.  
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>6</sup> Telegram from Clement Attlee to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (7 May 1946), in Hugh Tinker, *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-48: Documents from Official and Private Sources*, vol. 1, ‘From military occupation to civil government, 1 January 1944 to 31 August 1946’, London, HMSO, 1984, 773.

the country. The first measure he took was to form a new Executive Council on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, in which members of the AFPFL occupied major positions: for instance, U Aung San became the Counsellor for Defence (as well as the Deputy Chairman as previously mentioned), Thakin Mya was in charge of Home and Judicial Affairs and U Tin Tut of Finance and Revenue. Simultaneously, the AFPFL managed to find new sources of support among some British parliamentarians, the most notorious of all being Tom Driberg who was committed to the cause of Burmese independence and repeatedly argued in favour of the AFPFL's demands in the House,<sup>7</sup> "creat[ing] a favourable atmosphere for Aung San's final negotiations with the British."<sup>8</sup>

For the AFPFL, the solution lay in sending a Burmese delegation to London to try and reach an agreement regarding the transfer of power: until the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946, the AFPFL and the government in London were "locked in a battle of wills"<sup>9</sup> over the conditions under which this delegation would travel to England. In early 1946, exactly when negotiations for self-government and independence in India were going on, the AFPFL had already made such a request, but it had been ignored on the grounds that the Government was "not prepared to receive deputations from any individual party".<sup>10</sup> In his article "Burma, Britain, and the Commonwealth", S.R. Ashton points out another reason why they were denied the invitation: as no election had been held in the colony since the end of the Second World War, the British were not entirely sure that the AFPFL was indeed supported by the majority of the Burmese population.<sup>11</sup> However, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, a new statement was issued by the AFPFL: the League demanded an official announcement by the British Government, before the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1947, that Burma would indeed become independent within a year and that the Executive Council would be recognised as a national government, threatening to resign from the Executive Council should these requests not be met.<sup>12</sup> Governor Rance therefore insisted that a delegation from the Executive Council be received in London to discuss the transfer of power. The India and Burma Committee, as well as the Cabinet, agreed to the visit and a formal invitation was sent. Yet, before accepting the invitation, the AFPFL raised a final objection to the way the negotiation process was devised: Aung San and his followers

---

<sup>7</sup> Tom Driberg, *Ruling Passions, The Autobiography of Tom Driberg*, London, Quartet Books, 1978, 215.

<sup>8</sup> Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 167.

<sup>9</sup> S. R. Ashton, "Burma, Britain, and the Commonwealth, 1946-1956", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29:1, 2001, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State for Burma to the Governor of Burma (2 January 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, 581.

<sup>11</sup> S. R. Ashton, *op. cit.*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Telegram from Sir Hubert Rance to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (13 November 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 138.

demanded that a parliamentary announcement was issued by His Majesty's Government. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, Prime Minister Clement Attlee made the famous speech in which he reiterated his invitation to the Burmese leaders in order to accelerate the transfer of power and listen to the AFPFL's suggestions regarding self-government. In the end, the AFPFL Executive Committee accepted the terms of the statement on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December and answered favourably to the invitation.

According to S.R. Ashton<sup>13</sup>, three main reasons can be put forward as to why the British eventually agreed to receive a Burmese delegation in London. First, Governor Rance's influence has to be largely taken into account: he managed to become a genuine mediator between the two sides, paying attention to the AFPFL's requests while diplomatically trying to get them to listen to reason when they had overstepped the line in the eyes of His Majesty's Government. Then, militarily speaking, the British could not afford the armed rebellion that a political stalemate was bound to cause, as already mentioned. Finally, economic motives intervened as well: Burma being the largest supplier of rice in the world, it was expected to export about 1.5 million tons of rice over to the other South-East Asian colonies; any disruption in rice exports could have disastrous consequences, as Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin warned.

In his book *British Government Policy and Decolonisation*, Frank Heinlein shows that the London Conference resulted in a partial transfer of power to Aung San,<sup>14</sup> while Hugh Tinker goes further and indicates that he prefers talking about a "capitulation of power" by the British, rather than a regular transfer of power<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, these meetings marked the setting out of new relations of power between the two countries, as it seems that the British made a lot of concessions to meet the Burmese demands, and were quite unable to offer resistance to their soon-to-be former colony. From this point of view, I have chosen to focus on the specific form which the transfer of power from Britain to Burma took, especially through the examination of the London Conference. In his article "Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field", Andrew Selth shows that Burma has never been a popular subject of study outside the country.<sup>16</sup> It is only since the tragic events of 1988 that Burma has attracted a renewal of interest from foreign scholars. In comparison to other South-East Asian former colonies such

---

<sup>13</sup> S. R. Ashton, *art. cit.*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonisation, 1945-1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind*, London, Frank Cass, 2002, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Tinker, "Burma's Struggle for Independence: The Transfer of Power Thesis Re-Examined", *Modern Asian Studies*, 20:3, 1986, 479.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Selth, "Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field", *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:2, 2010, 402.

as India or Malaya, Burma is underrepresented in studies of decolonisation: before Nicholas Tarling's important books on Britain and South-East Asia in the context of the decline of the British Empire,<sup>17</sup> very few general books on decolonisation included sections on Burma. Though taking place roughly at the same time as Indian decolonisation, Burma's struggle for independence has been overshadowed by its neighbour's: the AFPFL's actions as part of its freedom struggle never had the same mediatised impact worldwide as the events initiated by Gandhi's Indian Independence Movement (for instance, the Quit India Movement of August 1942 which demanded British withdrawal from India and complete independence represented the largest mass movement ever witnessed by the British). Moreover, India and Pakistan were the first two Asian colonies to obtain their independence from Britain, which could also explain the existence of a much more abundant historiography on India than on Burma.

In this study of the London Talks, I will consider in detail the points on which the leaders of the two countries focused during the negotiations of Burmese independence and will try to establish a balance of the London Conference. Solutions to such major issues as the form the new assembly would take or the diplomatic relations the two countries would observe were brought up during this series of meetings. Other more intricate questions, such as that of the status of ethnic minorities in Burma or that of Burma's membership in the Commonwealth, were left open, when no agreement was reached between the representatives of the two sides. I will analyse the specificities of the transfer of power from the metropole to the colony in the case of Burma through the examination of the Aung San-Attlee Agreement, to try and show that Burma initiated a new fashion in its rejection of Dominion Status. With mixed results, Burma tried to emerge as a unified democracy, distant from either the British or its Indian neighbour models: as suggested repeatedly by Aung San in the wake of the London Conference, it might have achieved more than its predecessor in a shorter period of time. If I have until now presented the London Talks as an effective confrontation between the metropole and the colony (each having established its precise line of action before the start of the meetings), I will also explore the relations of power at play within the two sides.

Very early on, some officials on the British side committed themselves to the cause of Burma's independence. I have already evoked the roles of parliamentarians such as Tom Driberg in drawing the Prime Minister's attention to the Burmese's claims and officials such as Governor Rance in convincing the government to invite a delegation from the Burmese

---

<sup>17</sup> See Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945-1950*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Executive Council to London, but the influence of Lord Mountbatten in the negotiations is worth mentioning as well. As soon as the Japanese were driven out of the country in August 1945, Lord Mountbatten promised Aung San independence for Burma upon resumption of civil government, in complete opposition to policy-makers in London. If members of the British government gradually recognised the necessity to grant Burma its independence, divisions remained on specific questions and the Conservatives were often dissatisfied with the way negotiations were going between the Labour Party and the AFPFL. On the other hand, the AFPFL being on the front of the Burmese stage - most of its well-known leaders were members of the 1946 Executive Council and the League had the support of a large part of the population – the party sometimes gave the impression that it did not encounter any opposition. In reality, we have to keep in mind that, while the AFPFL included at first many different political groups, it suffered from a split with the Communists on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1946, when some members of the League entered in negotiations with the British and eventually became part of Rance's new Executive Council. The Communists, divided between the "Red Flag" Communist Party (which had left the League at the beginning of 1946) and the "White Flag" Communist Party, advocated much more revolutionary methods to obtain self-government. According to Angelene Naw, Aung San's acceptance of the visit to London led to a weakening of his popularity: he did not manage to get the support of the Communist Party and he was worried that the Communists, along with the PVO (his paramilitary People's Volunteer Organization formed in December 1945) might take advantage of his compromising attitude towards the British to launch a political struggle<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, two members of the Burmese delegation sent to London, the Socialist Ba Sein and U Saw, are particularly interesting as they were not members of the AFPFL though they were present at the London Conference (and were much less keen on making compromises with the British): they are often seen as figures of dissent as they disrupted the unity of the delegation, especially through their intervention during the final meeting.

Finally, as already mentioned, the meetings of the London Conference took place on an unprecedented scale, but at the same time were concentrated on a very short period of time: key decisions for Burma's future were taken quickly in compliance with the AFPFL's desire to rush through the process of obtaining self-government. The role of India's decolonisation has to be largely taken into account here, as it seems to have worked as one of the motors for Burma's independence: far from complying with its label of "minor colony", the leaders of

---

<sup>18</sup> Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 185.

Burma struggled to be acknowledged as India's equal. In the speeches of the Burmese leaders, constant parallels were drawn between the two territories, and a concession could not be made to India without the Burmese representatives hastening to demand the same rights. Moreover, the rhetoric of the independence movement laid emphasis on the idea of a unified process of decolonisation in South-East Asia, in accordance with Aung San's desire to "help Asia discover her own destiny and contribute her due share towards the unity and brotherhood of mankind".<sup>19</sup> I will also dwell on the symbolic dimension of the whole process: the role of the two countries' leaders' figures, especially Aung San, has to be acknowledged. A whole myth was built around the Bogyoke<sup>20</sup> at that time: Aung San genuinely embodied Burma's struggle for independence both in the eyes of the Burmese and the British and is still today an emblem of the country's liberation movements.

To examine these questions, I have first largely relied on Hugh Tinker's gathering of an incredible mass of primary documents both from private and public sources in *Burma: The Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948* as these two volumes are very useful to trace the precise chronological progress of Burma towards independence. They also provided me with most of the necessary documents (speeches, official statements, newspapers articles and Cabinet reports) in relation to the London Talks. I also consulted several Statements of Policy issued by His Majesty's Government, and analysed the archives from the Burma Office, available in the Oriental Manuscript section of the British Library in London. The sources on Aung San were plentiful and Angelene Naw's recent book, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*, is notably thorough in its confrontation of the Burmese leader's life with the wider historic context of decolonisation. But the difficulty was to distinguish between facts and fiction in biographies, as Aung San's figure has been surrounded by a series of myths. Josef Silverstein's *The Political Legacy of Aung San* is also worth mentioning as it gathers various speeches given by Aung San in the wake of the London Conference. Furthermore, several articles from *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* or *Modern Asian Studies* address more contemporary debates on the subject, in particular reflections on the course of the transfer of power from Great-Britain to its colony or on Burma's refusal to become a member of the British Commonwealth on obtaining self-government and the consequences of this decision. Finally, articles in the press, though quite

---

<sup>19</sup> This speech was reproduced in the newspaper *Dawn* from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 224.

<sup>20</sup> Aung San's nickname. It means the 'Great General' in Burmese.

difficult to get hold of (especially when it came to Burmese sources, with newspapers such as *Dawn* or *The Burman*), were very useful to provide day-to-day information on the process of decolonisation in Burma.

I thus chose to analyse three dimensions of the London Talks in this dissertation. The first important step was to reach an agreement on the date of independence, through the establishment of an “Interim Government” with full powers, which the Burmese wanted to be free of any external influence: the position of the Governor was re-defined and essentially reduced to a symbolic one. The first part of this thesis will analyse the conception, formulation and impact of the AFPFL’s Statement of 23 December 1946 which expresses the demands made by the Burmese leaders for the independence negotiations. I will consider to what extent this desire to move rapidly in the direction of self-government was often motivated, on the Burmese part, by India’s progress towards independence, as a response to Attlee’s speech from the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946 in which the Prime Minister reasserted his pledge that Burma should keep pace with its neighbour. In parallel, this chapter will consider how, on the British side, accelerating the decolonisation process through the meetings in London came as a response to the growing tensions inside the colony and to the pressure exerted by the AFPFL on the British government.

Secondly, this thesis will analyse the genesis of the Constitution of the Burmese state, as defined during the London Talks. The British argued in favour of a Legislative Assembly (from which a Constituent Assembly would emerge) while the Burmese demanded a Constituent Assembly “to go to independence in [their] own way”.<sup>21</sup> Delineating a Burmese State came together with the necessary definition of a Burmese identity. During the London Conference, the leaders from the two countries dwelt at length on the question of the ethnic minorities: while the AFPFL, and in particular Aung San, thought that the ethnic minorities in Burma had to be a part of the constitutional process of self-determination, the British deemed that the Frontier People had to remain under their special responsibility. The idea of a unified state had emerged during the Japanese occupation, when Aung San came to realise the importance of the frontier areas inhabitants (he successively met with representatives of the Karen, the Kachin, and at the end of the Second World War, the Shan people); he then devoted the rest of his life to the building of a “Union of Burma”. As the two sides failed to reach an agreement regarding the question of the ethnic minorities in London, I will examine

---

<sup>21</sup> Speech given by Aung San on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1947, in Josef Silverstein (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, New York, Cornell University, 1993, 57.

the role of the Panglong Conference that closely followed the London Talks in February 1947, in the negotiations for a unified Burma.

I will eventually focus on Burma and Britain's future relations. The terms of Britain's future economic relations with Burma had to be defined, as exports of such products as oil and rice were at stake. The financial requests made by Burma had to be discussed as well: the British side was reluctant to grant Burma financial assistance before knowing whether the country intended to stay within the Commonwealth. I will also dwell on the Defence Agreement which emerged from the London Conference. From a strategic point of view, the British leaders' interest in securing future diplomatic relations with their colony lay in their desire to avoid Burma giving way to "communist subversion"<sup>22</sup> – negotiating with the AFPFL thus seemed like a good alternative. In the end, Burma's decision to complete its independence outside the Commonwealth gave a final blow to the British, as it seemed that the metropole had lost its last remnant of control over its former colony. In the light of the Aung San-Attlee's Agreement and the colony's rejection of Dominion Status, this thesis will ultimately reflect on what control, if any, Britain still possessed over Burma at the end of the London meetings.

---

<sup>22</sup> Frank Heinlein, *op. cit.*, 46.

## CHAPTER I

### **Accelerating the process: “Independence within a year”**

By the end of 1946, at a time when discussions regarding the venue in London for Burmese members from the Executive Council were still going on, the AFPFL issued a series of requests that would have to be examined with the British leaders. The AFPFL Statement of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1946 is a central text, as it was issued on the eve of the delegation’s journey overseas and sums up in a straightforward manner the goals of the AFPFL in going to London. In this statement, the British were asked to make concessions even before having met with the Burmese representatives. This text was part of the AFPFL’s first attempts to reverse the relations of power between the metropole and its colony, and to assert the dominating position it would try and maintain during the whole of the London Conference. It is important to stress that the British representatives’ room for manoeuvre in the debates was highly limited, not only by the AFPFL’s threats of massive strikes in Burma, but also by the wider context of decolonisation in South-East Asia: the British knew they had to be very careful what they granted Burma if they wanted to avoid repercussions in other Asian colonies. I will here examine two central requests contained in this Statement in detail: the setting up of an Interim Government and the settling of a date for independence, in a common concern to speed up Burma’s progress to self-government. These demands had already been formulated before on multiple occasions, but for the purpose of clarity, I will centre on the last Statement by the AFPFL containing all of the key requests. Finally, the decolonisation of India was of importance as far as the acceleration of granting Burma its freedom is concerned: it conditioned both Burmese and British attitudes towards independence.

#### 1. Preliminary demands: establishing a position of strength

##### *a. The AFPFL’s statement on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1946<sup>1</sup>*

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1946, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League issued their last statement before sending some of their most prominent members to London: it corresponds to the official acceptance of His Majesty’s Government’s invitation. This

---

<sup>1</sup> AFPFL Statement – “Independence Within a Year” (23 December 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 213.

statement also came as an answer to Attlee's Statement of the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946<sup>2</sup>: "His Majesty's Government propose to invite a representative group of Burmans from the Governor's Executive Council to visit their country in the near future for discussions". The second paragraph contains the AFPFL's three well-known core demands: the transformation of the Governor's Executive Council into an Interim Government, elections for a Constituent Assembly and independence within a year (these demands were previously formulated by Aung San during his presidential address at the opening ceremony of the third Supreme Council of the AFPFL and in a statement published in *New Times of Burma* on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1946). However, the main purpose of the Statement was to clarify certain unsatisfactory points of Attlee's Statement. First, the Prime Minister had not asserted any clear position regarding independence within a year, but had preferred to remain rather vague on the question: "[the] desire [of His Majesty's Government] is that the Burmese people should attain their self-government by the quickest and most convenient path possible". Secondly, as far as the Constituent Assembly was concerned, agreement was yet to be reached between the two sides: His Majesty's Government wanted to hold intermediary Legislative elections before establishing a Constituent Assembly while the AFPFL requested the suppression of this mediation, as this thesis will show later on. Finally, regarding the Interim Government, if Prime Minister Attlee had agreed that power should be in the hands of the Burmese, he had also announced his desire to maintain the existing Constitution and the current Executive Council, therefore preserving some control over the handling of Burmese internal affairs, through the figure of the Governor. The AFPFL's programmatic ideas contained in this Statement served one central purpose: complete independence without the participation of any foreign power.

In his book *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War*, Nicholas Tarling underlines the controversial aspect of the invitation of a Burmese delegation for discussions in London. Indeed, this measure corresponded to the "transfer of practically complete control to a caucus before the political and administrative issues involved ha[d] been satisfactorily cleared, in advance of elections, and in advance of the framing of a new Constitution for Burma":<sup>3</sup> the Burma Delegation was trusted with the fate of the whole country, before elections to ascertain the dominant political party in Burma were held. The British feared in particular the reaction of the Indian leaders regarding this granting of a special favour to their

---

<sup>2</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons (20 December 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 209.

<sup>3</sup> Extract from a memorandum by Acting Inspector-General of Police Chettle for the India and Burma Committee, quoted in Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 144.

neighbours. Moreover, each statement issued by the AFPFL since the conditions under which the delegation would travel to London were being discussed contained an additional request: it seems that the League tried to push the boundaries of what they could “reasonably” demand from His Majesty’s Government to see what the British were prepared to grant them, but also to show them they were the ones who had to compromise. In that context of rather peaceful negotiations, Governor Rance advised the British to adopt a conciliatory attitude, or “new and novel methods of embarrassing His Majesty’s Government [would] continue to arise”.<sup>4</sup>

*b. Pressure and threats*

In the last paragraph of the Statement, the AFPFL leaders reminded His Majesty’s Government of their intention to resign from the Governor’s Executive Council, if the British side failed to meet Burmese demands by the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1947. In other words, in this context of peaceful negotiations, the British Government was in fact under a lot of pressure as failure to compromise would lead to major political unrest in the colony and the end of any hope of negotiations. This “freedom struggle” would be led by U Nu, Aung San’s right-hand man, which was the reason for him not joining the delegation. However, there seemed to be no alternative but to compromise with the AFPFL, as confirmed by deputy under-secretary of state for Burma Sir Laithwaite’s account of his visit to Burma during a Cabinet Meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1947: their nationalist aspirations commanded general support and “in this matter, no other party counted”.<sup>5</sup> We have to keep in mind that Sir Dorman-Smith’s attempt at forming another political coalition capable of counterbalancing the AFPFL in 1945 had failed: by backing unpopular political figures such as former Prime Minister U Saw who had been discredited following his dealing with the Japanese in 1941 and Thakin Tun Ok who campaigned for peace, his enterprise failed and he was eventually removed from his position in June 1946. In September 1946, the British had already witnessed the AFPFL’s influence among the Burmese population and within public services: in a couple of weeks only, the whole country had been paralyzed by a major strike of the police, soon imitated by university students, post and telegraphs, railways, government offices and schools. At that time already, the AFPFL had warned the British government that “such situations would keep on coming up unless a national government were at the helm of affairs as sought in August 1945”.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as warned by Governor Rance, this resignation from the Executive Council would

---

<sup>4</sup> Telegram from Sir Hubert Rance to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (13 November 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 138.

come together with the launching of a new general strike and, possibly, recourse to violence. By the beginning of January, at the moment when the London Talks were about to start, there were already signs of this massive campaign of action, or “dress rehearsal for the fight for the Burmese freedom to be staged after 31/1 should conditions warrant it”, in the Governor’s words:<sup>7</sup> demonstrations of various sections of the Burmese population (such as veterans’ groups, university students, teachers or other public servants) were organised between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, dangerously reminding the British of the events that had taken place in September 1946.

In the case of an outbreak of violence in Burma, the British knew their forces would be insufficient to resist: 2000 British troops only were still stationed on Burmese soil. Indian troops could not be used: because of the negotiations for independence, the tense situation in India might require full deployment of those military forces. What’s more, relying on the Burma National Army seemed unsafe and using hill men could have disastrous consequences for the future as it would lead to further division in the country. Nicholas Tarling concludes that “if the AFPFL resigned and provoked trouble or, more likely, stimulated a general strike and set up a parallel government, Britain would find it very difficult to meet the situation”.<sup>8</sup> Going through the trouble of holding the country by force for an uncertain number of years while both sides had agreed in principle on Burma’s independence seemed rather pointless and the Cabinet soon settled for the inevitable compromises that were required. Strategic considerations in a wider context of South-East Asian decolonisation were also taken into account: the Colonial Secretary warned the British government that other colonies, such as Ceylon or Malaya, would be likely to be influenced by the unfolding of such events in Burma and might develop the same aspiration at a quick transition to self-government. In his article “Some contrasts between Burma and Malaya”, R. B. Smith highlights the economic interests that the Southern area of Asia represented for the British: their protection depended on the political stability of the British colonies in this region, amongst which Burma.<sup>9</sup>

Military Intelligence in Rangoon, along with Governor Rance, wrote reports on other threats that might disrupt the tranquillity of the unfolding of the discussions in London. The Communists notably, fearing that a positive outcome of the AFPFL negotiations with the British might have negative consequences on their popularity at home, had made plans to

---

<sup>7</sup> Telegram from Sir Hubert Rance to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (9 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 147.

<sup>9</sup> R. B. Smith, “Some contrasts between Burma and Malaya in British policy in South-East Asia”, in R. B. Smith and A. J. Stockwell (eds.), *British Policy and the Transfer of Power in Asia: Documentary Perspectives*, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987, 69.

resort to force while the key members of the AFPFL were abroad. Reports indicated that the Red Flag Communists had started gathering arms and would march on Rangoon around the 15<sup>th</sup> of January: their plan consisted in starting hostilities with Government forces so that, interpreted as the beginning of rebellion in the districts, it would provoke “widespread revolt”.<sup>10</sup> This turn of events worried Aung San who was afraid his popularity at home might be weakened by his recent decisions, such as that of negotiating with the British: the Communists in particular, who preferred armed resistance to peaceful discussions, accused him of not being strongly enough opposed to imperialism. He himself was under a lot of pressure, as a failure on his part to obtain concessions from the British would question his leadership and support in the country: before leaving Burma, he asserted that if the negotiations did not go his way, he would leave London immediately to join the freedom movements.

## 2. A necessary redefinition of the White Paper programme

### a. *The White Paper programme*

When the AFPFL members first agreed on their common line of action, they built their demands in opposition to the White Paper that had been issued by the British Parliament on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1945. This White Paper envisaged a period of three years under the direct rule of the Governor, in compliance with Section 139 of the 1935 Burma Act:<sup>11</sup> this period was justified by the need for reconstruction and the recovery of a certain political and economic stability. At the end of those three years, “the normal provisions of the Act [...] w[ould] re-enter into force”: elections would be held “and a Legislature formed with the same degree of authority over the same range of matters as it enjoyed before the Japanese invasion”.<sup>12</sup> A constitution would then be drafted, providing the basis for Burma’s self-government within the British Commonwealth (Burma would therefore obtain dominion status). Only after this final step would the Burmese be free to secede or set up a republic if that was their desire. According to this program, the Burmese would not attain self-government before five to six

---

<sup>10</sup> Telegram from Sir Hubert Rance to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (9 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 243.

<sup>11</sup> Under this section of the Burmese Constitution, the Governor of Burma could be granted special powers should the internal situation of the country require so.

<sup>12</sup> Great Britain, Burma Office, Information Department, *Burma – Policy of HMG, Statements of Policy and Official Speeches*, “Statement of Policy”, P/V 2250, 1945, 10.

years, as the three-year-period of direct rule was to start after the restoration of civil government only.

The British attachment to the White Paper was a long-standing one. If it was highly supported by Governor Dorman-Smith in 1945, unaware – on his return to the colony – of the new hopes raised by the liberation of the country, its program was not abandoned when the new Governor arrived in Burma in September 1946. Indeed, Rance was told by the metropole to stick with the White Paper plan and the Act of 1935 to form his Executive Council, and to make no reference whatsoever to “independence”, while tensions within the country signaled a need for a change of policy. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1946, Counsellor to the Governor Raibeart MacDougall produced a Memorandum in which he put forward the different advantages of speeding up the White Paper programme: he reminded the Prime Minister that the principle of independence was already included in this White Paper (upon certain formalities) and that the AFPFL was likely to keep on cooperating with the His Majesty’s Government if the negotiations led to genuine results. Not before his Statement on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946 did Prime Minister Clement Attlee recognise that the White Paper needed revision: “[the Burmese] leaders have expressed some impatience with the apparently slow development of the White Paper plan. In these circumstances, His Majesty’s Government think that the plan requires reconsideration”.<sup>13</sup> The White Paper, out of date in the eyes of the AFPFL, did not match the rapid unfolding of events in the country anymore.

*b. Interim Government*

One of the most important demands by the AFPFL was the establishment of an Interim Government with full powers to prepare for independence: they wanted the AFPFL-dominated Executive Council to be recognised as the national government, i.e. they demanded a transfer of power without the organisation of prior elections. In a “General Statement by the Burma Delegation” on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, the League requested that the Governor no longer be under the control of the Secretary of State but should follow the advice of his Executive Council: the Interim Government was to be free of any foreign influence.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the fact that Burma’s Governor held too much power had already been acknowledged on multiple occasions. In his Memorandum of the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 1946, U Tin Tut highlighted that, under the 1935 Constitution, the Governor could act in his discretion

---

<sup>13</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons (20 December 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 209.

<sup>14</sup> General Statement by the Burma Delegation (15 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 263.

or in his individual judgement (that is to say without consulting his ministers) to take decisions regarding crucial matters such as defence, external affairs, finances or the Frontier Areas, in total contradiction with any idea of self-government: “it is desirable that these functions should now be converted to functions in which the Governor acts on the advice of his Council”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the AFPFL required financial autonomy for the Executive Council and that the Frontier Areas should be placed within the scope of the Council.

During the negotiations, the Burmese obtained most of their demands regarding the question of a National Government. In the Aung San-Attlee Agreement, the Governor’s Executive Council was effectively turned into the Interim Government of Burma. It was built on the model of the dominion government in India: the Executive Council was to work in close relation with the metropole, but was given complete freedom in the running of day-to-day administration. Certain fields, such as Defence and External Affairs, which had previously been under the control of the Governor, were handed down to the Burmese Counsellor in charge (Aung San was in charge of Defence and External Affairs) and would in the future be brought before the Executive Council. Finally, the Burma Army would be placed under the control of the Interim Government. Therefore, as Hugh Tinker shows in “Burma’s Struggle for Independence: The Transfer of Power Thesis Re-Examined”, the London Conference resulted in an effective transfer of power: Aung San was in charge of this new National Government, and the Governor’s presence at meetings was not required anymore, except when his special powers were involved.<sup>16</sup>

*c. The date of independence*

Another intricate matter was the timetable of decolonisation, although in the discussions, the date of the British departure from Burma was not given as much importance as the date for the effective declaration of independence. If the Burmese pressed for independence before the end of January 1948, the British deemed this deadline impossible to observe and wanted the process to be spread out. Nevertheless, the Secretary of State for India and Burma, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, recognised that talking the delegation out of this idea was a difficult task, as, in the decolonisation rhetoric, all the AFPFL demands were summed up in “Independence Within a Year”: “great and unwise publicity has been given in Burma to

---

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum by U Tin Tut (6 November 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Tinker, *art. cit.*, 474.

31<sup>st</sup> January 1948 as the date by which Burma shall receive her freedom”.<sup>17</sup> By establishing a utopian timetable, Lord Pethick-Lawrence tried to underline the impossibility of achieving self-government at such an early date. Indeed, elections were planned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 1947, which meant that the constitution-making assembly (whose nature still had to be decided) could be formed around the beginning of May. Then, taking into account the time necessary to draft proposals and some time to negotiate the terms of the future Constitution with His Majesty’s Government, the Constitution could not be completed before the very end of 1947. This is why the Secretary of State for Burma put forward the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1948 as a more suitable date for Burma’s independence, which was also similar to the date given for India’s transfer of power).

This concern over the date for the independence of Burma was soon left aside in the debates as more pressing matters called for the attention of the two countries’ representatives: at the end of the meetings, the precise date of independence had yet to be agreed upon. According to Aung San, “Independence could be announced two months after the formation of a Constituent Assembly”,<sup>18</sup> which represented a much tighter schedule than that foreseen by the Secretary of State. After the elections in April 1947, Aung San put the question of the date of the final transfer of power back on the agenda, reminding Rance and Attlee that his target date was January 1948. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Aung San argued that the freshly elected Constituent Assembly would have completed its work by October 1947, allowing for a transfer of sovereignty in early 1948; he highlighted the positive outcome in public opinion that the proper announcement of the date of independence would produce.<sup>19</sup> In the last week of June, another delegation led by Thakin Nu left for London to ensure that the transfer of power would take place in January 1948 as planned. In the end, the so-called Nu-Attlee Agreement for the transfer of power was signed in October 1947 and Burma became a sovereign independent state early in the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948, following the advice of astrologers: “the independence of Burma was achieved within the time frame Aung San had envisioned”.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Memorandum “By Which Date Can Burma Full Self-Government Be Achieved?” by Secretary of State for India and Burma (10 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Press Conference “AFPFL demands granted in full” (3 February 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 388.

<sup>19</sup> Aung San’s Letter to Prime Minister Attlee (13 May 1947), in Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 261-263.

<sup>20</sup> Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 218.

### 3. The influence of India's struggle for independence

#### a. *Burma and India's shared History*

Burma's decolonisation process is often analysed in comparison to India's: indeed, up until 1935 both countries were under the control of a common administration and together formed one unique colony; moreover, the nationalist movements and claims for independence developed more or less at the same time in the two neighbour territories, though in very different ways. In 1897, Burma became a province of British India: it was placed under the authority of the Viceroy and Governor-General of India on the one hand, and that of the Secretary of State for India (the Cabinet minister responsible for India who was also at the head of the India Office in London) on the other hand. The fact that the best positions in Burmese administration were saved for Britons and Indian civil servants while the lowest positions were occupied by Burmese soon fuelled nationalist sentiments. In the early twentieth century, several Burmese Buddhist societies and nationalist associations were formed by Western-educated middle-class Burmese, and later merged into the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920: those associations became increasingly versed in politics. As a response to the rise of nationalist movements, discussions about the separation of Burma from India began in 1930. The question was first examined at the India Round Table of 1930-31: Burma and Britain representatives soon agreed that Burma would be separated from India. A second meeting, the Burma Round Table, was organised to specify the terms of the separation and of Burma's administration under the new reform scheme. In late July 1931, Secretary of State for India Benn stated that "all the pledges made to Burma as part of India stand": the British thus asserted that they were committed to Burma's constitutional progress and that Burma's new constitution would not be inferior to India's.<sup>21</sup> In 1935, under the Government of Burma Act (which was fully operational in 1937), Burma was separated from India.

Therefore, from Burma's separation from India to its independence in 1948, two dynamics were at play regarding its neighbour colony: if the Burmese leaders were largely influenced by the Indian nationalist struggle (as early as the boycott movements engendered by the Gandhi-led Indian National Congress in 1920), they also strove to refute Burma's position as a "minor colony" and to be recognised as India's equal by the British Government. According to Stephen Howe, in 1945, when the Labour Party came to power, Clement Attlee expressed his commitment to Indian independence, but he remained rather cautious and vague

---

<sup>21</sup> John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1958, 328.

regarding the constitutional progress of other colonies.<sup>22</sup> It seemed that Burma was only important in an Indian subcontinent context, but not on its own. Even in comparison with other South-East Asian colonies, such as Malaya or Singapore, which were of interest to the British from an economic and strategic point of view, Burma's demands were often met with indifference. R. B. Smith concludes his article "Some contrasts between Burma and Malaya in British policy in South-East Asia" by saying that "from the British point of view the focal point of the region lay in Malaya and Singapore. Even at the height of its prosperity, as an 'empire gem', Burma had never attained that level of importance for Britain".<sup>23</sup> In Burma, resentment and a desire to be a part of the great movements of decolonisation fuelled a long struggle to be heard by the colonial power. Between 1946 and 1948, there was a sudden acceleration of the process of attaining self-government in Burma: Burmese independence came much faster than any other British colony's, and Burma was the second colony in Asia to obtain its freedom, right after India and Pakistan.

*b. Keeping pace with India*

On the occasion of his speech in the House of Commons on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946, Prime Minister Clement Attlee reasserted the 1931 promise that the British Government would help Burma keep in step with India: "His Majesty's Government further take the view that the pledge of 1931 must be fully carried out".<sup>24</sup> In response, the AFPFL reminded the British Government that this pledge had not been observed and that the Burmese felt somewhat prejudiced against: "although at the time of the separation of Burma from India the British Government made a definite pledge that the separation would not prejudice the constitutional progress of Burma, they have not carried it out, so much so that Burma finds herself left with a much lower status at this moment when India is almost at the goal of freedom".<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as I have already suggested, it seemed that India was an important factor for both the metropole and its colony. At the time, Britain's room for manoeuvre in Burma was limited by its primary concern over India's process of decolonisation. The British were constrained by the fact that they could not grant the Burmese nationalists more than they granted their counterparts in India, or they risked facing the rise of difficult demands from

---

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Howe, *Anticolonialism in British Politics: the Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1964*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, 82.

<sup>23</sup> R. B. Smith, *op. cit.*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons (20 December 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 209.

<sup>25</sup> AFPFL Statement – "Independence Within a Year" (23 December 1946), Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 213.

India: “so long as India remained British, Britain could not afford to lose control of Burma”.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, as suggested by R. Ovendale, events in India made it doubly important to give the impression that Britain could reject demands for independence from other possessions because it was recognized that, if India went, Ceylon and Burma would follow rapidly, perhaps within 5 years.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, “there was [...] a long-established pattern of taking decisions about Burma in the light of what had already been done in India”, as R. B. Smith puts it.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the idea of inviting a Burmese delegation to London for negotiations was modelled on the invitation of an Indian delegation to Britain a year before. Smith’s chronology puts in perspective the developments in India and Burma:<sup>29</sup> in November 1946, Jinnah and Nehru were invited to London for crisis talks. The Indian leaders’ venue was accepted by the Cabinet on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November while the India and Burma Committee accepted the Burmese delegation’s visit on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November. Yet agreement on the part of the Burmese took much longer than agreement by the Indian leaders as the AFPFL pressed for further concessions before eventually accepting the invitation.

If the Burmese leaders relied at times on India’s constitutional advance to demand the same rights, they also tried to erect Burma as a new nation, distant from the Indian model: Aung San often expressed his commitment to the creation in Burma of his own model of government. To the problems that arose in India at that time (especially around the partition of the country in August 1947), Aung San systematically opposed and emphasized the unity of the Burmese population (leaving aside the ethnic minorities issue) and the relative atmosphere of peace inside the country, in order to legitimize the AFPFL claims for self-government: “the danger of civil war so pregnant in India hardly exists in Burma”.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, if Aung San sometimes referred to Gandhi’s advocacy of non-violence in India, he also reminded the Burmese that when violence broke out in the country, Gandhi suspended civil disobedience. In that way, the AFPFL was not firmly opposed, as Gandhi was, to resorting to violence if non-violent resistance was deemed insufficient.

After the Aung San-Attlee Agreement was signed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, Aung San gave four speeches to try and answer the severe criticism he was faced with upon his return to Burma, that he had become an enemy sympathiser: what was recurrent in all his

---

<sup>26</sup> R. B. Smith, *op. cit.*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Ritchie Ovendale (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments, 1945-1951*, London, Leicester University Press, 1984, 37.

<sup>28</sup> R.B. Smith, *op. cit.*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> “AFPFL demands for early independence” (7 June 1947), in Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 257.

speeches was the constant comparison with India, and more specifically the fact that Burma was then ahead of India. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, he declared at the AFPFL headquarters: “as regards the interim government we have achieved an interim government with as much powers as we had desired. It is better than the interim government granted to India”. On the following day, addressing the public via radio, he stated: “No foreigners will be in the elections. Even India has not been able to exclude foreigners”; “To be precise, what we have now received is not less than what India has obtained: what we have received might even be more”.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, keeping in step with India not only worked as a motor, but also provided a definite purpose for the AFPFL members’ struggle for independence: they took pride in obtaining the same constitutional rights as India – if not more, as with their eventual decision to become a republic outside the Commonwealth as I will show later on in this dissertation.

The negotiations which took place during the London Conference were marked with efficiency on important matters: the members of the Burma Delegation knew what they wanted to secure in London beforehand and hardly made any concessions of their own regarding the Interim Government and the date of independence. The Governor’s Executive Council was turned into an Interim Government and was placed under Aung San’s control. The Governor’s position was reduced to a mere official one: under the new regime, Rance did not have any influence over the internal administration of the country. Moreover, showing skills and determination in running Burma in 1947, Aung San and his followers succeeded in securing an early date for the effective transfer of sovereignty: Burma became independent on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948. The entire negotiations fell within a sort of general rush as the AFPFL members needed to live up to the Burmese population’s expectations of achieving “Independence within a year”. The Burmese’s haste conflicted with the Britons’ willingness to slow down the whole process and to observe a timetable similar to that adopted in India: the latter deemed preferable to try and retain Burma as a colony as long as possible. It seemed to be the only secure move regarding India: because its position as Britain’s most important colony conferred it a special status, India could not arrive second in the bid for freedom. Furthermore, the pressure of world opinion did not allow Britain any faux pas. Yet in the end, the Burma Delegation’s pressure was the one that proved most difficult to resist: there were already signs of a potential general revolution in the country in mid-January 1947 and the

---

<sup>31</sup> Two speeches by Aung San quoted in Josef Silverstein (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, New York, Cornell University, 1993, 53-59.

British did not have much choice but to reconsider the terms of the 1945 White Paper and grant the Burmese what they had required. Upon his return to Rangoon, Aung San declared that “Burma was now ahead of India in the bid for freedom” and that “it was up to Burma to see that she maintained this lead”.<sup>32</sup> The London Conference represented an important achievement for the Burmese as it enabled the members of the AFPFL to assert themselves as a real organised front and as tough negotiators. Nevertheless, if the discussions for the Interim Government unfolded smoothly enough, the Burmese had to show a further sense of diplomacy in the negotiations regarding the real foundation of their new State. Two issues in particular divided the two sides: the election of a Constituent Assembly and the assimilation of the Frontier Areas with the rest of Burma. But these questions also revealed the absence of consensus within the Burmese population and within the Burma Delegation itself: to achieve Aung San’s dream of a “Union of Burma”, the AFPFL not only needed to convince the British that they embodied the general wish and thus would obtain the majority at the Assembly, but they also had to obtain the general trust of the population, especially that of the ethnic minorities.

---

<sup>32</sup> Telegram from Sir Hubert Rance to Lord Pethick-Lawrence (21 February 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

## CHAPTER II

### **Independence, state and nation: debating Burmese identity**

At the opening of the London Conference, the Burma Delegation's statement read: "We understand [from the Prime Minister's Statement on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946] that His Majesty's Government are prepared to concede to Burma the right to such form of independence as she may choose".<sup>1</sup> This declaration represented a claim for self-determination: the Burmese wanted to be the sole decision-takers in their achievement of independence. Indeed, after the discussions around the timetable of decolonisation, the second pressing matter was to determine the features of the new Burmese state. I will here examine the two central questions which opened the way for debate. On the one hand, establishing a new state required the drafting of a new Constitution: in that sense, the first step was to reach an agreement on the form the constituent body would take. If the British Government argued for a Legislative Assembly, electing a Constituent Assembly straight away seemed to be the best solution for the Burmese as it would correspond to a significant gain of time. Moreover, as Burma was still in a period of reconstruction after the Japanese invasion, it was necessary for the AFPFL to secure funds during the negotiations. On the other hand, the question of a "Burmese identity" was raised during the London Talks: which status to grant the ethnic minorities living on Burmese soil? How to define a "Burma National"? In opposition to the upcoming partition in India, the Burmese Delegation wanted to find a solution for the Frontier Areas issue and believed they could achieve Aung San's utopian vision of a "Union of Burma", that is to say to forge the new nation on an alliance of the Plains and Hills Peoples.

#### 1. The birth of a new State: struggling for self-determination

##### *a. The form of the new State: Constituent Assembly vs. Legislative Assembly*

After the agreement on an early date for the transfer of sovereignty and the setting up of an Interim Government, the third core demand formulated by the AFPFL was the election of a Constituent Assembly through universal franchise, free from the participation of aliens. But the British side adamantly rejected this idea: they wanted first to hold elections for a Legislative Assembly, from which a Constituent Assembly composed of Burmese nationals

---

<sup>1</sup> General Statement by the Burma Delegation (15 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 261.

would emerge. This measure mainly aimed at appeasing the possible reactions of the non-Burmese: if the British side deemed the European elements would not pose a real problem, they were worried about the Indians' reactions on being excluded from representation. The British Ministers preferred that the Legislature formed a different body from the Constituent Assembly which would be fully occupied by the drafting of a new Constitution and could not afford to spend time on legislation. To the rapidity of electing a constituent body with no intermediate stage and the right to self-determination put forward by the AFPFL, the British side opposed the safety of a regular constitutional progress and of following the same model as in India.<sup>2</sup> They also stressed that, this way, it would be easier to include law experts (such as judges) in the constituent-body, useful in the elaboration of a constitution. Before the start of the negotiations, the British considered other options should their initial proposition be rejected (as indeed happened): for instance, Sir Laithwaite argued for the election of a Legislative Assembly which could be adjourned for several months after members from this Assembly had been chosen to form a Constituent Assembly. In any case, this idea was equally rejected by the AFPFL: the Burmese were not prepared to make concessions on this point.

Indeed, the League was worried that various dissident political parties (and, in particular, the Communists) would benefit from the election of a Legislative Assembly and rise, thus weakening the government: their willingness to skip the first step of the process was partly justified by a need for cohesion. Moreover, electing a Legislative Assembly first would correspond to holding elections under the 1935 Act, unacceptable to the members of the AFPFL: in their struggle to choose their own model of independence, they could not cope with any feature of this Constitution, out of date since the Japanese invasion and seen as a means of strengthening the imperial power. The 1935 Act had allotted some seats to foreign minorities: on the contrary, the AFPFL wanted to abolish those separated seats and "elect a Constituent Assembly 'for the whole of Burma'".<sup>3</sup> The League thus proposed that a Constituent Assembly should be elected and that, in parallel, a Legislative Assembly of a hundred members should be formed by the Governor. However, this additional proposition raised constitutional problems: it required the amendment of an existing Order-in-Council which prevented the Governor from appointing more than fifty members to the Legislative

---

<sup>2</sup> As decided in May 1946 during the British Cabinet Mission in India. See Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India*, Oxford University Press, 2007, 290.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Tinker, *art. cit.*, 471.

Council. Though considered a “travesty of democratic principles”,<sup>4</sup> it was a definite attempt at compromising.

The Cabinet, faced with such determination on the part of the AFPFL, eventually yielded and agreed to the election of a Constituent Assembly in April 1947, by Burma nationals only: “in order that the people of Burma may decide on the future constitution of their own country as soon as possible a Constituent Assembly shall be elected instead of a Legislature”.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, it seems that, in India, the process of constitution-making was considerably slowed down by the failure of the two leading parties, the National Congress and the Muslim League, to compromise: Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League threatened to boycott the Constituent Assembly if a Pakistan-Hindustan solution was not adopted. The Indian Constitution was only finalised in 1950, that is to say a couple of years after the Partition of India and Pakistan. Yet the Burmese Constituent Assembly was to be elected under “the electoral machinery of the 1935 Act”,<sup>6</sup> that is to say in accordance with the constituencies defined under the Burma Act. The AFPFL hoped a Constitution would be framed within six months of the election of this Assembly; when drafted, it was to be presented to the British Parliament for approval.

*b. Obtaining financial autonomy*

As the preparations for self-government intensified, the members of the Burmese Delegation expressed the necessity for financial arrangements. Prior to the London visit, the League requested to be given a free grant (and not a loan, as first offered by Britain) of eighty-seven million pounds by the United Kingdom: they wanted to have complete freedom as to the spending of this grant, with no control of the British Government. Simultaneously, the British were asked to pay for Burma’s war damage, as well as its Defence forces. In a context of financial crisis in Britain – the metropole was at that time still spending a lot on reconstruction and was largely dependent on foreign assets and the United States’ pecuniary help – such settlements seemed impossible, especially when Britain was in the process of losing India, one of its key colonies in terms of economic revenues. Therefore, Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton thought it best to propose that the British Government gave Burma thirty-five million pounds as a loan free of interest, with a period of seven years to refund this sum. His attitude regarding Defence and war damage compensation appeared to be

---

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet: India and Burma Committee, I.B. (47) 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting (9 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Clement R. Attlee and Aung San, *Aung San-Attlee Agreement*, London, 27 January 1947, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

unbending: he deemed that Britain did not have any obligations towards its colony in those fields. Compared to other British colonies, Burma had considerable potential wealth: the British could not encourage financial improvidence by increasing their expenses overseas. According to him, the main objective of the Delegation was to obtain political concessions from the British; securing financial concessions came second. It would be easier for the British ministers to resist on this front (at least as long as the AFPFL had not decided whether to remain in the Commonwealth), as emphasized by the Chancellor of the Exchequer: “far better give them what they want on the political front at the outset, and save good British money from being lavished unnecessarily”.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Burma was still perceived as an infant nation incapable of running its finances sensibly: even the terms of the Aung San-Attlee Agreement were very cautious in their evocation of future loans to the new state-to-be. Hugh Dalton mentioned the Burmese leaders’ lack of realism and their optimistic belief that they could obtain additional loans from India and the United States. Finally, the Chancellor of the Exchequer ironically put forward that the proud and independent nature of Burma could not be combined with a request for a free grant from the imperialist power: if the AFPFL members genuinely wanted to achieve independence on their own, they would *obviously* prefer accepting a loan to be repaid from the metropole.

However, Aung San and U Tin Tut (who was in charge of Finance and Revenue in the Governor’s Executive Council) pointed out the heavy expenditure necessary to reconstruct the country after the war and the responsibility of the British Empire in Burma’s engagement during the Second World War. According to Tin Tut, Burma was perfectly capable of running its finances as shown by the pre-war years during which the colony had started building up a reserve and paying back the Separation Debt to India. To sum up the Delegation’s argument, the AFPFL “hold[s] strongly the view that without complete financial autonomy, the so-called autonomy in other spheres of Government would be illusory”.<sup>8</sup> In the end, financial matters were not discussed extensively during the negotiations, in comparison to other questions: Hugh Dalton and U Tin Tut soon reached an agreement along general lines. In principle, Burma would be granted financial autonomy and would receive an interest-free loan of roughly eight million pounds for the coming year, which could possibly be converted into a grant. The Chancellor of the Exchequer further offered to help with Burma’s current deficit and to take notice of any contribution made towards the Frontier Areas. The eventual

---

<sup>7</sup> Chancellor of the Exchequer to Secretary of State for Burma (8 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 229.

<sup>8</sup> Further Statement by the Burma Delegation (22 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 321.

financial issues were settled on the occasion of U Tin Tut's second visit to London in late 1947: these arrangements, included in the U Nu-Attlee Treaty of the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1947, notably comprised the United Kingdom's pledge to refund Burma for its expenditure during the war effort and to cancel a part of Burma's debt.

*c. The elections of April 1947*

For the purposes of the upcoming elections, the two parties had to define a "Burma National" during the London Talks. The first definition read as follows: "a Burmese National should be defined as a person who is born and domiciled in Burma and who was also born of parents permanently resident in Burma".<sup>9</sup> Yet, as pointed out by the British, this definition left aside all the Burmese who were born overseas (for instance, a lot of Indians lived in Burma<sup>10</sup> at the time). Moreover, the Burma Delegation recognised that they wanted people enrolled in Indian and European constituencies to be included in the definition: they suggested that a test could be established in order to distinguish between those who regarded Burma as their home and those who considered their home was elsewhere. This new definition was readily accepted by His Majesty's Government: in Annex A of the London Agreement, a Burmese National was defined as "a British subject or the subject of an Indian State who was born in Burma and resided there for a total period of not less than eight years in the ten years immediately preceding either 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1942, or 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1947".<sup>11</sup>

As soon as the Aung San-Attlee Agreement was signed by both parties, the Delegation travelled back to Rangoon and preparations for the upcoming elections of the Constituent Assembly began. Around March and April 1947, the AFPFL launched a large-scale political campaign: Aung San toured the country, attracting huge crowds wherever he would stop. The elections were held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1947 and resulted in an overwhelming victory of the AFPFL. The League won 88 of the 91 general constituencies, which represented 172 seats out of 182 (the ten remaining seats were filled by Communists and independents). Along with those, 24 seats were allotted to the Karen Community, 4 to the Anglo-Burmese community and 45 to the Frontier Areas. Thakin Nu became the President of this new Constituent Assembly and started working on the Constitution right away: power had been transferred to a democratically elected government.

---

<sup>9</sup> General Statement by the Burma Delegation (15 January 1947) in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 265.

<sup>10</sup> About 60% of the Indians living in Burma were not born there. See Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 277.

<sup>11</sup> Annex A of the Aung San-Attlee Agreement (27 January 1947) in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 382.

## 2. The Frontier Areas and the Union of Burma: reuniting Plains and Hills Burma

### a. *The ethnic minorities issue*

During the few months before the negotiations opened in London, the place of the Frontier Areas in the political process and the status of the ethnic minorities came under review. At that time, there were “two” Burmas, separated under the 1935 Burma Act: on the one hand, “Plains Burma” (or Ministerial Burma) had over the years obtained larger responsibilities in the administration of the country while, on the other hand, “Hills Burma” was still subjected to a special regime, under British tutelage. These “Excluded Areas” (covering more than two-fifths of the area of present day Burma) were administered through indirect rule: thus, the Shan or the Kachin people for instance were allowed to keep their traditional chiefs, who followed the guidance of British superintendents. In October 1922, the Federated Shan States were created, gathering the Shan<sup>12</sup> and the Karenni States which were placed under the authority of a British commissioner. After the Second World War, the inhabitants of the Frontier Areas began demanding the same degree of self-government as the rest of Burma had been granted. If they were hostile to British rule, the Shan contacts with Burmese political leaders around 1945-1946 were not always friendly either. As the London negotiations drew nearer, the Council of the Federated Shan States let both the British Government and the AFPFL know that they wanted to be consulted if questions relating to the Frontier Areas were raised. Aung San toured the country in late 1946 and visited different minorities around Burma to argue in favour of unity and to build support for the independence movement. Simultaneously, he worked with U Nu to form an organisation gathering different ethnic groups: they managed to bring together Chin, Kachin and Shan people in a Supreme Council of the United Hill People (SCOUHP), which would later act as an advisory body working alongside the Governor.

The London Conference revealed further tensions between the Burmese and the British regarding the issue of the Frontier Areas. Though both the British and the Burmese agreed on a final goal that was the establishment of a united Burma including British Burma and the Hills States, they did not share the same views as to the means of achieving this Union of Burma. Indeed, the AFPFL wanted the Frontier Peoples to be straightaway included in the constitutional process aiming at complete self-government while the British were not willing to abandon these areas, considered to be the special responsibility of His Majesty's

---

<sup>12</sup> This word designates one precise ethnic minority living in Burma but is often used to refer to the different non-Burmese people as a whole.

Government. The British side emphasised the implication of the Hills Peoples, and notably the Karens, in the Second World War: several British officials believed that the Government was in debt to the “hill tribes who fought so gallantly [...] during the war”<sup>13</sup> and could not let the Burmese alone decide of their fate. They wanted to retain some rights of intervention on these lands by granting the Frontier Tribes a certain degree of local autonomy. Such provision was regarded by the Burmese as a further means to limit their achievement of complete independence. According to the British, the Frontier Peoples were reluctant to be associated with the Burmese Government for fear of further domination by the Burmese, which explained their wish to stay within the British Commonwealth. On the contrary, the Burmese assumed that this attitude was only a result of the British administration of the two Burmas: they considered that the Hills Peoples had been deliberately secluded from the rest of Burma because they were seen by the British as politically backward areas which could not be trusted with self-government. But this artificial division did not reflect the will of the Frontier Areas people. In any case, the division seemed difficult to maintain in the long term: those in the Frontier Areas could not be kept apart from parliamentary Burma much longer, as the British officials recognised that Plains and Hills Burma formed, geographically speaking, one country only. With the upcoming British departure from Burma, it was essential that the two parts of the country should be reunited as the British deemed that most of the Frontier Areas were lacking the necessary experience with representative institutions to be left on their own.

Before the London Talks, the AFPFL had stated that it “did not wish to include unwilling peoples within the boundaries of independent Burma” on several occasions: it was “accordingly now up to them to work out conditions under which the Frontier Areas would join the rest of Burma of their own free will”.<sup>14</sup> On his way to London, Aung San stopped in New Delhi for a press conference and made a speech in which he asserted that, although him and his followers would try to persuade the Hills Peoples to work alongside the Burmese for a common progress towards independence, they would not compel them to join the new Burmese State: “our attitude is that we do not want to impose any settlement upon the peoples of the frontier areas. We offer them the option of joining us with a great deal of autonomy”.<sup>15</sup> In the same sense, the British Prime Minister declared, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, that it was necessary to ensure that measures taken to bring a solution to the status of the Frontier Areas were taken in accordance with the wishes of Frontier Peoples. However, we have to keep in

---

<sup>13</sup> *HC Deb* 27 January 1947, vol. 432, cols. 586-7.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 187.

mind that no representative from any of those ethnic minorities was present during the London Conference: while both the British and the Burmese undertook to decide the fate of the Frontier People without consulting them at first, the Hills Peoples' representatives refused to cooperate. Thus, during the negotiations, the Karens let the two countries' leaders know that they would not consider themselves bound by any decision taken during sessions from which their representatives were absent: this statement originated discussions on the necessity of organising another Conference including members of the various minorities.

Therefore, this issue constituted the most important “sticking point”<sup>16</sup> between the two sides: it engendered the longest debate of the whole Conference and, in the end, no real decision was taken. The London Talks rather opened on further processes of negotiations: the Aung San-Attlee Agreement already mentioned the upcoming Panglong Conference in the Shan States and simply underlined that the two sides were “to achieve the early unification of the Frontier Areas and Ministerial Burma with the free consent of the inhabitants of those areas”.<sup>17</sup> The resolution to set up an Advisory Council of Frontier Leaders was also comprised in the London Agreement: this Council was to give advice to the Governor regarding Frontier affairs and to work in close connection with the Executive Council. Finally, the Aung San-Attlee Agreement contains the two parties' decision to form the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry (FACE) in order to clarify the desires of the Frontier Peoples and to examine the long-term relations between the Plains and the Hills Peoples. This Committee was composed of nine members, four of them from Ministerial Burma, four of them representing the Frontier Areas people, along with one British Chairman, Mr. David Rees-Williams, former Labour Member of Parliament for Croydon South and future Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office.<sup>18</sup> FACE was required to report what was the best method for including the Frontier Peoples in the process of drafting a new Constitution for Burma.

Indeed, Nicholas Tarling suggests in *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War* that the British had not fully grasped the problem of the Frontier Areas people and of the Karen in particular.<sup>19</sup> This ethnic group was the most reluctant to work alongside the Burmese: they issued several demands for the creation of an independent Karen State, a “Karenistan”. Furthermore, their position was a difficult one: some Karen people dwelt in the Hills areas while others lived in Plains Burma, where they were intermixed with the Burmese. But the British failed to bring distinctions between the different ethnic minorities: in order to

---

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Tinker, *art. cit.*, 473.

<sup>17</sup> Clement R. Attlee and Aung San, *Aung San-Attlee Agreement*, London, 27 January 1947, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, <<http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/index.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 196.

address the issue of the Frontier Peoples, they considered them as a whole, without making any nuance between the different groups under review. On the contrary, this Committee of Enquiry consisted of representatives of the main different minorities (of the Chin, Kachin and Karen especially) in a desire to take into account the wishes of particularisms. The report thus revealed the various ethnic groups' diverging attitudes towards the proposed Burmese State. While the Shan and Kachin were in favour of establishing autonomous states within a federated Burma (in order to gain more control over matters such as foreign relations or finances), the Chin's position was more ambiguous: they did not seem to be prepared for the responsibilities that would come with separate statehood but did not wish to be assimilated with Ministerial Burma either. As for the Karen, they did not want to take any part whatsoever in the idea of a "Union of Burma". The report, completed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1947 (that is to say after the Constituent Assembly had been elected), notably recommended that the Frontier Areas people should be allotted forty-five seats in the Constituent Assembly, divided as such: twenty-seven seats for the Shan people, seven for the Kachin, six for the Chin and five for other ethnic minorities. It also advised the consultation of representatives of the Frontier Peoples on any constitutional dispositions susceptible to alter the federal principle. Finally, it requested the gradual fusion of the most governmentally-advanced Frontier Areas with Ministerial Burma, the Chin area and the Karen-inhabited Salween District in particular.

*b. The Panglong Conference*

In order to counter the assumption that the Frontier Peoples preferred to remain under British control, the Burmese leaders organised the Panglong Conference in the Shan States in February 1947, as an echo to the first Panglong Conference which had taken place in November 1946 but had not resulted in any concrete measure. Taking place but ten days after the Burma Delegation had returned from London, this second (and most famous) Panglong Conference gathered representatives of the Shan, Kachin and Chin, some Burmese leaders such as Aung San and Tin Tut, and British Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs A. G. Bottomley. Karen leaders were also present, but they attended the Conference as observers only, as they were divided between those who supported the AFPFL and those who advocated the formation of a new State, distinct from Burma. The aim of the Panglong Conference, which took place between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1947, was to clarify the wishes of the ethnic minorities regarding their joining the new State of Burma. Indeed, as previously mentioned, due to the administration of Burma under British rule, two separate Burmas had

emerged: Ministerial Burma and the so-called “Excluded Areas”, which represented 15% of the country’s total population. Because of this political division, contact and exchanges of all kinds between the various ethnic groups and the rest of Burma had declined during the British period. According to J. S. Furnivall in *The Governance of Modern Burma*, “British rule did nothing to foster national unity. On the contrary, both directly and indirectly, it stimulated sectional particularism”.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the idea of the Panglong Conference first emerged from a desire to renew the contacts between the two parts of Burma in order to get to a better understanding of the Frontier Areas people.

At the Panglong Conference, the Hills inhabitants expressed two demands in particular. First, they requested to be granted three seats in the Governor’s Executive Council, to which Aung San initially replied by offering the three Frontier leaders one seat each in his cabinet, as it was not in his power to override the terms of the 1935 Burma Act which defined the conditions of participation in the Executive Council. Secondly, they reminded the Burmese leaders of their wish to obtain statehood for the Shan, Chin and Kachin peoples. Aung San did not make any pledge for autonomy during the Conference, but rather argued in favour of unity: “the dream of a unified Burma has always haunted me. [...] We who are gathered here tonight are engaged in the pursuit of the same dream”.<sup>21</sup> Before signing the Agreement, the leaders of the three main ethnic groups announced that they were in fact willing to postpone the question of statehood for a couple of months, so that it could be examined at the Constituent Assembly: thanks to Aung San’s diplomacy, the Conference went well for the Burmese. In the words of U Vum Ko Hau, the Chin representative during the Panglong Conference, “there probably was more understanding between the Frontier leaders and the Ministerial Burmese leaders during the four days at Panglong than the previous fifty years put together”.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, one community stayed out of the consensus: indeed, the Karens protested against the Burmese leaders’ failure to acknowledge their claim to a separate state. This dissent was of bad omen for the future: if the Burmese did not succeed in reaching some sort of agreement with the Karens, the latter were likely to become more extreme as independence drew nearer.

The Panglong Agreement was signed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February: it stated that the Governor was to choose a representative of the Hills Peoples as his counsellor on issues related to the Frontier Areas, following the advice of the Supreme Council of the United Hill

---

<sup>20</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *The Governance of Modern Burma*, New York, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1960, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Speech by Aung San at the Panglong Conference (11 February 1947), quoted in Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 202.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Angelene Naw, *op. cit.*, 200.

Peoples. This counsellor, the Shan Sao Sam Htun, would become a member of the Governor's Executive Council without portfolio and would have two deputy counsellors representing other ethnic groups of Burma (U Vum Ko Hau for the Chin and Sima Hsinwa Nawng for the Kachin). Moreover, the Frontier Areas would be granted complete autonomy for their internal administration, though the Kachin, Chin and Shan areas might receive financial assistance from Burma's revenues. Thus, the Panglong Agreement laid the basis for the Union of Burma (though the Karens did not recognise it): the 12<sup>th</sup> of February was notably proclaimed "Union Day" after Burma became independent.

*c. Failed unity?*

Upon his return to Rangoon, Aung San gave a series of speeches to the Burmese population to give an account of what the AFPFL had obtained during the London Talks and to argue in favour of continued unity: "we have been successful in opening the road to freedom because we have popular and united support. It is because the people are strong behind us that we are heard with respect",<sup>23</sup> he declared on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1947. In the rhetoric of decolonisation, emphasis was constantly laid on the role of national unity in the achievement of independence. From a general point of view, it seemed indeed that the context of independence had clearly defined a united Burma. Contrary to India where discussions for partition were in full swing, no separatist tendencies had been allowed to emerge in Burma: those advocating the creation of a Karen State were but a minority and the AFPFL had worked on the possibility to offer the ethnic minorities alternate options to prevent them from seceding. The results of the elections of the Constituent Assembly in April 1947 further ascertained that the country was largely united behind the Anti-Fascist League – itself representing, in the words of Tom Driberg, a "real united front"<sup>24</sup> behind a set of nationalist goals: "the outcome of the April, 1947, elections for the Constituent Assembly was an overwhelming popular endorsement of Thakin Aung San and his London Agreement."<sup>25</sup> Aung San went even further in his struggle for unification: during his visit in India on his way to London, he expressed his dream for a united Asian continent to resist against Western colonialism. He stressed the need to develop inter-Asian relations "so that ultimately [they] may all help Asia to discover her own destiny".<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Broadcast Speech by Aung San (3 February 1947), quoted in U Maung Maung (ed.), *Aung San of Burma*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, 112-113.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Stephen Howe, *op. cit.*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> John Cady, *op. cit.*, 551.

<sup>26</sup> Extract from Indian newspaper *Dawn* (6 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 224.

Nevertheless, in reality, various parties or groups did not support the AFPFL and did not always work in favour of unity. Even during the London Conference, the Burma Delegation showed weaknesses as it did not manage to present the British with one solid common programme. Two of the members of the Delegation, Ba Sein and U Saw, did not belong to the AFPFL – they were in fact minor rivals of the League – and failed to back the AFPFL decisions until the end of the Conference: right at the moment when the two parties were about to sign the Agreement on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, Ba Sein and U Saw refused to recognise the terms of the Agreement and, upon intervention by Aung San, they eventually resigned from their positions. This way, the two dissidents did not take any responsibility for the completed Agreement but excluded themselves from any political future in the new State. Thereafter, Ba Sein and U Saw, along with Dr. Ba Maw (another former Burmese politician who had served as head of state of the newly independent State of Burma in 1943 during the Japanese Occupation), formed the “Democratic Nationalist Opposition Front”. Another opposition came from the Red Flag Communists led by Thakin Soe: all of these political opponents knew that the AFPFL was about to win the majority at the Constituent Assembly and chose to boycott the elections. Finally, the strongest opposition to the AFPFL came from the Karen National Union, that is to say the oldest and best organised section of the Karens: as they deemed they would be underrepresented at the Assembly (they had been allotted 24 seats only), they chose not to participate altogether. Instead, those seats were won by members of the Karen Youth Organisation, who were willing to cooperate with the AFPFL: they represented a new trend among the Karens and wanted to try and appease regional antagonisms by working alongside the Burmese for common national objectives. According to Josef Silverstein, the 1947 elections “demonstrated a veneer of unity”:<sup>27</sup> if they indeed legitimised the AFPFL claim to political leadership, all the seats in the Constituent Assembly were in fact filled with officials who shared, to a certain extent, the same political goals as the AFPFL. To symbolize the new Union that had just emerged as well as the struggle for independence, the Constituent Assembly decided to adopt a red and blue flag containing six stars: the largest one represented the Union itself while the other five surrounding it represented the unity of the five largest ethnic groups living on Burmese soil – the Burmese, the Karens, the Shans, the Chins and the Kachins.

Tensions between the different political forces reached a climax in July 1947 when Aung San, along with six other Cabinet Ministers, was assassinated in the middle of a

---

<sup>27</sup> Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics, The Dilemma of National Unity*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1980, 119.

meeting of the Executive Council at the Secretariat Building. Enquiries revealed the role of U Saw in orchestrating the murders, apparently out of pure frustrated ambition. He seemingly wanted to put the blame on the British for this crime while taking advantage of the following chaos to raise a general revolution from which he and his partisans could benefit.<sup>28</sup> But his attempt at destroying the current government failed. Thanks to the rapid intervention of Governor Rance, a new government was formed: Thakin Nu – who was then President of the Constituent Assembly and Vice-President of the Executive Council – became the head of this new government. His regime took over on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, that is to say but a week after the tragic events. Through cooperation with leaders of other political movements, such as the Communist Than Tun, he managed to thwart the coup d'état planned by U Saw's partisans: if Burma was irreparably weakened by the loss of some of its most prominent leaders, it seems that, for a couple of months, the country was actually more united than ever in mourning the Bogyoke.

The London Conference not only constituted negotiations for independence but it also represented a genuine struggle for self-determination: the Burmese Delegation showed with stamina that it wanted to achieve freedom on its own terms, rather than to follow a model shaped by the colonial power. The core negotiations of the Talks concerned the political foundations of the new nation-to-be and concessions around these matters were not secured easily by the Burma Delegation. After long discussions, it was agreed that, just as the AFPFL had desired, the Burmese would be allowed to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly instead of a Legislative Assembly. Through this concession, the British agreed to stick with the AFPFL timetable for independence: the Assembly elections were held in April 1947 and the Constitution was completed by September 1947 which opened the way for the actual transfer of power in early 1948. Moreover, an issue divided the two sides during the whole of the Conference: the British and the Burmese did not manage to reach an early consensus on the question of the ethnic minorities and the status of the Frontier Areas, as opposed to that of Burma Proper. While the British wanted to retain special rights of intervention upon those areas, the Burmese wished to include the Hills regions in their constitutional progress towards self-government: in order to try and reach an agreement, a Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry was set up to enquire on the views of the Frontier Peoples. Therefore, rather than

---

<sup>28</sup> See John Cady, *op. cit.*, 557.

offering a proper resolution of the question, the London Conference opened on further processes of negotiation, such as the Panglong Conference in February 1947. The final goal was the formation of a Union of Burma in which both Hills and Plains Burma would be reunited, though the Burmese leaders still had a long way to go before convincing some ethnic minorities – the Karens in particular – to be a part of the Union. Even if the AFPFL obtained a large majority at the Assembly elections of April 1947, they had to acknowledge the other powerful forces at play, such as the Red Flag Communists and the Democratic Nationalist Opposition Front. Yet, on Independence Day, enthusiasm and optimism culminated with new President Sao Shwe Thaik's speech: "today is for us not only a day of freedom but also a day of reunion. For a long time, the principal races of Burma [...] have tended to look upon themselves as separate national units. Of late, a nobler vision, the vision of a Union of Burma, has moved our hearts, and we stand united today as one nation determined to work in unity and concord for the advancement of Burma's interests and for the speedy attainment of her due position as one of the great nations of the world".<sup>29</sup> With its foundations laid, Burma was to become a new actor on the international scene: the last aspect of the London Talks consisted in defining Burma's future relations with Britain in particular, but also with the rest of the free world. Certain questions still needed answering, such as the form Burma and Britain's military and diplomatic relations would take after the withdrawal of British troops from the country or Burma's Commonwealth membership: while the colony's impending Independence started attracting the attention of other powers, Britain needed to secure its interests in the country through treaties or by convincing Burma to accept Dominion Status.

---

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, 133.

## CHAPTER III

### Drawing the outline of Burma and Britain's future relations

Early on in the debates of the London Conference, it became clear that Britain was in no position to negotiate: as the discussions drew to an end, the British had to make concessions of importance, especially regarding the holding of elections for a Constituent Assembly, while it proved difficult to compromise with the Burma Delegation, which firmly stood its ground. During these tough negotiations, the British side grew aware of the importance of securing future relations with the soon-to-be independent State. Indeed, Burma represented a strategic area in the economic and military fields. As it was located at a crossroad between major powers (Burma shares a border with China and India), the new nation was bound to attract the attention of other countries on becoming free, especially in the context of the Cold War: Britain needed to make sure that its interests came first. On the verge of becoming the leaders of an independent nation, the AFPFL leaders raised questions regarding Burma's place on the international stage: its membership to such international organisations as the United Nations or the British Commonwealth of Nations had to be considered. During the whole of the Talks and after, Britain pushed for Burma to remain in the Commonwealth. But the Burmese leaders showed reluctance as they thought that the term "Dominion Status" would push them back in their position of inferiority and was a new way for His Majesty's Government to infringe on their achievement of complete self-government. In the end, the British Government's struggle to maintain a form of control over Burma gave mixed results: if they managed to secure some of their military interests through a series of treaties, they could not prevent Burma from becoming a Republic and leaving the Commonwealth for good. At the end of the Attlee administration, the Foreign Office in London issued a paper establishing a balance of Britain's responsibilities within its Empire and former colonies. In this paper, the Middle East was acknowledged as the key region for British interests; South-East Asia came second for being the "dollar earner and sterling source of raw materials" of the former Empire:<sup>1</sup> even if Britain gradually lost its control over the countries in this area, it was necessary for this region to remain within the British sphere of influence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank Heinlein, *op. cit.*, 20.

## 1. Securing diplomatic ties with Burma

### a. *Burma: a region of strategic importance?*

In his article “Burma, Britain, and the Commonwealth”, S. R. Ashton argues that Burma was not considered as a colony of first rank strategically speaking, compared to others such as India or Malaya.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Burma did not have many resources or facilities that made it of primary strategic importance. According to the Chiefs of Staff Committee to His Majesty’s Government, it was Burma’s strategic position in relation to India and South-East Asia that constituted its main asset – the only reason why it was important to protect it against the domination of any hostile power.<sup>3</sup> In the 1880’s in particular, Burma constituted a major line of defence for India, and represented the main source of rice, teak and oil for the Indian market. But in early 1947, with all the political changes at play in India, Burma’s importance declined and came to be defined only in relation to other strategic powers: the colony was then considered as a mere outpost to India and South-East Asia, whose loss would not have a major impact on the British Empire. In 1945, an Interdepartmental paper on “British Foreign Policy in the Far East” established a distinction between two regions of the Far East, each on one side of the Tropic of Cancer. The focus of the paper was the area located south of the Tropic, as it was identified as a region in which Britain had a genuine political and economic role to play in order to secure its interests. In this draft paper, Burma was considered as a part of the South-East Asian region: in the context of a post-war Empire, Britain still deemed Burma’s resources worthy of protection. However, according to R. B. Smith in his article “Some contrasts between Burma and Malaya in British Policy towards South-East Asia”, “Burma’s position in South-East Asia was much more peripheral than its position in relation to India. As it became clear that South-East Asia (rather than India) was to be the main focus of Britain’s strategic interests in Asia in the foreseeable future, Burma became less and less important *vis-à-vis* the territories which later became Malaya and Singapore”.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, in the economic field, Burmese resources did not seem as vital and worthy of protection as Malayan products for example. Since the 1930’s, Burma’s economy had been dominated by small businesses owned by Britons, which mainly produced, as already mentioned, rice, teak and oil. Those commodities were largely destined to be exported to India and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the sterling area: in the words of R. B. Smith, those

---

<sup>2</sup> S. R. Ashton, *art. cit.*, 70.

<sup>3</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, C.O.S. (47) 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting (17 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 284.

<sup>4</sup> R. B. Smith, *op. cit.*, 72.

commodities were not “dollar-earners”,<sup>5</sup> in comparison to such products as Malayan tin or rubber, for which there was a genuine demand from America, China and Japan. While, after the war, the Americans grew even more interested in Malaya where commodities which the United States could not produce abounded, Burmese rice on the contrary did not seem truly irreplaceable in the larger context of world trade, and foreign – and British as a matter of fact – firms did not really see the point in investing in Burmese oil deposits given that new opportunities had arisen in the Middle East. Thus, though Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin advised the British Government that it would be useful to help Burma regain its position as one of the world’s three major suppliers of rice, the whole economic reconstruction of Burma came to be directed mainly at the needs of the Indian population: “in terms of the harsh economic realities of the post-war world, Britain could afford to let events in Burma take their course – and could not afford to do much more. Malaya was vital”.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, it is possible to nuance S. R. Ashton and R. B. Smith’s assertions that Burma did not really count in a South-East Asia geopolitical context because of its “peripheral position” and its not-so-vital resources in the light of Burma’s strategic geographical location. Indeed, Burma was the only country sharing a border with both India and China and soon started to attract the attention of other powers, such as the United States. The British quickly grew aware of the necessity to secure their interests through treaties with their colony: they wished to make it clear that they did not want the Burmese to ally with any other power. In November 1946, the United States started to become involved in South-East Asian affairs and to express an interest in Burma in particular, as this country was located on projected American air routes and represented a sort of buffer state between India and China. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1946, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson requested more information about Burma: in this telegram to the Chargé des Affaires in London, he acknowledged that America could benefit from orderly constitutional developments in Burma.<sup>7</sup> Both in the Americans’ and the Britons’ minds, it was deemed crucial to succeed in setting up a strong and centralised state that would be capable of resisting communist subversion. For Britain, the major threat to Burma’s stability and freedom was identified as China, from the north and the east. In January 1948, when the transfer of power from Britain to Burma was eventually completed, the Foreign Office became in charge of supervising Britain’s relations with its former colony, within the framework of the different treaties signed over the course of the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

year 1947. The Foreign Office thus highlighted that, in the long term, its aims were to encourage British trade with Burma and to retain Burma in its sphere of influence through a political and commercial presence in the country so that the new nation would not become an obstacle to its strategic plans for the rest of South-East Asia.

*b. Settling Defence and military matters*

Consequently, it seemed that the British had much to gain in establishing diplomatic ties with Burma. To begin with, though Burma's internal security did not call for the remaining of an active British military presence on Burmese soil after the declaration of independence – the British agreed to withdraw their forces after independence<sup>8</sup> – setting up a treaty to clarify military and strategic matters seemed necessary for both countries. Most of the details regarding Burma and Britain's future diplomatic relations are gathered in the U Nu-Attlee Treaty of the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1947.<sup>9</sup> The Treaty opened on an article underlining that both nations were considered equal – an important acknowledgement in the eyes of the AFPFL leaders whose feeling of inferiority towards the colonial power was a long-standing one. This Treaty also contained the two countries' leaders' decision to proceed to an exchange of diplomatic representatives as a sign of *entente cordiale*. A tradition of exchanges had seemingly already been instituted at the London Conference. Following January 1947, back and forth movements of representatives between the two countries multiplied, with the intention of facilitating working towards a common goal: notably, British Undersecretary of State for Dominion Affairs A. G. Bottomley's journey to Burma to attend the Panglong Conference and U Nu's journey to London to finalise the last questions around the imminent independence directly stemmed from the London Talks.

To settle military matters, a Defence Agreement was signed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1947 between Bo Let Ya, Thakin Nu's understudy, and John W. Freeman; this Defence Agreement appears in Annex of the U Nu-Attlee Treaty. First, an agreement allowing both the military and naval British forces to be reintroduced in Burma – should there be some regional emergency or some threat developing from China or India – was reached. The British also managed to cling to their right to fly over and land in the country (which also required the stationing of maintenance crews on Burmese soil) and to use Burma's airfields in order to

---

<sup>8</sup> See Clement Attlee and Thakin Nu, *Treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the provisional Government of Burma* (17 October 1947), Annex "Defence Agreement", art. 2 (29 August 1947).

<sup>9</sup> Clement Attlee and Thakin Nu, *Treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the provisional Government of Burma* (17 October 1947).

transport military reinforcements to the Far East. As a last concession, the Burmese made a pledge that no armed forces mission from outside the British Commonwealth would be allowed in the country. In exchange, Britain agreed to help the Burma Army financially and with some equipment and training facilities. Britain also accepted to provide a Naval, Military and Air Force mission to Burma, as well as instructional staff to contribute to the development and modernisation of the Burma Forces.<sup>10</sup> This Defence Agreement was to run for three years after coming into effect and could thereafter be cancelled by one of the two signatory countries on a twelve-month notice. It was eventually terminated in January 1954.

*c. External Affairs: obtaining international representation*

During the London Talks, the members of the Burma Delegation showed the British side that they attached much importance to the question of Burma's future external relations. The AFPFL leaders' main requirement was that Burma should be granted full control over its external affairs upon achieving self-government – a requirement to which the British soon answered favourably. The Burmese representatives also put forward their desire to obtain an international representation of their own. Therefore, they repeatedly asked His Majesty's Government to support Burma's upcoming application to obtain membership of the United Nations Organisation. However, the British were reluctant to make any pledge as to their support for such an enterprise: they deemed that, in light of its constitutional advance, it was too soon for Burma to apply to the UNO, and that making an early application might prevent Burma from accessing the Organisation for a long time. They underlined that, in any case, it was not in their power to decide whether Burma was considered as a "peace-loving state [...] able and willing to carry out [the] obligations [contained in the Charter]".<sup>11</sup> Once more, the Burmese League argued for the same rights obtained by India: during the meetings, the AFPFL reminded the British that before 1937, Burma had shared India's membership of the League of Nations and that it was only fair that it should obtain membership on becoming independent. Furthermore, the Burmese representatives wanted some Burmese ambassadors to be sent to other countries, such as the United States, as India had obtained this concession: "it was wrong that, because of her separation from India, Burma should be deprived altogether of independent diplomatic status".<sup>12</sup> In the end, the British agreed to appoint

---

<sup>10</sup> Clement Attlee and Thakin Nu, *Treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the provisional Government of Burma* (17 October 1947), Annex "Defence Agreement" (29 August 1947).

<sup>11</sup> *Charter of the United Nations*, Article 4 (26 June 1945).

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter2.shtml> (accessed 24 May 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Burma Conversations: B. (U.K.R.) (47) 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting (16 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 274.

Agents-Generals in certain countries: those Agents-Generals would hold diplomatic powers until diplomats were properly trained in Burma with the help of His Majesty's Government. The London Agreement further stated that a High Commissioner for Burma would be appointed in order to represent the Burmese Government in London. Finally, His Majesty's Government agreed to back Burma's membership to the UNO as soon as the colony had made sufficient progress towards independence to legitimise such an application. During the Interim period, it would inquire as to the different options Burma had to be represented at meetings of the United Nations.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The end of Britain's influence?

#### a. *The difficult negotiations around Burma's Commonwealth membership*

With all the other matters eventually settled, one last question worried the British Government: would the Burmese decide to remain within or leave the British Commonwealth of Nations? We have to keep in mind that, in his statement in Parliament on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1946, Prime Minister Clement Attlee had underlined Britain's intention "to hasten forward the time when Burma shall realise her independence, either within or without the Commonwealth".<sup>14</sup> If the British pushed for Burma to accept Dominion Status, they had made the pledge, even before the start of the London Conference, that they would not compel the new nation to recognise the authority of the King. During the London Conference, the Burmese remained rather silent on the subject; simultaneously, for tactical reasons, the British had agreed before the Talks that they would not show the Burma Delegation they wanted their colony to remain within the Commonwealth. On the contrary, they wanted to stress what Burma would gain should it decide to stay within Britain's sphere of influence: an association with the United Kingdom, in terms of defence or economic assistance, could prove useful for the ex-colony. Governor Rance also pointed out the country's weak position between two great powers, China and India: future diplomatic negotiations would be easier for Burma if they were carried out from within the association rather than on its own. Moreover, if Britain was respectful of its promises and indeed rushed through the process of granting Burma its independence, it was hoped that Burma would choose the "safe" solution and remain in the organisation: "a majority of ministers was convinced that concessions were vital to maintain local goodwill which was of crucial importance for Anglo-Burmese relations after

---

<sup>13</sup> Clement R. Attlee and Aung San, *Aung San-Attlee Agreement*, London, 27 January 1947, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister to the House of Commons (20 December 1946), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 210.

independence”.<sup>15</sup> Lord Pethick-Lawrence had also advised the government not to refer to “Dominion Status” in relation to Burma, but rather to use the phrase “full self-government within the British Commonwealth”.<sup>16</sup>

But the British had mixed feelings regarding the necessity of retaining Burma within the Commonwealth. Some policy-makers in the metropole, such as Lord Pethick-Lawrence, deemed that the advantages of retaining Burma were slight and that it was preferable to secure Britain’s strategic and economic interests through a treaty<sup>17</sup>. On the contrary, a few British officials reckoned that Britain did have interests in securing Burma’s future membership in the Commonwealth. At that time, the British Prime Minister thought that membership in the association of countries was the key to close cooperation between Britain and its ex-colonies and would enable Britain to retain some degree of guiding influence over the Dominions.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, prior to the London Talks, P. G. Nash, the Governor’s Secretary, had warned the British Government that Burma choosing to leave the Commonwealth would set an example among other South-East Asian colonies such as Malaya or Ceylon and would constitute a proof of Britain’s declining influence. Commenting on Burma’s Commonwealth membership, Governor-General of Malaya Malcolm MacDonald declared that Burma’s departure would be “regarded through Asia [...] as unchallengeable evidence of the weakening of British influence”.<sup>19</sup> The beneficiaries of Britain’s declining sphere of influence in South-East Asia would be the two communist powers, Russia and China: it was necessary for Britain to oppose another political model to that of these two countries – a model that its former colonies would prefer and embrace.

However, the Burmese appeared to be hostile to the term “Dominion Status” and most of Aung San’s followers had clearly stated their intention to cut loose from the metropole upon obtaining self-government: they knew that, should they decide to stay in the Commonwealth, they would have to recognise the King of England as having some kind of guiding influence over them – though the British had agreed to allow them to leave the organisation afterwards. As for Aung San, if he had expressed a desire to maintain close relations with Britain, he rejected this status which would leave Burma in its position of inferiority: Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Burma Sir Gilbert Laithwaite explained that

---

<sup>15</sup> Frank Heinlein, *op. cit.*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> “Burma and the Commonwealth”, Memorandum by Secretary of State for Burma (9 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 246-247.

<sup>17</sup> “Burma and the Commonwealth”, Memorandum by Secretary of State for Burma (9 January 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 246.

<sup>18</sup> See Telegram from Clement Attlee to Bogyoke Aung San (3 June 1947), in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 555.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 205.

the AFPFL knew that “dominion” came from “dominus” which meant “lord”, “and they felt it implied some degree of “overlordship” on the part of the United Kingdom Government”.<sup>20</sup> In any case, the members of the AFPFL could not afford to follow the advice of the British ministers as they risked being accused of betrayal by their fellow citizens: if they sided with the British, their supporters would be disappointed and might transfer their allegiance to the Communist Party.

Finally, it is important to take into account the Frontier People’s position in the debate: if Burma’s independence outside the Commonwealth seemed, to a certain extent, acceptable to the Burmese and the British, the ethnic minorities favoured Burma’s Commonwealth membership. Indeed, as underlined by Nicholas Tarling in *The Fall of Britain in South-East Asia*, the Frontier People feared that the end of the Commonwealth (and thus the “removal of the imperial arbiter”) might prejudice their security by putting them at the mercy of a Burmese-dominated Burma.<sup>21</sup> While the AFPFL hoped to reinforce the population’s nationalist aspirations by opposing Dominion Status, their position in fact increased the ethnic minorities’ distrust of the Burmese Government and even raised a sentiment of hostility among the Karens – sentiment which would culminate, after the country’s access to independence, in a series of rebellions. Nicholas Tarling concludes that “their reaction meant that, whether or not Burmans followed their leaders, independent Burma was far from stable”.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the discussions in London, the question of Burma’s Commonwealth membership was left unsettled.

*b. Burma becomes a sovereign independent Republic outside the Commonwealth*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1947, Aung San let Rance know that the AFPFL intended to pass, at the first session of the Constituent Assembly on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, a resolution stating that Burma would become a sovereign, independent Republic in early 1948. At the end of June 1947, U Nu went to London with the purpose of making a last attempt at discussing the status of the Commonwealth with British representatives: during this Goodwill Mission, he argued successively for U Tin Tut’s idea of a “Britannic Alliance”, that is to say a political association that would not compel the Dominions to pledge allegiance to the British Crown and his own idea of a Socialist Federation that would organise economic plans so that Burma could stay in the Commonwealth while being completely independent. The British adamantly

---

<sup>20</sup> Cabinet: India and Burma Committee, I.B. (47) 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, in Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*, Oxford University Press, 1993, 191.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

rejected both propositions: most of the policy-makers in Britain thought it was preferable to let Burma secede rather than to “destroy the legitimacy of the club”.<sup>23</sup> According to them, Burma was a small country and its strategic importance was nothing near India’s: it did not call for the creation of a special status or category of membership in the Commonwealth. A. F. Morley from the Burma Office declared: “even if new forms are not unthinkable in all cases, Burma is not sufficiently important to warrant them”.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, U Nu’s idea of a Socialist Federation was dismissed by Attlee as being a totalitarian conception.

In his article “Burma, Britain, and the Commonwealth”, Ashton argues that “the crucial decision had been made before the assassins stormed the Secretariat building on 19 July 1946. Without a significant climbdown by one side or the other there was never a serious possibility, during the negotiations preceding independence, that Burma could be kept within the Commonwealth”.<sup>25</sup> However, it seems that it was truly the assassination of Aung San and other members of the Burmese Government that definitively put an end to the discussions. Without Aung San trying to find a solution for Burma to stay within the Commonwealth and with U Nu clinging even closer to the objective of setting up an independent sovereign Republic in Burma, the subject was dropped altogether: no one now questioned the idea that Burma would leave the Commonwealth upon independence. In September 1947, the Burmese Constituent Assembly approved the first clause of the draft Constitution in which Burma was declared a sovereign independent Republic outside the Commonwealth. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1947, the U Nu-Attlee Treaty was signed at 10 Downing Street; the first Article of the Treaty read: “The Government of the United Kingdom recognises the Republic of the Union of Burma as a fully independence sovereign state”.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, when the transfer of power from Britain to Burma was completed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948, Burma, going completely against the general trend, became the first British colony to become independent outside of the Commonwealth and thus to leave altogether the British Empire since the United States in 1776. If in the end, the negotiations did not quite go the way the British hoped they would, Burma’s rejection of Dominion Status still played a crucial role in the decision-making process about the evolution of the Commonwealth. In the case of India, things turned out differently: India did become a member of the Commonwealth even though it chose to become a Republic. Under the Indian Independence Act of 1947, two

---

<sup>23</sup> Frank Heinlein, *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*, 190.

<sup>25</sup> S. R. Ashton, *art. cit.*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Clement Attlee and Thakin Nu, *Treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the provisional Government of Burma* (17 October 1947).

Dominions – India and Pakistan – were created out of British India: even if the Indian leaders aimed at forming a Republic, they accepted Dominion Status in order to speed up the transfer of power. This “dealt mortal blows”<sup>27</sup> to the Dominion Status as defined by the Statute of Westminster in 1931<sup>28</sup>: as India could not recognise the King as its head of state, Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook suggested that the British monarch could be recognised as the “Head of the association”;<sup>29</sup> this change was effective in July 1947. If this change of status was granted to India in 1949, Burma was not allowed the same privilege, as it did not share India’s primary position: “Burma, on the other hand, was of only marginal value”.<sup>30</sup> The Cabinet Committee feared that, if Burma obtained Dominion Status but left the Commonwealth afterwards, it “would bring Dominion status under contempt”.<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding, in retrospect, Clement Attlee said he regretted Burma’s decision to leave the Commonwealth, as Burma’s return into the Commonwealth, even after independence, might have helped Britain to enhance its prestige in the area.<sup>32</sup>

*c. Fragile foundations for the new State?*

Although the Burmese succeeded in achieving early independence and leaving the Empire altogether, they still had a lot to organise to prove to the British that they could genuinely run a whole nation on their own. After the signature of the Attlee-Nu Agreement in October 1947, reactions in Britain were mitigated. While Prime Minister Attlee expressed his regrets regarding Burma’s departure from the Commonwealth, he took pride in the fact that this whole episode constituted solid proof of the British Commonwealth being indeed a “free association of peoples, not a collection of subject nations”.<sup>33</sup> He also hoped that Burma and Britain would maintain enduring ties of friendship after Burma’s independence, as planned in the Treaty. In the name of the Labour Party, he recognised the awakening of the Far East as one of the greatest achievements of the period. But distrust could also be perceived among British parliamentarians, especially among those belonging to the Conservative Party. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1947, during the second reading of the U Nu-Attlee Treaty at the House of

---

<sup>27</sup> W. David McIntyre, “The Strange Death of Dominion Status”, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27:2, 1999, 193.

<sup>28</sup> The Statute of Westminster is an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom which established the equality of Britain and the self-governing “old Dominions” (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Ireland). These Dominions were united by a common allegiance to the British Crown.

<sup>29</sup> W. David McIntyre, *art. cit.*, 200.

<sup>30</sup> S. R. Ashton, *art. cit.*, 66.

<sup>31</sup> W. David McIntyre, *art. cit.* 199.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in John Cady, *op. cit.*, 569.

Commons, Winston Churchill, then the Leader of the Opposition, expressed doubts as to the future political stability of Burma, as a response to Attlee's optimistic views. According to him, the British troops stationed in Palestine after the Second World War could have been sufficient, had they been used in Burma, to help carry out the original White Paper plan. Following this program would have enabled a much more serene consideration of Burma's plans for the future as well as a closer analysis of its new Constitution. As the White Paper's primary purpose was to ensure that the country was politically and economically stable before its accession to self-government, it would have constituted a safeguard against the rise of Communist elements and would have let more time to the AFPFL leaders to reconsider the Commonwealth membership: Churchill demanded that Attlee accepted full responsibility for a decision affecting the entire future of the Dominion Status.

In Burma, reactions towards the U Nu-Attlee Treaty were also mitigated and the tensions between the different parties, especially between the AFPFL and the Communists, intensified as the actual transfer of sovereignty drew closer. According to John Cady in his analysis of the few months before Burma's independence, the Nu-Attlee Agreement "triggered the break which the embittered political contest between Socialists and Communists had made inevitable".<sup>34</sup> at the very end of 1947, there was a sudden increase in Communist political unrest within the country. But the most pressing matter was the very high level of distrust of the Burmese population towards the Government: while the Government threatened to collapse because of the very rapid withdrawal of non-Burmese (often British) officials and members of the administration, Premier U Nu needed to convince the Burmese people that both the influential political figures of the country and the highly educated section of the Burmese population were up for the job. He himself came off as a leader of doubtful qualifications: he still had to demonstrate his political skills as the head of a newly independent country.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 573.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to analyse the negotiations for Burmese independence which occurred during the London Conference of January 1947, in order to lay emphasis on the specificities of the transfer of power from Britain to Burma. By exploring the different issues that required consideration in the light of Burma's upcoming independence, this study showed that the London Talks did not represent mere diplomatic discussions but resulted in a genuine "capitulation of power" from the metropole, in the words of Hugh Tinker<sup>1</sup>: incapable of compromising with the AFPFL, the British made most of the important concessions and eventually let Burma escape from their sphere of influence. If the historiography on Burmese independence focuses more on specific problems Burma encountered in its bid for freedom, such as its difficult decision to leave the Commonwealth<sup>2</sup> or issues related to the Frontier Areas<sup>3</sup>, I chose to devote a large part of my dissertation to the London Conference. Indeed, the London Conference is often perceived as a simple procedural formality, barely mentioned in books on the topic, but, in the tradition of Tinker, I deemed it crucial to underline what it really represented, that is the expression of the Burmese awakening and organisation in a well-united front behind the AFPFL, as well as Britain's loss of control over its colony.

This analysis also highlighted that the specificity of the Burmese case lies in the extreme rapidity of its independence process: a genuine large-scale Burmese nationalist movement emerged in the course of 1946 and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948, Burma became independent. During the Conference, major concessions were made by the British in an incredibly short period of time and regular proceedings were left aside. First, in order to lay the foundations of the soon-to-be sovereign nation, the representatives of the two countries tried to find common ground on a timetable for decolonisation. Abiding by the AFPFL's motto "Independence within a year" meant taking major decisions in a rush for the British and working actively and efficiently for the Burmese. In any case, the internal situation of Burma at the time called for an acceleration of the progress towards self-government: both the British and the Burmese, during the Talks, were pressured by the increasing unrest among the

---

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Tinker, *art. cit.*, 479.

<sup>2</sup> See S. R. Ashton, *art. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> See Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.* and Nicholas Tarling, *op. cit.*

Burmese population, at first encouraged by the AFPFL but then exploited by the Communists trying to benefit from the absence of the main Burmese leaders. As a consequence, in about two weeks, it was decided that the Governor's Executive Council would be turned into an Interim Government, free of the participation of foreign officials: this measure corresponded to the first step towards the transfer of power, and it was passed without the prior organisation of elections. To keep speeding up the process, it was also concluded that elections would be organised for a Constituent Assembly, and not for a Legislative Assembly as His Majesty's Government had first wished: electing a Constituent Assembly straightaway meant, once again, that a step in the normal proceedings had been suppressed and that a Constitution could be drafted by the end of 1947.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the London Conference and, more generally speaking, the Burmese struggle for independence, was essentially a matter of individuals. Two figures in particular led the negotiations while attempting at gathering support from their respective side and taming the opposition: Burmese President of the Governor's Executive Council Aung San and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee. Symbolically, Clement Attlee and Aung San are remembered as the two main agents of Burmese independence: they gave their name to the Aung San-Attlee Agreement which contained all of the main points necessary for the preparation of the final transfer of power. On the British side, Clement Attlee, though depicted as lacking charisma and having risen up to the head of the Labour Party "by default" by Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds,<sup>4</sup> is given credit for holding "a fissiparous party" together and for running the Cabinet with firmness.<sup>5</sup> His ability, as a Prime Minister, to choose his advisers with caution and to delegate work to a system of committees proved very efficient, especially in his handling of the situation in South Asia. If, at first, Attlee was slow to respond to the Burmese requests regarding their achievement of self-government and to acknowledge that Burma deserved the same consideration as its Indian neighbour, he manoeuvred cautiously both *vis-à-vis* the British opposition and the Burmese leaders. His decision to invite a Burmese Delegation for discussions in London (on the initiative of Governor Rance and the Burma Office) enabled Britain to avoid a major crisis within its colony. Widely criticised by members of the Conservative Party – during the whole of the London Talks, he had to resist the attacks of Churchill on his foreign policy – it seems however that he chose the only acceptable solution

---

<sup>4</sup> See Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> P. Weiler, "Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, Attlee: A Life in Politics", *The Journal of Modern History*, 84:1, 2012, 187.

at the time: he made the necessary concessions and let Burma go before rebellions broke out, which enabled Britain to maintain rather friendly relations with its former colony. Kenneth O. Morgan, in *Labour People*, writes: “it was Attlee who dictated the vital parallel decision to speed up independence for Burma”.<sup>6</sup> If Burma’s independence outside the Commonwealth constituted a milestone in the declining influence of the British Empire, Morgan suggests that Clement Attlee emerged from the decolonisation of South Asian countries such as India, Burma or Ceylon as “a liberator, the leader of his government and the architect of the new Commonwealth”,<sup>7</sup> as he managed to envisage British withdrawal from this area in the light of the long-term relationship between Britain and its former Asian colonies. On the Burmese side, the political figure which emerged from the struggle for independence was Aung San, the Bogyoke. Often described as discrete but charismatic when delivering a speech, Aung San was unquestionably the most influential and well-known Burmese political leader: he was the subject of numerous books published over the past two decades.<sup>8</sup> Aung San is remembered for his orchestration of the negotiations with the British while controlling the freedom struggle inside Burma and paying attention to the Frontier Peoples’ claims, with the aim of making his dream of a Union of Burma a reality. His tragic death in July 1947 raised him to the rank of hero in the peoples’ memories. In *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*, Josef Silverstein underlines that “although Aung San has been dead since 1947, his name and influence still remain extremely important in contemporary Burma”.<sup>9</sup> Beyond his image as the leader of independence or the Father of the Nation, Aung San came to embody the ideas of resistance and struggle: his picture became the symbol of the struggle against the military junta regime from 1988 on – a struggle led by his famous daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi.

This dissertation then underlined that, though taken in a rush, the decisions around the decolonisation of Burma had a major impact on Britain’s decision-making regarding its foreign policy. Burma’s nationalist movements set an example for other colonies in South-East Asia such as Ceylon which obtained independence exactly a month after Burma, and determined the imperial power’s attitude towards those other colonies. The Burmese Government’s decision to become a Republic and leave the Commonwealth for good disappointed the British and came as a threat for the whole imperial structure. On this issue,

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour People: Leaders and Lieutenants, Hardie to Kinnock*, Oxford University Press, 1987, 141.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> See Angelene Naw, *op. cit.* and Josef Silverstein (ed.), *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, 135.

neither of the two sides was willing to make concessions: the AFPFL rejected Dominion status as relegating the Burmese to their former position of inferiority and subordination while the British could not afford to modify the entire structure of the association in a way that would satisfy the Burmese leaders for a colony that was only secondary. The fact that Burma did not present the same economic or strategic advantages as other British colonies in Asia also played a role in its early release from the imperial grip – although Britain was not prepared to let go of its colony without securing its military interests in the U Nu-Attlee Defence Treaty. It seemed important, in the course of this dissertation, to draw comparisons between India and Burma, at different stages of their progress towards independence, as the relationship between these two neighbours was central to the geopolitical interrogations at stake in the region. The two colonies achieved the various necessary steps to become self-governing countries more or less at the same time: negotiations for independence in India influenced the concessions the British Government made for Burma, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the AFPFL leaders had to show great determination to make their pledges heard by the British Government, and to try and be considered as equals to the Indians, both held as models and anti-models in this context of decolonisation in South Asia. While the Burmese struggled to obtain the same rights as their neighbours, they also strove to follow their own path and avoid making the same mistakes as India: by laying emphasis on what distinguished Burma from India, this analysis tried to bring legitimacy to the idea of a “Burmese model”.

As opposed to India which was divided between two major political parties at the time – the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League – the Burmese struggle for independence was led by one main party, the Burmese Anti-Fascist League, a powerful nationalist movement which commanded almost unanimous support from the population and prevented other genuinely influential political parties from emerging. Nevertheless, the London Conference revealed that tensions existed within the Burmese side and that the sense of unity that Aung San and his party had struggled to create might in fact be fragile. Upon its return to Rangoon, the Burma Delegation found it difficult to obtain unanimous approval of the London Agreement: members of the Communist Party (along with some P.V.O guerrillas) who deemed that there had been too few concessions by the British, launched a series of rebellions throughout the country in February 1947. Moreover, the only two representatives sent to London in January 1947 who did not belong to the AFPFL, Ba Sein and U Saw, refused to sign the London Agreement at the very last minute: with this gesture, they asserted themselves as rivals of the AFPFL-led Executive Council. They decided to boycott the Constituent Assembly elections and started advocating more violent methods to drive the

British out of the country, as a way of questioning what the AFPFL had managed to peacefully secure in London. Finally, major threats to the stability of the country came from another section of the population: the Frontier Peoples, and especially the Karens, dissatisfied with certain decisions taken in their absence during the Talks, refused to consider themselves bound by the London Agreement. While the Panglong Conference of February 1947 helped the AFPFL regain the trust of certain ethnic minorities – the Chin, Kachin and Shan people accepted to assist the Burmese Government in its progress towards independence, the leaders of the well-organised Karen National Union declared that they did not wish to maintain any constitutional relations with Ministerial Burma. The Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry revealed that the Karen National Organisation (KNO) was in favour of establishing a separate British Karen colony: “the Karens [...] firmly claim that their right of self-determination be recognized by the concession of a separate Colony for the Karens. If the British fail to honor this great responsibility of theirs, the Karens should not be blamed if they think of other alternatives to achieve their legitimate objectives”.<sup>10</sup> Despite the Karen Youth Organisation’s more conciliatory position, the KNO decided to boycott the elections of the Constituent Assembly: “the hearings of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry and the outcome of the elections did little to quiet Karen misgivings concerning their future safety and welfare under Burman rule”.<sup>11</sup> In the end, the AFPFL leaders’ multiplied attempts at assuaging the Karens’ hostile sentiments could not prevent the situation from reaching a deadlock: in 1949, a major Karen revolt broke out and threatened to wreck the Government – while other rebellious movements such as Communist factions or army mutineers tried to take advantage of the situation to increase their influence over central Burma. The apparition or assertion of those different dissenting movements during the period under study led us to question the idea of a Union of Burma: while Aung San dreamt of bringing together Plains and Hills Burma in a united nation, it seems that the different outbursts of violence throughout the country in the years that followed the London Conference pointed at the fragility of the foundations of the Burmese State and the illusory nature of the Union.

This dissertation thus calls for further research on this central idea of a Union of Burma: while in Burma the transfer of power occurred rather peacefully, stability did not last long after independence. Within 15 years, the country which had succeeded in opposing its own version of democracy to both the Indian and the British models and had struggled to be accepted on the international stage was brutally turned into an enclosed space, under the

---

<sup>10</sup> FACE Report, part II, pp. 121-134, 175-178. Quoted in John Cady, *op. cit.*, 550.

<sup>11</sup> John Cady, *op. cit.*, 554.

authoritarian regime of Ne Win's military junta. If Burma managed to achieve independence very early compared to other British colonies in Asia, it is in fact one of the last ones to have achieved democracy: where did it go wrong? The important flow of reforms to democratise the country has just been launched and Burma only started to open to the rest of the world a couple of years ago. This study also lays the ground for further work on the enduring Frontier Areas problem which shattered the unity of the country: the AFPFL leaders failed to pay sufficient attention to the Karens' demands and could not prevent the numerous rebellions which closely followed the country's independence. Nowadays, the ethnic conflicts within Burma (or Myanmar since October 2010) still represent the "main obstacle" to the country's "continued progress".<sup>12</sup>

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948, that is to say hardly a year after the London Conference, Burma became independent: U Nu continued as Prime Minister while Sao Shwe Thaik became the first President of the new State. On Independence Day, U Nu declared: "we lost our independence without losing our self-respect; we clung to our culture and our traditions and these we now hold to cherish and to develop. [...] We part without rancour and in friendship from the Great British nation which held us in fee",<sup>13</sup> suggesting that the two countries would maintain diplomatic ties in the future. However, while the British quickly departed from the newly independent State, a series of armed uprisings broke out throughout the country, as already mentioned, from various dissident groups who were reluctant to accept the authority of the new regime: within a year of its formation, Premier Nu's Government was almost destroyed. On top of it all, the fragile administrative institutions of the State needed consolidating and it seemed necessary to train new Burmese officials in order to fill in the positions that had previously been occupied by Britons. Burma also faced problems of economic disintegration, as its industries had not recovered their pre-war status: to revive its economy, the country needed to open more widely to foreign investments. By the spring of 1950, the political crisis was eventually brought under control: "U Nu's survival and assertive performance as Burma's leader"<sup>14</sup> and his skills in maintaining the civil administration alive almost singlehandedly were revealed during this period of unrest, as he refused to surrender to military factions the sovereign power he had been given by the people.

---

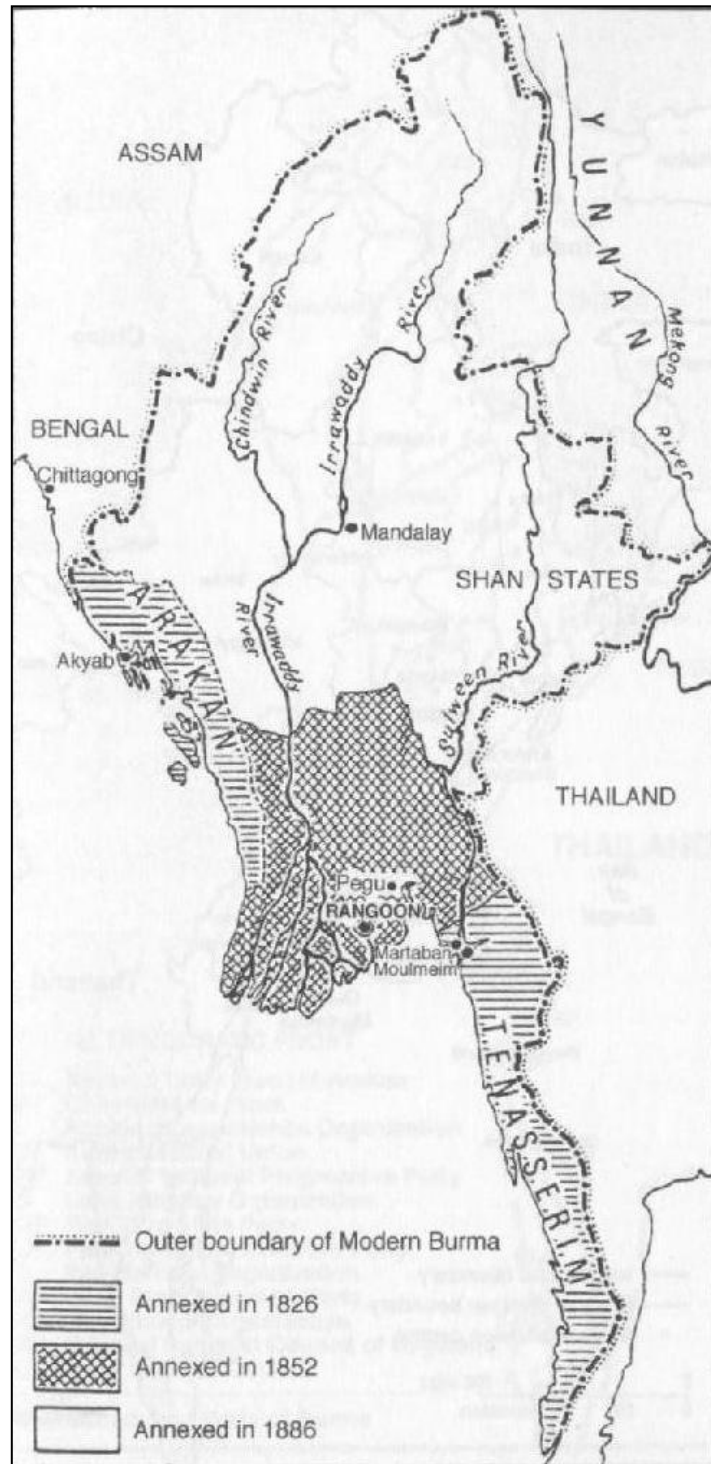
<sup>12</sup> See "Special Report on Myanmar", *The Economist*, May 2013, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in John Cady, *op. cit.*, 572.

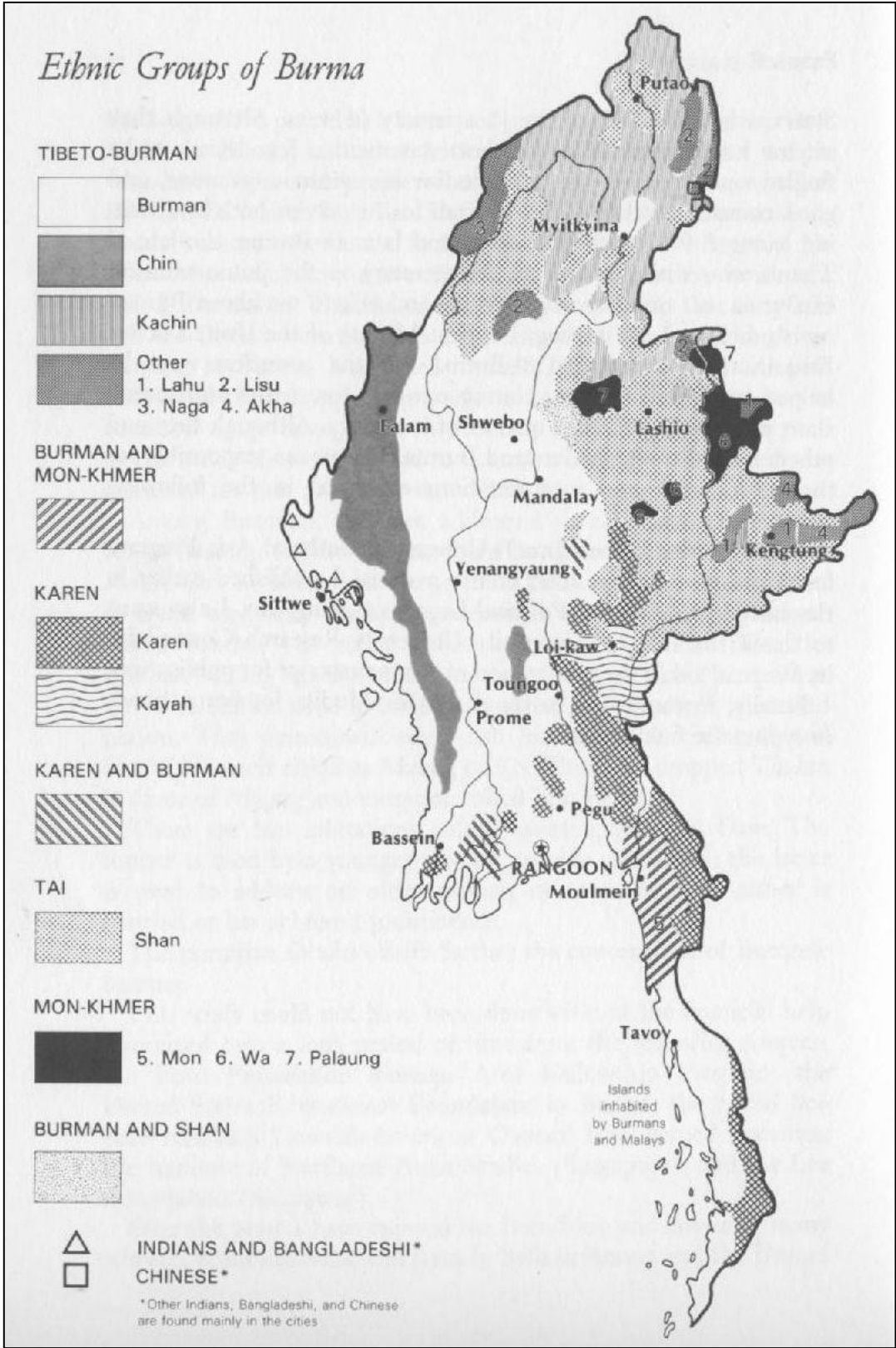
<sup>14</sup> Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma*, Stanford University Press, 1969, 99.

# APPENDICES

## 1. MAPS



1. British conquest of Burma. Source: Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence*, London, Pluto Press, 2001, xvii.



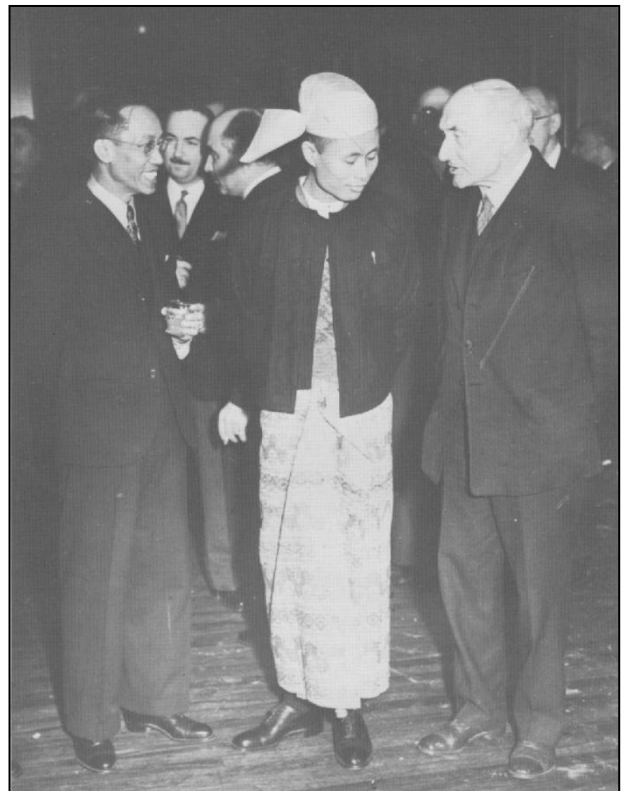
2. The different ethnic groups of Burma.  
 Source: Josef Silverstein, *op. cit.*, xii.

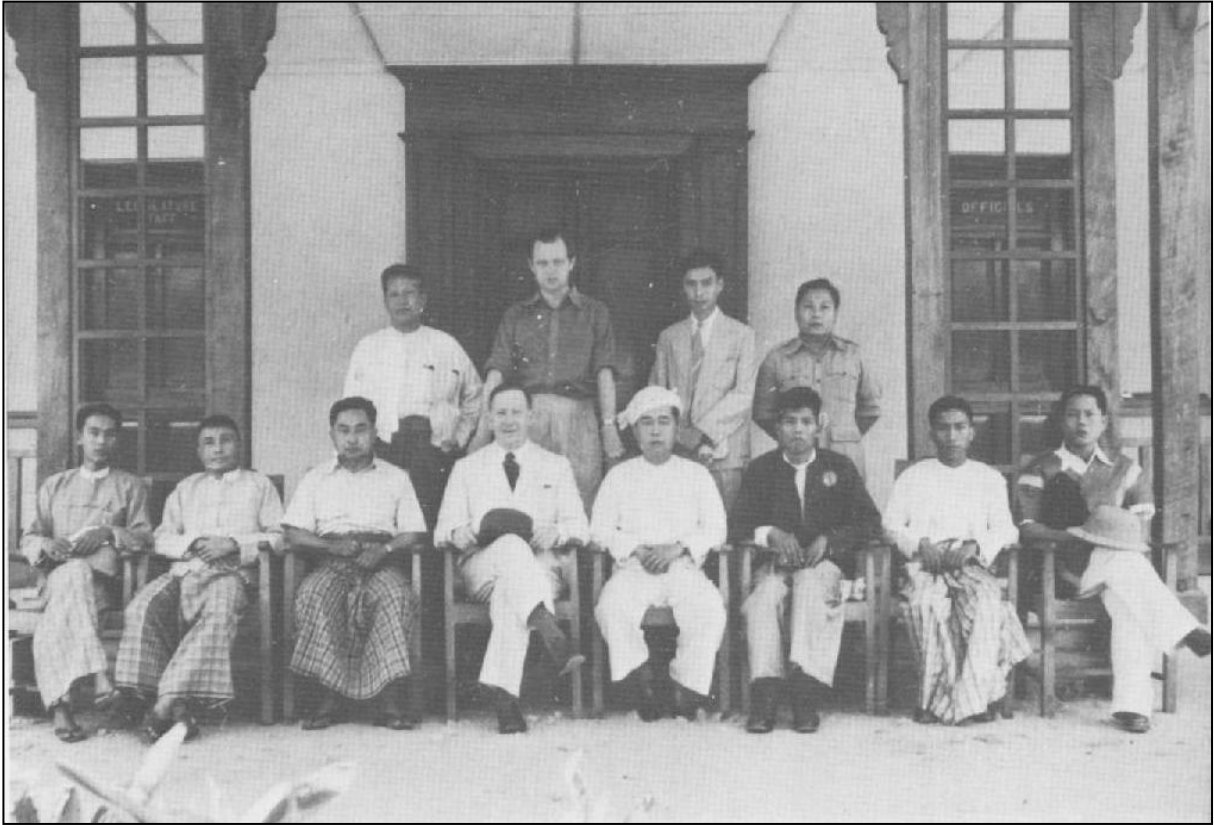
## 2. PHOTOGRAPHS



1. Sir Hubert Rance with Aung San and other new members of the Executive Council (October 1946). *From left to right: Thakin Ba Sein, Thakin Mya, Aung San, Aung Zan Wai, Rance, Thakin Thein Pe, Ba Pe, Tin Tut.*  
Source: Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, facing p. 75.

2. Aung San at a reception for the Burmese Delegation in London (January 1947). Standing between Thakin Mya and Lord Pethick-Lawrence. Source: Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, frontispiece.





3. Members of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry. Source: Hugh Tinker, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, facing p. 461.



4. Prime Minister Clement Attlee (third from the left) and Aung San (fourth from the left) in front of 10 Downing Street (January 1947). Source: *The National*, November 2011.

<http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/asia-pacific/no-reason-to-celebrate-as-myanmar-marks-anniversary> (accessed 24 May 2013).



5. Governor Rance bidding farewell to Premier Nu on Independence Day (4<sup>th</sup> of January 1948).  
Source: Shelby Tucker, *op. cit.*, 90.

6. Governor Rance and President Sao Shwe Thaik on Independence Day.  
Source: *The Ambassadors*, 11:23, 2008.  
<<http://ambassadors.net/archives/issue23/photos.htm>>  
(accessed 24 May 2013).



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### I. Archives

Attlee, Clement R. and Aung San. *Aung San-Attlee Agreement*. London: 27 January 1947  
<<http://burmastar1010.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/44172419-aungsan-atlee-agreement.pdf>>.

Attlee, Clement R. and Thakin Nu. *Treaty between the Government of the United Kingdom and the provisional Government of Burma*. London: 17 October 1947. Annex "Defence Agreement". Rangoon: 29 August 1947  
<<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/reg.burma/archives/199507/msg00015.html>>.

England. 'Conclusions reached in the Conversations between HMG and the Delegation from the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma', India Office Library P/V 2249, British Library, Asia, Pacific & Africa. Presented by the Prime Minister to Parliament.

Great Britain, Burma Office, Information Department. 'Burma – Policy of HMG, Statements of Policy and Official Speeches' 1945, P/V 2250, British Library, Asia, Pacific & Africa.

*Government of Burma Act, 1935*  
<[http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/1935\\_Constitution%28en%29.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/1935_Constitution%28en%29.pdf)>.

Rees-Williams, D. R. and Thakin Nu, Sao Sam Htun, Tin Tut, Hsinwa Nawng, Khin Maung Gale, Vum Ko Hau, Myint Thein, Saw Sankey. *Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry*. Maymyo: 24 April 1947  
<<http://www.shanland.org/oldversion/index-3143.htm>>.

### II. Edited archives

Silverstein, Josef (ed.). *The Political Legacy of Aung San*. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993.

Tinker, Hugh (ed.). *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-48: Documents from Official and Private Sources*. Vol. 1, 'From military occupation to civil government, 1 January 1944 to 31 August 1946'. London: HMSO, 1983.

Tinker, Hugh (ed.). *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-48: Documents from Official and Private Sources*. Vol. 2, 'From general strike to independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948'. London: HMSO, 1984.

### III. Memoirs

Maw, Ba. *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a Revolution, 1939-1946*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

Ziegler, Philip (ed.). *Personal diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943-1946*. London: Collins, 1988.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

### I. On Burma

Ashton, S.R. 'Burma, Britain, and the Commonwealth, 1946-56', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*. 29:1, 2001, pp. 65-91.

Butwell, Richard. *U Nu of Burma*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969.

Cady, John F. *A History of modern Burma*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1958.

Collis, Maurice. *Last and First in Burma (1941-1948)*. London: Faber and Faber, 1956.

Dautremer, Joseph. *La Birmanie: une colonie modèle sous le régime britannique*. Paris: E. Guilmoto, 1912.

Dennis, Peter. *Troubled Days of Peace, Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945-46*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.

Driberg, Tom. *Ruling Passions*. London: Quartet Books, 1978.

Englehart, Neil. 'Liberal Leviathan or Imperial Outpost? J. S. Furnivall on Colonial Rule in Burma', *Modern Asian Studies*. 45, 2001, pp. 759-790.

Furnivall, John Sydenham. *The Governance of Modern Burma*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1960.

Htin Aung, Maung. *The Stricken Peacock; Anglo-Burmese Relations, 1752-1948*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965.

Maung Maung, U (ed.). *Aung San of Burma*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff for Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1962.

Maung Maung, U. *Burma in the Family of Nations*. Amsterdam, Djambatan, 1957.

Naw, Angelene. *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2011.

Selth, Andrew. 'Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-45', in James Le Sueur (ed.), *The Decolonisation Reader*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Silverstein, Josef. *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980.

Tarling, Nicholas. *The Fourth Anglo-Burmese War: Britain and the Independence of Burma*. Gaya: Centre for South East Asian Studies, 1987.

Thant, Myint-U. *The Making of modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Tucker, Shelby. *Burma, The Curse of Independence*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

When, Francis. *Tom Driberg: his life and indiscretions*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1990.

## II. On Great Britain and decolonisation

Goldsworthy, David. *Colonial Issues in British Politics, 1945-1961: from "colonial development" to "wind of change"*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Heinlein, Frank. *British Government Policy and Decolonisation, 1945-1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind*. London: Frank Cass, 2002.

Howe, Stephen. *Anticolonialism in British Politics: the Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1964*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

McIntyre, W. David. "The Strange Death of Dominion Status", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27:2, 1991, pp. 193-212.

McIntyre, W. David. "'A Formula May Have To Be Found': Ireland, India, and the Headship of the Commonwealth", *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 91:365, 2002, pp. 391-413.

McMahon, Deirdre. "A Larger and Noisier Southern Ireland: Ireland and the Evolution of Dominion status in India, Burma and the Commonwealth, 1942-9" in Michael Kennedy and

Joseph Morrison Skelly (eds.), *Irish Foreign Policy, 1919-66: from independence to internationalism*. Dublin: Four Courts, 2000.

Owen, Nicholas. *The British Left and India, Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885-1947*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Smith, R. B. and A. J. Stockwell (eds.). *British Policy and the Transfer of Power in Asia, Documentary Perspectives*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987.

Tarling, Nicholas. *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Tinker, Hugh. *Separate and Unequal, India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth 1920-1950*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1976.

### III. On the influence of strategic issues

Donnison, F. S. V. *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-1946*. London: H.M.S.O, 1956.

Hack, Karl. 'South East Asia and British Strategy, 1944-51', Aldrich, Richard (ed), *British Intelligence Strategy and the Cold War, 1945-1951*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Ovendale, Ritchie (ed.). *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments, 1945-1951*. London: Leicester University Press, 1984.

Stockwell, Anthony J. 'Britain's Imperial Strategy and Decolonisation in South East Asia, 1947-57', in Bassett, D.K., King, V.T. (eds.), *Britain and South East Asia*. Hull: University of Hull, Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 1986.

Tarling, Nicholas. *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

### IV. On British society

Clarke, Peter. *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004.

Morgan, Kenneth O. *Labour People: Leaders and Lieutenants, Hardie to Kinnock*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Pugh, Martin. *State and Society: a Social and Political History of Britain since 1870*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London: Hodder Education, 2008.

Reynolds, David. *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 1991.

Thomas-Symonds, Nicklaus. *Attlee: A Life in Politics*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2010.