

Myanmar: State Racism Meets Neoliberalism

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In Burma, state racism isn't just perpetrated by its military, but liberals like Aung San Suu Kyi.

Burma — officially known as Myanmar — celebrated the seventieth anniversary of its independence at a moment when the failures of its incomplete nation-building project have become increasingly evident.

Last year saw the almost complete [ethnic cleansing](#) of the Muslim [Rohingya](#) minority in the northwestern state of Arakan. More than 600,000 Muslims fled to overstretched refugee camps in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, wars between the *Tatmadaw*, as the Burmese Army is known, and several ethno-nationalist armed groups [continued to rage](#).

The government's civilian wing, led by [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and her National League for Democracy (NLD), seems unable to offer a vision for the country that differs from the "discipline-flourishing democracy" envisioned by the military junta that ruled Burma for five decades.

The generals who once controlled the nation have accomplished an astonishing feat. Most of the population opposed them, but now a large section of the Buddhist Bamar population (the country's majority group) and the Buddhist Rakhine population (the majority in Arakan) support — [even cheer](#) — the military's "clearance operations" against the Rohingya. Meanwhile, the civilian government either [covers up or flatly denies](#) the atrocities while trying [to move toward peace](#) with other armed ethnic groups. Suu Kyi doesn't control the military, but her government appears too timid to make meaningful change anyway.

The elected government operates under a *Tatmadaw*-drafted constitution that grants the military wide powers and complete autonomy from civilian oversight. But these institutional constraints don't fully explain the NLD's shortcomings. Indeed, the party seems to share much of its ideology [with the military junta](#) it once resisted.

The National Question

If Burma has a hegemonic ideology, it's the concept of "national races" (*taingyintha*) and its corollary, which holds that only members of those groups belong in the country. This set of beliefs is founded on an understanding of race that separates ethnic communities into discrete groups, attached to a particular territory and endowed with more-or-less unalterable cultural and often psychological traits.

No single legal text fully captures [the taingyintha ideology](#), but it finds its most pristine expression in the 1982 Citizenship Law, which created three layers of citizenship and gave full rights only to those ethnic groups that "settled [in Burma] ... from a period anterior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D." The cutoff date is significant, as it predates the first Anglo-Burmese War, in which the British conquered Arakan and the southern province of Tenasserim, by just one year.

The government ostensibly enacted the new citizenship rules to protect the national races from encroachment by foreigners, particularly Chinese and Indians. Partly the result of popular consultation, the law seems to enjoy as wide support now as it did when first written.

In 1991, the government issued the current list of national races, which has met with some controversy ever since: it [arbitrarily excluded](#) the Rohingya, subsumed some groups under others with which they have little or no linguistic relation, as is the case of many Shan “subgroups,” and subdivided others, like the Chin and the Kachin, into several smaller categories that some ethno-nationalist politicians see as an attempt to divide and rule the population. Despite these objections, few have contested the existence of such a list.

Different groups approach the *taingyintha* ideology in different ways. For Bamar ethno-nationalists, it founds a civilizational hierarchy that puts them at its apex, while Kachin ethno-nationalists see themselves as belonging to Kachinland first and Burma second.

Indeed, nationalist narratives vary widely among different groups. As anthropologist Laur Kiik [has shown](#), Kachin nationalism looks forward to freeing its members from the constraints imposed by the Burmese central state. Rakhine nationalism, in contrast, hinges on recovering the glories of a largely imagined past as an independent and relatively powerful kingdom. This [retrotopian](#) project has already started taking advantage of the Rohingya ethnic cleansing by settling poor farmers in the previously Muslim-majority areas of Northern Arakan. Their [stated purpose](#) is reestablishing the “demographic balance” that purportedly existed in the region before World War II.

While the *taingyintha* ideology failed to provide a sense of common nationhood to Burma’s ethnic groups, it does serve as a common idiom that determines who can make political claims. According to the government, the military, and most Burmese, the Rohingya are Bengalis, illegal immigrants from what is now Bangladesh trying to invade and Islamize Arakan. Thus, they have no right to participate in Burmese politics — either in parliament or in the battlefield.

Indeed, when compared to armed organizations like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) or the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), the Arkan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), [the newly established Rohingya insurgent group](#) has met with [particularly extreme](#) repression, even by the *Tatmadaw*’s brutal standards. While the KIA and the SSA-South are technically illegal, and the police can arrest anyone suspected of having links to them, the state nevertheless sees them as valid participants in peace negotiations. But ARSA is beyond the pale. It’s clear that the Rohingya are not a population to be subdued, like the Kachin, but a population to expel.

Burma’s fault lines are fundamentally ethnic and communal; class is conspicuously absent. This is not to say that a crony-capitalist nation with gross inequalities, in which a tiny elite controls most of the wealth and where exploitation and land grabbing are endemic, does not have sharp class differences, but rather that class does not function as a political category.

This came to be thanks to a long process in which ethnicity has taken center stage at the expense of almost every other political issue. The transition to democracy only exacerbated the situation, playing out as an alliance between two elite groups — the military and the intelligentsia, a paradoxically depoliticized pro-democracy grouping that orbits around Suu Kyi’s NLD — that has provided few benefits for ordinary Burmese.

Colonial Legacies

[British domination](#) left a poisonous legacy from which Burma has yet to recover. The making of the modern state depended on two forces — one centripetal and the other centrifugal. On the one hand,

the British put territories that had never been unified under a single political authority; even though they divided Burma between a central administrative unit, “Burma proper,” under direct rule, and the “administered Burma,” under indirect rule leaving to the elites of the so-called hill tribes the management of their internal affairs. On the other hand, [colonial rule](#) deepened interethnic divisions and solidified identities that had historically been [more diffuse and fluid](#).

Using censuses and other modern state technologies, the British fit the complex array of ethno-linguistic groups into water-tight boxes, often introducing policies that discouraged interaction between them. For example, because the colonial rulers didn’t trust the Bamar majority, they recruited Kachin, Chin, and Karen — the supposedly martial races — into the armed forces. As a result, the country’s unfinished political unification was accompanied by the atomization and disaggregation of its constituent parts.

Further, until 1937, the British ruled Burma as a province of India, encouraging millions of Indians to immigrate, which turned Rangoon into an Indian-majority city by the thirties. The colonial elite favored Indians as administrators, policemen, and doctors. They also had disproportionate power in finance. As a result, Burmese nationalists bitterly resented the Indian population, much of it Muslim, and saw them as stooges of the empire. By the twentieth century, according to colonial administrator and scholar J. S. Furnivall, Burma had become a “plural society,” in which “there was a racial division of labor” and “all the various peoples met in the market place, but they lived apart and continually tended to fall apart.”

Muslims also entered Arakan from the Chittagong province in Bengal, but this migration had a different character. These mostly seasonal laborers joined an already sizable Muslim population that had arrived in precolonial times. Further, they came from a geographical and cultural space largely continuous with Arakan, which has historically served as a border area between the Burmese and the Bengali worlds, in which they mixed for centuries. The claims by Rakhine and Burmese nationalists that the Arakan Muslim population arrived with the British — or even later — is simply untenable.

The tensions simmering between all these groups exploded with Japanese invasion during World War II. Most of the Indian population fled in a [gruesome exodus](#) that cost tens of thousands their lives. Burmese nationalists, led by Aung San, Suu Kyi’s father, initially sided with the Japanese before changing sides at the end of the war. Ethnic minorities, including the Karen, the Kachin, and the Chin, fought on the British side. At times, Aung San’s army clashed directly with those groups. The Rakhine majority in Arakan supported Aung San and the Japanese, while the retreating British armed some Muslims in hopes of slowing the much-feared Japanese advance into India. Arakan soon descended into a brutal civil war that pitted Muslims against Buddhists. At the end, the north was ethnically cleansed of Buddhists as much as the south was cleansed of Muslims.

When Burma gained independence in 1948, it was devastated by war, with a very weak state and militias freely roaming the countryside. In the hectic two years after the end of the war, Aung San served as the main interlocutor with the British. To this day, the Bamar majority sees him as the architect and hero of independence, despite the fact that he didn’t live to see a fully independent Burma: a political rival assassinated him, along with his entire cabinet, a few months before independence.

Aung San

It’s difficult to pin down the ideology of Aung San and his followers. He was not an intellectual but a man of action single-mindedly pursuing independence. “[Burma’s Challenge](#),” a booklet containing several speeches given after the expulsion of the Japanese and published in 1946, perhaps best

captures his vision.

He aimed to build a “true democracy,” free from the “dictatorship of the capitalist class.” Distancing himself from a classic model of liberal democracy, he defended socialism and communism because “they only seek the wider connotation of democracy.” His social model called for nationalizing crucial industries and means of production at some point, though he admitted that the economic conditions in Burma made it impossible to establish socialism.

On the question of race and ethnicity, he drew mostly on Stalin’s [Marxism and the National Question](#). Applying this model, he claimed somewhat arbitrarily that only the Shan constituted a national minority. But in his version of nationalism, race, language, and religion — which he hoped to keep separate from politics — didn’t constitute a nation. Only the “historic necessity of having to lead a common life” did. He was willing to accept the Indians, Chinese, and Anglo-Burmese living in Burma at the time as citizens with full rights.

[The British](#) wouldn’t grant independence unless the ethnic minorities agreed. Aung San rushed this difficult task as much as he could, creating the Panglong Agreement, signed in Shan State in February 1947. [Despite its obvious weaknesses](#), the deal has acquired an almost mythical status as the foundational document of modern Burma.

Rather than a definitive agreement, the text reads like a declaration of intentions. Only the Kachin, the Shan, the Chin, and the Bamar actually signed it. The Karen attended as observers, and Aung San persuaded the Rakhine to wait to discuss their sovereignty until after independence. Moreover, he preferred to deal with the leaders the British had designated, rather than the younger, more progressive representatives, with whom negotiations would have taken more time. In any case, the agreement accepted, “in principle ... full autonomy in internal administration for the frontier areas.” The constitution, adopted that same year, granted different degrees of autonomy to the frontier areas and gave the Shan and Karenni states the right of secession.

The Burmese Way to Socialism

Many Burmese regard Aung San’s assassination as the moment when everything went wrong. But, even if he had lived, the country was thrown into independence in extremely difficult circumstances.

Several insurgencies quickly exploded, and the weak state wasn’t equipped to control its territory. [The Communist Party](#) went underground and declared war against the government; the Karen also rebelled and almost took over Rangoon itself. In Arakan, which also had an active Communist presence, a *mujahed* rebellion arose, demanding to join East Pakistan. To make things worse, the Chinese Kuomintang, having lost to Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army, established bases in Shan State near the Chinese border with the help of American intelligence.

With the Communists resorting to armed struggle, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) dominated politics. But factional divisions split the party by 1958. Aung San’s promises to minorities were left largely unfulfilled, pushing even more groups to armed uprising: the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was established in 1961, after thirteen years of frustrating peaceful struggle to win autonomy for its people. That same year, the government defeated the *mujahed* rebellion and recognized the Rohingya as a national group.

U Nu and General Ne Win were the period’s key figures. A firm believer in the nonalignment movement, U Nu supported a mixed economy and was also a pious Buddhist who made his faith the [state religion](#) in 1961, alienating the Christian and Muslim minorities. When he reversed course, promising to amend the constitution to assure the people that their religions would be protected,

radical Buddhist monks torched mosques in Rangoon.

In 1962, Ne Win staged a coup d'état against U Nu's government. The putsch was relatively bloodless compared to others in the region. With a population tired of the democratic era's instability and factional disputes, Ne Win's power grab elicited little opposition in the central Burmese cities. Only students, an important political force since the thirties, rebelled.

Ne Win launched a brutal crackdown, killing scores of protesters. He demolished the historic Rangoon University Students Union (RUSU), which had served as the center of student political activity for decades. Throughout his dictatorship, Ne Win maintained tight control on the universities, stunting one of Burma's longest-standing political focal points.

The [secular Ne Win](#) immediately reversed the decision that made Buddhism the state religion. He also strove to put the Buddhist monastic community under government control. But he was a Bamar supremacist, and he adopted an almost purely military approach in the war against the ethno-nationalist armed groups.

Ne Win closed down the country in hopes of isolating it from the Cold War upheavals running through Southeast Asia. He succeeded, but stalled the country's development in the process. He adopted what he called "the Burmese way to socialism," which consisted of a centralized, autarkic economy and one-party rule.

When his government embarked on a nationalization process, it wasn't aiming to redistribute wealth among the poor but to deprive so-called foreigners of their share of the economy. Rather than a Burmese way to socialism, his system was a socialist way to Burmese-ness, in which the economic system helped reach a patriotic end. As a result of the nationalization, hundreds of thousands of Burmese of Indian origin were pushed to the subcontinent.

The "Dragon King" operation launched in 1978 in Arakan was part of this plan. Ostensibly set up to screen illegal immigrants coming in from [Bangladesh](#), the project pushed up to 250,000 Rohingya into the neighboring country. Burma accepted many back after a bilateral repatriation agreement — and the [Bangladeshi pressured](#) many Rohingya to return to Arakan — but the operation nevertheless marks the beginning of decades of oppression.

In the 1974 constitution, Ne Win proclaimed the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as the only party, but he could never build a [strong enough organization](#) to establish one-party rule. The BSPP leadership came from the military and turned into a mere appendage of the *Tatmadaw*. By 1988, an uprising motivated by crippling economic conditions was repressed brutally but still managed to overthrow Ne Win and the BSPP. They were replaced by an even more oppressive military dictatorship.

The Burmese Way to Capitalism

The military junta that took power after Ne Win's fall called itself the State Order and Law Restoration Council (SLORC), changing its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. The junta always presented itself as a provisional government that would create the conditions for a constitutional order to replace it. Until then, it would govern mostly by decree in a permanent state of exception.

The junta soon abandoned the previous regime's socialist veneer and ruled by pure force. Lacking any ideological rationale to maintain their power and with no popular legitimacy, the generals postured as the heirs of the ancient Burmese kings. They made Buddhism the de facto state religion, portraying themselves as its protectors by funding pagodas and monasteries.

The generals also began a process of economic liberalization, but it didn't take off. Western powers had imposed sanctions in response to the regime's human rights violations, so the junta had to court its neighbors — particularly China, which had withdrawn its support of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

In fact, the Communists had imploded in 1989, when the majority-minority rank and file rebelled against the Bamar-dominated leadership. Fitting Burma's increasingly race-based politics, an ethno-nationalist group arose from the CPB's ashes: [The United Wa State Army](#) (UWSA), which remains the best-armed and strongest militia in the country, thanks to its lucrative narcotic business and support from China.

The economic opening meant Burma depended more and more on Chinese investment. It also created a new class of wealthy businessmen: the infamous cronies who now own huge conglomerates and control most of the economy alongside the military-run mammoths.

The powerful chief of military intelligence, Khin Nyunt, signed a series of ceasefires with several armed ethnic organizations, including the Wa and the Kachin. These agreements were not meant to signify a political settlement, which the military junta deferred until a "legitimate government" could decide the long-standing question of ethnic minorities' political autonomy. But, in territories like Kachin State, the generals took advantage of peace to expand their businesses and take control of valuable assets in a process Kevin Woods has termed "[ceasefire capitalism](#)."

In Arakan, the junta decided to [use the 1982 Citizenship Law](#) against the Rohingya population. Because the legislation limits full citizenship to those who belong to one of the "national races" and because the "definitive" list does not include the Rohingya people, they were denied citizenship. The law does recognize those who could claim citizenship under to the 1948 law, which would cover many Rohingya. But state authorities confiscated most Rohingya's documents, promising them new identification cards that never came. Thus, the overwhelming majority of Rohingya became stateless.

During its rule, the SLORC/SPDC crushed Aung San Suu Kyi's democratic opposition, lured armed ethnic groups into fragile ceasefires — or fought them with increasing violence — and strengthened the army and the state bureaucracy, which was completely subordinated to the *Tatmadaw*. In the meantime, it stuck to its plan for a "discipline-flourishing democracy," which Khin Nyunt designed in 2003, before he was purged the next year by junta supremo Senior General Than Shwe.

This road map included a new constitution, which would, of course, maintain the military's preeminent position. In November 2010, the SLORC/SPDC held an election. The NLD didn't take part, and the junta's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), won by an implausibly large margin.

A few months later, the SPDC dissolved itself, and former general Thein Sein assumed the presidency. The transition, which many international observers cheered, had begun in earnest. The *Tatmadaw* was starting from a position of strength that nothing — not even the NLD's 2015 victory — could easily challenge.

The Burmese Way to Neoliberalism

Aung San Suu Kyi rose to national and worldwide prominence in the wake of the 1988 uprising against the Ne Win regime, eventually embodying the Burmese people's aspirations for democracy and human rights. Her authority at first came from her parentage and personal sacrifice, including almost fifteen years under house arrest. She was an attractive icon for the international press as well — an Oxford alum with perfect English, gracefully fighting a bunch of thuggish generals. She

provided a clear-cut narrative of good against evil in a country whose complexity very few understood.

Since the transition began in 2011, she has built good relationships with the generals rather than mobilizing the people whose support she simply takes for granted — apparently rightly so, since they voted for her enthusiastically in the 2012 by-election and the 2015 general election, when she took power.

Her rapprochement with the military shouldn't come as a surprise. In her [first major speech](#), back in 1988, she said that she felt a "strong attachment for the armed forces," as they "not only were they built up by my father, as a child I was cared for by his soldiers." The personal is often political when it comes to "the Lady," a nickname she earned since saying Suu Kyi out loud used to get people into serious trouble.

In that first speech, she also plead for unity "between the army which my father built up and the people who love my father so much." But the ideal of unity [has been dubious](#) throughout Burma's history as an independent country. The military, the democratic opposition, and the ethnic leaders have made the concept nearly sacred, so that any act of dissent appears as a frontal attack on the nation.

Suu Kyi's approach to the transition has made her party an ineffective political force. By throwing all her weight behind her positive relationships with the generals, she has made the NLD merely reactive. The generals have stayed at the helm since the transition started, and the NLD has played the part the former junta scripted.

This strategy reveals Suu Kyi's deep distrust of participatory politics. She has met the [genuinely democratic protests](#) against land grabbing with indifference and veiled hostility. The irony, of course, is that she owes her power to the wave of mass protests that she came to symbolize.

Suu Kyi has met the wave of sectarian violence and the confinement of tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in concentration camps with studied silence and ambiguous statements. Confronted with these events, [she responded that](#) she "started in politics not as a human rights defender or a humanitarian worker, but as the leader of a political party," establishing a false dichotomy between human rights and politics.

More important, however, her lack of response to the ethnic cleansing goes against her previous positions. When I [interviewed her](#) in 2011, I asked her to describe the kind of democracy she aspired to build. She vaguely answered that there is democracy "when people's voices are heard," so I pushed her on the concept's ideological underpinnings. "The universal declaration of human rights," she replied.

This answer reveals the poverty of her politics. Feted for years as a human rights icon, [she has become a politician](#) who has to make calculations in order to win or maintain power. Indeed, many defend her passivity over the Rohingya as a politician's strategy: she's willing to sacrifice an unpopular minority in order to establish democracy in the country as a whole. But it's become increasingly clear that she and most members of her party share the deep prejudices against the Rohingya that the military and many Burmese and Rakhine nationalists also hold.

However, the real problem with Aung San Suu Kyi — apart from her racism and her authoritarian streak — is that she's not political enough. Her vision for the country isn't political: it's moral. As she put it more than two decades ago, she wants "revolution of the spirit," and a [very puritanical one](#) at that. Her politics amount to a collection of vague phrases like "national reconciliation," "rule of law,"

“peace,” and “development.” She has put forward no policies that would benefit the mass of impoverished Burmese to accompany this rhetoric.

In Suu Kyi’s worldview, every Burmese must do their duty without challenging the nation’s socioeconomic structure. A couple of years ago, she assured the cronies who had amassed huge fortunes during the SLORC/SPDC period that she would not [threaten their position](#), though she asked them to “act fairly” and “work for others.” Suu Kyi doesn’t think change will come from a systemic overhaul, but from the moral redemption of those at the top and the sacrifices and hard work of those at the bottom, all united in a spirit of national solidarity.

Aung San Suu Kyi puts personal responsibility at the center of her “political” vision. In that sense, she is a [neoliberal](#) of a [particular kind](#): while she doesn’t seem to believe in collective action unless it follows the dictates of a strong leader — herself — she holds everyone responsible for their own situation.

In this way, she’s actively blocking politics from developing in Burma, as neoliberalism does all over the world by rendering political action impotent against the market. Such depoliticization creates a vacuum, readily filled by the kind of xenophobic ethno-nationalism so prevalent in Burma and elsewhere today.

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