

UNIT 19 BURMA

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Historical Background
 - 19.2.1 Establishment of British Rule
 - 19.2.2 Colonial Exploitation and Emergence of Nationalism
 - 19.2.3 Japanese Occupation and Burmese Independence
- 19.3 Parliamentary Period
 - 19.3.1 Political Instability of the Early Days
 - 19.3.2 Development Policies
 - 19.3.3 Ethnic Minorities and Burmanisation
 - 19.3.4 Internal Dissensions within the AFPFL and the Coup
- 19.4 The Army Regime
 - 19.4.1 The New Political System
 - 19.4.2 Problems of Economic Development
 - 19.4.3 Prelude to Resistance
- 19.5 The Movement for Democracy
 - 19.5.1 End of BSPP Rule
 - 19.5.2 Weaknesses of the Pro-Democracy Movement
 - 19.5.3 Towards the Election of 1990 and After
- 19.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.7 Key Words
- 19.8 Some Useful Books
- 19.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

19.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the aspects of Government and Politics in Burma. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- trace the historical background up to Burmese independence
- describe parliamentary system and its existence
- examine the role of army and bureaucracy in a developing state
- recognise the importance of democratic movement.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Burma occupies the Western most part of Southeast Asia and attached to South Asia. The country borders on India, China, Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand. A total area of the state is 678,000 sq. km. and 1971 census estimated 28,200,000 as the total population. Burma is inhabited by a number of sub-nationalities and tribes. The Burmese are about 70 per cent of the total population. Among other groups Karens (8 per cent) the Shans (7 per cent), the Chins (2 per cent) and the Kachins (1.5 per cent) are most important. All these groups have their own language, literature and culture and also historically developed economic areas. The eastern, northern and western mountainous borders are inhabited by different tribe—who are backward in their socio-economic and cultural development. Burma has inherited large number of people of Indian origin. Burma is endowed with vast and rich economic resources by harnessing them the country may be both agriculturally and industrially prosperous.

Burma after independence followed the British model of parliamentary democracy. Even though the political process was dominated by the AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League), the elections were fair and free. But the rule of the AFPFL was far from smooth

since it assumed power under Premier U.Nu. The party itself was threatened by internal rivalries and personal bickerings. The first major challenge to the civilian government came from the Communists who created a situation in the initial years of independence whereby the real control of the Rangoon government ceased beyond the limits of the capital city. By taking advantage of the confusion, the ethnic minorities further destabilized the political situation in the country. The government was so busy with pacifying the dissident groups that before 1950-52 it did not have time or energy to think about development problems. A syncretic ideology called the 'Burmese way to Socialism' was devised incorporating proposals like nationalization of monopolistic enterprises, foreign trade, land etc. and protection for the workers, peasants and the poor against capitalist exploitation. But nothing practically was done in this direction in the subsequent years. The economic performance of U.Nu government was unsatisfactory. The demand of the ethnic minorities for political autonomy had created a far more critical political as well as security problem at this juncture. This served a pretext for the army junta under General Ne Win to seize power in 1962 and to continue in office uninterrupted ever since.

The army rule brought neither political stability nor economic prosperity to Burma. The political system was highly authoritarian with the supreme control of all political institutions in the hands of General Ne Win and his Coharts. All political activities other than through government channels were banned. Many civilian leaders were arrested and imprisoned. There was a blanket ban on private newspapers and news media. The policy of stick and carrot pursued by the army-sponsored Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) did succeed for twenty-six years in preventing any major popular resistance to the army rule, though there was simmering discontent among the political public in general and among the ethnic groups in particular for domination by the Burmans over the non-Burmans constituting Karens, Shans, Chins and Kachins. But this apparent stability received a jolt with the declining economic conditions in the country in the late 80s forcing General Ne Win to openly acknowledge the failures of his economic policies. This really infuriated the middle classes, while the lower classes were already distressed by the soaring food prices. The obvious results was great unrest which could no longer be controlled by mere force. The resultant mass protest developed into a democracy movement leading to the end of the BSPP rule. The military rule in Burma had never been accepted by the non-Burman ethnic minorities who had taken to prolonged insurgency to assert their autonomy, but now the regime lost its legitimacy among the majority Burman population as well. While the BSPP rule ended under pressure from the democracy movement, it was replaced by a much brutal government which calls itself *the state Law and Order Restoration Council* (SLORC) and which has not only let loose a reign of terror in the country but also refugees to handover power to the democratically elected group called the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) following the 1990 elections. None of the arrested leaders, including Syukyi have yet been released to facilitate a peaceful transition to democracy. Thus Burma or Myanmar still effectively remains under military rule.

19.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

19.2.1 Establishment of British Rule

The Burmans, or the majority ethnic group who inhabit the country which today is called Myanmar (Burma), belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic group of the great Sino-Tibetan family. They had entered the territory sometime in A.D. 9th century and had subjugated the indigenous people. The latter, who belonged to various ethnic groups, such as the Shans, Mons, Kachins, Karens, Chins and the Arakanese, were gradually pushed to the frontier regions. They were brought under the tutelage of an absolutist Burman Buddhist monarchy, which had its headquarter at Ava-Amarapura located in northern or upper Burma.

For a hundred years before the advent of the British, the Konbaung dynasty held away over the whole of Burma. The organisation of its power resembled a system of 'concentric circles', which existed in many other Buddhist Kingdoms of Southeast Asia. It meant that royal power was most consolidated and absolutist near the centre. It assumed a more 'dispersed character' towards the periphery. This dispersal of royal authority was most palpable in the south or lower Burma, where we find the existence of locally powerful district governors or *myouns* and the township headmen or *myothugyis*. This weakening of

central authority could also be found in the frontier regions, dominated by the various ethnic minorities.

After the 1750s, by proclaiming a royal monopoly over foreign trade, the Konbaung Kings had virtually insulated Burma from the Asian maritime trade networks. For sometime, Burma was saved from the western imperialist intrusions. But in the nineteenth century, the British, then firmly entrenched in India and interested in participating in China trade, began to cast covetous eyes on Burma. In 1852, they occupied Lower Burma. The rest, i.e., the Upper Burma was incorporated in 1886 and the whole country was made into a part of the British Indian Empire.

19.2.2 Colonial Exploitation and Emergence of Nationalism

After her annexation by the British, Burma was exposed to a dual exploitation. In addition to her western colonial masters, there had been the Indian businessmen, financiers and the educated middle classes who went there in search of jobs. Her economy remained agricultural throughout the period, as the majority of the population depended on this sector. But in this sphere also important changes were taking place. Removal of the ban on the export of rice led to rapid commercialization and the fertile lands in the Irrawaddy delta were opened to a profitable rice cultivation. Burma soon became the granary of the world. The Burmese rice had great demands in the European markets and it also fed the vast populations of the Indian subcontinent.

This emergence of a rice-bearing mono-culture had a profound impact on Burmese rural society. The British land revenue system and commercialisation transformed a community of peasant proprietors into a highly stratified society of large landowners, owner-cultivators, tenants and a growing class of share-croppers. Land alienation became a chronic problem, as the agriculturists, particularly to the Indian Chettiar money-lenders. The situation bred contempt for foreign rule and its agents. Right from the beginning there had been peasant resistance to colonial rule in Burma. This growing rural unrest was fully blown up in the famous Say San Revolt of 1930-32. Its main targets of attack were the Europeans and the Indian money-lenders. In this way it aimed at overthrowing the exploitative system instituted by colonial rule and its Indian and Chinese underlings.

The suppression of the Say San Revolt in 1932 did not quell unrest in Burma. But around this time the emergence of an indigenous educated middle class gave an entirely new direction to her struggle for independence. This nationalism developed in a context where the indigenous population belonged almost entirely to the oppressed class and their oppressors, the imperialists and the capitalists, were foreigners. For this reason, Burmese nationalism could set forth socialist goals. It did not involve the risk of alienating any major interest or any important section of the indigenous people. Such ideas of establishing a socialist economy, cleansed of foreign exploiters and freed from colonial control, were articulated through the movement of a group of younger educated people who called themselves *Thakins* or masters of their own country. Gradually this movement influenced other sections of society, such as the students, workers and peasants, thus creating a wider mass base for the nationalist movement. But the *Thakins* soon became divided in terms of their ideologies and programmes. Some were socialists, who formed a socialist party in 1939, called the People's Revolutionary Party. There had been another group who were full scale communists and formed in 1944 the Burma Communist Party. There was yet a third group of nationalists, who also had strong socialist leanings.

19.2.3 Japanese Occupation and Burmese Independence

It was around this time that the Second World War broke out and Burma in 1942 passed into the hands of the Japanese. Even before the war, some of the Burmese leaders had thought of raising an army with Japanese assistance, in order to fight British imperialism. Aung San for this purpose had gone to Tokyo, along with some of his close compatriots like Ne Win, and received military training. Like many other political leaders in Asia, he also believed that militaristic Japan would contribute to the liberation of the colonised Asiatic nations. With this hope, his newly formed Burma Independence Army supported the Japanese war efforts. It was replaced, after Japanese occupation of Burma, by the Burma Defence Army, which was more directly controlled by the Japanese. But Japan kept alive its image of a liberator. In pursuance of that Burma was accorded a formal independent status on August 1, 1943. Dr. Ba Maw became the prime minister and Aung

San the minister of defence and the commander-in-chief of the Burma National Army.

But soon there was disillusionment with the Japanese. Their occupation was followed by intensive economic exploitation of the country. What was unleashed in Burma was a 'conqueror's rule' under which the racial polarity between the Japanese and the local inhabitants 'was complete'. At this juncture the Burmese freedom fighters formed Anti Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) under the leadership of Aung Sun and his followers to fight against the Japanese occupation of Burma. Japan was finally defeated in 1945. Burma was reoccupied by the British. Now negotiation for self-government was started between the AFPFL and the British government. Meanwhile Indian achieved independence. British now decided to withdraw from Burma. A pact, known as Nu-Atlee pact was signed and Burma achieved independence at the beginning January 1948.

The study of nationalist movement is important for us, as it had certain significant legacies for future Burma. First of all, the nationalism of the Burmans, the majority community, had become a major dominating force in Burmese politics. The ideas of socialism had also acquired a natural legitimacy, as these were expected to affect only the foreign exploiting elements. Finally, a national army was born through this movement and it had performed an important political role by participating in the antion's war of liberation. All these factors were to influence Burma's politics during the next forty years of her independence.

Check Your Progress I

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Identify the major ethnic groups in Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Briefly describe the factors responsible for the rise of nationalism in Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

19.3 PARLIAMENTARY PERIOD

19.3.1 Political Instability of the Early Days

The political system in Burma since independence followed the British model of parliamentary democracy. The elections were free and fair, but were dominated although by the Anti Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). During this period, nationalism continued to have a tremendous appeal for the average Burmans. The ideals of socialism were also widely acceptable. So also were the concepts of Buddhism, which was made the state religion in 1960. But the rule of the AFPFL government was far from smooth ever since it assumed power under Premier U Nu.

To begin with, the first challenge that the new democratically elected ministry in independent Burma faced was from the communists. They were divided into two groups: the Red Flag (Trotskytes) and the White Flag (Stalinists). The latter, under the intellectual guidance of its theoretician, M.N. Ghosal, had begun to criticize the AFPFL for being the

agents of British imperialism. They called for an armed uprising, which actually took place just four months after the new ministry had taken over power. The situation appeared to be really critical when a section of the Burma Army revolted and went over to the communists. At one point, the real control of the Rangoon Government ceased beyond the limits of the capital city. The government retaliated, but could not crush the revolt decisively. It only gradually began to lose its momentum after about a month of protracted warfare.

By taking advantage of the confusion, the ethnic minorities further destabilized the political situation in the country. The greatest of the danger came from the Karens, who wanted a separate Karen state. For this purpose, they raised a paramilitary force, the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), which started a war against Rangoon in late 1948. By March next year, they had captured the city of Mandalay, ransacked Insein, made several unsuccessful attempts to capture Rangoon and inflicted a number of defeats on the Burmese army. It was not until 1950 that the KNDO forces could be driven back to the hills beyond Salween river. But even then there were wide tracts which remained under its effective control.

Meanwhile there had been trouble from other sources as well. The members of the People's Volunteer Organisation (PVO), the former armed wing of the AFPFL of the pre-independence days, took advantage of the situation for personal aggrandizement. The Union Police revolted in Arakan in mid-1949. The Mujahids were up in arms against the Rangoon Government in the north of Arakan while Red Flag Communists were active in the interior of Arakan. Back in Rangoon, the government servants went on a strike in February 1949, against a salary cut. The situation really looked dismal and it sapped the government's energy and financial resources.

19.3.2 Developmental Policies

Before 1950-52, which is considered to be the period of consolidation for the U Nu government, it did not really have time or energy to think about the developmental problems. In this sphere, socialism remained a guiding principle. But it was emphasized repeatedly, first by Aung San and then by Ba Swe, that it had to be adapted to the specific Burmese conditions and her historical legacies. In other words, a 'Burmese way to socialism' had to be devised. The new constitution spoke of a welfare concept of government and of adequate preventive measures against foreign economic penetration. It proposed, for example, the state ownership of land and accordingly a Land and Nationalisation Act was passed in 1948, along with an Agricultural Labourer's Minimum Wages Bill. The 'Two Year Plan for Economic Development of Burma', drafted in the same year, also envisaged the establishment of a socialist economy. In June that year, U Nu announced his fifteen point socialist programme. It included many proposals such as nationalisation of monopolistic enterprises, foreign trade, land etc. and protection for the workers, peasants and the poor against capitalist exploitation. But nothing practically was done in this direction in the subsequent years. Later, U Nu gradually shifted from this 'extreme left' stand 'a moderate socialist position'.

This shift had become necessary in view of the less than satisfactory performance of the economy in the first few years of independence. The 'Eight Year Programme of Economic and Social Reform' popularly known as the 'Pidawtha' (welfare state) programme, launched in 1952, had retained a socialist orientation. But by 1955 its failure was manifest and this resulted in a decline in anti-capitalist slogans. There was now a greater preparedness to accept private capitalist enterprise. The shift was clearly evident in the next 'Four Year Plan for Economic Development' proposed by U Nu in June 1957. Though the goal of social welfare was retained, there was more emphasis on private investments, both indigenous and foreign. The ideal of socialism henceforth began to play a less important role in the realities of Burmese life. The result was not, however, an accelerated economic growth, but a perpetuation of the existing chaos, both economic and political.

19.3.3 Ethnic Minorities and Burmanization

The major cause of political chaos was the lack of legitimacy that the AFPFL government suffered from in areas outside the deltaic mainland. The dominant political culture that it represented was a blending of Burman nationalism, the tenets of Buddhism and certain

vague principles of socialism. And in the name of 'Burmanization', the government tried to impose it on the ethnic minorities, such as the Arakanese, Chins, Kachins, Karens, Kayahs, Mons and the Shans. The cultural domination of the majority Burmans came through the imposition of the Burmese as the official language of the nation and the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion. The constitution of 1948 also did not provide for a federal structure. The state power and the resources were concentrated in the hands of the central government. This resulted in a simmering sense of frustration and the articulation of regional identities among the ethnic minorities, such as the Arakanese, Chins, Kachins, Karens, Kayahs, Mons and the Shans.

19.3.4 Internal Dissensions within the AFPFL and the Coup

U Nu had often talked about further democratization of the polity by handing over power from the national to local officials and ultimately turning the government and the army into real people's organisations. But nothing of that sort happened. And then the unity of the AFPFL party itself was threatened by internal rivalries and personal bickerings. Subsequent to the Communists, the Socialists had also decided to quit the AFPFL. The internal dissensions within the party had reached such a point by 1956, that U Nu had to take a year off from premiership to set his house in order. After the formal split in the party in June 1958, a clean AFPFL government took over power, also under the premiership of U Nu. But the situation continued to be so unstable, that power had to be temporarily handed over in September 1958 to a caretaker government under General Ne Win. This gave the veteran officer of the Burma National Army of the pre-independence days a taste of real political power. But this time he had kept his words—he handed over power to the democratically elected government under U Nu in April 1960. The record of this new reformed Pyidaungsu government was however far from satisfactory. Moreover, the demand of the ethnic minorities for political autonomy had created a far more critical political as well as security problem at this General Ne Win, a socialist and a former close associate of Aung San, to seize power through a bloodless coup on 2 March 1962. The military government which thus came into power in Burma continued to have an uninterrupted rule for the next twenty six years.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What are the main reasons for the political instability in Burma?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Describe some of the important features of socialism in Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

19.4 THE ARMY REGIME

19.4.1 The New Political System

General Ne Win with his political experience could realise that in order to be in power, he must politicise the army rule as quickly as possible. So in July 1962 he launched a new political party, known as the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). It promised to

reconstruct Burmese economy and society through the 'Burmese Way to socialism'. This could not be expected to be achieved through parliamentary democracy, it was declared. Because this system had been 'tried and tested' and had 'failed', because of the absence of a matured public opinion. Hence the task of reconstructing a socialist Burma was to be entrusted to an effective party organisation which was to enjoy an absolute monopoly of political power. This party was supposed to have its network spread over the whole country, involving the masses—the peasants and the workers in particular. Initially, however, it was to remain a closed 'cadre party', consisting of nucleus personnel. Its supreme authority was to be vested in a Revolutionary Council, which included only some high ranking military officers close to Ne Win. It was empowered to appoint certain high powered committees, such as the Central Organizing Committee, the Discipline Committee, the Socialist Economy Planning Committee etc. At the lower level, the Central Organizing Committee would appoint the primary 'party units' on the basis of 'constituencies' and 'branches of production' and if necessary townships and hill tracts. The party units would appoint 'party groups' in villages, wards, roads and streets, mills, factories etc. The Chairman of the Revolutionary Council, Ne Win, himself was to appoint a Council of Ministers, with the approval of the Revolutionary Council.

Thus on organisational framework was improvised in which an effective party network, reaching out to the common people in the interior, was linked with the administrative machinery. The supreme control of the entire structure was vested in the apex body of the Revolutionary Council, which was in effect a military council under the all powerful leader General Ne Win. Along with this, in 1964 all other political parties were banned and their leaders arrested. In 1966 there was a blanket ban on private newspapers and news media. The iron rule of Ne Win was thus consolidated.

But the last half of the 1960s was not very smooth for the army rulers. The economy had been malfunctioning and popular discontent was simmering in many parts of the country. This situation compelled the ruling clique to think about doing something to legitimise its rule through popular consent. Against this backdrop, the First Congress of the BSPP was held in 1971. Here it was decided that the 'cadre party' would be transformed into a 'mass party' by incorporating also the ordinary civilian population into it. The decision was followed by a vigorous membership drive, as a result of which by 1980-81 about one-third of the adult population of Burma had become 'full' or 'candidate' members of the BSPP, or were otherwise associated with it through the ancillary bodies like 'People's Councils'. Many of them were also placed at the lower rungs of the party leadership hierarchy and the lower level bureaucracy. This was expected to generate among the common people a sense of involvement in the new political system. On the other hand, the army dominance in the party was carefully retained. At the time of the Fifth Party Congress in 1985, about 94% of the armed forces and para-military units were members of the party. They constituted nearly 60% of the total party membership. The top leadership was also vested in the hands of senior army officers, the trusted men of General Ne Win. Finally, the new constitution promulgated in 1974 officially legitimized this single party rule. The party was projected as the people's party, but it was controlled effectively by an all powerful military elite.

19.4.2 Problems of Economic Development

The dictum of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', as we have already seen, was by no means a new concept. The professed socialist ideology of the new regime, like that of its predecessors, provided for nationalization of the means of production, which were to be owned by the state or the cooperative societies or the 'collective unions'. But private enterprise was not to be totally stifled, particularly where the interests of the Burmans were involved. The Nationalization Act which came in 1963 therefore mainly affected the immigrant merchant capitalists, financiers and white-collar employees. This policy gradually led to a complete Burmanization of the economy and the services. This was followed by a Land Reforms Act in 1965. It abolished tenancy and redistributed some surplus land among the landless labourers. So far as the distribution of national income was concerned, it was envisaged that every individual would work according to his ability and would have a share of the material and cultural values that accrue 'in accordance with the quantity and quality of labour expended'. Though complete equality was accepted as an utopian goal, 'correct measures' were promised to narrow down the difference in income to a reasonable limit. Laudable welfare goals were thus set forth. But at the same time sufficient manoeuvring space was left to enable the military bureaucracy to legitimise

its attempts to monopolize wealth and power.

As far as economic growth was concerned, the new government placed its primary emphasis on the agricultural sector, which in 1960 had accounted for 33% of the GDP. To promote agricultural production a number of measures were taken, such as provision for agricultural credit, introduction of improved methods of cultivation, fertilization, use of quality seeds, land reclamation and irrigation. But despite all these, the annual growth rate in agriculture was just 4.1% between 1960 and 1970. Nor did the production of paddy, which really dominated Burmese agriculture, register any appreciable increase during the first decade of the military rule. In the industrial sector too, situation was far from satisfactory. The amount of public investment in industry had increased during this period from 3.6% in 1960-61 to 37% in 1970-71. But output did not keep pace with this growth in public investment, while fresh private investment remained minimal. Foreign investments were also scrupulously avoided, as the government strictly followed the policy of autarchy. As a result, between 1960 and 1970, the annual average growth rates were 3.1% for the industrial sector as a whole and 3.7% for the manufacturing sector. By the end of the 1960s Burma was about to be swept away by an impending economic crisis, with an abysmally low average growth rate of GDP—just about 2.6% between 1960 and 1970.

The First Party Congress of the BSPP in 1971 therefore took up seriously the question of economic development. It decided to launch a 'Twenty Year Development Programme' the aim of which would be to establish a socialist economy in the country by 1993-94, when there would be 'affluence for all'. The Twenty Year Plan was to be divided into five Four Year Plans. On the four Plans completed (the Fourth Plan came to an end in 1985-86), the Third Plan was the most successful, as the annual average GDP growth rate during this plan period was 6.7%. But on the whole the rate of economic growth has been rather slow: between 1965 and 1980 it was just 3.9% and between 1980 and 1986 only 4.9%. To achieve a further increase in growth rate, Burma needed a technological breakthrough, which necessitated foreign assistance. But from the beginning the new regime had avoided economic contact with the outer world, as through this gate usually comes in also foreign political intervention. On the other hand her foreign exchange reserve dwindled, as the production of rice, the major export commodity for Burma, did not increase according to expectations. Consequently, the country faced difficulty in importing the necessary industrial machinery, spare parts and agricultural inputs. The result was an economic deadlock out of which Burma could not come out on her own. The economy went further downhill, due either to the mismanagement or the rampant corruption of the bureaucracy.

But this slow economic growth was at the same time accompanied by a higher degree of distributive justice. Since 1963 the distribution of all essential commodities was controlled by the government and through a chain of 'People's Shops' food items and other necessary consumer goods were supplied to the people at quite reasonable prices. True, a thriving black market was always there. But in spite of that, there was no major short supply of coarse rice or minimum essential clothings. From 1978-79, the government initiated People's Health Plans to provide for the minimum health care facilities for the masses. As a result, infant mortality declined and average life expectancy increased appreciably, particularly in comparison with the other South Asian countries. This comparative situation would become evident if we look at the index of physical quality of life, calculated by averaging three indices, i.e., life expectancy at birth, infant mortality and literacy. The index for Burma in 1984 was 55. For India it was 44, for Pakistan 40 and for Bangladesh 36. Thus by curbing all democratic rights and by initiating welfare measures, the BSPP tried to sustain its rule. Such a system would continue as long as the public distribution system functioned well. But once cheap rice became scarce, the people could find no other reasons to tolerate this oppressive regime. And this was precisely what began to happen from 1987.

19.4.3 Prelude to Resistance

The policy of stick and carrot pursued by the BSPP did succeed for twenty-six years in preventing any major popular resistance to its rule. Resistance was certainly there and some of them not of very trivial nature. Leaving aside the resistance of the Burma Communist Party of the insurgency carried on by the ethnic minorities, there were in the city of Rangoon itself several movements for the restoration of democracy. There were student revolts in the Rangoon University campus in July 1962 and again in November

1963. In May-June 1974, there were workers' strikes, followed by student disturbances, and these recurred again the following year. Then in July 1976, there was an unsuccessful coup by some young army officers, who denounced the new socialist system. But such movements did not involve people of other than middle class background. The only exception was the 1974 riot in which the working class had taken an active part. The reason behind this absence of popular resistance was that there was still no major dearth of food and clothing for the common people. It was only in 1974 that there was an unusual food shortage which had made the Rangoon working class restive. But the distributing exportable rice through the People's Shops in the capital city at highly subsidized rates.

The economic situation once again became alarming in 1986-87 precipitating a crisis. The low growth rate which was the perennial problem for the Burmese economy proved to be the Achilles's heel for her government. As the national pie did not increase in size (the GDP in Burma in 1986 was just US Dollar 8,180 million), the individual's share in it also did not increase or even decreased with the rise in population. So distributive justice in this case really began to amount to a kind of sharing of poverty that was continually growing at an alarming rate. The economy was heading towards a crisis during the Fourth Plan period (1982-83 to 1985-86), when the overall growth rate of GDP had come down to 5.5%. During the last two years of the plan period the actual growth rate had gone down even further and the Fifth Plan really began with a crisis situation. During the first year of this plan period, i.e., in 1986-87 the growth rate was just 1% and in the second year (1987-88) it was estimated to be around 2.2%. Along with this, the consumer price index rose to 167 in 1987 with 1980 as the base year. The average annual inflation rate was 26.7% in 1986 and about 28% in 1987. In a situation like this Burma applied to the United Nations for the 'Least Developed Country' status, which was granted in December 1987.

But what really hastened a political crisis was the virtual collapse of the public distribution system around this time. In 1986-87, the official procurement of rice fell by about 49% from the previous year. The reasons were an artificially fixed low procurement price with the simultaneous existence of a high black market price and the lure of a lucrative smuggling trade. What added to this was the inefficiency and sometimes the connivance of the local bureaucracy. But the result was a nearly complete breakdown of the public distribution system, compelling the common people to buy rice at exorbitant prices from the open market.

The distressing situation forced General Ne Win to openly acknowledge the failures of his economic policies in a special meeting of the party on 10 August 1987. He promised to rethink and the outcome was a series of dramatic measures taken in the first week of the following month. On 1 September, trade in certain essential food crops, such as paddy, maize and seven varieties of beans and pulses was decontrolled. As a result, endeavour to keep the rationing system going, it was decreed that land revenue would be collected in kind and the wholesale traders were charged a 5% turnover tax which was also to be paid in grains. But in spite of this, food prices immediately began to rise. As a further measure to check profiteering in grain trade, the government demonetized 25, 35 and 75 Kyat (Burmese currency) notes on 6 September, thus invalidating, according to one calculation, about 80% of the currency notes in circulation. The measure adversely affected the businessmen and the blackmarketeers no doubt, but the worst affected were the middle classes. For, the demonetization was announced in the afternoon of 6 September which was incidentally a Saturday, i.e., the first weekend of the month, when the employed middle class Burmese people had just drawn their monthly salaries. There was no prior warning and even the high ranking civil servants had no inkling about it. So at one stroke they lost nearly a whole month's income and no compensation was paid. This really infuriated the middle classes, while the lower classes were already distressed by the soaring food prices. The obvious result was a conflagration which could no longer be prevented by any concession.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.
 ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Explain the main reasons led to the single party rule in Burma.
-

- 2) Critically examine the various development policies followed by Burma.

19.5 THE MOVEMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Immediately after the demonetization, there was a fierce student riot in Rangoon, which was ruthlessly suppressed and the Rangoon University was closed. But the disturbances recurred again in March and then in June 1988. While the student protesters were being beaten up by the riot police, *Loon Htein*, Ne Win was also thinking of some policy reforms to revitalize the economy. The measures he was contemplating were those his prospective foreign donors were insisting on for a long time, i.e., to give more facilities to private enterprise and to open the gates for foreign private capital. Presumably there has been a considerable opposition within his party to such a drastic reversal of the earlier policy of autarchy pursued for the last twenty-six years. It was in this context that at a special congress of the party on 23 July 1988, Ne Win offered to resign and suggested a referendum to decide whether the single party rule was to continue or not. But his suggestion was overruled and Sein Lwin, known to be an arch conservative and a strong man within the ruling conterie, now took over power. Many Burma watchers believe that some liberal concessions and economic reforms would have satisfied the middle classes at this juncture. But when Sein Lwin took over power, this unnerved the people, for he was a man who was behind all repressive acts undertaken during the last twenty six years' rule by the BSPP. He was the brain behind the hated *Lon Htein* which had mercilessly tortured the student protesters on the earlier occasions and this had earned him the reputation of a 'butcher'. So his succession was immediately received with massive protests and the tide began to taken its own course. Under pressures, Sein Lwin also declared that he would initiate some liberal economic reforms, like giving more privileges to the private businessmen or allowing investment of private foreign capital. But there was now a complete credibility gap, as boundless repression also continued simultaneously. The demand for multi-party democracy now took the foreground in the protest movement and its forerunners were the students and the monks. To deal with the situation soon martial law was declared in the whole of the country.

19.5.1 End of BSPP Rule

The stringent measure of the new government could not control the mass protests which demanded the restoration of democracy and resignation of the new president. Particularly on 8 August 1988, there was a massive rally in Rangoon, largest indeed in the history of the last quarter century, participated by about 100,000 people defiantly violating the martial law. The nervous authorities now unleashed violence. But even this state terror failed to control the anti-government riots, which ultimately compelled Sein Lwin to resign on 12 August, only after seventeen days of what was truly a reign of terror.

A week later, the former Attorney General Dr. Maung Maung became the first civilian President of the Republic since the coup of 1962. Under his stewardship, the BSPP offered to hold a multi-party general election within three months. But this concession failed to satisfy the opposition forces, consisting mainly of students, Buddhist monks, civil servants and workers. They now demanded the establishment of an interim government. Mammoth pro-democracy rallies continued to take place both in the capital city of Rangoon and outside. And now there were also reports of defection from the army, particularly from the

airforce. Therefore, as a further concession to the people, Maung Maung asked the military personnel to resign from the party—a move that really threatens to rob them of the political privileges which they have been enjoying for the last twenty six years. Under these circumstances, the Chief of Staff, General Saw Maung on 18 September 1988 took over power from the civilian president and announced the formation of a nine member cabinet, which called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). It included only one civilian member with an insignificant portfolio. Immediately after assuming power, the army junta unleashed a full scale reign of terror, killing about 1,000 men in two days. It was sidely remoured that the octogenerian leader, the BSPP's ex-Chairman Ne Win, was operating from behind the scene. The dissenting students initially tried to resist, but then went underground. Some crossed the border to take refuge in Thailand or India. Others went of the ethnic rebels to receive armed training. Under severe army repression, the movement now began to pull in different directions. The situation in Burma was now even worse than what was before the commencement of the movement. Instead of being administered by a single party (BSPP) dominated by the army, the country passed under direct army rule.

19.5.2 Weaknesses of the Pro-Democracy Movement

During the initial phase, the movement for democracy was spontaneous, disorganized and leaderless. Because in course of the last twenty-six years of single party rule all organized opposition had been liquidated. The only organized force in this situation of virtual chaos were the students who now formally announced, as a symbol of further solidarity, the re-establishment of the All Burma Students Union. The symbolic action took place at the same spot in the Rangoon University campus where twenty-six years ago in July 1962, Sein Lwin's troops had gunned down 148 student protesters and thus had crushed the last organized opposition to the newly instituted army rule. The students now declared democracy through peaceful means and refused of accept armed assistance from the ethnic insurgents or the Burma Communist Party. In this peaceful struggle they could have with them the Buddhist monks, the professional classes and a segment of the working class. In other words, the urban middle class character of the movement was pronounced from the beginning. Even during its peak period, it remained confined to the urban centres from Maudalay to Moulmein in central Burma, leaving the countryside more or less unaffected. It is always easy to suppress localized urban movements with superior striking power. And this was precisely what happened in Burma in 1988-89. The students initially tried to resist the state violence in amateurish ways, and then fled to the jungles, to the ethnic rebels across the borders or to the neighbouring countries.

The other leaders who had emerged in course of the movement also lacked in experience and vision of guide it properly. Among them the most important was Aung Gyi, who had written a few open letters to Ne Win, criticizing his socialist economic policies. The others were General Tinco, who had been expelled from the BSPP in 1983, and Captain Win Thein, the leader of the abortive army coup in 1976. There was also another name which surfaced during this time and that was of Daw Aung San Syuu Kyi, the daughter of the nationalist hero Aung San. None of these leaders, except perhaps U Nu, had any political experience necessary for leading a nationwide political movement. Nor did any one of them have any pre-existing following and therefore had to depend fully on the students for political support. What was worse, conflicting ambitions prevented them from forming a united front against army rule. By November 1988, 230 political parties had registered their names, indicating utter disunity. The movement therefore could not sustain itself in the face of severe repression, though people's antipathy to army rule did not die down.

19.5.3 Towards the Election of 1990 and After

To legitimise its rule, the SLORC also took a number of political measures aimed at placating public opinion. Its first strategy has been to whip up Burman nationalism and to magnify the threats to national unity and security. As a first symbolic move, the BSPP changed its name into the National Unity Party. Then in June 1989, the name of the country was officially changed from Burma to its vernacular equivalent Myanmar. Similarly the Anglicized versions of some other city names were replaced with the original indigenous names, e.g., Rangoon became Yangon and so on. Next, 16 May 1990 was announced as the date for a general election. But nowhere in the announcement it was mentioned that power would be handed over to the elected representatives of the people.

To supervise the elections, an Election Commission was appointed. But its neutrality was questioned by many political parties.

The people were initially deceived and they responded enthusiastically to the prospect of having a free and fair election. The early possibility of the opposition to National Unity Party (or BSPP) being divided, with the registration of 230 political parties with the Election Commission, was also soon averted. An electoral alliance, called the National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed with 41 of them. Tin Oo became its president and Aung San Syuu Kyi became the secretary. Aung Gyi, on the other hand, headed another formation, named the Union National Democratic Party, which became to some extent friendly to the SLORC. Many other parties subsequently withdrew their names from the Election Commission.

But none of the political parties that intended to contest the election had any political base whatsoever. Nor was it possible to prepare it now. Just when the NLD was about to start its election campaign in the countryside, which had more or less remained unaffected by the pro-democracy movement so far, martial law was clamped on the country on 17 July, 1989. Syuu Kyi was put under house arrest, while other front ranking leaders were either interned or arrested. About five to six thousand students and political workers were arrested. Public meetings were prohibited, meaning that campaigning for election was virtually put to a stop. The foreign press was practically expelled from the country to plug the information leakage to the outside world.

But the results of the election held under such circumstances, were quite astonishing—amounting indeed to a silent revolution. The NLD had a sweeping victory, with a clear sway over seventy per cent of the seats (396 out of 485 contested seats). The SLORC officially accepted the results, but refused to hand over power to the elected representatives of the people. It was announced that the newly elected body would only frame the third constitution of Myanmar (Burma). Nor were the arrested leaders, including Syuu Kyi, released to facilitate a peaceful transition to democracy. Thus Burma or Myanmar still effectively remains under military rule which had been initiated thirty years ago in March 1962.

Check Your Progress 4

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Explain the main features of pro-democracy movement in Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Write a note on factors contributed for weakening pro-democracy movement in Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

9.6 LET US SUM UP

The military rule in Burma had never been accepted by the non-Burman ethnic minorities, who had taken to prolonged insurgency to assert their autonomy. Gradually the regime lost its legitimacy among the majority Burman population as well. This was to a large extent

because of the breakdown of the economy. From the 1970s onward Burma had been accepting bilateral and multilateral foreign aid to boost her economy. In 1976, an Aid Burma Consortium was formed, with Japan, Federal Republic of Germany, France, Australia and USA as its partners. In view of the pro-democracy movement, all these countries had stopped their aid. This has been a great pressure on the military government, as already by September 1988 the country's foreign debt had amounted to 70% of her GDP. All these countries had been demanding more facilities for private enterprise and removal of remaining restrictions on foreign investments. The Burmese government had first succumbed to this pressure in 1977, when it had passed the 'Rights of Private Ownership Law'. Then in November 1988, the SLORC further removed restrictions on private foreign investments. It was hoped that this would attract more foreign capital resulting in a revival of the economy and strengthening of the army rule.

In 1989, a few more steps were taken by the SLORC in this direction. To encourage indigenous private investments, four Joint Venture Corporations were set up. It was hoped that this would both attract private investment and ensure official control. Apart from this a Foreign Investment Commission was also formed. In May 1989, it announced that in nine particular sectors there would be no restriction on foreign investment. Several tax exemptions were also announced for these sectors. The only rider was that the profits had to be transferred through the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank.

It is true though that some countries have responded favourably to such concessions, the amount of foreign investment has been far short of the expectations of the SLORC. The result has been a continuing economic crisis which may cause in the present political context another popular outburst. The army rulers therefore tried to divert people's attention by reviving counter-insurgency measures against the ethnic rebels near the Thai frontier and mounted a renewed onslaught on the Muslim Rohingyas near the Bangladesh border. Both these manoeuvres involved the SLORC in controversies with the Thai and Bangladesh governments, creating for it an opportunity to whip up Burman nationalism. But this strategy may not ultimately succeed in quelling public discontent. The world opinion seems to have been awakened to the crisis of democracy in Burma. The award of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Syu Kyi, still under house arrest, is symptomatic of that. Under the circumstances it is hoped world-wide that soon the intransigent army rulers of Burma would be forced to bow down to the wishes of the people.

19.7 KEY WORDS

- Imperialism** : Imperialism is chiefly characterised by the power of monopolies and finance capital in economics and politics within a given country and in The World Market.
- Nationalization** : Transition from private ownership to state ownership of land, industrial enterprises, banks, transport, etc.
- Political System** : A totality of state institutions, political parties, public associations and norms (rules) of human behaviour in accordance with which state power is exercised and political life organised.
- Political Revolution** : The overthrow of state power of a given ruling class and establishment of state power of another class.

19.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Bertil Lintner, 1989. *Outrage : Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, Hong Kong.
- David J Steinberg, 1981. *Burma's Road Toward Development : Growth and Ideology under Military Rule*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.
- Hugh Tinker, 1957. *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence*. Oxford University Press, London.
- Frank N. Trager, 1958. *Building a Welfare State in Burma, 1948-1956*. Institute of Pacific Relations, New Yorks.

Joseph Silverstein, 1977. *Burma, Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.

Louis J. Walinsky, 1962. *Economic Development in Burma, 1951-1960*. The Twentieth Century Fund, New York.

Robert H. Taylor, 1987. *The State in Burma*. C. Hurst & Co., London.

19.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1)
 - i) The Burmans,
 - ii) The Shans,
 - iii) Mons,
 - iv) Kachins,
 - v) Karens,
 - vi) Chins, and
 - vii) The Arakanese
- 2)
 - i) Colonial exploitation
 - ii) Agricultural policy
 - iii) Protests against the British policies
 - iv) Emergence of the indigenous educated middle class imbued with radical and liberal ideas.
 - v) Indian influence

Check Your Progress 1

- 1)
 - i) Mixing of Religion (Buddhism) with politics
 - ii) Left adventurism
 - iii) Failures of the Burmese nationalism to integrate the ethnic minorities with the mainstream national politics
 - iv) Removal of the national leaders—assassination of top leaders in 1947.
 - v) Policies of Burmanization of the minor ethnic groups
 - vi) Unitary system of government in the multi-ethnic state
 - vii) Cleavages in the AFPFL.
- 2)
 - i) Welfare of the people
 - ii) Measures to prevent the puncturation of the foreign economic interests
 - iii) State ownership of land
 - iv) Nationalisation of monopolistic enterprises, foreign trade etc.
 - v) Protection of the labouring masses from under exploitation.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1)
 - i) Multiparty System failed to deliver goods
 - ii) After the foundation of the officially backed BSPP all other parties were banned
 - iii) Endemic political instability
 - iv) Growing economic crisis.
- 2)
 - i) Foundation of one party system leads to curb the political liberty of the people
 - ii) Nationalisation leads to Burmanization rather than socialization
 - iii) Agricultural policy and the industrial policy both in the first decade of the one party rule did not register much progress
 - iv) Too much control gave birth of a thriving black market
 - v) However despite many short comings, the quality of life in Burma under socialist system improved.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1)
 - i) Movement was initiated by the students whose dominance continued throughout the period of the movement

- ii) Growing movement accompanied severe repression
- iii) The movement which was initially a student movement, transformed soon into a mass movement.
- iv) Continuing pressure of the movement encouraged defection from the ruling party
- v) Movement demanded multi-party democratic system, privatization and liberalization of both economic and political systems.

- i) Movement was initially spontaneous, disorganized and leaderless
- ii) Movement was dominated by the students and the urban middle class
- iii) Conflicting ambition in the participants in the movement prevented them to form limited front
- iv) Very fact that the leaders and the sponsors failed to get underground shelter within the country shows that the masses in general had little sympathy for the movement. They had to flee away.