CHAPTER II

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE BURMA SOCIALIST
PROGRAMME PARTY
THE COUP D'ÉTAT

On March 2, 1962, General Ne Win, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, told the Burmese people in a radio broadcast that "The Armed Forces of the Union have taken over the responsibility and task of keeping the country's safety owing to greatly deteriorating conditions in the Union".¹

The announcement said that a Revolutionary Council (RC) had been formed with himself as Chairman.² According to General Ne Win, the 17-member Revolutionary Council included senior officers of the Army, Navy and Air Force Staff. He himself held the posts of Defence, Justice, Finance and Revenue.³ Various ministries were assigned to several of these officers. U Thi Han, a long time civilian friend of General Ne Win, was included as Foreign Minister.

The leaders of the RC came out explaining several reasons for installing a military rule. On March 7, Brigadier Aung Syi, next in importance to General Ne Win,

¹ Guardian (Rangoon), in its issue of March 3, 1962, published the broadcast message of General Ne Win after the coup.
³ The other members were: Brigadier Aung Gyi, Commodore Than Pe, Air Brigadier Clift, Brigadiers Tin Pe, San Yu, Sein Win, Colonels Thaung Kyi, Kyi Maung, Maung Shwe, Than, Sein, Kyaw Soe, Saw Myint, Chit Myaing, Kin Nyo, Hla Han, and Tan Yu Saing. See also New York Times, March 3, 1962, p.1.
declared at a press conference: "In Burma we had economic, religious and political crises with the issue of Federalism the most important reason for the coup ... A small country like Burma cannot afford division."^4^.

General Ne Win had for some years been concerned about the threat of secession to the survival of the Union. In his speech on Union Day, February 12, 1959, he, as Caretaker Prime Minister, was quoted to have warned: "... Forces are at work trying to pull the Union part. The clamour for a separate Mon state, a separate Arakan State mounts, and the demand for constitutional amendment to carve out these separate states, is insistent. In the Shan State... there are those who brandish the threat of secession to reinforce their demands. I do feel deeply concerned about all this, and wonder whether the Union will survive"^5^.

Other military leaders fully shared General Ne Win's concern. For instance, Brigadier Aung Gyi declared the army would retain power until all political elements agreed upon a new Constitution. He observed that, "the economic and political crises had forced General Ne Win to reinstate the


^5^ "General Ne Win's warning note 5 years ago today", Guardian (Rangoon), February 12, 1964, p.4.
military regime" and that the government eventually would be returned to civilian authority.\(^6\)

Obviously, the possibility of territorial disintegration of the Union was a valid concern which the Revolutionary Council used to keep a hold on the reins of power.

A month after the coup d'\'état Brigadier Sein Win, member of the RC, characterized the military's seizure of power as the second half of the revolution that began with the fight for independence. Now the Army's task was to transform the society to socialism.\(^7\)

Echoing the voice of the military leaders, the Guardian wrote: "The immediate provocation for the takeover had been the fissiparious tendencies of the forces of disintegration which have crystallized themselves into the Shan pressure for a federal structure. The army is confident of solving the law and order problems."\(^8\)

Simultaneously, the military government embarked on a programme to put down "widespread insurgency, to eradicate

---


lingering sentiment of federalism and restore stability to Burma's economy. Brigadier Aung Gyi promised "definite improvement" within a year in actions against separate armed insurrections.9

In his bid to consolidate his hold over power, which he had usurped on March 2, 1962, General Ne Win, by a proclamation, suspended the 1947 Constitution, dissolved Parliament and assumed "supreme legislative, executive and judicial authority".10 Thus after the coup d'état, all powers vested in one man, i.e. General Ne Win himself, as the supreme leader of the RC. Senior political leaders had already been detained on the night of March 1.11

On March 8, 1962, the RC members in charge of various Ministries were authorized to assume the designation of Ministers. The Supreme Court and the High Court had already been disbanded, and a Court of Final Appeal created in their place. Five local State Supreme Councils had replaced the Shan, Kachin, Kayah and Chin Affairs Councils.12


THE EMERGENCE OF THE BURMA SOCIALIST PROGRAMME PARTY;
THE IDEOLOGICAL FORMULATIONS OF THE MILITARY REGIME

From as far back as the Second World War, the army had viewed itself as the driving force in the struggle for independence, and its commanders had made the decision just about the end of the War that Aung San should leave the military and lead the nation. It is in this perspective that the coup leaders' aspirations to legitimize their rule through popular support should be seen.

On April 30, 1962, the RC issued a basic policy statement, "The Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS)."

On July 4, the same year, the military decreed the establishment of its own party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In January, 1963, the BSPP published a document called "The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment" (SCME), which was a detailed


15. This was a sequel to the lack of adequately positive response to General Ne Win's appeal on May 9, 1962 to major political parties (Union Party, AFPFL and NUF) to form a United Front Organisation. The NUF had responded positively, but the other two parties were undecided. On the decision of the RC to form a national party, and take over government leadership, see "BSPP formed", Guardian (Rangoon), July 5, 1962, p.1.
exposition of its ideology based on a theory of human nature and society.\textsuperscript{16}

The SCME is more theoretical as a formulation of the military's concept of a national ideology than the BWS, which focuses on the approach to be taken on immediate economic goals. Hence, an analysis of the former first: The ideology of the RC rests on three basic principles: change, revolution and socialism. The SCME blends moral pronouncements, abstract generalizations, and utopian goals. Like Buddhism, it is based on the assumption that all things are subject to the law of impermanence and change. Change takes many forms. As long as the changes alter things only in a limited way, they may be considered a evolutionary., however, as the tempo quickens and the degree of change increases, they become revolutionary. Social revolution is "an effect and not a cause., whereas the evolutionary process is the cause of that revolutionary change". While change, more frequently is involuntary, it can be induced and directed by action. Man is the mover, he is also the centre of all things.\textsuperscript{17} According to the SCME, man's nature

\textsuperscript{16} The Philosophy of the Burma Socialist Programme Party: The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment (Rangoon, Ministry of Information, 1963), hereinafter called SCME.

\textsuperscript{17} SCME, p.17. All quotations are from the official translation. According to SCME, "When an evolutionary process reaches a certain condition, point or change, if posses into revolution. Historians call such changes social revolution".
is dual - ego-centric and altruistic. Man strives to fulfil himself, at the same time his empathy and concern for others leads him to identify and work with his fellow men to achieve common objectives. The military leaders seized power, according to the SCME, to transform society (i.e. Burmese Society) and improve the conditions of the working people. They believed they were accelerating the rate and quality of change to a revolutionary level.

Man's nature, the military social theorists argued, has a propensity for evil as well as for good. "Aware as we are of such human frailties, we must make our way of life a living reality, i.e. a socialist way of democratic life that can constantly check and control this tendency to lapse. Only then can everyone have the right of using his own creative labour and initiative. Socialism, according to the SCME, is a necessary form of social control to restrict the unbridled freedom of individual man and channel his energy and effort along socially useful and constructive paths.

The socialist democracy envisaged by the military leaders "includes the unity of the will and initiative of the individual man and group on the one hand and the centralized guidance of society on the other. Democratic

18. Ibid., pp.28-29, Emphasis in the original.
19. Ibid., p.31, Emphasis in the original.
centralism and individual freedom, therefore, are mutually compatible and when combined, produce a progressive and prosperous society.

Society is defined as more than a collection of individuals - it is the interaction of people in a particular way. That way is determined by the productive forces - the interaction between the "spiritual life" (man's imagination and creativity), the "material life" (the instruments of production created by man) and the productive relationship. The latter, according to the SCME, means the mutual relationship between men as defined by their legal codes, traditions and customs. man inherits the social system of the previous generation and "by his own creative effort changes as he deems to be good".20

Socialism, as expressed by Burma's military leaders, could at best be described as utopian in its goals. A socialist system, they argue, is based on justice: it "is a prosperous and affluent society free from exploitation or oppression of man by man, where there is no profiteering... no class antagonism that threatens human welfare and where man's physical well-being and happiness are assured".21

20. Ibid., p.11.
Thus, the ideology of the state as developed by the RC could be considered too vague and general to appeal to a large proportion of the population without trying to state the specific policies other than general goals such as socialism and affluence. The ideology is based on Pali terminology (the Abidhamma Pitaka or the third Basket of the Buddhist Canon), but takes its analytical language from Marxism. The ideology serves as a rationale for the socialist state without providing a justification for the creation of social and economic demands upon it. It serves to control and to mobilize its believers in the interests of the state and to obviate the desire to seek an alternative ideology.

The ideology as not regarded as a set of immutable principles. Rather, it was designed to serve as a basis and view point from which government policies and programmes were to be implemented. The ideology itself could be altered with changing circumstances. In the concepts of correlation, dialectics, interaction, correlation and cause and effect were seen as essentially the same phenomenon, all these terms being key philosophical concepts in Theravada

23. SCME, n.16, p.38.
In order to justify the functions of the state, the theory deals with the establishments of order so as to mobilize man's resources for the economic and cultural advancement of the society upon which he is dependent. As the currently dominant institution in human society, the state exists, by implication, to regulate the conflict between progression and non-progressive forces. At this point, the ideology justifies the role of socialism as an economic system to control man's greed. It states that, "our socialist system is a system which will achieve a harmony between the individual and the social interests of the people". Socialism is thus seen as the means to regulate man's natural acquisitiveness. It is at this stage that the justification and legitimization of the modern authoritarian state begins to emerge. The party and the state provide the basis for morality, by creating a cadre of superior people to lead society by a "reorientation of views" to eradicate "fraudulent practices, profit motive, easy living, parasitism, shirking and selfishness".

25. SCME, n.16, pp.6-7.
26. Ibid., p.25.
27. Ibid., pp.18-19.
"Capitalism seeks to solve man's problems through the profit motive, while communism tends to over-restrict man's egotism and kills his creative powers. Through the practice of socialist democracy, of public ownership of the means of production, the extreme errors of both the capitalists and communists can be avoided".  

The function of the ideology is considered essentially moral. The party and its cadres exist to provide the society with proper leadership. The Party Member's Handbook notes: "Only if there is an organization and leadership for all the working people which leads to the economic advantage of man, which is able to judge each man as a man... will the socialist economic system be successful",  

Burma has been experiencing capitalism and colonialism, depression and poverty, and rebellion and anarchy during the years after independence. The BSPP thus seemed convinced that authority is needed to create social harmony.  

The party, however, did not regard its ideology as final. As explained by Donald Eugene Smith, it was a

29. Ibid., p.32.  
mundane doctrine. But it contradicted itself by declaring that the material and spiritual happiness of man shall be the guide in all our activities, and ambiguously defined the spiritual life of human society as a collective term embracing such as entire range of development as man's aspirations, thoughts, ideas, arts and sciences, policies and plans (political, educational, social, economic), knowledge and experience, philosophies and ideologies.\(^{32}\) The theories and concepts of the Burmese ideologues followed no particular school of thought, according to Joseph Silverstein. They had sought to blend traditional Buddhist thought and popular Western concepts that were attractive to those who, like the leaders themselves, grew up under capitalism and colonialism and rejected both because of their negative impact on Burmese Society. The ideology provided them with a theoretical framework for changing the polity and economy of Burma in a direction they felt was more in keeping with Burmese traditions.\(^{33}\)

The central concerns of the ideology of the military leaders were related to traditional notions of Burmese authority and Buddhist laws of causation. Simultaneously, however, it drew extensively on Marxist teachings in explaining material developments. The SCME actually seemed

---


to be close to the practices of Western Marxist-Leninist system, observes Jon Wiant. The revolution was not characterized necessarily as one reflecting the popular will, but rather one which held the popular will in check or channeled its direction. After all, the creation of Communist Parties was a recognition that the popular will must be controlled lest man's particularistic concerns should sap revolutionary vigour. 34

In modern times, ideology has frequently taken the place of tradition as a prime factor in the legitimization of political systems. The ideology of the SCME, attempted to explain and justify the new political system. In Burma, nationalism, democracy and socialism had all been important elements in the thinking of politically conscious Burmese, but the sole aim of the military leaders was obviously to monopolize political power.

The element of political monopoly is not peculiar to the pattern of authoritarian rule in Burma. In all authoritarian systems the ruling elite always tried to monopolize political power and the Ne Win regime was no exception. 35

34. The SCME was apparently authored by U Chit Hlaing, a Marxist active in the pre-revolution NUF, who was a member of the Party Executive Committee up to 1980. See "Tradition in the Service of Revolution", in F.K. Lehman, (ed), Military Rule in Burma since 1962 (Singapore, Maruzen Asia, 1981), p.62.

35. The Ne Win regime was essentially a rule of the military class. See Gyi, n.28, pp.199-200.
THE BURMESE WAY TO SOCIALISM (BWS)

A study of the BWS shows, on the other hand, that it was a guide to action that was flexible and tentative. Awareness of the goals allowed the measurement of progress along the Burmese way, and, if necessary, a change of the course. In economic terms, Burma's socialism was designed to ensure vesting of production and ownership in the people's hands, rather than in those of a few individuals. Describing itself as "we the working people of the national races of the Union of Burma", the BWS expressed its commitment to the creation of a socialist economy - the "planned, proportional development of all the national productive forces", aimed at eliminating the exploitation of man by man, and creating a more prosperous and "morally better" society. The BWS announced a clean break with the parliamentary institutions, it stated that "parliamentary democracy had been tried and tested in furtherance of the aims of socialist development. But Burma's "parliamentary democracy" has not only failed to serve our socialist development, but lost sight of, and deviated from, the socialist aims". The RC promised to establish "mass and class" organizations based "primarily on the strength of peasants and other working masses who form a

great majority of the nation". The BWS declared that in order to carry out socialist plans such vital means of production, as agricultural and industrial production, distribution and transportation, communications, external trade, etc. will have to be nationalized.37

"In building up an economy according to socialist plans, every individual will have to work according to his ability. The material and cultural values that accrue will be distributed in accordance with the quantity and quality of labour expended by each individual. But at the same time, justice demands that the gaps between incomes are reasonable, and correct measures will be taken to narrow these as much as possible. A Socialist Democratic State will be constituted to build up a successful socialist economy".38

Again, the BWS, in calling for an alternations of the political system, took recourse to "democratic centralism" making the peasants and workers, the primary "vanguards and custodians of such a state". The RC would develop, "in conformity with existing conditions and environment and ever-changing circumstances, only such a form of democracy as will protect and safeguard the socialist development".39

37. Ibid., p.5.
38. Ibid., pp.6-7.
39. Ibid., p.8.
In the socio-cultural sphere, the RC would first "reorientate all erroneous views" of the people. It would educate the people so that "to earn one's living by one's labour and to see dignity in one's own work comes into vogue". 40

The curriculum of education would be reorganised to emphasize science and moral training, basic education would be open to all, while higher education would be open only to those with promise and potential. The immediate objective outlined in the BWS included the rebuilding of the administrative structure: "Steps will have to be taken to remove the bureaucratic machinery" which was "a big stumbling block in our road to socialism", and "lay firm foundations for a socialist democratic one". 41

The new Burma like the old, would incorporate all the indigenous people in its territory. "It is only upon the solidarity of all the indigenous groups that socialist economy which can guarantee the welfare of every racial group can be achieved". The right of everyone to freely profess and practise the religion was also recognized. The RC's policy, was, therefore, to create a happy, strong, united and modern nation.

40. Ibid., p.10. The aim was stated to be to eradicate parasitism to cultivate the dignity of labour.
41. Ibid., p.10.
The visions of Burmese socialism might share some of the aspirations of Marxism and the political institutions so devised might, on the surface, reflect the organisational designs of Leninism, but the ways in which Ne Win had sought to legitimise it were essentially Burmese. The perspective is clear — thus, it is the "Burmese Way" to socialism, rather than the Burmese way to "Socialism".

In a leading article contributed to the *Times* (London), the BWS was described as a manifesto which makes it plea for a socialist economy based on justice, the ending of pernicious economic systems in which man exploits man, a wholesome morality, the end of self-interest and self-seeking, and a united country marching towards the goal of socialism — all phrases ... which might have been used by any of the Governments Burma has had since 1948. According to it, the manifesto concluded that democracy was abused in Burma and that the nation's socialist aims could no longer be left in the change of a parliamentary system" in it, the ethical duty was put in contrast to political right. "What Burma needs is dignity in work; the end of the profit motive., a new socialist and democratic bureaucracy;


and armed forces committed to the defence of the socialist economy. The educational system needs to be better matched to economic purpose, though based on socialistic moral values; there must be unity among different racial groups; and in all this a reliance on the peasants and other working masses. The article continued: "It is too early to see how such high-minded purpose will be translated into practical policy. Nevertheless, for all its socialist slogans, there is no hint of social reform. There is no attempt to create an emotional totem, and there is some distaste for those tried out in the past in the reference to "bogus piety and hypocritical religiosity". General Ne Win seems to think that good administration and a growing economy are what matters, and if some political institutions are necessary at the lower levels then the people must be given "democratic training to ensure their conscious participation" — to quote the Burmese definition. Basic democracy promises to be the answer for Burma.

The BSPP, in order to thwart criticism that it was pursuing a totally Marxist ideology, issued a tabulated document outlining its "specific characteristics" and distinguishing features that presumably marked it off from

45. Ibid.
46. It was an aside on U Nu's Buddhist predilections.
47. Ibid., 'conscious' implies 'attentive' and 'sincere'.

56
social democratic and communist parties in other countries. The five characteristics noted were: (1) the ideas were Marxist and non-Marxist; (2) the BWS recognized freedom of religion and conscience; (3) the party was the vanguard of all the people except those who exploited others; (4) the leadership of the party belonged to the people; (5) the beliefs were based on the idea of change in a world of material and non-material things.48

Interestingly, it omitted any reference to a return to parliamentary democracy. It was also clear that it had dropped U Nu's commitment to Buddhism as the state religion, and instead espoused full freedom of conscience and religion to believers and non-believers as well.

The RC, it seems, by germinating official ideology and its own political values as a political necessity, sought to make the BSPP an instrument to legitimize itself.

**AFPFL LEFTIST IDEOLOGY AND THE BWS: SOME PARAMETERS OF COMPARISON**

Socialism has been the pet ideology of all the political leaders that belonged to the AFPFL: U Nu, U Kyaw Nyein, U Ba Swe, U Aung San, as well as the Communist

---

leaders of both White and Red flags were all socialists or Marxists except that the communists wanted power by violence. U Nu and other socialist leaders were agitators, political organizers, strike leaders, and founders of radical clubs, and peasant and labour unions during the British period. At the time Burma attained independence, many were doctrinaire socialists. Attempts were made in 1947-48 by the AFPFL to form a Marxism. The guiding philosophy to bring out a united leftist party. Socialism and nationalization were convenient tools by which foreign economic domination could be overturned. The members of the post-1962 military elite also could not think otherwise.

The AFPFL perspective on Socialism might be gauged from the statement of U Nu on May 25, 1948. It dealt with the maximum and minimum programme of leftist unity. The statement called for the nationalizing and monopolizing capitalist undertaking by partnership between the state and the workers, to secure a living wage, to limit the working day to eight hours, to ensure the right to association, and

49 Syi, n...28, p.206. So also were the Thakins of the 1930's. Maung Maung writes, "They were Marxists, they were Fabian Socialists.... They consumed with great hunger the stories of the Irish struggle for freedom". See Maung Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations* (Amsterdam, 1956) p.88.

50 Ibid., p.207.

the right to strike; the state to take into its own hands the export and import trade., the transformation of the Army of the Union into a People's Democratic Army., to abolish private ownership of land, and to the distribute the land only among the tillers of the soil., to draw up a plan for the industrialization of the country, and, to transform the present bureaucratic administrative machinery into a democratic machinery, among other things. U Nu's statement also laid stress on the need for the leftist organizations to secure the assistance of the state, to take the lead and to work with other organizations in the cause of compulsory education, of physical health and culture. Regarding the formation of a political league, the statement called for the formation of a league for the propagation of a Marxist doctrine, composed of Socialists, Communists, and others who lean towards Marxism and to read, discuss and propagate the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Tito, Dimitrev and other apostles of Marxism.

In the BWS, the RC stated, as its leaders had done in the earlier document of 1958, "The National Ideology and Role of the Defence Services,"52 its commitment to a socialist policy in keeping with the outlook of Burmese nationalist leaders.

52. See "Is Trust Vindicated?" (Rangoon), Directorate of Information, 1960).
The socialist democracy thus envisaged appeared to have evolved from the Burmese Buddhist philosophy of each according to his merit. It was put in a generalized explanation by the RC leadership when Col. Tin Soe, a member of the RC, said, "The BWS seeks to release the energies of the nation in a concerted and systematic attack against all impediments on the path to economic development". 53. Again, Ne Win, in his opening speech at the First Training Course for members of the Divisional Supervision Committees of the BSPP held at the Central School of Political Science, on September 19, 1963, stated that the philosophy of the BWS had been evolved to solve the two problems of existing economic and class inequality, and lack of security of means of livelihood confronting the large majority of the people of the Union. 54.

While the leftists and U Nu chalked out a comprehensive programme of land nationalization, urban industrialization and socio-political measures under the Pyidawtha (Welfare State) Scheme, 55, General Ne Win, it appears, substituted the phraseology of the older politicians with syncretic socialist ideals.


55. The Pyidawtha Scheme is discussed in Chapter IV.