CHAPTER III

FORMATION, ORGANIZATION AND
STRUCTURE OF THE BSPP
GENESIS OF THE BSPP

Since 1962, there has been a continuing effort to cast General Aung San, at least symbolically, in the role of a great unifier. He had been projected as a symbolic repository of all that the Burmese revolution stood for. It was to his ideals that General Ne Win turned for guidance and inspiration.¹ The main source of inspiration was Aung San's "Blueprint for Free Burma." He had written: "Our aim is finally to establish an independent republic suited to our own conditions and needs... What we want is a strong state administration. There shall be only one nation, one party, one leader. There shall be no parliamentary opposition, no nonsense of individualism."²

The Revolutionary Council (RC) expressed its deep disillusionment with the system of parliamentary democracy. In a statement on April 30, 1962, it noted that "parliamentary democracy has failed to serve our socialist development," and that "the new course would promote "only such a form of democracy as will safeguard the socialist development."³

¹. The Guardian (Rangoon), June 1962, p.2.

². Maung Maung, Burma and General Ne Win (Bombay, 1969), p.298. The "Blueprint" was written in Japan where Aung San was undergoing military training against the British.

In order to seek support for the military ideology and policy, General Ne Win had, on May 9, 1962, invited the leaders of three major political parties - the Pyidaungsu, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), and the National United Front (NUF) - to form a National Front Organisation. All the parties had announced their agreement and support for the Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS). The NUF responded to General Ne Win's appeal to forge a united front, but the other parties were undecided on the question of forming a party. General Ne Win, it may be observed, had already proposed the formation of a United Front, a sort of political organization to which all politicians willing to serve for the BWS, were invited.

It was clear that on this issue the military leaders could not get the support of all the major parties. In the circumstances, the RC decided to proceed with the formation of a new party called the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) as a cadre party with emphasis on quality of the cadres rather than their numbers. So, on July 4, 1962, the RC leaders announced the formation of their own party with a long-range view to take over government leadership. The


5. On April 30, 1962, at the Tenth Annual Conference of the Defence Services Commanding Officers, Ne Win formally proposed such a formation. See Guardian (Rangoon), May 1, 1962, p.1.
sole aim seemed either to assimilate if possible, or crush if unavoidable, all opposition to the rule by the RC. This meant bringing the political parties, above-ground dissidents, and the underground political and ethnic rebels under the control of the RC.  

Authoritarian rulers believed that the perpetuation of authoritarian rule was possible and desirable, if not by rejecting all democratic forms, then by erecting some facade behind which they could maintain inviolate the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of their power. They rejected the 'disorders' of democracy and believed they had a mission to eliminate such pathologies from political life, as one political analyst observed.

Ne Win took power with the avowed goal of building national unity. The instruments that were to be used in achieving this goal were the BSPP and the Tatmadaw, the military. The symbols that Ne Win and his associates used in the promotion of their ideology were the ideas of Aung San. The centrality of the military image in the ideology


was closely linked with the centrality of the tatmadaw as
the chief instrument of the state. 8

THE FORMATION OF THE BSPP

The RC had a monopoly of power, but it needed to
legitimize itself in the eyes of the people. Claiming
itself as "revolutionary in essence" the RC primarily aimed
at cloaking itself with the facade of a civilian party.
Commenting on its own image, the RC stated: "The RC, forged
by peculiar and powerful historical forces... wears the
outward garb of a military council. This the RC deems
undesirable. The RC believes that the natural leader of the
revolution is a revolutionary party." 9

The BSPP was designed to be a transitional party under
the leadership of the RC. For the first nine years of its
existence, it remained a cadre organisation of the military
elite. In 1971, it was transformed into a mass or people's
party, when, on June 28, the BSPP held its First Congress.
This event marked the start of what the BSPP called "a mass
party" based on democratic centralism and collective

8. "Burma's Crisis of Legitimacy", in F.K. Lehman, (ed.).,
Military Rule in Burma since 1962 (Singapore, 1981),
p.81.

9. In the section of the Constitution of the BSPP entitled
"Origins and Purposes", the RC outlined the People's
Army concept. See BSPP, The Constitution of the BSPP
leadership. The Congress was attended by locally-elected delegates representing both regional and functional units of the BSPP. The delegates heard Party Chairman U Ne Win's report on organizational matters, adopted a new Party Constitution, which replaced the 1962 version, and took part for the first time in public debates on the state of the economy. U Ne Win also expressed the need to draft a new State Constitution so that the envisaged Constitution may be free from all defects of the previous Constitution, and that national solidarity be achieved.

The RC had yet to seek and obtain the people's mandate as it was ruling without any constitutional basis. Hence the need for planning a Constitution. This way, the RC hoped to formalize political power for their exclusive use. They were "the actual power holders in control of the enforcement machinery of the state", as Loewenstein commented.

PARTY MEMBERSHIP

The BSPP began with twenty regular members, seventeen

of whom were concurrently on the RC. Since the founder-members belonged to the RC, the coup leaders chose applicants who were its most loyal supporters, accepted the ideology "out of conviction" and were prepared to carry out "unswervingly all tasks assigned by the party."\(^{13}\) Party membership was open to all citizens of 18 years age and older graded into 'sympathizers' on those who were willing to work for party goals, and 'candidate-members', those likely to earn full membership, after the initial period of two years, depending on their political background and loyalty.\(^ {14}\)

The party began to accept membership applications one year after the coup. Three years later, there were only twenty permanent members, although there was 99,638 candidate-members and 167,447 sympathizers by the end of July 1969, the number of regular members was however, only 24.\(^ {15}\) The military moved slowly to ensure its continuing control of the political process. By 1966, almost 30 percent of the candidate members were from the armed forces 1.2 per cent from the police, and only 8.3 per cent were

\(^{13}\) *(Party Affairs Journal) (Rangoon, BSPP Hqrs.), April 1963, p. 4.* *Constitution of the BSPP (Rangoon BSPP Hqrs., 1983), Section 6, pp.43-47.*

\(^{14}\) *"General Ne Win consolidates position", Guardian (Rangoon), March 23, 1963, p.4.* *No Permanent member could resign from the party, a precondition against defection.*

\(^{15}\) *(Party Affairs Journal) (Rangoon, BSPP Hqrs.), December 1972, p.20.*
peasants. It indicated that rural recruitment was failing, as about four-fifths of the candidate-members were from urban areas. Even after a decade of military rule, the BSPP continued to reflect the predominant role of the army at all levels. By 1972, 58 percent of the total members of BSPP were from the armed forces. Two-thirds of the total membership of the armed forces were either full or candidate-members of the BSPP. 16

An effort to broaden the base of the party was initiated in 1969, and by July 1970 party regulars had increased to 879, and to over 73,000 by April 1971. Structurally, both permanent (regular) and candidate-members were attached to the basic party cells, each consisting of about 10 members. Three to nine cells constituted a section. Above the party sections were party units at the township, state, and division levels. The party units were established on both geographical and functional bases. The armed forces, ministries, and state enterprises were among these functional organizations. In October 1973, when the Second Party Congress was held, Party membership - about 840,000 - showed an increase of 150 percent over the 1971 level. 17 The conversion of the BSPP to a mass party also did

16. This was significant, since the armed forces, were half per cent of the total population. See David A. Steinberg, Burma's Road Toward Development: Growth and Ideology under Military Rule (Colorado, 1981), p.32.

17. The RC had appointed two Committees - the Central Organizing Committee and the Disciplinary Committee, to recruit, screen and train applicants.
not lead to broadening its mass base. It rather reinforced the military control on the eleven-member Executive Committee - the controlling suborgan of the Centre Committee. It had ten military personnel, while the Central Committee itself - composed as it was of one hundred and fifty individuals - had one hundred and twenty seven military or former military men. 18

Furthermore, the law of the land supported the BSPP. In March, 1964, the RC had banned all political parties except the BSPP, which existed as the only legal party. 19 This had rendered Burma mono-party state. The BSPP was thus officially given a vanguard role in Burmese politics and society. 20

TRAINING OF CADRES

To train the cadres, on July 1, 1963, the party organized a Central School of Political Science at Chawdwingone outside Rangoon. Here the candidates received instruction in basic policy, political thought, economics,

18. Steinberg, n.16, p.33.


organization and management. The Defence Services also created a political leadership School - Command In-service training courses.21 Again, in June 1964, the Ministry of Home Affairs opened a similar school, the Central Service Training School for training civil servants in order "to transform the present bureaucratic machinery into one based on socialist democracy.22

Together, these Schools gave instructions to 44,173 service men and civilians. By 1972 since nearly one third of the BSPP members were drawn from the military and police, the remaining members and candidates represented no more than 0.8 per cent of the population.23

To support the programme, the Party published a variety of journals, papers and special studies.24 Despite all these and other efforts, the party leaders campaigned about the problem of recruiting good and reliable cadres. The reports of the Secretary General and the speeches of General


22. See Forward (Rangoon), September 15, 1964, pp.4-6., Guardian (Rangoon), July 2, 1963, p.1, for General Ne Win's inaugural speech at Chawdwingone, expounding the views of the RC. This was the first cadre training course lasting between six and seven weeks.


24. Some of them were Lanzin Thadin, Party Affairs, BSPP Party Members' Handbook; BSPP Internal Affairs, International Affairs, Concise History of the Actions of the RC, Constitution of the BSPP.
Ne Win at Party Seminars, Meetings and Conferences, revealed that many recruits were actually party saboteurs, self-seekers, and non-conformists. The 1966 Report of the Secretary-General Stated that once cadres finished their course at the Central School, they "puffed up with arrogance thinking they alone were the most learned."25

The mass rallies of peasants and workers convened annually, first for seminars and later for the national meetings of the BSPP, scarcely had the effect the RC intended.26

Gradually, things came to such a stage that at the BSPP Party Seminar in 1968, Party Chairman General Ne Win openly called for immediate revision, re-assessment and overhauling of policies and programmes, so that instead of stubbornly going ahead with outmoded practices, and systems, a nexus between theory and practice was established. After all, he observed, "man is not infallible."27


STRUCTURE, FUNCTION AND ELITISM

Structure of the party during the cadre period lasting until 1971, was based upon tight central control. At the base was the local unit which drew its members from the community where it was located. Recruits, selected on the basis of occupation or social background, were organized in functional units, factories, military units, administrative organizations, and the like. The party units and functional organizations were all under the supervision and control of the Central Organizing Committee and the Disciplinary Committee. 28

In November 1969, in line with the RC's determination to transform the BSPP into a mass party, a new party constitution was drafted, laying down clear-cut party organizations on the regional and local levels, requirements for party membership, and specific intra-party decision making procedures, based on "democratic centralism." The RC promised a transition from rule by a close knit military elite to a "socialist democracy", having a broad base of popular participation. 29

In this spirit, the BSPP convened the long-awaited First Congress in June-July, 1971. The Congress, the highest organ of the party, which represented 17,599 cells,

28. See Chart on the Organisation of the BSPP.
29. See Constitution of the BSPP, n.9, pp.4-6.
organized into 2,595 sections and 313 party units, elected a Central Committee of 150 members and 50 alternate members to reorganize the party. Interestingly, out of the 150 full members, 118 were drawn from the armed forces. The alternates, numbered 26 from the military and 24 from the civilians. The BSPP Congress set up a Committee under Brigadier San Yu to draft a new State Constitution. The Congress set up several subordinate Committees: a party Inspection Committee, a new Discipline Committee, and a Central Affairs Committee to assist the Executive Committee in formulating policies. The day-to-day affairs of the Central and Executive Committees were concentrated in the hands of a small secretariat - the Secretary General, San Yu, the Joint Secretary General, Col. Thaung Kyi, and three Senior Military Officers. As part of the "civilianization" process of converting the BSPP into a mass party, an estimated 150 to 200 top military leaders including General Ne Win, retired from the military though they continued to retain their party positions.

Thus the dominance of the military in the BSPP and the national administration, combined with the hierarchical

30. 'Party Congress' (Rangoon), July 1, 1971, p. 1.

31. The Central Committee consisted of General Ne Win, Chairman; Brigadier San Yu, Secretary General, Col. Thaung Kyi, Joint Secretary General, 11 Senior Military Officers, and U Ba Nyein, a civilian. See Working People's Daily (Rangoon), July 4, 1971, p. 1., and Forward (Rangoon), May 1, 1972.
command structure in both, effectively excluded civilian participation in either structure. Despite the "civilianization" of the RC in 1972, according to a Western analyst, the Government of Colonels still reigned supreme. 32

MASS MOBILIZATION THROUGH MASS ORGANIZATION

At the First Party Congress in June-July, 1971 General Ne Win indicated three goals for the party - Party Unity, national unity, and a new constitution for the nation. The Secretary General's report gave first priority to the drafting of a new constitution. The report also called for the formation of mass organizations under the leadership of the party. 33

Nine months after the coup, the RC had organized the first Peasants' Seminar at Ohndaw, and in 1964, at a regional seminar, the date of Peasants Day was changed from January 1 to March 2, the date of the coup. In March 1964, the delegates had decided to form Peasants' Councils. By Peasants' Day, 1972, the BSPP Central Organizing Committee (Peasants' Affairs Division) had established the Central


33. (Secretary General's Report on the First BSPP Congress), Kyemon (Rangoon), July 2, 1971.
People's Peasants Council (CPPC) with over six million members. 34

The RC had created a parallel organization for the workers. On Workers' Day, May 1, 1968, the RC had called upon the workers to form associations. A year later, workers' council were created, and active recruiting and organization had begun. By 1972, the membership had grown to be 1.5 million. This enabled the creation of a Central People's Workers Council (CPWC). 35

The only other mass organization to emerge during this period was Lanzin Youth Organization, formed on August 4, 1971, to train the youths as the "reserve forces" and future cadres of the BSPP. 36 The organisation was open to all youths between the ages of fifteen and twenty five. In due course, it was enlarged to include youths (10 to 15 years) in the Shesaung group, and Children from five to ten years of age under the Teza group. The Lanzin group was organized into committees in universities and colleges, in the armed forces and other functional units, and at the township level. Lanzin youths were given training courses in the

34. Silverstein, n.23, pp.108 ff.
party ideology, political programmes, and organizational work. They contributed "voluntary labour" at mills, factories, on construction sites, and in literacy campaigns. By 1979, 297 Township Langin Youth committees and 19 such committees in Colleges and Universities had been formed. Out of the Lanzin Youth applications numbering 530,744, a total of 436,509 applications had been selected, while 111,994 Shesaung and 739,909 Teza Youth applicants had been accepted and organized into various units, sections and groups. 37

The key role of these mass organizations in the political system was to draw the masses into controlled political activity and to create a popular base for the military in power. The RC sought to give legitimacy to their own creation, the BSPP, by placing itself technically under the party. The BSPP was, in fact, a projection of the military regime itself. 38

To be viable, the BSPP adjusted itself to the Burmese traditional environment with the elaborate, resilient and eclectic philosophy. Because the RC desired to form a vanguard party for a future, one-party state, wherein it

37. ˘î ˘ì 02 (Mass Affairs) (Rangoon BSPP Hqrs., 1979), pp.42-45.

38. John F. Cady, The United States and Burma (Massachusetts, 1976), p.239.
would seek legitimacy, the BSPP became a military class party with a civilian mask. 39

Again, it may be noticed that the second BSPP Congress, held from October 8-11, 1973, was timed prior to the holding of a national referendum seeking legitimacy of military rule. 40

In essence, the BSPP might be regarded as a social organization with political objectives. The organizational structure of the BSPP reserved the top posts to the select RC members, similar to the structural pattern of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU). The Communist Party has been the core institution of the Soviet political system. However, a comparison of this 'Party' with the 'Pluralist' Parties may not be considered appropriate. As John A. Armstrong says: "In a pluralist system there are almost always two or more parties. The party here acts as a legitimate institution for articulating the political demands of a number of groups in the society. The CPSU was given the monopoly of political articulation. It became the institutional guardian and interpreter of the ideology for indoctrinating

the people with the ideas and values of Communism." 41 The BSPP also created political auxiliary institutions where the admitees became a part of the monolithic party structure. This was evident from the Government Notification of October 1, 1963 which stated that BSPP finances were to be drawn from the national coffers. 42 In the Notification, it was stated that, "although the RC was at present holding the mantle of leadership as necessitated by circumstances, gradually it would nurture and groom the BSPP, the organization to lead the country, and transfer the mantle of leadership to it eventually." 43

The BSPP in Burma is an example of a group of authoritarian mono-party states, which have party systems, lying somewhere between the all-embracing single-party system and the totalitarian single-party system of the Communist bloc. They could be considered mechanisms devised by authoritarian leaders in their attempt to control and mobilize the masses behind them. 44


43. Ibid., p.1.

Perhaps that was why the RC gave a call: "... all peasants and workers, all intelligentsia, all government servants, all those who do not exploit others ... are encouraged to participate in the social revolution by joining the BSPP." 45