

# **Colonialism and Nationalism in Burma: A Contestation of an Embattled Country**

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## Abstract

Human history and societies have come to be perceived as a site of struggle between tribes, classes, nations: in a word, the oppressed versus the oppressor. Accordingly, it can be conceived that the *raison d'être* of colonialism and nationalism in human affairs is the product of perpetual struggle, a dilemmatic struggle that results in either domination or liberation. This paper is about empire and nationalism, their façades, and the political and legal instruments that are used to deceive the peoples of the world. The paper will focus on Burma and the nation's resistant struggle against the empire: a movement from colonialism to neo-colonialism, and towards democratic independence. Furthermore, this essay will examine the relationship between nationalism and colonialism. Arguing that while the relationship between the two ideologies may seem ironic, nationalism and colonialism can also be perceived at times complementary, at others conflicting.

## Introduction

This paper aims to explore the ways in which concerns over colonialism and nationalism have come to shape human societies from the early nineteenth century to the present. This essay will provide an exegesis on colonialism in Burma, and its impact on a nation's struggle for independence and freedom. The paper is divided into three segments: the first segment provides a conceptual background to colonialism and nationalism, this will be used to analyze Burma's history to understand the influence of colonialism on the state; the second section will examine the role nationalism has played in Burma's path towards independence. Lastly, drawing upon the consideration of how colonialism and nationalism can be mutually inclusive, the third section provides an analysis as to why colonialism is a means to group conquest and domination, while nationalism can be used to justify the exertion of power. However, unlike colonialism, which sets out to override the freedom of foreign populations, nationalism can sometimes be used

towards national independence as well as the preservation of individual rights within a state. Finally, the paper concludes with the argument that although colonialism and nationalism are both complementary ideologies- which can be used to expand and preserve group identity- nevertheless, antagonism between the two ideologies arises when colonials seek to exploit foreign nations, which in turn compels colonies to resist the empire.

### Colonialism and Nationalism: Definitions, Interpretations, and History

The roles that colonialism and nationalistic movements have played in human history have created a plurality of interpretations in the understanding of colonialism and nationalism proper. In fact, today there are various definitions and interpretations of nationalism and colonialism amongst scholars. For this reason, in order to give an analysis of Burma's history and the influence of colonialism and nationalism in the country's development, it is important to provide the various definitions and interpretations concerning the two terms. Doing so will shed light on our understanding of the legacy colonialism and nationalism have had on human history and societies.

#### **Space and Identity**

When people first began to organize themselves into groups based on a shared identity, a belief emerged that the family is a group in which individuals shared certain basic physical and mental qualities. In a way, social relations amongst individuals came to be viewed as the composition of the collective consciousness wherein an individual's consciousness became synchronised with those of others. This Hegelian conception of human nature as the component and product of dialectical social and cultural forces became relevant in how people came to identify themselves. Not only is collective consciousness an important aspect in how people came to perceive themselves, but also, the shared consciousness that a group or tribe possessed came to be understood as the product of geography. In other words, people identified themselves based on a spatial dimension, wherein on the existential level individuals became bonded to their spatial boundary. Consequently, such personal identification entailed that wherever "there is a spatial focus to the relation between individuals, place became the basis by which to distinguish persons" (Grosby, 2005, p.10). As highlighted in Grosby (2005), groups are not only defined based on the notion of a collective consciousness, but, more relevantly, it can also be understood

in terms of the relation between physical geography and a demographic group occupying a certain geographic location. With the idea that a physical location is part of one's identity, the idea of location as an area of space consisting of natural objects "is no longer merely an area of space. Rather, it becomes a space with meaning: a territory" (Grosby, 2005, p.10). In this way territory is seen as the physical and historical base in which individuals recognize their socio-spatial relationships with other members of their group.

## **Nationalism**

The belief that groups based on a shared identity also have a sacred attachment to their natural environment persisted amongst early *Homo sapiens* throughout pre-history. From an evolutionary perspective, such communitarian principles ensured the survival of the human race. It enabled humans to collectively work together and cultivate a close bond with one another. Such psychological behaviours were in conjunction with the invention of tools that improved the natural condition of the human species and also helped the human race to grow exponentially. Greater numbers meant complex socio-political structures for communities. Complexities led to the development of factions, nation-states, and empires. In a word, civilization was born because hunter-gatherer societies were forced to abandon its old ways of life due to the complex nature of social organization and the advent of population growth.

The socio-political evolution of human societies later gave rise to an ideology called *nationalism*, which is the "idea that all peoples have separate, distinct, and indissoluble features; that each is united by a common language and a common culture, and lives under a single indigenous ruler" (Pagden, 2003, p. 131), a concept that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. As McLean and McMillan (2009) observed, nationalism is the ideology that distinguishes nations on the basis of "elements which include language, culture, religion, or race" (p. 357). For this reason, we can assume that once humans began to identify themselves based on a common belief and that nationalism and nationalistic sentiment may well be part of the human genome. Conversely, whenever a nation or group came to believe in its superiority over others, the rise of national conflict arose. As such, condescending beliefs incitingly gave some nations the moral justification to exploit and subjugate foreign populations.

## **Colonialism and Nationalism as Ideologies**

Today, a nation's systematic domination and control over other nations, whether direct or indirect, have come to be known as *colonialism* and, at times, *imperialism*. With colonization, nations or empires have maintained and extended their sphere of influence through the political and economic control of other territories. One of the underlining ideologies that motivate nations to take on a colonial uniform is the idea that the natural thing for a nation to do is to grow and preserve itself. First, this naturalistic view of nations portrays colonialism "as the outgrowth of popular nationalism: an application of social Darwinism signifying the struggle between races, groups, nations, and the civilizing mission, both striving for power and prestige through cultural and religious domination of foreigners i.e., the civilized versus the uncivilized and heathens" (McLean & McMillan, 2009, p. 258).

However, in order to succeed in their quest for dominance, nationalists believed that a communitarian philosophy "that unites and regards each member of the community based on some shared history, customs and traditions, language, and values" (Dobson and Eckersley, 2006, p. 75) must be upheld and preserved. As a result, nationalists and nation-states placed greater emphasis on the *polis* (the nation, or city-state), for it was perceived as the only entity that cultivated and psychologically empowered individuals towards a sense of identity in the natural world, and that also united the people into one body. Conversely, nation-states and nationalists used colonialism as a political and legal tool in strengthening their expansion and preservation in the natural world.

### Historical Background of Burma

Having given a clarification of colonialism and nationalism, this section provides a historical analysis of Burma as a way to understand the influence of colonialism and nationalism on Burma's social and political evolution.

The historical legacy of colonialism in Burma has come to play a significant role in Burma's post-independence movements. With the rise of European imperialism in post-medieval times, European settlers began their colonial conquest on the international stage through

explorations, settlements, exploitation, and territorial expansion. These practices and policies of control of foreign lands and populations were backed up by the logistics of politics and economics of the empires. Through the territorial, political, and economic logic of empires, European colonials successfully extended their sphere of influence over the economic and political life of non-European territories.

### **British Imperial Rule over Burma**

In Southeast Asia, a sub-region of Asia, there were many European powers that colonized most countries in the area. One of the countries that were victims of European colonialism is Burma. Burma, a region in Southeast Asia, was under imperial rule for many years. The battle for Burma commenced on 1824 when British colonials set foot in the area to explore and exploit the rich natural resources of the country. This imperial conquest ended on 1885 after which Burma became part of the British Commonwealth. From this, it can be argued that the aim of empires is to extend their territorial states through the extraction of resources in peripheral areas, and this philosophy of expansionism was the dominating force and ideology compelling the British Empire to target and colonize peripheral areas like Burma. Therefore, as a rich-resource agricultural country, it was inevitable and imminent that Burma would fall victim to European colonialism. Also, not only was the country agriculturally fit, but it was also abundant in natural resources like “timber, natural gas, gem, jade, and fishery reserves” (United States. Dept. of State. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, August 3, 2011). For this reason, British colonials in Burma decided to dominate and control the economic and political life of the Burmese population, hence leading to the stagnation of Burma’s political and economic development.

### **The Unification of the Burmese People**

Falling victim to colonization and unable to progress socially and economically, the exploitation, degradation, and dehumanization that were bestowed upon them existentially degenerated the Burmese people. Conversely, with the emergence and rise of anti-colonial movements, many colonized nations began to resist the empire of the West. The global emergence of various social and political upheavals spurred many nationalist movements worldwide. These “nationalist movements seen in the developing world at the time of

decolonization were viewed as the product of different forces- i.e., the spread of communism, democratization, and the empowerment of the common person through education” (McLean & McMillan, 2009, p. 358). Also, these movements emerged neither out of the process of modernization nor the ‘Cold War’. Rather, “colonized territories were ethnically heterogeneous and the bond unifying the nationalist movement was a shared sense of difference from the colonial power; the other (Orient-East) vs. the Occident (the West)” (McLean & McMillan, 2009, p. 258). This oriental mentality and attitude promoted amongst the colonized population gave rise to a new consciousness; a philosophy which empowered colonized people to abolish the false consciousness of the East-West dichotomy. Such abolishment was vital, because from the perspective of the colonized country, the East-West dichotomy served to establish the false belief that ‘Western Nations’ are inherently superior to ‘non-Western Nations’.

As described above, the global phenomenon of anti-colonialism across many colonized nations became a source of empowerment for the marginalized population. It motivated colonized nations to oppose Western colonial powers which throughout the nineteenth century have systematically degenerated and hindered the social and economic life of the colonized people. As for Burma, the resistance of the Burmese people in the aims of overthrowing and removing the British Empire from Burma began with the outbreak of World War II. This was the period during which a “group of Burmese nationalists led by General Aung San (the founder of modern Burma) drove the British and Japanese out of Burma in short order between 1941-1945. Unfortunately, Aung San was assassinated by a jealous rival as he discussed a new constitution with his cabinet six months before formal independence from British colonial rule” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 175). Despite the assassination of Aung San, British colonial rule continued to decline as the systematic control of Burma’s political and economic activities slowly receded. More importantly, shortly after his death and with the continual pressure from the Burmese national party established by Aung San, independence was achieved as the British government accepted Aung Sang’s prior proposal for political and economic independence for the Burmese population. Henceforth, in “1947, a constitution was completed and independence was granted in January 1948” (United States. Dept. of State. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, August 3, 2011).

More relevantly, the decolonization of Burma and its national independence in 1948 followed shortly after India gained independence from the United Kingdom on August 1947. This temporal proximity vis-à-vis the national independence of India and Burma can be conceived as a snowball effect in which success in India was sufficient enough to have an indirect impact on Burma's socio-political movements against imperialism. Thus, it can be argued that the decolonization and national independence of one country in the region of Southeast Asia in a way served to indirectly amplify anti-colonial movements within the region.

### **The Struggle against Dictatorship**

Despite Burma's independence and decolonization from the British Empire, the twentieth century saw socio-political phenomena like political militias and authoritarian regimes arise in Burma. These regimes aimed to control the Burmese people through systemic oppression and violence, internal colonization, and the de-development of Burma's social and economic life. Led by General Ne Win in a 1962 coup, these regimes set out to not only oppress the Burmese people, but also to exclude all foreigners from entering Burma. With a strong and radical national sentiment, Ne Win and his regime "introduced a socialist and isolationist programme, expelling all foreign companies, closing all private schools, and nationalising all major companies and industries" (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001, xi). For this reason, the systematic "policy of total economic and political isolation from the international community resulted in an economic decline which drove the country from once being the rice of Asia to being declared the least developed country by the UN in 1987" (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001, xi). Despite the negative effect of Ne Win's regime on the Burmese population following 1962, the systemic oppression created a post-independence movement in Burma. From 1988 onward, the Burmese people nationalistically and cartographically drew a map towards freedom. With "hundreds of thousands of Burmese, [which amongst the activists] were the daughter of Aung Sang: Aung San Suu Kyi; all took to the streets to demand an end to military oppression" (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001, xi).

In retrospect, the legacies that colonialism and nationalism bequeathed to Burma have come to show how the two ideologies can be used as complementary forces to expand and preserve group identities. However, it is plausible to argue that sometimes colonialism and

nationalism can conflict with each other. For the former ideology can also be used by empires as a moral justification for the domination and conquest of foreign territories, while the latter sets out to preserve a national or group identity. Thus, colonialism can be seen as an offensive tool, whereas nationalism is both offensive and defensive in nature. In the case of Burma, Hobbs (1947) notes the departure of colonialism “after the British evacuation in 1942, nationalism found expression in a variety of ways: (1) English was abolished as the official language in favor of Burmese; (2) a movement was launched to standardize the Burmese language; (3) English names of streets, buildings, and parks in most cities and towns were given Burmese equivalents; (4) statues and memorials to Burmese national heroes were erected; and (5) the British blue ensign mounted with a peacock was replaced by a gold, green, and red flag with the peacock medallion” (p. 117).

### Analysis

Given the historical analysis on the influence of colonialism and nationalism on Burma from colonization to decolonization, one can see the role nationalism has played in Burma’s independence movements over the years. In fact, the antagonism between colonialism and nationalism shows that colonization by non-European countries was not only counteracted by anti-colonial movements; rather, the cause behind these movements was backed up by nationalistic sentiments that the colonized populace developed. And in Burma it was individuals like Aung Sang who decided to start a national uprising to overthrow the British presence in Burma. Also, nationalism brought about a kind of national identity and value amongst colonized people. For this reason, the majority of the Burmese people became aware that under British imperial rule, their identity and values as a community were receding and degenerating. As a result, and as the population became more educated, empowered, and united, Burmese nationalism began to grow, thus giving rise to a national revolution in the country. When this national coup d’état succeeded, Burma gained national independence from the British Empire. However, the country was overtaken by military rulers and once again it was nationalism that created a national awareness for the Burmese people. And this national awareness helped the majority of the Burmese to fight against internal oppression established by the authoritarian regime of Ne Win.

### **Nationalism: Aberration or Social Progress?**



By contrast, it is important to note that nationalism and colonialism are not always conflicting ideologies, for extreme forms of nationalism can also lead a country to dominate other countries. An example of extreme nationalism is 'ethnic' and 'civic' nationalism. Ethnic and civic nationalism are extreme forms of national sentiments, because their aim is to categorise and classify individuals based on their ethnic or religious ties with members within the political boundary. These ideologies are often supported by the myths and traditions of the nation, and the practices of exclusion through inclusion. In other words, nations are constructed based on the notion of 'us' versus 'them'. This approach to nationalism and its relation to colonialism provide us with different views about how the issues of colonialism and nationalism have changed over time, and how one ought to approach these issues today.

Although "nationalism is specifically a modern phenomenon, it replaced the relationship of lordship (oppressor) and bondage (oppressed) in exchange for a *cosmopolis* society in which there persisted mutual and equal recognition of all" (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 266). Nevertheless, the fact that nationalism somewhat abolished the feudal caste system does not mean that nationalism protects the oppressed from the oppressor. This is because extreme nationalism or national movements, once established, are also capable of oppressing the marginalized population through military juntas, as in the case of the military coup that took place in Burma in 1962, and the dispute between Serbs and Croats which led to civil unrest and eventually military conflict from 1991 to 1995. For this reason, nationalism should not only be viewed as a democratic and egalitarian ideology which strives to rescue the oppressed majority from its oppressors. On the contrary, it can be 'inegalitarian' in the sense that "it extends recognition only to members of a given national or ethnic group, and such ideology can give rise to internal ethnic and civil conflict" (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 266).

Also, the dignity that nationalists "seek to have recognized is not universal human dignity, but the dignity of their group members which in a way can lead to potential conflict with other groups who are also seeking recognition" (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 266). Thus, nationalism and colonialism can be harmonized into a dynastic ambition solely for imperialistic motives.

With the above analysis on nationalism and its relation to colonialism, the paper has shown that colonialism and nationalism are forces that can sometimes conflict each other. In Burma, for example, the conflict between the British Empire and the Burmese population

signifies that colonialism and nationalism are two opposing forces. From the perspective of the Burmese nationalist party, in order to attain national sovereignty, it was in the nation's best interest to oppose their colonial masters. Conversely, the British Empire thought it was in their best interest to maintain domination and extend their sphere of influence over the region of Burma. This is because the continual domination and exploitation of foreign lands and foreign resources allowed the empire to prosper and grow economically.

### Conclusion

In examining Burma's historical background to understand nationalism and its relation to colonialism, this paper has provided some facts and arguments as to why nationalism and colonialism can be both complementary and, simultaneously, conflicting ideologies. For example, from the perspective of the British Empire, colonialism and nationalism were both seen as mutually inclusive ideologies which enabled the British nationalists to expand their empire by dominating other territories. This systematic control of foreigners helped the British to preserve their national identity, and at the same time extend their national influence to other nations. Conversely, the Burmese nationalist party and the British colonials were two opposing groups. From Burma's perspective, colonialism was a threat to Burma's national autonomy. It became a hindrance to the nation's political and economic development.

Lastly, as described, antagonism between the two ideologies arises when colonials seek to exploit foreign nations, which in turn compels colonies to resist the empire. And in the case of Burma, nationalism and colonialism have played a major role in the nation's development. For unlike colonialism, which sets out to override the freedom of the Burmese populace, nationalism has not only given nations under imperial rule a sense of identity and value; it has consciously awakened the oppressed majority in a way that impelled the oppressed to embrace their traditional identity, and as a result, has brought about social, political, and economic change. Hence, the struggle for independence and national autonomy signifies that the antagonism between colonialism and nationalism represents the battle against oppression. Like all liberation movements (i.e., civil rights, human rights, democratization, etc.), nationalism can sometimes be used towards national independence, and also the preservation of individual rights in a political boundary, while colonialism is seen as a threat to individual natural freedom.

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