

**THE ANTI-FASCIST LEAGUE:
A NEW FORCE IN BURMAN POLITICS**

The British forces returning to Burma in 1945 found a single, well-organized group—the Anti-Fascist League (AFL)—politically dominant among the Burmans. The AFL and its military arm—the Burma National Army (BNA)—cooperated fully with the liberating armies. However, if re-establishment of British rule in Burma was facilitated by the AFL and the BNA, it is also complicated by the existence of a strong, nationalist political organization.

The AFL, which apparently includes most of Burma's political groups, was organized as an underground movement during 1944 by members of the revolutionary nationalist Thakin Party. Its objectives were to expel the Japanese and to work for Burmese independence. In the fall of 1944 the BNA offered guerrilla aid to the Allies and in March 1945 committed fully organized units against the retreating Japanese. Realizing the growing power of the AFL, under the strong leadership of Thakin General Aung San, the British decided to make use of the League in the task of restoring law and order in Burma. The Burmese people, heartily tired of war and anxious for security, have followed the leadership of the AFL in supporting the British. As a result the Government of Burma, exiled in India during the war years, is expected to begin replacing the British Army's Burma Civil Affairs government in the fall of 1945.

The Thakin leaders who dominate the AFL have consistently demanded full Burman independence from British rule and have even favored fighting for this goal. The League's present policy, however, is to seek a comprehensive national political organization which will be sufficiently strong and united to win self-government from the British, without recourse to arms. This policy undoubtedly is based upon a realistic appraisal of current BNA limitations, the low potential of Burma's war devastated economy, and the war weariness of the Burman people.

The violently anti-British Thakins, taking Tokyo's Greater East Asia propaganda at face value, helped the Japanese in the conquest of Burma in 1942. However, when the Japanese failed to give them as prominent a role as they expected in Burma's new government and when they saw that Japanese rule did not really mean independence, they became bitterly disaffected. In the summer of 1944, furthermore, after the failure of the Japanese drive into India, a serious rift developed between the Thakins and the Burma puppet government. In August 1944 the puppet premier, Ba Maw, in an effort to suppress growing opposition, dissolved

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all political parties. To replace them he established the *Mahabama Asiayone* or Greater Burma Association, designed to unite all Burman factions into one patriotic league to support his government. Individual opposition leaders were kept in the Cabinet in order to preserve the appearance of solidarity. In effect, however, the opposition was forced underground and individual Thakins took the initiative in directing it. Some Thakins actually split off from their party organization, calling themselves Communists. Others were anxious to drop their affiliation with a party which had a collaborationist record. Another element fled with puppet premier Ba Maw as Allied troops advanced. The Thakin Party as such is now on the point of dissolution.

A small radical section in the League continues to advocate the old Thakin policy of winning Burma's independence through recourse to arms. This faction, however, is not strong enough to disrupt present League unity. Since the Japanese defeat in Burma the majority of the AFL leaders repudiated their former Thakin program in favor of a policy of organized but peaceful popular pressure for Burman independence. They have clearly decided to capitalize on the "light hand" policy which Supreme SEAC Commander Mountbatten has adopted. Certain leading elements in the League are well aware that, having greatly assisted the Japanese in the early phases of the war, they could be severely dealt with as collaborators. Good relations with Great Britain will give AFL leaders the time necessary to shape the League into an effective bargaining body, and an opportunity for those with collaborationist records to redeem themselves.

The League now embraces various factions of the former Thakin Party, including a small Communist group, former Premier U Saw's Myochit (Patriotic) Party, Ba Pe's moderate United Party, the East Asia Youth League (EAYL), certain politically active *pongyi* (Buddhist priest) groups, and a number of non-political organizations. Efforts are being made to consolidate and centralize the national structure of the League. AFL district branches and local cells are being instructed to affiliate themselves more closely with League headquarters in Rangoon. Individual Burmans who wish to join the League and independent groups which resisted the Japanese are being asked to register. Furthermore, the League is seeking to gain the support of labor and agricultural groups by building up a reputation as a sponsor of new farmers' cooperatives and labor unions.

The cement which now holds the highly disparate parts of the League together is the common objective of self-government for Burma. Rival leaders within the League have merged their differences temporarily to achieve a goal which they consider obtainable only by presenting a united front to the British. Furthermore, the dynamic leadership of the youthful Thakins, who are backed by the BNA, has won such a large measure of public support that the older parties have realized the political necessities of joining forces with them. The younger leadership of the AFL is anxious to hold early elections on the purely political issue of Burma's relation to Great Britain. If elections are long delayed, basic

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differences among the various parties now belonging to the League may well become more pronounced, with more moderate groups tending once again to reach a compromise with the British in order to gain political power. Furthermore, AFL leaders are temporarily minimizing economic issues because they know that Burma will be able to restrict foreign economic exploitation in the country only after achieving political autonomy. They fear that economic rehabilitation under exclusive British control would leave the British in a position to make economic reservations whenever self-government is conceded.

In general, League leaders have expressed satisfaction with the present attitude of cooperation shown them by high British authorities. The British Civil Affairs Service is much perturbed by growing Burman nationalist influence, but has nevertheless allowed high-ranking AFL officials to attend weekly meetings where all civil questions are open for discussion. Admiral Mountbatten has in fact permitted a greater degree of political freedom than Governor Dorman-Smith's counselors have thought advisable. Political meetings among the Burmese are apparently allowed upon the procurement of permits. Few requests have been refused. Although the Burmans are dissatisfied with the British treatment of BNA units, the British reportedly plan to recognize the BNA as a part of the Allied Forces of South East Asia. Demobilization of the BNA would prove a very difficult task, and might precipitate open rebellion.

AFL leaders believe that, by presenting a united front, the various races of Burma could apply enough pressure on Great Britain to force the granting of early dominion status. For this reason they consider undesirable the creation of separate communal privileges for Karens and Indians and are much opposed to continued British control of the Shan States. If an interim rule for mountainous border areas of Burma is necessary, the League would probably demand that it be administered by an international trusteeship.

The AFL has not officially indicated any dissatisfaction with British proposals for Burma's political future as interpreted at Rangoon on 20 June by Governor Dorman-Smith. The British White Paper of 24 May 1945 merely outlined, with no time-limit guarantees, a series of steps which Burma would have to follow to attain self-government, whereas the Governor indicated his strong determination to hasten the process. Some observers believe that the League, along with most Burmans, will be satisfied with dominion status as an intermediate objective if such status is quickly and unequivocally granted. Other League objectives include: (1) The maintenance of an independent National Defense Army, such as the BNA; (2) United Nations responsibility for the protection of Burma rather than reliance upon the promises and convenience of the British Empire; (3) a place in the world peace organization and the right of self-determination; (4) freedom to trade with all countries and to seek foreign capital and technical aid other than British, and (5) a new channel for presenting Burma's problems to the world in their true light.

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