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Taylor, Robert H.

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# The Causes of the Proclivity towards Factionalism in the Political Parties of Myanmar

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/saa](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/saa)**Robert H. Taylor****Abstract**

Factionalism has been a dominant factor in the formation and management of political parties in Myanmar. Since the first elections in 1922 until the most recent in 2015, ideological and programmatic differences, as well as personalities and competition for resources, have encouraged the growth of factionalism.

**Keywords**

Myanmar, political parties, factionalism

Since the first elections for a “national”-level legislative assembly in the most heavily populated districts of the British Indian province of Burma in 1922, to the most recent elections for the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) and state/regional legislatures<sup>1</sup> in 2015, the formation and functioning of political parties in Myanmar has been dependent on the policies of the previous autocratic government, British colonial or army dominated. The creation of representative institutions has resulted from the perceived need on the part of the previous regime to ensure the survival of its long-term interests in terms of political stability, economic prosperity, and state security. This has consequently raised ideological and programmatic issues upon which political leaders may differ, hence leading to factionalism, leaving aside issues of personalities and competition for resources and power.

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London, UK

**Corresponding author:**

Robert H. Taylor, 13 Baron Close, London N11 3PS, UK

Email: [dr.tinhla@gmail.com](mailto:dr.tinhla@gmail.com)



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The creation of political parties formed to respond to the requirements of electoral politics faced opportunities and challenges generated not only by government policies but also by the historical legacies created by earlier policies as represented in the perceived interests of the electorate. This is the context in which electoral institutions have operated. Moreover, the politicians who undertook to create and lead political parties also faced the challenge of how to organise and fund their organisations in addition to how to change the legal or constitutional requirements of the system they were expected to manage to the advantage of their authoritarian creators as well as to the electorate. Thus, political party leaders were and are caught in a vortex of changing policies, interests, and requirements over which they have little ultimate control. In the Myanmar case, it is not surprising that factionalism has occurred with some frequency in the absence of one unifying person or, less often, ideology, principle, or goal, which united political activists and partially suppressed the “demand for deference” which drives public figures (Lasswell, 1977[1920]).

The most recent manifestation of this process was the result of the intention of the Myanmar army government, known finally as the State Peace and Development Council, to create, from 1988 onwards, a multi-party political system after the economic failure of the previous army created socialist one party system under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) (Taylor, 2015). The bankruptcy of the socialist regime generated great political discontent which in turn manifested itself as what came to be known as a “pro-democracy” movement after General Ne Win, the man of created the old regime, proposed reverting to the multi-party political system which he had destroyed twenty-six years earlier. This resulted over time in the creation of two dominant political parties and a plethora of lesser ones organised around particular individuals, strategic positions, or claims to power based on alleged ethnic identities. The two dominant parties represented, respectively, defending the old, militarily dominated order, or a popular movement, led by a dominant figure coming from Myanmar’s earlier history. This article will begin by examining the growth of factionalism in the major and some of the minor parties generated by this process during more than a quarter of a century leading up to the 2015 elections and their aftermath before examining the legacies of previous party systems.

## **The National League for Democracy**

The National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed on 27 September 1988 following the establishment of a new military government which promised to hold national elections “as soon as possible” (SLORC, 1988). Brigadier (retired) Aung Gyi, General (retired) Tin U, and recently returned to Myanmar and the only daughter of national hero General Aung San, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, were the initial instigators. Each brought his or her own followers along with them. Each had spoken at rival anti-BSPP rallies in the weeks leading up to the autocoup of 18 September when the army replaced the old socialist order. Thus, from the beginning, the NLD was very much in the nature of a coalition with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi becoming eventually very much *primus inter pares* despite her relative youth and lack of previous political or administrative

experience.<sup>2</sup> However, much of the party's initial support and its eventual electoral triumph drew on the profile of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in her role as General Secretary of the Party and eventual Chairman. Her international idolisation, commencing with many international awards including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and her prominent role in criticising the socialist–military regime of her father's successor, General Ne Win, won instant popularity.

Aung Gyi's support came from the business community and as a result of open letters he had written to Ne Win in the months leading up to the anti-BSPP demonstrations. Tin U's support was derived from his previously popularity as Ne Win's commander-in-chief of the armed forces, a position from which he was removed and eventually imprisoned in the 1970s. At the meeting where the three leaders formed the party, each was backed by three persons from their respective entourages. The three supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi were a senior journalist who developed the party's strategy of passive resistance to the army government and drafted the party's Soviet style constitution, U Win Tin; a feisty lady lawyer; and a movie actor. Reflecting the army careers of the other leaders, the six they brought in, known as *Myo Chits* (patriots), had all served in the army. Some had been dismissed for interfering on the side of the major losing party in the last multi-party elections held in 1960 elections such as U Chit Khaing and U Aung Shwe. Some had served General Ne Win longer, such a U Kyi Maung.

NLD party organisational work soon commenced with Aung Gyi, on his way to the town of Myamyo (now Pwin-Oo-Lwin), stopped at towns on his route and announced that those who donated Ks. 30,000 (then about US\$2,000) to the party would become NLD candidates. Aung Gyi, who went into business after leaving the army, was known for his organisational skills as well as his commercial nous. Aung San Suu Kyi, however, disagreed with Aung Gyi's fundraising tactics and on her organisational tour to major towns in the four central divisions of the country denounced his appeal to the wealthy.<sup>3</sup> A class-based fissure thus appeared within a month of the party's formation. As Suu Kyi toured, she was often met by self-appointed NLD committees composed of Chairman and Secretaries wearing *gaung baungs* (formal male head gear) and *longvis*, with their wives decked out in silks with long scarves just like the former BSPP when in power.

The party suffered its first factional fight, however, not over its fund-raising tactics but on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's choice and advisors and aids from outside the retired army group, especially U Win Tin and Thakin Mya. The latter, a former follower of Red Flag Communist leader Thakin Soe, and subsequently a supporter of the BSPP, was accused by Aung Gyi of still being a Communist. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's aunt, Daw Khin Kyi, the wife of former White Flag Communist leader Thakin Than Tun, also resided in her compound which became the de facto party headquarters. Aung Gyi then left the NLD to form his own Union National Democracy Party (UNDP) along with U Ba Shwe and U Kyi Hang who also left the League. Tin U then became NLD Chairman and Win Tin succeeded him as deputy chairman.

Within two months of Aung Gyi leaving the party, factionalism once more appeared among the party leadership. By then the ex-army group, the *myo chits*, were antagonising the civilian faction, known as the *Intelligentsia* led by Win Tin. He called for the formation of a separate party with Tin U and Aung San Suu Kyi as its patrons. This they

refused to contemplate and the party remained formally united under Suu Kyi's growing domination. At her instigation, the NLD organised a women's section despite being advised against the move by other women. No women other than Suu Kyi was included in the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) or its newly formed thirty-member Central Committee. The socialist party language and structure of the party was no accident as this was the only model of a party familiar to Win Tin and others who were shaping its structure around the wishes of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, other parties were being formed. In the months following the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) confirmation of elections, 243 were said to have been registered with the Election Commission established by the government. One, the Democratic Party for a New Society, led by student activists in the demonstrations in the previous year, struck out separately from the NLD. It was, however, getting attention and public exposure from Aung San Suu Kyi, irritating members of the NLD's own youth organisation. The NLD also spawned the Party for National Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin as a proxy in case the military government banned the NLD. Its leader, Dr. Sein Win, won the seat earmarked for her in the 1990 election after she was declared ineligible to stand as her given home address was in Oxford. He later formed the exile National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) in a failed attempt to establish a parallel government. The NCGUB became, in turn a subordinate element of the National Council of the Union of Burma, a coalition of armed ethnic opponents of the military government and exile political organisations and led initially by Bo Mya, the commander of the Karen National Liberation Army and the Karen National Union, the country's oldest armed ethnically designated group.

Factionalism within the NLD was temporarily halted on 20 July 1989 when Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest and other senior party leaders were arrested then or in the next two months. This followed her announcement at a press conference on 26 June that she believed that former General Ne Win was still running the country and that it was the duty of all to "defy unlawful commands in the present struggle for democracy." Then on Martyrs' Day, the anniversary of her father's assassination in 1947, she refused an invitation from the government to lay a wreath at her father's grave along with other martyr's families and her brother and threatened to lead a separate NLD march to the Martyrs' mausoleum. Two days before she had learned that the Myo Chit leaders had intended to join the official ceremony and she denounced them in no uncertain terms. On the day of the march, she called it off though many got the news too late and suffered detention by the police and army.

Elections were held in May, 1990, with the leadership of the NLD in the hands of U Kyi Maung, U Aung Shwe, and other old soldiers. Nonetheless, the party won about 60 per cent of the vote and 80 per cent of the seats in the constituent assembly that the government said had to draw up a new constitution to be approved at a referendum before a civilian government could be formed following fresh elections. The National Unity Party (NUP), the successor to the BSPP, received approximately 25 per cent of the vote but won only 10 seats under Myanmar's first past the post electoral system. The UNDP won but one seat and twenty parties with ethnic designations won one or more seats. The NLD refused the army's terms for forming a constituent assembly, and

demanded power be passed to a new government, though there were differences of opinion on the way forward, and the army effectively then nullified the election result.<sup>5</sup>

The NLD then entered into an adumbral phase. In October the following year Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and was then expelled from the party by its leaders, under the control of the Myo Chit faction but under pressure from the government, three months later. Following a change in the leadership of the SLORC, as the army government was then known, a number of political prisoners were released in April 1992, and more than two thousand more than a year later. On 9 January 1993, the SLORC convened a National Convention to draw up a new constitution under army auspices and the NLD agreed to participate as a minority of attendees, the majority being chosen by the government. The convention continued to meet spasmodically over the next three and a half years. The Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and at a press conference on 17 July 1995 called for economic sanctions to be applied to Myanmar and insisted on “dialogue or devastation.”

On 11 October, Aung San Suu Kyi was reinstated as General Secretary of the NLD and just over a month later the party withdrew from the national convention after she said it did not represent the people. Suu Kyi was clearly back in control of the party and what factionalism as had existed was held in check for most of the succeeding years as she became to dominate party decisions. Her word became unquestioned and unquestionable. Despite various restrictions place on her and her party, the NLD held a three-day congress in May 1996. Resolutions passed called for the NLD to draft a new constitution and reinstatement of the 1990 election results. In the following month, she admitted that the party was not well organised and the government press announced many resignations from the NLD. She claimed that members were blackmailed into leaving. In a videotape smuggled from Myanmar in mid-1996, she called for economic sanctions to be applied to “make it clear that economic change in Burma is not possible without political dialogue.” She further alleged that the only people affected by such sanctions would be “the privileged.”<sup>6</sup>

On 26 September, the NLD attempted to hold a second party congress in Aung San Suu Kyi’s compound and the next day the police prevented her from speaking to the public. Over 550 supporters had been arrested the day before. In the following year, splits within the party were revealed when U Than Tun and U Thein Kyi were expelled for advocating a less uncompromising posture in entering into talks with the government (Callahan, 2005). U Kyi Maung left the party in mid-1997 as he became increasingly disenchanted with the General Secretary’s leadership and personal behaviour (Aye Aye Win, 2004).

From September, 1990, for the next decade, Aung San Suu Kyi, despite failed attempts by the United Nations intermediaries, countless resolutions of condemnation, and occasional meetings between her and senior government figures, was held mostly under house arrest. All of the NLD’s branch offices were closed and the only visible evidence of the party was its small headquarters office near the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. In the meantime, the government had reconvened the constituent assembly, held a referendum on the resulting constitution, and held new elections in November 2010. The day following the elections, she was released from arrest. The NLD had refused to stand in

the elections and when it refused to re-register with the Election Commission effectively had become an illegal organisation.

According to the party's Shwegondine Declaration of 29 April 2009, the NLD would not stand in any election under the new constitution because of its undemocratic features, such as 25 per cent of the members of the legislative bodies being appointed by the army and the exclusion of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as serving as president. This remained the party's position and it played no role in the first year of the sitting of the new Pyidaungsu Hluttaw after elections won by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), an army created party about which more below. The creation of a quasi-civilian government under the previous army appointed Prime Minister, President Thein Sein, and his efforts at liberalisation, despite the unchanged nature of the constitution, convinced, for a variety of as yet undisclosed reasons, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi to stand in bye-elections called for May 2012. In the meantime, Suu Kyi had become Chairman of the NLD, with the General Secretary role unfilled.

However, before then, the NLD suffered its last rupture before the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. The National Democratic Force (NDF) rejected the NLD's Shwegondine Declaration and chose to stand in the 2010 elections on the argument that accepting the army sponsored constitution was the only realistic way to advance the cause of establishing a civilian party regime. It, along with the USPD and the NUP, the successor to the BSPP, was the only party to run candidates in most of the constituencies in the election. However, the party won just eight seats in the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (People's Assembly) and ten in the *Amyotha Hluttaw* (Nationalities Assembly) plus four in the Yangon regional assembly. Soon after the election, the NDF also split with two elected members forming a new party, the New National Democracy Party, and another rejoining the NLD. The NDF stood in eleven constituencies in the 2012 bye-elections and many more in the 2015 elections but won no seats in either.

With the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD was once more focussed on its paramount leader. She dominated the campaign for the 2012 bye-elections and her party won forty-three of the forty-four seats it contested. There were forty-five constituencies for which elections were then held. Following her and her fellow party members joining the national legislature, she travelled repeatedly but as the 2015 elections came nearer, she took firm control of the party, choosing personally its candidates and disciplining or expelling members who violated her understanding of the party's policies and interests.

The NLD has, all along, been betting on its chairperson Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's charisma and popularity to deliver victory at the polls. She was a one-woman election machine, relentlessly leading the charge, exploiting the polity's frustrations over the incumbent regimes' apparent failure to deliver reform dividends to the grass roots and falling short on its ambitious objectives of rooting out corruption and drastically reducing poverty. Emphasizing that there was no "real" change despite the multitude of reform measures instituted by the government, she travelled extensively in Myanmar in what could be described as quasi-campaigning well before the official election period. (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2016)

The result was an overwhelming victory for the NLD. The party won 135 out of 168 contested seats in the *Amyotha Hluttaw*, 255 seats out of 323 in the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, and

476 out of 629 in the regional and state assemblies with between 76 per cent and 80 per cent of the vote in each category. Although the constitution barred Aung San Suu Kyi from the Presidency, she clearly, as NLD Chairman, was in a position to determine the next government despite the 25 per cent of the seats in each assembly held by the army.

The fear of factionalism among so large and diverse number of elected members, as well as the danger of overly antagonising the army and its members of the legislature, has led the NLD leadership to reinforce a rule laid down during the election campaign. That is that only Aung San Suu Kyi or her designated spokesperson could speak on behalf of the party. Known as the *mani* or “iron rules” by the party’s Hluttaw members, all were sworn “not to share party information without permission from the NLD leadership.” So far the rule seems to have been obeyed, but it is, of course, early days (Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 2016). As long as Aung San Suu Kyi can maintain her dominance over the party, she who must be obeyed can control her followers. She is, however, seventy-two years of age and is driven by many concerns in her official roles as Minister of Foreign Affairs and State Counsellor “over” her first chosen President, U Htin Kyaw. To date, the NLD in government has avoided the problem of factionalism. How long will it be before the NLD fractions as it did in the past or so many other Myanmar political parties have during earlier periods of party government? Time will tell.

## The USDP

The USDP developed out of very different circumstances that its main rival, the NLD. Originally formed in 1993 as the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) as what under the previous socialist regime would have been referred to as a “mass and class” organisation, by 2005 it claimed to have twenty-three million members, approximately half of the population of the country. Its head was the chairman of the ruling SLORC and its leaders were government ministers. The core of the organisation were civil servants and others closely related to the government. It had an organisational representation in every township in the country and most village and urban tracts. There was little spontaneous about membership and participation in its rallies, and meetings to receive government ministers were considered necessary as part of one’s responsibilities in the community.

Prior to the 2010 elections, the USDA was converted into a government-sponsored political party. However, officially it was divorced from the government as civil servants are not permitted to participate in political affairs. In the absence of any significant opposition, the USDA easily won the 2010 elections. It took 50 per cent of votes and won 129 seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw to the NUP’s 19 per cent and only 5 seats, while in the Pyithu Hluttaw vote it won 57 per cent of the votes and took 259 seats to the NUP’s 12 seats and 19 per cent of the vote.

Given the authoritarian nature of the army government which established the USDA, there were never any obvious factions within the organisation, despite evidence of factionalism in the army and government, particularly in 2004 when the Prime Minister and Head of Military Intelligence, General Khin Nyunt, and his entourage were arrested and removed from office. However, soon after the formation of the first semi-civilian



government established in 2011 under the 2008 constitution, a fissure in the USDP began to appear. Not initially obvious, in retrospect it would appear that the rupture was the result of the choice by the outgoing head of the regime, Senior General Than Shwe, over who was to become the first president under the new order. Until the last minute, it was widely assumed that the choice would be the number three man in the ruling Council, General Thura Shwe Mann, then commander of the army. However, on the day when he and other top officials visited the new Hluttaw building with the Senior General, it was obvious that the choice was the then Prime Minister, General Thein Sein. On Than Shwe's retirement from public life on 1 April 2011, Thein Sein succeeded him as Party Chairman. However, under the terms of Myanmar's 2009 constitution, he could not be involved in political party affairs, so Shwe Mann became acting chairman in his stead.

Shwe Mann was then made Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw, a job which he undertook with great determination, quickly coming into conflict with President Thein Sein over the powers of the Hluttaw relative to the executive branch. Also, under the doctrine that there is no official opposition in the Myanmar legislature, he and the Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw ensured that members of political parties other than the USDP were appointed to legislative committees. Soon after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the other 42 members of the NLD elected in the 2012 bye-elections entered the legislature, they were given posts. Suu Kyi was made chairman of a newly formed Law, Peace and Tranquillity Committee of the lower house. She and Shwe Mann from then on met frequently and apparently developed a close working relationship.

Shwe Mann, who at the end of two years as Pyithu Hluttaw speaker, became simultaneously speaker of the Union Hluttaw. Shwe Mann's public visibility was very high during these years and cooperation with Suu Kyi even led to speculation that she might choose him as president following the 2015 elections which the NLD were expected to win. However, before that could happen, Shwe Mann and other members known to be close to him were ousted from their positions in the party four months prior to the elections. He had allegedly refused to appoint candidates favourable to Thein Sein in key constituencies but was filling vacancies with individuals favourable to himself. Nonetheless, Shwe Mann remained a member of the party and campaigned as a USDP candidate. However, he subsequently lost his seat in the Hpyu constituency despite the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi did not campaign in his constituency and Shwe Mann had used his connections with the indigenous business community to develop facilities in the town (Belford, 2015). He was opposed by an independent, U Ko Ko Kyaw, a personal aide to the President. U Htay Oo, the General Secretary of the USDP, served as acting chairman in the interim.

Following the overwhelming defeat of the USDP and the handover of power from President Thein Sein to President Htin Kyaw on 1 April 2016, Thein Sein soon resumed the role as Chairman of the Party. Approximately three weeks later, Shwe Mann and sixteen other USDP members were expelled for "not obeying party rules and disciplines" and were "allowed to leave the party." This followed Shwe Mann's acceptance of an offer from NLD Chairman Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to chair the Hluttaw Legal Affairs and Special Cases Amendment Commission. The committee, created by Shwe Mann when he was a legislator, is an extra-legislative body that advises the Hluttaw on legal

matters and revising existing laws. In addition to Shwe Mann, some of the other sixteen expelled were made member of the Committee (Wai Mar Tun, 2016).

Among those also expelled was U Maung Maung Thein, former Deputy Finance Minister involved with establishing Myanmar's first stock market, and U Aung Ko, a former Brigadier General and USDP member of the Hluttaw who lost his seat in 2015. Aung Ko is now Minister for Religious Affairs in the NLD lead government of President Htin Kyaw. Also expelled was U Thein Swe, former party spokesman and Minister for Transport. He is now Minister for Labour, Immigration and Population. At the time of Shwe Mann's removal from the acting chairmanship, Presidential Spokesman U Ye Htut said had made some "questionable decisions" in his own interests and not that of the party or the country. He accused Shwe Mann of trying repeatedly "to force his will on other people" (Shwe Mann, 2015). Among other things, Shwe Mann had promised to amend the constitution to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to be elected president.

The army, which controls three ministries in the government, Home, Defence, and Border Affairs, has a majority on the National Defence Council and occupies 25 per cent of the seats in the legislatures, and thus an effective veto on amendment of fundamental constitutional principles, worked closed with the USDP government under Thein Sein. Army leaders were said, like Thein Sein and others in the government, to have come increasingly to distrust and even dislike Shwe Mann, despite, or perhaps because, of their previous responsibilities to him as commander of the armed forces.<sup>7</sup> While factionalism among members of the army leadership had been unsubstantiated, despite claims about "hard liners" and "liberals" vying for influence, since the ouster of General Khin Nyunt in 2004. The initial signs of a division between Shwe Mann and his faction and Thein Sein and his could even have been interpreted as staged to demonstrate the increasingly "democratic" values of the former generals. The events of 2015 and 2016, however, dispelled such an interpretation.

The army leaderships' antagonism towards Shwe Mann became public when, on 27 April 2016, it published a statement attacking a Facebook posting by him on the forty-seventh anniversary of his graduation from the eleven intake of the Defence Services Academy. Accusing Shwe Mann of trying to drive a wedge between serving and retired army officers, and the besmirch the reputation of the current army leadership, he was denounced in no uncertain terms. Shwe Mann, who questioned whether his expulsion from the USDP was legal, urged his former military colleagues to support the NLD government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Shwe Mann, 2016a, 2016b). At the time of writing, it is unclear what will be the ultimate result of the fissure between Shwe Mann, on the one side, and Thein Sein and the army leadership, on the other. So far, Shwe Mann has not joined the NLD but others expelled have appealed the decision.

## **Factionalism among Minor Parties**

In addition to the USDP and NLD, there were three other significant non-ethnically designated political parties which contested the 2015 elections, but only one, the Democratic Party (Myanmar), won any seats; in this case, only one regional/state assembly seat. Seventeen parties which claimed to represent the interests of particularly

ethnic minorities also won seats in one or more of the sixteen legislatures formed under the 2008 constitution. Only two managed to achieve a total of ten or more elected representatives, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy under the leadership of Khun Htun Oo, a veteran politician who served a number of years in prison and enjoys the kind of fame that only Aung San Suu Kyi can outshine, and the Arakan National Party (ANP).

The other ethnically designated party which did well in 2015 was the ANP. The ANP won ten seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw and twelve in the Pyithu Hluttaw, plus a majority in the Rakhaing State Hluttaw, twenty-two seats. The ANP was formed after eighteen months of negotiations by two parties which had stood in the 2010 elections and tended to split the ethnic vote, allowing the USDP to dominate the election. By merging the Rakhaing Nationalities Development Party, under its Chairman Dr. Aye Maung, and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), under Aye Tha Aung, the ANP was able to do better, relatively speaking, than any other ethnically designated party in the country.

However, four months after the election, and as the new Hluttaw was being formed in Naypyitaw, the ANP split asunder over some of its members co-operation with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Six members of the ANP leadership who had previously led the ALD were removed from their posts at a two-day party meeting in mid-March. The six CEC members had previously held a press conference where they criticised the direction in which the party was going. The only former ALD member who remained in the CEC was Aye Tha Aung who had accepted the deputy speakership of the Amyotha Hluttaw (Moe Myint, 2016a).

The continued membership of Aye Tha Aung in the ANP leadership is curious in as much as the ostensible reason for the press conference by the six expelled was that the party position of not entering into cross-party collaboration until they were able to form their own state government under an ANP leader. Under the constitution, appointment of state premiers is the prerogative of the President and Htin Kyaw has appointed only NLD members to these posts (Moe Myint, 2016b). Politics in Rakhaing state are, and have been, highly factionalised for many years. While the clash within the ANP was underway, fighting was taking place between the government army and the Arakan Army, an insurgent band. Both the ANP and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), which signed a ceasefire with the government the previous year, urged an end to the fighting, with the ALP placing the onus of responsibility on the government forces (ANP, ALP, 2016).

When one examines the histories of the major political parties in Myanmar today, the NLD and the USPD, one finds that the former has become more and more unified under the dominance of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi while the USDP has become increasingly factionalised, especially around the persons of two prominent leaders from the old military regime, former Generals Thein Sein and Shwe Mann. Suu Kyi's dominance has come at a price, however, in terms of limiting interparty democracy and allowing her to run a government that in its first months in office seems to lack a new strategy or innovative policies to tackle the country's most crucial problems, resolving the years of ethnically designated armed insurgency and developing the economy to end the years of poverty that has made Myanmar one of the world's poorest countries.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is now seventy-two years of age and has taken on a huge burden as minister and state counsellor above the president. She has held the party together by her will and the legacy of her father's role in Myanmar's history. What will happen to her party when her will weakens and she eventually leaves the scene remains unknown. The two principal figures in the USDP factional struggles are also in their late 60s or early 70s and are but mortal. Their divide appears to have been created by their different roles in the last government and contrasting approaches as to how to manage the interests of the army and the party in dealing with the Aung San Suu Kyi phenomenon under the new constitutional order. As their roles have now changed, and their policy differences may disappear when she does, whether their differences will sunder the USDP remains in question. What legacies, if any, does Myanmar's earlier experience in multi-party politics provide which can aid in seeing what the future holds?

### **Legacies from the Past**

Myanmar experienced two periods of multi-party politics before the current period. The first, under British colonial auspices, was confined to the central and southern regions of the country, lasted twenty years, from 1922 to 1942. The second, after the upheaval of the Second World War, under weakening British influence, survived for fourteen years, from 1947 to 1962. The twenty-eight-year gap between 1962 and the election of 1990 and the forty-nine-year gap between 1962 and the 2011 election left little in terms of historical memory of how the party system, and the nature of factionalism in it, worked. Nonetheless, some of the issues and problems that were faced then are likely to be repeated in the future.

The introduction of electoral politics in British Burma was an afterthought to the introduction of the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms which established in 1919-elected provincial legislatures in India. The British Indian province of Burma was excluded from the reforms as Burma was considered to be unprepared for the introduction of democratic institutions. Protests at this slight led the British government to change policy, and the first elections in Myanmar were held in 1922. Under what was known as the Craddock Scheme, as in all British period elections, the electorate was divided on a “racial” basis with separate constituencies for Europeans, Indians, and the Karen ethnic group, in contrast to so-called general constituencies. Four elections were held between 1922 and 1932. For a variety of reasons, not least because of a campaign by Burmese nationalists to boycott the elections, until the 1930s, turn out was less than 20 per cent.

Among the small indigenous political class which were willing to participate in the electoral system, there were a number of fissures. Issues that arose concerned the role of Buddhist monks in politics and party finance. Prior to then, however, there occurred a deep fissure within the leading political organisation, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), or *Myanma Athinchokyi* in Burmese, itself an amalgam of lesser organisations, over whether the organisation should participate in the elections. The GCBA repeatedly, however, divided during the 1920s as the appeal of office and the lure of political power under the so-called dyarchy system of political tutelage proved too tempting for some political leaders.

The Twenty-One Party, named after the number of founders, split from the GCBA first and stood in the 1922 election. The GCBA split again prior to the 1925 election as a key leader, U Chit Hlaing, formed another party. It soon split and from this divide was formed the Home Rule Party. Prior to the 1928 election, the former GCBA groups split again with the formation of another new party, named for its founders, the Hlaing-Myat-Paw GCBA. The GCBA by then had disintegrated so significantly, with probably the majority still supporting monks and others, such as U Soe Thein, who advocated continued boycott of the elections.

The situation only changed in the approach of the 1932 elections which saw the arrival of new individuals into the politically interested public. The major issues in that election was the question of Burma should remain a province of India or become a separate administrative entity outside the control of the central government of India. In this election, as in that of 1936, Indian money to fund political parties seeking the support of Burmese peasant voters whose interests were antithetical to those of the Indian moneylenders drive the elections. The search for office caused conflict among the victorious parties and the parties rapidly fractured and reformed in the five years between 1937 and the Japanese invasion of 1942. This little remembered era in Burmese politics has been overshadowed by the nationalist young men who replaced the old politicians and their factitious parties after the Second World War and Burma's independence in 1948.

However, the post-war generation were no more capable of building unified political parties. The dominant political organisation to emerge from the war years was the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom (AFPFL). It was from this organisation that every post-independence government was formed. Born to be a national front of all political forces seeking independence, it soon fractured over rival claims to primacy and ideological disputes which had Cold War echoes.

Born as the Anti-Fascist Organisation, the AFPFL was initially composed of the Burma army officer corps led by General Aung San, the Communist Party of Burma (CB[B]), and the Peoples' Revolution Party (PRP), soon renamed the Burma Socialist Party. Although united behind the commander of the army, many of the officer corps were loyal to the Communist Party or the anti-Communist but leftist PRP. Prior to independence, the Communist Party split into two factions, the Red Flag under party founder Thakin Soe and the White Flag under former Agriculture Minister Thakin Than Tun. First the Red Flags were expelled from the AFPFL and then the White Flags followed. Both felt they had had a large role in gaining independence and were denied the power that they had wrestled from the British. However, by then the British had determined that Aung San and his colleagues were sufficiently anti-Communist that power could be entrusted to them. In the meantime, the centre of political gravity in the AFPFL had shifted from the left to the right as the Communists were expelled and many other groups including landowners, businessmen, and other conservative interests had become the financial basis of the League.

In the meantime, political organisations began for the first time to be formed in the northern parts of the country which had been excluded from the party politics of the rest of the country prior to the war. This saw the emergence of many smaller political parties

organised around claims to represent particular ethnic groups. This trend was given a boost by the formation of parties from the various Karen speaking communities which had participated in pre-war politics. Many of these parties were led by so-called traditional political leaders who had been recognised as local rulers by the British. They often represented also different regions dominated by linguistically related but diverse and relatively isolated communities.

In power, following elections in 1947 and 1951–1952 which either their previous colleagues boycotted or were excluded from standing in, the AFPFL ruled in its own name, though the Socialist group within it provided the most dominant section of the party. Turn out in these elections were as low as it had been in the 1920s, indicating that the party did not resonate with the electorate. Following the outbreak of the Korean War, the Burma Workers and Peasants Party was formed from a left-wing faction of the AFPFL over the government support for the United Nations in the war. In elections in 1956, the AFPFL faced the National United Front, itself an unstable coalition of left- and right-wing parties. However, the remaining AFPFL was not to hang together much longer. Prime Minister U Nu resigned that office soon after to take a six-month break as President of the League allegedly to purge it of corrupt elements.

When he resumed to power, he detected that there were plots to remove him by the Socialist group led by U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein in league with some senior army officers. The AFPFL soon split between the Nu-Tin “Clean” AFPFL and the Swe-Nyein “Stable” AFPFL. The Tin of the Nu-Tin faction was Thakin Tin, whose power base was the All Burma Peasants Organisation which he headed while U Ba Swe had the support of the Trades Union Council (Burma) representing organised labour. The police tended to support Nu-Tin while the army lent towards the Stable element. The result of this rupture was the establishment of an eighteen-month army Caretaker government after which elections were held.

The two AFPFL factions faced each other in the 1960 elections which the Nu-Tin faction won easily. Renamed soon after the elections the Union Party, it too soon divided between the Thakin faction led by Thakin Tin and the U-Bo faction, led by urban, university educated individuals rather like the Socialists around the old Swe-Nyein faction. When U Nu announced he would not stand for re-election, these two factions split asunder. However, before the consequences of that could be felt, the army conducted a coup and closed down the multi-party political system for the next quarter century.

In first two periods of party life in Myanmar, the country experienced a phenomenal founding and splintering of party and party-like organisations, sometimes merging into insurgent organisations. On one incomplete account, at least forty-five different “national” parties were formed between 1922 and 1962, excluding the war years. In the fifteen years between 1947 and 1962, at least thirty parties claiming to represent ethnic minorities. None of these parties has any resonance with the political parties which have been formed since 1988. Indeed, there have been more parties founded in the last twenty-five years than in all previous Burmese political experience. Ninety-two stood in the 2015 elections, sixty in the name of some variety of ethnicity. The diversity of the country cannot explain this phenomenon. Nor does it explain the huge success of the NLD in that election. What does?

## Factors Giving Rise to Factionalism in Myanmar Party Life

A review of the history of multi-party electoral politics in Burma/Myanmar suggests that the causes of factionalism have been a function of the historical conditions and circumstances under which it occurred. In the earliest days, there was no tradition or experience of party politics to draw upon. The electoral process was largely unknown and many who were aware of it disdained what was on offer as an imperialist trick. Those who did participate tended to come from the wealthiest and Western educated segments of Burmese society. As the rewards for office were great and the number available were few, loyalty to party or policy was weak and factionalism was encouraged.

During the second decade of party politics, the 1930s, the available offices to be achieved and cooperating politicians came to realise that what the British offered was not necessarily a sham but that effecting real policies could be achieved by elections. However, financing parties was a problem due to the political elite expansion, as journalists, junior ranks of the legal profession and educators were drawn into party politics. As their primary source of funding came from alien business interests, doing deals in the parliament became a lucrative undertaking and party loyalties withered until a firmer indigenous source of funding could be generated. However, this came late in the process and was terminated by the Japanese invasion of 1942.

On the cusp of independence, factionalism was facilitated by several factors. One was the effort to weld together a broad nationalist front as a political force to confront the returning British. As long as independence seemed a goal still to be won, this front held together but as soon as it became apparent that independence soon would be granted, conservative social forces took control of the national front and the most left-wing elements, particularly the Communists in two varieties, hived off as did at least part of the leadership of one of the ethnic minority groups.

After independence was achieved, the lure of office, especially after the post-independence civil war had abated, was great and finding support in mass organisations of peasants and workers was one route to power. Another was finding funding for one's political ambitions. The civil war had led much of the country being controlled by local strong men who combined criminal with political power, making them very much laws unto themselves, as least until the 1958 army government took power. Prior to then, intense factional rivalries developed between the followers of the top leaders of the ruling party and it eventually split in two. A similar process occurred following the restoration of multi-party politics for two years after elections in 1960, only to be terminated by a second army government.

Political parties in Myanmar up to 1962 were not well organised at the grass roots. Rather, they were ephemeral organisations that came and went at election times. As such, they were very much the property of factional leaders who were not rooted to any particular group of followers. This permitted personal rivalries, the search for wealth and power, the demand for deference that drives factionalism in any political system.

The conditions for party building and factionalism after 1988 were different, at least at the national level, if not at the local. The two major "national" parties have very different origins and very different experiences of factionalism. The NLD has come to be

increasingly tightly knit from the various groups which came together to form it in 1988 under the dominance of one person, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Whether she can continue to hold it together now that the party is in office and is facing the pressures of government remains to be seen. What will happen to the party after she leaves the scene is also an unknown.

The USDP, imitating its military and official origins, remained at least publicly without factions until it had been in power for several years. Then strained relations between the two men who had been numbers three and four in the old regime, General Shwe Mann and General Thein Sein, began to become apparent. Their different roles in the governing process can partly explain their rivalry but it seems that Shwe Mann's desire to take control of the party from Thein Sein has led to an irreversible split. From the GCBA of the 1920s to the USDP of the 2010s, the lust for power has often overcome the demands of party discipline.

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### **Notes**

1. Under the 2008 constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, there are elected two central government chambers, the Pyithu Hluttaw (Peoples' Assembly) and the Amyotha Hluttaw (Nationalities Assembly) and fourteen state or regional assemblies. The two central government assemblies meet together to choose the President of the Republic and he or she has the authority to appoint all central government ministers except the Home, Border Affairs and Defence Ministers who are appointed from a list provided by the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the fourteen state/regional chief ministers.
2. In 1988, Aung Gyi was sixty-nine years old, Tin U was sixty-one, and Aung San Suu Kyi a mere forty-three.
3. While the broad outline of the formation and tribulations of the NLD are well described in a number of publication such as Zollner (2012), added details here come from notes made soon after the events described by a close aid of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
4. See the provisional constitution of the NLD, in Burmese.
5. For details, see Taylor (1991).
6. *International Herald Tribune*, 19 July 1996. For the effects of the sanctions, see Jones (2015).
7. Interviews with senior government officials, Naypyitaw and London, 2015.

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### Author biography

Robert H Taylor is the author of *THE STATE IN MYANMAR* (2009) and *GENERAL NE WIN: A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY* (2015) among other publications since the 1970s. He is retired professor from SOAS and his last full time post was vice-chancellor of Buckingham University.