Grafting Democracy: British Policy in the Burma Independence Process

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Honor’s Thesis

Grafting Democracy: British Policy in the Burma Independence Process

by

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ABSTRACT

GRAFTING DEMOCRACY: BRITISH POLICY IN THE BURMA INDEPENDENCE PROCESS

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This thesis investigates—through a case study of the independence process in Burma—what, if any, specific policies the British established and followed in granting independence to their former colonies. The author investigates the development of institutions in the first Burma constitution through primary source documents. Statements of policy found indicate that the British strove to create a policy of protection and representation of minorities, encouragement of democracy mirroring Western constitutions, and a desire to establish stability in the region and preserve self-interests. Documents indicate a large disparity between policy and practice. The author concludes that this disparity is caused primarily by economic and political constraints and a prioritization of domestic economic policy, not an absence of colonial policy.
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I. Introduction

In almost every discussion on the modern economic and political progress of developing nations, colonialism is brought up. For centuries global powers conquered, controlled, and cut up regions in the global south. Colonial administrations aggravated ethnic tensions to “divide and rule,” restructured economies to maximize resource extraction, and imposed laws and restrictions to maintain power and export domestic goods. At the height of the colonial era, essentially every aspect of a colony was exploited for the home country’s benefit. The British empire in particular at one time controlled about a fourth of Earth’s land area. The people of these areas were subject to the monarch of England and expected to loyally and proudly serve the throne without many of the benefits enjoyed by true Englishmen.

Over a period of about two centuries, Britain gradually relinquished its colonies, changing from ruler to government-crafter. England has been called “the mother of parliaments,”1 a nod to the role it has played in establishing a democratic parliamentary system in most of its over 60 former colonies. Under colonial rule, British Victorian culture, dress, and education were imposed on the colonies; the British way of life was marketed as the ideal for all of her subjects and it appears that British form of government was no exception.

However, it is striking how diverse the governments of former British colonies actually are in spite of British self-endorsement. The systems and institutions created by the British resemble each other in core democratic principles but are dissimilar in many

1 A phrase coined by British politician John Bright in 1865
critical aspects including electoral rules, parliamentary structures and duties, minority protections, and enduring relationships with England.

With these differences in mind it becomes difficult to discern what, if any, consistent policy the British employed in decolonization. There have been moments where Britain has explicitly stated colonial policy. Some common themes in these statements include goals for peaceful multi-racial pluralism, constitutional safeguards, and eventual self-government within The Commonwealth of Nations. However, these statements become problematic when compared to the disparate policies enacted in practice, and the resulting institutions created in individual colonies.

Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson conducted research on the impact of colonial institutions on the colony’s future economic performance. They find that colonies where extractive institutions were set up continue to have poorer economic success. On the other hand, colonies where “better” institutions were formed—defined as protections of property rights and checks on government power—appear to have more successful economies. Their later research reaffirms this finding, adding the observation that these institutions appear to not just slightly impact, but in some cases even reverse economic growth trends.

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3 The Commonwealth of Nations, or more often just The Commonwealth is an intergovernmental organization composed mainly of countries formerly part of the British Empire. In 1947 The Commonwealth served as a way of securing preferential trade even under post-war free trade agreements, and as a network of general political cooperation. Members during this period were referred to as having “Dominion Status” rather than being independent nations.
5 Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, 2002.
Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson suggest that disease and European mortality rate in regions during the colonial period greatly influenced the level of settlement and thus the institutions formed. While this observed correlation is valid and leverageable as a statistical instrument for the general type of institutions formed, it does not completely answer why colonizers, in this case the British, chose the specific institutions that they did. Burma and India, for example, share similar climates and diseases, yet they were governed with very different institutions, both before and after independence. Why the difference?

Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini have contributed extensive empirical analysis on the impact of institutions on a variety of aspects of a country, including fiscal policy and economic performance. These scholars have at their disposal data and statistical tools which equip them to analyze causality empirically and thus express informed policy recommendations. During the independence period, the British did not have access to this information, but they do appear to operate with prior beliefs on what institutions provide the best outcomes. This thesis will attempt to understand why the British made the decisions that they did with the limited information that they did have. It would be anachronistic to hold the British accountable to the knowledge that is currently available. It is instead more insightful to seek to understand what they knew, and how they responded to that knowledge. Primary source documents and correspondence enable that understanding.

This paper seeks to better understand the creation of institutions through a case study of Burma’s independence process. The author acknowledges the limitations of this

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case study, and the findings presented in this research have limited applicability to other former colonies. However, it opens a detailed window into the underlying process of forming institutions, and as such this thesis provides a foundation for future research on this topic.

Burma provides a valuable case study because of when its independence took place. A defining period of development for British colonial policy occurred after World War II. By the end of the ward Britain had lost her prestigious global status and her ability to maintain a global empire, accelerating an already significant momentum toward independence for several British colonies. With the fade of her global hegemony, colonial nationalist movements and economic strain tested Britain’s dedication to her ideals. Under these pressures, the independence processes in Burma shows to what extent the British will consciously promulgate their fundamental principles, the limitations of their resolve, and the gap between their rhetoric and actions.

This thesis investigates the design of government institutions in former British colonies through the lens of stated British policy, proposing a theory for the disparity between policy and practice. The author argues that there is limited evidence for a consistent British policy; instead, economic and political self-interests and conditions drove the creation of institutions. The discourse will center on one case, namely the independence process in Burma.

The thesis will proceed as follows: Section II will give a brief history of Burma, with a focus on individuals and events that have a particular impact on the independence period. Sections III-V look at three aspects British policy: protection of minorities, majoritarian democracy, and strategic self-interests and stability. Each aspect is examined
through the lens of the expressed British policy, showing the disparities between policy and practice. In the context of these three aspects, the author argues—with support from primary-source, archival documents—that these disparities are a function of the political and economic situation in Britain rather than an established and consistent policy. Section VI concludes.

**II. Historical Background**

Burma has a complex political history prior to and during British rule. The Irrawaddy valley, the central plains area in Burma, has been home to several dynasties and kingdoms, controlling to varying degrees the surrounding tribes, sometimes as vassals and sometimes as formal subjects. Often these subjects included the diverse ethnic groups in the northern “frontier areas.” Traditionally, the Burmese kings allowed chieftains in provincial areas to continue to rule their own states even after incorporation into the kingdom.\(^7\)

The power of Burmese monarchs fluctuated. Some dynasties administered only fractions of the region; others built mighty kingdoms, extending their borders into Siam and China. The last kingdom of Burma was centered in Mandalay and led by King Thibaw Min. The British conquered Burma in three phases, moving from the coast north into the Irrawaddy valley and ultimately up into The Frontier Areas. Thibaw abdicated and was led into exile during the second phase of British conquest, essentially ending formal resistance to the British aside from skirmishes in The Frontier Areas.\(^8\) Some

\(^7\) Burma Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry Report, 1947
regions of Burma were never formally subject to British rule. Similar to the earlier Burmese policy, the British allowed tribes in the borders of their territory to maintain a degree of autonomy.

Burma was administered as part of British India until The Burma Act of 1935 (which went into effect in 1937) when it was separated and became its own, separate colony. Between separation from India and World War II, one set of elections were held in November 1936. These elections generated a government with more Burmese representation, but still lacked real indigenous autonomy. There were no cohesive or particularly distinct parties and even the Burmese majority lacked unity. The elected government succeeded in passing several measures (mostly agrarian acts) and leaders were generally willing to work toward more autonomy in a constitutional manner. At this period, it seemed that Burma was on a trajectory for a peaceful attainment of Dominion status. The Thakin Party, composed of several significant national leaders including Aung San, sought for more rapid movement toward complete independence, not Dominion status, but at this point their opinion represented a small minority.

World War II halted all progress toward autonomy. In an attempt to circumvent the British and grasp independence, Aung San and a small group of Thakin Party members secretly traveled to Japan to receive military training. They entered Burma with Japanese forces and rallied nationalists behind the Japanese. They succeeded, the British were forced to retreat, and Burma was annexed by the Japanese. Sentiment was different in the Frontier Areas; according to a May 1945 statement from the British Government,

“throughout the whole of the two Burma campaigns, and the intervening period, those of the hill peoples with whom we were able to maintain contact have shown

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outstanding and spontaneous loyalty and have fought hard against the Japanese both as guerillas and as levies and members of the regular armed forces.”

The Japanese did not allow Burma and its leaders the freedom promised, and quickly began oppressing the “Free Burma Administrations” set up by Aung San and his forces. Disillusioned by the Japanese, as the tide of the war turned Aung San again switched sides and worked with the British to undermine Japanese control and take back the colony.

World War II devastated Burma. Each time the region switched hands, the retreating side intentionally destroyed capital, supplies, communications, and transportation routes. Combat was heavy for an extended period of time, causing many casualties. This devastation stoked nationalism; the Burmese had suffered tyranny from two different empires and were sick of subjugation. Thus, quickly after the close of World War II Burmese leaders actively resumed their push for independence.

Britain was also devastated by World War II; the war drained financial, military, and industrial resources. Britain’s international power gave way to the United States’ economic and political hegemony. Her colonies had been decimated as battlefields, and German air-raids had scorched London. What was left of Britain’s military machine now needed to be restructured into peace-time production, and what limited resources remained were needed for reconstruction at home.

Ultimately, the war depleted Britain’s ability and willpower to maintain its empire. Clement Attlee and the Labour Party capitalized on this post-war sentiment to seize a strong majority in parliament. The Labour government enacted a Keynesian domestic policy. Attlee nationalized several industries, worked to stimulate the economy

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10 Burma Statement of Policy by His Majesty’s Government, 1945 (7).
through government spending, and attempted to leverage the British currency until they were restricted by the Bretton Woods system.\textsuperscript{11}

The domestic policy demanded adjustments internationally. Britain needed money and manpower back home. It also needed hard currency to exist in the new global monetary regime. Thus, colonies that were once assets became liabilities. For example, India—in addition to absorbing substantial manpower—was running a trade deficit with the United States and bleeding dollars.\textsuperscript{12} The same was true of Burma and many other colonies, though not all of them.

The Labour Government worked quickly toward independence in India, and the momentum in India served as a catalyst for Burma’s progression. Burmese leaders used as a foundation for their cause statements made in 1935 when Burma split from India which contained promises that, “constitutional advance held out to Burma as part of British India will not be prejudiced by this decision.”\textsuperscript{13} As India progressed toward independence, Burmese leaders claimed they were promised that their process would advance at the same speed.

The initial attempt at reconciling Burma was the Burma White Paper of May 17, 1945, put in effect under Churchill’s Conservative government. The plan would return Burma to British rule for three years, during which time reconstruction would take place. After that period, elections would be held, a constitution would be drafted, and Burma

\textsuperscript{11} Specifically, the anchoring of international currencies to the dollar, and the dollar to gold.


\textsuperscript{13} United Kingdom, House of Commons 1931, January 20, File 9103/39 Part V.
would gain Dominion Status in the Commonwealth of Nations.\textsuperscript{14} Burmese leaders were adamantly opposed to this process, specifically its delay of independence and the compulsion into Dominion Status.

The White Paper also appeared to enable an entrenchment of British interests in Burma. As the British began reestablishing control, they returned land taken by the Burmese during the war back to Indian landowners, established economic planning boards dominated by European and Indian firms, and almost exclusively consulted British businesses in decisions.\textsuperscript{15}

Increasing Burmese pressure for independence compounded with the new Labour government’s desire for quick progress, and promises were made in 1947 for independence within a year.\textsuperscript{16} At that point, British involvement the specifics of independence decreased, and the process accelerated. Churchill and the Conservative party continued to push for a slower and more deliberate process, indicating that the infrastructure and political climate were too unstable for independence and pushing forward would lead to instability. But by 1947 the momentum was unstoppable and resisting risked just as much if not more instability.\textsuperscript{17}

General elections were held in April of 1947 for a Constituent Assembly that would be responsible to form and gain support for a constitution. Aung San and the AFPFL gained an overwhelming majority in the assembly. In July, Aung San and other

\textsuperscript{14} Dominion Status denotes a country that is free and autonomous, but still holds connections to Britain in a global network called The Commonwealth of Nations, or The Commonwealth. Examples in the period include Canada, Australia, and soon India.

\textsuperscript{15} Pluvier, Jan. \textit{South-East Asia: from Colonialism to Independence}. London: Oxford University Press, 1974 (389).

\textsuperscript{16} Conclusions reached in the Conversations between His Majesty’s Government and the Delegation from the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma, January 1947.

\textsuperscript{17} United Kingdom, House of Commons 1946, December 20, vol 431.
leaders of the AFPFL were assassinated. Despite these assassinations, the constitution was completed by the end of the year and official independence was declared on January 4, 1948.

While the history of Burma shows that the country’s independence process started before World War II, the economic and political landscape in South East Asia and Britain changed dramatically during the war. Thus, this paper will focus primarily on the post-war independence process (1945-1948), the context in which almost all major policy decisions for Independence were formed.

III. Protection of Minorities

The history of Burma is one of consistent tension between ethnic groups. British rule in many ways exacerbated these tensions, administering them all under one regime. Some groups, like the Karen, were more loyal and supportive of British rule. As a result, they were elevated and given privilege. For example, the British military and police force in Burma was mostly Karen.

In January, 1947, a delegation from Burma met with British leaders in London to establish expectations for Burma’s progression toward independence. Creating a policy for the incorporation of ethnic minorities was one of the central points of discussion. Both British and Burmese leaders agreed that incorporating The Frontier Areas with an Independent Burma should be done with the consent of the peoples inhabiting those areas. To accomplish this two actions were agreed upon: the Burmese delegation

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18 Conclusions reached in the Conversations between His Majesty’s Government and the Delegation from the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma, January 1947.
promised to hold a conference with minority leaders to gain their consent, and the British declared that a committee of Burmese and minority leaders would be formed to ascertain the best way to incorporate the groups into Independent Burma.

The Panglong Agreement

The Panglong Conference represents Aung San and the Burma Executive Council’s efforts to obtain consent and support among ethnic minorities, and the resulting document was the Panglong Agreement. The agreement was not permanent or official legislation; rather, it was designed to begin unification during the interim period before independence, enabling progression toward elections for the Constituent Assembly which would then formalize cooperation and plans for long-term governance.

On February 12, 1947, Aung San gathered with representatives of the Kachins, Shans, and Chins (notably, no Karen representatives took part in the proceedings) in Panglong to discuss the future formation of independent Burma. At the conference, all parties agreed that “freedom will be more speedily achieved by the Shans, the Kachins and the Chins by their immediate co-operation with the Interim Burmese Government.”

The minorities secured representation in the Executive Council of the interim government, restrictions on the scope of the council’s power over the Frontier Areas, and basic democratic rights and privileges. The document does not legislate or form separate states for the Kachins, Shans, and Chins (or Karens), as it lacked the power to do so. Instead, the parties agreed that separate states are desirable, and that Counsellors from the Frontier Areas would be consulted in the interim administration of the region and

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19 Panglong Agreement. February 12, 1947.
represented in the Constituent Assembly. Notably, although there were Karen representatives present at the conference, there were no Karen signatories.

The specifications and language in the Panglong Agreement indicate a willing but cautious union, formed out of necessity rather than comradery. In the debates surrounding the Burma Independence Bill, Parliamentary Member David Gammans asserted, “[The Panglong Agreement] was negotiated by the frontier people in the knowledge that we were going to sell out on them anyway, that we were prepared to abandon them, and that they had better make peace with their adversary quickly.”

In practice, the document solidified nothing, but it effectively ensured that any future united Burma would be built on a Federalist system of ethnic states. It was also a step toward establishing trust between Frontier Area leaders and Aung San. Most importantly, it gave Burmese leaders a tangible indicator of unity to show the British, which helped maintain a quick trajectory toward independence.

The British had a lukewarm response to the Panglong Agreement. While many members of parliament emphasized the diplomatic progress the document represented, others were wary of the limited Karen involvement and suspicious of Aung San and his party. To them, the tone of the document seemed incongruous with the history of violence and contempt that had existed between the groups up to that point.

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20 United Kingdom, House of Commons 1947, November 5, Burma Independence Bill.
21 The Karen states de facto joined the Constituent Assembly months after the Panglong Agreement. Referring to their eventual incorporation, PM Henry Raikes stated, “What else could they do? Our Government have made it clear that we were clearing out, but no one in Burma imagines that the position between the Karens and the Burmans will be either happy or pleasant for that very gallant minority” (House of Commons 1947, November 5, Burma Independence Bill).
22 Of Aung San, Winston Churchill said, “Either he was a traitor to Burma when he helped the Japanese to come in, or he was a traitor to the Japanese when he deserted them to join the British. We get him both ways” (House of Commons 1947, November 5, Burma Independence Bill).
Ultimately, Parliament was reluctant to rely solely on the Panglong Agreement for evidence of harmony and consent in Burma.

**The Frontier Areas Committee of Inquiry**

To fulfill the second of the January 1947 agreements between the Burmese delegation and the British, The Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry was formed to ascertain “the best method of associating the Frontier peoples with the working out of the new constitution for Burma.” The committee was composed of equal numbers of Burmese and Frontier Areas people, appointed by the Burma Executive council and the British Governor of Burma respectively. They traveled throughout the Frontier Areas, interviewed individuals from each ethnic group, and compiled a report of minority sentiment on the future of Burma.

Almost all recommendations provided by the Frontier Areas Report have expression in the 1947 Constitution, indicating that British and Burmese policy did take into account the desires of minority peoples. These accepted recommendations include a federal government, a proposal for the geographic divisions of states, and expectations for representation in parliament (the specifics of which will be discussed later). The committee also recommended an interesting secession policy that was implemented in the constitution. This clause allows any state in Burma to secede from the union after 10 years and with 2/3 support from that state’s legislature.

The secession clause is problematic in understanding British (and Burmese) policy. On one hand, including it in the constitution shows that minority concerns were

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24 *Conclusions reached in the Conversations between His Majesty’s Government and the Delegation from the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma, January 1947 (4.)*
considered in designing the government. On the other, it is glaring evidence that unity had not been truly achieved with the Frontier Area peoples. It shows a tenuous and fragile acceptance of plans for a unified Burma, which does fill the policy expectation for gaining their consent, but also conveys anticipation of impending conflict and disagreement.

The time constraint imposed at this point partially explains why this clause did not spark concern and was accepted by the British as well as Aung San. Independence had been promised within a year, and delay was no longer an option.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the policy of getting consent from the Frontier peoples was fulfilled. The principle behind it—establishing a peaceful pluralistic nation—was not.

**Foreshadowed Conflict**

The frailty between the Burmese majority and other ethnic groups can be seen clearly in an episode surrounding The Karen National Union. Saw M. Shwin, President of the Shwegyin Karen Association, sent a letter to the Governor of Burma explaining that the Karens “have a number of weapons that they used against the Japanese [during World War II]” and that they “are not going to give up these arms […] to be left at the mercilessness of the Burmese.”\textsuperscript{26} Shwin expressed his belief in Karen ability to maintain law and order and their belief that the Burmese would move to disarm them and subsequently subject them in the Union of Burma.

The British response to this episode again reveals a self-interest-based policy. In discussing how to respond to this letter, the Governor’s office initially intended to ignore

\textsuperscript{25} Section 5 discusses in more depth the temporal pressures imposed both by the Burmese and the Labour Party

\textsuperscript{26} Shwin, Saw M. Saw M. Shwin to His Excellency, the Governor of Burma, June 29, 1947.
it—not because they didn’t care but because acknowledging they received it meant informing the Burma Executive Council.\textsuperscript{27} This would give the council more reason to push to remove those weapons, and the British didn’t necessarily want the Karens disarmed in case the Burmese did unjustly try to marginalize them. The British called this “a spikey” situation, and they hoped to approach it in a way favorable to the Karen minority without upsetting the Burmese. (Governor’s Secretary’s Office No. 263). Effectively, the British sidestepped getting involved in an almost certain ethnic conflict directly while doing what they could to keep arms in the hands of the side they hoped would win.

Another loaded statement by Sir Walter Fletcher in a House of Commons debate suggests at least one contributing factor to the British policy toward the Burmese ethnic groups. In discussing how to ensure Karen consent to the Panglong Agreement, he encouraged the House to “bear in mind the exceptional services which they rendered during the war in contrast with certain other people in Burma.”\textsuperscript{28} Fletcher is here alluding to the actions of Aung San and other Burmese leaders now prominent in the AFPFL who betrayed the British and renewed loyalty only after the tide of the war turned. This left many British leaders with unfavorable views of the Burmese majority, including Churchill who openly disliked and distrusted Aung San. In contrast, the Karen and other minority groups in The Frontier Areas remained loyal to the British and actively participated with British forces in maintaining and subsequently reclaiming Burma.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[27] British official to J. P. Gibson, July 17, 1947.
\item[28] House of Commons, March 3, 1947.
\item[29] \textit{Burma Statement of Policy by His Majesty’s Government}, May 1945 (4).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Thus, British concern for the minority groups can be understood as an effort to reward loyalty.

History does not show the British actively ensuring a policy of minority protection. While this does not necessarily prove the absence of those principles, it does show their limits. The Burmese were constantly pressuring constitutional progress, and parliament had committed to a deadline for independence in 1948. Delaying that process threatened to bring unrest in Burma and further push them away from the British and from democracy. The stated British policy clearly indicates a desire and intention to protect minorities, if for no other reason than to repay loyalty. However, the enacted policy, and the institutions created show a superficial effort to ensure that protections were in place and would be effective. The British resolve to create institutions that would guarantee that protection was overcome by other pressures.

**IV. Majoritarian Democracy**

The Westminster model of democracy follows a majoritarian system. This system operates under the belief that rule by a majority is the most effective way to operate a democracy. At the center of this structure is a first-past-the-post electoral system, where each individual can vote for only one individual for a given position, and the candidate who receives the highest number of votes is elected. This is also described as a “winner takes all” system.

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30 This does not require the candidate to have a majority (over 50%) of the votes. In a situation with more than two candidates, the winner only needs to have the highest percentage of votes.
The British government nuances pure majoritarian democracy by having a bicameral system with an upper and lower house—the House of Lords and House of Commons respectively—with the House of Lords consisting of appointed members not subject to a general election. However, the House of Lords is extremely limited in its powers and in the 20th century was effectively only able to stall, not veto, legislation introduced in the House of Commons. Thus, the British government still embodies a majoritarian system.

The independence process in Burma shows that the British did not have a policy of imposing their conception of majoritarian democracy. However, their number one priority in every aspect of policy was the establishment of some form of democracy. A statement of policy made in May 1945 sheds light on British priorities:

“the ultimate objective of His Majesty’s Government will be that representatives of the Burmese people, after reaching a sufficient measure of agreement between the various parties and sections, should draw up a Constitution of a type which they themselves consider most suitable for Burma, taking into account not only the British but the other various types of constitution in democratically governed countries”

This approach to establishing democracy by allowing the people to form their own constitution resembles a policy of self-determination. However, British documents and records of parliamentary debates show that it was more of a “democracy or bust” policy than any attachment to specific institutions or underlying benevolence toward the Burmese. The threat of communism made the differences between democracies minute; preserving a democratic country in Southeast Asia was worth minor concessions.

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31 Burma Statement of Policy by His Majesty’s Government, May 1945 (7), emphasis added.
The following specific diversions from the British form of majoritarian government are worth noting. They provide evidence that the British had limited commitment to majoritarian principles and show how the Burmese constitution was formed (by the Burmese) to accommodate their specific needs.

**Federalism**

Because a majoritarian government asserts that the best method of democratic governance is by pure majority, it necessarily calls for a unitary system. Having federalist subdivisions spoils rule of majority at a national level. The Burmese completely depart from the British unitary example by establishing a federal system. Historically the region of Burma had been loosely connected under kingdoms generally based in the Irrawaddy valley; the frontier area regions were normally tributaries to the central kingdom and indirectly ruled. Under British rule, the colony of Burma was administered through separated states. Some regions, specifically in parts of the northern Frontier Areas, were never formally administered by the British. Thus, federalism was a much more organic choice for administration than a unitary government. The Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry report indicates British, Burmese, and ethnic minority support for federalism.\(^32\)

The Panglong Agreement also indicated Burmese desire to establish states within the Union of Burma, promising “full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas.”\(^33\) The Frontier Area states were less-developed than Burma proper, and thus they acknowledged the importance of continued ties with either Britain or Burma.\(^34\) However, they were suspicious of the Burmese commitment to the best interests of their ethnic

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\(^{32}\) Burma Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry Report, 1947 (18).

\(^{33}\) Panglong Agreement, 1947.

\(^{34}\) Frontier Areas Report, 1947 (13).
groups. A federalist arrangement was intended to allow these states to align themselves with the Burmese while maintaining a level of autonomy and gaining a check on the federal government.  

**Legislature**

Burma adopted a bi-cameral legislature consisting of the Chamber of Deputies and the Chamber of Nationalities. The Chamber of Deputies is composed of members selected to represent constituencies. In this regard, it mirrors the United States House of Representatives more than any British legislative body, with each member representing a constituency of between 30,000 to 100,000 constituents. The Chamber of Nationalities is designed to ensure representation for all of the minority states. The allocation of seats ensures a specific number of seats for each state, based loosely on the state’s population. Unlike the British relationship between the House of Lords and the House of Commons, both houses in Burma have significant power in introducing, debating, and vetoing legislation.

The Chamber of Nationalities was a crucial component in securing ethnic minority support for the constitution. The reserved seats for members from each state provided a check on the Burmese majority, without which Burmans would easily command the votes needed for any legislation of their choosing. This arrangement

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35 Political economist James Buchanan asserts that Federalism “limits the power of the central government to meddle in social problems.” He argues that in a federal system, the federal government becomes more efficient at meeting individual needs because the people, organized into states, have an opportunity to exit. This requires that the states have a legitimate ability to secede, which is what the Burma Constitution intended to install. Thus, the success of Burma’s federalism rested on the legitimacy of the secession clause, which failed when a military coup took control of the country before any state was able to exercise that right.
complemented the establishment of states and federalism by adding influence in the federal government, not just at the state level.

The British had relatively little to say on the form of the legislature. The Frontier Areas Committee Report indicates that they were consciously ascertaining the interests of the minorities and this conception aligned with that goal, but the idea originated with the Burma Constituent Assembly, not British Parliament.

Despite the British desire to protect and represent minorities, the systems created for their protection were flawed. Lord Rankeillour enumerated several of these flaws in the House of Lords:

“Under Chapter XI the whole Constitution may be changed by a two-thirds vote of the two Chambers of Parliament, and it would seem from the figures available that the Burmans could always command such a two-thirds majority. […] It is quite true that the special rights of the Karens or Chins shall be safeguarded under Clause 209, but these special rights appear only to relate to semi-autonomous solid blocks of these races in the North and not to the general rights of a mixed population in the greater part of the country.”

Thus, while Federalism and the Chamber of Nationalities both worked to ensure representation, autonomy, and protection for The Frontier Areas, their conception in the constitution was inadequate to effectively ensure these protections were impactful or lasting.

Like minority protections, we again see the British expressing a policy regarding the creation of democracy with a lack of involvement on designing and perfecting the institutions created. If the British were genuinely concerned with creating an effective government, issues like the one observed by Lord Rankeillour would have prompted a delay in independence until they were ironed out. No delay occurred.

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36 Rankeillour to the Editor of the Daily Telegraph.
This could be construed as a policy of self-determination; the British do express their desire for the Burmese to design their own constitution. Thus, their lack of involvement may have been deliberate. However, that does not completely explain British actions. The next section will discuss alternative possibilities that more comprehensively explain why the British followed a non-intervention policy in many of these decisions.

V. Strategic Self-Interests and Stability

Cutting Burma from the British empire was in the best interests of both Britain and Burma; the former lacked the resources and willpower to sustain rule and the latter craved independence free from any meddling empire. The rate at which independence was obtained and Burma’s departure from the commonwealth can be traced back to British self-interests and efforts to maintain stability and influence in the region.

The British, according to a statement of policy issued by H.M.G. in May of 1945, initially desired a level of reconstruction before independence. Referring to Burma’s economic and social foundations, the British claimed, “it is, of course, upon these foundations that a political structure rests, and until the foundations are once again firm the political institutions which were in operation before the Japanese invasion cannot be restored.” Issues this document cites include: population upheaval necessitating the need to revise electoral roles, restoration of communications to enable a general election, restoration of buildings and public utilities, rehabilitation of agriculture and other essential industries. “Till this is done, conditions are lacking in which the requirements of
a democratic system of government can be met.”37 Over the next two years, British and Burmese leaders made progress toward these reconstruction goals; the Burma Executive council was established as an interim administration, and funds were allocated for public projects.

Two months after the May 1945 statement, Clement Attlee and the Labour party assumed control of British Parliament. Their statement of policy was a bit different. Their intentions were still to aid in reconstruction, but much more emphasis was made on moving to self-government as quickly as possible. A speech stating their policy says that Colonies pursuing independence “shall go as fast as they show themselves capable of going.”38

Churchill and the Opposition resented and opposed this emphasis on speed. In December of 1946, Churchill said in Parliament:

“It is less than a year since the Japanese were expelled or destroyed. There have been no adequate elections, no representative assembly formed, and nothing that could be said to be a representative or settled view of the people there. […] Yet we are told that we must accelerate the process of our departure as much as possible […] This haste is appalling. “Scuttle” is the only word that can be applied. What, spread over a number of years, would be a healthy and constitutional process and might easily have given the Burmese people an opportunity of continuing their association with our congregation of nations, has been cast aside.”39

However, it appears at this point momentum was unstoppable. PM Thomas Reed responded in the same debate:

“In my opinion, if we try to delay constitutional reform, that is the very best way of creating disorder. The Burmese intelligentsia are determined to push forward towards independence, and it is quite in vain for us to put obstacles in their way at this stage.”40

37 Statement of Policy by H.M.G., (9-11).
38 House of Commons, July 9, 1946.
39 House of Commons, December, 1946.
40 House of Commons, December, 1946.
Thus, the British did not necessarily abandon the good intentions of reconstruction and aid before independence. Even after independence the British promised to deliver funds for reparations. However, debates do indicate that the acceleration of independence—not just for Burma but for India and other Colonies—was a politically charged, partisan decision made by the Labour Party.

The quick departure from Burma also lines up with an adjustment in domestic policy. Keynesian economic theory underpinned Prime Minister Attlee’s plans for post-war reconstruction in Britain. Attlee and his Labour government nationalized several industries, increased government spending, and ultimately had in their sites a robust welfare state.\(^{41}\) To enact this policy, Britain needed to increase government spending specifically within Britain, not the colonies, in order to put money into the hands of workers within Britain. Additionally, under the Bretton Woods system, Britain needed hard currency; colonies in South Asia were running a trade deficit with the USA, reducing the availability of currency within the empire.\(^{42}\) Letting go of Burma seemed like a net positive.

The British may have also wanted to leave Burma quickly because of signs that the situation would soon get further out of hand. The letter from Saw M. Shwin, cited earlier, foretold armed conflict and resistance. The assassination of Aung San was another huge indicator or political unrest. Furthermore, British experience in other colonies—India being a close example—gave the British ample evidence of the issues surrounding independence. Contemporary to the Burma independence process, the


\(^{42}\) Cain, 1993 (198).
British were sorting out the partition of India and Pakistan. In that case, the British chose to separate ethnic groups into independent countries, sparking extremely violent conflicts and a huge refugee crisis.

Burma’s moment of independence resembled India and Pakistan; ethnic and religious diversity was divisive and the Karen minority, like the Pakistani Muslims, wanted a separate state. The British moved forward with the opposite policy in Burma, requiring a united Burma, but had ample reason to anticipate a similar outcome. The British had hope for a successful future in Burma, but the evidence available gave them reason to expect the worst, and motivation to get out quickly.

Allowing Burma to not only be independent but to also leave the Commonwealth may have ultimately been in Britain’s best interests. Thakin Nu had suggested to British leaders that a push by AFPFL for Burma to accept independence would result in the downfall of the party and turn the country to communist influences. The AFPFL was by far the party that lined up closest with British goals for the region, so preserving their preeminence in Burma was advantageous. Above all else, Britain wanted a democratic government installed in Burma. Communism was emerging throughout Asia and as the Cold War approached, maintaining territory for the democratic world was seen as critical. Although keeping Burma in the Commonwealth was another top priority, the British were willing to sacrifice that goal if it meant ensuring democracy.

British leaders also realized in Burma the shortcomings of Dominion status and Commonwealth relations. They believed, or at least suggested, that Dominion status was

44 Hare, letter to Hubert Rance, June 1947.
equal to independence with the additional benefits of strong ties to the rest of the Commonwealth and British protection. This concept did not translate well; the Burmese saw Dominion status as continued subjugation by the British and felt true independence required departure from the Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{45} Hubert Rance, Governor of Burma prior to Independence, discussed these shortcomings and concerns surrounding them in a telegram to William Hare:

“\textit{I feel that the example of Burma in leaving the Commonwealth may well be followed by other subject countries treading the path of political development. There is a natural psychological urge in such countries to demonstrate their independence and political adulthood. […] If it is declared to the world by the case of Burma that there are only two choices—within the Commonwealth on Commonwealth terms particularly where one of these is allegiance to the King or outside on their own it may well be that opinion will harden. The Leftist trend in Burma is I believe common to all Eastern countries now rising to nationhood and with humble respect to His Majesty allegiance to the King may prove not immediately but ultimately a difficulty. The conclusion I reach therefore is that the time seems ripe for a new conception of association within the Commonwealth not necessarily owing allegiance to the Crown especially for those countries which have no ties of blood culture or religion. […] In my opinion it is a question not only whether H.M.G. has a \textit{dynamic} policy for S.E.A. [Southeast Asia] but whether H.M.G. can produce a new conception of Commonwealth to meet new conditions.\textsuperscript{46}}”

To Rance, Burma marked a turning point in the British Empire. At the height of their power, it was absurd to think any colony would want to completely sever ties with Britain; they had too much to lose. After World War II, allegiance with the British was not as vital. This diminished value, combined with a rise of nationalism throughout the world and especially in Asia, required British adaptation. The rhetoric of Dominion status as a privileged membership had to be modified, and relations with the Crown made less explicit.

\textsuperscript{45} Thakin Nu, Broadcast 1947.  
\textsuperscript{46} Rance, June 1947.
VI. Conclusion

A propaganda strategy memo drafted by Guy Wint in 1944, before Britain had even regained Burma, provides a resonant comment on British policy in Asia. In context of expressing the desire and potential for a reincorporation of Burma into the empire, Wint cites lack of a clear policy as one of the largest obstacles.

“The British Empire […] fails to suggest to its Asiatic subjects any simple and clear-cut principles. It is a vast political structure, still with great strength […] but for the present lacking the vital fluid of exciting ideas uniform throughout its parts. It stood for such ideas in the past, but these have become old-fashioned, have lost their vigour, or been discredited, and no clear new ideas have replaced them. […] The sapping power of stimulating new ideas from outside against an Empire whose central concepts are an enigma, and which has failed to reconcile to itself the nationalist movements within its own body, may cause a gradual but unarrestable crumbling into ruin of the British Asiatic Empire.”

Wint’s prediction was fulfilled; a concrete policy was never established, and within 5 years every colony on the Bay of Bengal left the empire.

Wint also hypothesizes why a policy was never formed. He writes, “The structure of this Empire has never been deliberately designed. Its development has been shaped and determined by forces working within the British people and within the peoples of the other countries of which the Empire is composed.” This pattern holds in the Burma independence process; no deliberate policy was followed.

However, that is not necessarily a negative reflection on British intentions. The events in Burma do not give much evidence for a comprehensive British policy, but they do highlight several fundamental principles and the relative importance the British gave

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48 Wint, 1944 (4).
to them. They took a devolutionary approach to independence, encouraging the Burmese to look to western democracies as examples but conceive their constitution themselves.

The British were adamant that democracy be established in a union supported by and protecting all ethnic minority groups but showed much less concern about the specifics of how that goal would be achieved. Self-interests ultimately dictated policy, and as maintaining Burma as a colony became burdensome and problematic ties were more readily and quickly cut.

This paper has discussed several motivations behind British policy and investigated how their actions compare with their proposed goals and ideals. Evidence indicates that the British did genuinely care for minority groups, although that care was motivated in part to repay loyalty during World War II. The British did little to impose majoritarian principles, and several institutions created in the Constitution show significant deviations from the British pattern of democracy. Their lack of concern here may have been less an abandonment of those principles and instead a prioritization of other needs. Ultimately the British appear to have acted in their own best interests, preserving resources, exiting quickly, and avoiding conflict.

A consistent policy throughout the Burma independence process was the establishment of democracy. The British determination to see democracy established is evidenced by their concessions in particulars including the form of democracy and the timeline of independence. The British were even willing to let go of the concept of The Commonwealth (at least with Burma) in order to lock in a democracy in Southeast Asia. Fear of losing democracy in Burma was one of the most powerful catalysts in the relaxations of other less-important policies.
This analysis of British policy in Burma does not provide a comprehensive view of British policy in decolonization. However, the patterns of limited concern for minorities, a devolutionary approach to constitutional design, and prioritizing self-interest do seem to be fairly consistent. Preliminary research conducted by other individuals in association with this paper has found similar patterns in the independence processes of several other colonies.\footnote{49 At the date of publication of this thesis, the research of other students remains unpublished. More information on this research can be provided by the author upon request.} The next step in understanding British policy should be a study of consistencies and differences in each independence process.

At least with the Burma independence process, it appears that despite consistencies in general patterns, most of British colonial policy is situational, dictated by the economic and political environment at the time of independence, and the strategic relationship with the colony. This thesis suggests that while there may be consistencies in underlying British policy, situational constraints reveal limitations of commitment to these policies, and a gap between rhetoric and actions.
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