

Myanmar and Foreign Contacts (1939-1941)

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Abstract

World political conditions and political conditions in Myanmar pushed Myanmar nationalist youths to contact with Japan.

Keywords: Nationalism, Political conditions, Burma Road

Introduction

The Myanmar liberation movement had to develop only with the conditions of connecting aid from foreign countries for armed resistance movement against the British.

Research Question

Why did the Myanmar Nationalist Youths contact with Japan?

Data and Method

The materials required for this paper has been collected from the books, journals and newspapers. Descriptive method and analytical method are used.

Myanmar and Foreign Contacts (1939-1941)

Myanmar had administrative changes before the World War II. With the outbreak of Oilfield Workers' Strike in 1300 Myanmar Sakaraj, the workers, peasants, and students, monks and people joined together and accelerated the independence struggle and anti-colonialism. When the Second World War broke out, Thakhin Soe who was in Insein Jail wrote a *Sittan* report popularly known as 'Insein Sittan' by considering all political and military conditions of the world.¹ Although Thakhin Soe's 'Insein Sittan' was not an official statement of Dobamar Asiayone, it reflected the opinion of Thakhin leaders who were imprisoned in Insein jail.²

The 'Insein Sittan' in fact stirred among Myanmar politicians. Divisions of political groups such as the group which wished to cooperate with any groups to achieve independence (Thakhin Mya, Thakhin Nu, Thakhin Aung San and Ko Kyaw Nyein), the group which wanted to fight for independence without cooperating with any groups (Thakhin Thein Pe, Goshal, Dr. Nat, Thakhin Ba Hein and Thakhin Tun Shwe), and the group which wanted to fight against the Japanese and then allied with the Allied Powers such as the British to achieve independence (Thakhin Soe, Thakhin Than Tun, Thakhin Kyaw Sein, and Ko Mya Sein) apparently emerged because of 'Insein Sittan'.³

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¹ (Tin Mya 1971) pp. 191-195

² (*Abridege History of Dobamar Asiayone* Vol. II, 1edit, 1976) p. 554

³ (Thein Pe Myint 1956) pp. 37-38

The 'Myingyan Sittan' written by Thankhin Soe in Myingyan jail was a supplement and extension of 'Insein Sittan' by adding changing world political situation.⁴ The Burma Freedom Bloc convened a mass rally at Jubilee Hall in Yangon in June 1940. The rally was attended by the representatives of other Myanmar political parties and some association of the Sangha and shouted extreme and anti-British sentiments.⁵

As early as 18 November 1939, a branch of the Dobamar Asiayone including Thakhin Aung San and Thakhin Mya organized the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP). From its initial formation, the PRP advocated the use of any available means in the struggle against Britain. The PRP proposed to seek the support of other countries, starting with neighboring states⁶. Thakhin Aung San hoped to get aid from communist elements in China⁷. The idea of getting aid from communist elements in China was suggested by Deedok U Ba Cho and Thakhin Nu who had recently visited China. It was intended to visit China first and tried to get contact with communist elements in China.⁸ At that time, No. 8 Communist Column Division in China was famous for its fighting and organizing power. Thakhin leaders hoped to obtain aid from this communist division. Firstly, it was intended to China by land route⁹. However, it was unable to go by land road because the British government closed the 'Burma Road'¹⁰ temporarily by accepting the Japanese coercive demand on 12 July 1940. It was closed for three months from July to October 1940. Thus, Thakhin Aung San chose sea route to go to China.¹¹

Going China by sea route happened to be a reason to have connection with the Japanese later.¹² In the meantime, the British rulers in Myanmar, under the Defence of Burma Act, began wholesale arrests of the Myanmar politicians on charges of sedition or other political offences. Myanmar politicians could hardly carry on legal activities. Consequently, the Myanmar liberation movement had to develop only with the conditions of connecting aid from foreign countries for armed resistance movement against the British.¹³

The colonized Southeast Asian countries and Myanmar's neighbor Thailand did not seem to be capable of aiding to Myanmar struggle for independence. The Soviet Union, lofty and remote goal for Thakhin leaders enamored of Marxism, was apparently never visited by any Myanmar politician until after 1945¹⁴.

Ultra-nationalism sprang up in Japan since 1930 and the western countries tried to make embargo to Japanese goods and limit political and military sectors of Japan when ultra-nationalist movements were strong in Japan. Japanese government planned to annex Asia and Southeast Asia to find new alternative markets to sell their

⁴ (*Abride History of Dobamar Asiayone*, Vol. II, 1edit, 1976) p. 354

⁵ (Jan Becka, 1983) p. 65

⁶ (Maung Maung, 2 edit 1966) p.49

⁷ (Ba Thaug 1972) p. 259

⁸ (John LeRoy Christian 1945) p. 281

⁹ (Ba Thaug 1972) p. 281

¹⁰ 'The Burma Road' which connected between Kuming in Yunnan Province of China and Lashio in Shan State and Mandalay and Yangon in Myanmar was a main supply road of military equipment to Nationalist Government of Chaing Kai-shek by the Allied Powers of Britain and the United States during the Second World War.

¹¹ (*Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) p. 2

¹² (Aung Than 1965) p. 79

¹³ (Ba Than 1962) pp. 13-14

¹⁴ (Dorothy Hess Guyot 1970) p.42

goods and acquired raw material for the country's production¹⁵. In November 1938, Konoe Cabinet outlined Japan's Asian policy in the programme of the "New Order in East Asia" which was designed to replace Western Imperialist control in China, Manchukuo and Southeast Asia area.¹⁶

The Japanese authority introduced the doctrine "Asia for Asians" which was the ideology of equality, sharing culture and solidarity among Asian and Southeast Asian countries¹⁷. The Japanese propagandized its "Greater Asia ideology" to the world to annex the British and Western Powers colonized countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia. The Japanese led anti-Western Imperialist Movement in Asia. Asians were appealed by the Japanese ideology and hailed Japanese as liberator of Asia. Japan launched his aggressive war to China in 1937. The Britain and the United States tried to prevent Japanese control over China. The war between Japan and the Western Powers in China was competition between Western Imperialists and Asia Imperialist country, Japan. Japan waged war on China by propagandizing its Greater Asia ideology and extended their influence over other parts of Asia¹⁸.

Secret movements of Japanese Agents in Myanmar were very active in the middle of 1930s. Since the late 1937, Defence Bureau Intelligence Summary reported about the investigations of Japanese movements in Myanmar once or twice a month in the report. The names of Japanese servants from Japan Embassy and Japanese soldiers' names and respective Japanese from Japan-Myanmar Association were frequently described in the reports.¹⁹ The Japanese names Mr. Oba Tadashi, Mr. Kokubu Shozo, Dr. Ba Maw's family doctor Mr. Suzuki Tsukasa and Japanese monk Nagai Gyoji from Zanmyohoji temple from Japan were main actors who were frequently mentioned in Defence Bureau Intelligence Summary Report. However, Japanese activities and their contacts with Myanmar politicians were more apparent and active when Colonel Suzuki Keiji arrived at Myanmar.²⁰

The Burma Road, which connected between Kuming in Yunnan Province of China and Lashio in Shan State and Mandalay and Yangon, was started to open in July 1938. This road was practically used for transportation of military aid to China from Myanmar when the British ship, Stand Hill, loaded with 6,000 tons of goods to support Chaing Kai-shek Nationalist Government of China arrived at Yangon Port on 8 October 1938.²¹ Japanese in Myanmar investigate more inquiries about Myanmar after the Burma Road was opened²². This road was a main important supply road to provide over 10,000 tons military equipment to Chaing Kai-shek Government in a month²³.

Four roads which could connected with mainland China are (1) Road to mainland China through central China and southern coast of China centered at Hong Kong (Hong Kong Road or Smuggling Road), (2) Road connected to Russia from Kansu and Sinkiang towns from China (Northwestern Road or Red Road), (3) Road connected between Haiphong from Indochina and Kuming in China (Indochina Road) and Road connected between Kunming in Yunnan Province of China and

¹⁵ (T.E. Vandey 1987) p. 95

¹⁶ ("Daitooa Kyoeiken and Nippon-Burma Conditions No Date) pp.1-16

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ (*Journal Kyaw*, 10 July 1940) p. 4

¹⁹ (Nemoto Kei 1993) p.96

²⁰ Ibid, p. 97

²¹ (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) p. 3

²² (*The Burma Handbook* 1943) p. 112

²³ (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) p. 2

Lashio in Shan State, Myanmar (the Burma Road).²⁴ In these four roads, half volumes of total provisions and military equipment to China were transported from Indochina Road and one third of the volume of total provisions and military equipment were transported from the Burma Road in June 1940. The British and American forces used the Burma Road to transport military equipment to China. Firstly they imported 31% of military equipment and transported these equipment to China by using the Burma Road.²⁵

Japanese Government and Japanese Imperial General Headquarters tried to end the war in China and to cut Indochina Road, the Burma Road and Hong Kong Road with all efforts.²⁶ Similar to the Burma Road, Indochina Road played as a main supply road for the British, American and French to provide military equipment to Chaing Kai-shek Government²⁷. It was great hardship for the Japanese that they could not block the Burma Road.²⁸

Political situations in Europe had been changed in early 1939. Germany and Italy concluded military treaty which was later known as Rome-Berlin Axis in May 1939. Germany and the Soviet Union concluded Non-aggression Pact in August 1939. Hiranuma Government in Japan resigned on excuse of confused political situations in Europe.²⁹

Changing conditions of warfare in Europe gave considerable impetus for more active maneuver of Japanese southern group. In June 1940, Japanese Foreign Minister Mr. Arita Hachiro from Mr. Yonai Mitsumasa government aired in radio programme as follows:

“...Countries of East Asia and regions in South Sea have close connections geographically, racially and economically. Nature has created to help each other's to share the fruits of the region peacefully...³⁰”

The Yonai Mitsumasa government was replaced by Konoe government in July 1940. Mr. Matsuoka Yosuke was appointed as foreign minister. In his press conference soon after his appointment, he used the term “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” officially for the first time³¹.

Leaders of Dobamar Asiayone considered the outbreak of World War II in Europe was the good opportunity and Thakhin leaders like Thakhin Soe, Thakhin Aung San, Thakhin Nu, Thakhin Than Tun, Thakhin Tin Maung Gyi, Thakhin Kyaw Sein and Thakhin Mya shouted to change imperialist war into civil war and organized anti-imperialist and struggle for independence with their all efforts.³²

As the rapid changes of world political situations, Myanmar local political situations have been changing more rapidly. The coalition government headed by Dr. Ba Maw was forced to resign in 12 February 1939 and a coalition government headed by U Pu was formed. These governments headed by Dr. Ba Maw and U Pu demanded to promote Myanmar's political status.³³

²⁴ (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) p. 1

²⁵ (Ono Toru 1975) p. 59

²⁶ (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) pp. 2-3

²⁷ (Nemoto Kei 1993) p. 96

²⁸ Ibid, p. 76

²⁹ (Nemoto Kei 1993) p. 76

³⁰ (Kobarashi Hideo 2000) pp. 52-53

³¹ Ibid, pp. 53-54

³² (Thein Pe Myint 1969) p. 432

³³ (*Abridge History of Dobamar Asiayone* 1976) pp.521-522

Cutting the Burma Road was a serious problem for the Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ) to find the way immediately. Under this circumstance, IGHQ decided that a secret organization must be established to carry out the task of closing the Burma Road. On 1 February 1941, the Minami Kikan (Southern (Minami) Intelligent Organization) was formerly established in Tokyo. This organization was placed under IGHQ and Colonel Keiji Suzuki was appointed to find out the possible ways for closing the Burma Road. After examining Myanmar nationalist movement for the struggle for independence, Colonel Suzuki noticed Dobamar Asiayone which was the main nationalist front for the struggle for independence.³⁴ Thakhins from Dobamar Asiayone headed by Thakhin Kodaw Hmaing said that the suppression of Japanese in Manchuria and North Korea and giving any types of independence given to these countries did not concern with them. They continued receiving aid from foreign countries for attainment of independence should be made and they were ready to accept aid from any foreign countries. The main and practical thing was to receive arms assistance and military training.³⁵

Dr. Ba Maw and Dr. Thein Maung played an important role who tried to obtain help from the Japanese for the struggle for independence. Dr. Ba Maw sent his trusted friend Dr. Thein Maung to Tokyo to discuss the matter of Japanese aid.³⁶ Dr. Ba Maw recounted that although the Japanese were a constant cause of worry and suspense to them, the first enemy of Myanmar was the British colonialism and he firmly believed that Myanmar should give emphasis to fight against the British in cooperation with the Japanese.³⁷ The foreign aid should be received by sending someone to that country. At that time, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Aung San in response to Aung San's anti-government speech at Daung Gyi village earlier in early June 1940. Thus, Thakhin Aung San was chosen to send to foreign country. Thakhin Aung San determined to serve for the country by sacrificing his life³⁸.

As the British government regularly closed the Burma Road from July to October because monsoons made it impossible for them to use the land route, Thakhin Aung San had to use the sea route. Thakhin Hla Pe was assigned to find contact for the sea route and he arranged Thakhin Aung San and Thakhin Hla Myaing to go to Amoy through a Chinese Ko Kyaw Khin lived in 19th Street in Yangon. They arrived at Amoy on 24 August 1940. Thakhin Aung San and Thakhin Hla Myaing remained calm without finding any contacts in Amoy because Japanese dominated in the eastern coast of China³⁹.

While staying at Amoy, they were short of money and unable to proceed to Shanghai, the National Policy Research Institute published a secret report named 'Measures to be taken toward the People of East Asia – for Burma' on 20 September 1940. This secret report recognized Myanmar as a part of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.⁴⁰ Major Kanda of the Kempeitai (Japanese military police) found Aung San and Hla Myaing and arranged for their passage to Japan. At Haneda Airport, on 12 November 1940, Colonel Suzuki and Mr. Sugii Mitsuru welcomed Thakhin Aung San and Thakhin Hla Myaing at the airport.⁴¹

³⁴ (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) p. 5

³⁵ (Nagasaki Yooko) p. 141

³⁶ (Thakhin Lwin 1969) pp. 47-48

³⁷ (Ba Maw 1968) p. 369

³⁸ (Aung San 1968) p. 29

³⁹ (*Bamar Khit Newspaper*, 1 August 1943)

⁴⁰ (Joyce C. Letra 1977) p. 40

⁴¹ (*Bamar Khit Newspaper* 1 August 1943)

The British troops were retreating from Denmark at the end of 1940. This news stirred the people of Myanmar and motivated the spirit to fight against the British.⁴² Colonel Suzuki considered that the changing of Anti-British colonialism in Myanmar to armed resistance movement would bring the Japanese aim for cutting the Burma Road automatically.⁴³

Conclusion

The Japanese were well aware that helping Myanmar's struggle for independence by the Japanese would have good relations with Myanmar and would provide great help for cutting the Burma Road. During this period, Myanmar nationalist struggle for the attainment of independence was strong and the British were facing trouble because they were waging war with Nazi Germany in European theatre. It was the time Myanmar nationalist youths were trying to achieve independence actively in accordance with the motto "The British's difficulties would be Myanmar's opportunity". World political conditions and political conditions in Myanmar pushed Myanmar nationalist youths to contact with Japan. Achievement of independence by taking advantages of the confused political and military situations in Europe by the British was crucial time for Myanmar politicians to accelerate their struggle for independence. They were well aware of aid from a foreign country for armed resistance against the British. In the meantime, Myanmar nationalist youths got contact with the Japanese who was anxious to cut the Burma Road which was the main supply road to provide military equipment to Chaing Kai-shek Nationalist Government of China.

⁴² (*The Military Operation for the Conquest of Burma* 1967) pp. 9-10

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 9

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