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The languages of Pyidawtha and the Burmese approach to national development¹

Tharaphi Than

Abstract: Burma's first well known welfare plan was entitled *Pyidawtha* or *Happy Land*, and it was launched in 1952. In vernacular terms, the literal meaning of *Pyidawtha* is 'Prosperous Royal Country'. The government's attempt to sustain tradition and culture and to instil modern aspirations in its citizens was reflected in its choice of the word *Pyidawtha*. The Plan failed and its implications still overshadow the development framework of Burma. This paper discusses how the country's major decisions, including whether or not to join the Commonwealth, have been influenced by language; how the term and concept of 'development' were conceived; how the Burmese translation was coined to attract public support; and how the detailed planning was presented to the masses by the government. The paper also discusses the concerns and anxieties of the democratic government led by U Nu in introducing Burma's first major development plan to a war-torn and bitterly divided country, and why it eventually failed.

Keywords: welfare plan; poverty alleviation; insurgency; communism; Pyidawtha; Burmese language

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In May 2011, the new government of Burma convened a workshop entitled 'Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation'.² Convened almost 50 years after Burma's first Development Conference, called *Pyidawtha*, the 2011 workshop shared some of the ideologies of the *Pyidawtha* Plan under the government led by Nu. Social welfare and equity have long been adopted by different Burmese governments as their political goals, since the attainment of these goals could very well highlight the role of the government as the champion of the poor. During the Nu era – from 1948 to 1962 – the administration's image as the people's government was very important, as winning the hearts and minds of the rural poor meant winning the then ongoing war against the communists. Such a rationale was reflected in

¹ I would like to thank the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, the Netherlands for funding this research project; Ian Brown, Emeritus Professor of History at SOAS, University of London; Duncan McDuie-Ra, Associate Professor in Development Studies at the School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales; and Willem van Schendel, Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam for their feedback and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper, and two anonymous reviewers who have provided me with valuable suggestions.

² *The Mirror*, 23 May 2011.

government ministers' speeches and government publications in the 1950s, particularly in the vernacular circulations of their development plan.³

In this paper, I discuss historical events leading to the launch of the first major welfare plan in Burma, and how Nu and his government presented this plan to the country. The paper focuses on the use of language in the government campaign to win over the masses with its development plan. With an analysis of the vernacular version of the development plan *Pyidawtha*,⁴ my contention is that, to understand the post-independence development programme of Burma, it is important to take into account the Nu-led government's profound concern that the public would be won over by the communists if national planning were to be carried out largely with foreign aid. The government avoided terms and campaigns that linked development with imperialism, and the leaders – particularly Nu – presented the Plan as a major revitalizing strategy to overcome the structural impediments left behind by the British-imposed capitalist system and a weak economic sector.⁵ The government chose the title and language of the Plan carefully so that it would resonate with core Burmese values and aspirations. Such a process can be understood in the context of the government's profound fear and concern that there might be a public backlash if the plan was viewed as a post-imperialist structure.⁶

This paper makes use of previously unavailable transcripts of the discussions held by U Maung Maung, former Brigadier, Ambassador and author of *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920–1940* and *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940–1948*, and by former politicians and military leaders serving during the 1950s, including U Kyaw Nyein, Minister of Home Affairs. It also has recourse to transcripts of interviews by Burmese historians with leading Burmese politicians in the 1980s; to newspaper reports; to government publications on the speeches concerning the plans; and to debates on issues regarding foreign aid. As a result of these sources, the paper departs from previous studies of the development plans by analysing the language of the Pyidawtha Plan.

Existing scholarship on the development plans of Burma

Existing scholarship has often referred to the post-independence development of Burma in the context of how Burma made concessions to and negotiations with different donors. It has looked at what contributed to development failures and how the civil war crippled governments. Ademola Adeleke has analysed how Burma negotiated with and reconciled between the Economic Cooperation Administration

³ One such speech was that of Prime Minister U Nu, given at the launching ceremony of the *Pyidawtha Plan* on 17 August 1952.

⁴ U Nu, (1955), 'ပြည်ထောင်စုတစ်နိုင်ငံရေး' [Pyidawtha Plan], edited by Thein Han. Thein Han, နိုင်ငံတော်ဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ဦးနု၏ပြည်ထောင်စုပန်းတိုင် [Prime Minister Nu's Union Goal], Burma Translation Society, Rangoon, pp 121–143.

⁵ Thein Han, ed (1957), 'Premier reports to the people on law and order, national solidarity, social welfare, national economy, foreign affairs' (translation of speech delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister U Nu in the Chamber of Deputies on 27 September 1957), p 29.

⁶ During his premiership, Nu also penned many articles and stories, including a play entitled *People Win Through*, or လူထုအောင်သံ, which portrayed the negative consequences of the civil war and of communism, even though the Hollywood film version of the play painted Nu as a champion of democracy and a defender of communist aggression in the region. For more information, see Michael W. Charney (2009), 'Ludu Aung Than: Nu's Burma and the Cold War', in Christopher Goscha, and Christian Ostermann, eds, *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, pp 335–355.

(ECA) of the USA and the Colombo Plan.⁷ Allen Fenichel and Gregg Huff have focused on how the British administration neglected indigenous interests and how the trade policies, or rather the lack of them, coupled with British immigration policy, crippled the Burmese economy.⁸ Mya Maung has discussed how the conflicting ideologies of the Burmese government and development contributed to the failure of development plans, and how cultural resistance to change might explain the lack of development.⁹ Furnivall highlighted the vacuum left behind by the foreign military and the collapse of social order under British rule, both of which presented a mountain of challenges to the new independent government.¹⁰ Following similar lines of argument, Michael Adas posited that the British did not occupy 'undeveloped' Burma, and that Burma's problems could not be blamed on local factors.¹¹ And one of the architects of the Pyidawtha Plan, economic consultant Louis Walinsky, has outlined the details of the plan and discussed its failures in his comprehensive blueprint, *Economic Development in Burma 1951–60*.¹²

What is lacking in the existing literature, however, is any analysis of the process by which the development plans were conceived and how their language was deployed, or rather manipulated, by their architects, in order to win public votes and endorsement. The words and language used in public speeches revealed the government's immediate concerns over the public reception of its plan and the threat perceived to exist from the communists. While historical and political frameworks give the reader an overview of the plans and the reasons for their failure in the broader context, an analysis of the words and style of the language chosen by political leaders can provide a snapshot of the immediate concerns that occupied leaders in the design and implementation of their development plans. While previous research and publications focused on hard factors, such as the political and economic variables that underpin the execution of the development plan, this paper instead places its emphasis on soft factors such as the *raison d'être* of the development plan, its cultural relevance and the attempts to manipulate its language on the part of the leaders.

The power of words, Burma's post-independence woes and foreign aid

Controversies surrounding foreign aid originated around 1945, immediately after the Second World War, during the time when the British came to realize that,

⁷ Ademola Adeleke (2003/04), 'The strings of neutralism: Burma and the Colombo Plan', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 76, No 4, pp 593–610.

⁸ Allen Fenichel and Gregg Huff (1975), 'Colonialism and the economic system of an independent Burma', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 9, No 3, pp 321–335; Allen Fenichel and Gregg Huff (1971), *The Impact of Colonialism on Burmese Economic Development*, Occasional Paper Series, No 7, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University, Montreal. See also Norman G. Owen (1975), 'Colonialism, development, and under-development in Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 25, No 1, pp 115–119.

⁹ Mya Maung (1964), 'Cultural value and economic change in Burma', *Asian Survey*, Vol 4, No 3, pp 757–764. Robert Holmes discussed the Burmanization during the Socialist period. See Robert A. Holmes (1967), 'Burmese domestic policy: the politics of Burmanization', *Asian Survey*, Vol 7, No 3, pp 188–197.

¹⁰ J.S. Furnivall (1949), 'Twilight in Burma: independence and after', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 22, No 2, pp 155–172. J.S. Furnivall (1949), 'Twilight in Burma: reconquest and crisis', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 22, No 1, pp 3–20.

¹¹ Michael Adas (1972), 'Imperialist rhetoric and modern historiography: the case of Lower Burma before and after conquest', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 3, No 2, pp 175–192.

¹² Louis J. Walinsky (1962), *Economic Development in Burma 1951–60*, Twentieth Century Fund, New York.

sooner or later, Burma should be granted the right to self-determination, be it in the form of total independence or as part of the Commonwealth of Nations. But before Burma was granted independence on 4 January 1948, almost all the cabinet members were assassinated on 19 July 1947. Aung San's first and last trip to London to meet Attlee to discuss the terms and conditions of independence was fraught with conflict both before and during the visit.

According to Ba Pe, who was the founding father of modern Burma's first political organization – the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) – and of *Thuriya* [*The Sun*] newspaper in Burma, and who served on the governor's council, Burma's new young leaders first debated whether Burma should accept dominion status or independence in 1946. In an interview with Burmese historians,¹³ Ba Pe noted that he had advised the young leaders, including Aung San, during the famous Naythurein Conference in August 1946,¹⁴ that independence was a must, but that Burma needed time to rebuild the country, and should therefore ask for Dominion status first. He argued that only then could Burma request help from its 'friends' within the Commonwealth of Nations to rebuild the country.

The then leader of the Communist Party, Than Tun, opposed Dominion status, however, and instead advocated a 'clean break' with the British.¹⁵ Ba Pe admitted that Than Tun's communists outnumbered senior politicians like him, who had served in the previous cabinets. The senior politicians favoured Dominion status and wanted Burma to remain in the Commonwealth. They consequently urged Aung San to follow their advice.

When Aung San left Burma to meet Attlee in London in late 1946, Ba Pe did not join the group in the beginning, but after receiving a telegram from the delegation to join them, he left his ailing wife and travelled to London. According to Ba Pe, he advised Aung San to use the term 'the right of [*sic*] self-determination' when negotiating with Attlee for Burma's status after the war. The Aung San–Attlee Treaty was duly signed, laying down the conditions and steps for Burma's right to self-determination. At that point, there was no dialogue between the Burmese delegation and the British administration regarding Burma's future in terms of whether Burma should join the Commonwealth of Nations or opt for total independence.

In fact, Ba Pe revealed in his interview that Aung San considered his advice on Dominion status and reflected his thoughts on the status in his speech at the Rangoon Town Hall made a few months before his assassination. Nu – who succeeded Aung San – remained ambivalent, however, about Dominion status.¹⁶ Nu was

¹³ They were preparing to write Burma's history for the Historical Commission in 1965.

¹⁴ This conference was the first of many public rallies to show the masses' support for the Anti-Fascist Peoples' Freedom League (AFPFL) led by Aung San.

¹⁵ Interview with Ba Pe (transcripts) by Aung Than and Khin Maung Oo, 6 September 1961, p 44, private collections of the International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam. These transcripts formed part of Maung Maung's papers deposited at IISH. Burmese Ambassador to Israel and Australia, Maung Maung, collected interviews made by the Burmese Historical Commission, and he himself conducted interviews and led discussions with other politicians and then leading army officers including Kyaw Nyein and Brigadier Tin Oo, who later became one of the founding fathers and the first president of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Maung Maung also penned two books entitled *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920–1940* (Manohar, New Delhi, 1980) and *Burmese Nationalist Movements 1940–1948* (Kiscadale, Stirling, 1989).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 57.

concerned that, unless Burma was prepared to fight for total independence, the communists would dominate parliament and Burma's politics, and he believed that total independence was the only means by which to ward off the communist threat.¹⁷ Before he was assassinated, Aung San suggested to Nu that he should pay a visit to Whitehall in the hope that he would change his views about independence when he saw the might of the British Army.¹⁸ Aung San requested Governor Rance to send Nu an invitation to London, and Rance duly complied. Nu discussed with Attlee in London whether the name 'British Commonwealth of Nations' could be changed to 'Free Commonwealth of Nations' and, on learning that this was impossible, Nu became determined that total independence was Burma's only option.

One leading woman politician of the time, Daw Mya Sein,¹⁹ was perhaps among the very few people who could imagine Burma's future in the Commonwealth of Nations. In 1944, she wrote, 'It was only a matter of time before the country became a full member of the British Commonwealth of Nations'.²⁰ She was optimistic about Burma's future after the war and, given the country's natural resources and traditionally strong social organizations, she believed that Burma could prosper quickly, and in her own words, 'adjust to the tempo of modern life'.²¹

But British intelligence was less convinced. Reporting on Burma during the Japanese Occupation, British intelligence wrote that, 'Burmese nationalism is the key to all Burmese political thought, and, as a general rule, it may be taken that the Burman is primarily both anti-Japanese and anti-British'.²² Such an assessment partly explained why Prime Minister Nu opted for total independence rather than for joining the Commonwealth of Nations. Another important reason was that the communists fiercely opposed any plan that would see Burma as part of the British Empire, and the most profound fear of Burma's cabinet was that the country would fall into the hands of the communists if the government decided to remain part of the Empire by choosing to accept Dominion status over total independence. Ba Pe reflected such fears in his interview, and Nu made the decision to break free of the Empire based on his calculations of the strength of his support against the communists, and not on how Burma could best be rebuilt using the resources the Commonwealth of Nations had to offer, as once envisioned by people such as Daw Mya Sein – and briefly contemplated even by Aung San after his short visit to London.

According to these previously undisclosed records, Burma's decision to opt out of the Commonwealth was based more on the name change than on patriotism and the inflexibility of the nationalist leaders, as is commonly argued in the independence narratives. This perhaps reflected the importance of the meaning of words

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 46–57.

¹⁹ Daw Mya Sein obtained her BLitt from Oxford University and became the principal of the Buddhist Girls School in Rangoon, Chairman of the Rangoon Education Board and Director of Women's Civil Defence. Highly educated and involved in politics, she was once considered for appointment to the Governor's Council by Dorman Smith.

²⁰ Mya Sein (1944), *Burma: The Country: The People, Their History, Administration, Resources and Trade Communications, Education and Religion, Relations with India, Nationalism, The Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Burma Intelligence Bureau (1943), *Burma During the Japanese Occupation, Vol 1*, Burma Intelligence Bureau, Rangoon, p 17.

to Burma's leaders. Once the final goal of independence or the right to self-determination (the term Aung San first used when he met Attlee) was in sight, the choice of which political status to adopt – be it Dominion status, total independence or becoming part of the Commonwealth – depended on which option would leave the communists in the weakest position and hence mean the government was better placed to deal with them. After years of struggle for independence, the final decision seemed to have been influenced by how best to fend off an internal enemy, rather than how to make best use of the resources that the colonial power and the nations within the Commonwealth had to offer. Such a decision helps to explain how national planning was later conceived and executed. Priorities were set so that the enemy would benefit least from the plans, rather than the plans' outcomes being managed most efficiently. And the language of the plans, such as the Pyidawtha Plan, clearly reflected this rationale.

Immediately after independence in 1948, Burma was plagued by wars with different insurgent groups. In fact, late 1948 could be regarded as the climax of the civil war, during which the Karen rebels seized major towns including Insein, a suburb of Rangoon, for 108 days. The worst year of civil war followed in 1949. Life expectancy in 1952 was a mere 34 years²³ and, at the household level, there was a net deficit of 2 rupees in the daily budget for food, according to reports by the Burma Trade Union (BTU). The average labourer found himself in a much worse situation after the war than before.²⁴

Although Burma clearly needed help, Prime Minister Nu found himself walking a tightrope in terms of receiving overseas aid. Two years after independence, the Burmese government fell behind in servicing British debts, and U Nu turned to Britain and the Commonwealth for a loan in January 1950. As early as June 1949, Britain together with Australia, and then Ceylon, India and Pakistan, had offered six million pounds sterling, mainly to back the Burmese currency. Nu accepted the loan but decided not to use it.²⁵

The government went to the USA in 1951, hoping that the first development aid of US\$8.01 million granted through the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) would be extended when it expired in June 1952. But according to Section 511 B of the Mutual Security Act of the ECA, the Burmese government had to agree to 'eliminate causes of international tension', a clause the Nu government rejected. Burma then turned to the Commonwealth of Nations for aid.²⁶ On 9 January 1952, the Nu government notified the British that it would participate in the Colombo Plan. Following this announcement, the government replied to the USA that it would not apply for more aid.

The ideology behind the Colombo Plan was that 'poverty and underdevelopment, and a huge population, made the non-communist states in the Asia-Pacific region vulnerable to communist subversion; that economic development was the most effective weapon against this menace; and that a significant improvement in living standards in the region would render communism less attractive to the people'.²⁷ The main objective of the Colombo Plan was to protect countries from the threat of communism. For the Nu government, public declaration of the govern-

²³ *Ibid.*, p 17.

²⁴ Myo Htun Lynn (1961), *Labour and Labour Movement in Burma*, Department of Economics, University of Rangoon, Rangoon, p 131.

²⁵ Adeleke, *supra* note 7, at p 599.

ment's intention to accept the Colombo Plan was out of the question. Fighting an internal enemy with foreign aid, as envisioned by the Colombo Plan, would not only weaken the government position, but could also call into question the government foreign policy of neutralism, especially when the government needed to work together with the People's Republic of China in the war against Kuomintang troops (KMT).

Perhaps the original goals of the Burma National Farmers' Union (BNFU), a political wing of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) government, drafted in 1946, are able to provide an explanation of the tactics of, and negotiations made by the Nu-led AFPFL when it sought foreign aid after the climax of the civil war. Neutralism and non-alignment policies were used by the Burmese government to strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* the communists, who later sought support from China. But the government's immediate concern was not, as many Cold War scholars have argued, the communist blocs or the capitalists.²⁸ Rather, it was the possible backlash from the mass of farmers and workers upon which the Burmese communists built their strength. In its constitution, the BNFU listed 21 agendas, the first of which was to fight 'capitalist' projects. By adopting ideologies and slogans close to those of the communists, the AFPFL strove to win the hearts and minds of the rural populations, whose support it needed to win the physical battles and ideological wars against the communists.²⁹

The Nu government's change of decision to accept technical assistance from the American firm Knappen Tippetts Abbett (KTA), as recommended by the US ECA, therefore raised many questions. First, by August 1951, when the government signed the contract with KTA, Kuomintang troops (KMT) led by General Li Mi had already occupied the border town of Ming Sat and expanded their hold to Wa, Kokang and Ming Lin along Burma–China borders.³⁰ KMT later established its headquarters in Ming Maw in the Wa region of north-east Burma. The Burma Army warned the KMT in the first week of June 1950 and launched its first attacks a week later. In the meantime, communists and some members of parliament were already linking the KMT to the Americans, and the government's attempt to seek help from a private American firm was, in this context, very controversial. Indeed, such a strategy was heavily criticized later by all camps, including the Socialists, and Nu was accused of bringing back imperialism via his Pyidawtha Plan.³¹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 602.

²⁷ The American Embassy, London to the Department of State: 'Minutes on US–UK talks on South Asia, 15 February 1951', RG 59, Microfilm, C 0046 Reel 14, 890.00/2-1551, National Archives, Washington, DC, as quoted in Adeleke, *supra* note 7, at p 595.

²⁸ For more on Burma and the Cold War, see George Fujii, Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds (2009), *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York; and for round-table debates on the book, website: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplom/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-7.pdf> (accessed 7 March 2011). Karl Hack and Geoff Wade (2009), 'The origins of the Southeast Asian Cold War', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 40, No 3, pp 441–448.

²⁹ For the government struggle against the communists, see Ba Ta La Sa (nd), ငါတို့ဘာလုပ်ကြမလဲ။ *What shall we do?*, Rangoon.

³⁰ Bo Mya Thway (1961), *ဗမာ့ရန်သူတစ်ဖြူ* *Burma's Enemy: White Chinese*, Aung Myo Publishing, Rangoon, pp 25–27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p 92. But the English version listed 12 schemes for 12 sectors categorized by industry, namely: agriculture, forestry and fishing, transportation, telecommunications, power development, minerals, industrial development, small-scale industries, health, education, housing and social welfare.

Foreign aid was seen as a direct threat to religion, custom and the state, according to one leading newspaper, *Bamakhit*. The term ‘Pyidawtha’ was therefore presented to the country in such a way that the concept and the very meaning behind it could hide the tensions highlighted by *Bamakhit*. According to the government, the plan or concept of Pyidawtha was not an emulation of, or a submission to, foreign ideologies and hegemony. Instead, it was the Burmanized development plan based on the Burmese vision and understanding of development.

The editor of *The Nation* newspaper wrote the following, which highlighted the controversies surrounding the planning for development, and the challenges that the central government faced in bringing together a development plan:

‘Burma is a country that is experimenting with Socialism but is not going to turn Communist overnight, a country that is on the frontier of the Iron Curtain, and lives in peace with its neighbours, but is not willing to surrender its new-found independence to any foreign power; a small country, very young, very inexperienced and, therefore, sometimes over-sensitive.’³²

Burma struggled to defend its new, post-independence foreign policies, which are generally understood as non-alignment and neutralism. The new country’s sensibility could be understood in the context of its strong desire and attempts to delink from imperialism and to decide its own fate independently, free from any foreign hegemony.

The Pyidawtha Plan

The Pyidawtha Conference was held from 7 to 17 August 1952, during which time the government laid down different steps under the Plan and introduced the whole Plan to the country. The Plan comprised 10 grand schemes covering (1) transfer of power to regional governments, (2) health, (3) education, (4) economy, (5) nationalization of arable lands, (6) transportation, (7) sufficiency (welfare), (8) democratic local councils, (9) development in frontier and non-developed areas, and (10) rebuilding.³³ During the conference, Nu highlighted the fact that the administrative organs the government had inherited from the British were in need of repair.³⁴ Nu’s famous pledge to the country about the Plan was that it would bring every citizen of Burma ‘a brick house, a car and 800 kyats in salary’.

There are two versions, or rather, two different forms of presentation of the Pyidawtha Plan to the country. The vernacular form was in fact a compilation of speeches made by U Nu when he introduced the plan to the country during the Pyidawtha Conference in August 1951. Librarian, poet and writer, Zaw Gyi, also known as Thein Han, edited the book of speeches, and it was published in Burmese in Rangoon by the Translation Society, though no date of publication was mentioned in the book.³⁵ The English version was published by Hazell, Watson

³² *The Nation*, 27 November 1953, as quoted in ILO (1954), *Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance. Report to the Government of the Union of Burma on Labour Administration and Labour Inspection* (R6), ILO, Geneva.

³³ Thein Han (1955), *နိုင်ငံတော်ဝန်ကြီးချုပ်၏ ပြည်ထောင်စုဝန်တိုင် [Prime Minister Nu’s Union Goal]*, Burma Translation Society, Rangoon, p 120.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p 119.

³⁵ The book included 12 speeches made by U Nu between August 1952 and December 1955, and one could assume that the book was published some time in 1956.

and Viney Ltd in London in 1954, and explained different sectors of the development programme in terms of background, objectives, and the Plan in detail, using graphs, figures and photographs. While the vernacular version was seemingly aimed at rallying the masses behind the Plan, the English version provided a summary of technical details for the educated and informed elites. The former was for the heart and the latter was for the head.

'Pyidawtha' is often translated as 'welfare' and the Pyidawtha Plan as the 'Welfare Plan'.³⁶ There are three syllables or parts to the word Pyidawtha – *Pyi*, *Daw* and *Tha* – and each has a meaning. *Pyi* means country, *Daw* is a royal suffix and *Tha* means pleasant, delighted or to prosper. In terms of syntax, Pyidawtha is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it means a pleasant and majestic country, and as a verb, it means the majestic country will prosper. The word *Pyidawtha* is a unique Burmanization of the modern word 'development', which is translated as ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေး or *phún-phỳò-yè*. An accomplished writer and playwright who once told Thakin Soe that he could become Burma's Maxim Gorky if Soe became Lenin,³⁷ Nu seemed to have invented the very first all-encompassing Burmese term for development – *Pyidawtha*. Modern references to the country such as နိုင်ငံ or *naing-ngan* were also avoided; instead, ပြည် or *pyi* was used, connecting present-day Burma to the times of kings and queens, during which kingdoms were known as *Pagan Pyi*, *Pinya Pyi* and *Ava Pyi*.³⁸ Ideas of sustaining tradition and culture, but also emphasizing hope with modern development, were all crystallized in the word *Pyidawtha*.

The use of the word not only signalled the Prime Minister's desire to embrace tradition and promise development to the country, but it also reflected the newfound confidence of the government, which had just won the elections in 1950, and which had just reoccupied the previously 'multi-colour' insurgent-held areas in 1949 and 1950. The Pyidawtha Plan can be referred to as the second major national planning scheme of the Nu government, the first set of plans being the Sorrento Villa Plan, named after the building in Rangoon in which it was announced. The state's control of the economy was the linchpin of the 1947 Sorrento Villa Plan, and the Land Nationalization Act was one of the pieces of legislation enacted under it. But most of the objectives of the plan were not fulfilled, and many tasks remained on paper due to the outbreak of the civil war.³⁹ Compared with the name Sorrento Villa, 'Pyidawtha' reflected a fresh, confident start by the government to rebuild the country.

Without question, the term 'Pyidawtha' captured the imagination of the masses. A Rangoon bus advertisement campaign claimed 'Pyidawtha' as the destination; children in the streets sang Pyidawtha songs; at Pyidawtha coffee bars, one could buy a cup of 'Pyidawtha coffee' or a glass of cold 'Pyidawtha milk'.⁴⁰ Pyidawtha was synonymous with everything modern.

When Nu opened the Pyidawtha Conference in August 1952, he outlined its four goals: (a) to explain new projects to the representatives of the people; (b) to ask for advice from the representatives; (c) to promote the projects through the

³⁶ Mya Maung, *supra* note 9.

³⁷ Maung Soe Maung (nd), ဝန်ကြီးချုပ်စိုးနု [Prime Minister U Nu], Thamaseiqta, Rangoon, p 57.

³⁸ The new capital of Burma, *Naypyidaw*, means 'Royal Abode', or literally, 'live', 'country' and 'royal' or 'majestic'.

³⁹ Mya Maung, *supra* note 9, at pp 1182–1183.

⁴⁰ Maung Maung (1953), 'Pyidawtha comes to Burma', *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol 22, No 9, pp 117–119, at p 119.

representatives; and (d) to seek approval from the public. There were certain key-words that the Prime Minister repeatedly used during his opening speech: ဘဝသစ်ဖန်တီးရေး or ‘to create new lives’; ဗလငါးတန်ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေး or ‘to promote all-round development for the five pillars, that is, physique, intellect, economy, morality, and society’; and စာရိတ္တမြှင့်တင်ရေး or ‘to improve morality’. These words appeared repeatedly throughout his speech.

U Nu’s Pyidawtha opening speech could be understood as the Prime Minister’s first public meeting with the masses to explain why independence alone had failed to bring what the people expected, and what was expected of the citizens to build a new *Pyidaungsu* or Union. The Prime Minister pointed out the dangers of not uniting or working hard or having loose morals, and he begged the people to understand and trust in the government programmes, and to be patient with the slow progress they were making. He defended the fact that little progress had been made in nation-building after five years of independence, and directly addressed his critics who had coined the term ရွှေရည်စိမ်လွတ်လပ်ရေး or ‘fake-gold independence’.

His speech also contained numerous metaphors for the country, people and events. He used the term မျောက်လောင်း or ‘juvenile monkey’ to refer to a country that could not aim towards higher goals because of armed insurgencies and robberies, and the country that was frozen in a state of transition, unable to attain its potential or maturity a few years after independence. Furthermore, he pledged to work hard so that the citizens could be as healthy and strong as the legendary heroes Kyan-siq-thà ကျန်စစ်သား, Nyaung-ù-phì ညောင်ဦးဖိ၊ Nga-htwe-yù ငွေရူး၊ Nga-louñ-la-phèh ငလုံးလက်ဖယ်, Ananda-Thuriya အနန္တသူရိယ, Pauq-hla ပေါက်လှ and Tha-main-ba-yañ သမိန်ဗရမ်း, who could fight tigers, crocodiles and gorillas single-handedly.⁴¹ His speech abounded with examples from Burmese legends and proverbs, and could be understood more as a prime ministerial attempt to re-enact ‘history’ than as a laying out of detailed plans for development. Perhaps such an attempt reflected how the Prime Minister chose the language and metaphors that would win the approval of the rural masses, at whom the Pyidawtha Plan was targeted. He was perhaps convinced that only words rooted in local culture and Buddhism could help his rural masses to understand the Plan better and to visualize its goals more clearly – hence his oft-cited references to the importance of moral characters and to creating new lives built upon moral foundations.

But in its English version, which seemed to be aimed at planners and elites, the use of overtly Burmanized words such as ‘to develop the five pillars’, ‘to improve morality’ and references to Burmese proverbs were omitted. Instead, in the official publication of Pyidawtha, the government highlighted the words chosen by technical advisers such as Louis Walinsky. Phrases such as ‘Burma can remain economically independent and self-supporting, but can never become economically self-sufficient’⁴² were chosen over ‘poverty brought corrupt morality’.⁴³ The English version of the Pyidawtha Plan⁴⁴ was in fact closer to the original copy of

⁴¹ Thein Han, *supra* note 5.

⁴² Economic and Social Board (Government of the Union of Burma) (1954), *Pyidawtha: The New Burma, A Report from the Government to the People of the Union of Burma on our Long-term Programme for Economic and Social Development*, Hazell, Watson and Viney, London.

⁴³ Thein Han, *supra* note 5, at p 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

the *Comprehensive Report on the Economic and Engineering Development of Burma* by the KTA submitted to U Win, Minister for National Planning and Religious Affairs, on 7 August 1953.

That the government presented the Pyidawtha Plan in two versions at two different times, and that they were completely different from each other in terms of the choice of language and style, reflected the fact that the government was concerned that the drafting of the Pyidawtha Plan, as aided by the ECA, could have given political leverage to the communists if it was understood as a blueprint to invite further colonizers, as *Bamakhit* argued.⁴⁵ The government's decision to present the Pyidawtha Plan differently to two different audiences – the rural population and the urban elites – was influenced by its acute awareness of the imminent danger posed by the communists who commanded a strong influence over the former. Words capturing the masses' understanding of physical and spiritual development reflecting Buddhist concepts, which could attract not only laypeople but also members of the Sangha community, were chosen by U Nu in his speeches and in writing.

In his speeches, the Prime Minister often assumed the tone of a father encouraging his children to turn their backs on pleasure and look to work. He also blamed the British government for neglecting the real needs of Burma, especially the provision of modern education, the improvement of healthcare and sharing the economic benefits with the peoples of Burma. The essence of his message was that Burma did not recover because of systematic destruction by the British. According to him, civil war only postponed the rebuilding programmes, but the British were responsible for the difficult start that the nation had experienced.⁴⁶ He repeatedly emphasized that independence was not the goal, but a means towards the goal, and the goal as he revealed was the Pyidawtha or the Prosperous, Majestic Country, and the means or pathway towards it must be guided by moral values.

Mrs Ba Maung Chain, once Minister of the Karen State and representative of the Burmese Christians, accused the Burmese government, however, of testing 'Russian'-style economic plans that contributed to the failure of government programmes.⁴⁷ She referred in particular to the nationalization of land and businesses outlined in the Sorrento Villa Plans, some of which were also repeated in the Pyidawtha Plan. She also suggested that the government should seek foreign aid as long as the country did not sacrifice its ideologies to the donor countries. Women politicians and leaders such as Mrs Ba Maung Chain and Daw Mya Sein clearly saw the need to seek aid from outside, pointing to the shortage of personnel and skills necessary to carry out the nation-building process. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of self-help and ensured that the public understood the development programme as a set of 'Burmanized' plans, independent of foreign influences.

But the Prime Minister's decision to present the Pyidawtha Plan as an indigenous plan to address the real needs of the country, and his rallying cry to help implement it, seemed to have been justified, as it was well received by the public. Hugh Tinker wrote:

⁴⁵ *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955.

⁴⁶ The Burmese government from 1988 to 2010 often echoed such reasoning. See Aung San Suu Kyi's Reith Lectures, 2011.

⁴⁷ *Thuriya*, 2 November 1950.

‘An appeal has been directed to the strong Burmese tradition of charity (ahlu) which, in the past, has been applied largely to religious ends: in particular it has been the aspiration of every well-disposed and wealthy Burman to be a paya-taga (temple builder). Now, it is hoped to persuade the people that merit can be acquired through devoting their resources and their energies to the building of works of social benefit. There is little doubt that Pyidawtha in this form has attracted the popular imagination, and in promoting the cause none has been so enthusiastic, none has set such an example, as U Nu.’⁴⁸

Pyidawtha, which was also translated as ‘Happy Land’, was fraught with controversies from its conception. In its English version, the Plan not only laid down detailed strategies for rebuilding the country, but it also highlighted the fact that Burma, with this Plan, could remain at the vanguard of the non-alignment movement, and it adopted a position of neutrality in Asian political theatres. Burma needed foreign aid, and it sought help from the USA and UN agencies. Yet the country had just emerged from civil war,⁴⁹ and leaders were deeply concerned that reliance on foreign aid would push the masses into the arms of the communists, who constantly portrayed the government as ‘stooges of imperialism’. The government’s difficult position was reflected in the diplomatic and political strategies it adopted to secure help from both the USA and the Commonwealth of Nations so as to neutralize their positions, along with the government’s attempt to portray its development plan as self-help, independent of any foreign influence so as to hide foreign aid from the eyes of the public. Words were carefully chosen to present the Pyidawtha Plan to the country as a blueprint for self-help, a Burmanized development plan which would meet the needs of the people and which would be implemented by the people themselves. According to one of Nu’s ministers, the goal of his government’s Plan was to give life to the ‘People’s Democratic Machine’.⁵⁰

U Nu’s Pyidawtha Plan could be viewed in the context of the government striving to maintain neutrality, substituting the formal nationalist strategy once described by British Intelligence as ‘anti-British, anti-Japanese’, with an almost ‘pro-British, pro-American’ tactic to represent Burma as a strictly neutral nation. U Nu also attempted to change all the former notions about Burma and its nationalist leaders. Before he declared the Pyidawtha Plan to the nation, U Nu announced on 3 May 1952 that he was to be known as U Nu instead of Thakin Nu as he had previously been known.⁵¹ The year 1952 seems to have been a turning point for the Burmese government. Not only was it the year in which the Pyidawtha Plan was launched, but it was also the year that the leaders of the government made a departure from the past, perhaps also shedding nationalist titles and presenting themselves as neutral, starting with the name ‘U’ instead of ‘Thakin’. A new chapter

⁴⁸ Hugh Tinker (1957), ‘Nu, the serene statesman’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 30, No 2, pp 120–137, at p 129.

⁴⁹ It was reported that the civil war claimed the lives of 22,077 civilians, 5,693 of soldiers, armed personnel and government servants, and it is estimated that the war cost Burma 47.3 billion Kyats in 1955. ‘Premier reports to the people on law and order, national solidarity, social welfare, national economy, foreign affairs’ (translation of speech delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister U Nu in the Chamber of Deputies on 27 September 1957).

⁵⁰ Ba Swe, (1951), *ငါတို့တော်လှန်ရေး: Our Revolution*, Pyithu Sarpay, Rangoon, p 18.

⁵¹ *Bamakhit*, 13 March 1952, p 1.

for Burma, the Burma that was now ready to receive not only foreign technical assistance but also foreign aid, over which communist and socialist camps vehemently fought, began. Nationalist Burma was no more; internationalist Burma was to be ushered in and the *Happy Land* was the door to the new Burma.⁵² But the terms ‘aid’ and ‘foreign aid’ were well hidden from the public sphere and from public debate.

Maung Maung, one of the advisers to the Burma Socialist Programme Party,⁵³ observed that socialists within the Nu government supported the Pyidawtha Plan, as it was ideologically neutral and above politics or party.⁵⁴ One of the socialist leaders, Ba Swe, who was also the Defence Minister in 1952, viewed the Pyidawtha Plan as a step towards ‘their revolution’. The ideologies that lay behind Pyidawtha, which placed a strong emphasis on social welfare, were based on Marxism but adapted to meet local needs and circumstances.⁵⁵ Ba Swe also wrote that the government’s new programmes were designed to transfer power back to the people, quoting the 1947 constitution, which included a clause that ‘Power must come from the People’.⁵⁶ Maung Maung also described the Plan as self-help, which was clearly misleading, as the recommendations from the Plan were to be implemented with aid provided by the American government as part of the Colombo Plan. At the end of the first year of the Pyidawtha Plan, it was reported that it had been 80% successful, though no explanation was given as to how such success was measured. Townships in the country were given funds to implement their own plans, one of which included assisting peasants. Maung Maung highlighted the fact that ‘more reservoirs have been dug, more roads opened and repaired, more bridges built, and more primary-school accommodation added than could have been provided by years of government activity in the sphere of blueprints and bureaucracy’.⁵⁷ Maung Maung also pointed out that Pyidawtha’s practical solutions to the war-torn Burma were aimed at the fair distribution of welfare services. While the leaders were praising the indigenous approach to national planning, it was obvious that they were continuing to seek support from foreign experts, as they visited the country and often stayed for months to gather facts and prepare reports for the Burmese government. But Maung Maung’s paper did not mention the roles of such experts, and perhaps he wanted to draw attention to Burma’s own self-help approach to its problems, being careful not to draw attention to foreign intervention in the nation’s (re)building.

As Maung Maung further wrote, ‘Pyidawtha aspires not merely to develop Burma in material ways, but also to create the “new man” that is, a responsible citizen who will participate actively and constructively in government, an intelligent, public-spirited individual possessing a reasonable share of modern education’.⁵⁸ Maung Maung contradicted himself in the same article, however: after praising

⁵² For more literature on new nations as a product of nationalist movements, see David C. Potter (1973), ‘Manpower shortage and the end of colonialism: the case of the Indian Civil Service’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 7, No 1, pp 47–73.

⁵³ He later became the President, though only for 18 days, after the 1988 uprisings. A former PhD student from the University of Leiden, he was the architect behind the 1974 constitution, and was a trusted member of the BSPP government led by General Ne Win.

⁵⁴ Maung Maung, *supra* note 40, at p 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ba Swe, (1951) ငါတို့တော်လှန်ရေး: *Our Revolution*, Pyithu Sarpay, Rangoon, p 17.

⁵⁷ Maung Maung, *supra* note 40, at p 117.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p 119

Pyidawtha for its self-help model, he also commented that Pyidawtha was to lean 'rather heavily' on the USA.

Despite the government's eulogies and high expectations, the Pyidawtha Plan ultimately failed. Projects were delayed and subject to overspending, and logistics failed woefully. Some examples included cement powder destroyed in the rain and newly built textile factories that could not use the local cotton, since it was too short. Similar stories began to appear in local newspapers in the mid-1950s. Louis Walinsky lists further factors to explain the fall of U Nu, among them a lack of technical and executive ability among leaders, including U Nu and civil servants; corruption; the government's inability to remove 'the bureaucratic shackles inherited from the colonial administration'; failures in democracy and the parliamentary system; internal factions within the AFPFL; and the government's inability to end the civil war.⁵⁹ These same factors were also attributable to the fall of the Pyidawtha Plan.⁶⁰

In addition, Burmese rice exported to Korea during the Korean War helped bring much needed revenue to the country,⁶¹ but it also created fundamental problems in the drafting of the development plan. While the actual amount exported did not increase, the price of rice decreased from £60 per ton from 1952/53 to £32 by 1957/58, a staggering 46%.⁶² One of the major assumptions made in the Plan was that it should be supported by the export revenue from rice. The irony was that although the Rice Marketing Board, which was later known as the State Agricultural Marketing Board (SAMB), became a 'powerful instrument of national economic development',⁶³ it had no control over the world rice market and the decline in price became one of the reasons for the shortfall in development funding.

When the Plan collapsed, 'Pyidawtha' became a catchphrase for all things that had failed at the hands of the government. For example, couples practising ballroom dancing and women wearing sheer blouses were referred to as 'Pyidawtha'. Pyidawtha in this context became an oxymoron. Its original meaning highlighted modernity as a desirable lifestyle, yet when the Plan collapsed, Pyidawtha became synonymous with what society considered to be social ills, such as male–female intimacy, indulgence and immodesty.

Conclusion

Nu was aware of some of the problems that Walinsky lists, and his opening speech during the Pyidawtha Conference highlighted the long-term problems of Burma. Moreover, he also requested that the public should be patient in the rebuilding of the country. But the very language he and his ministers, such as Ba Swe and advisers such as Maung Maung, used in public belied the magnitude of the problems

⁵⁹ Walinsky thought that because they had been comrades during the independence struggle, the government was too lenient on the insurgents. Walinsky, *supra* note 12, at p 385.

⁶⁰ Louis J. Walinsky (1965–66), 'The rise and fall of U Nu', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 38, No 3/4, pp 269–281.

⁶¹ Sean Turnell (2009), *Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders and Microfinance in Burma*, NIAS, Copenhagen, p 172.

⁶² Walinsky, *supra* note 12, at pp 371–373.

⁶³ Hla Myint, Rector, University of Rangoon, to Louis Walinsky, Washington, DC, 4 February 1960: 3/20 in *Louis Walinsky Papers*, Cornell University Library, Collection Number 4874 (courtesy of Professor Ian Brown).

they faced in implementing the Pyidawtha Plan. Their language painted the Pyidawtha Plan as a sure way out of poverty, and *the* road to the *Happy Land*. In this paper, I show how Nu and his government chose particular words and examples to distinguish themselves from the communists and to present the government as independent of any foreign hegemonies and instead as being reliant on self-help programmes to rebuild the country. Yet such a careful selection of words and the style of language in the end still failed to connect the government with the public, with the innovative term ‘Pyidawtha’ becoming an oxymoron following the failure of its projects.

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