

The Death of Aung San in 1947 - An Important Clarification

Derek Tonkin comments on the [final release last month of the full text](#) of a 1948 official document which had hitherto not been fully disclosed for reasons of sensitivity.

There have been reports that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is contemplating the production of a documentary about her father's life and work.

The assassination of General Aung San and six members of the Interim Government of Burma on 19 July 1947 deprived the country, then close to independence, of a future generation of talented political leaders. From the perspective of Britain, the departing colonial power, Aung San was seen as a charismatic and dynamic leader, fully capable of leading the Burmese nation towards a democratic future. [He was strongly supported by the British Labour Government of the day under Clement Attlee.](#) The assassination took place only days before [the British Government announced, on 24 July 1947](#), that the Interim Government of Burma under an Executive Council was to become the Provisional Government of Burma with an all-Burmese Council of Ministers, Cabinet and Prime Minister.

Suspicion for the murders at once fell on a political rival, U Saw, who had been Prime Minister up to the Japanese invasion of Burma in December 1941. He had been detained by the British in Uganda during the war because of subversive contacts with the Japanese while in transit at Lisbon. He accompanied Aung San to the UK in January 1947, but declined to sign [the Independence Agreement reached with Clement Attlee](#) on 27 January 1947. He was taken into custody in the late morning of the day following the assassination, was tried, convicted and eventually hanged on 8 May 1948, some four months after Burma had achieved independence.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office recently agreed to my request under the Freedom of Information Act to release the full text of a Confidential letter written by the then British Ambassador in Burma James Bowker to the supervising Under-Secretary Esler Denning on the very day that the sentence had been carried out. This had been quoted [in a BBC documentary broadcast on the occasion of the 50th anniversary](#) of Aung San's assassination as strong evidence of British connivance in the murder, though the presenter, Fergal Keane, acknowledged that there was no definitive proof and that the truth might never be known.

Although the evidence against U Saw personally was overwhelming, conspiracy theories persist to this day about whether U Saw had accomplices - Burmese or British - who had conspired with him or had promised to support him. Allegations appeared in the local press almost immediately that the assassinations were a British Government plot. Many years later, Brig-Gen Kyaw Saw, a former Burmese Army commander and member of the CPB ¹ was to repeat these allegations, both in a [documentary on BBC2](#) on 19 July 1997 - the 50th anniversary of the assassinations - and in an [interview with 'The Irrawaddy'](#) magazine.

At the time rumours of British official involvement were [denied by Prime Minister Attlee in the House of Commons on 30 July 1947](#) and Anthony Eden also made it plain on the same occasion that "His Majesty's Opposition, equally, have no connection with this outrage". In Burma a Press Communiqué was approved for release by the Council of Ministers meeting under the chairmanship of U Nu on 25 July 1947. It read:

¹ Communist Party of Burma. Appears as "BCP" or Burma Communist Party (BCP) in contemporary British documents, but that is inaccurate. The CPB were popularly known as "White Flags" because of the white background colour of their flag. Defunct 1989. A break-away, militant group known as the Communist Party (Burma) or CP(B) were known as "Red Flags" because they kept the original red-coloured flag. Defunct 1970. See "The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)" - Bertil Lintner: SEAP Cornell University 1990.

"Rumours connecting His Majesty's Government and His Excellency the Governor of Burma with the recent dastardly murders of the Hon'ble U Aung San and others of the Executive Council, have spread into certain sections of the public. The Government of Burma wish it to be known that these rumours are utterly unfounded and that there is lose understanding between His Majesty's Government, His Excellency the Governor and the Burmese Government. They are actively co-operating with the view to bringing the culprits to book, with the least possible delay."

Source: British Library IOR M/4/2555 - Council of Ministers Special Meeting on 25 July 1947

There have however been persistent allegations, which were highlighted in the BBC2 documentary, that a shadowy group of former British officials, known as "The Friends of the Burma Hill Peoples", was deeply involved, led by the former Governor of Burma Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, who had unsuccessfully sought to have Aung San indicted for the murder of a pro-British village headman in Karen State in 1942. However, no actual evidence of any kind linking this group to U Saw has ever been produced, but the fact that the former Governor made an appeal for clemency for U Saw, who as Prime Minister had been close to Sir Reginald, is regarded as suspicious. A former member of this group of "Friends", **Henry Stonor**, has said that these allegations have "**no foundation in historical fact**", that the group did not really come to life until after Burma's independence in 1948, initially as little more than a talking shop, that the former Governor may have attended at least one meeting out of interest "where he said nothing" and that indeed diverse opinions were expressed within the group by persons interested in the cause of Karen independence.

The military regime at the time (August 1997), did however seize on the allegations made in the documentary to **criticize the British authorities**, a stance which they maintained for some time afterwards.

The final allegation of British involvement relates to the gun-running activities of certain middle-ranking British Officers in Burma at the time, with no known political ambitions, but unable to resist the black-market opportunities presented in post-war Burma. One of these, Captain Vivian, was convicted of supplying U Saw with considerable quantities of weapons and ammunition, not in fact used in the assassinations, while another officer, Major Young, was indicted for the supply of sten and tommy guns used, but was reported in the BBC2 documentary to have been released on a technicality. Though the gun-running activities were well established, there is no evidence that either Vivian or Young, or other military and civilian personnel linked to U Saw, had any involvement in or prior knowledge of the planned assassinations. Friends of U Saw among the British business community and a non-entity John Stewart Bingley in the British Council in Rangoon were also alleged to have played an undefined role in the plot.

In short, allegations of British Government involvement or of a high-level plot involving "The Friends of the Hill Peoples" are devoid of any serious evidence, but are attractive to conspiracy theorists or **those with their own agendas or axes to grind**.

The BBC presenter **Fergal Keane would have known at the time that the "Secret telegram" was in fact no more than a "Confidential letter"** which aroused very little interest in London, to judge from the comments on the file jacket. What Fergal Keane would not however have known, and we can forgive his faulty conclusion, is that it was not the Ambassador to whom the Inspector-General of Police (IGP), Major General Tun Hla Oung, had spoken, but to the Ambassador's Security Liaison Officer, Sullivan, who had simply passed on the IGP's alleged rant to his Ambassador, who thought it worth reporting to the Burma Office in London as a matter of routine, and so by letter.

In retrospect, the importance attached by Fergal Keane to the document is much diminished. Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith had already made it clear in a letter to the Secretary of State for Burma dated 10 August 1947 (Document 448 - Tinker Collection Volume II) that he felt he should offer to help Saw "in his hour of greatest need", though "it is not that I have any illusions about Saw whom I know too well for

that". Dorman-Smith offered to appear at the trial, but was not called as a witness. He did however send a letter seeking clemency.

Further reading:

- [Burma: The Curse of Independence : A Hero's Death - Shelby Tucker 2001](#)
- [Who killed Aung San? - Kin Oung, son of Maj Gen Tun Hla Oung, 2011](#)
- [A Trial in Burma: The Assassination of Aung San - Dr Maung Maung 1962](#)
- [Burma: The Struggle for Independence. Vol II Documents 451 + edited by Hugh Tinker HMSO 1984](#)

[Note: On file WO 208/4941 in the UK National Archives there are a number of Secret and Top Secret reports from British military sources on the assassination and subsequent trial of U Saw. These reports parallel the diplomatic and private papers in the two HMSO volumes edited by Professor Hugh Tinker. These HMSO volumes are available in most major libraries.]

Derek Tonkin
Chairman - Network Myanmar
8 October 2013