

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN THE UNION OF BURMA.

GEORGE A. THEODORSON

The presence of large, often dissident, minority populations has been one of the most serious problems facing many of the nations which have attained independence since the close of World War II. This paper will examine the minority situation in Burma, where the problem has been of serious proportions, posing a threat to national unity and in some cases resulting in armed insurrection. There are at present an estimated 11,000 insurgents in Burma, most of whom represent ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup>

The Burmese (a linguistic and ethnic group) comprise 60% of the population of Burma. The remainder of the population is composed of a variety of smaller ethnic groups. In this paper we shall examine the more important of these groups, analyzing their major characteristics and their relationships to the Burmese majority.

### *KARENS*

The largest minority group in Burma is the Karens, who comprise close to 10% of the total population of the country. The Karens are considered one of the hill tribes of Burma, originally occupying the mountainous area in the southeastern portion of Burma, bordering on Thailand. However, the Karens have spread out into the plains area of the Tenasserim coast, and in addition large numbers are found in the predominantly Burmese Irrawaddy delta region. Karen populations are also found in other countries of Southeast Asia, including Thailand and the Philippines.

The Karens migrated to Burma in the sixth or seventh century A. D. from southern China. The Karen language is more closely related to Thai than to Burmese, being part of the Thai-Chinese linguistic group, and in Burma is divided into three major linguistic sub-divisions (Sgaw, Pwo, and Bghai), which in turn are

\* Expanded version of a paper presented at the First International Conference of Southeast Asian Historians, Singapore, January 1961.

1. *New York Times*, International Edition, December 27, 1962, p. 5.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

divided into many dialects. The origin of the name "Karen" is uncertain. It is the name used by the Burmese. The Karens call themselves "Pga K'Nyaw," which may be of Chinese origin, and means "Men." Before the arrival of Western missionaries in the nineteenth century the Karens were a preliterate people, mostly animist in religion. Traditionally the Karens occupied a subordinate position in Burma, alternating between domination by the Burmese and the Mons. Only the Karenni or Red Karens (Bghai linguistic subdivision) who lived high in the mountain vastness were able to maintain their independence, and even made raids upon the Burmese. However, the Karens in the plains and the more accessible hilly areas were completely under the domination of their more powerful neighbours.

The Karens lived in small inland villages, built away from the rivers which were the lines of communication. Each village was ruled by a hereditary headman with the consent of the village elders. The position of headman was not automatically passed on from father to eldest son. Each headman chose his successor from among his sons, or occasionally nephews. (This, incidentally, was also the method of succession practiced by the Burmese kings.) The Karens had no permanent political organization beyond the limits of a single village. Occasionally a strong headman would extend his control to include several villages, but such a union usually dissolved after his death.

The arrival of Baptist missionaries in the nineteenth century had a profound effect upon the Karens. The conversion of many Karens to Christianity was facilitated by a traditional Karen legend. According to this legend the Karens had once been a great people. At that time they had possessed a book, which was carelessly lost, thus bringing about their decline. However, a copy of this book was preserved by a younger white brother who would one day bring it back to the Karens. Some historians attribute this legend to the influence of Nestorian Christian missionaries who reached China in the sixth or seventh century. The Karens are today the largest Christian group in Burma, but the proportion who are Christians is generally exaggerated by both the Christian Karens and the Burmese. Probably the most reliable estimate is about 15%. The missionaries put Karen into the Burmese script, and many of the Karens, particularly the Christian Karens, became well educated and assumed a position of leadership among their people. At one time Christian Karens numbered 22% of the student body at the University of Rangoon, while they were

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

only about 2% of the population of Burma.<sup>2</sup> The influence of the missionaries and missionary schools disrupted the old social order. Whether they became Christians or not, the Karens developed a new self-conception and were no longer willing to accept a subordinate position.

The Karens found definite advantages in the arrival of the British in Burma. In the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826 Karens served as guides for the British expedition against Ava. After the war they were forbidden by the Burmese king to have any contact with foreigners. In 1851 the Burmese Viceroy in Rangoon threatened to shoot instantly the first Karen he found capable of reading. Nevertheless in the second Anglo-Burmese War Karens again served as guides for the British. In retaliation the Burmese burned all Karen villages within a fifty mile radius of Rangoon.<sup>3</sup> In later years through their cooperative attitude and eagerness for Western education many Karens achieved prominent positions under the British administration. However, the Burmese looked unfavorably upon the Karens' cooperation with the British. The independence of Burma in 1948 brought the mutual hostility to a political test. The Karens demanded a separate nation and when this could not be achieved by peaceful means organised the Karen National Defense Organization to bring it about by force. Bitter fighting ensued, and at one time the K.N.D.O.'s almost succeeded in capturing the city of Rangoon. The Karen rebellion continues to the present time. The rebels are now much weaker than in the early days of Burmese independence, but still pose a constant problem for the government of Burma. They number 4,000 to 5,000 out of an estimated 11,000 insurgents in Burma.<sup>4</sup> Their sporadic raids, disrupting transportation, flooding paddy lands, etc., when combined with the activities of other insurgents, provide a serious drain on the Burmese economy.

Special mention may be made at this point of the Karenni. As mentioned above, in the pre-British days the Karenni were not under the domination of the Burmese kings because of their geographical position. Because of this difference in their historical relationship to the Burmese, the Karenni did not share the hostility of many of the other Karens toward incorporation into the union of Burma. At the time of Burma's independence, to dis-

---

2. J. Russell Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1948, p. 27.

3. Henry I. Marshall, "The Karens of Burma," *Burma Pamphlet No. 8*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1945, pp. 32 - 33.

4. *New York Times*, *op. cit.*

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

sociate themselves from the Karen rebellion they adopted the name "Kayah" and were granted their own state. On the whole the Kayahs have not joined with the K.N.D.O.'s. However, in 1962 the Kayah leaders supported a movement to divide Burma into a federal union of sovereign states.<sup>5</sup>

Many Karens who accept the impracticability of a separate nation, have favoured the establishment of a Karen State. Such a state has been established by the Union of Burma government (a Karen State not to be confused with the Kayah State mentioned above), but it is smaller than that desired by many Karens, and embraces only one-fourth of the Karen population. On June 3, 1961 the Karen State government announced that Kyaukkyi and Shwegyin townships in Toungoo district and Kyaikto and Bilin townships in Thaton district, all adjacent to the Karen State, should be incorporated into the Karen State.<sup>6</sup> Other Karen leaders believe that the Karen State should include a much larger area than the State would encompass even with these townships. The major obstacle to the establishment of a satisfactory state is the geographical distribution of the Karens. The present Karen State includes all districts in which a majority of the population is Karen. The majority of Karens are scattered among the Burman population in the delta and coastal regions of lower Burma. They desire a much larger state than the Union of Burma government feels is justified. This is a problem not easily resolved because of the ecological difficulties involved.

### SHANS

The Shans, who are about 7% of the population of Burma and form the second largest minority group, are located north of the Karens in the Shan States, a mountainous area in the northeastern part of the country, bordering on China, Laos, and Thailand. Shan villages usually are located in the valleys, while other ethnic groups live in the highlands of the Shan States. There are also a certain number of Shans scattered in other sections of Burma. However, those outside the Shan States are mixed with other ethnic groups in their language and customs. The Shans are closely related to the Thai, and in fact call themselves Thai and speak the Thai language. The word Shan is related to the words Siam and Assam. The Thai, including the present day Thai, Shans, Laotians, and some of the inhabitants of Assam, came originally from China. References to them may be found in Chinese records

---

5. *Guardian* (magazine), April 1962, p. 6.

6. *Guardian* (magazine), August 1961, p. 11.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

from the sixth century B.C. onward. By the seventh century A.D. they had established a strong kingdom in western Yunnan, and were known at that time as the Nanchao (from the Chinese "nan" meaning south and "chao" meaning prince). They dominated many surrounding groups, and in 832 destroyed the Pyu Kingdom which dominated northern Burma before the arrival of the Burmese. The Burmese themselves, at that time living in eastern Tibet, were under Nanchao domination. It was to escape from this domination that the Burmese migrated to Burma. Burmese culture was influenced by the Nanchao, from whom they took over a number of culture traits such as the use of the water buffalo, breeding of horses, etc. In time Nanchao power declined, and by the end of the ninth century they were considered by China to be a tributary state. However, the Nanchao still often were able to defeat Chinese attempts to enforce their control, and often the Chinese were unsuccessful in collecting tribute from Nanchao. The Nanchao continued to dominate the tribes in Upper Burma until the eleventh century.

The Thai had been gradually emigrating from the Nanchao Kingdom into southeastern China and northeastern Burma for a long time, but in 1253 the conquest and destruction of the Nanchao Kingdom by Kublai Khan brought about a mass emigration. Thai migrated into Assam, Burma, Thailand, and Laos. (In 1229 they had founded the Ahom Kingdom in Assam.) The ancestors of the present day Thai attacked and destroyed the great Khmer Empire, forcing the Khmers to abandon their great capital of Angkor. The Thai took over much of Khmer civilization, and in 1350 founded a new kingdom (Siam) with its capital at Ayuthaya.

Those Thai who migrated to Burma, called Shans by the Burmese, did not come into direct contact with the Khmers. Thus their cultural development took a somewhat different path. They were converted to Buddhism by the Burmese, and a Burmese monk adapted the Burmese script to the Shan language. Thus while the Shans have essentially the same spoken language as the Thai, their written languages are different since the Thai adopted the Khmer script. In the years that followed their adoption of the Burmese script the Shans developed a literature of their own.

After the power of the Burmese capital at Pagan was destroyed by the Chinese (under Kublai Khan) in 1287, it was sacked by the Shans in 1299. After the fall of Pagan the Shans dominated Burma until the sixteenth century. The Shans had a feudal type of political organization, being organized into a number of principalities each ruled by a *sawbwa*. The period of Shan domination

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

in Burma was a period of continual internal strife. There were constant quarrels among the various Shan rulers as well as conflicts between the Shans and other groups. Despite the dominant Shan position in Burma during this period, Burmese influence remained significant. The largest of the Shan States, with its capital at Ava, became essentially Burmanized in culture. After their dominant position in Burma declined the Shans continued to maintain a considerable degree of independence from the Burmese until the middle of the eighteenth century. Up until that time they sometimes fought the Burmese, and sometimes allied themselves with the Burmese kings against other groups. The Shans sometimes paid tribute to the kings of Burma, but they more often paid tribute to China. In the latter part of the eighteenth century during a war between Burma and China a number of the larger and more powerful of the Shan principalities, which had sided with China against Burma, were destroyed by the Burmese and placed under the direct rule of officials appointed by the Burmese king. However, generally the *sawbwas* maintained their position, and for the most part the Shans simply paid tribute to the Burmese king.

After the British conquered Burma, they maintained the semi-autonomous status of the Shan States, leaving the *sawbwas* in power and having them pay regular taxes to the British administration. After independence the Shan States joined the Union of Burma, with the promise that they could secede in ten years if they so desired, and the *sawbwas* were maintained in their hereditary position. The Burmese leaders agreed to the hereditary representation of the *sawbwas* in the Chamber of Nationalities of the national parliament. In time, however, the Union government sought to weaken the power of the *sawbwas* with a plan for the eventual total elimination of their hereditary power. In addition the right of secession from the Union was withdrawn. The result of these actions was a serious Shan rebellion which began in 1959. The purpose of the rebellion was the secession of the Shan States from the Union of Burma and the formation of a separate nation. Other Shan leaders demanded the federalization of Burma. That is, they wanted Burma divided into a federal union of sovereign states with Burma proper reduced to the status of a state in the union. In 1961 the Shan leaders called a conference of the minorities of Burma at Taunggyi to obtain the support of the other minorities for their plan of federalization.<sup>7</sup> However the idea of federalization was completely rejected by the (military) Revolutionary Government established in March 1962. The

---

7. *Guardian* (magazine), July 1961, p. 6.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

Revolutionary Government also has completely abolished the power of the *sawbwas*, and largely suppressed, although not completely eliminated, the rebellion.

### INDIANS

Indians migrated to Burma at a very early date, and had a profound effect upon Burmese culture. Some of the early Indian immigrants come to Burma by way of an overland route through Assam into Upper Burma, whereas other came by sea from south India to Lower Burma. The first written language in Burma was brought to the Pyus (a group once dominant in northern Burma, but now extinct) from south India probably about 300 A.D. The earliest known Pyu inscriptions, which date from 500 A.D., contain letters of the Kadamba alphabet which was in use at that time near Goa on the Bombay coast.<sup>8</sup> At that time a large percentage of the population in Thaton, Prome, Pegu, Rangoon, and the towns on the Arakan coast was Indian. The Indians brought first Hinduism to Burma and later Buddhism. The Burmese were influenced by Indian culture primarily through the Mons (see below). Burmese script is based on Mon script, which in turn was based on Pali. Most Burmese towns have a classical Indian as well as a Burmese name. A few of these classical names are based on the names of the towns in India from which the Indian immigrants came. For example, the old name for Pegu is Ussa which is derived from Orissa, the place from which the ancient Indian settlers came.<sup>9</sup>

These early Indian immigrants became absorbed into various other population groups of Burma, and the present Indian population in Burma is of relatively recent Indian origin. After all of Burma came under British administration in 1885 it was annexed to India, and in the years that followed many Indians moved to Burma. Some were brought by the British to take low level jobs that the Burmese would not fill, while many others came on their own, attracted by the higher standard of living in Burma. Many of these Indians went into business, and being more familiar with modern finance and commerce than the Burmans soon outdistanced them and came to control a disproportionately large share of the economic life of the country. Some of the Indians of the money lending caste (Chettyars) in time came to control a good deal of the best paddy land in southern Burma (25% in

---

8. G. E. Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1926, p. 2.

9. *Ibid*, p. 4.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

1936), while the Burmese themselves became tenant farmers.

The economic success of the Indians, and particularly their control of the land, led to the rise of anti-Indian sentiment on the part of the Burmans. The situation was worsened by the depression of the 1930's. Driven by bad economic conditions the Burmese were now anxious to secure the low level jobs that had come to be occupied by Indians. In 1930 there were a series of severe race riots.

Because of Burmese agitation Britain in 1937 separated Burma from India and placed it under separate administration. However, Indian immigration into Burma was not stopped. By 1941 Indians numbered about 6% of the total population. They were scattered throughout the country, but mostly concentrated in the cities. Rangoon was 45% Indian. This situation was drastically changed by the Second World War. The Japanese invasion of Burma resulted in a mass flight of Indians to India. Most made the long, hard journey to India on foot, and many died along the way. It is estimated that half of the Indian population fled from Burma to India, or died in the attempt.

After Burma secured her independence, she did not permit the Indians who had left the country during the war to return, thus greatly reducing the Indian population from its pre-war level. In addition many Indians were deported from Burma, and they lost the dominant economic position they had previously held. The agricultural land that had come to be controlled by Indians was taken from them and given to the Burmese peasants. Certain occupations previously controlled by Indians (such as trishaw drivers) were given to citizens of Burma. Indians in Burma today face many restrictions. It is relatively difficult for them to attain Burmese citizenship, and as foreigners their status is insecure and they are forced to pay a foreigners' registration tax. However, some Indians have secured Burmese citizenship, and attained high positions in the country. For example, the Commissioner of Pegu Division is a Sikh who was born in East Punjab.<sup>10</sup>

Burma has been anxious to prevent any further immigration of Indians, and has been largely successful in this effort. The main exception has been in Arakan along the border of East Pakistan, where the great difference in standard of living between this particularly poor section of Pakistan and the relatively prosperous conditions in Burma has caused many Pakistannis to illegally cross the frontier. Great hostility between the Arakanese

---

10. *Guardian* (magazine), February 1962, pp. 37-38.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

and the Pakistanni immigrants has often resulted, sometimes terminating in riots which have forced some of the Pakistannis back to Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> The Mayu Frontier Administrative Area, a section of Arakan bordering on East Pakistan and placed under special administration in 1961, has a particularly large proportion of Pakistanni residents. Only 18% of the population of this area is composed of indigenous groups. Most of the inhabitants are Chittagonian immigrants (Bengali Moslems), many of whom were seasonal laborers from Pakistan who in time settled in this section of Burma permanently. Others are more recent illegal immigrants. Some of the Pakistannis in this area since 1960 have been involved in the Mujahid insurrection. The Mujahid insurgents demand merger of the area with East Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

### CHINESE

The Burmese have traditionally felt much closer to the Chinese than to the Indians. The Burmese word for Chinese is "Pauk paw," which means next of kin. Although Chinese have been entering Burma for centuries, they have generally intermarried quite freely, and usually assimilated in approximately three generations. The small size of the Chinese community in Burma, recently estimated at somewhere over 300,000 — or about 1½% of the total population, also probably accounts for the low level of hostility against the Chinese compared to the feeling in other countries of Southeast Asia.

However, recently anti-Chinese feeling has been growing in Burma. This may be traced to three sources. First of all, Burma became hostile to the Nationalist Chinese. After the fall of China to the Communists many KMT troops fled into the Shan States of Burma. The Burmese feared that their presence would antagonize the Communist Chinese. In addition the KMT troops were forced to live off the countryside. Burma protested to the United States, as well as to the United Nations, and eventually the United States flew most of the KMT troops to Formosa. This incident worsened Burma's relationship with the United States. For six years Burma refused to accept any major American aid. Some KMT troops remain in the eastern Shan States until the present time. Periodically they are involved in armed clashes with the Burmese army. In April 1961 the Burma Army announced that a document had been captured which involved an agreement between the Shan insurgents led by Nam Seik Han and the KMT's for mutual aid

---

11. *New York Times*, October 25, 1959, p. 56.

12. *Guardian* (magazine), February 1962, pp. 29-30.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

for five years or longer, until the Shan States achieved independence.<sup>13</sup>

Burma early recognized Communist China and maintained a fairly good relationship with that government until the Tibetan issue became prominent in 1959. This incident had a marked effect upon Burmese sentiment, not only because of Burmese concern for the Tibetan people, but also because they regarded the Communist actions in Tibet as detrimental to Buddhism. Burmese monks organized mass protest meetings, and even suggested that Burma break diplomatic relations with Communist China.<sup>14</sup> Later in 1959 when the settlement of a long standing border dispute with China involved a loss to Burma of three villages, unfriendly feeling toward China was increased. However, since the settlement of the border issue there have been numerous high level political and cultural exchange visits between the two nations, as well as agreements on technical assistance for Burma from China.

The position of the Chinese minority in Burma has been adversely affected by events which promote Burmese antagonism toward the Nationalist or Communist Chinese governments for they cause the growth of a less friendly feeling on the part of the Burmese toward the Chinese in general. In addition, a third factor that has increased anti-Chinese feeling in Burma has been the Burmese fear of the growth of the Chinese community. The Chinese community has been growing rapidly in recent years as the Burmese have been unable to stop immigration along the long Burma-China frontier. Incidents involving clashes between Chinese immigrants and Burmese border patrols are frequently reported in the newspapers.

### MONS

The Mons, once a powerful people who controlled all of southern Burma, are today only a small group.

The Mon Kingdom, an offshoot of the Khmer Empire, was originally centered in southern Thailand. From Thailand the Mons spread over southern Burma, apparently entering the country by way of the Salween River, and replaced the earliest inhabitants of the area who may have been Indonesians but who have left very few traces. With the founding of Pegu, about 825 A.D., the center of Mon power and influence shifted west. The Mons

---

13. *Guardian* (magazine), July 1961, p. 9.

14. *New York Times*, April 28, 1959, p. 40.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

were, of course, strongly influenced by Khmer civilization, but their civilization also was directly influenced by India. Emigrants from India who had settled along the Tenasserim coast were absorbed by the Mons who took over many aspects of Indian culture. The Mons are also known as Talaings, which is probably derived from Telingana, a region on the Madras coast from which many of the early Indian immigrants to Lower Burma came.<sup>15</sup> Theravada Buddhism came to the Mons from south India, and they adopted the Pali script.

At the time the Burmese first arrived in Burma in the ninth or tenth century the Mons possessed a powerful and highly developed kingdom in southern Burma. After the founding of Pagan by the Burmese, King Anawrahta attacked and in 1057 completely conquered the Mons. It was upon Mon civilization that Burmese civilization was primarily built. The Burmese took over the Mon script, and it was from the Mons that they received Theravade Buddhism. The fall of Pagan at the end of the thirteenth century gave the Mons an opportunity to free themselves from Burmese rule and reestablish an independent kingdom in southern Burma. In 1281 a Thai named Wareru (from Sukhotai in Thailand) captured Martaban and from there gained control of Lower Burma, expelling the Burmese, and founding a kingdom which lasted until 1539. Despite the fact that its founder was Thai, this soon became a Mon Kingdom. The Kingdom was successfully defended against repeated attacks by the Shans and Burmese, and after 1423 enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity. In 1539 the Kingdom fell under Burmese attack. This was followed by two hundred years of periodic fighting between the Burmese and the Mons with each trying to secure the dominant position and with sometimes one and sometimes the other more successful. Finally, in the mid-eighteenth century the Burmese triumphed permanently over the Mons. In 1757 the Burmese led by King Alaungpaya captured and destroyed the Mon capital of Pegu. This marked the end of the Mon Kingdom. Large numbers of Mons fled to Thailand, and the delta region of southern Burma became largely depopulated, later to be resettled by Burmese and Karens. Many of the remaining Mons were absorbed into the Burmese population, so that the Mons today are a small group in Burma, mostly located in the Tenasserim coastal district, the southeasternmost part of Burma, south of the Karens, and bordering on Thailand.

After the independence of Burma some Mons formed the in-

---

15. Harney, *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

urgent Mon National Defense Organization, devoted to the establishment of an independent nation. The M.N.D.O.'s have at times cooperated with the K.N.D.O. insurgents. However, the Mons have been too small a group to pose a major threat or to seriously support a movement for an independent nation. There has been strong Mon sentiment in favor of a Mon State, however. The Mon United Front (M.U.F.) was organized to promote the establishment of an autonomous Mon State. In his election campaign, prior to the February 1960 election, U Nu promised the Mons a state if elected.<sup>16</sup> After his election as prime minister, U Nu promised that a Mon State would be established by constitutional amendment at the August 1962 session of Parliament.<sup>17</sup> However, the establishment of the Revolutionary Government in March 1962 prevented this from being carried out.

### ARAKANESSE

Arakan, located on the west coast of Burma, along the Bay of Bengal, and stretching up to East Pakistan, was originally inhabited by Indians. In the tenth century it was invaded by a people closely related to the Burmese, probably the Kanran, one of the three earliest Tibeto-Burman tribes from eastern Tibet to enter Burma. (The other two were the Pyus who are now extinct probably having been assimilated by the Burmese, and the Thet who became the Chins, discussed below.) The invaders mixed with the original inhabitants and formed a separate kingdom of Arakan. The Arakanese language is an earlier form of Burmese. Being separated by a mountain range the Arakanese were able to maintain their independence from Burma until the late eighteenth century. During this time in some ways Arakan had closer ties with India than with Burma. Islam spread to Arakan, but Buddhism remained strong and the dominant religion. After 1430 the Arakanese kings, although Buddhist, used Moslem titles in addition to their own names and issued medallions bearing the Kalima (Moslem confession of faith).

At times Arakan paid tribute to Bengal, but when Arakan was strong tribute was collected from the Ganges delta area. Chittagong alternated between the control of Bengal and Arakan, being under Arakanese control from 1459 to 1666. Finally in 1666 Arakan was defeated by the Mogul rulers of India. After that the kingdom declined until in 1785 it was taken over by the Burmese.

---

16. *New York Times*, May 1, 1960, p. 19.

17. *Guardian* (magazine), June 1961, p. 11.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

Today many Arakanese favor the reestablishment of an independent nation, but feeling that such an eventuality is impossible they have not organised armed insurrection such as the Karen rebellion. However, there has been a strong movement demanding an Arakan State. As in the case of the Mons, U Nu, while prime minister, promised a constitutional amendment at the August 1962 session of Parliament to create an Arakan State.<sup>18</sup> Plans to carry out the establishment of an Arakan State were well under way. In December 1961 a draft Arakan State Constitution was submitted to the government by the Preparatory Committee.<sup>19</sup> However, the Revolutionary Government cancelled plans to establish an Arakan State in August 1962.

### KACHINS

Although the Kachins are only 1% of the total population, they have a large state covering all of the northernmost part of Burma, and second in size only to the combined Shan States. The Kachins, originally known as the Jinghpaw or Singhpo, came to northern Burma from Tibet about 700 A.D. According to Kachin tradition they originally came from near the headwaters of the Irrawaddy in eastern Tibet. Prior to the arrival of the Kachins northern Burma was controlled by the Chins (see below), Palaungs, and Shans (Nanchao — see above). The Kachins drove the Chins west and the Palaungs south. In time they attacked and destroyed the Ahom Kingdom (Shan — see above) and extended west into Assam. The Hukawng Valley received its name from “ju-kawng,” which in the Jinghpaw dialect means “cremation mounds,” referring to the innumerable mounds where the bodies of Shans from the Ahom Kingdom who were killed by the Kachins were cremated.<sup>20</sup> Today Kachins, speaking the same language and with basically the same customs are found not only in northern Burma and Assam, but also in Yunnan.

Living high in the mountains, and being fierce fighters, the Kachins were never suppressed by either the Burmese or the Chinese. They frequently raided trading caravans passing between China and Burma. Today, while they no longer make raiding forays, they are still known as fierce fighters, and for many years formed an important part of the Burma Army. In recent years some Kachins have moved down into the valleys to cultivate paddy.

---

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Guardian* (magazine), February 1962, p. 10.

20. H. N. C. Stevenson, “The Hill Peoples of Burma,” *Burma Pamphlet No. 6* London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1944, p. 9.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries the Kachins were preliterate, and animist in religion. The missionaries put Kachin into the Roman alphabet. It is said that at the present time Christianity, mostly Baptist, is spreading much faster among the Kachins than among any other ethnic group in Burma.

There was no nationalist Kachin insurrection until 1960 when the Kachin Independence Army (K.I.A.) was formed in the northeastern part of the Kachin State. Its stated purpose was to oppose the establishment of Buddhism as the State Religion of Burma (enacted by the national Parliament on August 26, 1961) and what they called "Burmese chauvinism" by force of arms. It has been reported that the K.I.A. has allied itself with the Karen insurgents.<sup>21</sup>

### CHINS

The Chins, 2% of the population of Burma, are located in the northwestern part of the country, in the Chin Special Division, bordering on Assam. Closely related to the Lushais of Assam, the Chins came to Burma from Tibet. As mentioned above, they may have been the Thet, one of the three earliest Tibeto-Burman tribes to migrate to Burma.

There are at least forty-four different Chin dialects, and a good deal of variation in customs from one locality to another. The major distinction is between the Northern Chins (called Mar) and the Southern Chins (called Pawi). The Northern Chins are more closely related to the Lushai and belong to the Lushai-Kuki tribes, where as the Southern Chins are considered "true" Chins. There are differences in dress and hair style. The Northern Chins tie their hair in a bun at the nape of the neck, while the Southern Chins tie their hair in a top knot.

Before their contact with Western missionaries the Chins were animist in religion and preliterate. Missionaries put Chin into written form, using the Roman alphabet. Quite a few Chins have become Christians, but the majority remain animists. (It might be mentioned that in recent years the Burmese have been sending some Buddhist missionaries among the Kachins and Chins.)

In traditional political organization the Northern Chin tribes and some of the Southern tribes had hereditary chiefs and an aristocracy. However, many of the Southern Chins had a democratic type organization. Each village was governed by a council

---

21. *Guardian* (newspaper), September 3, 1962, p. 4.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

whose members were elected to represent the main families or residential sections of the village. Each village was usually autonomous.

Unlike the Kachins, the Chins were not able in the pre-British period to maintain their complete independence from the Burmese, and they were forced to pay tribute to the Burmese kings.

Thus far there has been no Chin nationalist insurrection. However, there has been some Chin dissatisfaction with their status as a Special Division. In December 1960 the Chin Affairs Council passed a resolution demanding statehood.<sup>22</sup>

### *OTHER MINORITIES*

There are many other smaller tribes in Burma. The Naga Hills are located north of the Chins, in the western part of the Kachin State, bordering on Assam. They are a remote, mountainous region extending from Assam to the Chindwin River. There are many Nagas in Assam. These people have for many years been conducting a rebellion against the government of India in an attempt to establish an independent nation. However, the Nagas in Burma have not been in rebellion against the government. The people who have had the least contact with the great civilizations of Asia or Europe are the Was who live in the eastern Shan States, and who, it is claimed, still practise headhunting. The Palaungs, located a little further west, are related to the Was. The Kaws or Eskaws and the Lahus live in the highlands of the Shan States. They fought the Shans when the Shans first invaded the area and for a time, although only temporarily, were successful in defeating the Shan armies. The Taungthus, numerous in the Southern Shan State, are related to the Karens, as are the Padaungs, who live mostly to the south in Kayah State. The Padaungs are famous for the elongated necks of their women, which are covered with brass rings. In addition to these there are still other smaller tribal groups.

In addition to the groups thus far discussed mention should be made of the Anglo-Burmans who numbered about 25,000 at the close of World War II. Of these about 10,000 have emigrated from Burma to Britain and Australia. Approximately another 10,000 have renounced their British citizenship and become Burmese citizens, while most of the remainder have retained British citizenship and remained in Burma.

---

22. *Guardian* (magazine), June, 1961 p. 10.

## MINORITY PEOPLES IN BURMA

The European community in Burma is small. The British, the largest European group, have declined from 17,000 before the Second World War to a present total of about 1,000.

### *CONCLUSION*

The minority groups in Burma are diverse and numerous, and present a serious challenge to the unity of the nation. Thus far, Burma has been forced to expend a good deal of effort and resources in dealing with internal strife. Only when internal peace and harmony is attained will Burma be able to devote her full energies to the progress and prosperity of the nation. It is to be hoped that the day is not too far distant when the majority and minority groups of Burma will work out their differences in fairness to all, and join together for the common good.