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The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar: Imagining Togetherness, Practising Difference?

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Although Myanmar has been an independent state for over half a century, its 135 different national races and equally numerous dialects and languages renders language the main continual source of problems for its incomplete and problem-ridden nation-building process. Because successive post-colonial Myanmar governments based nation-building projects on the culture and history of the ethnic majority, Burman, many ethnic minority groups and observers have long accused the Burman-dominated post-colonial governments, especially the Socialist and current military governments, of Burmanizing the country's entire population. The adoption of the Burman language as the country's official language by successive governments and the suspension of minority language classes at pre-university public schools since the early 1970s were viewed by many as attempts to homogenize the population and establish a monolingual nation. Both scholars and minority nationalists have directly and indirectly suggested that the Burman-dominated language policy only benefited the regime and the Burmans, whereas ethnic minorities suffered from it.

While acknowledging the prevalence of Burman chauvinistic elements in the nation-building discourse and activities undertaken by post-colonial Myanmar governments, this paper intends to show that successive Myanmar governments did not try to establish a monolingual nation. Rather, the governments would usually allow ethnic minorities to undertake cultural activities, including the freedom to speak and write their own languages, as long as those activities were not related to political attempts

to topple them or undermine their control of the country. In addition, to understand the complexities of the politics of language in Myanmar, one also ought to pay more attention to the politics of interaction between officials from the centre and local areas. During the Socialist and current military periods, local officials responsible for promoting minority cultures were not elected by local people but appointed by the central government. Since those officials were more interested in keeping their jobs than serving the minority peoples, most of them stayed away from minority cultural activities because they did not want to be associated with insurgent groups, who usually sought to promote minority cultures. Thus, the conspicuous absence of local officials willing to stand up for the interests of ethnic minorities contributed to the suspension of ethnic minority language classes in the country. This paper will also show that while the adoption of the Burman language as official language helped opponents of the regime to communicate with each other more efficiently and facilitated the various ethnic groups'' sense of belonging to a united Myanmar, its institutionalization also generate some misunderstanding between the Government and ethnic minorities.[1]

LANGUAGE AND NATION-BUILDING IN MYANMAR: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Myanmar's present boundaries were only established after its annexation into the British Empire. The British absorbed much of Myanmar's frontier regions into its Empire because it considered these regions with tributary relations to the Myanmar kings as part of colonial Myanmar. Although the British ruled Myanmar proper — the area inhabited by the majority ethnic Burman, and the frontier areas, the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities — under two separate administrative systems, the British colonial administration adopted English as the official language throughout Myanmar. Indigenous people, however, were allowed to speak and study their respective languages. Christian missionaries that came with the colonial administration also invented written languages for the Kachin, Chin, Lahu and a few other ethnic minorities to facilitate their missionary activities.

Language was not a political issue until Burmese students at Rangoon University College were politically awoken by the 1920 University Act that adopted very strict and high admission standards, which included a high level of English language proficiency. Since most Burmese could not meet the requirements of the new University Act, university students

organized protests against the university administration. Student leaders and other nationalist leaders collaborated to establish national colleges and schools that placed emphasis on the Burman language. Although most national schools that refused the colonial Government's financial assistance were closed down some three years later, the movement opened a new chapter for the Burman language by providing educated Burmans with the inspiration to invent a new literary style for the Burman language and to work for the introduction of an honors program in Burmese literature at Rangoon University.

The politics of language reached its zenith when a group of politically conscious and educated young people formed "Do Bama Asiayone" (DBA, Our Bama Association). The DBA noted in its first declaration:

> Bama pyi (the Bama country) is our country.
> Bama literature is our literature.
> Bama language is our language.
> Love our country.
> Praise our literature.
> Respect our language.[2]

Dubbing themselves *thakin* (Master), members of the DBA organized nationalist and anti-colonial activities throughout the country. The organization became a major nationalist organization when more and more politically conscious young people, including independence hero, Aung San and other future leaders of the country, joined its ranks. Although the DBA initially attracted mostly Burmans, far-sighted DBA leaders also tried to win the minds and hearts of ethnic and foreign minorities by declaring that an insult directed at any indigenous person was tantamount to insulting the entire indigenous population. DBA leaders were quoted as saying that if a Burman from Myitkyina (the capital city of Kachin state) were insulted, Burmans from Yay and Tavoy (cities in Mon State) would be insulted as well.

However, DBA leaders failed to convince most minority elites and nationalists that their organization was a united entity of various ethnicities. This was because the emergence of national consciousness was not confined to the Burmans, but to the ethnic minorities as well.[3] With the introduction of modern education and the availability of books on politics, many ethnic minorities also came to understand the power of nationalism. Probably due to the colonial administration's tradition of favouring ethnic minorities over Burmans, minority nationalists based their nationalist

discourses on anti-Burmese stories which highlighted the suffering of their ancestors under the rule of the Burmese kings. Minority elites and nationalist leaders appeared to believe that their cooperation with the colonial administration engendered the antipathy of Burmans, especially those engaging in the struggle for independence. Minority elites and nationalists also believed that they and their people might be discriminated against by the Government if Burmans were to assume control of the country. Hence, when these minority elites and nationalists sought more political rights for their peoples in the 1930s and 1940s, they wanted the British Government to keep their areas separate from Myanmar proper.

A major problem in the DBA's nationalist activities was that while the organization claimed to represent all indigenous groups, it failed to develop a strong, convincing and all-encompassing Myanmar identity. Although it called for the improvement of the physical welfare of all indigenous groups, leading DBA members did not promote the culture of ethnic and religious minorities. DBA's nationalist discourses continued to focus on promoting Buddhism and the Burman language even though it had launched a campaign to mobilize ethnic minorities. Realizing this, many left-wing DBA leaders dropped Buddhism from their discourses and tried to mobilize religious and foreign minorities by appealing to their individual cultures and sensibilities. The traditional nationalist leaders and Buddhist monks, however, continued to emphasize Buddhism and the Burman language. Consequently, although it managed to recruit a number of Mon, Rakhine, Chin, Pa O, Indian and Chinese, the DBA was regarded as a predominantly Burman organization throughout the colonial period. When Burman nationalist leaders fought against the British with the help of the Japanese army in the Second World War, many Karen, Kachin and Chin soldiers from the colonial army maintained their loyalty to the British colonial administration by fighting the Burman Nationalist Army alongside British forces. When the British retreated to India, many minority soldiers remained in Myanmar, and this accentuated Burman distrust of minority peoples. This distrust was further compounded when some members of the Burman Nationalist Army killed a large number of Karen in a communal riot.

Therefore, when Burman nationalist leaders negotiated for the country's independence with the British Government, the Shan, Karen and Kayah indicated that they did not want to be a part of independent Myanmar. Many minority elites and nationalists begged the British Government to keep their areas under its rule (U Kyaw Win et al. 1990, pp. 52, 87). However, after a series of lengthy meetings with Burman nationalist

leader Aung San at Pinlong in Shan State, ethnic leaders agreed to be a part of independent Myanmar on the condition that if they were unsatisfied with the Union, their regions would be allowed to secede from the Union ten years after Independence.

In the discussions leading up to the establishment of a constitution for an independent Myanmar, language became a major political issue between Burman and ethnic leaders. The first language-related issue encountered by the constitution drafters was on the issue of the official language (Maung Maung 1961, p. 204). When the Burman nationalists called for the Burman language to be designated the official language, it was easily resolved as none of the minority groups seriously took up the issue with the Burman nationalists. A Shan leader astutely noted that the minority leaders' acceptance of Burmese as the official language was due to their understanding of the necessity and practicality of having an official language through which all ethnic groups in the Union are able to effectively communicate with one another (Interview, 21 July 2003). He also noted that minority leaders accepted the replacement of English with Burmese partially because most ordinary people in the ethnic minorities did not speak English and also because Burmese was easier than English. A *thakin*, however, observed that some ethnic leaders were very anxious to maintain English as the official language as it was a neutral language. However, in spite of these sentiments, they did not block the designation of Burmese as the official language in part, because they wanted to devote their resources to other more important issues, and also because they believed all ethnic groups should know the language of the ethnic majority dominating the Union's politics (Interview, 11 July 2003).

The second and more important language-related issue emerged from the question as to which minority group should be granted statehood.[4] Aung San suggested that any ethnic group desirous of forming a separate state should possess, among other things, a language totally different from Burmese (Maung Maung 1961, pp. 167–70). Naturally, the ethnic groups pushing for the formation of their own separate state accordingly placed greater emphasis on the distinctiveness of their respective languages. For various reasons, the Constitution initially granted statehood to only the Shan and Kachin. The Constitution, however, guaranteed the right of all citizens to practise and promote their respective cultures and religions freely (Constitution of the Union of Burma 1947).

All in all, the Union of Myanmar did not emerge out of mutual trust and love between the Burmans and ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities joined the predominantly Burman Union with the expectation that they

would be considerably better off as a part of the Union than if they were independent from it. For ethnic minorities, especially ethnic elites and nationalists, keeping their own ethnic identity was more important than becoming "Myanmar". The central Government, on the other hand, wanted all citizens of Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity, to use Burmese as the lingua franca. This fundamental difference between minority nationalist leaders and Burman political leaders was to have a long-term impact on the nation-building process in post-colonial Myanmar.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND NATION-BUILDING IN PARLIAMENTARY MYANMAR[5] (1948–1962)

The parliamentary Government understood that unless it found a method to unify all the ethnic groups and give them a cause to feel as if they belonged to the larger predominantly Burman society, it would be extremely difficult to keep the newly independent country together. Aware of the ethnic minorities' growing nationalism, the Burman-dominated Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) Government promised that it would not seek national unity by pressuring all of the country's inhabitants to accept and endorse a common culture. Prime Minister, U Nu, publicly declared that national unity would only emerge if the Government instituted a system that accommodated the cultural differences am ous ethnic groups and guaranteed the economic wellbeing of all ethnic groups.[6] One might, therefore, argue that the AFPFL Government tried to, or at least claimed to, establish unity in diversity.

The complex socio-political situation under which the AFPFL Government attempted to undertake nation-building activities should be taken into consideration. This is especially so given that a large majority of Burmans believed that independence and a Burman-dominated Government would alleviate and eliminate all their economic and social difficulties. While attempting to to meet the Burmans' expectations, the Government also had to deal with minority elites whose main fear was that a Burman-dominated Union would marginalize their status as leaders of their respective communities. Thus, the Government found that it had to contend with minority nationalists who were distrustful of the Burmans.[7]

The Government was prudent enough to comprehend that the ethnic minorities' distrust of Burman political leaders and their methods of dealing with ethnic insurgent groups would have a serious impact on the groups' perception of it. Therefore, when the Government took actions against minority insurgent groups, it tried to ensure that it did not antagonize

those who were not involved in the movements. For instance, in order not to provoke and alienate the Karens who did not join the insurgent movement, U Nu labelled the Karen insurgent movement as the illegal activity of recalcitrant citizens. U Nu's high praise of the Karens who did not turn against the Government resulted in some ethnic Burmans dubbing him 'Karen Nu' (Pu Ga Lay 1949, p. 111). While it attempted to appease the law-abiding Karen, the State simultaneously sought to reassert its control of the country by launching military operations against insurgent groups. The defections of several battalions led the military to form militia groups to fight the insurgent groups. This arrangement was problematic because the militia was mainly comprised of unemployed thugs and bullies who did not care about winning the hearts and minds of minority peoples. Many militia groups and government soldiers reportedly looted and physically abused ethnic minorities they came across during military operations. Senior military and political leaders privately apologized to minority leaders for the abuses committed by government soldiers and requested them to be patient while the Government sought to discipline them.[8] U Nu and some political leaders also reasoned that it would be easier to win the hearts and minds of minorities if they were Buddhists and if they were to have a common language. The Government thus tried to promote the teaching and learning of the Burman language and Buddhist missionary work in minority areas (Kyawt Kyawt 2002, pp. 173–77).[9]

The teaching of Burmese in minority areas did not cause any major resentment among minority communities, as ethnic groups were allowed to teach their languages in pre-university level classes as well as to freely publish books, newspapers and magazines.[10] However, not all minority languages were taught at public schools in minority areas. Public schools in minority areas only taught the languages of major ethnic groups such as Shan, Karen, Chin, Kayah and Mon.[11] The languages of smaller ethnic groups were taught only in Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches. This was because some local state governments in minority areas dominated by major ethnic groups did not care for the promotion of the cultures of smaller groups. Therefore, politically conscious members of some smaller ethnic minority groups resented the elites of the dominant ethnic groups in their areas. For instance, the Red Shan group, who resides in Kachin State and speaks a Shan dialect, resented the Kachin state government and Kachin leaders for paying insufficient attention to the wellbeing of non-Kachin groups residing in the state (Interview, 1 October 2003).[12] In some areas where smaller ethnic groups outnumbered

the dominant ethnic groups, state governments did not require public schools to teach the language of the dominant ethnic group, instead the public schools in these areas used Burmese as the medium of instruction.[13]

From this situation arises the question of "how did the promotion of the Burmese language and the Government's flexible language policy contribute to the creation of national consciousness?"[14] Many ethnic minorities welcomed the teaching of Burmese in their respective areas, for proficiency in Burmese was essential if they wanted to succeed in their professional lives and in business. Also, the teaching of Burmese in minority areas enabled the various ethnic groups to communicate with each other and to conduct business transactions more efficiently. A retired government official originally from Kachin state noted:

> I spoke only Shan until I started to study Burmese at school in the early 1950s. The village I grew up in was a multiethnic one. The residents of the village included Shan, Kachin, Chinese and Burmese. Most people in the village understood a little bit of each others' languages. We tried to communicate with each other through what little we knew of each other's languages. Of course, we often misunderstood each other. For important matters, leaders from different ethnic communities talked to each other through the people who knew both languages. When we were forced to study Burmese at schools, we all came to master the language quite quickly. We could then communicate with people from other ethnic groups more efficiently. Also, the knowledge of Burmese enabled us to read newspapers and books in Burmese. Not everybody liked to read books and newspapers in the past, but with an education in Burmese, more and more people came to read newspapers and books. As a result, more and more people came to understand what was going on in the region and in the country. (Interview, 12 October 2003)

Nevertheless, although the teaching of Burmese had helped the various ethnic groups to better understand one another, the relations between the Government and minority elites and nationalists continued to deteriorate. This was because while ethnic minorities were more interested in gaining benefits for themselves and their people than in preserving the Union, the Burman military and political leaders equated their primary duty with the preservation of the Union.[15] The major problem between ethnic minorities and the central Government thus was that the former wanted more political and economic rights and benefits from the Union than the central

Government would dispense.[16] Burman political leaders' practice of dividing revenue for various ethnic regions according to the size of the population did not endear them to the ethnic minorities or their leaders. Since the majority of the population resided in Myanmar proper, the budget allocated for Myanmar proper was always several times more than the budget for minority states. Minority leaders also thought that since minority areas were more underdeveloped than Myanmar proper, the central Government ought to invest more in the development of those areas. While the ethnic minorities were pressing for the development of their regions, Burmans, too, wanted the Government to build more schools and roads in their areas. The central Government, however, did not possess the fiscal capacity to meet the demands of both the Burman and ethnic minorities.

Electoral politics importantly also aggravated the already volatile relationship between the Government and the minority leaders. Since no political party was able to win majority seats in the parliament without the support of the majority of Buddhist Burmans, major political parties always placed emphasis on winning in the constituencies in Myanmar proper. Political parties thus adopted policies that would help them obtain the support of Burmans at the cost of the support of ethnic minorities. In order to win the support of Buddhist monks and Buddhist Burmans, Prime Minister U Nu promised to make Buddhism the state religion if he won. When his party won with the support of Buddhist Burman votes, U Nu had little choice but to keep his promise, which upset the ethnic and religious minorities (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003*a*). Although U Nu tried to assuage the situation by passing a law guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities, the minority leaders, including Buddhist minorities, conclude that the Burman-dominated central Government was prepared to sacrifice the welfare of ethnic minorities in order to win the support of their own people.[17] Hence, although the central State tried to improve their relations with the ethnic minorities, it could not remove the ethnic minorities' view that the central Government was the government of the Burmans. A former Shan insurgent leader was observed to have said,

> If the Government wanted us to consider it *our* government, it had to take care of us, it must be actively involved in the promotion of our culture and languages. All post-colonial governments claimed that they wanted to help us develop our regions and our cultures. The problem is that they never matched their words and their deeds. Ethnic minorities, therefore, always referred to the

> central Government as, *Bamar a-soe-ya* (the Burman Government) (Interview, 9 June 2003).

Indignant with the central Government, many young Karen, Kayah, Rakhine, Mon, Pa O, Palong and Kachin people went underground and fought against the central Government for the independence of their region. Conversely, ethnic minority leaders banded together to pressure the Government into granting them more autonomy and revenues. An interesting point here is that minority leaders of various ethnic groups communicated with each other in Burmese. A former member of the Shan State Army recalled:

> Most minority leaders in those days understood English but many of them were not comfortable discussing political matters in English. So, Shan, Kachin, Mon, Karen and Chin leaders communicated in Burmese. Since Burmese was the official language, all minority leaders were forced to speak it. I graduated from high school during the parliamentary days. I learned Burmese at school. After I joined the underground movement, I had to deal with members of BCP and KIA and we all talked to each other in Burmese (Interview, 7 June 2003).[18]

Prior to the declaration that rendered Burmese the official language, many minority leaders only spoke broken Burmese. However, when Burmese became the official language, all minority leaders were forced to speak it and over time, they came to master the language.

The knowledge of Burmese also allowed politically conscious ethnic minorities to better understand Burman chauvinistic views and the problems inherent in the nation-building activities undertaken by the State. Although Burman political leaders repeatedly noted that all indigenous ethnic groups residing in Myanmar are blood relations, they failed to define "Myanmarness" clearly. Many political leaders continued to use the nationalist discourses developed by the Do Bama Asiayone (DBA) during the colonial period. Since DBA's nationalist discourses were based on anti-colonialism, they were unsuitable or unifying the country in the post-colonial period. A lot of ethnic minorities who were on good terms with the colonial Government viewed such discourses as evidence of the Burman-dominated Government's hostility towards them. Even some politicians who understood the sensitive situation within the nation-building process often made comments and statements in their speeches (which were directed at the Burman audience) that upset minority elites.

As more and more ethnic minorities came to better understand Burmese, the reckless chauvinistic statements uttered by Burman political leaders began to impact negatively on the minorities' perception of the Government. A Mon community leader commented,

> In their political speeches to the Burmans, many Burman politicians liked to talk about how ancient Burman kings unified the country. The problem with this is that many ethnic minorities also had access to newspapers. Many ethnic minorities grew up learning that Burman kings were patronizing and were often very abusive towards their vessels. Burman leaders used anti-British discourses to instigate nationalistic sentiments among Burmans. Likewise, many minority leaders used anti-Burman discourses to instigate nationalism among their respective ethnic groups. For minority nationalists, Burmans were colonizers. Some minority leaders even used excerpts about Burman leaders' chauvinistic statements from newspapers as evidence that Burmans do not think much of us. The chauvinistic statements of Burman leaders offended many young people who understood Burmese. That is why, a lot of minority leaders who studied at Yangon and Mandalay universities in the 1950s and early 1960s joined the armed struggle against the Government (Interview, 23 October 2003).

In general, most ordinary ethnic minorities stayed out of politics. All twenty-five Shan, Mon, and Kachin interviewees who were between sixty and seventy-two years old noted that most ordinary ethnic minorities just wanted to live peacefully. However, due to the abusive manners of Burman soldiers and militia groups in their areas, many ethnic minorities came to see the central Government as the colonizer of their regions. Even members of smaller ethnic groups who had no quarrel with the dominant ethnic groups in their respective regions were disgusted with the soldiers of the central Government. Sixty-five-year-old Pa O recalled:

> Shan police and Shan Sawbwa never looted our property but a lot of Burman solders were really barbaric. We could not support the Government that sent such barbaric people to our region (Interview, 10 June 2003).

In 1961, minority leaders impatient with the central Government had a meeting to collectively pressure the Government to establish a true federal state. They also threatened to secede from the Union if the Government did not comply with their demands. Before minority leaders and Burman political leaders could reach an agreement, however, the

military seized control of the country, claiming that it did so to prevent the disintegration of the Union.

In conclusion, declaring Burmese as the official state language by the Burman-dominated Government proved to be a double-edge sword. While it allowed the Government to communicate with minority peoples, the knowledge of Burmese permitted minority peoples to better understand the low opinion many Burman political leaders and traditional nationalists had of them. Furthermore, the Burman-dominated Government failed to develop a new nationalist discourse that would appeal to both the Burman majority and minority ethnic groups. In so doing, the Government failed to meet the demands and expectations of minority people; this led many minority leaders to use Burmese as a means in organizing anti-Government activities.

LANGUAGE AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE SOCIALIST PERIOD (1962–1988)

As a regime that came to power claiming it would prevent the disintegration of the Union, leaders of the Revolutionary Council (RC) repeatedly emphasized the importance of national unity and promised to institute a system that would serve the interests of all citizens of the country. A few months after it seized control of the country, the RC formed the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) and announced that it would establish a socialist system called the "Burmese Way to Socialism". The RC's language policies proved to be more anti-colonial than its predecessor's; it maintained Burmese as the official language, but tried to do away with the use of English at the state level.

Within two years of seizing power, the RC closed down all missionary schools and announced its plan to make Burmese the only medium of instruction in all university and pre-university classes, except English language classes. The RC also planned to invent new Burmese alphabet-based scripts for languages that previously used Roman scripts. Although the latter plan was never implemented, Burmese became the only medium of instruction in most university and pre-university classes by the end of 1970. In contrast, the RC limited the teaching of minority languages only up to the second standard and publicly announced that minority groups could develop and promote their respective culture freely as long as their cultural activities did not negatively effect the national unity and the RC's socialist projects.[19]

As a result of the BSPP's rigorous nation-building activities, foreign observers of Burmese ethnic politics and minority nationalists accused the BSPP of "Burmanizing" the entire population. Many scholars and

journalists claimed that "adherence to a minority cultural tradition is treated as tantamount to subversion of the nation and is branded as a mark of group inferiority within the nation" (Lehman 1967). Others argued that the Government only allowed ethnic minorities to practise their cultures if their practices were in line with the Burmese Way to Socialism, or viewed the promotion of Burman language and literature and the suspension of minority languages in public schools as evidence of the Socialist Government's attempt to "Burmanize" the entire population.

In reality, however, the Government cannot be said to be systematically forbidding ethnic minorities the practice of their respective customs and cultures. All ethnic groups were allowed to promote and develop their own cultures. The Socialist Government was not against the idea of ethnic minorities possessing multiethnic identities. In many minority areas, ethnic minorities were also allowed to resolve legal problems including rape, divorce and inheritance according to their respective customary laws and practices (Interview, 21 October 2003). Ethnic minorities enjoyed more cultural freedom than most scholars and minority nationalists would suggest. Indeed, traditional cultural activities of minority groups did not have to be in line with the Burmese Way to Socialism; as long as their traditional activities did not challenge the authority of the Government, minorities were allowed to organize cultural activities freely.

The problems of teaching minority languages were also more complex than many scholars and ethnic nationalists intimated. The 1966 Education Act required public schools in minority areas to teach minority languages up to second grade. The Ministry of Education published textbooks for Mon, Shan, Po Karen, Scot Karen, Chin and Kachin languages. Ethnic communities that wanted to teach their languages beyond the second standard were allowed to use classrooms in public schools before or after regular school hours. While it was indeed true that some schools in minority areas suspended the teaching of minority languages in1960s, nevertheless many schools in several minority areas continued to teach minority languages until the early 1980s. The Ministry of Education published textbooks for Kachin language courses until the early 1970s, for Shan and Po and Scot Karen language courses until the mid-1970s, Chin language courses until the late 1970s and Mon language course until the early 1980s.[20]

Given these diametrically opposing facts then, two questions could be raised: Why was the Socialist Government accused of "Burmanizing" the ethnic minorities?, and Why did some schools stop teaching minority languages when others continued to teach them? The answers to both

questions lie in the complexities of the political system and the way in which the Socialist Government functioned. A retired senior BSPP official noted that some senior Socialist Government officials thought that the Burmese Way to Socialism would help the Government achieve national unification by encouraging all ethnic groups to transcend their ethnic nationalistic sentiments (Interview, 19 July 2003). Since the Government was more willing to work with the people who would endorse the Burmese Way to Socialism, the system would marginalize the ethnic nationalists.

Chauvinistic statements made by senior central state officials further compounded this situation. For example, BSPP chairman, U Ne Win, publicly stated that Burmans would have to help their backward minority brothers and sisters improve their living standards and the level of culture so that these other cultures will be comparable to that of the Burmans.[21] Also, like its predecessor, the Socialist Government did not define "Myanmarness" clearly and referred to the Burman cultural elements when promoting the Union of Myanmar. Infuriated by the political system and the way senior government officials engaged in nation-building activities, minority nationalists, especially insurgent leaders, began to develop anti-government discourses, which accused the Government of "Burmanizing" the entire population.

In theory, the Socialist Government was supposed to function under collective leadership. In practice, however, most of the State's power was concentrated in the hands of Party Chairman Ne Win. Known to the general public as Number-One-Gyi (Big Number One) or A-Pho-Gyi (Big Old Man), Ne Win had the power to appoint and dismiss, at his own discretion, state and party officials at all levels of administration. Although there were initially some officials who were genuinely interested in establishing a socialist system in the country, by the early 1970s, only those who were willing to please Ne Win remained in important positions. In other words, by the early 1970s, most senior government positions were filled with those who were more interested in securing and maximizing their self-interest than serving the interests of the public. In order to keep their jobs, many senior officials came to practise three *mas* — *ma-loke* (not doing any work), *ma-shote* (not getting involved in any complication) and *ma-pyoke* (not getting dismissed) as guiding principles in performing their duties. In turn, the senior officials appointed their loyal followers to positions in the division/state and township-level administrative units. Hence, although local administrative units were theoretically supposed to be staffed with people elected by the public, the elections, in reality, were merely ceremonial and most candidates

nominated by senior government officials always won. Since they owed their jobs to senior government officials, most local state officials were more interested in impressing their patrons than serving the interests of the public (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003*a*, pp. 35–36).

As expected, most self-interested central and local state officials were unwilling to deal with controversial issues even if these deeds would benefit the public. For instance, in the late 1960s, a group of Shan university students tried to promote new Shan scripts and vocabularies invented by some Shan nationalists. Since the old Shan scripts were much closer to Burmese scripts, young educated Shan associated the invention of the new Shan with the Shan nationalist movement. However, based on their suspicions that the promoters of the new Shan scripts were linked to the Shan insurgents, the then members of the Shan State Council refused to accept the new Shan scripts. When some Shan language teachers started speculating whether they should teach new Shan at public schools, the Shan State Council decided to suspend the teaching of Shan language at public schools under their jurisdiction.

Some schools in Mon, Kachin, and Karen states stopped teaching minority languages when they could no longer find teachers capable of teaching both minority languages and other courses. This was because the Socialist Government, unlike its parliamentary predecessor, did not provide its Ministry of Education with a means of allocating budgets for public schools in minority areas to hire minority language teachers. The Ministry expected primary school teachers in the minority areas to follow the example of teachers in Myanmar proper and to teach all subjects. The People's Councils were responsible for helping schools to hire qualified teachers, however, local state officials, instead of locating and hiring qualified teachers, simply suspended minority language classes.[22] When they saw the suspension of minority languages in other schools, many teachers capable of teaching minority languages called for the teaching of minority languages to be suspended as well (Interview, 2 October 2003). This was because they did not want to handle the heavy workload of teaching more classes than they could manage. In some places, local authorities and teachers decided to suspend minority language classes, because students were unable to handle the workload. According to a former Socialist Government official, the irresponsibility of Socialist Government officials was the main reason for the suspension of the teaching of minority languages at public schools in minority areas.[23]

Nevertheless, since the 1966 Education Law allowed public schools in minority areas to teach minority languages up to second grade, there

were public schools in minority areas that continued to teach minority languages until the early 1980s. Clearly, the teaching of minority languages at public schools in minority areas continued as long as local state officials were willing to work for it. The teaching of minority languages could sometimes be problematic as insurgent groups and ethnic nationalists hostile to the Socialist Government also tried to promote their languages or their own brand of their languages on their own. This made local state officials, who did not want to be implicated with any socio-political complications, reluctant to promote the teaching of minority languages in minority areas.[24] However, because by the beginning of the 1980s, the officials left in the various levels of the Socialist Government were predominantly those who chiefly abided by the three *ma* principles, most public schools in minority areas stopped teaching minority languages.

It would, however, be incorrect to assume that the teaching of minority languages was suspended throughout the country. Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches continued to offer minority language courses soon after public schools stopped offering them. People from some minority villages collectively hired language teachers to teach their children how to read and write their mother tongues. Moreover, public schools in Chin state, Palong and other remote areas continued to use their mother tongues as the medium of instruction.[25] In city areas, however, younger members of the ethnic minorities came to lose interest in learning how to read and write their own mother tongues as there was no incentive for them to do so. More generally, a growing disinterest in the study of their languages led to the suspension of teaching of minority languages in many monasteries in several minority areas. A Mon lecturer from Yangon University surmised that Mons in Mon state who could speak Mon only made up approximately 50 per cent of the population and only about 20 per cent knew how to write in Mon (Interview, 2 October 2003). A retired Shan politician also noted that only Shan people living in remote areas took the trouble of learning to write Shan (Interview, 28 July 2003). Both the Mon lecturer and retired Shan politician were united in their observations that young people from their respective states were more familiar with Burman history than their own ethnic histories. Thus, in contrast to those who grew up in the parliamentary period, these young ethnic minorities tend to associate themselves with the country more than their ethnic group.[26]

For ethnic nationalists, the central and local government organs were part of the same authoritarian state. Regardless of the true reason behind the cessation of minority language classes, the ethnic nationalists strongly

believed that the Government was responsible for the public schools' suspension of minority languages classes. Furthermore, they also resented the Government for not rendering any assistance to them. Minority nationalist leaders blamed the Government for the illiteracy of the large majority of young ethnic minorities living in cities and its surrounding areas in their own languages. Unsurprisingly, schools opened in the insurgent areas, often referred to as "liberated areas" by insurgent groups and "black areas" by the Government, taught most courses in minority languages and Burmese was taught only as a foreign language. Insurgent leaders and teachers from those schools also tried to instill anti-Burmese sentiments into the minds of their young ethnic minority students by emphasizing the brutalities of Burman kings and soldiers in their history lessons. An NGO activist currently running teachers' training courses for ethnic minorities in Chiang Mai attests to this:

> Most ethnic minorities growing up in liberated areas were taught to view Burmans in a negative light. This is more so given the fact that most of them grew up experiencing the attacks of government forces. This explains why most of them only speak their own languages and are not fluent in Burmese. They have associated Burmans with danger and the military forces attacking them, as such, whenever they heard that Burmans were coming, they would run away. The paradoxical thing is, though, most minority leaders need to speak Burmese so as to enable them to directly communicate with other minority leaders (Interview, 7 June 2003).

Although it never stopped developing anti-colonial discourses, the Socialist Government's policy towards the English language changed when one of U Ne Win's daughters did not get into the Royal Medical School in England because of her poor English. English came to be re-emphasized as the language of modernization and re-introduced as a major medium of instruction both in high schools and universities. In fact, contrary to appearances, English did not cease to be a popular language throughout the socialist period. The young people in Myanmar, like many other young people in poor countries in the 1980s, were extremely keen on getting jobs in foreign countries, and to do so, they needed to have some working knowledge of English. The reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction at various levels of public schools, however, did not help young Burmese to improve their English because many lecturers were trained in Burmese and were ill-equipped to teach

courses in English. Although the Government re-introduced English as a medium of instruction in the classroom as part of its modernization of the education system, people viewed the poor state of English proficiency among young people as evidence of the Socialist Government's failure to modernize the country.

All in all, the Socialist Government did not have a clear plan to "Burmanize" the entire population. In fact, some of the top ten most powerful Socialist Government officials were not Burmans; for example, the BSPP's powerful Assistant Secretary, Tin Oo, and the penultimate President of the socialist regime, Sein Lwin, were Mons. The Government's major problem was its officials' failure to represent the interests of both the majority Burmans and the ethnic minorities. These government officials were mainly interested in either keeping their jobs or getting promotion, and, consequently, the teaching of minority languages was suspended largely because the state officials were not willing to work for the interests of minority peoples. Even in the face of lack of state officials' support, the Socialist Government generally allowed minority groups to promote their languages and cultures freely, as long as they did not challenge its rule. Therefore, one may argue that during the socialist period, minority groups enjoyed a great deal of cultural freedom, but little political freedom.

LANGUAGE AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE SLORC/SPDC PERIOD (1988–)

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), at first known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), seized control of the Government in late 1988. Initially, the military leaders regarded all political opposition and insurgent groups as major opponents, but gradually came to perceive the major opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), as more dangerous than the ethnic insurgent groups, precisely because the former wanted to take its place.[27] The Junta began to make peace with insurgent groups in order to consolidate its position vis-à-vis the NLD in 1989 and, by the close of 1997, it had made ceasefire agreements with seventeen insurgent groups. When making ceasefire agreements with insurgent groups, the Junta began to promote the idea that Myanmar was a multiethnic state with 135 different races and over 100 different languages. Some observers and minority nationalists concluded that the Government promoted such ideas to undermine the unity between different minority groups and to perpetuate Burman dominance.

Among the Junta's strategies to preserve the unity of the Union was to maintain Burmese as the official language. Due to past governments' successful efforts in promoting the teaching of Burmese in minority areas, most young people, and those in their fifties, spoke Burmese as fluently as Burmans. The Junta used Burmese as a means of transmitting its propaganda, which was designed to undermine its opponents and to convince the public, both the majority Burmans and ethnic minorities, that their lives would be better off only under military rule. Senior military officials and the Government-controlled media repeatedly noted that if the public did not cooperate with the military Government and lacked Union spirit, they would be responsible for Myanmar's absorption into any of the other foreign powers surrounding it.[28]

Like the Socialist Government, the Junta permitted both indigenous and foreign minority groups to freely promote the teaching and studying of their own languages. Ethnic minorities were further impelled to promote their own languages when the Junta held the National Convention in 1992 to draft a new constitution. Referring to the language requirement for statehood proposed by Aung San in 1947, many ethnic groups tried to emphasize the uniqueness of their languages when they presented their causes at the Convention (*Proposals Submitted at the National Convention* 1993). Since then, some minority groups have tried to revive their languages. For instance, the rare use of the Kachin state's Red Shan written language culminated in the ignorance of many Red Shan of the existence of their written language. Given the trend in promulgating ethnic languages, it was certainly no coincidence that a Red Shan cultural association wrote the history of Red Shan in its own language in the early 1990s (Interview, 12 October 2003). Although the National Convention has been stalled since 1996, minority political parties have continued to promote their languages in a more aggressive manner than they did in the 1970s and 1980s (Interviews, June 2003–October 2003).

In 1998, however, the Junta's National Education Promotion Program dropped the teaching of minority languages at pre-university level classes. This was because, a Ministry of Education official explained, the existence of many different ethnic minority groups with their own dialects and languages in each minority state and their constant pressures on the Government to introduce their language classes at public schools in their respective areas created many problems. It was also noted that public schools in minority areas lacked the capacity to teach the mother tongues of all the peoples residing within their jurisdiction. Subsequently, the Government decided to let the minority groups organize their ethnic

minority language classes on their own. This led the local communities of many minority areas to hire language teachers to teach their students the written aspects of their languages.[29]

This phenomenon was not merely restricted to the ethnic villages. In Yangon, there were Minority Cultural Associations, especially, Mon and Shan Associations, offering courses in their languages. Also, university students could organize minority language courses at the universities,[30] so long as they obtained permission from their respective registrars to have a room for that purpose (Interview, 12 October 2003). But since 1996, after the Government had closed the universities for about three years, student associations became less active and accordingly stopped organizing language classes (Interview, 29 October 2003).

Regardless of its efforts, the Military Government remained very unpopular and was continually criticized by the opposition and minority groups for "Burmanizing" the entire population. The Government was not the only beneficiary from the widespread usage of the Burman language within the country. The predominance of Burmese made it easier for opposition groups to continue their dissemination of anti-government propaganda throughout the country; this usage of Burmese as a subversive anti-government tool had its roots in the socialist period. Thus, with the exception of the inhabitants of a few remote areas, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders were able to directly communicate with ethnic minorities when touring their areas. Also, many people from minority areas could read anti-government literature distributed by opposition groups and learn about developments, which the Government wanted to cover up, from the Burmese language programmes from BBC, VOA and RFA radio broadcasts.[31] Political opposition groups and foreign radio stations served as alternative sources of information, and their anti-military discourses undermined the Government's anti-colonialist and NLD discourses.

For all its enthusiastic promotion of Union spirit, the Military Government did not have a clear definition of "Myanmarness" other than the fact that Myanmar represented all the ethnic groups in the country. Similar to the parliamentary and socialist periods, there were a lot of overlaps between the "Myanmarness" and "Burmanness". Most cultural activities undertaken by the Junta under the label of promoting Myanmar culture focused mainly on Burman culture. For example, although the Government rewrote its interpretation of the historical wars between the Burman and Mon kings, public school history textbooks continued to emphasize the roles of the Burman kings who

attempted to unify the country. To make matters worse, some senior military officers often expressed their desire to emulate the "mighty ancient Myanmar kings" in reunifying the Government. Many ethnic nationalists resented the teaching of such historical lessons as well as the fact that the Government did not provide any assistance to the teaching of minority languages.[32] Not surprisingly, ethnic nationalists responded by constructing anti-government discourses and disseminating them through the foreign media and the Internet.

The Government's intolerance of the opposition groups also engendered much misunderstanding of its language policy. Any group suspected of preaching anti-government sentiments was labelled by the Government as working towards the disintegration of the Union. In teaching their own language, ethnic minority groups also promoted ethnic nationalism and were occasionally critical of the Government. When the Government got wind of this "marked opposition", it would close such schools. For instance, in 1994 and 1998, the Government closed down some Mon schools run by the New Mon State Party. Mon nationalists and foreign observers alleged that the schools were closed for teaching their own ethnic languages. This allegation was not fully justified, for while the schools in the ethnic regions were closed down, the Mon Cultural Association in Yangon, and the Departments of Myanmar Language and Literature in the universities continued to offer courses on the Mon language. In reality, the Government was not bothered with the teaching of ethnic languages, but only proceeded to close down the schools because they feared that the schools might become the birth place of anti-government activists. When it was proven, after some meetings with the Mon leaders, that language was the only thing taught to the students, the Government permitted the Mon schools to reopen.

In most of the country, the absence of government support for minority languages and cultures and the promotion of Burmese contributed to the decline of minority languages and culture.[33] Furthermore, the success of the Government's education programme in teaching the peoples of Myanmar to be almost united in their loyalty to the country is quite evident. In other words, ethnic minorities, taught in Burmese as the medium of instruction and exposed to the Burman nationalist interpretation of Myanmar history, were likely to identify themselves with the defence of the nation. Nevertheless, when asked where their loyalties lie, with the Government or the country, none of them stated the Government. In contrast, ethnic minorities who grew up in the so-called "liberated" areas, controlled by insurgent groups, went through a different socialization

process. Since they studied Burmese in their schools as a second language, they assumed that they need not master it. Many of them did not know how to speak, read and write Burmese very well and, in fact, they hated Burmans and considered Burmese as the language of the enemy. This could be attributed to their association of the Burman language with the brutality and violence of the "invading" Burman armies attacking them.[34]

However, it is interesting to note that the various ethnic insurgent groups would use Burmese as their common medium of negotiation. At Mesot, at the Thai-Myanmar border, the multiethnic front of the National Council for the Union of Myanmar (NCUB), which consists of Burman, Shan, Karen, Kachin, Rakhine and other ethnic groups, used Burmese as its chief mode of communication. Although they use Burmese in their discussions or for planning their anti-government activities, many of the ethnic nationalists and anti-Burman Government activists wanted to promote English as the official language. However, their plan to render English as the official language is problematic because most of the ethnic nationalists and anti-Burman Government activists speak better Burmese than English. Their desire to institute English as the official language stems from their belief that English, being a neutral language, will ensure that no one group will dominate politically or socially. The rationale is that if Burmese remains the national language, the ethnic Burmans will continue to have the upper hand in politics and all other sectors of society.

Ironically, in spite of its anti-colonial stance, in recent years, the Government has placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of English, such that most departments in all universities have reverted to using English as a medium of instruction. However, in effecting this change, the Government failed to consider that most of the university teachers were trained in Burmese and thus unqualified to teach in English. The students, being not well versed in the language themselves, usually resorted to plagiarism in their term papers and thesis. Also, there were students who wrote their theses in Burmese before getting someone to translate their work into English. Despite the negative effects, the Government persisted in its promotion of English; for example, various government-sponsored civil society organizations, such as the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) opened English language classes for its members.[35]

It can be surmised that the Junta carried out nation-building, activities as a part of its attempt to justify its continued rule of the country. It used the official language as a means of conveying its intent and propaganda. However, the Military Government does not enjoy sole control over the

use of languages as a propaganda tool. Opposition groups also made use of the official language to disseminate anti-government discourses throughout the country. Similar to the Socialist Government, the Junta allowed minority groups to freely promote their languages and cultures as long as they did not challenge its rule. Nevertheless, due to its failure to support the promotion of minority cultures, the Junta was accused of "Burmanizing" the entire population.

CONCLUSION

Successive governments claimed that they instituted Burmese as the official language for the sake of better communication amongst the various ethnic groups. They also claimed that being an independent country, it is only natural that Myanmar uses one of its native languages as the official language, rather than a foreign language like English. Since the majority of the people are ethnic Burmans, the selection and implementation of Burmese as the official language seemed a natural choice. Until recently, most ethnic nationalists did not see the implementation of Burmese as the official language as a slight on the other languages and culture in the Union. However, they resented successive Myanmar governments for not sufficiently supporting their respective languages and cultures. There is a fundamental difference between ethnic nationalists and Burman political leaders on the matter of language politics and nation-building. While ethnic elites and nationalists believe that the Union should only last as long as it benefited them, the Burman political leaders appear to be obsessed with ancient Burman history and their grandiose thoughts of unifying the country.

Apart from their belief in themselves as the chief unifiers of the country, post-colonial Myanmar governments have neither a clear nation-building discourse nor a clear definition of "Myanmarness". Whenever they claimed that something was done for the sake of nation-building, it was usually a deploy to keep themselves in power. For example, they often used the official language as a propaganda tool. Since they were not popularly elected, the Socialist and current Military Governments had to organize popular activities to legitimize themselves. The promotion of Burman culture and language was clearly a means to pacify and gain the support of the majority Burman populace. Although it is true that the Government did not actively seek to promote minority cultures and languages, this oversight was more due to ignorant irresponsibility than governmental policy.[36]

The establishment of Burmese as the official language has helped to facilitate communication between the various ethnic groups. Indeed, Burmese played a crucial role in making the various ethnic groups feel that they are all fellow citizens belonging to the same country.

With the exception of the first twenty years of the socialist period, successive Myanmar governments viewed English as a language of modernization. The current military government is actively trying to promote it, however, the present educational system is too weak to aid people in mastering the language. For the public, English is a language that could help them to get good jobs both within and outside the country. Due to their antipathy for the Burmans, many minority activists based in Thailand are keen to make English the official language of the country. While they believe in the necessity of linguistic centralization, they have no desire to be "linguistically subdued and culturally incorporated". This is extremely apparent in that many politically conscious and motivated minority nationalists have publicly stated that their languages need to be reinstated. In contrast, the NLD and other large political parties want to maintain Burmese as the official language. Given this situation, it is not preposterous to assume that language policy-making will be a controversial political issue for whoever comes to power in the future.

Notes

1. Before proceeding, it would indeed be prudent to clarify the usage of the terms: Myanmar, Burma, Burman and Burmese. While Burman usually refers to the ethnic majority "Bamar", Burmese and Myanmar can be said to be the name of the ethnic majority, the Burman language, and the term representing all citizens of the country or the name of the country. In order to avoid confusion, this paper will use Burman as the name for the ethnic majority, Burmese for the Burman language and Myanmar for the name of the country and all its citizens.
2. Committee for the Compilation of the History of Do-Ba-Ma-Asyayone, *Do-Ba-Ma-Asyayone Tha-Mai (History of Our Bama Organization)*, Vol. 1 (Sarpay Beikman, Yangon: 1976): 127.
3. In fact, the Karens formed the first organization bearing the name of an ethnic group.
4. The statehood is a federated state where an elected State Council enjoys some autonomy in administering its territory.
5. In modern Myanmar history, the period between 1948 and 1962 is known as the Parliamentary period, for the country in the British-style and system during that time.
6. U Nu also attended ethnic cultural festivals in order to show his endorsement

of different ethnic cultures (Nu 1954, p. 1). In trying to encourage various ethnic groups to respect and value each others' cultures, U Nu was recorded to have said at a Mon cultural conference, "Mon culture is not the sole concern of the Mons. It is also the concern of Burmans. Likewise, the term Burman culture is not the monopoly of Burman; it is also the property of the Mon people as well" (ibid., p. 3).

7. When the Government refused to grant Union Statehood to Karen, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) launched an armed struggle against it, instigating the Karen battalions in the government army to join the KNDO's fight against the Government. Similarly, the Burman Communist Party (BCP) and some Kachin soldiers also went underground during this period. Following these incidents, the remnants of the KMT forces entered Eastern Shan state with the intention of using it as a stronghold against the communist government in China.
8. As retired Brigadier General Aung Gyi remarked, the Government blamed this misunderstanding between Burman soldiers and ethnic minorities on the soldiers' lack of discipline and the lack of a common language between the soldiers and ethnic minorities (Interview, 25 June 2002).
9. Although the Buddhist missionary work was aimed chiefly at the minorities practising animism, a large number of Christian minorities resented the Government's actions. They felt that the Government was seeking to marginalize non-Buddhist groups by refusing to help them.
10. There were reportedly more than ten minority language newspapers in circulation during the parliamentary period.
11. The language of a major ethnic group, Rakhine, was not taught separately as Rakhine uses the same alphabets as Burmese.
12. For example, some Pa O tribes in Shan state briefly rebelled against Sawbwas (Shan traditional rulers) (Yaunghwe 1987, p. 114). However, most small ethnic groups were on the whole too politically weak to turn against the dominance of their respective local governments.
13. For instance, public schools in the *In-daw-gyi* area of Kachin state did not offer Kachin language courses, because almost two-thirds of its students were non-Kachin.
14. Regardless of the Government's palpable promotion of Burmese, the Constitution also permitted the use of English in the country. The Government thus allowed missionary schools where English was the medium of instruction to continue its operations. In fact, English remained a popular language in the country. This was evident from the many English bureaucratic letters and memos. Likewise, many Indian and westernized Burmans continued to write letters to government officials in English. Many well-to-do Buddhist families, including those supporting the promotion of Burmese, continued to send their children to missionary schools so as to allow their children to master English. At universities, students could take their lessons in either

English or Burmese, but those who opted for classes where the medium of instruction was English were considered smarter than those who took classes in Burmese.

15. U Nu and many other Burman political and military leaders, including leaders of opposition parties, frequently discussed the importance of keeping the Union together. They overtly and indirectly said that under no circumstance would they allow the Union to disintegrate. This rationale later justified the military's seizure of the country in 1962; as will be discussed later, it took control of the country on the pretext that the country was on the verge of collapse.
16. A prominent Shan leader and the first president of independent Myanmar, Sao Shwe Thaik declared in Parliament that if he had known standardized education, health services and the economy in his state would remain poor under the Burman-dominated Government, he would not have signed the Panglong Agreement (Parliamentary Proceedings (CN), II, xx1, 821).
17. Apart from attending minority peoples' cultural festivals, most central state officials were rarely involved in the promotion of minority cultures. In contrast, they actively participated in the promotion of Burman culture and language.
18. Three retired members of Mon and Kachin insurgent movements revealed that they too communicated with people from other insurgent groups in Burmese.
19. The RC also tried to better understand the cultures of minority people by commissioning scholars and officials from the Ministry of Culture to conduct research into minority cultures. The Ministry of Culture also opened cultural museums for minority peoples' cultural artifacts at the capitals of minority states, so as to promote and conserve these minorities' cultures (Daw Mya Oo 2003, p. 71). The curators of the museums at minority capitals must not only be members of the dominant ethnic groups whose names the state bore, but also speakers of their respective ethnic languages. In 1965, the Socialist Government also established the Academy for Development of National Races to train teachers and socialist cadres for minority areas. The Academy's trainees were recruited from among the residents of minority areas.
20. Ten government officials and eight businessmen who went to primary school in Shan state in the early 1970s said that they studied Shan language at school. A retired administrative official from Shan state also confirmed Shan language was taught at schools in Shan state until the mid-1970s (Interview, 25 October 2003). Some college students from Chin and Mon states also remarked that some schools in their respective villages taught their respective minority languages until the mid-1980s. Three Mon tutors from Yangon University said that they studied the Mon language for four years in primary schools in their respective villages in the early 1980s

(Interview, 22 October 2003). They also remembered taking Mon language exams held by their respective township people's councils. One of them also remembered being conferred a certificate for passing the exam.

21. In reality, however, apart from making people from Naga tribes wear pants, especially when they attended the Union Day festival in Yangon, the Socialist Government did not forcibly change or eliminate any of their cultural practices. Traditionally, people from the Naga tribe rarely covered their private parts.
22. A retired schoolteacher from Shan state noted that the State Councils at minority areas ought to have sent more people to the Academy for the Development of National Races to train as teachers because most of the Academy's graduates wanted to become party cadres rather than teachers (Interview, 29 July 2003).
23. Many minority nationalists thought that it was U Ne Win who wanted the suspension of the teaching of minority languages at public schools in minority areas. If the central Government and U Ne Win wanted to suspend the teaching of minority languages in public schools, the suspension of all languages would take place at the same time. A retired senior government official noted that many senior government officials often gave "U Ne Win does not like it" answer whenever they did not want to deal with an issue raised by the public. Three retired education ministry officials did not recall receiving any orders suspending the teaching of minority languages. In reality, U Ne Win asked officials from the Ministries of Education and Culture to develop Burmese-Ethnic minority language dictionaries to foster better understanding between Burmans and ethnic minorities in 1981 (The Speeches of the BSPP Chairman 1985, pp. 39–48). However, due to its limited human resources and technical capacity, the Ministry of Culture has yet to implement Ne Win's instruction. However, developing Burmese-ethnic minority language dictionaries remains on the list of future projects the Ministry of Culture wishes to undertake.
24. A retired socialist government official confirmed the widespread notion that minority areas blessed with some righteous officials willing to promote local culture and customs tended to teach minority languages for longer periods of time than in places where the officials did not have much interest in preserving and promoting local culture and customs.
25. Many people from such areas only learned how to speak Burmese properly when they went to college in major cities.
26. It is worth noting at this juncture that most young ethnic Christian minorities continued to study the reading and writing of their mother tongues because their churches encouraged them to read the Bible in their own languages. Apparently, the socialist regime was insecure in its own legitimacy. It was intolerant of any challenges to its rule. When it suspected that private minority language classes had become venues for anti-government activists to get

together or that these classes were birthplaces for anti-government activists, the Government closed down these language courses and arrested the teachers (Interview, 15 October 2003).

27. The Military Government allowed a multiparty democratic election to be held in 1990, but it refused to hand over power to the winning party, the NLD.
28. The Military Government also used anti-colonial discourses in demonizing the NLD and its leader. Because NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was married to a British academic, Dr. Michael Aris, the government media attacked her as a person who diluted the purity of the Burman race. This, by inference, implied that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is injurious to the preservation of the Union.
29. Schools run by the ceasefire insurgent groups also offered minority language courses (Thein Lwin 2000).
30. However, while the Department of Myanmar Language and Literature at various public universities did not stop teaching Mon language in their honors classes, the University of the Development of National Races (upgraded from the Academy) continued to require its trainees to take a minority language course other than their own and Burmese.
31. I interviewed many people from more than forty ethnic minority group, and these people in their fifties and sixties, all recalled seeing people listening to the Burmese language programmes on the BBC and VOA broadcasts in the 1950s and 1960s in their native places. However, they all added that with the advent of the 1990s, many people living in minority areas have come to be regular listeners of Burmese language programmes on foreign radio broadcasts. They all noted that one of the reasons for the present number of ethnic minorities listening to radio broadcasts in Burmese is that, unlike in the 1950s, most ethnic minorities these days speak, read and write Burmese as well as the Burmans.
32. The fact that the Government discriminated against Christian and Muslim civil servants also undermined its attempt to win the support of minority people.
33. A random survey of some 300 people from the various minority groups showed 100 per cent of them were better acquainted with Burman history than their own ethnic histories. While all of them have read novels in Burmese, less than 5 per cent have read literature in their own languages regularly. Eighty per cent of them said that their best friends were Burman. In terms of music, 100 per cent listened to Burmese songs, 85 per cent listened to either Burmese or English songs, and only 10 per cent regularly listened to songs in their own languages. While almost 35 per cent of them could speak their own languages, only 20 per cent knew how to write in them. But all of them could read and write Burmese very well.
34. I spoke to five students from the Karen area and they told me that roughly

40 per cent of their compatriots did not know any Burmese, while the rest did know some Burmese. My other sources, an ex-Karen solider, informed me that about half the Karen population in the "so-called liberated area" could speak Burmese and the other half could not; however, he added that those who spoke Burmese fluently accounted for less than 5 per cent of the population in that area.

35. The Government also set new standards for the Romanization of place names within the country in 1989. This came when the name of the country in English was renamed Myanmar. The English names of several Burman cities also reverted to their Burmese names, Rangoon was now Yangon and Moulmein was now Mawlamying. Street names in Myanmar were also affected by this change. While this "renaming" project has been dubbed by some members of the opposition and the international community as the Military Government's method of Burmanizing the country, the truth is, this name changing or name reversion carried out by the Government hardly affected the locals, because locals had always referred to these places by their Burmese names. This name changing of locations was meant to affect the international community as a part of the Government's anti-colonial nation-building process. Thus, this is not the Government's method of Burmanizing the society.
36. However, the ethnic elites and nationalists consider the Socialist and current Military Governments' actions unacceptable and that the words of the Burman political leaders were nothing more than empty rhetoric. Amongst these ethnic elites and nationalists were certain factions who believed that their territories ought to be independent from the Union, as such, these ethnic nationalist and activists have formed insurgency groups to rebel against the Burman-dominated Military Government.

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