

# PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

By *AMAR LAHIRI*

THE political proscenium of Burma is now presenting a colourful panorama, colourful because behind it the stage rehearsal for the enactment of a new drama of political harmony is going on in full swing. The "Land of Mien" died when the hordes of Kubla Khan sent the Pagan Dynasty to oblivion: and "Bama" passed into nothingness when the rifle-bearers of Colonel Saladin occupied Mandalay without firing a single shot. Today, over the scorching flame of war, Dobama (Burma for Burmans) is rising; and the neophytes are busy instilling perpendicular nationalism into the minds of the carefree, smiling sons and daughters of the soil. But Armageddon is an exacting taskmaster. Its eyes are still focused on Burma, for it takes delight in riding on the chariot of possession. The Argonauts of the country, who have abruptly recovered the "golden fleece," have yet to protect its safe-keeping by hazarding a decisive armed onslaught under the leadership of a modern Jason.

When August 1, 1943, was torn off the calendar, Burma commenced its new "liberty era," waving joyfully side by side the national "Mawriya" (Peacock) Ensign and the Sun Flag. The Union Jack no longer adorns the mast-head of the Secretariate Building in Rangoon. London does not talk any more through His Majesty's Governor. Burma is talking for itself, maintaining a "sombbrero" combination with Tokyo. The future of the country is being decided at Hermitage Road, where is located the residence of Dr. Ba Maw, who is proud to become a "free Prime Minister" to carry on with his rôle of

1611

Contemporary Japan:  
A Review of East Asiatic Affairs  
Vol. XII (December 1943)  
Published Monthly By  
Foreign Affairs Association of Japan.  
Tokyo

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Adipadi (Head of State). Anoratha, Alaung Sithu, Tabin Shwethi, Bayin Naung, Alung Paya and Maha Bandoola of the days of Burmese kingship, have all become the dusts of destiny; but the energy they left inculcated in the soul of the "Land of Golden Pagodas" has now exploded in an attractive pyrotechnic display of regional living and corporate existence.

Yuan China was opened to Western intercourse by Marco Polo, whose adventurous life in the "Yellow Kingdom" is still a source of inspiration to many an empire-builder. The gate of Burma, too, was opened by a Venetian merchant for European settlement. He was Nicolo de Conti, who by analogy can be called "the little Marco Polo of the Occident." In March, 1942, the "freedom-givers" of Japan dynamited the steel-gate of *Pax Britannica* in Burma and initiated a new cycle of intercourse between *Pax Japonica* and Dobama. When the civil administration in the country was inaugurated with the approval of the Japanese military administration, Dr. Ba Maw was made its chief. And again when on August 1, 1943, Burma "proclaimed its independence" with the concurrent dissolution of the Japanese military administration, Dr. Ba Maw, who enjoys the confidence of the leaders of the Kudan Hills of Tokyo, formed the first "liberty administration" of the country in modern times. When he was incarcerated by Britain some time after the ensuance of the current European war, the polite Sam Browne told him: "You are a *mawais sujet*." And when he escaped from jail during the onrush of the Japanese forces into Burma and contacted the "freedom-givers" of the "Warrior Land," the courteous Brass-buttons of Japan informed him: "We have come to liberate Burma. Please take charge of the administration for common security and advantage."

The political life of Dr. Ba Maw is associated with the last nationalist struggle of Burma as a unit of the British Empire. He joined the *wunthanu* (nationalist) movement at the most critical period of internal partisan spirit. He swung to action not with the cry of independence on his lips, but with the advocacy of Indo-Burmese solidarity in his breast-chamber. He

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

said that the independence of Burma could only be assured by tying its destiny to that of India. So he opposed the separation of Burma from India, and in turn earned the disfavour of the separationists of the nation. Later on, when Burma became a separate unit of the British Empire, he devoted himself to the task of energizing the national spirit on a "realistic scale." At heart, he is India-minded. His India-consciousness derives its sustenance from his conception of Indo-Burmese solidarity as perceived during the days of separation and anti-separation turbulence.

Born in 1893 at Maubin in the Delta district, Dr. Ba Maw passed the entrance examination from the St. Paul's School in Rangoon and then graduated from the Rangoon College. After that, he sailed for England to continue his studies at the Cambridge University. While he received the degree of Doctor of Literature from the Bordeaux University in France, he also "took the silk" from a British Inn and became a bar-at-law. On his return home, he started his professional career as a practising barrister, but found very little opportunity to make a name. He remained comparatively unknown until the outbreak of the Tharawaddy Rebellion in 1930. Throughout the 1930-31 rebellion period, he defended many of the prisoners who were brought before the court for trial. This move not only made him known among the higher-ups of the country, but also among the masses. Being a barrister, he fore saw that, by defending the rebellion prisoners, he would be able to bring himself to the spotlight of national notice. However, it would be incorrect to state that he was wholly swayed by professional instinct in taking up the cause of the recalcitrants. To some extent, he was propelled by nationalist fervour to seek justice for the unfortunate brother-Burmans. His activity as a defence lawyer for the insurrectionists facilitated his meteoric rise as a public man, with the result that, during the separation and anti-separation controversy which followed, he became one of the prominent leaders of the country.

Dr. Ba Maw in defending the rebellion prisoners always

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

pressed home one argument. He held that these people had risen up in arms not because they were entertaining any aggressive political motive, but because the acute economic hardship had driven them to resort to a perilous uprising to secure a redressing of their grievances. Hence, he submitted that the cause of the rebellion was primarily economic and not necessarily political—a view which was also boldly expressed by U Saw, who subsequently became the last Burmese Premier under Britain-controlled Burma. The British Burma administration of those days in an official document claimed that the rebellion was directed toward the overthrow of the existing political system. This claim was questioned in a debate by many nationalist members of the then Legislative Council. They persisted that the insurrection was substantially economic in nature. Because Dr. Ba Maw, in defending the intransigentists before the court, steadfastly adhered to economic adversity as the chief cause of the rebellion, he naturally came to be looked upon as a rising nationalist of the day.

Although the rebellion episode has become an exanimate matter, it will not be irrelevant to describe the conditions that precipitated it. In consequence of the world-wide economic depression, Burma was hit so badly that almost one-fourth of the total arable land passed into alien hands. Furthermore, the prices of rice registered the lowest level, increasing the miserable plight of the agrarian populace. At the beginning of 1930, when a semi-famine condition was prevailing in the rural areas, Indian labour was freshly indentured in Rangoon for longshore work. The Burmese workers of the city, who were then undergoing an economic ordeal, resented the importation of Indian labour, culminating in the outbreak of a short-lived Indo-Burmese labour riot. In the neighbouring districts, when the news of the unfortunate incident became known, certain unruly agrarian elements, after protracted discussions, came to the conclusion that it would be worthwhile to resort to violence against the British Raj as a means to liquidate their embittered economic position and acquire administrative power. At that

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

time, Sir Joseph Maung Gyi, the leader of the moderate political group in the country, was the Acting Governor. No sooner the Insein-Tharawaddy area was turned into the main operational zone by the insurrectionists than Sir Charles Innes, cancelling his furlough, hurried from London to resume the post of the Governor. Finally, the rebellion was quelled and its leader, Saya San, captured and executed. A large number of prisoners were sent to the Andamans to serve life sentences, while many others were given long-term imprisonment. The way the crowd used to cheer the rebellion prisoners brought before the Insein Law Courts for trial gave the impression that the uprising was not primarily economic in character. Moreover, when Saya San was being tried, the Burmese urban masses expressed so strong sympathy for him that it became apparent that they regarded him as a revolutionary fighter. The impartial opinion is that the Tharawaddy Rebellion was partly economic and partly political in manifestation. In 1937, when Dr. Ba Maw was serving as the first Premier under the separated Constitution, he, with the consent of the British Government, secured the gradual release of all rebellion prisoners.

One of the effects of the rebellion was the sudden upsurge of a strong nationalist feeling in the country. The Burmese nationalist sections in private vehemently criticized the manner in which the recalcitrants had been dealt with, for they recognized them as patriotic freedom-seekers who made an unsuccessful attempt to recover administrative sovereignty from the British Raj. Following the termination of the rebellion, the Dobama Asiayone (Burma for Burmans League) was organized by young radicals to strive for the creation of a socialistic economic set-up, as well as the propagation of a national emancipation movement with the support of urban workers and rural masses. There is no doubt that the Dobama Asiayone came into being as a direct repercussion of the rebellion. At this juncture, the separation and anti-separation controversy loomed large in the political horizon of Burma. U Chit Hliang, then the most popular Burmese leader and now

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

a Privy Councillor, led a nation-wide campaign in favour of Burma's non-separation from India. Dr. Ba Maw, whose eloquence as a platform speaker was acknowledged, was approached by interested anti-separationist quarters. He immediately bade adieu to his brief-case and sponsored an anti-separation agitation independently of U Chit Hliang.

On the whole, the separation movement was rather strong, for it had the support and the backing of the majority of prominent nationalists, who accepted the leadership of U Ba Pe. When Burma went to the poll on separation and anti-separation tickets, the election returns showed a majority in favour of non-separation in the total votes cast. A special debate was held in the Legislative Council to decide the controversial political issue one way or the other. The resolution, which was tabled recommending Burma's separation from India, was not moved. In its stead a motion indicating independence as the goal of Burma was adopted. During the debate, both U Chit Hliang and Dr. Ba Maw pointed out that from the election results it was clear that Burma was opposed to separation from India. U Ba Pe, in contending the point, quoted facts to show that the election returns did not reflect the popular will of the entire nation, for the number of votes cast in an electoral district represented only a limited percentage of the actual population there. He further mentioned that in some electoral districts the voters only numbered five to ten per cent. of the total inhabitants. Therefore, he averred that on population basis Burma was in favour of separation from India. It is said that U Ba Pe, the seasoned politician of Burma, is now living a quiet life in a secluded place on account of family misfortunes he has suffered of late.

The separation and anti-separation tussle accelerated the stride of national politics. While the Ba Maw and Chit Hliang adherents wanted Burma to remain within India and thereby work for national emancipation in collaboration with the latter, the Ba Pe party advocated the outright severance of connection with India to promote the independence movement separately.

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

During the Round Table Conferences held in London, U Chit Hliang and U Ba Pe pressed their respective viewpoints on constitutional reforms in Burma. Dr. Ba Maw then had not acquired sufficient following to have a weighty say in the conduct of Burmese politics. He rose into prominence afterwards. At the session of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Reforms for Burma convened in London, Dr. Ba Maw, U Chit Hliang and U Ba Pe individually submitted their political opinions in respect of Burma's separation from India. When Dr. Ba Maw returned to Rangoon after attending the session of the Joint Parliamentary Committee in 1934, he immediately addressed a meeting at his party headquarters and explained that he had done his best to press the anti-separationist cause, and that it now remained for Britain to decide what policy it would pursue.

On his return home, Dr. Ba Maw began to organize a political party of his own to increase his popularity as a nationalist. In the same year, he assumed the portfolio of Education under the then diarchical Constitution, but later, in consequence of the passing of a no-confidence motion in the Legislative Council, he had to go out of office. In 1935, when the Report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee was released recommending Burma's separation from India and the granting of an autonomous Parliamentary Constitution, the anti-separationists, including Dr. Ba Maw, expressed their dissatisfaction at the British non-recognition of their viewpoints. On the other hand, the separationists, including U Ba Pe, though welcomed the separation of Burma, scathingly criticized the framework that had been proposed for the functioning of the Parliamentary Government. April 1, 1937, was fixed as the day for Burma's formal separation from India, and it was announced that a general election would be held in 1936 under the new Constitution.

The attention of all the political denominations in the country became riveted on the forthcoming general election. Dr. Ba Maw informed the press that his party would contest the

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

election with the object of wrecking the Constitution through the Legislature. The Chit Hliang party and the Ba Pe group, which by then had been organized into the United Party, decided to participate in the election on the same ground. Dr. Ba Maw reconstituted his political plank into the Sinyetha (Proletarian) Party. While thus the major political factions were getting ready to contest the election, the Dobama Asiayone announced its policy of obstructing the operation of the new Constitution from within and without. Consequently, it, too, proposed to put up candidates for election. The general election over, it was seen that the United Party scored the greatest number of seats followed by the Chit Hliang party; whereas the Sinyetha Party of Dr. Ba Maw came last. The strength of the Dobama Asiayone was negligible. The only bright feature for it was that it managed to send Thakin Mya to the Lower House. Thakin Mya is now the Deputy Prime Minister of Burma. The present political organization in the country is a coalition between the Dobama Asiayone and the Sinyetha Party.

The parliamentary political system that was granted under the new Constitution had security clauses for the safeguarding of the interests of the minority communities. That is why adequate representations on the Burmese Parliament were given to the British and Indian communities, as well as to the indigenous minority sections. The results of the general election disclosed that not one of the Burmese parties could secure majority to form the Government. Only a coalition Cabinet was possible. Since the United Party was the strongest Burmese group, the then Governor Sir Archibald Cochrane informed its leader, U Ba Pe, to organize a Ministry. Unfortunately, the lure of office caused a split in the United Party, and U Ba Pe intimated to the Governor his inability to form a Cabinet. U Ba Pe's failure gave Dr. Ba Maw an opportunity to try his luck. He approached U Chit Hliang for co-operation and, obtaining the support of the Indian *bloc* and some Karen and Arakanese members, managed to put up a working majority. In this way, he came to form the first Parliamentary Government under the



## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

new Constitution in 1937.

When Dr. Ba Maw's Government was established, the United Party and some independents and Karen and Arakanese members organized the parliamentary opposition. Dr. Ba Maw became the Chief Minister and U Paw Tun, the deputy leader of the Chit Hliang party, Home Minister. Moreover, U Chit Hliang was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives. Politically, Dr. Ba Maw's acceptance of office contradicted his earlier principle of wrecking the Constitution through the Legislature, because by taking oath he became duty bound to work the Constitution faithfully. As against this, U Chit Hliang's acceptance of the post of the Speaker of the House of Representatives gave him a slight advantage to say that he was not directly connected with the working of the Constitution like Dr. Ba Maw. It is undoubtedly significant that the first Burmese Parliamentary Government was formed by the erst-while anti-separationists, being assured of the support of the Indian members.

The separation and anti-separation controversy developed in Burma, aside from domestic causes, on account of the manipulations of interested local British and Indian circles. The resident Indian merchant community, which had no political backing of Indian nationalists, supported the anti-separation movement and aided U Chit Hliang and Dr. Ba Maw in their campaigns. As regards the British community, the mainbody of it favoured separation and sympathized with the separationists. The Indian merchant community thought that under a separated Burma the exercise of its acquired rights and privileges would be restricted. The British community, however, welcomed separation, because, by alienating Burma from India, it hoped to entrench firmly its own economic system. According to reliable information, it is understood that Governor Sir Charles Innes personally recommended to the British Government the separation of Burma in order to isolate that country from the nationalist movement in India. A number of spokesmen of the Indian National Congress in press statements said

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

that, although the issue of Burma's separation was a matter to be decided entirely by the Burmese people, it was obvious that Britain was going to make that country an autonomous unit of the British Empire "to exploit it more thoroughly." Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in an interview with newspapers declared that India had no desire to intervene in Burmese affairs, but added that Britain had definitely decided to separate Burma from India to make that country "a durable pawn of British imperialism."

Dr. Ba Maw as Chief Minister of the Coalition Government announced that he would endeavour his best to improve the land and fiscal conditions of the country. Accordingly, he appointed land and fiscal committees to determine the policies to be followed thereanent. Until July, 1938, his Government functioned smoothly and executed a number of commendable measures. Its most noteworthy achievement was the securing of the gradual abolition of the Capitation and Thathameda (Village Income) Taxes. In the same year, Dr. Ba Maw went to London to attend the Imperial Conference, at which he made a brief speech as an equal to the Dominion Prime Ministers. While in London, he obtained the consent of the British Government for changing the designation of Chief Minister into Premier. He also succeeded in getting the approval of the Whitehall to the procedure that the Premier should ordinarily preside over the meetings of the Council of Ministers without infringing on the Constitutional rights of the Governor as stipulated in the Government of Burma Act, 1935. At the Empire Garden Party given by King George VI, Dr. Ba Maw planted a tree symbolizing Burma's new career as an autonomous unit of the British Empire. Now that the wheel of fate has turned in another direction, he as Adipadi has ordered the construction of a Burma Shrine to commemorate the Burmese-Japanese unanimity.

In July, 1938, as a result of a fracas near the Soortee Burra Bazar in Rangoon, an Indo-Burmese riot broke out and it swiftly spread to upper and lower Burma. The riot dragged on

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

for about four months entailing heavy casualties on both sides. The Burmese masses made only the Indian Moslems their targets of attacks and refrained from molesting the Hindus. The riot naturally roused the indignation of the Indian *bloc* in the House of Representatives, and Dr. Ba Maw had to denounce the sudden outburst of racial bitterness in the country. As Dr. Ba Maw for fear of losing the support of the Indian *bloc* at times spoke vehemently against the Burmese miscreants, his popularity among the indigenous masses and the opposition Burmese members in the House of Representatives waned markedly. On top of this, a series of nation-wide demonstrations were held to overthrow his administration. While the oil-field workers staged a "hunger march" to Rangoon, the university and college students in the capital went on strike. Consequently, the opposition Burmese members utilized every political opportunity to hasten the downfall of the Coalition Government. Farlier, a no-confidence motion against the Ba Maw Ministry moved in the House of Representatives was lost, because the British and Indian members voted in favour of the sitting administration. After that, as a result of a clash between striking students and policemen in front of the Secretariate Building in Rangoon, the power of the Ba Maw administration became extremely feeble. Noting the rising surge of anti-Ba Maw sentiment in the country, the Indian members considered the advisability of withdrawing their support. In February, 1939, when another no-confidence motion against the Ba Maw Cabinet was moved at the budget session of the House of Representatives, the Indian *bloc* decided to adopt the procedure of free voting, while the British group marched into the "Aye" lobby—and Dr. Ba Maw's career as a Premier came to an end.

After the fall of the Ba Maw Cabinet, U Pu, a veteran politician who was Forest Minister in the outgoing Ministry, formed the Government by effecting a "national coalition" with the Chit Hliang party, the Myochit (Patriotic) Party of U Saw and certain influential Karen, Arakanese and Indian members. Before the new Cabinet could marshal sufficient force

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

the European war broke out in September, 1939. The commencement of hostilities in Europe provided Dr. Ba Maw with a political opportunity to carry on an agitation demanding Britain's statutory declaration on Burma's independence as condition for its co-operation in the prosecution of war. When Dr. Ba Maw was unseated, he found it imperative to revert to his original nationalist fervour in order to point out to the masses that he still remained the energetic advocate of Burma's freedom. With a view to regaining his popularity, he made common cause with the Dobama Asiayone and the seceders of the United Party. Conferences were held between the leaders of the Dobama Asiayone, Dr. Ba Maw and Dr. Thein Maung, the last-named representing the United Party seceders, to devise ways and means for the formation of a new political organization. Eventually, an agreement was reached between the conferees to form a Burma Freedom Bloc without having any leader, but an executive board consisting of the heads of the three political factions. The Burma Freedom Bloc was inaugurated toward the close of 1939 and Dr. Ba Maw, Dr. Thein Maung, now the first Burmese Ambassador to Japan, and Thakin Mya were elected to the board. At a mass meeting held in Rangoon on June 9, 1940, under the auspices of the Burma Freedom Bloc, Dr. Ba Maw in the course of a speech said :

In struggling for freedom if no arms are at hand jails shall be used as arms. In this war the old world will disappear and out of the *débris* will emerge a new world. No small nation can exist without forming alliances with large nations. The Burmans cannot afford to remain in isolation. They must form alliances with the English or the Japanese. Many say that the Burmans have no arms to fight for freedom, and that they should not think of shaking free the English yoke as that will only place them beneath the yoke of either Japan or Germany. As regards arms, look at the world situation. Consider that the arms of the Japanese, the English and the Germans are the arms of the Burmans. If the Burmans make use of their arms, are they not the arms of the Burmans ?

By uttering such words while Burma was still a unit of the British Empire, Dr. Ba Maw not only incurred the displeasure of the British authorities, but also indirectly hinted that Burma

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

in its freedom fight could count on Japan as a friend and ally. Following this speech, Dr. Ba Maw again at a nationalist gathering referred to Japan as "our friend in the East." Because his subsequent utterances relative to the European war violated the regulations prescribed in the Burma Defence Act, he was taken into custody. On the outbreak of the Pacific war on December 8, 1941, the Japanese forces made a speed drive into Burma and occupied Rangoon in March, 1942. At that time, Dr. Ba Maw was being detained at a penitentiary in northern Burma. On hearing that the British forces were on the retreat, he escaped from the penitentiary and established contacts with the intelligence officers of the incoming Japanese troops. In May, 1942, by which time Mandalay had been reduced, Dr. Ba Maw came to take charge of the political affairs of the nation. A civil administration was organized under the supervision of the Japanese military administration and he was appointed chief civil administrator. Accepting the Japanese declaration of Burmese independence in good faith, the civil administration began to restore peace and order in the country in collaboration with the Japanese armed forces. A few months later, Japan announced that Burma would be made an independent State within 1943. Synchronizing with this announcement, a Burmese Independence Preparation Committee was formed, which hurriedly drafted the "independent Constitution of Burma." Then on August 1, 1943, Burma declared that "it has become an independent nation," and entered into a state of war with Britain and the United States. The new administration of the country selected Dr. Ba Maw as Prime Minister and Adipadi. When he attended the Assembly of Greater East Asiatic Nations held in Tokyo on November 5 and 6; he reaffirmed that Japan and Burma would march forward together to hew out their respective destinies.

At the time the Parliamentary Constitution was put into operation, Dr. Ba Maw shelved his previous political intentions and opened the era of Burma's advance as an autonomous unit of the British Empire. As long as he remained in office,

## CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

he faithfully worked the Constitution, but the moment he was thrown out of office, he resumed his "free" political career as one of the champions of Burmese independence. Today, he has ushered in the "independent era" by accepting the new adjustment as conducive to national interests. His recent speeches delivered at different parts of the country suggest that he feels himself pleased at the part he has played in making Burma a "free nation." He realizes, too, that the "new freedom" cannot be maintained unless the frontiers of Burma are held securely. For that reason, he has linked the "new freedom" of Burma with the regaining of political liberty by India.

Prime Minister Ba Maw has assumed the title of Adipadi. The word "adipadi" is derived from Pali and it literally means overlord. The Burmese Government is translating the expression into English as Head of State. From the academic viewpoint, such an English rendering appears to be far-fetched, particularly when the conditions which brought forth the currency of the title in the past do not exist at present. Ideologically, such a rendering is permissible to denote the apex of the new political arch. Since Adipadi is being referred to as Head of State; it signifies that Burma is developing a reformed politics under the ægis of a Duce or a Führer. Prime Minister Ba Maw says that Burma must have a State politics. This idea can be likened to the Nazi conception of *ein Volk, ein Staat*. In other words, he is proposing to translate into action the political philosophy of *ein ganzer Mensch*. While he is desirous of doing so, he must not neglect to remember what the old Burma said: *Taung-ka-chauk lo-myan-ka yu, ah-lai-lu ou-nai haung-luang* (Frightened on the south and taken away on the north, the man in the middle is left with an empty stomach).

As a politician, Dr. Ba Maw is occasionally inclined to give vent to play-acting. He tries to influence the masses by tempering his eloquence with heart-touching sentiments. He has a habit of doing something spectacular to make a name for himself in the history. Yet he is a determined man. Once he

## PRIME MINISTER BA MAW OF BURMA

decides to accomplish a task, he would stake his very career for that purpose. His rugged jaw symbolizes his determination. The hard school of experience has taught him many lessons. One of them is that it pays to keep cool and the other is that it is worthwhile to remain calm and plod stolidly when the storm of political criticism makes its force felt. Still he has something of Molière's "George Dandin" in him, for when excited he subconsciously exclaims: *vous l'avez voulu!* The swing of the pendulum is showing a new curve of time. On the success of the internal political drama that is about to be staged depends the future of Dobama.