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Burma (Myanmar) (1948 -)

Civil war has plagued Burma (the official name of which was changed to Myanmar in 1989) since it became independent from Britain after World War Two. Three main groups fought each other: the government, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and ethnic insurgencies seeking regional autonomy. Civilians ran the government until 1958, when a coup brought the military leader, Ne Win, to power. Ne Win resigned thirty years later, and now a group of generals called the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) are in charge. The CPB, which had alliances with many ethnic groups, disbanded in 1989, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) emerged as the new leading opposition party.

At independence from Britain, diverse groups pressed for ethnically defined regional autonomy. The national government, led mostly by ethnic Burmese, rejected these demands. Since then, more than twenty different opposition groups have fought the government. Burma is a major producer of poppy for opium and heroin, and drug lords have created private armies to protect their crops. In the last half-century, the people of Burma have seen their economy implode. Many have been forced to relocate, and the military state has systematically violated their human rights. Over 120,000 people are living as refugees in Thailand.

In the late 1980s opponents of the government formed the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the nationalist leader, Aung San, whose assassination in 1947 dashed hopes for a democratic government with respect for minority rights. In 1988 the government declared a state of emergency, killing and jailing thousands of protestors and established SLORC. In 1989, SLORC renamed Burma - Myanmar - and arrested thousands more activists, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who remained under house arrest for six years.

While under house arrest, Suu Kyi managed to lead the NLD to an overwhelming victory in the 1990 elections. SLORC, which won only 10 of more than 400 parliamentary seats, ignored the election results. In 1991 Suu Kyi won the Nobel Peace Prize, and since then international pressure on the government has increased steadily. The government stalled talks until 2000, still hoping for a military victory. Suu Kyi was arrested again in 2003 and she remains in prison. The government agreed in 2004 to end hostilities with the largest ethnic insurgency group, the Karen National Union (KNU).

Print Resources

Tucker, Shelby (2001) *Burma: The Curse of Independence*. London: Pluto Press.

Smith, Martin (1999) *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London: Zed Books.

Steinberg, David I. (2001) *Burma: The State of Myanmar*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Fink, Christina (2001) *Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule*. London: Zed Books.

Online Resources

Reuters Alertnet. *Country Profile: Myanmar (Formerly Burma)*.

<http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/countryprofiles/218938.htm?v=details>

BBC News. *Country Profile: Burma*.

http://ifric/country_profiles/1300003.stm

Human Rights Watch. *Burma Publications*.

http://hrw.org/doc/?t=asia_pub&c=burma

Minorities at Risk (see heading under Burma)

<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/data/asiatbl.htm>

Timeline

1945 - Japanese withdraw from Burma, British resume control

1947 - Negotiations begin for Burma's independence; Aung San assassinated

1948 - Burma becomes independent under president Nu; CPB leads rebellion

1949 - Government discrimination against non-Burmese increases

1955 - Opposition unifies under National United Front (NUF)

1958 - Nu issues general amnesty; Nu resigns in face of coup, Ne Win becomes president

1960 - Nu elected president

1962 - Military coup ousts Nu, Ne Win becomes president; Ne Win nationalizes economy, closes universities, represses students, cuts freedoms, bans free press, restricts travel, and allies with drug traders

1969 - Relations with China sour; Nu creates government in exile in Thailand

1974 - New constitution gives all powers to Ne Win, repeals minority protection

1980 - Government declares amnesty, 2,000 rebels surrender; peace negotiations fail

1986 - US lends Burma helicopters, herbicide to fight drug production in guerilla areas

1987 - Ne Win changes currency denomination; students riot, military responds violently

1988 - More demonstrations, Aung San Suu Kyi forms NLD; SLORC takes over

1989 - CPB disintegrates; SLORC renames Burma as Myanmar; NLD leaders arrested

1990 - NLD wins elections; SLORC rejects results and arrests NLD leaders

1991 - Aung San Suu Kyi awarded Nobel Peace Prize; UN, ILO, and governments criticize Myanmar

1995 - Aung San Suu Kyi released after 6 years of house arrest

2000 - Asian countries blame Myanmar for increased drug use; ILO calls for sanctions; Aung San Suu Kyi begins secret talks with government

2001 - Thailand and Myanmar clash openly; SLORC releases some NLD leaders, puts Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest

2002 - Aung San Suu Kyi released; relations with Thailand improve

2003 - Aung San Suu Kyi put under house arrest

2004 - Government and Karen National Union (largest ethnic army) agree to end fighting