

# BUILDING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH SCHOOLING AND LANGUAGE POLICIES: BURMANIZATION AS A DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

B E L L A   A U N G

## ABSTRACT

States use assimilation, integration, and accommodation in various ways to regulate ethnic conflict and cultivate a common national identity. This paper discusses the importance of policy making around language and education in building a common national identity, using the case study of Myanmar from 1962 to the present day. By comparing the Burmanization process by different Burmese governments to French nation-building through schools and schooling in the 1800s, this paper argues that the successful sustenance of diverse states draws from effective long-term diversity management through education reforms. It analyzes different Burmanization policies employed by four governments of Myanmar using the categorizations of different diversity management techniques. From Myanmar's example, the article concludes that diversity management through schooling as an ethnic conflict regulation strategy remains relevant in today's politics.

**Keywords:** Burmanization, Diversity Management, Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Minorities, Identity Politics, Myanmar, Residential Schools, Nation-building, South Asia, Southeast Asia.

## INTRODUCTION

States use assimilation, integration and accommodation in various ways to regulate ethnic conflict and cultivate a common national identity. A prominent example of this is the case of French nation-building through schools and schooling in the 1800s (Weber, 1976). There are many different sectors for which states can create public policies to manage diversity. Some examples include the

military, employment, religion, electoral politics, and education. This paper will discuss the importance of policy making around language and education in building a common national identity that can help manage ethnic conflict in the long run. By examining Myanmar as a case study of nationalizing through language and public education systems as a long-term diversity management strategy, this paper aims to determine whether Eugen Weber's theory of assimilation through schools to create a successful national identity amongst diverse ethnic communities can be generalizable to the Burmese case.

This paper seeks to answer the question of 'How has Burmanization through schooling and language policies contributed to the sustenance of the Union of Myanmar despite it being a deeply divided society?' This is an important topic as analyzing the research question will show whether assimilation through schools and language policies is still a relevant and effective strategy of diversity management for contemporary states, particularly those with high levels of ethnic and linguistic diversity. This paper concludes that the Burmanized education and language policies allowed for the creation of a Burmese national identity among different ethnic groups. Therefore, Weber's take on diversity management through schools and schooling as an ethnic conflict regulation strategy remains relevant in contemporary politics.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One must understand the ethnic and linguistic demographics as well as the history of Myanmar to fully grasp the process of Burmanization and its impacts on ethnic minority populations. Myanmar boasts enormous ethnic diversity, consisting of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and seven ethnic minority states in addition to seven divisions populated mainly by the Bamar majority (Minority Rights, 2020). The seven ethnic minority states: Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan,

are named after the largest national minority groups of the country. Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities comprise a sizable portion of the overall population in Myanmar, with the former making up to 3 percent of the total population and the latter 2 percent (Ibid.). However, only large ethnic minority groups indigenous to Myanmar get ethnic minority states named after them. In terms of linguistic diversity, 118 languages are spoken in Myanmar today. Burmese is the official language of the country (CIA, 2020).

## BURMANIZATION

Burmanization, as the term suggests, is a process in which education, repressive laws, religious proselytization, economic exploitation, and often brutal force are used to wash away ethnic minorities' own identities (Gray, 2018). A British colony from 1824 to 1948, the Western influence was dominant in Myanmar (then Burma) until 1962 (Holmes, 1967). However, since the military coup in 1962, different governments of Myanmar have promoted Burmese nationalism and the Burmese national identity for every citizen regardless of their ethnic origins.

Four governments have ruled Myanmar from 1962 to 2021. These governments were the single-party Socialist government (1962-1988), the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government (1990-2010), the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) Government (2010-2015), and the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party Government (2015-2021) (BBC News, 2018). The years 1988 and 1989 saw nationwide unrest and anti-government unrest without a government. During this time, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was formed to declare martial law and persecute proponents of democracy (BBC News, 2018).

## ANALYSIS OF THE POLICIES EMPLOYED IN THE BURMANIZATION PROCESS

In order to examine the education policies employed in the Burmanization process from 1962 to the present day, this paper first defines assimilation, integration, and accommodation using the explanations of these concepts by McGarry et al. (2008). Although the two popular sets of public

policies applied by democratic states to manage diversity fall under either integration or accommodation, assimilation also provides ways to manage diversity, albeit through erasing it and building an overarching national identity altogether (McGarry et al., 2008).

According to McGarry et al. (2008: 42), assimilationists "seek the erosion of private cultural and other sorts of difference among citizens as well as the creation of a common public identity." This common public identity can be created through either fusion or acculturation. The former involves two or more communities mixing to form something new whereas the latter means that one community adopts the culture of another and consequently, is eventually absorbed into it. Assimilation erodes both the public and private differences between and among different groups (McGarry et al., 2008).

Integration promotes a common public space. While integrationist practices respect cultural differences in the private sphere, they eliminate differences in the public sphere. It responds to diversity through institutions that "transcend, crosscut, and minimize" differences and aims to achieve public homogenization through common citizenship (McGarry et al., 2008).

Accommodation promotes more than one public identity, and accommodationist policies encourage institutional respect for differences. Accommodationists seek to make sure that each group enjoys a public space where every group can: "express its identity, protect itself against tyranny by the majority, and make its own decisions in domains of critical importance" (McGarry et al., 2008: 42). In other words, accommodation strategies encourage the maintenance of cultural differences in both the public and private arenas (McGarry et al., 2008).

## BURMANIZATION POLICIES BY DIFFERENT GOVERNMENTS IN MYANMAR

Different governments in Myanmar employed four streams of Burmanization policies to weaken the sense of national identity amongst ethnic minority

students. These four streams are: (i) declaring Burmese as the official, and virtually only, language of instruction in all educational institutions, (ii) denying the instruction of ethnic minority languages, (iii) establishing various educational institutions for ethnic minority youths from middle school to post-secondary levels controlled by the Ministry of Border Affairs, and (iv) training students enrolled in the aforementioned institutions to advocate for the sustenance of the Union of Myanmar and later turning them into faithful civil servants.

In the following sections, this paper discusses the Burmanization policies employed through schooling by different governments from 1962 until present.

### ***Socialist Era (1962-1988)***

Myanmar's federal government was abolished in 1962 when General Ne Win took over the country by leading a military coup. General Ne Win's government was highly ethnocentric and employed various nationalist policies in different sectors such as the economy, citizenship and immigration, and education (Holmes, 1967; Smith, 1992; BBC, 2018). In terms of the education sector, all the country's educational institutions, including over 800 private schools, were nationalized (Smith, 1992). The government limited teaching English to middle school and higher levels of education only (Holmes, 1967). Limited allowance for the teaching of minority languages at the primary school level continued (Bianco, 2016). However, no such allowance for teaching or research in any minority language existed in secondary school and higher levels of education (Smith, 1992).

In 1962, Burmese became the official language of instruction for schooling including at the university level, with few exceptions for English language classes (Bianco, 2016). By the 1980s, a majority of schools had stopped teaching in minority languages due to increasingly severe education policy restrictions (Aye and Sercombe, 2014). This is a significant Burmanization policy since it deterred ethnic minority youth from learning and speaking in their native tongues, thereby eroding their cultures linguistically. This language policy under the Ne Win government falls under the assimilation banner as it officially refuses to provide public education in minority languages (McGarry et al., 2008).

Under this regime, the Academy for the Development of National Groups was established in 1964 in the Sagaing Division and was highly publicized. This Academy intended to promote General Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism". The Academy was the socialist government's attempt at removing ethnic minorities from their respective ethnic minority states to a Burman-majority division and educate them at residential schools under the government's guidelines. Only national minorities indigenous to Myanmar qualified for enrollment (Smith, 1992).

### ***SPDC Era (1990-2010)***

Since the education system still primarily operated with Burmese as the official language of instruction under the SPDC government, ethnic minority students whose mother tongue was not Burmese faced linguistic disadvantages. Very few books were legally published in minority languages and those that were permitted for legal publication had to go through strict censorship tests. Ethnic minority teachers and community leaders faced persecution when they promoted their own language and cultures. For instance, in 1991, two ethnic Mon intellectuals were arrested because they promoted the usage of the Mon language (Smith, 1992). Therefore, assimilationist education and language policies continued and even intensified during the SPDC regime.

Given that higher education institutions were located in either urban areas or Burman-majority divisions, the students from ethnic minority states also faced the additional burdens associated with traveling and finances. In 1991, the Academy for the Development of National Groups was reformed as a university under the SPDC government. The legitimacy of this university remained questionable as there was no provision for research (Smith, 1992). The university was not run by the Ministry of Education. Instead, it was run directly by the military junta which is indicative of the increased military control of the state and education apparatus. Students were required to wear uniforms even at the post-secondary level. The university trained its ethnic minority attendees as Burmese language teachers

for the ethnic minority states and also to promote the Myanmar national identity along with Buddhist culture. Ethnic minority leaders saw the new university as an instrument by the Burman-majority government to suppress minority cultures *Ibid.*

Following the establishment of the University for the Development of National Groups, the Ministry of Border Affairs founded its Education and Training Department in 1999. The department was founded with two main aims: firstly, to educate ethnic people residing in border areas through basic and tertiary education along with vocational training, and secondly, to improve the human resources of people in the area (Ky, 2019). The establishment of such state-sponsored education institutions for ethnic minorities is assimilationist due to the extreme nature of physically removing ethnic minority children from ethnic minority states and then training them to become advocates of Burmese nationalism.

#### **USDP Era (2010-2015)**

Myanmar officially began its transition to a democratic government after the 2010 national elections. The first civilian government was led by the military-backed USDP and ex-general Thein Sein served as the President of the Union of Myanmar (BBC News, 2018). A National Education Bill was passed in July 2014 with 25 suggested amendments by the President. The bill did not allow the teaching of ethnic minority languages at the primary school level despite the demands of ethnic education groups (Myanmar Times, 2014). However, unlike previous regimes since 1962, the USDP government expressed some willingness to allow the teaching of ethnic minority languages outside of school hours in government buildings. The law still did not allow any deviation from the standard curriculum issued by the central government or instruction in a medium other than the Burmese language except for certain English language classes as mentioned in the discussion of education policies under the previous governments (Zobrist and McCormick, 2013).

According to Zobrist and McCormick (2013), one significant exception under Thein Sein's government was the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and its education system. MNEC largely operated in

ethnic communities that were formerly controlled by the New Mon State Army. It provided education to ethnic Mon children, often in the form of monastic schools or by incorporating Mon language and history lessons in government schools informally. Although MNEC was not funded by the government, it taught the local language and content and also worked as a bridge for Mon students to transition into the public school system. The MNEC education system was not legal. However, as it both satisfied demands for an "ethnic" education favored by the ethnic community and promoted an integrated nation as desired by the central government, this system was permitted to exist as part of a ceasefire agreement. This exception is worth mentioning as among the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, the Mon people are the only ones who benefitted from an exception in the education and language policies. As a result, the government accommodated some Mon content to be taught as long as the MNEC system did not become standardized or replace the Burmanized education system (Zobrist and McCormick, 2013).

Under this exception, certain Mon students were allowed to learn their language and culture as part of an informal arrangement that came with the ceasefire agreement between Mon armed groups and the Burmese military. Although instruction of the Mon language was incorporated, this arrangement was never legally recognized, and the government made sure that the Burmese national curriculum and language remain the main medium of instruction (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the Thein Sein government's education and language policies are at most integrationist—i.e. allowing ethnic minority cultures to exist informally but maintaining the dominant Burmese language and culture as the public standard.

#### **NLD Era (2015-2021)**

The NLD government was the most democratic government in Myanmar since 1962 (Lewis, 2016). However, ethnic minorities still faced *de facto* discrimination in education. For example, students from ethnic minority states continued to have lower



access to higher education, particularly in professional programs such as engineering and medicine, due to universities being concentrated in Burman-majority divisions. The overarching national identity continued to revolve around the Buddhist religion, Burmese language, and Burman ethnicity (Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, 2020). The Burmans make up approximately 60 percent of the population of Myanmar and have been the dominant decision-making ethnic group in government since independence.

In a 2019 interview, U Thein Htay Oo, the Director-General of the Education and Training Department at the Ministry of Border Affairs, confirmed that educational institutions dedicated to ethnic minority youth are still operating in full force. In fact, there were more of such institutions in 2019 compared to when the department was first established in 1999. According to the Director-General, there were the Education and Training Department headquarters, University for Development of National Races in Sagaing, two degree colleges for ethnic youth in Yangon and Sagaing, one central training school, 45 border youth development training centers, 9 mechanical schools and 5 women's vocational training schools (Kyj, 2019).

All the post-secondary education institutions operated under the Ministry of Border Affairs are located in Yangon or Sagaing, Burman-majority divisions far from the borderland areas populated by most ethnic minority communities. Aligned with the critics' concern of turning ethnic minority youths into teachers who promote Burmese nationalism back in their homelands, the degree colleges for ethnic youths are best known for giving out degrees in education to their students along with offers to work as teachers in the Ministry of Education. As of 2019, the Ministry of Education has employed more than 10,000 alumni from these degree colleges as high school teachers (Ibid.). These teachers help perpetuate a culture of state control and Burmanization through the education system.

The youth development training centers accept students as young as 10 year-olds. Ethnic minority youths in border areas are given free middle school

and high school education at these centers (Ibid.). However, once they complete their education at the training centers, their post-secondary education opportunities are limited. According to the Ministry of Border Affairs official website, "To pursue higher education for the nationalities youths who pass the basic education high school to have opportunities to study the courses in the University for the Development of the National Races of the Union and Nationalities Youths Resource Development Degree Colleges" (Ministry of Border Affairs, 2019). The website also lists that these programs aim to consolidate the Union Spirit among the ethnic minority youths and to nurture all national people to "constantly safeguard non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty" (Ibid.). Through these programs, the government employs systematically Burmanized ethnic minorities to recruit more youths from their respective homelands into the same nationalist education system.

### ***Post-Coup d'etat Era (2021-Present)***

A military coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing took control of Myanmar in February 2021 (Maizland, 2022). The country has been in political turmoil since then, with the military regime and the pro-democracy government in exile, the National Unity Government of Myanmar, constantly competing for full control of Myanmar (National Unity Government, 2023). Civil wars and armed conflicts have become and still remain part of the daily lives for the people of Myanmar today. The education sector of the country has suffered due to political instability post-coup d'etat.

Schools and universities across Myanmar were closed in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They remained closed immediately after the coup as many students and teachers refused to participate in the junta-led education system. In November 2021, the military regime announced that education institutions were to be reopened. However, classrooms remain almost completely empty with students and teachers boycotting the military rule (Mendelson, 2021). Schools became dangerous for students as security forces often occupied schools and universities and sometimes carried out armed attacks on education

sites. One such instance is the Let Yet Kone airstrike on an elementary school, killing at least eleven children (Agence-France Presse, 2022). As of today, teachers in Myanmar, whether they support or oppose the military regime, are facing threats, including death threats, in many parts of the country from both armed pro-junta and opposition groups as schools reopen under the junta's orders (Voice of America, 2022). Due to these exceptionally dangerous situations in schools and universities, the education sector and language policy are not actively used as a tool of diversity management by either the junta or the NUG.

## CONCLUSION

Since 1962, different governments of Myanmar have engaged in the Burmanization of ethnic minorities via education and linguistics policies. Some regimes were more robust and explicit in imposing such policies on ethnic minorities (socialist and SPDC regimes) whereas others were more subtle (USDP and NLD governments). Regardless of Myanmar being a deeply divided society, different governments were able to sustain the "Union" of Myanmar. This successful sustenance of the state draws from effective long-term diversity management through education reforms. The Burmanized education and language policies allowed for the creation of a Burmese national identity among different ethnic groups. This very identity allowed for the continued existence of Myanmar as a Union by weakening ethnic minorities' sense of identity. Therefore, Weber's take on diversity management through schools and schooling as an ethnic conflict regulation strategy remains very relevant in current day Myanmar, and in a broader scope, in contemporary politics.

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