

THE MON PEOPLE OF BURMA (MYANMAR)

The Mons of Burma, who are generally estimated to number about one million, in 1982 constituted 4.76% of the total population of Burma. They are thought to have been the earliest group to reach Burma in ancient times as migrants from the northern part of the Asian mainland.

Historical Background

The Mons populated the area around the mouths of the Salween and Sittang Rivers, from where they exerted control over the Irrawaddy Delta and the ports in the Gulf of Martaban. From the seventh to the ninth centuries A.D., Mon states dotted the coast of Burma and the Chao Phraya valley of Thailand.

The Mons were politically subjugated during the First Burmese Empire (1044-1257), although culturally they still dominated the conquering Burmese people. The Mon script, itself derived from one of the early Indian scripts, was taken over for use with the Burmese language. A famous king, Kyanzittha, who ruled in Pagan from 1084 to 1113, made Mon culture dominant during his reign and left many inscriptions in the Mon language. When Pagan, the Burmese capital, fell to the Mongols in 1287, the Mons declared their independence from the Burmese Empire. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Mons had their own dynasty in Lower Burma. Their territories were united into a single kingdom, but in 1752 the Mons captured the Burmese king and tried to unite Burma under their own control. By the eighteenth century, the Mons had been defeated and they became gradually reduced in numbers, with many migrating to Thailand and others being assimilated into the Burmese majority.

After Lower Burma was annexed by Great Britain in 1853 and the rest of Burma annexed in 1886, British rule then being extended to the entire territory, ethnic particularism was encouraged. In plains areas where the Mons and Karens lived, direct rule was instituted, with close supervision by British officials. The hill peoples such as the Shans, Chins, and Kachins were ruled indirectly through their own chieftains. This policy resulted in isolating the frontier peoples from each other and from the ethnic Burmans in the lowlands. Although a separate Mon state was created within the Union of Burma, this state consists only of the Thaton and Moulmein area. Many Mons live scattered throughout Lower Burma, while many more have migrated to Thailand over the centuries. Therefore, the remark made by a writer about the Mons that they are a people without a country is not inaccurate.

Mon Ethnicity

To give an idea of where the Mons fit in the ethnology of Southeast Asia, one authority has drawn up a taxonomy of ethnic groups according to their socio-political status. There are first the dominant ethnic groups such as the Burmans in Burma, the Tais in Thailand, the Laos in Laos, and the Hans in the People's Republic of China. Then there are ethnic groups who are dominant in one or more nation-states but minorities in others, such as the Shans in Burma and other Tai groups in Yunnan, China. Third come those ethnic groups who, though large in number, are not dominant in any nation-state. The Mons and the Karens, who are found in both Burma and Thailand, fall into this category. Fourth are

ethnic groups such as the Chins and Kachins, who are autochthonous in some sense and who maintain traditional relations with other dominant groups. Fifth and last, there are the ethnic groups who have moved into Southeast Asia from China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the Hmong and the Yao.

The Mons in Burma Today

Many ethnic Mons from Burma have fled to neighboring Thailand, where Mons have traditionally emigrated to over the centuries. The Mons accuse the current military junta now in power, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), of having treated them with brutality and of inflicting human rights abuses. They also charge SLORC with plundering and selling Mon on-shore and off-shore natural resources, without the Mons themselves having any say in the matter.

The Nation, a Bangkok newspaper, reported on February 25, 1994, that about 50 Mons of Thailand publicized the suffering of the Mon people of Burma in a public protest in front of the U.N. offices in Bangkok, "two days ahead of the 47th Mon National Day on February 26." The report said that this was the first time that the Mons in Thailand have mobilized to voice concern on behalf of the estimated six [sic] million ethnic Mon kinsmen on the other side of the border. The protesters are asking for United Nations intervention and showed their disapproval of the ongoing ceasefire negotiations between the rebel Mon group and SLORC, which, according to them, do not address a solution to Burma's political problems.

SLORC has reportedly made a six-point proposal that does not recognize the Mon homeland, sovereignty, freedom, language, or culture; it had rejected outright the 16-point demand that the Mon negotiating team proposed. Both sides met for the first time in Mounmein from December 29, 1993, to January 3, 1994, but no progress is said to have been made.

The Bangkok protests were apparently timed to coincide with the meeting in Geneva of the U.N. Human Rights Commission, which was to debate the situation in Burma the following week. The protesters sent a letter to the U.N., calling for that world body to take immediate action on Burma and to assist Mon refugees. The participants, in press releases and on the placards they held up, said that several thousand Mon refugees are on the Thai side of the border and have been forcibly relocated since early January from the Loh Loe camp to a new camp inside Burma where there is no guarantee of security due to the camp's proximity to the Burmese troop outposts at the Three Pagoda Pass.

At the present time, the general perception of the Mons on the part of the majority Burmans is that their movement for independence is less threatening than, e.g., those of the Karens and the Shans. Now that SLORC has made peace with some of the ethnic groups, it is even less threatening, since the Mons are relatively few in number and do not have a well-defined territory that is geographically self-contained. Compared to other ethnic groups such as the Kachins, Chins, Karens, and Was, there is more respect for the Mons, in view of their culture, civilization, and history being among the oldest in the area, and for the role the Mons played in the transmission of Buddhist teachings to the Burman people. The contribution of the Mons to the civilization and culture of Burma far outranks the contributions of other ethnic minorities. Also, unlike the Karens, Kachins, and Chins, many of whom were converted to Christianity by missionaries during colonial rule, the Mons are staunch Buddhists, like the majority Burmans. The Mons' ethnic distinctiveness is thought attributable to historical factors rather than to significant differences in culture from the Burmans.

Many of the minority groups of Burma have been rebelling against the central government since independence from British rule was achieved in 1948. Several of them have engaged in insurgency and separatist agitation, especially the Shans, Karens, and Kachins. Although not as large a group, the Mons are currently also engaged in terrorist activities. For example, Rangoon Radio reported on August 20, 1993, that a Mon terrorist organization, the NMSP or New Mon State Party, was in part responsible for a bombing incident.

Conclusion

To sum up, although as an ethnic group the Mons have more respect from the general population of Burmese for their ancient civilization, their long history, and their religion, nevertheless, from the official point of view, they share the opprobrium cast on all rebel groups who are seen as a threat to the military government now holding the reins of power. SLORC has since April 1993 held peace talks with at least nine individual rebel groups, offering the same opportunity to other rebel groups. SLORC has come to terms with at least nine armed organizations representing various ethnic peoples such as the Was, the Pa-os, and the Shans. Three main rebel groups are said to be still actively fighting the central government: the Karens, the Karennis, and the Mons. As stated above, talks with the Mon rebels apparently have not produced concrete results to date.

Endnote

While no information could be located regarding the Independent Mon Council of Burma, established in Albany, N.Y., it can be surmised that it is one of a number of such bodies that have been established outside of Burma by emigré groups of ethnic Mons who are in opposition to SLORC.

Prepared by Mya Saw Shin
Senior Legal Specialist
Far Eastern Law Division
Law Library of Congress
March 1994