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Post-Colonial Freedom, 1952–1956

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# Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom, 1952–1956\*

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IN a photograph taken in 1953, Sutan Sjahrir arrives off an airplane in Rangoon and is greeted warmly on the tarmac by Burmese socialist leaders U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, as well as his close friend Ali Algadri, the Arab-Indonesian chargé d'affaires. Sjahrir had, for several months, served as Indonesia's first Prime Minister, negotiated the country's independence at the United Nations, and put in place its first constitutional guarantees; but he had been sidelined from power by Sukarno, a political rival since the 1930s. U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, meanwhile, were powerful ministers in the new Burmese government. Along with Ram Manohar Lohia and Asoka Mehta, who had broken away from the Indian National Congress to start their own socialist party, they had together planned a conference dedicated to the cause of Asian socialism. With 200 delegates arriving from as far away as London and Tokyo, they sought to use the Asian Socialist Conference to promote socialism as the path out of the mounting international rivalry between "capitalist democracy" and "totalitarian Communism."

In the 1950s, Burma was an intellectual hotbed for Afro-Asian socialism and anti-colonial solidarity. Rangoon was, then, one of Southeast Asia's most cosmopolitan cities, a hub on transcontinental air routes. It hosted visits from the Moscow and San Francisco Ballet, Chinese intellectuals, Philippine artists, Japanese performance troupes, and Yugoslav musicians. It was also the first country in post-colonial Asia or Africa to be ruled by a nominally Socialist Party. Along the

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FIGURE 1. Sjahrir arrives for the Asian Socialist Conference. Left to right: Ali Algadri, Sutan Sjahrir, U Ba Swe, and U Kyaw Nyein (Sjahrir Family Collection).

lines of Yugoslavia, it proclaimed its foreign policy as overtly neutralist. As such, Burma attracted the attention of socialists from all over the world, along with European social democrats, American and Soviet intelligence officers, and African-American and Chinese trade union leaders attempting to influence its leaders and its people with propaganda and promises of aid.<sup>1</sup> Representatives of Tunisian, Kenyan, and Rhodesian freedom movements traveled to Burma, sometimes at U Ba Swe's expense, to share information about their struggles and request financial and military assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Asian Socialist Conference, and Burma's broader role as a hub of post-colonial networking, has largely been overshadowed by the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955. There is no other

<sup>1</sup> See Su Lin Lewis, "We are not copyists': Socialist Networks and Non-Alignment from Below in A. Philip Randolph's Asian Journey," *Journal of Social History* (forthcoming, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Alijah Gordon, *On Becoming Alijah* (Kuala Lumpur: Alijah Gordon, 2003), 291.

conference in global history that has garnered as much attention in its symbolic display of Third World solidarity, and none that so enhanced the global prestige of an emerging group of post-colonial leaders.<sup>3</sup> As Naoko Shimazu has highlighted, Bandung was a theatrical performance, in which Sukarno, Nehru, Zhou Enlai, and Nasser all performed the role of international statesmen who embodied the spirit of Third World nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Sukarno and Nasser walked down Freedom Way in military uniform. Nehru and Zhou Enlai wore their own styles of modern Indian and Chinese dress in front of the international press. U Nu wore a Burmese *longyi* and *pinni* jacket, dress symbolic of nationalist sentiment in the colonial era.<sup>5</sup> Along with Kwame Nkrumah, who was never at Bandung but is often remembered there,<sup>6</sup> these were the darlings of the Third World, their faces splashed on the cover of *Time* magazine throughout the 1950s. In celebrating the anti-colonial spirit of the figures so associated with Bandung, the political rivalries out of which these leaders emerged on center stage tend to be forgotten.

We must therefore ask what other currents of thought have been silenced in making Bandung such a defining moment of the post-colonial era. Kyaw Zaw Win has argued that the 1953 Asian Socialist Conference (ASC) served as a “precursor” to Bandung, highlighting parallel issues of human rights, anti-colonialism, and Asian-African solidarity that appeared on the agenda of both events.<sup>7</sup> Yet there were also key differences in the resolutions of both conferences, primarily in the ASC’s outlining a vision of an Asian welfare state and the promotion of equal rights for both women and men. While Bandung adopted some of the most high-profile internationalist resolutions of the ASC, it was also both a break and a parallel project. Bandung distinguished itself from the ASC’s project of democratic socialism by

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Ohio University Press, 2010); Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); Sally Percival Wood, “‘Chou Gags Critics in Bandoeng’ or How the Media Framed Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference, 1955,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2010): 1001–1027.

<sup>4</sup> Naoko Shimazu, “Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955,” *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 225–252.

<sup>5</sup> Penny Edwards, “Nationalism by Design: The Politics of Dress in British Burma,” *IIAS Newsletter* 46 (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Vitalis, “The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (Ban-Doong),” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4, no. 2 (2013): 261–288.

<sup>7</sup> Kyaw Zaw Win, “The 1953 Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon: Precursor to the Bandung Conference,” in *Bandung 1955: Little Histories*, ed. Derek McDougall and Antonia Finnane (Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2010).

carving out a nationalist trajectory, visibly centered around charismatic male political leaders with populist appeal. By the mid-1950s, socialist intellectuals had become increasingly marginalized from mainstream nationalist politics, by both failing, ironically, to secure mass support for their parties from electorates and by their censorship and own disillusionment with politics. This applied to parties across the socialist world who had taken a prominent role as delegates in Rangoon in 1953. When he appeared in Rangoon in 1953, the Yugoslavian intellectual Milovan Djilas was tipped to become Tito's successor; that same year, he began airing unorthodox views and would soon become Yugoslavia's most prominent dissident.<sup>8</sup> Moshe Sharrett, the leader of Israel's socialist Mapai party, would by 1956 leave politics in disagreement with David Ben Gurion's military escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Unlike the high-profile 1955 Bandung conference, delegates at the Asian Socialist Conference understood conferences to be ephemeral events, whose "spirit" needed to be sustained through regular contact and the circulation of information. As such, the ASC was not a one-off event but became an organizational body, with its secretariat based at Rangoon. From here, it published a number of periodicals and pamphlets to reach Asian as well as African audiences, including *Socialist Asia*, banned by the British governor of Kenya in 1954, and the *Anti-Colonial Bureau Newsletter*, which covered anti-colonial struggles on the African continent, Malaya, and Indochina from June 1954. Some of these publications are likely to have been read by circles around key political leaders. The ASC maintained regular contact with the Socialist International and International Union of Socialist Youth. Bureau meetings were held in Hyderabad and Tokyo, as well as the Burmese hill station of Kalaw, after a failed attempt to hold a meeting in Bandung in 1954 due to visa restrictions imposed by Sukarno's government. A Second Asian Socialist Conference was held in Bombay in November 1956, in the midst of the Suez Crisis and Hungarian Uprising. As both an event and a "permanent" organizational body, the Asian Socialist Conference maintained connections through the circulation of information and ideas, and a commitment to a more peaceful international world order both immediately before and after Bandung.

This might lead us to ask of conferences in the Afro-Asian era, why are some conferences more visible than others, and how do they entrench state-centered narratives? Were notions of individual

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Muravchik, "The Intellectual Odyssey of Milovan Djilas," *World Affairs* 145, no. 4 (1983): 323–346.

freedom and democracy incompatible with the state-centered socialism advocated by post-colonial governments? How did the fractious politics of the post-colonial state get in the way of the socialist dream of a “Third Force,” an alternative movement to Cold War power blocs? And finally, what were their legacies? While socialists may have dropped out of the political scene, their ideas nonetheless held important intellectual influence; popular nationalist political parties promoted a socialist agenda while retaining centralized control and implementing censorship regimes, as civil society actors, often critics of the state, took inspiration from earlier generations of socialist intellectuals. Socialist intellectuals who were not exiled, jailed, or co-opted as technocrats within new regimes were sent abroad as diplomats or as representatives at the UN on account of their fluency in English and other European languages. Along with the 1947 Asian Relations Conference, the Asian Socialist Conference provided first-hand experiences in the field of international diplomacy between new post-colonial nations. While the intellectuals examined here were deeply committed to the promises of the United Nations in advocating self-determination, world peace, and human rights, they were also its fiercest critics when its founders failed to live up to those ideals. As such, they embodied the spirit of international cooperation and drew from an older lineage of socialist internationalism, radically remade for the post-colonial world.

Focusing on the efforts of this new, post-colonial generation of socialist intellectuals in the 1950s, in parallel to the epochal Bandung conference, enables us to think about alternative visions and paths outside teleological narratives of post-colonial nationalism, dominated by key political leaders. This article focuses in particular on the role of socialist intellectuals from Indonesia and Burma, two countries that are surprisingly absent from the broad resurgence of scholarship on the Bandung era, despite their prominent place as hosts and key participants in its events. Rangoon has been conspicuously absent in the literature on the arc of sites where the Third World was “made,”<sup>9</sup> and while some scholars have emphasized the Indonesian context for Bandung, more might be said on Indonesia’s role as an incubator of Afro-Asian networks in the years before and after Bandung,

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<sup>9</sup> See especially Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press People’s History, 2007); Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boskovska, *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade* (London: Routledge, 2014); Mark Berger, “After the Third World? History, Destiny and the Fate of Third Worldism,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): 9–39.

particularly at the non-diplomatic level.<sup>10</sup> Burmese and Indonesian socialist intellectuals, along with their Indian and Japanese counterparts, cultivated some of the most concrete and traceable networks in early Cold War Asia, and began a project of Third World solidarity committed to the end of colonialism across Asia and Africa. Moreover, they sought to make space for individual freedom and human dignity against imperialism and what they saw as the totalitarian impulses of European and Japanese fascism and Soviet communism. Their politics would, at times, be criticized by their compatriots as elitist and lofty, but their most lasting legacies came in their efforts to build a world free of exploitation, one that valued individual freedoms within egalitarian states.

#### RANGOON: THE INTERSECTION OF ASIAN SOCIALIST NETWORKS

In the 1950s and 1960s, conferences were essential in creating notions of solidarity and collective purpose among Asians and Africans. They were facilitated by the growing accessibility of air travel, and the spending power of new post-colonial governments and political parties to engage in international diplomacy, particularly with leaders and activists in other newly decolonized nations. The arc of conferences of the post-colonial era begins in Delhi in 1947 with the Asian Relations Conference, hosted by Jawaharlal Nehru. It was here that Asian socialists first mooted the idea of a special conference to discuss a common program for the development of Asia. Nehru gave Sjahrir, then Indonesian Prime Minister, a grand welcome at the airport. The Indonesian delegation, however, was led by Sjahrir's political rivals, and Sjahrir began engaging in discussions with other socialist intellectuals from elsewhere in Asia. It was felt, Sjahrir later recounted, that "the ideology for a united Asia should have a more integrated content."<sup>11</sup> The emerging ideological solidarity between socialist parties occurred as Indian, Indonesian, and Burmese socialists sought to

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<sup>10</sup> Jamie Mackie, "The Bandung Conference and Afro-Asian Solidarity" in *Bandung 1955*, ed. McDougall and Finnane; Dewi Fortuna Anwar, "Indonesia and the Bandung Conference: Then and Now," *Bandung Revisited*; Wildan Sena Utama, "From Brussels to Bogor: Contacts, Networks and the History of the Bandung Conference 1955," *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2016); Katharine McGregor and Vanessa Herman, "Challenging the Lifeline of Imperialism: Reassessing Afro-Asian Solidarity and Related Activism in the Decade 1955–1965," in *Bandung, Global History, and International Law*, ed. Eslava, Fakhri, and Nesiiah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Sutan Sjahrir, "Reflections," *Socialist Asia* 2:10.



carve out a place within the messy and divisive realm of post-colonial politics. Rapid transitions to parliamentary democracy were accompanied by heightened political factionalism that drastically split the unified fronts of anti-colonial resistance. Socialist parties competed with communists, religious parties, the military, and mass nationalist parties centered around charismatic leaders. While socialist parties in Burma and Indonesia had once been aligned with more hardline Marxists during the Japanese resistance era and after, they had now split due to differences in ideology and strategy.

While Talbot Imlay has shown that Asian socialists were first and foremost regarded as anti-colonial nationalists by European socialists, we need to be careful about generalizing their politics without considering the competing visions of nationalism, and internationalism, that emerged at this time, and the ideological tensions that both united and divided Asian socialists. Imlay argues that what united Asian socialist parties was not so much a policy of “non-alignment,” as in Bandung, but a rapid end to colonialism; one which European socialists disdained in favor of development.<sup>12</sup> However, “non-alignment” as a diplomatic policy did not emerge from Bandung, as is so often claimed, but much later, with “neutralist” policies like those of India and Burma laying its groundwork.<sup>13</sup> The idea of creating a “Third Force” to counter the excesses of communism and capitalism emerged in the post-war era, both in Europe, in the radical wing of the post-war British Labour party,<sup>14</sup> and in Asia.

While the memory of colonial subjugation animated their anti-colonial sentiment, Asian socialists were simultaneously committed to the idea of the “Third Force,” seeing the spread of socialism as a peaceful solution to the antagonistic forces of the Cold War. Moreover, they believed that Asian socialists could succeed where Europe failed. In advocating for an end to European colonialism in Southeast Asia and Africa, they sought also to spread the socialist message to the post-colonial world and steel it against interference from America and the Soviet Union. When European socialists characterized Asian parties as

<sup>12</sup> Talbot C. Imlay, “International Socialism and Decolonization during the 1950s: Competing Rights and the Postcolonial Order,” *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 4 (2013): 1105–1132.

<sup>13</sup> See Lee, *Making a World*, 15; Lorenz M. Lüthi, “Non-Alignment, 1946–1965: Its Establishment and Struggle against Afro-Asianism,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7, no. 2 (2016): 201–223; Itty Abraham, “From Bandung to NAM: Non-Alignment and Indian Foreign Policy, 1947–65,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 46, no. 2 (2008): 195–219.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Schneer, “Hopes Deferred or Shattered: The British Labour Left and the Third Force Movement, 1945–49,” *The Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 2 (1984): 198–226.

overtly “nationalist,” they highlighted their own insecurities vis-à-vis colonialism, particularly after being confronted with the ire of Asian intellectuals (illustrated below); this characterization, however, obscures the complex layers underlying the position of Asian socialist intellectuals and undermines their commitment to the promotion of socialism in the Afro-Asian world.

The leaders of Indonesian and Indian socialist parties studied the workings of socialism both at home and abroad. Sjahrir, the head of the Indonesian Socialist Party, spent his student years in interwar Europe, working with trade unions and the youth wing of the Dutch Social Democratic Workers’ party. When Sjahrir returned to Java he began working extensively with the Indonesian labor movement.<sup>15</sup> He led part of the resistance movement against the Japanese and founded the Socialist Party through a merger with Amir Sjahrifuddin’s “Socialist” party in 1945.<sup>16</sup> That year, Sjahrir published *Our Struggle*, a fiery manifesto criticizing collaborators with the Japanese (and implicitly Sukarno), and calling for a constitution that would guarantee the broadest possible democratic rights.<sup>17</sup> It predicted the economic dislocation of the post-colonial world, and the emergence of “a new kind of imperialism” in the fundamental struggle between “neo-capitalism or socialism.”<sup>18</sup> Sjahrir’s technocratic faith in a mixed economy, a socialist state that made room for private enterprise, ultimately collided with Amir’s more populist and orthodox commitment to socialism.<sup>19</sup> The party split in 1948; Amir sought mass support and formed coalitions with the Indonesian Communist Party, while Sjahrir cultivated a “cadre” party to develop an ordered plan for the development of the state.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1994), 75–77 and 93–95 (I am indebted to this rich and sensitive biography of Sjahrir, as later footnotes will show); Jafar Suryomenggolo, *Organising under the Revolution: Unions and the State in Java, 1945–48* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 66–67.

<sup>16</sup> See George Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952), 158; Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944–1946* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); J. D. Legge, *Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia: A Study of the Following Recruited by Sutan Sjahrir in Occupied Jakarta* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1988), 171.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, “Introduction,” in *Our Struggle Translated and with an Introduction by Benedict Anderson*, ed. Sutan Sjahrir and Benedict Anderson (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1968), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Sutan Sjahrir, “Our Struggle,” in *Our Struggle Translated and with an Introduction by Benedict Anderson* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1968), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Legge, 176.

<sup>20</sup> On the PSI’s approach to politics, see Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1962), 130.

Within the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI), noticeable divisions emerged between Sjahrir's elite Jakarta intellectual circle, and a more grassroots East Java group.<sup>21</sup> While Sjahrir helped found the Asian Socialist Conference, gave key speeches, and wrote for its publications, socialists from East Java played an active role in the everyday machinery of the ASC. The delegation to the 1952 Preparatory conference was led by Djohan Sjahroezah, a veteran journalist and revolutionary leader who had first connected Sjahrir with the labor movement, led oil worker unions, and maintained close links with members of the Indonesian Communist Party. Wijono, initially a member of Amir's circle, had once encouraged the legendary Indonesian Marxist Tan Malaka to head the Socialist Party,<sup>22</sup> and would later become Joint Secretary-General of the ASC. While both were deeply committed to Sjahrir, their backgrounds indicate different but interconnected approaches to politics: Sjahrir's Jakarta circle helped provide the intellectual basis of the modern state, while the East Java circle led the cultivation of popular support and raised awareness among grassroots labor and underground movements.

Like Sjahrir, the founders of the Praja Socialist party in India also cut their political teeth in the world of anti-colonial internationalism in Europe. Ram Manohar Lohia had studied in 1920s Berlin, a haven for anticolonial activists in Europe and later the operative center for the League Against Imperialism.<sup>23</sup> In the 1930s Nehru appointed Lohia, then an active member of the Indian National Congress (INC), to the party's foreign department, where he cultivated ties with freedom movements across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. After the assassination of Gandhi, his mentor, Lohia left the INC in 1948 to help form a progressive alternative in the Congress Socialist Party, joining with the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party.<sup>24</sup> The new Praja Socialist Party, led by Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan, and Asoka Mehta, was by 1952 the major opposition party to the INC. While Nehru is generally associated with generating the idea of "Non-Alignment,"<sup>25</sup> Lohia had put forth his idea of a "Third Camp" in 1950, which would act as a bloc

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Ita F. Nadia, February 16, 2017 (activist and daughter of Dayino, in Rangoon as part of the ASC Preparatory Committee for some months). On Djohan Sjahroezah see: Legge, 100–107; Riadi Ngasiran, *Kesabaran Revolusioner: Djohan Sjahroezah Pejuang Kemerdekaan Bawah Tanah* (2015); and Anderson, *Java*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Java*, 282 fn 38.

<sup>23</sup> See Frederik Petersson, "Hub of the Anti-imperialist Movement: The League Against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927–1933," *Interventions* 16, no. 1 (2014): 49–71.

<sup>24</sup> Saul Rose, *Socialism in Southern Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>25</sup> Luthi, "Non-Alignment," 203.

on the inter-governmental level, and at the popular and party-political level would take the form of a more dynamic “Third Force.”<sup>26</sup> Both ideas would be taken up in the writings and speeches of his Indonesian and Burmese colleagues. For Lohia, it was Asia, and later Afro-Asia, that could begin a “Third Camp” with a clean state, one which, unlike Europe, could adopt a position of genuine neutrality.<sup>27</sup> Due to colonialism, Asia had fundamentally different problems of economic development than Europe.<sup>28</sup> Mehta, meanwhile, looked towards Europe and “evolutionary socialism,” seeing democratic socialism as a reply to the “dehumanisation caused by totalitarian communism.”<sup>29</sup>

In 1951, Lohia and his party traveled to Japan to meet with delegates of the Japanese Socialist Party, split into Right and Left factions due to ideological differences over the origins of the Korean War.<sup>30</sup> As Heonik Kwon has argued, the Korean War was the “first violent manifestation of the bipolar global order,” one that provoked heated public debate over its origins both domestically and internationally.<sup>31</sup> The Japanese Socialist Party’s Left faction became more vocally committed to unarmed neutralism; it quickly attached itself to Lohia’s notion of an Asian “Third Force,” taking a more anti-American and pro-Asian stance in the midst of America’s occupation in post-war Japan.<sup>32</sup> The Right, meanwhile, rejected “third force neutralism” on account of its fears of communism, looking instead to actively promote the spread of democratic socialism and affiliate with the Socialist International. Both sides were united in denouncing their “fascist” opponents, distancing themselves from the policy pursued by Japanese militarists in the past, and believed in the importance of building ties with socialist counterparts in Asia, not least because of their interests in cooperative economic development. Despite the devastation of the war, Burma recognized the importance of Japan in providing aid to help with post-war reconstruction, and also invited Japanese socialists to send observers to the first Preparatory Meeting of

<sup>26</sup> Lohia, *The Third Camp in World Affairs* (Bombay: Praja Socialist Party, 1950), 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50.

<sup>28</sup> Gopal Krishan, “Rammanohar Lohia: An Appreciation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 3, no. 26/27 (1968): 1109.

<sup>29</sup> Mehta, “Final Lap,” *Socialist Asia* 1, no. 4 (1952): 15; Asoka Mehta, *Studies in Asian Socialism* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1959). Differences between Lohia and Mehta’s thought are also noted in Talbot Imlay, *The Practice of Socialist Internationalism: European Socialists and International Politics, 1914–1960* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 448.

<sup>30</sup> J. A. Stockwin, “The Neutralist Policy of the Japan Socialist Party,” PhD diss., Australian National University, 1964.

<sup>31</sup> Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Stockwin, 2.

the ASC in 1952. Indonesia, however, was less sanguine about Japan's involvement; at the 1953 conference, Indonesian attendees refused to listen as one member of the Japanese Socialist Party, Mosaburo Suzuki, rose to speak. This was followed by a deep bow from Suzuki, and apology for the "indescribable acts of suffering inflicted on our brothers in Asia." The Indonesians were reportedly moved, particularly on hearing that many of their socialist brothers were in prison because of their opposition to Japanese fascism.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Sjahrir and Lohia, the founders of the Burma Socialist Party were schooled not in Europe but in Rangoon University, a hotbed of anti-imperial sentiment by the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> U Nu, U Ba Swe, and U Kyaw Nyein had all been students in the 1930s, with U Ba Swe leading a major anti-colonial protest that brought together students with oil workers. In 1944, born out of the resistance to the Japanese, they formed the AFPFL, a coalition between socialists and communists, and supporters in peasant associations, trade unions, and women's, youth, and ethnic organizations, with the Burma Socialist Party formed in 1945.<sup>35</sup> As with the Japanese Socialist Party, the Korean War was also an important flashpoint in splitting the AFPFL coalition after the war. In a surprising deviation from its neutralist policy, Burma voted with the General Assembly to condemn North Koreans as aggressors (a vote on which India and Indonesia abstained).<sup>36</sup> This split the Burma Socialist Party in 1950, with a large faction forming the Burma Workers and Peasants Party (BWPP), lambasting the government as "serfs of the capitalo-expansionists" and pledging to uphold Marxist-Leninist principles.<sup>37</sup> The following year, Burma held its first elections, with the AFPFL winning an overwhelming victory, and the BWPP in opposition.

The ideological competition between charismatic national leaders, socialists, and communists escalated in the post-war period amidst the jockeying for political power, and soon became manifest in the overlapping journeys of the Afro-Asian era. In 1952, as the Burma Socialist Party hosted the preparatory meeting for the Asian Socialist

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<sup>33</sup> Hamid Algadri, "Prime Minister Sjahrir as Statesman and Diplomat" [Unpublished Memoir], 81, Hamid Algadri Personal Papers, Jakarta (henceforth Algadri Memoir).

<sup>34</sup> Aye Kyaw, *The Voice of Young Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1993); Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 215–226.

<sup>35</sup> See Kyaw Zaw Win, "A History of the Burma Socialist Party (1930–1964)," Dissertation (School of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Frank N. Trager, "Burma's Foreign Policy, 1948–56: Neutralism, Third Force, and Rice," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (1956): 91.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Conference, members of the BWPP traveled by ship to Beijing to attend the Asia-Pacific Peace Conference, discussed by Rachel Leow elsewhere in this issue. Burma's post-war government became locked in a civil war with the Burmese Communist Party, which they believed to be taking orders from Moscow. As head of the Burma Socialist Party, as well as the largest organization of Burmese trade unions, U Ba Swe criticized his former allies in the Burmese Communist Party, while remaining close to the labor movements with whom he had cultivated close ties. As he told an American journalist in 1952, his opposition to Soviet communism stemmed in part from a visit to the Soviet Union and Poland in 1949; while he had once respected Stalin, the Soviet Union's ambitions in Eastern Europe were akin to Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia.<sup>38</sup> U Kyaw Nyein, meanwhile, had been invited to Yugoslavia in 1952, which under Tito had famously refused to become a Soviet satellite.<sup>39</sup> While both U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein still considered themselves Marxists, both were wary about the new threat of Soviet imperialism, and looked with both admiration and fear at their powerful Chinese neighbor.

Rangoon thus became a transnational hub for like-minded socialists from Indonesia, India, Burma, and Japan to engage in the work of socialist internationalism with an Asian inflection. The speech given by U Kyaw Nyein to delegates at the preparatory meeting stressed a legacy of common suffering, and the need for Asian Socialist Parties to look to each other to solve common problems. Echoing Lohia's notion of a "Third Camp," U Kyaw Nyein argued:

It is for Asian Socialist Parties to head a Third Camp, and try their level best to save the world from the Third Great War while they still can. It is for the Asian Socialist Parties to offer an alternative to Capitalist Democracy and Totalitarian Communism namely in the form of Democratic Socialism . . . World Public Opinion will be with us.<sup>40</sup>

The idea that Asian socialists continued to cultivate the support of "public opinion," in favor of peace, was a central principle of the organization. The Preparatory Meeting resulted not only in an agreement to co-organize the First Asian Socialist Conference but also to act as an information hub, gathering news about Asian socialist

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with U Ba Swe by Louis Fischer, October 1, 1952, RG84 Burma U.S. Embassy Files, 1950-52 Box 7, NARA.

<sup>39</sup> Alvin Rubinstein, *Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>40</sup> U Kyaw Nyein, "Common Ties that Bind us Together," *Socialist Asia* 1, no. 3 (1952).



FIGURE 2. Rangoon City Hall, 1945 (Creative Commons).

parties from Cairo to Tokyo. From 1952, a fortnightly bulletin, *Socialist Asia*, published news of various socialist parties and preparations for the conference, as well as short articles by core members of the committee on various themes related to socialism, the “Third Force,” and post-colonial politics.

The First Asian Socialist Conference took place across a full week, between January 6 and 15, with meetings and seminars held at City Hall, built in the 1920s in an architectural mix of Art Deco and Burmese ornamentation (see Fig. 2). Official delegates included the Japanese, Indonesian, Burmese, and Indian socialist parties as well as the Pan-Malayan Labour Party, Socialist Party of Pakistan, the Progressive Socialist Party of Lebanon, the Socialist Party of Israel (Mapai), and the Socialist Party of Egypt. “Observers” came from Tunisia, Gold Coast, Uganda, Algeria, Kenya, and Nepal. Invitations were also sent to nationalist parties in Syria, Iraq, Gold Coast, and Nigeria, who expressed solidarity with the Asian socialist project but were unable to afford the flight. As the former Prime Minister who had presided over Burma’s independence, Clement Atlee, representing the Socialist International, was the most high-profile guest at the conference and hosted by U Nu. The Burmese press lauded Atlee’s

experience as a “social worker in the slums of East London” to ratify his socialist credentials.<sup>41</sup> Also present as “fraternal delegates” were members of the Socialist International, the International Union of Socialist Youth, and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, and the Congress of Peoples Against Imperialism. While European socialists, as Imlay and Peter van Kemseke have shown,<sup>42</sup> engaged with Asian socialists to expand and globalize their membership, Asian socialists had used the Socialist International and its contacts to extend its own networks across “Asia,” broadly conceived as extending from Japan to Israel, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Unlike other conferences of the Afro-Asian era or even conferences of the Socialist International,<sup>43</sup> the Asian Socialist Conference was conducted in English, without translators. This speaks to multilingualism of its participants and the fluency of delegates schooled in British colonial institutions and mission schools. Saul Rose, who was at the conference, noted that because English was the official language, as at the Asian Relations Conference, “The conference was rarely delayed by the need for translation. Still more important, the participants were able to meet and talk informally and without intermediaries outside the conference rooms.”<sup>44</sup> These informal, fluid conversations led to an emerging sense of affinity between conference delegates and worked to build a collective shared purpose. Rose argued that the “advantage accrued to the massive and talkative Indian delegation.” The numbers reflect some truth in this: the Praja Socialist Party sent 77 delegates, compared to the 26 delegates of the Indonesian Socialist Party, the second largest group. Rose noted that a disadvantage was suffered by Japanese, Indonesians, and Yugoslavia’s Milovan Djilas. But Djilas’ ideas were nonetheless communicated fluently in the press, and he hosted a number of seminars and debates during the conference. Indonesian socialist intellectuals were schooled in Dutch, with some students learning English and other modern European languages in government secondary schools in Batavia and Yogyakarta.<sup>45</sup> Some, like Sjahroezah, were also journalists, able to practice their English as they

<sup>41</sup> “Asian Socialist Conference: Atlee’s Forthcoming Visit to Rangoon,” *The Burman*, December 19, 1952.

<sup>42</sup> See Imlay, *Socialist Internationalism* and Peter Van Kemseke, *Towards an Era of Development: The Globalization of Socialism and Christian Democracy, 1945–1965* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006) and Imlay, *The Practice of International Socialism*.

<sup>43</sup> Dogliani, Patrizia. “The Fate of Socialist Internationalism,” in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Rose, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Legge, 119.



read the Reuters and AP wires and other English-language newspapers in the region to report on regional and international news. English versions of speeches given in other languages were to be provided with the help of the delegations concerned.<sup>46</sup>

This gathering of intellectuals and politicians did not take place solely behind closed doors. A mass rally took place with 100,000 members of the Burmese public in attendance; the high number likely attributable to U Ba Swe's chairmanship of the Burma Trade Union Congress and its large organizational reach.<sup>47</sup> Speeches from Asian and African socialist leaders drummed up support for anti-colonial solidarity. Margaret Pope, representing the Congress of Peoples Against Imperialism, spoke on behalf of delegates from Morocco who were unable to attend.<sup>48</sup> While committee meetings were held during the day, lively seminars, open to the press and the public, were held in City Hall in the evenings. In his seminar on "Nationalism and Internationalism," Sjahrir gave a broad overview of the development of European and Asian nationalism and spoke on the necessity of the United Nations as a governing world body, inciting a lively discussion between Scandinavian, Yugoslavian, and Asian socialists on the challenges of international cooperation.<sup>49</sup> Atlee's seminar on parliamentary democracy was interrupted by fiery Indian intellectuals like G.K. Reddy, who accused European socialists of failing to apply universal socialist principles in upholding colonialism.<sup>50</sup> Tayeb Salim, the Asian representative of Tunisia's banned nationalist Neo Destour party, gave a rousing seminar on "Freedom Movements in Africa." He urged all socialists to end the "massacres taking place in Tunisia and Morocco" and implored Asian socialists to impress upon the Socialist International the urgency of putting an end to the violence; this resulted in a bitter clash with French socialist André Bidet, carrying the discussion past midnight.<sup>51</sup> It is no wonder, then, that the reports of the Socialist International focused on the "nationalism" of socialists at the conference, given the popular focus on anti-colonialism and the animosity directed at European delegates.

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<sup>46</sup> "Report of the First Asian Socialist Conference" (Rangoon, 1953), 90. (Henceforth "First ASC Report").

<sup>47</sup> Photo caption, *New Times of Burma*, January 13, 1953.

<sup>48</sup> "Asian Socialist Conference Sponsors at BAA Stadium," *New Times of Burma*, January 13, 1953.

<sup>49</sup> Soetan Sjahrir, *Nationalism and Internationalism* (Rangoon: Asian Socialist Conference, 1953).

<sup>50</sup> "Relations between European and Asian Socialists: Lively Discussions at City Hall," *New Times of Burma*, January 14, 1953. "Political Harangues Mar Socialist Seminar," *The Nation*, January 14, 1953.

<sup>51</sup> "Tunisian Sounds off on colonialism issue," *The Nation*, January 10, 1953.

The formation of the Asian Socialist Conference had generated excitement among European socialists, who sought a more active engagement with the decolonizing world. Due to increasing disenchantment with European regionalism, European socialists put the development of the “Third World” on its foreign policy agenda, seeking to bring the Asian Socialist Conference into its fold.<sup>52</sup> During the conference, Asian socialists pushed back on this, continually arguing that they had different goals and aims than European socialists due to shared histories of colonialism and the agricultural base of their economies. This is vividly captured in a story recounted in the memoirs of Indonesian socialist Hamid Algadri about one of the British Labour Delegation waking him up in his hotel room late at night to find out why the Asian Socialists were refusing to unite with the Socialist International.<sup>53</sup> Algadri, confused, had told him he was not the right person to ask, but that he was inclined to agree with the resolution, based on the great differences in wages, rights, and living standards between the British and Indonesian laborer. When the European socialist outlined plans for providing aid to “underdeveloped areas,” Algadri asked why, realistically, British workers would want to give up part of their hard-earned rights and income to help socialists in Asia, and that in comparison to the Asian laborer, the European laborer was a “capitalist” from the viewpoint of income and salary.<sup>54</sup> After a moment of silence, the European acknowledged that he was beginning to understand the Asian Socialist position and left.<sup>55</sup> This vignette captures the skepticism with which Asian socialists viewed the Socialist International and its failure to recognize the different contexts and struggles facing workers in the colonial world, and echoes points made by Asian feminists in refusing to be co-opted within European-led international women’s movements.<sup>56</sup> In the end, delegates at the ASC resolved not to join the Socialist International, but agreed to coordinate with the body as a separate organization.

In an analysis of the conference that appeared in Indonesian socialist periodicals, the socialist intellectual Soedjatmoko argued that the conference’s great triumph was in overcoming the diversity of views

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<sup>52</sup> See Van Kemseke and Imlay, *The Practice of International Socialism*.

<sup>53</sup> This is likely Saul Rose, the only other official delegate in the British Labour Party apart from Atlee.

<sup>54</sup> A similar point is made in Lohia, *Third Camp*, 6–7.

<sup>55</sup> Algadri Memoir, 80.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Sumita Mukherjee, “The All-Asian Women’s Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation,” *Women’s History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–381.

on socialism within Asia. While socialism in Japan developed within an industrial economy, he argued, a gulf of experience existed between colonized and non-colonized countries. Socialism in India could not be separated from the influence of Gandhi, while socialism in Egypt was characterized by hostility towards the West. The Indian socialist party, he argued, was somewhat “impractical,” having not had the experience of governing. And yet, he concluded, Asian socialists had come together with an awareness of their differences, convinced about the unity of the socialist movement as an antidote to both communism and capitalism. While Asian socialists were united in the shared history of colonialism and the underdevelopment of the economy, they were conscious that the Socialist International would not be able to meet their needs.<sup>57</sup> Nationalism, he argued, was a “framework” (*rangka*) for the struggle of socialism in Asia. The views of European socialists, who saw anti-colonialism as the key concern of Asian socialists, failed to consider their end goal: that liberation was a pathway for a newer, better socialism attuned to the realities of Asia and Africa.

#### DRAFTING THE POST-COLONIAL STATE AND A NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER

If the Bandung Conference outlined the principles of diplomatic and economic cooperation between emerging nations of the Third World, then the Asian Socialist Conference was first and foremost concerned with outlining the ideal character of the post-colonial state, one that valued collective social welfare as well as individual rights. Despite the claims of European socialists that Asian socialists were always divided, and “agreed on little else”<sup>58</sup> than anti-colonial nationalism, this set of resolutions indicates a strong collective belief in the welfare state as a basis of social security, along with a protection of democratic rights. While the European welfare state provided a model, Asian socialists devised these plans in committee meetings that did not include European counterparts, and they echo many of the rights enshrined in the first constitutions of Indonesia and Burma. The first set of resolutions defined socialism as distinct from totalitarianism, to be realized through democratic means. Socialism would uphold the “democratic rights of the people, namely freedom of speech, of organization, of

<sup>57</sup> Sujatmoko, “Socialis Asia,” *Sikap* no. 4, January 26, 1953 (reprinted from *Siasat*).

<sup>58</sup> Imlay, 1110.

assembly, of faith and conscience, of election of representative bodies," rights to be "granted to all."<sup>59</sup> It would, crucially, imply the right of opposition parties to exist and operate. It would safeguard basic economic and social rights, including the right to work, free medical care, support for the elderly, and the "right of children and the young to good care," and the right to decent housing.<sup>60</sup> In recognition of the different applications of socialism in different country-contexts, it advocated mutual collaboration between socialist movements.

Indonesia's constitution of 1949, which Sjahrir helped to draft, had stripped away many of the president's executive powers put forth with Sukarno's initial proclamation of the Republic. The 1949 constitution, first drafted in 1946 while Sjahrir was Prime Minister, included many of the democratic rights and rights to social security set out in the first set of resolutions of the ASC. In a letter, Maria Ulfah Santoso, who served as Social Minister in Sjahrir's cabinet, informed Mary Saran, the leader of the women's wing of the Socialist International, that, in her view, the basis of a Socialist Country was already laid down in this constitution.<sup>61</sup> Sjahrir's faith in parliamentary democracy, coupled with the extension of social services to all, stemmed in part from the example of the European welfare state. As a student and anti-colonial activist, Sjahrir traveled around Europe witnessing various models of government. As Mrazek notes, in Sjahrir's political hierarchy of the 1950s, Scandinavian countries topped his list, while France and Britain were generally absent; this world-view could safely disregard the U.S. and the Soviet Union, who had not yet made it into the community of welfare states.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, while Sjahrir seemed to have jettisoned the British model, Mehta and Lohia made frequent reference to the success of Scandinavia and Labour Britain in providing a model that catered for the welfare of all. The adoption of the welfare state model, then, signaled a method of cutting across the warring camps of the Cold War.

The model of the welfare state was also enacted in Burma via the policies of Burma's democratically elected coalition government, headed by U Nu and the Burma Socialist Party. In 1952, Burma's welfare state took the form of *Pyidawtha* (coined by Nu and often translated as "Welfare Plan" or "Happy Land"), an eight-year plan of social and economic improvement. Burmese socialists saw this as a phase in their social

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<sup>59</sup> First ASC Report, 94.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Maria Ulfah Santoso to Mary Saran, December 31, 1956 in ICSDW Archives Indonesia File, IISH.

<sup>62</sup> Mrazek, 429.

revolution, and a uniquely Burmese solution rather than, in U Ba Swe's words, a "carbon copy of Russian or Chinese revolutionary patterns."<sup>63</sup> Based on the idea of "self-help," every township was to receive a government allowance, with committees proposing projects for villages within the township.<sup>64</sup> As Tharaphi Than has argued, the plan aimed to legitimize Burma's post-war development policies and counter accusations of the influence of foreign aid, while winning over rural villagers in an ongoing war against Burmese communists.<sup>65</sup> In *Socialist Asia*, Ba Swe outlined the economic, social, and political rights underlying the "Socialist Pyidawtha State," as stated in the 1948 Constitution established by a multi-ethnic assembly of "Shans, Chins, Kachins, Karens, Mons, Kayahs, and Burmese." Each person was to enjoy facilities of "modern and progressive education, irrespective of sex, wealth, or social status," as well as medical facilities and housing.<sup>66</sup> Pyidawtha was to guarantee individual freedom and address the anxieties of the *ludu* (people) over food, shelter, and clothing by building a modern welfare state.

In particular contrast to Bandung's Final Communiqué, which makes no mention of women's rights, the Asian Socialist Conference advocated full equal rights to women regardless of caste or creed, and pledged "to be the vehicle of ensuring to women full equality of rights and dignity of position."<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, the resolutions acknowledged "the social and political handicaps under which women in Asia suffer," and advocated that Asian socialists "should combat prejudice and ignorance which militate against enjoyment of equal rights by women."<sup>68</sup> As "modern," educated reformers, these socialist intellectuals were keen to portray themselves as attuned to progressive ideals of gender equality.<sup>69</sup> Given the prominence of the Burmese and Indonesian delegations, the deeply rooted Southeast Asian perception of women as having "high status," should be taken into account, alongside Lohia's radical views on gender and caste equality in India.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, unlike in Bandung, where

<sup>63</sup> Maung, Maung, "Pyidawtha Comes to Burma," *Far Eastern Survey* (1953): 117–119; U Ba Swe, *The Burmese Revolution* (Rangoon: Union of Burma Information Department, 1952), 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Tharaphi Than, "The Languages of Pyidawtha and the Burmese Approach to National Development," *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 4 (2013): 639–654.

<sup>66</sup> U Ba Swe, "Burma builds for Socialism," *Socialist Asia* 2, no. 11 (1954).

<sup>67</sup> First ASC Report, 94.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>69</sup> Kumari Jayawardene, *Nationalism and Feminism in the Third World* (Zed, 1986), 12.

<sup>70</sup> See: Barbara Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 2006); Chie Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration," *Journal of Burma Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 51–81; on

women were prominently “invisible,” as Shimazu has noted, female delegates did attend the ASC, including six Indian female delegates and at least three Japanese female delegates.<sup>71</sup> Maria Ulfah Santoso was also part of the Indonesian delegation; Santoso was not only Indonesia’s first female cabinet minister, but a close friend of Sjahrir; the two had studied together in the Netherlands when Santoso was pursuing a law degree. The participation of these women, and their friendships and collegiate relationships with leading male socialists, no doubt contributed to the shaping of the ASC resolutions on equal rights for women.

The socialist state, built on equality between peoples, was to be mirrored in the international realm by the equality of states. The second set of resolutions thus centered on “Asia and World Peace.” Again, the resolutions advocated democratic means, rather than revolution, as the key to Asia’s reemergence in world politics after recovering from the “yokes of imperialism and feudalism.”<sup>72</sup> They pledged an end to colonial rule, citing the struggle against colonial rule as the essence of human protest against subjection, degradation, and poverty. Here, as Kyaw Zaw Win has argued, the parallels with Bandung’s resolutions are most clear.<sup>73</sup> While Asian socialists upheld the principles of the UN Charter as the basis for world peace, they also acknowledged the imbalances and processes of polarization manifest in the structure of the United Nations (particularly the exclusivity of the Security Council). More forcefully, it was up to Asian nations to enable and uphold the principles of the UN charter as a basis of justice, peace, and equality. Resolutions also advocated coordination and cooperation of Asian countries, recognizing shared conditions of agricultural prominence and low productivity, and the need to own the means of production. Finally, as with Bandung, this set of resolutions argued for the importance of human rights, which were associated with the struggles against colonial oppression (Kyaw Zaw Win points out that U Tun Win, one of the speakers for human rights at the ASC, was one of the few ASC members also present at Bandung as Burma’s Minister of Information).<sup>74</sup> As Roland Burke has shown with regards to Bandung,

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Lohia see Jaya Shrivastava, “Locating Lohia in Feminist Theory,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Naoko Shimazu, “Women ‘Performing’ Diplomacy at the Bandung Conference of 1955,” in *Bandung at 60: New Insights and Emerging Forces*, ed. Darwis Khudori (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> First ASC Report, 95.

<sup>73</sup> Kyaw Zaw Win, “1953 Asian Socialist Conference.”

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

this early period of post-colonial solidarity showed a significant and unrecognized positive engagement with human rights by representatives of decolonized nations, who valued self-determination alongside a respect for individual rights.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as Burke concludes, these early Asian engagements with human rights repudiate characterizations of human rights as uniquely “Western.”<sup>76</sup>

In his examination of the competing rights discourses between European and Asian socialists at the ASC, Imlay argues that one of the key differences was in their views of nationalism. While European socialism “had always regarded nationalism as potentially dangerous” and saw “human rights” as the basis for minority rights, Asian socialists were fundamentally concerned with nationalism.<sup>77</sup> Yet while seeking an end to colonialism was the major concern in their applicability of human rights, Asian socialists were highly aware of the dangers of nationalism in Europe and Asia. At the ASC, Sjahrir’s seminar on “Nationalism and Internationalism” outlined the problem of nationalities in Europe as one of “oppressed minorities,” leading to the beginnings of the First World War. Imlay quotes Sjahrir’s reference to nationalism, for Asians, as “quite a natural thing” and a “source of new life and strength.”<sup>78</sup> But he fails to put this in the context of Sjahrir’s thoughts on nationalism in this speech and in his wider body of thought. In his speech, Sjahrir also argued that “Nationalism in the extreme form is irrational and will lead to disaster” and that “emotional nationalism has to be developed into maturity, into a rational and responsible nationalism.”<sup>79</sup> Sjahrir’s distrust of “emotional” and “irrational” nationalism generated criticism from a number of scholars of Indonesian history, particularly Benedict Anderson.<sup>80</sup> Anderson argued that Sjahrir was too quick to dismiss the excitement and energy of youth in the Indonesian Revolution, but what he acknowledged about Sjahrir was “the moral strength of his impassioned pleas for the humane treatment of the Chinese, Eurasians and other minority groups, and his sensitive awareness of the degradation of many sectors of traditional society.”<sup>81</sup> Sjahrir’s party drew to it individuals from diverse ethnic groups precisely because of his belief in social equality and a transcendent humanism that superseded race or religion. Asian socialist

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<sup>75</sup> Roland Burke, “‘The Compelling Dialogue of Freedom’: Human Rights at the Bandung Conference,” *Human Rights Quarterly* (2006): 962.

<sup>76</sup> Burke, 965.

<sup>77</sup> Imlay, 1111.

<sup>78</sup> Sjahrir as quoted in Imlay, 1110.

<sup>79</sup> Sjahrir, “Nationalism and Internationalism,” 15, 19.

<sup>80</sup> See Anderson, *Java and Legge, Intellectuals and Nationalism*.

<sup>81</sup> See Anderson, “Introduction,” to Sutan Sjahrir, *Our Struggle*, 14.

intellectuals had learned much about the diverse components of nationalism in the strikes they organized, the colonial prison cells they shared (in some cases over several years), and the multi-ethnic resistance movements they led.

For these Asian socialists, the basis of the state rested on a rational, egalitarian social order, rather than revolutionary spirit. The focus on anti-colonial nationalism did not preclude an appreciation for minority rights: this was encapsulated in the belief that the state would address the equality of all, irrespective of caste or creed. We see in the resolutions on “Common Asian Problems” condemnation of religious and communal fanaticism, cautioning against the rise of religious and ethnic nationalism. We see reference to the rise of “political apathy” in Asia and the need for “political education” and “purposeful action.”<sup>82</sup> Along with a condemnation of foreign exploitation and feudalism, underlying many of these resolutions was a distrust of the “ignorance of the common masses”<sup>83</sup> in becoming victims of foreign exploitation, indigenous feudalism, and extremism. To counter this, the state’s task was to ensure all citizens would engage in economic and political activity. While Asian socialists were fundamentally concerned with addressing exploitation caused by ignorance and lack of information, this attitude towards the public was precisely what led to accusations of elitism and consequently caused socialist parties to lose elections, as we shall see.

While recognizing its roots in European socialism, Asian socialists advocated a different vision of development: “While the democratic, egalitarian and distributive impulses and achievements of European socialism evoke the admiration of Asia, Asian socialism must be dynamic instead of gradual, and, if necessary, must develop its own methods of peaceful mass action.”<sup>84</sup> The basis for agrarian development in Asia included radical land reforms that abolished feudalism and landlordism, introducing cooperatives, agricultural finance, and collective farms. The Israeli experience of the kibbutz was an important model for Asian socialists, as were European “co-operatives” and indigenous models of village cooperation. Economic development relied on a planned economy that ensured ownership and control over the means of production, and “preferably State ownership of that sector of economy where capital tends to accumulate, such as financial institutions like banks and insurance companies, big industries, and foreign

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<sup>82</sup> First ASC Report, 99.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–100.



trade.”<sup>85</sup> This, again, mirrored the experience of the post-colonial Burmese state, which, well before Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Company, had begun to nationalize a number of foreign assets and activities, including foreign-owned transport and teak firms that had reaped the profits from Burma’s raw materials.

The final set of resolutions laid the basis for the support of liberation movements in Southeast Asia and the African continent. Asian socialists sought active cooperation with freedom struggles to “give these movements a socialist orientation” and safeguard them from the designs of Capitalists and Communists. They urged representatives of the Socialist International and International Union of Socialist Youth to take a firm stance on the question of colonialism and end the repression of liberation movements in Asia and Africa. The ASC demanded that detained nationalist leaders in Malaya and Kenya be immediately released, that freedom of assembly and the press be immediately restored in Kenya, and that the demands of the Uganda National Congress for elections be immediately granted. It condemned policies of racial supremacy in South Africa, and expressed full support for liberation movements in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. There was a significant omission of Indochina in its list of Asian countries to be liberated from colonialism, suggesting contention over whether the ASC should support the Viet Minh.<sup>86</sup> Indonesian news reports of the conference show that Indochina was clearly discussed as a critique of French colonial policy.<sup>87</sup> In a subsequent bureau meeting at Hyderabad, Kyaw Nyein expressed his frustration that Ho Chi Minh, to whom the Socialists had once maintained close relations, had been pushed further towards Russia and China, partly because of India’s refusal to take a stand on the French re-occupation of Indochina, as they had with the Dutch re-occupation of Indonesia; the Indonesian delegate agreed that the ASC should take a stand on Vietnamese independence, regardless of Ho’s commitment to communism.<sup>88</sup> The ASC decided it could not look on passively at the situation in Indochina; a “fact-finding” mission was planned for the following year to gather information to mobilize world public opinion.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Trager, “Burma’s Foreign Policy,” 95.

<sup>87</sup> Despatch from the U.S. Embassy, Jakarta to Department of State re: “Abadi Comments on the Rangoon Socialist Conference,” January 20, 1953. RG 85 U.S. Embassy, Burma 1953–1955 Box 3. NARA asyumi report.

<sup>88</sup> “Report of the Bureau Meeting of the Asian Socialist Conference held at Hyderabad” in Myanmar National Archives AG-15/3(3) Acc-062 (henceforth Hyderabad Report).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

After ten days of committee meetings, the groundwork of Asian socialism was thus set forth in the conference's joint resolutions. The ASC was to be no less than the vehicle to ensure that the world lived up to the internationalist principles of the United Nations and promote the self-determination of all nations in the interests of world peace. At its heart was the democratic socialist state, one that would be arrived at by each country suitable to local conditions, and enable every individual, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or class, to develop to their fullest potential, with adequate access to education, health, and social services. It would temper the excesses of unfettered capitalism and foreign exploitation through nationalization of specific industries and focus on grassroots development from the village level up; it would avoid the totalitarian impulses of Soviet communism through its basis in democratic institutions that protected freedom of speech and association. As Soedjatmoko had observed, nationalism was to be the *rangka*, the framework, for the spread of democratic socialism throughout the post-colonial world. Whether the public would endorse this vision was another story.

#### TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING AND NATIONAL IMPLOSION

The outcome of the Asian Socialist Conference was an agreement to establish a permanent Secretariat at Rangoon. An office was set up at 4 Wingaba Road, the address of the Burma Socialist Party, in a leafy residential area of Rangoon near the home of the assassinated nationalist leader Aung San. U Ba Swe was unanimously elected as Chairman of the ASC, but over the next three years, the work of the ASC was shared between a dedicated set of socialist organizers, all in place by the end of December 1953. The General-Secretary of the ASC, from Indonesia, was Wijono, who settled in Rangoon for a number of years with his wife Sujatin, active in both the socialist and women's movement in Indonesia. U Hla Aung, formerly a member of Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, became Joint-Secretary alongside his duties as a Burmese delegate to the United Nations. Madhu Limaye and Madhav Gokhale, active in the Praja Socialist Party, consecutively served as Joint Secretaries from India, along with Roo Watanabe and Chisato Tatebayashi from the Japanese Socialist Party. In August 1954, after its second bureau meeting in Hyderabad, the ASC agreed to the establishment of the Anti-Colonial Bureau, specifically dedicated to supporting liberation movements in Malaya and Africa. The African connection, as Gerard McCann examines elsewhere in this issue, was

solidified through the figure of James Markham of the Gold Coast's Convention People's Party, who joined the group at 4 Wingaba Road later that year.

With the publication of *Socialist Asia*, between 1952 and 1957, and the *Anti-Colonial Bureau Newsletter*, edited by Markham between 1954 and 1955, Rangoon became an information hub for socialism and anti-colonial solidarity. Subscriber numbers proved disappointing compared to the number of circulars sent out to socialist parties around the world.<sup>90</sup> But these publications nonetheless served as an important outlet for the more active members of the Asian Socialist Conference to exchange ideas and reach out to new audiences. The ASC office hosted a number of international visitors, aided by the prominence of Rangoon on international air routes. The ASC's foot-soldiers engaged in a flurry of transnational networking across Asia and Africa. In 1953, Wijono traveled to Stockholm for the Third Congress of the Socialist International, where he criticized European socialist parties for refusing to take a strong stance against colonialism. U Hla Aung, meanwhile, traveled to Central Africa and Gold Coast in December 1953, before arriving at the United Nations the following month to address the UN General Assembly. Referring to the continuing colonial exploitation he had witnessed on his travels in Africa, he accused the collective conscience of the world of being "dulled by its preoccupations with the cold war" and criticized the United States for failing to intervene.<sup>91</sup> In 1954, Wijono led the aforementioned study mission to Indo-China and Malaya with Watanabe and Markham to study social, economic, and political conditions in both countries. In various international fora, these representatives campaigned vigorously against the continuation of colonialism and the need to de-escalate Cold War tensions through disarmament and allegiance to the principles of the United Nations. These protests proved effective: by 1956, arguments within the Socialist International—particularly between British and Scandinavian socialists against the French—made reference to the disenchantment of socialist brothers in Asia with European socialists' colonial policies.<sup>92</sup> Speaking to the journalist and activist Alijah Gordon, U Ba Swe showed how conscious ASC members were of their influence on European socialists: "For the first time they are beginning to take positions against colonialism, against imperialism . . . They are

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<sup>90</sup> Rose, 239; Hyderabad Report.

<sup>91</sup> "The Problems of the Colonial Peoples," *Anti-Colonial Bureau* 6 (1955).

<sup>92</sup> Imlay, 1118.

criticizing one another, this is a result of our refusal to join them until they have taken a clear-cut stand on the question of colonialism.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite these overtures to internationalism, one of the most discernible tensions emerging within the Asian Socialist Conference was between delegates from Israel and Arab nations, both considered part of “West Asia.” At the first conference, Egyptian delegates had walked out of the conference due to the presence of Israel’s Moshe Sharrett. Israel’s presence was due in part to the increasingly close ties between Burma and Israel as new socialist nations in the post-war period. Rose notes that while socialist parties from Indonesia and Pakistan had been wary about Israel’s presence at the conference, the personable nature of the Israeli delegates changed their minds.<sup>94</sup> By the time of the Hyderabad meeting in August 1953, overtures to Arab parties had been made, probably stemming from the relationship between Indian and Lebanese socialists; Kamal Djumblatt, the head of Lebanon’s Progressive Socialist Party, had visited India in 1951, writing a joint manifesto with Praja socialists rejecting colonialism as well as militaristic and xenophobic nationalism, and promoting the Third Force as an instrument of peace.<sup>95</sup> Djumblatt and his wife attended the Hyderabad meeting as delegates and spoke to the challenges faced by socialists in West Asia, struggling against military dictatorship, local feudalism, and imperialist intrigues in a strategic and rich oil-producing region.<sup>96</sup> He advocated that the ASC send greetings to all West Asian Socialist parties, whether dissolved, underground, or in exile, and support the position of Egypt on Suez. Other tensions emerged at the meeting, including the question of how to deal with Communist China: Mehta and Djumblatt argued that the ASC should not have any contact with Chinese communists because of their closeness to Soviet Russia, while the Burmese referred to Mao’s movement as independent, arguing that if denied outside contacts China would be pushed even further into the Soviet camp.<sup>97</sup>

The third bureau meeting of the Asian Socialist Conference was planned in Bandung for April 1954. However, Sukarno’s government refused to grant visas to Israeli socialists for fear of offending Arab nations, to which it was cultivating close ties. In an official statement, the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) cited other reasons, including

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<sup>93</sup> Gordon, 321.

<sup>94</sup> Rose, 9.

<sup>95</sup> “The Right of the Way,” *Socialist Asia* 2, no. 10 (1954): 10–11.

<sup>96</sup> Hyderabad Report.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Sukarno's fear of offending Indonesian communists, and the refusal by his party to give Indonesian socialists the publicity which the holding of the conference in Indonesia would have given them.<sup>98</sup> That April, Prime Ministers of Indonesia, Burma, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka met in Colombo for an informal discussion of the impact of the Cold War in Asia.<sup>99</sup> It was here that Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo proposed holding an Asian-African Conference in Bandung the following year. Israel was not to be invited to Bandung, despite the protests of U Nu. It is difficult to know whether the push by the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) to hold the conference in Bandung was at all influenced by the activities of the Asian Socialist Conference, to which one of its rival parties belonged, but it is notable that Sastroamidjojo proposed it the same month that the Asian socialists were to hold their third bureau meeting in Bandung, and that the more famous 1955 Asia-Africa conference happened exactly one year later. Throughout the 1950s the PSI functioned as a "brains-trust," in which its policy recommendations were read carefully by Indonesia's political elite.<sup>100</sup> Sastroamidjojo may well have been aware of the conferences and recommendations emerging from Rangoon for a "Third Force" and "Afro-Asian solidarity." Regardless, the Bandung Conference worked towards the political marginalization of the PSI in Indonesia: one of its major impacts on the Indonesian political scene was its benefit to Sastroamidjojo's government and the PNI in the months running up to the September 1955 elections.<sup>101</sup>

With the plan to hold the meeting in Bandung cancelled, the ASC's third bureau meeting was subsequently moved to Kalaw, a breezy former hill station in Burma's Shan state. U Ba Swe began the conference in Kalaw with a strong criticism of the Indonesian Government's action in obstructing the meeting, as well as a criticism of the Pakistan Government for refusing visas to delegates from the Praja Socialist Party to attend the National Conference of the Pakistan Socialist Party.<sup>102</sup> The ASC issued a statement "deploring the actions of national governments seeking to obstruct the principles of

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<sup>98</sup> "Statement of Partai Sosialis Indonesia: On the Failure to Convene the Conference Bureau Asian Socialists in Indonesia," in FO 371/11928 Reports on Meetings of the Asian Socialist Conference, TNA.

<sup>99</sup> See Cindy Ewing, "The Colombo Powers: Crafting Diplomacy in the Third World and Launching Afro-Asia at Bandung," *Cold War History* (2018): 1-19.

<sup>100</sup> Feith, 130.

<sup>101</sup> The point is made in Feith, 392 and Mackie, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Kalaw report (IUSY), "Asian Bureau May Formulate Plans for Korea, Indochina," *The Nation* (May 26, 1954).

democracy and international understanding,” arguing that the “division of Asia along communal lines cannot but have disastrous consequences.”<sup>103</sup> In these early years of post-colonial democracy, the transnational ties among socialists across Asia were hampered by the policies of national governments able to police their borders and dictate who came in and out.

At the Kalaw meeting, U Kyaw Nyein drew headlines for his bold description of Soviet imperialism as “neo-colonialism,” more dangerous than the old imperialism in being “more ruthless, more systematic, and more blatantly justified in the name of the world Communist revolution.”<sup>104</sup> Lohia publicly disagreed, objecting to any implication that “one or other form of imperialism was less bad” and pointing to the “barbaric” actions carried out by capitalist imperialisms in Indochina and Kenya.<sup>105</sup> U Kyaw Nyein tempered his assertions in response, arguing that both forms of imperialism should be rejected, but Asian socialists should not forget the potential dangers of Soviet imperialism. For both Lohia and Kyaw Nyein, despite their apparent differences, maintaining a sense of neutrality between the two camps was of utmost importance. This disagreement did not preclude resolutions made at the meeting, including a “Declaration on Colonialism” that upheld the right to self-determination as recognized by the United Nations Charter. Referring to freedom fighters around the world, the declaration stated: “All genuine democrats fully share with these fighters their passionate desire for human rights and freedom, and therefore associate themselves with the struggle against colonial oppression and for a world order free from slavery, hunger, political terror and war.”<sup>106</sup>

While the ASC pledged its commitment to the principles of internationalism, many of its socialist parties faced continuing domestic struggles in coming to power. Apart from the Burmese socialists, the core group of members to the Asian Socialist Conference were not only losing elections to bigger, more populist nationalist parties, but suffering splits within their own ranks. While the Praja Socialist Party was, in 1952, an effective opposition to the Congress Party, by 1955 it had split. Critics accused the party leaders of espousing their own political salvation, indulging in “fruitless abstractions.” But India’s ruling Congress Party, by 1955, committed itself to the establishment of

<sup>103</sup> “Bureau A.S.C. Statement,” in International Union of Socialist Youth Archives folder 1511, IISH.

<sup>104</sup> Despatch from British Embassy, Rangoon to Anthony Eden, 1954 in FO 371/111928; “A Timely Definition,” *The Nation* (May 25, 1954).

<sup>105</sup> Lohia speech to the ASC Bureau meeting in Kalaw, 1954 (TNA).

<sup>106</sup> Report of the ASC Bureau Meeting in Kalaw, 1954 (Myanmar National Archives).

a socialist pattern, and in the ensuing years co-opted various members of the Praja Socialist Party within its ranks,<sup>107</sup> while others would play an active role in protest and activist movements.<sup>108</sup> In Indonesia, while the membership of the Indonesian Socialist Party had grown to 50,000, the Communist Party had ten times as many members and the Indonesian Nationalist Party had membership in the millions. In September 1955, a few months after the Bandung conference, the Indonesian Socialist Party stood for elections, and lost miserably. This was partly due to a lack of campaigning, with Sjahrir refusing to engage in “cheap politics” and “demagoguery,” while Sukarno’s Indonesian Nationalist Party cultivated a cult of personality around its leader, employing nationalist symbols, slogans, and theatricality.<sup>109</sup> The PSI had focused on establishing itself as an intellectual “cadre” party that sought to educate the people; popular mobilization would come later.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, Burma’s Socialist Party suffered a shock after General Elections in April 1956, where the formidable AFPFL coalition scraped a majority but lost a large number of seats to the opposition left-wing coalition known as the National United Front, which blamed the APFLF for failing to bring peace, security, and economic prosperity to the country.<sup>111</sup> In the atmosphere of the early Cold War, as local communist parties gained power by providing an alternative to the political and economic dislocations of the post-colonial era, the technocratic ideals of democratic socialism proved a hard sell.

In November 1956, the Asian Socialist Conference convened its second major conference in Bombay, the industrial heartland of India’s Socialist Party since the 1930s.<sup>112</sup> New delegations appeared from Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Ceylon. Delegates from further afield included Joseph Murumbi from Kenya and a member of the Popular Socialist Party of Chile. There were notable absences, particularly from Arab nations. Two major events formed the international backdrop of the conference: the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution. A subcommittee of representatives from India, Burma, Indonesia, and Japan drafted an initial resolution on the two crises. The following day, U Ba Swe (Fig. 3), now Burma’s Prime Minister, opened the conference

<sup>107</sup> “The Praja Socialist Party in India: A Final Assessment.”

<sup>108</sup> See Kent-Carrasco, “A Battle Over Meanings,” 384.

<sup>109</sup> Mrazek, 430; Feith, 316.

<sup>110</sup> Feith, 130.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph Silverstein, “Politics, Parties, and National Elections in Burma,” *Far Eastern Survey* 25, no. 12 (1956): 180–181.

<sup>112</sup> John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 228.



FIGURE 3. U Hla Aung, Genda Singh, U Ba Swe, and Wijono presiding over the Bombay Socialist Conference (International Institute of Social History Collection).

with a speech condemning the actions of Britain and France as well as the Soviet retaliation against the Hungary. He lambasted Britain and France, as members of the Security council, who had “wantonly attacked Egypt . . . All moral codes and human decency on which the UN was founded were thus shattered.”<sup>113</sup> He referred to the struggle of both Poland and Hungary in seeking independence from Soviet control. He simultaneously paid tribute to the United Nations Organization and its agencies for raising living standards and upholding human rights. Despite all its teething problems, the Asian Socialist Conference still saw itself as the guardian of international peace, particularly when those who held power on the UN security council failed to live up to its ideals.

<sup>113</sup> Dispatch from Embassy, New Delhi to Department of State, Washington, DC, December 26, 1956. RG 84 Burma: U.S. Embassy General Records, 1953–1958 UD2186, NARA.



The following year saw the collapse of the democratic socialist vision in Indonesia and Burma. In 1957, Sukarno instituted his policy of “Guided Democracy,” undoing Sjahrir’s constitutional guarantees. In 1959 he reintroduced the Constitution of 1945, which gave the President full executive powers. While calling for an end to neo-imperialism and the establishment of a socialist society, he dissolved parliament and banned both the liberal Islamic party Masjumi and the Indonesian Socialist Party in 1960. Privately, in a position paper to his PSI colleagues, Sjahrir communicated his fears of violence and the emotional pull of ethnic-based regionalist movements as detrimental to the unity of Indonesian public life, and his “sickness” at the military repression that followed.<sup>114</sup> In 1962, under rumors of a “PSI conspiracy,” Sjahrir was put under house arrest, along with other socialist intellectuals. Rosihan Anwar, a journalist close to Sjahrir, talked with an “Asian diplomat”, utterly confused about what had happened to Sjahrir, who “together with Nehru, was the famous man of Asia . . . Could the problems between him and Sukarno possibly make him vanish like this?”<sup>115</sup> In prison, Sjahrir buried himself in the literature of Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Max Weber before suffering a stroke and losing his ability to speak and write.<sup>116</sup> After his death far from Indonesia in 1966, in a hospital in Geneva, Sjahrir’s body was returned to Indonesia and given a state funeral, with Sukarno still formally in office in the aftermath of the military coup that brought Suharto to power.

In Burma, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, led by U Nu, finally split apart in 1958. As Frank Trager notes, this “political divorce” had its roots in fatigue: the two components of the AFPFL had spent too much time together over two decades and were overstretched in their responsibilities (post-war Burma had not only lost a generation of political leaders in the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet in 1947, but also a great number of Indian civil servants that had staffed the colonial government).<sup>117</sup> Foreign experts blamed the failure of Pyidawtha on its leadership and lack of technical expertise; the plan also relied on income from rice exports that failed to materialize after the end of the Korean War caused a worldwide drop in rice prices.<sup>118</sup> In

<sup>114</sup> Sjahrir, “Peninjauan dan Pernilaian” (1958), as quoted in Mrazek, 453.

<sup>115</sup> Rosihan Anwar, *Sebelum Prahara* (1962), as quoted in Mrazek, 465.

<sup>116</sup> Mrazek, 473–480.

<sup>117</sup> Frank N. Trager, “Political Divorce in Burma,” *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 2 (1959): 317–327; See also Ian Brown, “Tracing Burma’s Economic Failure to its Colonial Inheritance,” *The Business History Review* 85, no. 4 (2011): 725–747.

<sup>118</sup> See Louis Walinsky, “The Rise and Fall of U Nu,” *Pacific Affairs* 38, no. 3/4 (1965): 269–281; Trager, “Burma’s Foreign Policy”; Than, 652.

the midst of economic distress and political fallout, General Ne Win was asked to provide a “caretaker government,” as U Nu renounced his worldly possessions and temporarily resorted to the life of a Buddhist monk. During this time, Ne Win ruthlessly put down the disorder emerging in both the countryside and the city and arrested a number of political leaders from U Nu’s and U Ba Swe’s groups. The press published a letter where Ba Swe openly consented to an extension of Ne Win’s term in office until elections could be held in 1960. U Nu’s party captured a majority, with Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein’s faction losing miserably; the public believed they had become too close to the military.<sup>119</sup> In 1962, Ne Win overthrew U Nu’s democratically elected government and seized power. Ba Swe was detained for a short while, and then released to live in retirement in Rangoon, passing away in 1987. Kyaw Nyein, meanwhile, was detained by the military government for some years, and released only in January 1967. After years of cultivating a vision of the democratic socialist state both within Burma and with Asian nations, and professing a commitment to internationalism and allegiance to the UN Charter of human rights, Burmese socialists found themselves in a xenophobic prison, one at least partly of their own making.

## CONCLUSION

In an article published soon after the 1953 Kalaw Conference, Edward Lawyone, the editor of Rangoon’s popular *Nation* newspaper and a cautious supporter of the Asian Socialist Conference, suggested that socialists had not “proved themselves revolutionary enough to capture the masses in a period of great political ferment in the area.” Where socialism grew well in the “sheltered climate of advanced political democracy,” he argued, it “appears to lack the dynamism to cope with more violent political situations.”<sup>120</sup> Asian nations were coping with rapid political transitions against the backdrop of turbulent Cold War geopolitics. Domestic cleavages were exacerbated by responses to Cold War flashpoints, as the broad leftist coalitions born out of anti-colonial

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<sup>119</sup> On the long and complex history between the BSP and the post-war reorganisation of the Burmese military see Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) and “The Sinking Schooner: Murder and the State in Independent Burma,” in *Gangsters, Democracy, and the State in Southeast Asia*, ed. Carl A. Trocki (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>120</sup> “Asian Socialists and Realism,” *The Nation* (May 26, 1954).

struggles split into two over the Korean War, Vietnam, and the continuing popular appeal of international Communism. In Burma and Indonesia, this was fed by a propaganda war waged by American and Soviet intelligence officers, with one bloc smearing Marxist ideology and upholding “freedom” alongside capitalism, and the other engaged, in the words of a Soviet diplomat in Rangoon, in the “penetration and subversion of local regimes, direct and active participation in the struggle between different political parties.”<sup>121</sup>

And yet in the years of its existence, the Asian Socialist Conference provided a venue for some of the most thoughtful intellectuals in a region stretching from Cairo to Tokyo to come together for a momentary escape from the realm of fractious national politics. They devised a collective and humanist vision for post-colonial society that was equitable to all men and women, regardless of religion or ethnicity, providing for the welfare of all. The ASC devoted itself to the cause of national liberation, seeking out information and personal connections about socialist parties and freedom movements throughout Asia and Africa. As they fought ideological and propaganda battles at home, delegates at the ASC remained committed to the idea that the model of democratic socialism would constitute a way out of the Cold War. In an interview given to the American journalist Louis Fischer, U Ba Swe stated “we not believe in a group of Third Force governments but in people’s force, the force of the people who want peace.” Fischer protested, “but that will take fifty years.” Ba Swe responded, “Maybe not fifty years, twenty years. If we are lucky we will get there.”<sup>122</sup> Asian socialists believed that the force of public opinion would be behind their vision, but that this would take time. They did not foresee such a rapid fall from power, but nonetheless their vision of an alternative “third way” was one that continued to have purchase.

Indonesian and Burmese socialists, forgotten as some of the most active proponents of this vision, were particularly vulnerable to the rise of military-backed authoritarian regimes. These regimes borrowed ideas from socialist intellectuals but abandoned the democratic values which they advocated so strongly. Whereas Burmese socialist intellectuals of the 1950s were keen to learn from the experiences of socialist, communist, and democratic countries, Ne Win—under the guise of a “Burmese Way to Socialism”—closed off Burmese civil society from the outside world. The ascendancy of Suharto in a U.S.-backed 1965 military coup decimated the Indonesian Communist Party, resulting in

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<sup>121</sup> A. Kaznavcheev, *Inside a Soviet Embassy* (Lippincott, 1962).

<sup>122</sup> Interview with U Ba Swe by Louis Fischer.

the mass killing of an estimated half a million Indonesians suspected of having communist sympathies and an erasure of the Left in state-led narratives of Indonesian history. Some Indonesian socialists remained fierce critics of the Suharto regime, others were co-opted as modernizing technocrats.

While the vision of Asian socialists was defeated politically, it nonetheless left legacies in the realm of civil society and the contribution of Asian and African nations to the new international order. Socialist intellectuals like Soedjatmoko would serve in the United Nations, and U Thant, political secretary to both U Nu and U Ba Swe would become its third Secretary-General. Student protests and democratic protests flared up throughout periods of authoritarian rule in Burma and Indonesia, in which the students and children of socialist intellectuals participated.<sup>123</sup> Discourses of democracy, human rights, individual freedom and dignity, and a more egalitarian social order have become increasingly important to generations of activists in challenging authoritarian rule as well as those working in the field of social policy and women's and LGBT rights, and perhaps owe more to these earlier generations of activists and intellectuals than current trends in globalisation. The democratic challenges to Southeast Asia's authoritarian regimes in the 1980s, 1990s, or the beginning of the millennium, were not new phenomenon, but one with perhaps deeper roots. Asian socialists devised a collective vision of social welfare alongside individual and political freedom that stretched from the village to the state and across the boundaries of nations, providing an alternative draft of internationalism to the diplomatic machinations of Bandung.

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<sup>123</sup> Examples include the Malari incident in Indonesia, a student protest often blamed on socialist intellectuals, and the U Thant funeral crisis, in which U Ba Swe's daughters participated. U Kyaw Nyein's daughter Cho Cho Kyaw Nyein was active in the 1988 democracy movement.