

Indonesia and burma  
possess similar  
political systems  
history essay



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Both Burma and Indonesia's political landscapes are shaded with military domination since their independence. However, Indonesia has experienced democratization after the fall of Suharto and Burma remains aloof. We need to have a look at why Burma did not experience the political transformation and why Indonesia did. While we consider this, we also have to examine the political history and the elements that shape the systems.

## **Geographical landscape**

Indonesia is geographically the biggest country in Southeast Asia and Myanmar is the second biggest. Indonesia also enjoys (rather suffers from) the biggest population size in the region. Scholars have noted that Indonesia has a potential to become a regional powerhouse given its geographic and demographic size but has not asserted to be so, mainly because of its failure for economic transformation which is also deterred by political instability. On the other hand, scholars have also mentioned that Burma could be an important country in the region if its doors were open and its political and economic reforms were introduced. Speculation are good to be made, however, in contrast, the practical situations are different. There are several elements that hinder both countries' successes.

## **Colonial periods**

The countries that became independent after the Second World War usually point their fingers to the western colonialists to justify their failure to implement modern state-building. The case is quite true with Both Indonesia and Burma. Both countries were colonised by the western powers – Burma by the British and Indonesia by the Dutch. The creation of Modern Burma was essentially the British creation and the Indonesia unavoidably by the <https://assignbuster.com/indonesia-and-burma-possess-similar-political-systems-history-essay/>

Dutch. Both countries, as noted above, have failed to become successful both politically and economically after independence. I would like to assert here that it is true that the British and the Dutch made the geographical demarcations on the basis of their economic interests neglecting the composition of the diverse ethnic groups within the created regions. However, it is the fundamental fault of the domestic rule to accommodate the diverse ethnicities and to bring about a workable and economic-oriented political attitude. I would like to focus more about this later on when I further talk about Burma and Indonesia.

### **Struggle for Independence and the rise of nationalism**

A similarity exists in the struggle for Independence in both countries. They experienced the surge of nationalism in the immediate pre-war period. Burma oversaw a peasant uprising in 1930. The event made an epoch in the struggle for social liberation leading up to nationalism. The leader of the rebellion, Hsaya San, was a member of a social group called YMBA (Young Man Buddhist Association). (Gravers 2005, p36) Even though there were some small scale outbreaks of the revival of nationalism previously in Burma, I totally agree that Hsaya San was a major inspiring figure in the struggle for liberation and the establishment of nationalism. Thus, we know that the rise of nationalism is comparably quite late in Burma. We can look at the Philippines and India to compare this trend. The same is true with Indonesia. The landmark in the nationalist movement in Indonesia happened in the immediate pre-war period. Brown noted as below:

The Indonesia nationalist movement, emerging in the first decade of the century and a prominent part of the political and social landscape by the <https://assignbuster.com/indonesia-and-burma-possess-similar-political-systems-history-essay/>

1920s, had been remarkably successful. In the space of less than half a century, it had apparently not only defeated Dutch colonialism, but also succeeded in overcoming historical ethnic and religious differences between Indonesians. And these are the terms in which many Indonesians today view that movement. (Brown 2003, p105)

Brown went on to say that the nationalist movement accomplished much in Indonesia. However, in the case of Burma, I just would like to say that the Burmese gained the independence from the British not with the assistance of firepower but with the situational timing and diplomatic negotiation. The evidence is the sheer lack of serious bloodshed with the British forces and the agreement of AungSan-Attlee.

## **Political structures after Independence**

Burma gained independence from the British on the 4th of January, 1948. The first Burmese leader, General Aung San, visualized Burma as a plural society in which diverse political structures coexisted within a framework of overarching consensus. (Tarling 1999, p80) That was the reason why he promised the Shan and the Karenni the right to secede from the Union after ten years of independence unless they were satisfied with the Union. But after Aung San was assassinated, the structure was changed. Burma developed a Westminster style parliamentary system with the lower house possessing large amount of legislative power and accordingly the Prime Minister became exceedingly powerful. The upper house, containing the equal proportions of the different ethnic nationalities, was not granted overriding power of the lower house. Thus, the establishment of a federation failed.

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The powerful Prime Minister U Nu (also the first PM of Burma) tried to develop a political structure based on a synthesis of Buddhism and Socialism, with an especially heavy dose of the former. (Tarling 1999, p87) This structure was opposed by the ethnic minorities who are Christians. Socialists did not support this program as well. Along with this structure appeared several different kinds of revolts, particularly the communists and the Karen National Union. The rebels controlled large area in the countryside and the central government was confined within the Rangoon city limit. The deteriorating political situations paved the way to the military takeover of the country.

Indonesia proclaimed independence on 17th August, 1945. However, proclamation of the independence does not mean a real freedom. The Dutch were eager to come to their former colony, so the Indonesians had to fight for their liberation. Sukarno and Hatta were appointed President and Vice-President respectively, and a system of regional based on a division of the Republic into seven provinces each headed by a nominated governor, was established. (Brown 2003, p159) The formal Dutch recognition of Indonesian independence came only in December 1949. The recognition established in the light of American pressure on the Dutch government and Indonesian Army's determined resistance.

The seed of military domination in the politics of both countries thus was planted during the revolution periods. In Burma, the Army was formed in ally with the Japanese to fight off the British and the important role of the military was sustained in the continuous fighting in the internal revolts-the communists and the ethnic resurgence. Also in Indonesia, the Army played a

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big role in fencing off the Dutch during the Dutch's military launch and in addition to that, it pinpointed the two enemies within the state-the rise of communism and the formation of Darul Islam. It did not fail to struggle with them until they are toppled.

### **Military takeover of the power**

Burma enjoyed a democratic state between 1948 and 1962. However, the time had come for a change. In March 1962, a military coup led by General Ne Win overthrew the elected government of U Nu, ushering in a period of military rule that has lasted more than 40 years. (Church 2006, p117) The main justification for the military coup given by General Ne Win was that the country was in tatters because of the selfish activities of the politicians, as a result of which, the Shan and other ethnic minorities were preparing to secede from Burma. One cannot imagine how many times the military leaders have repeated this same reason over the several decades since their takeover, in the newspaper, magazines and state-run TVs and radios. As a man who grew up in 1990s, I personally have heard of these kinds of statements over and over again and am just fed up with it. However, if one was a normal person who was not actually interested in politics and had no access to foreign media, he or she would probably just take it as true and real. Therefore this just serves as the military's psychological warfare.

Now there may arise some questions why one has to put so much blame on the Burmese military as long as it is doing good for the country. In fact, the Burmese military headed by General Ne Win at that time was not doing any good to the country. Let us first look at the economy. The military

government fundamentally transformed the state economy from capitalist  
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market to the socialist collectivism. The business enterprises were nationalized forcefully. No compensation was offered.

The economy worsened acutely under military rule, with the expulsion of Indians and Pakistanis, the prohibition on foreign investment and the efforts of the one-party State to impose a command economy. In 1987, the United Nations gave Burma “Least Developed Nation” status, recognizing it as one of the world’s 10 poorest countries. (Church 2006, p117)

There has been widespread analysis of Burmese economic development index despite the difficulties in terms of data collection and information retrieval. Scholars have pointed out that military’s mismanagement of the economy inexorably led to the demise of the economic structure. The state wanted to build an industrial proletariat while Burma is a state of little industry and to control all economic activities. At the same time it purged the administration of the civilian meritocratic bureaucratic elite who were the only civil servants capable of attempting to run a centrally planned economy. (Steinberg 2005, p 57) What the government did was, as Steinberg continued; replace the elites with military brass who did not have any economic competence. This kind of management ultimately led to the economic disaster.

Now that we have seen how Burma’s military economic mismanagement brought about the economic demise of the country, we turn to look at Indonesia and its military’s management of the economy. Here when we talk about the economic handling of the state, we look at the shift of political power from Sukarno to Suharto and his ambition to bring the country to the

existing economic world order. We can compare U Nu and General Ne Win to Sukarno and Suharto. Even though they represent stark differences in some respect, the pattern could be tentatively drawn to the same phenomenon. However, the power change from U Nu to General Ne Win was witnessed as the move from economic development to all-round ruins. On the other hand, Suharto inherited a bleak future in the country's economy from Sukarno. Despite of it, he initiated economic transformation and subsequently the development.

There are so many things Suharto did to promote the economic development. First, he tried to make sure the foreign investment come to the country. Tax collection was properly made. In 1967 a group of Indonesia's major western creditors, including Japan, the United States and Australia, formed the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI), an organization aimed at coordinating the flow of aid to Indonesia. (Brown 2003, p 219)

Thus, Suharto transformed the economy successfully. He also tried to legitimize his military takeover of the country by showing economic growth. He brought about dramatic improvements in the living standards of most Indonesians. (Fuston 2001, p77) In Asia, Indonesia became an economic tiger along with Thailand and Malaysia. However, the economy contracted again after the fall of Suharto in 1997, in the wake of the Asian financial crisis.

So, comparing the two dictators seems quite different in this economic sector. General Ne Win who was extremely corrupt and was intent on

centralizing the power on his own hand, pushed the country into the bottom of the ground, whereas, General Suharto, despite his authoritative manner, lifted his country up to the desirable economic standard.

People usually argue that economic development comes only in the light of political stability. This statement has credible source. In the case of Indonesia, the 1997 financial crisis and political instability brought down the Suharto regime and since then, the economy did not recover to the fullest extent. In Burma, political instability is usually interpreted as the ethnic tensions and armed resurrections.

## **Ethnic Conflicts**

Burma is a country infested with ethnic conflicts. All the ethnic-controlled areas of the country are situated on the periphery of the state and they want to break away from the Union of Burma. Tin Maung Maung Than (2005, p 65) rightly points out that the nation-state in Myanmar is a post-colonial construction and the issue of national identity in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting has played a significant role in state building since independence. He also revealed the fact that ethnic conflicts take a shape of central political stage in Burma's political background. All major ethnicities in the country want to secede from the post-colonial formation of the state. This constitutes a huge problem in nation building.

Like in Burma, there are ethnic conflicts in Indonesia. Academics put those conflicts in two types; vertical conflicts and horizontal conflicts. Vertical conflicts are those happened between the state and a particular group (ethnically, religiously or ideologically-motivated) within the nation-state. On <https://assignbuster.com/indonesia-and-burma-possess-similar-political-systems-history-essay/>

the other hand horizontal conflicts are those happened within the society itself or intra-society. It occurs between at least two culturally or religiously differentiated communities under a single political authority. (Sukma, 2005, p3) According to this definition, both types of conflicts can be seen in Indonesia.

However, more dangerous conflicts that are similar to Burma's case are vertical conflicts such as Aceh and Papua's struggle for secession. These two states exist in the extreme far ends of the archipelago; Aceh being in the west end and Papua in the east. This unique geographical location of the peripheral states resembles those states in Burma, which are trying to break away from the Union of Burma. Sukma asserts that the Aceh conflict began to take form as a secessionist conflict only in mid-1970s with the establishment of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). If this is the case, their cause was much later than the ethnic conflicts in Burma; Karen National Union, for example, took up arms in 1949 to secede from the state.

Although ethnic tensions played a pivotal role in Burma's political arena, most so-called pro-democracy opposition groups of the country tend to forget its role. Their main concern has always been the military domination and their chief aim is to push the soldiers into the barracks. The main justification of the military takeover of the politics, however, was and still is the disintegration of the so-called Union of Burma. The opposition groups, such as NLD (National League for Democracy) did not pay much heed into the above-mentioned cause of the military.

## **Civilian democracy uprisings**

NLD was only formed after the 1988 democracy uprisings in Burma. Why did the uprisings happen? The reason was that people were most fed up with the arbitrary management of the economy by the army. I can still recall those days when suddenly we woke up in the morning and found that the money my parents have accumulated in life was declared useless by the military government. It must have been the most painful experience in life for my parents. They did not know how to go to the market and buy food and other necessary commodities. The government was, bluntly speaking, idiotic and brainless to declare the state currency worthless without any compensation. The worst is that it did it twice. People's anger poured out into the street. They were really fed up with the rationed food, commodities, closed economy, political suppression and so many other things. Once in a life time, people went into the street risking their lives under the shooting guns and shouted " Democracy"! Overnight, the whole country was turned upside down. People from all walks of life joined the shouting. They walked hand-in-hand and demonstrated.

That was a time when NLD was introduced with the head of Aung San Suu Kyi. People needed a leader to direct their cause. Students were at the forefront of the uprisings and they supported Aung San Suu Kyi. She and her party won the landslide victory in the 1990 election but she was not granted the power. Power was not a type to be granted in Burma. The power comes from the barrel of the gun for the soldiers. When the uprising was put down brutally, the students and the dissidents run into the ethnic controlled areas

and made ally with them. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest and the military went on ruling the country.

Is it just impossible to bring down a military regime? Of course, yes. It is possible to kick a man out from the highest position. Indonesia is the case study. General Suharto was ousted at the wake of 1997 Asian financial crisis. General Suharto granted economic prosperity to the country but his era was marked with authoritarianism, corruption and nepotism. (Church 2006, p56) In 1997, because of the Asian financial crisis, there was a speculative bubble, and capital flight. The currency quickly crashed from around 4, 000 rupiah to more than 12, 000 rupiah to the US dollar. (ibid) There were massive public demonstrations. Some elements of the military organized chaos and violence against the Chinese community. The Jakarta elite turned against Suharto. The vice-president, Habibie, helped convince Suharto to step down. Military head, General Wiranto, reportedly refused to act against demonstrations. Suharto's hope of remaining in power was thwarted away. He was forced to resign. (Fuston 2001, p79)

Demonstrations in Burma also forced General Ne Win resign in 1988 while Suharto was also toppled in 1997. But in Burma, another military regime was introduced and it crashed down the demonstrations brutally, followed by the promise of elections and civilian rule. The second promise was not kept. On the while, in Indonesia, Suharto's fall and Habibie's succession was seen as a transition to Democracy.

## **Present days**

There is a real mess still going on in the present day of Indonesia's politics as the case was in Burma. For Habibie, there was a force for him to make a change in the country. First, greater freedom of speech and assembly was ensured. Along with it, creation of political parties was allowed. An election was held in 1999. However, Habibie was not absolutely free from the shadow of Suharto and his followers. There came meetings and discussions among leading figures such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Megawati Sukarnoputri and Amien Rais, etc. In the elections, Megawati's party won and after series of negotiations, promises and double crosses, Wahid came to power. (Fuston 2001, p80) However political turmoil continued. Finally, in 2001, Wahid was removed by parliament and replaced by his vice president, Megawati. The summary of this chaotic period is that the political situation was not stable. So many things changed in a short period of time.

Also in Burma, the military continued to rule the country with an iron fist. Since the victory of NLD in the 1990 election, little political and economic changed. There was a time the head of the Junta was replaced. General Saw Maung, the head of SLORC was ousted and took over by General Than Shwe. Still one man change did not mean a thing for the country. However, there was a short period of economic growth in 1995 and 1996 due to the open door policy. But as Tin Maung Maung Than noted in a seminar, the door was the spring door for Burma. It opened briefly but closed later on.

## **Conclusion**

When we look at Indonesia and Burma, we have in fact to look at the whole Southeast Asia region. The political systems of the whole region are really <https://assignbuster.com/indonesia-and-burma-possess-similar-political-systems-history-essay/>

messed up. We cannot actually say that they have functional intuitions. In Indonesia, the bureaucracy is extremely corrupt. Not less in Burma. Not less in Thailand. However, the governments want to claim that they are truly democratic countries. Of course, nobody wants to say that they are autocratic and authoritarian. However, in comparison, some countries are much better off than others in the region. Indonesia has better potentials than Burma in terms of economic and political development. They have experienced political transformation and long before that, the economic transformation. Even though they are fragile and volatile, they are still going on. Not in Burma. When we talk about Burma, we end up scolding the government because we cannot see a method to change the country. In fact, there is a way. That way can only come from the opposition groups stationed on the borders of Thailand and Burma. The opposition groups aggressively tightened up the rope of sanctions on the neck of the government hoping that it will kill the dictatorship once and for all. No way, the Chinese and the regional allies helped the dictators out of the loop of the deadly sanctions, leaving the country people with the effects of them. So there is no way out. Will dialogue be successful? It would have been successful if it had been the way.