

# **Anarchists struggle in Burma**

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This article explains how anarchism used to be in Burma and how it's developing at the moment. This article informs how the anarchist movements in Burma were misdirected by divisive neoliberal identity politics and how they're being claimed back by the anarchists from a class-based intersectional perspective.

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## Anarchists struggle in Burma

Myanmar has a long history of totalitarian left traditions of Stalinism since its colonial times as a resistance to British colonialism. Later, the Stalinist socialist regime led by military dictator General Ne Win ruled the country. After that, the Stalinist socialist regime had transformed into a military bureaucracy where the military officers had become the new class oppressing the democratic movements.

## Left-wing community during the 1900s

Even though the communist party of Burma was created with the ideological influence of the Communist Party of India and Earl Browder's communism, it later degraded further into a personality cult of Stalinism and Maoism under the illiterate leadership of Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Zin, and Thakin Chit. Generally speaking, the leadership of the communist party of Burma can be categorised into three factions.

- The first era is when it pledges its ideological allegiance to Browderism.
- The second fraction includes the Leninist tradition of a tiny minority in the Politburo (which later got purged by the Maoists during the 1960s).
- The last fraction represents the Maoist personality cult (still controlling the present party).

Outside of CPB, there were other leftist movements that identified themselves as something unique from CPB. The socialist party, represented by the social democrats and the military, was one of those fractions. There used to be some syndicalist movements under the flag of the Red Socialist Fraction, which Thakin Lwin led. Despite holding the banner of syndicalism, Thakin Lwin and his faction chose to remain loyal to the Stalinist personality cult.

However, anarchism was never a fraction of these, at least in contemporary historical references. While the concept of seizing the state's power by some elitist vanguard is too common in Burma, the concept of building communities from the ground, the mutual aid concept, and the anti-authoritarian idea were unknown to the public. Thakin Nu, the first prime minister of Burma, was known to write some anarchist articles. However, his article was far from anarchism and had nothing to do with it.

Thus, anarchism has become a slur for the authoritarian leftists to accuse someone who they don't agree with. The term "anarchist" is used to dehumanise someone or devalue someone's political legacy. One such example is the case for Thakin Ba Tin (H.N. Goshal). Thakin Ba Tin was the only member of the politburo who voted against the Maoist guerrilla approach in the committee meeting just before the CPB started the civil war (1940s). Before that meeting, Thakin Ba Tin wrote a book while he was with the Communist Party of India called "**On the Present Political Situation in Burma and Our Task**" which basically calls for the orthodox Marxist approach of "mass strike". Thakin Ba Tin decided to defend his position of the orthodox Marxist approach of "mass strike" over the Maoist guerrilla approach in a meeting of the CPB's politburo. However, Thakin Than Tun's faction, which favoured the Maoist guerrillas, won the majority vote, and the communist party of Burma started the historic first and longest-lasting civil war against the social democratic government of post-colonial Burma. That debate or political struggle persisted within the politburo of the CPB until Thakin Ba Tin and his followers got murdered mercilessly in the forest during the 1960s (when the Burma Socialist Programme Party had seized the government position). While calling to kill Thakin Ba Tin, the leadership of CPB, it was reported that Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Zin accused

Thakin Ba Tin of being an anarchist. This is the perfect example of how these Maoist red fascists used the term anarchist as a slur against the leftists with whom they disagree. Also, this reveals how illiterate they are and how ignorant they are about the differences between the political tactics of orthodox Marxism and anarchism.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the historical development of having to witness the local Stalinist new-class military regime and international Maoist regimes, a few minority groups of progressive leftists in Burma looked for new alternatives. Some found their alternatives in orthodox Marxist tendencies such as Leninism and Trotskyism. Some described themselves as anarchists. Some leant towards the social democratic approach of gradual reforms.

The historical evidence on the anarchist movements during the early 2000s is too difficult to find. However, the anarchist movement in Burma has huge influence on its 21<sup>st</sup>-century atheism movement. (How Maoists and Stalinists appropriated Buddhism to be compatible with their ideologies will be discussed later in a separate article.) One of the founders of “Burmese Atheists”, Thiha JP, is known to be one of the earliest anarchists among the current anarchist stream. He describes himself as a “self-styled punk anarchist. Thiha JP is well known for his insightful writings on ancient Indian materialist philosophies and anarchism.

Just like in the west, the counter-culture punk movement is largely interconnected with anarchism in Myanmar. Even at present, the most popular anarchists in Burma are debatably a punk band called “Rebel Riots”. Rebel Riots is well known for its mutual aid projects and its progressive music lyrics. Till now, this dehumanising or degrading of people who disagree with them seems to be a thing. Rebel Riots, despite having a great portfolio of mutual aid projects and music activism, is still accused of being “NGO punk” by some online Stalinist leftists who have done nothing effective in the struggle against capitalism and the military junta.

## **Synthesis Anarchism or useful idiots of tankies**

Since there was no anarchist literature being translated into Burmese, the anarchism in Burma is pretty shallow. Most of the self-proclaimed anarchists have no idea about the revolutionary anarchist movements in history. Furthermore, the label fetishism of subscribing to “anarchists” tends to play a role for drug addicts, bohemians, and lumpenproletariat who like to do anything they want. Despite self-claiming themselves as anarchists for one to two decades, it turns out that they are still highly influenced by tankie perspectives. Most of them still believe in the Stalin and Maoist personality cults and are influenced by tankie personalities such as Polpot, Ho Chi Minh, and Fidel Castro. Despite announcing themselves as anarchists, they still actively participate in party politics, supporting or participating in both the Communist Party of Burma and centre-left social democratic parties such as the Democratic Party for a New Society. Such examples might include populist leftist figures like “Zin L” and some other self-described anarchists from his generation.

When a lot of these self-described anarchists are being approached by me, it turns out that the histories of the Kronstadt rebellions, the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine, the Peasant Rebellion against the Bolsheviks, and other radical left-wing movements against the Bolsheviks are totally foreign to them. When I wrote about these things in “Libertarian Marxism Myanmar”, these useful idiots of red fascism and Maoism accused the page of being right-libertarian propaganda.

Only a tiny fraction of anarchists in Burma who knew and read about Nestor Makhno and Max Stirner approached me for detailed discussions on these topics. As a result of our discussions, the anarchist politics in Burma have changed into a movement where the tankie can no longer order around the anarchists since the anarchists have become organised ideologically. Now, along with these actual anarchists, we’re planning to form an anarcho-syndicalism group where we could do proper mutual aid projects, community engagement, and campaigns to produce anarchist reading materials.

Personally, as someone who also works closely with western Trotskyist groups such as the International Socialist Alternative and the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, I generally have no problem working together with people of different praxis as long as they’re not bureaucratically authoritarian and hypocritical. I find myself happy to work with progressives from every ideological background as long as it’s not in a hierarchical, bureaucratic manner. However, the Maoists in Burma are hypocritical in every possible way. While denouncing the military dictatorship as evil, they find the Communist Party of China as some kind of saviour for them. While denouncing the Rohingya genocide for

their political comeback, they never publicly denounced the Communist Party of China for the Uyghurs genocide. In fact, they defended the cause of Uyghur genocide against the Communist Party of China.

In the past (early 2010s), most of the anarcho-tankies (useful idiots of red fascists) have done nothing effective when it comes to mutual aid movements, self-administration movements, syndicalist movements, and anti-censorship campaigns. Those activities are being led by a few anarchists who want to distance their movement from the Maoist (red fascist) movements.

## **When anarchists don't educate themselves, neoliberalism makes good use of their ignorance.**

Apart from that, most of these fractions are ill-informed about global politics despite having the privilege of going to the best private and public universities in Burma with their parents' sponsorship. Taking the western mainstream social democratic politics of Bernie and AOC as the radical left, these self-claiming anarchists adopted the litmus test politics. Most of them are totally ignorant of the existence of anarcho-syndicalist groups such as the IWA, the IWW, and so on. As a result, they're highly influenced by identity politics, which are rooted within the liberal white guilt and virtue signalling politics of western privileged liberals. Apparently, with their ignorance of classical literature regarding left-wing politics and their guilt conscience for their identity as Buddhists or Burmese in a Buddhist or Burmese majority country, they ended up endorsing the right-wing nationalist movement from the ethnic and religious minorities. For example, Maung Zarni, a popular academic from the western world even accused Kirt Mausert of pointing out ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army ) as a terrorist group as an someone who is working to increase islamophobia in Burma. Apparently, ARSA had killed a lot of progressive and moderate Rohingya activists in refuge camps by today. That explains the Burmese/Buddhist saviour complex of neoliberal activist who accuse everyone as Islamophobic who tend to have different opinion from him when it comes to the issues with Muslim community. Such kind of mentality is something that can be found with most guilty Burmese/Bamar Buddhists who called themselves progressives. Apart from these self-hating Burmese neoliberals, there is one tendency which is based on saviour complex.

Here, Maung Zarni with his Burmese/Buddhist saviour complexity and Kirt Mausert with White saviour complexity, both tend to have one similarity between them even though they've personal clashes over ARSA issues. They both don't hesitate to denounce all the Burmese working class as monolithic racists when it comes to Rohingya issue. They both failed to acknowledge the diversity of thoughts within Burmese Buddhist communities and Burmese Muslim communities when it comes to Rohingya issues. They didn't consider the differences between the progressive elements, the conservative elements and the neutral elements (who are too poor to inform themselves about these issues). That seems to be anti-Bamar/Burmese kind of racism to me, writing as an ex-Muslim/ex-Buddhist mixed religion/race individual.

One of the most influential leaders of the contemporary Communist Party of Burma, comrade Kyin Maung, has a different view about the question of ethnic nationalism as an old or orthodox left. In his articles, comrade Kyin Maung correctly pointed out how nationalist ideology contrasted with traditional class politics. Thus, comrade Kyin Maung, despite being a Maoist, correctly pointed out that the solidarity of the working-class people is needed despite having different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This analysis reminds me of what Professor Adolph Reeds said when the Black Lives Matter movement was adopted by neoliberal anti-racism due to the leftists' failure to direct it to the solidarity movements with class struggle.

Another example of such reactionary politics could be a self-described tankie or anarchist called "Kyi T," who raised his voice in support of the Taliban when the working class and progressive women from Afghanistan were fighting to liberate themselves from the Taliban and their Islamism. Such kinds of politics are common among Maoists, Stalinists, and tankies who were naive enough to think of Islamism as anti-imperialism, not with anarchists. Nonetheless, such political views have been debunked countless times by organic Muslims, Marxists, and progressives both inside and outside the Middle East. Even the Marxists and anarchists from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh will be disgusted by such anti-imperialism by idiots. Even the Muslim religious

reformers in Burma said publicly that the Taliban had nothing to do with their progressive version of Islam. Yet, this Maoist-influenced drug dealer activist who came from Muslim background, “KYI Thit,” who claimed himself as an anarchist, publicly announced his support for the Taliban. This kind of Muslim pseudo-leftists who only hostile towards the Buddhist community but supporting the Muslim fundamentalist elements are growing gradually to outnumber the actual left-wing progressive Muslim comrades who dare to challenge the fundamentalist elements within Muslim community and racist elements from Buddhist community in Burma.

## **Discriminations against anarchists**

Since the anarchists are no longer being controlled by the tankies and have started to question the war crimes of both Stalin and Leon Trotsky, the authoritarian left in Burma has lost patience with the anarchists. We are expecting to witness a lot of discrimination against the anarchists who are actively involved with left-wing militia groups such as the PLA and so on.

## **When social democrats and tankies unite**

Superficially, it would be hard to digest the fact that social democrats and tankies sometimes unite against the libertarian far-left organisations. Such an example is apparent in Burma. However, according to Hal Draper’s two souls of socialism and the socialism from below, it’s apparent that both Stalinism and reformist social democracy are similar when it comes to their socialism from above politics.

## **The first publication by Burmese anarchists**

Despite having a lot of challenges, anarchists in Burma are trying to setup proper federations where they could distance themselves from the elitist vanguard’s authoritarian tendencies. “Libertarian Marxism Myanmar” page serves its role as the frontline theoretical fortress against the authoritarian red fascism. The “Autonomists” telegram channel, where most anarchists share their localised political texts, has been created recently.

A few translated texts are being published by our anarchist comrades via a telegram channel named “The Autonomist”. The following are the translated contents:

- Democratic confederalism by Abdullah Ocalan
- Debbie Bookchin’s How My Father’s Ideas Helped the Kurds Create a New Democracy
- Some texts by David Graeber
- Some texts by Murray Bookchin
- Some articles from libcom.org
  - The Politics of Revolution: Learning from Autonomist Marxism by Gary Kinsman
  - Give up activism.
  - Building Urban Autonomy: The Construction of a Communal Form of Life in Mexico City’s Peripheries by Sam Law

## Personal Projects

Personally, I'm motivated to compile or write about some books on "Left-wing uprisings against the Bolsheviks," which include topics such as

- The struggle of the Kronstadt rebellion against the Bolsheviks
- The Struggle of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine
- Pitchfork uprising
- Tambov Rebellion

Also, as a libertarian communist who found a lot of aspirations in a Chinese Trotskyist leader Chen Duxiu and an Iranian Marxist leader Mansoor Hekmat, I'm also working hard to write about them in Burmese too.

## Summary

Summing up, the anarchism in Burma used to be so shallow and got influenced by some western self-claiming rich anarchist academics with white saviour complexes. That's why it was so reactionary and inefficient when it came to digesting the political values that are anti-authoritarian. Back then, some anarchists who managed to break their ties with the red fascists also ended up as individualist anarchists due to the lack of a proper historical understanding of anarchism.

The 2020s are the years where our generation of anarchists will have to try our best to produce learning materials for the historical understanding of anarchism and also further developments of contemporary anarchism. With my unusual confrontation against the left-wing authoritarian tendencies with this "Libertarian Marxism Myanmar" Facebook page, it was indeed a great thing that the properly educated anarchists in Burma got united despite belonging to different tendencies of anarchism. With our united struggle to produce more anarchist literature and organise mutual aid communities, it's inevitable that there will be stronger anarchist tendencies in Burma for the next generation.

## Links for Further Readings

H.N. Goshal — On the Present Political Situation in Burma and Our Task

- <[drive.google.com/file/d/1p4YER\\_Wl0WyKvOu6m2VEKBD616jO76-o/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p4YER_Wl0WyKvOu6m2VEKBD616jO76-o/view)>

## Disclaimer

In order to avoid personal conflicts, I only used the initials of names when I talked about unpopular Burmese (citizen) figures that I used as references.

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