

# **Minn Latt Yekhaun**

**A pioneer of libertarian communism in Burma**

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Minn Latt Yekhaun, a.k.a. Min Latt Ye Khaung was a Burmese linguist who was one of the first three Burmese students to study in Prague during the 1950s. He was an influential activist and student leader during 1947–48.

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In 1947, a delegation from the Communist Party of Burma was requested to attend the 1947 International Student Union (ISU) conference in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Minn Latt Yekhaun, being a talented youth, was excited to attend the conference but was not selected as the party representative. A different prominent party member was selected by the Communist Party of Burma's leadership to represent the party at the congress. Minn Latt Yekhaun left on his own for the congress and attended as an independent representative for Burma. He remained in Czechoslovakia to continue his academic career after the conference because Burma's civil war has already begun. While concentrating on language studies, he was able to obtain both his master's and doctorate degrees.

The necessity for a vernacular Burmese movement, which is thought to have been inspired by the literary revolution and vernacular Chinese movement headed by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, is the core focus of his thesis. Similar to the vernacular Chinese movement, his thesis "Modernisation of Burmese" sparked a number of disagreements between conservatives and progressives. Minn Latt started instructing Burmese language at the Prague Language School in 1955. He also started working as a researcher at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science in Prague and a lecturer at Charles University's Faculty of Philosophy.

Minn Latt Yekhaun made the decision to travel to the Communist Party of Burma branch in China in 1963. At the time, the Communist Party of Burma can be considered as a mere proxy party of China Communist Party. He was personally welcomed at the airport by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, because of his well-known advocacy for the vernacular Burmese movement and his academic credentials (MoeMaKa Burmese News & Media, 2017).

## **Anti-authoritarian Activism**

When the leader of the Burma Socialist Program Party and autocratic military dictator of Burma, General Ne Win, visited Czechoslovakia in 1966, he addressed a letter to General Ne Win. He asked that General Ne Win reveal the truth about Burma to the world in the letter (The Irrawaddy Magazine, 2019).

## **Unique leftist: Democratic Confederalism before Rojava**

The phrase "democratic confederalism" was first used by Abdullah Ocalan, the head of the Kurdistan Workers Party. Democratic confederalism has gained popularity among libertarian socialists and libertarian communists because it is a system of democratic self-organization with the characteristics of a confederation based on the principles of autonomy, direct democracy, political ecology, feminism, multiculturalism, self-defense, self-governance, and elements of a cooperative economy.

However, Minn Latt Yekhaun put up a similar notion in one of his articles in the 1970s. He gave less attention to feminism and the environment, though. He argued that the ethnic states vying for self-rule should establish their own little states. The majority of those who were able to read it, according to Minn Latt Yekhaun, claimed that Minn Latt Yekhaun demanded that the Burmese military and the Burma Socialist Programme Party, which claimed to represent the majority ethnic group, the Bamar ethnic group, give up on the fictitious hope of a fake union where the central power of bureaucracy ruled. According to the articles about him, Minn Latt Yekhaun demanded that the Union of Burma be completely dissolved.

All of the ethnic states would secede from the Union of Burma and establish their own sovereign republics under Minn Latt Yekhaun's proposed confederation. Then he advised creating a legitimate confederation into which the ethnic states may enter with due consent. Since the Irrawaddy and the Thanlwin, two broad, long rivers, may be used to represent the entirety of Burma's geography, he gave this idea the name "Irre-Lwin."

Thakin Soe, the political leader of Red Flag Communist Party of Burma, a radical and intellectually more talented split from the Communist Party of Burma, also had similar idea (Win, 2010). Red Flag Communist Party of Burma was in the favour of separatism for several ethnic states and openly advocated for their self-determinism during the Burma's civil war era. However, Communist Party of Burma insisted that more communist parties shouldn't be formed anymore since they exist. Meanwhile, Red Flag Communist Party of Burma was in favour of several new communist parties in the ethnic states and ethnic people. However, Thakin Soe failed to express detailed analysis as precise as Minn Latt Yekhaun. That can be justified since Thakin Soe was an organic intellectual and revolutionary while Minn Latt Yekhaun was a trained academic and activist.

## Communist Party of Burma

A new libertarian idea was apparently not welcomed by the Communist Party of Burma, a group that was founded under the influence of Stalinism and later adopted Maoism, both of which are based on authoritarianism, totalitarianism, state capitalism, the bureaucratic new class, democratic centralism, personality cults, and nationalism.

By linking national liberation movements with bourgeois ideologies, the Communist Party of Burma adopted the Stalinist narrative when it comes to the national question. In opposition to the federalism of self-determination, the Communist Party of Burma supported democratic centralism. Regarding the national question, Minn Latt Yekhaun adopted a similar stance to Lenin. The nationalist stance taken by Minn Latt Yekhaun, however, is somewhat comparable to the tinyism of anarchist movements in the twenty-first century. According to an article from April 2010, Volume One, Number Four edition of Ayaytawpon journal, the party's official journal of CPB which was written by comrade Ba Win, Minn Latt Yekhaun wanted to be Burma's Lenin. According to the article, Minn Latt Yekhaun claimed that he was different from other CPB members since he was not indoctrinated by either Moscow or Peking. Besides, he proudly said that he was advancing Leninism and managed to create his own ideology based on his own unique experience from the East Europe.

Minn Latt Yekhaun was a migrant in China when he was developing the Irra-Lwin idea. He aggressively championed the democratic confederalism idea of Irra-Lwin during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He resolved to defend democracy within the Chinese Communist Party because he had a lifelong allergy to the regressive, authoritarian bureaucratic class. He published pamphlets and essays criticising Lin Biao, influential member of "bureaucratic new-class gang of four". Minn Latt Yekhaun expanded his criticism of the CPB, the party he is a member of, in addition to the CPC, to further his attacks on the bureaucratic new class. Ba Thein Tin, the chairman of the Burmese Communist Party, was criticised in pieces written and disseminated by Minn Latt Yekhaun. Additionally, he published booklets that critiqued the Communist Party of Burma's political policies.

His advocacy ultimately compelled the CPB to summon him to Burma, where the party is based. Minn Latt Yekhaun visited to the party's headquarter after the cultural revolution. There, Minn Latt Yekhaun made his official Irra-Lwin idea proposal to Ba Thein Tin, the party's chairman. Ba Thein Tin declined, though. Even more, Minn Latt Yekhaun offered to transfer ownership of the idea to Ba Thein Tin and asked permission to promote it through the party's propaganda channels.

Ba Thein Tin, however, steadfastly refused to concede and instead launched a derogatory tirade on Minn Latt Yekhaun. The discussion between a dissident communist and the red fascist chairman has turned into a verbal duel, with both sides trading derogatory remarks. Minn Latt Yekhaun equated chairman Ba Thein Tin as Liu Shaoqi, Karl Kautsky, Nikita Khrushchev line of revisionism. Minn Latt Yekhaun was consequently forcibly relocated to a location where none of the party members spoke Chinese, Burmese, Kachin, Shan or English. Because Minn Latt Yekhaun is unable to speak ethnic languages and dialects of the region, he became a prophet unarmed. He made an effort to flee the area where CPB had confined him against his will. In 1976–1977, he became friends with seven war prisoners who had previously served in the Burmese army and made an attempt to flee. Unfortunately, it was reported that the escaping war prisoners had to murder three CPB soldiers and a daughter of the police station officer during their attempt to escape. So, the local CPB's leadership decided to capture them at all cost. Being an activist and intellectual with poor physical condition, Minn Latt Yekhaun is therefore more at risk during his attempt to flee compared to the other ones. Eventually, CPB was able to recapture every escapee dead except Minn Latt Yekhaun.

The respective local CPB managed to capture Minn Latt Yekhaun alive. However, Minn Latt Yekhaun was shot to death by his own party, the Communist Party of Burma, because of the predicament in which he found himself. According to Mg Mg Soe, an ex-communist from CPB, Minn Latt Yekhaun will only be sentenced to jail for having a different political insight from the party leadership if he was not involved in the escape attempt that killed three CPB soldiers and a daughter of the police station officer. Mg Mg Soe tried to justify the murder by dragging the escape attempt in order to defend CPB. However, his justification itself literally revealed a fact that CPB still sentenced political dissents into jail even after the cultural revolution. Here, it's important to note that CPB killed several political dissents of its own members for having different opinions from the previous leadership during the cultural revolution. It's reported by the survivors that all the political dissents were murdered by long torture for several weeks before they finally died. However, Minn Latt Yekhaun was killed without the acknowledgement of the party's headquarter according to Than Soe Naing, a political dissent who was expelled from CPB when CPB decided to dissolve in 1989-1990s.

Unfortunately, the Communist Party of Burma purposefully destroyed the books in which he expressed these ideas. He authored several essays in which he criticised the Gang of Four and the CPB. Those articles also were buried by the Communist Party of Burma as well. A few former communist party members claimed to have read some of the papers and chose to spread what they had comprehended from his articles. So, it's extremely difficult for the next generations to quote properly to reflect his original writings.

Summing up, it can be concluded that Minn Latt Yekhaun is one of the pioneers of libertarian communism in Burma, where the majority of leftists are either influenced by Maoism or social democracy, given his opposition to the so-called democratic centralism and bureaucracy of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism as well as the authoritarian governments.

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