

Statement by the British Government on its policy in Burma (May 1945)

Caption: In May 1945, the Secretary of State for India and Burma, Leo Amery, outlines the United Kingdom's policy in Burma. Given the worrying situation in the country, the British Government has decided that it will not yet grant self-government to Burma but will introduce initiatives to restore political, economic and military order.

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BURMA
Statement of Policy
by His Majesty's Government

*Presented by the Secretary of State for Burma to Parliament
by Command of His Majesty
May 1945*

LONDON
HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
TWO PENCE NET

Cmd. 6635

PART II

STATEMENT OF POLICY

The considered policy of His Majesty's Government of promoting full self-government in Burma has frequently been declared. It is and has consistently been our aim to assist her political development till she can sustain the responsibilities of complete self-government within the British Commonwealth and consequently attain a status equal to that of the Dominions and of this country.

2. Inevitably Burma's progress towards full self-government has been interrupted and set back by the Japanese invasion and the long interval of enemy occupation and active warfare in her territories, during which she has suffered grave damage not only in the form of material destruction but in a shattering of the foundations of her economic and social life. It is, of course, upon these foundations that a political structure rests, and until the foundations are once again firm the political institutions which were in operation before the Japanese invasion cannot be restored.

For example, the removals and dispersal of the population and general upheaval of life during enemy occupation will necessitate a complete revision of the electoral rolls and possibly the determination of a new franchise before steps can be taken for a General Election; nor could an election be held throughout Burma until adequate restoration of communications has been achieved. There is a most formidable task to be faced in the re-establishment of stable conditions, the restoration of buildings, communications and public utilities and in the rehabilitation of agriculture and the other essential industries which are the life-blood of the country. Till this is done, conditions are lacking in which the requirements of a democratic system of government can be met; and these essential tasks will fall to the civil Government as soon as operational requirements permit the transfer of the administration to it from the military authorities; they will be beyond the financial resources of Burma in her present ravaged condition, and His Majesty's Government will have to come to her aid, but they will require the energetic co-operation of all sections of the Burmese people, and the more completely this can be given the sooner will it be possible for Burma to resume her interrupted progress in constitutional development.

3. Until these foundations are restored sufficiently to enable the first essential political process to be undertaken, that is for a General Election to be held, it is not possible to re-establish a Burmese Government as it existed in 1941. It is accordingly necessary, so long as the government of the country cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the 1935 Act, that recourse should continue to be had to the provisions of Section 139, under which the administration is carried on by the Governor in direct responsibility to His Majesty's Government. As the proclamation, issued in 1942, exhausts its validity in December next, it is proposed to make it permissible to prolong its validity for three years more, that is till 9th December, 1948. Parliament is asked to approve this extension for a period of three years only, in the hope that it will be possible by then, if not before, to establish conditions in which a General Election can be held and a Government established under the normal constitutional methods. But though this initial period of controlled government is necessary, His Majesty's Government are anxious that all the functions of government should not in fact be concentrated in the Governor, but that he should be provided with definite means of obtaining Burmese assistance and advice in the discharge of them and have power to associate with himself representatives of Burmese opinion

in executive and legislative capacities. It is proposed, therefore, to give the power to introduce by Orders in Council modifications to enable the system of administration authorised by Section 139 as it now stands to be liberalised. It is contemplated that early opportunity will be taken under these proposed powers to establish an Executive Council which, though it might at the outset be a small and mainly official body, could be expanded as opportunity offers by the inclusion in it of non-official Burmese. Such a Council would, pending the revival of normal constitutional methods, give Burmans a share in the administrative task of restoring the economy of their country, subject to the retention of the Governor's powers of supervision and control. Such power to act by Order in Council might also be used at an appropriate stage, if recommended by the Governor and his Executive Council, to establish as an interim body a small Legislative Council. The composition and powers of these bodies and the relations between them would be prescribed by Orders in Council after submission to Parliament.

4. The immediate purpose of such new and experimental institutions, brought in by Order in Council, would be to relax the regime which Section 139 prescribes, but they would themselves necessarily lapse when the time comes for the operation of that Section to be terminated. It is the intention of His Majesty's Government that when conditions are sufficiently restored to make it possible to hold an election and terminate the operation of Section 139, the normal provisions of the Act (unless amended by the incorporation of temporary provisions which had been found to commend themselves to Burmans) will re-enter into force. A General Election could then be held, and a Legislature formed with the same degree of authority over the same range of matters as it enjoyed before the Japanese invasion.

5. Government in accordance with the provisions of the Act of 1935 having thus been restored, as soon as the conditions in the country permit, a second phase in constitutional development will begin, during which the ground will be prepared for the attainment of full self-government. At the same time the necessary measures for the restoration of Burma's economy beyond the point which must be attained before even the first General Election can be held, would continue and her financial position would progressively develop towards a standard of self-sufficiency.

6. The ultimate objective of His Majesty's Government will be that representatives of the Burmese people, after reaching a sufficient measure of agreement between the various parties and sections, should draw up a Constitution of a type which they themselves consider most suitable for Burma, taking into account not only the British but the other various types of constitution in democratically governed countries. What the machinery for this should be will be a matter for discussion and agreement with representative Burmans. A simultaneous process would be discussion of the content of the agreements to be made with His Majesty's Government on matters on which the latter would have continuing obligations after the establishment of full self-government in Burma.

7. When once the duly appointed representatives of the Burmese people have agreed, in the light of preparatory study of the subject, on the type of constitution most suitable for Burma, and it is clear that the proposed constitution has a sufficient measure of support in Burma to justify endorsement by Parliament, His Majesty's Government will enter into discussions with representatives of Burma with a view to satisfactory agreements being made to enable them to fulfil their continuing obligations and to safeguard any out-

standing financial advances made by His Majesty's Government, so that, when the necessary administrative organisation is in existence, and the other arrangements have been completed, full self-government within the British Commonwealth can thereupon be established in Burma proper. The administration of the Scheduled Areas, that is the Shan States and the tribal areas in the mountainous fringes of the country, inhabited by peoples differing in language, social customs and degree of political development from the Burmans inhabiting the central areas, would for the time being be subject to a special regime under the Governor until such time as their inhabitants signify their desire for some suitable form of amalgamation of their territories with Burma proper.