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Burma: ‘Nationalism is not rationalism’

(10:23 AEDT, 10 June 2009)

The burial of India’s last king in Myanmar in 1862, and of Myanmar’s last king in India in 1916, opened the way for a swap of earthly remains that would be highly symbolic and satisfying for nationalists on both sides. It could also appeal to Myanmar’s military regime, which was always keen to shore up its populist credentials.

British journalist Dennis Bloodworth once wrote that ‘nationalism is not rationalism’.¹ This aphorism came to mind when I was in Burma recently and visited the mausoleum of the last Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah II.

Also known as Zafar (the pen-name he used when writing poetry), the emperor was exiled to Rangoon in 1858 for his small part in the uprising that became known to the British as the Great Mutiny and to Indians as the First War of Independence. He died in Rangoon in 1862, aged 87, and was buried in an unmarked grave. Early last century, a shrine was built close to his presumed burial place. It is now a modest mosque and mausoleum housing the emperor’s remains, which were accidentally discovered close to the site in 1991.

¹ Dennis Bloodworth, *An Eye for the Dragon: Southeast Asia Observed: 1954–1970* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), p.31.

The mausoleum is a popular place of pilgrimage for Burma's Muslim community, which considers Zafar a Sufi saint. He is also honoured by many Hindus, who recognise his efforts to reconcile religious differences in India, both before and during the 1857 uprising (his mother was a Hindu). And he still has some resonance in political circles. As William Dalrymple (author of *The Last Mughal*) has written: '[D]ignitaries from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh now compete to shower the grave with presents.'²

In India, too, Zafar remains 'the focus of much nostalgic sympathy'. Interest in the late emperor peaked in 2007—the 150th anniversary of the uprising. However, there are still intermittent calls by nationalists, Muslims and Zafar's descendants for the return of his remains to India.³ There is no sign of this happening just yet, but it does raise the intriguing possibility of a swap. For India has something it can offer Burma in return.

In 1885, after the fall of Mandalay, the British Government exiled the young Burmese king Thibaw Min to India. He died there in 1916, aged 58, and was buried in a mausoleum in the grounds of his house at Ratnagiri, near Bombay. Thibaw's queen, Supayalat, was permitted to return to Burma in 1919. When she died in 1925, she was buried at the foot of the revered Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. The colonial authorities feared the king's remains might become a focus for anti-British sentiment in Burma, so they were left in India.

Thibaw has not been treated kindly by historians. He is usually portrayed either as a tyrant or as a weakling manipulated by his wife. Certainly, his reputation does not stand comparison with Burma's three most prominent warrior kings, Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya, who are held up as national heroes by the current regime. Their 10-metre-high statues tower over the main parade ground in the new capital of Naypyidaw.⁴ Even so, Thibaw was the last king of Burma and the chief patron of the Buddhist monastic order. In both political and religious terms, the return of his remains from India would be symbolically important.

2 Geoffrey Moorhouse, 'Zafar the Ditherer', *The Guardian*, [London], 11 November 2006, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/nov/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview6.

3 Dean Nelson, 'Last Mughal Emperor's Descendants to Be Traced', *The Telegraph*, [London], 6 April 2009, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/5114995/The-Last-Mughals-descendants-to-be-traced.html?hc_location=ufi.

4 Bertil Lintner, 'Burma's Warrior Kings and the Generation of 8.8.88', *Global Asia*, Vol.2, No.2 (Fall 2007), globalasia.org/articles/issue3/iss3_10.html [site discontinued].

Burma's military rulers are ardent nationalists and look back to the time when Burma was an independent monarchy. In state propaganda, precolonial Burma is described as a political, economic and cultural force in the region—denied its true greatness only by the three-stage British conquest of the country between 1824 and 1885. The 60 or so years Burma spent under colonial rule are characterised as a period of unrelieved oppression during which the British imperialists shamelessly exploited Burma's rich natural resources. The king's exile to India is cited by the regime as the beginning of modern Burma's suffering.

More to the point, perhaps, both leaders of the military council that has ruled Burma since 1988 have displayed monarchical pretensions. When Senior General Saw Maung suffered a 'nervous breakdown' in late 1991, he startled diplomats at a golf tournament by screaming: 'I am the great king Kyansittha.' In early 1992, he was quietly replaced with Senior General Than Shwe. Despite his humble origins, Than Shwe, too, has begun to see himself as a kingly figure, dedicated to founding a new Burmese dynasty based on military strength.⁵ In some translations, Naypyidaw means 'abode of kings'.

Than Shwe is a former psychological warfare officer and, as such, is well aware of the power of popular symbols. He has already presided over a series of high-profile projects designed to shore up the regime's credentials. These have included an officially sponsored tour of Burma of the Buddha's tooth relic (on loan from China) and the construction of a near-exact replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Naypyidaw. The return of Thibaw's remains to Burma for ceremonial reburial, perhaps in the new capital, would enhance the status of both the regime and Than Shwe himself.

Mix together the regime's extreme nationalism, its exploitation of Burmese history for propaganda purposes, its need for popular legitimacy and Than Shwe's royal ambitions and the result is a potent combination. In these circumstances, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the Burmese Government will one day suggest to its Indian counterpart that, in return for Shah Bahadur Zafar's remains, Burma's last king be permitted to come home. To nationalists on both sides of the border, this might seem like a good idea.

5 Richard Ehrlich and Shawn W. Crispin, 'The Man Behind the Myanmar Madness', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 28 September 2007, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/II28Ae02.html [page discontinued].

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.