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The Road to Naypyitaw: Making Sense of the Myanmar Government's Decision to Move its Capital

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The Road to Naypyitaw: Making Sense of the Myanmar Government's Decision to Move its Capital

Maung Aung Myoe

Many people are curious about the rationale behind the Myanmar government's decision to move its capital from Yangon to a new location in central Myanmar, now known as Naypyitaw. It was first announced at a press conference held on 7 November 2005 by Brigadier General Kyaw San, the Minister for Information, that government departments would move to the new "administrative capital". In fact, the order to move had been issued to all government departments a day earlier. In the official explanation, the relocation of government departments to a new location near Pyinmana, about 240 miles north of Yangon, was "to ensure more effective administration of nation-building activities." The minister further explained: "With the expansion of the government's national development activities to border regions and remote villages, it was necessary to move the government's administration to a location which is more centrally located and placed strategically on major transportation networks."¹

Initially, the government did not disclose the name of the new administrative capital and insisted that Yangon remained the national capital. Meanwhile, in accordance with one of 104 basic principles laid down at the on-going National Convention, Yangon would continue to be the capital of Myanmar. However, in less than a month, at another press conference held on 3 December 2005, Major General Khin Aung Myint, Director of Public Relations of the Tatmadaw [Armed Forces], confirmed that a new military regional command named "Naypyitaw Command" had been established at the new administrative capital.² Only then did people realize that the new administrative capital was named "Naypyitaw". On the same occasion, the government press committee told the media that the capital of the nation would continue to be in accordance with the new Constitution. Three months later, on 27 February 2006, the Myanmar government issued Order No. (3/2006) that appointed Colonel Thein Nyunt, Minister for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs,

¹ *Myanmar Times* (English), Vol. 15, No. 292 (14 November 2005)

² *Khit Myanmar*, Vol. 3, No.12 (16 December 2005); *Yangon Times*, Vol. 1, No. 10 (8 December 2005)

concurrently as the Mayor of Naypyitaw.³ Naypyitaw was territorially organized upon three townships under Pyinmana District: Pyinmana, Lewe, and Alar. Alar Airport, which had been out of service for decades, was renovated and upgraded to become Naypyitaw Airport. Then on 12 July 2006, for the first time, General Thura Shwe Mann stated that "Naypyitaw will become the nation's capital in accordance with the new Constitution to be adopted."⁴ Now it became clear that Naypyitaw would be the future capital of Myanmar; it was no longer merely the administrative capital. Why Naypyitaw? Since Naypyitaw was the term used in pre-colonial Myanmar to denote the royal capital or the palace site, it became clear that the government wanted its new capital to be the "Royal Capital".

Map of Myanmar Showing the Location of Naypyitaw



³ *Myanmar Gazette*, No. 10, 10 March 2006, Vol. 59, p. 1

⁴ *Myanma Alin* (13 July 2006)

WHY DID THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT DECIDE TO MOVE ITS CAPITAL? THERE ARE SIX POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS.

(1) Information Security

The government, especially the Ministry of Defence, is aware of serious breaches of security and leaking of information from various government departments. The military is particularly concerned with the leak of military secrets or confidential information. That partly explains why the Tatmadaw renamed its intelligence apparatus “Military Affairs Security”. Being in Yangon, in the view of the Tatmadaw, the military establishment is practically under the surveillance of “unfriendly forces”, who could be in collaboration with “foreign agents”. The Tatmadaw even suspected that some diplomatic missions in Myanmar might be bugging its communication links. Since employees of the ministries, especially the Ministry of Defence, are living among the population in wards, they perceive a huge problem of leaking state secrets and confidential information. Relocating government staff to a remote and isolated location or into a cantonment could address this problem. Satellite communication also poses another problem for information security since all hand-phone conversations could be intercepted and eavesdropped upon. At the present, Myanmar is using the Thai Shin Satellite for its wireless communication; and this provides ample opportunity for the Thai intelligence community to eavesdrop at the gateway. Although the government could easily install mobile communication facilities at Naypyitaw, it is not doing so for the sake of information security. Only fiber-optic cable lines are allowed to be used for communication.

Concern for information security was also apparent in the way the military government announced its decision to move its administrative capital. Although the news about moving the Ministry of Defence [War Office], or a portion of it as an alternative command, had been floating around in the country for about three to four years, nobody actually thought that the capital would be moved.⁵ Until the last moment, just before the announcement to move the offices, ministries had only vaguely known about it. Many thought that only liaison teams for the Ministry of Defence from various ministries would go there on a rotation basis. When it was announced, most of the people were caught by surprise. Some ASEAN countries openly

⁵ In fact, there was a rumor about the separation of command between upper and lower Myanmar and the possible appointment of General Thura Shwe Mann as the army commander in Upper Myanmar.

expressed their disappointment with the Myanmar government's decision for not consulting with them; from the point of view of the present Myanmar leadership, it was a domestic affair and consultation with any other country was not necessary. Now, in Naypyitaw, the military leadership enjoys information security.

(2) Military-Strategic Factor

The decision could be motivated by a worst case scenario generated by the siege mentality among the senior Tatmadaw leadership. The same rationale lay behind the Tatmadaw's decision in early 2002 to move the Western Command HQ from Sittwe, a city on the Rakhine coast, to Ann, an inward location. Yangon is too close to the coastline and is certainly vulnerable to amphibious warfare. Although the Tatmadaw leadership realizes that a U.S.-led invasion of Myanmar is rather remote in terms of likelihood, considering the fact that the U.S. is occupied with the Middle East problem and its armed forces are bogged down in both Afghanistan and Iraqi theatres, in addition to other more pressing situations such as North Korea and Iran, it never underestimates this possibility nor gambles on the fate of the nation. The military leadership has not forgotten that the U.S Navy [an aircraft carrier and four warships] violated Myanmar territorial waters in September 1988 during the political chaos in Myanmar. The military government is more concerned with a proxy war supported by the U.S.. Thus the military government would not take anything lightly that could compromise or endanger national security, which is always conflated with state security and regime security in Myanmar security perspectives.

By looking at the articles in various publications by the Tatmadaw, one can glean that the military leadership understands the modern war-fighting method of effect-based operations and airpower in parallel attacks or inside-out attacks; but what it wants is more time to prepare for resistance. In the age of asymmetric warfare, also known as 4th Generation War (4GW), for the military leadership, the fundamental principle is what Mao Zedong called "you fight your kind of war and I will fight mine [你打你的，我打我的 -- *ni da ni de, wo da wo de*]." Senior military commanders are also familiar with the concept of "Unrestricted Warfare" put forward by the People's Liberation Army of China. By moving the seat of the government and military high command to about 240 miles north of the coast, the military could buy more time for its defence against both air and ground attacks; thus it could provide

a defense-in-depth. From the Tatmadaw's point of view, it is the trading of space for time. Being located in the vicinity of mountains and jungles in a spot that sits on major communication links between upper and lower Myanmar, the Tatmadaw could mount considerable resistance against an invasion force using a military strategy of protracted people's guerrilla warfare of attrition. The Tatmadaw's training regime continues to emphasize principles of guerrilla warfare, such as "if the enemy advances, we withdraw; if the enemy rests, we harass; if the enemy tires, we attack; and if the enemy withdraws, we pursue" [敵進我退, 敵駐我擾, 敵疲我打, 敵退我追] -- *Di jin wo tui; Di jiu wo rao; Di pi wo da; Di tui wo jui*. In this context, the surrounding areas of Naypyitaw could be considered as the heartland or base area where enemy should be "lured deep for annihilation". The Inchon landing of 1950 in Korea appears to offer military lessons for the Tatmadaw; an amphibious landing on the west coast of Myanmar [Rakhine State] and a land based invasion from the east [Kayah State] will not only cut off Yangon from the Upper Myanmar but also make it an encircled target for attacks from the south. The new location will give the military high command an easy access to heavily forested mountainous areas in the north bordering China or India; this is vital for the protracted guerrilla warfare. A major drawback of the new location of the military high command is that it has become a solely military target with almost no likelihood of collateral damage.



(3) Gaining a Sense of Control

The location of Naypyitaw is very close to the intersection of major highways linking India to Thailand and China to Bangladesh. Besides, it commands the major road links between Upper and Lower Myanmar, on both sides of the Bago mountain range, and it controls both the Ayerwaddy and Sittaung rivers; therefore, it is at the tip of the chokepoint. The centrality of the location also serves the purpose of radiating state authority into the periphery, particularly into the areas populated by non-Bamar ethnic nationalities. As the new capital is physically closer to the Kachin, Kayah, Shan, and Kayin states, it could become psychologically closer to these nationalities. In the official explanation, the new location "is centrally located and has quick access to all parts of the country."⁶ Moreover, it is much better and more cost-effective to build a new city rather than renovate the old city of Yangon, if there is proper urban planning. Yangon city is plagued with traffic congestion and drainage problems. After all, capital cities nowadays are not necessarily on the sea coast.⁷

(4) Decolonization

In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government decided to change the English names of the country and capital from *Burma* to *Myanmar* and *Rangoon* to *Yangon*; restoring the original names or their pronunciation in the Myanmar language. Further, *Bassein* became *Patheingyi* and *Tavoy* became *Dawei*. *Arakan State* and *Irrawaddy Division* are now written as *Rakhine State* and *Ayeyarwady Division* while the *Salween River* has become known as the *Thanlwin River*. *Maymyo* [named after Colonel May] was renamed *Pyin Oo Lwin*. Moreover, names of streets, blocks, avenues and islands named after British colonial authorities, English names or the names of those considered as traitors who collaborated with the British were replaced by the names of prominent figures in Myanmar history or in the anti-colonial struggle. In this process, nearly 200 places were renamed. Thus, *Windsor Road* became *Shin Saw Pu Road*, *Dufferin Road* became *Sandaku Road*, *Maung Htaw Lay Street* became *Bo Sun Pat Street* and *Maung Khine Street* became *Bo Ywe Street*. In the same light, as Rangoon [Yangon] was made the capital of Colonial Burma by the British after the occupation of Mandalay and the deposition of the last Myanmar King, it

⁶ "Seeing Stars over Myanmar's Capital shift, *The Straits Times* (12 November 2005), p. 26.

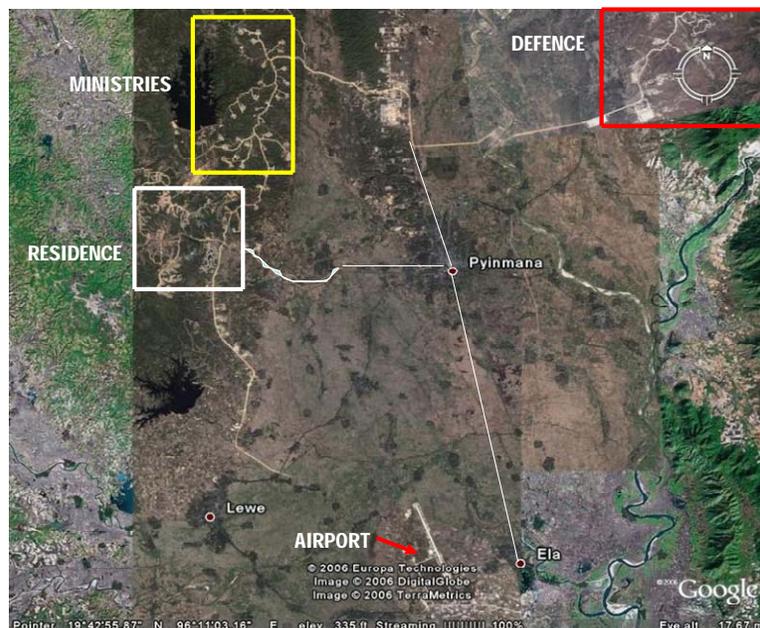
⁷ Canberra (Australia), Islamabad (Pakistan), New Delhi (India), and Beijing (China) are all inland.

could be considered a symbol of humiliation for the Myanmar people. Perhaps, in the view of the present leadership, the capital of Myanmar should not be a symbol of humiliation. Therefore, in the process of decolonization, a new capital should be established.

(5) Isolating Central Administration from the Larger Population Centre

In the 1988 uprising civil servants, including some troops, particularly from the navy and air force, were involved in anti-government demonstrations, and in the view of the present leadership this was mostly due to their residence in the wards, rather than the cantonment or in government quarters. This situation resulted in the government machinery being completely paralyzed during the 1988 uprising. Therefore, in this context, keeping key civil servants in the central administration and military personnel away from population centres could create a better space for managing state affairs in any contingency.

Map Showing the Locations of Ministries at Naypyitaw



(6) Traditional Myanmar World View

Although some may be quizzical about this explanation, one cannot dismiss outright the role of fortune-tellers or soothsayers in the decision. Father Sangermano once unsympathetically described Myanmar as a nation so given to superstition that not only do people practise judicial astrology, and divination, and put faith in dreams, but also they have an infinity of foolish and superstitious customs.⁸ After all, as Rudyard Kipling claimed: "This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about." No one could deny the fact that the occult and superstition play a role in a traditional society like Myanmar. People in Myanmar have grown accustomed to the very notion that there is a parallel between the Macrocosm and the Microcosm, and between the universe and the world of men, and humanity is constantly influenced by forces emanating from the movements of stars and planets.⁹ Besides, it is believed that other supernatural forces also influence human life. Therefore, consultation with prognosticators, such as astrologers, palm-readers, and even clairvoyants, is quite common in Myanmar society.

In the traditional Myanmar pattern of authority, it is believed that a person can rise to prominence through the combination of three factors: *Phon* (glory), *Hnalone* (wisdom) and *Letyone* (physical prowess). The combination of these three elements will produce one with *Azwa* (influence) and *Ahna* (power or authority). Perhaps the most important concept in the traditional idea of power and authority is *Phon*, without which one cannot become a leader. In traditional Myanmar belief, *Phon* is conceptually linked to *Kamma*, which is a result of one's *Kutho* (merits) in the previous life and present existence. The accumulation of more merit can lead to more *Phon*; thus, patronizing religious order [*Sangha*] is important, with actions such as building pagodas and monasteries and performing good deeds for both monks and laymen. In this context, "although *Phon* is intrinsic to the inner force of an individual, there are ways to tap external forces to sustain and reinforce one's *Phon*, and one way of enhancing one's *Phon* is by performing rituals such as coronations and acquiring objects of magical potency such as Buddha images, relics, white elephants, amulets, and other objects."¹⁰ Also because of the *Phon* of the king, these objects, such as a white elephant,

⁸ Father Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1969), p. 141

⁹ Robert Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Myo Myint, *Pattern of Authorities in Pre-Colonial Myanmar*, unpublished paper, p. 14.

could come into his possession. Therefore, the possession of white elephants was greatly desirable in the pre-colonial Myanmar polity as it indicated the possession of great *Phon*, by extension a symbol of a *Cakkavattin* [world conqueror].

When one relies heavily on *Phon* alone [because of weakness in *Hnalone* and *Letyone*], then the enhancing of *Phon* becomes more important. Although one's *Phon* cannot be easily contested, when *Phon* becomes weak one cannot escape from a downturn in life and that person will face a challenge from aspirants with superior *Kamma*. Thus, enhancing *Phon* is important, and it can be done through accumulating merit and performing rituals. Acquiring magical potency, through *Letphwe* [amulets], *Gartar* [incantations], *Mantan* [mantras], *Piyasae* [philters] and *Inn* [cabalistic diagrams], helps protect oneself or cushion, if not enhance, one's own *Kamma*. Besides, Myanmar people look for omens and prophetic sayings in order to avoid misfortune and to decide whether to take or not to take a particular action. Several different practices come under these two broad categories.¹¹

Where there is a bad omen or prophecy, in addition to the above-mentioned practices, one can avoid misfortune by performing a *Yadaya*. The noun “*Yadaya*” is defined in the Myanmar-English Dictionary as "something done in keeping with an astrologer's advice to avert impending misfortune or to realize what one wishes."¹² The verb form "*Yadaya-che*" means to follow an astrologer's advice on what one must do to avert an impending event or to achieve what one desires.¹³ In the "*Myanma Min Okchokpon Sadan*" (Treatise on the Administration of the Myanmar King), U Maung Maung Tin described *Yadaya* in the following terms: "Treatises of *Yadaya* were based on the belief that whatever circumstances arose could be managed by performing a certain act or ritual so that one can either avert misfortunes or fulfil desires. Our renowned scholars used to claim that this practice began with Ari monks in the Bagan period."¹⁴ Nevertheless, *Yadaya* is very commonly practised in

¹¹ For detail, see Maung Than Swe (Dewai), "Myanmar Doeï Lawki Pyinnya [Myanmar Occults]", *Atwe Amyin*, Issue 178, July 2006, pp. 162-167; Saw Lu, "Tabaung Shepye Laelarchet [Preliminary Survey of Prophetic Saying]", *Ngwe Taryi Magazine*, Issue 429, April 1996, pp. 26-35.

¹² Department of Myanmar Language Commission, *Myanmar-English Dictionary*, sixth printing (Yangon: DMLC, 2001), p. 382.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ U Maung Maung Tin, *Myanma Min Okchokpon Sadan* [Royal Administration of Myanmar], Vol. 4 (Yangon: Baho Press, 1971), p. 197.

present-day Myanmar.¹⁵ In this context, there are some people who think the moving of the capital is performing a particular *Yadaya*; it is difficult to substantiate, but the possibility is there. The shape of the ministry buildings, which look just like scorpions, however, is interesting to note. According to some believers, it is a *Yadaya* in the form of *Katkin* [preventive measure to ward off any impending ill fate].¹⁶



In Southeast Asian history, rulers have often moved their capitals or seats of government to make symbolic statements at the start of new dynasties and to propitiate spirits. Myanmar history is full of examples of kings building new royal capitals, especially at the start of a new dynasty.

How did Myanmar kings build their new royal capitals in pre-colonial days? Myanmar chronicles provide examples of the significance of *Tabaung* in building new royal capitals in Myanmar. *Tabaung*, which offers prophecies in the form of verses in rhyme, was one of the

¹⁵ One recent example, according to some rumours or hearsay, is the building of a pagoda in a city with two Wednesday letters of the Myanmar alphabet as a *Yadaya*; thus, a pagoda was built in Lashio as both "La" and "Ya" in the name of the city are Wednesday letters. Consequently, a hillock in Lashio was named "Vijaya-Bumi Maha-Aungmye Mingalar Kone-daw" (literally Victory-land, Great Victory-land, and Auspicious Hill) and the pagoda named "Yan-Taing-Aung" [Victory in Every Strife] was built.

¹⁶ There were scorpion statues at the Aungzeya Hillock in Maesai, Thailand, which is just across the Myanmar town of Tachilake. According to the oral history, these statues were built by the Myanmar King Alaungpaya, also known as U Aungzeya, during his *Yodaya* [Ayutthaya] campaign in the 1750s. The Thai called their capital "Ayutthaya" which meant "the city that could not be conquered by the fighting or war". But to reverse it, Myanmar called it "Yutthaya" so that "the city that could be conquered by the fighting or war", and it eventually became "Yodaya". In the same fashion, King Alaungpaya built scorpion statues and issued a curse that the Thai could never conquer Myanmar. [Naung (Correspondent), "Consequences of Turning the Scorpion in Thailand towards Myanmar", *Natkhetta Yaungchi* (No. 179, June 2001), pp. 9-12.

most common forms of prophecy in Myanmar.¹⁷ According to the Myanmar chronicles, King Thihathu (1309-1322) built his royal capital at Pinya because he heard a *Tabaung* that discouraged him building the capital at Myinsaing and recommended a move to the south without delay. Likewise, King Thado Minpya (1364-1368) built a new royal capital at Innwa after hearing *Tabaungs* that preferred Innwa over Sagaing.¹⁸ Similarly, King Mindon (1852-1878) also built Yadanabon (Mandalay) after hearing *Tabaung*.¹⁹ There is no clear evidence to support the theory that the recent moving of the capital to Naypyitaw was in accordance with or because of *Tabaung*.²⁰ Nevertheless, the moving of the capital indicates the beginning of a new rule, if not a new dynasty. However, based on rumours that the Senior General Than Shwe and his family have been behaving like royalty, the *Irrawaddy Magazine* in Chiang Mai produced an image of the Senior General in the traditional dress of a Myanmar king with regalia.



¹⁷ Even in the early Second World War period, in 1941, Aung San named Colonel Suzuki, the leader of the Japanese Army's secret organization known as Minamikikan, as Bo Mogyo [Thunderbolt] in line with a *Tabaung* that was popular in late 1930s, which said that thunderbolt would strike the Htiyoe [umbrella stem], an implicit reference to the British in Myanmar.

¹⁸ U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi*, Vol. 1 (Yangon: Yarpayae Sarpay, 2006), pp. 259; 273-274

¹⁹ U Maung Maung Tin, *Konebaungset Mahayazawin*, Vol. 3 (Yangon: Yarpayae Sarpay, 2005), pp. 171-172

²⁰ There was a *Tabaung* before the fall of the BSPP regime. It was: "Kalapaya-Htitawtin; Naymingyi-Laewin [When the finial is hoisted on the Indian Pagoda; the Sun will set]". The Indian Pagoda is the Mahavijaya Pagoda enshrined with the Buddhist relics brought from Nepal and the Sun referred to General Ne Win ["bright sun"]. Another *Tabaung* appeared in mid 1990s. It was: "Swaetaw-Hnitsu-Atutu; Pyithu-Laemwe-Tatlaekwe [The two Tooth-relic pagodas are similar; people would be impoverish and the army would split]". This could well be politically motivated. Anyway, the fissure between the infantry and intelligence factions within the Army was serious in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it was overcome by the elimination of the intelligence faction by the infantry faction by 2004.

What would kings do after founding a new royal capital [Naypyitaw]? Having announced the arrival of a new dynasty, Myanmar kings usually built a palace and a pagoda in the new royal capital, since the capital stands for the whole country. These represent *Cakkavattin Mandaing* [political *Mandala*] and *Bodhi Mandaing* [religious *Mandala*] respectively.²¹ By doing so, the king declares himself not only a *Cakkavattin* [world conqueror] but also a *Bodhisatta* [future Buddha], who resides on the continent of *Jabudipa* [paradise on earth]; therefore, in Tambiah's terms, the king is the "World Conqueror and World Renouncer".²² In the Buddhist cosmology, Mount Meru forms the centre of the universe and there lie four continents known as *Mahadipas*, one in each of the cardinal directions. The continent south of Mount Meru is *Jabudipa*. This *Jabudipa*, considered the most auspicious continent, was the place where the Buddhas were born, future Buddha will attain enlightenment, and the *Cakkavattin* [world conqueror] will be born. At present, there is no evidence that the government is building palace-style buildings; but some could argue that there is a possibility of sanctifying some buildings as such, yet we will never know. However, recently, the Myanmar government announced that it had begun building a pagoda in Naypyitaw of almost the same size and shape as the Shwe Dagon Pagoda; and it is named "Uppatasanti" which means development and stability.²³ The stake-driving ceremony for the pagoda was held on 12 November 2006. The invitation card for the ceremony opened with a phrase "Rajahtani Naypyitaw [the royal capital where the king resides]".

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In pre-colonial Myanmar, kings moved their capitals occasionally; but they remained mostly in Central or Upper Myanmar. Bagan lasted for over three centuries, from the 11th to the 13th century. Myainsaing became the centre of Myanmar authority for about a decade. Thihathu built a new capital at Pinya in 1312, not far from the previous site, and it remained as capital until 1364. Sagaing was a rival capital between 1322 and 1364. Then, Innwa became the capital of ethnic Bamar in 1365 while Bago, also known as Hantharwaddy, was the capital of

²¹ *Mandala* is generally considered as sphere of influence.

²² Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

²³ *Weekly Eleven*, Vol. 1, No. 44 (16 August 2006), p. 9. The pagoda is just less than one foot shorter than the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. *Uppatasanti* is the name of a sutra, not part of the Tripitaka, but prepared by a monk in the early 16th century. It is to be recited in time of crisis especially in the face of foreign invasion.

the Mon in the south that controlled Ramanyadesa. This situation was described as "One Basin, Two Poles" in Myanmar by Victor Lieberman.²⁴ Innwa was attacked and destroyed by Shans in 1526; and the Innwa throne passed into the hands of Shan rulers. By then, Taungoo under Mingyinyo and Tabinshwehti rose to prominence and became the centre of Myanmar authority.

Tabinshwehti decided to move his capital from Taungoo to Bago, further south. This was perhaps primarily to take control of commercial ports which had increasingly become major sources of maritime revenue. With the domination of the Shan in the north, especially after the fall of Innwa in 1526, the revenue from overland trade with China had become less significant for the Myanmar polity in central or upper Myanmar. Moreover, it was a geopolitically significant decision as remaining in Taungoo or moving to Innwa would invite security challenges from either the Shan in the north or the Mon in the south. By taking firm control over the Mon, through residence at the Mon capital and adoption of Mon customs, Tabinshwehti could avoid a two-prong attack. Nevertheless, as indicated by Lieberman, it was the first and only time in the precolonial history of Myanmar that a capital with authority over most of the Ayerwaddy-Sitaung basin was located in the south, near the coast.²⁵

Bayinnaung, despite his re-conquest of Innwa in 1555, called Bago his home and built a new palace and held his coronation there. Thus, Bago served as the capital of Myanmar in the period between 1539 and 1599. Bago was completely destroyed by Rakhine in 1599. Meanwhile, in central Myanmar, Prince Nyaunagyan, governor of Yemathin and a son of Bayinnaung, tried to restore the empire of his father and established the Nyaungyan dynasty in 1597. He decided to move his power base from Yemathin to Innwa in 1598. Innwa remained the official capital of the Nyaungyan dynasty until it was destroyed by the Mon in 1752. However, from 1623, King Anaukphetlun and his successor, Thalun, made Bago a temporary residence and it was only in 1635 that Thalun decided to go back to his official residence and the royal capital at Innwa. King Thalun's decision to return and make Innwa his home has generated a scholarly debate among some historians on Myanmar. G. E. Harvey remarked that Thalun's decision to abandon Tabinshwehti's dream of Mon-Bamar national kingship resulted from the failure of the attempted coalescence with the Mon; thus, the

²⁴ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800 - 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 85- 211

²⁵ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, p. 151

Myanmar court relapsed into its tribal homeland in Upper Myanmar. The decision pushed Myanmar back into the past, according to Harvey, as its appropriate future lay on the seacoast; and it subsequently contributed to the isolation of Myanmar from international developments.²⁶ D. G. E. Hall went even further and wrote that the move of the Myanmar capital from Bago to Innwa in 1635 was, without doubt, one of the cardinal events of Myanmar history and it signalled the triumph of the more intransigent elements in Myanmar character and government policy that contributed ultimately to the political ruin of the country.²⁷ But Maung Htin Aung, known for his nationalist perspective, disputed the long-term significance of the move.²⁸ In fact, Victor Lieberman has correctly pointed out that Bago was never the official palace site between 1613 and 1635, and Innwa remained the official capital of Myanmar.²⁹ Both Anaukphetlun and Thalun treated Bago as a temporary residence and stayed in Thakama Tetaw [hut] or Yaye Nantaw [temporary palace] as indicated in the Myanmar chronicles. Bago, then, was like a command post for military or pacification campaigns in the south. Hence, as stated in the chronicles, King Thalun returned to Innwa the royal capital on 24 December 1634 and entered the Thetnge Nantaw [thatched palace] on 14 January 1635.³⁰ Then the king built a new palace and consecrated it on 24 May 1635. With regard to the decision to move the capital from Lower to Upper Myanmar, Victor Lieberman explained:

Although the north obviously lacked direct access to maritime trade, it profited from commerce with Yunnan, while a series of provincial reforms preserved direct control over the invaluable ports. In the event of rebellion, an interior capital always made sense: one could go downriver up to seven times more quickly than one could ascend the Irrawaddy. Most critical, with refugees streaming up the Irrawaddy and with Upper Burma prospering from 80 years of more or less continuous peace, population in the north again rose markedly. Reinforced by deportations, in 1635 the dry zone contained over three times more people, hence potential soldiers, than Lower Burma. To control some

²⁶ G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: from the earliest times to 10 March 1824* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1967), p. 193.

²⁷ D. G. E. Hall, *Early English Intercourse with Burma 1587-1743* (London: 1928) p. 11.

²⁸ Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 143-146

²⁹ Victor Lieberman, "The Transfer of the Burmese Capital from Pegu to Ava", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1980; no.1), p. 64.

³⁰ Ukala III, p. 192.

4,000 villages spread throughout this zone was a far more critical task, requiring on-site royal supervision, than to control a far smaller number of villages and two or three ports in the south. Unfavourable climate later in the 17th century may have hit Upper Burma harder than the coast, but of course, when the decision to change capitals was finalized in 1635, this problem lay well in the future. In any case, famines around the Bay of Bengal from 1630-1635 slammed Lower Burma no less savagely than the interior.³¹

When Alaungpaya established the Konbaung dynasty on 17 April 1752, he made Shwebo his capital. Perhaps, the Konbaung dynasty was the only dynasty in pre-colonial Myanmar to move its capital five times. Alungpaya gave Shwebo, his capital, the name "Yadana Theinga" on 21 June 1753. His son, Sinbyushin, the third king of Konbaung, moved the capital from Shwebo to Innwa on 20 March 1766. Then his brother, Bodawpaya, the 6th Konbaung king, moved the capital from Innwa to Amarapura on 9 January 1783. Bodawpaya's grandson, Bagyidaw, the 7th king of Konbaung, moved the capital back again to Innwa on 3 March 1824. Twenty seven years later, Amarapura was made capital again on 9 July 1841 during the reign of Thayarwaddy. Finally, on 16 July 1858 Mindon moved his capital from Amarapura to Mandalay. After the last king of Konbaung, Thibaw, was dethroned on 27 November 1885, Mandalay ceased to exist as the capital of Myanmar. Yangon then became the capital of both colonial and post-colonial Myanmar until late 2005.

With regard to Mindon's decision to move his capital, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab from Thailand, during his journey in Myanmar in 1935, remarked:

Judging from the history of the period, there were other factors in the construction of Mandalay, although the annals did not point them out. From the time that the Burmese lost their first war with the British, the Burmese kings became somewhat deranged, and three of them in succession had to be removed from the throne. This situation must have been regarded as inauspicious for the former capital.

³¹ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, p. 159.

The most important reason, however, must have been the arrival of European steam-powered trading ships. During the reign of King Min-don, steamers began to come up to Ava and Amarapura. Since both towns were on the bank of the Irrawaddy, it would have been possible for the Europeans to bring artillery pieces up-river aboard the trading ships and to shell the capital. The Burmese therefore thought the capital should be moved some distance from the river, beyond the range of enemy fire. Although this must have been the original reason, King Min-don was sensitive about being accused of fearing the Europeans. And so, pointing to his portentous dream and the prophesy of the Lord Buddha, he instructed his chief minister to discuss his view with the Heir Apparent, senior princes, ministers, royal councillors, ecclesiastical chiefs and court Brahmins. Most of them accepted the king's idea.³²

Nevertheless, the Myanmar kings' decision to move their capitals, especially during the Konbaung period, did indicate their desire to make a fresh start. This was apparently the case as they moved back and forth between Innwa and Amarapura. Mindon's decision would have been partly influenced by the military-strategic factors; yet it was certainly a symbolic gesture of a fresh start after losing two wars to the British in 1824 and 1852, from Innwa and Amarapura respectively; both cities could be considered as inauspicious.

With regard to the Myanmar government's decision to move the capital in late 2005, Michael Aung-Thwin said that the recent move of capital to the dry zone of Upper Myanmar has nothing to do with soothsayers, but was based on historical, cultural and strategic considerations. "It is where the capital of the first classical state of Burma, Pagan, and where all subsequent capitals of its dynasties except one have been centred. It is the ancestral home of the Burmese people and is very much part of their psyche, unlike Rangoon which has been a reminder of the country's colonial experience." said Aung-Thwin.³³

Some people have argued that the recent decision to move the capital from Yangon to Naypyitaw might be somewhat influenced by the birthplaces of the top two leaders. They pointed out that Senior General Than Shwe and Vice Senior General Maung Aye were

³² H.R.H Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Journey Through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok: River Books, 1991), pp. 78-79.

³³ *Bangkok Post* (26 November 2005).

natives of Kyaukse and Kantbalu, respectively, in Upper Myanmar. [However, former prime minister General Khin Nyunt was from Kyauktan, near Yangon, while General Thura Shwe Mann is a native of Kanyuntkwin, between Bago and Taungoo.] This could not be the case. Many people are concerned with the economic impact [cost] of building a new capital which could take at least another four years.³⁴ It is reported that the Naypyitaw now has about 80,000 migrant workers and the labour costs alone total over four billion kyat a month.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The Myanmar government's decision to move its capital from Yangon to Naypyitaw does reveal certain aspects of its security and strategic perspectives and the leadership's world-view as well. It is now certain that the military government will make a change in the National Convention to endorse Naypyitaw as the national capital. However, whether Myanmar with its new capital, Naypyitaw [the royal capital], will ever represent the *Jabudipa* [Paradise on Earth] remains to be seen.

³⁴ *Living Color* (No. 137, December 2006), p. 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*