

Appendix 1

Karenni independence

The issue of independence appears to be straightforward but has been glossed by all sides, and is therefore worth describing again here. One of the Karenni states, Kantarawaddy or Eastern Karenni, in 1866 assisted the Burmese crown in putting down a rebellion and in return the chief was appointed *myosa* (ruler) by the Burmese King Mindon (British Government 1947: 11). In 1875 the independence of Western Karenni (which in 1892 contained 4 chiefs) was separately guaranteed by an agreement between the British and Burmese governments, which stated:

It is hereby agreed between the British and the Burmese Governments that the State of Western Karenni shall remain separate and independent, and that no sovereignty or government authority of any description shall be claimed or exercised over that State.

(*ibid*: 11)

Independence was, in fact, feudatory status, with the obligation to pay an

annual tribute and to 'accept and act upon any advice given to them by the British political officer concerned' (*ibid*: 12). The conditions were set out explicitly in a *sanad* or patent of appointment for the ruler, issued by the colonial power. When in 1888 Kantarawaddy raided the Shan state of Mawmai, which had accepted British suzerainty, the Kantarawaddy *myosa* was deposed by the British and replaced by his son who was confirmed as *myosa* under a British *sanad* specifying the same terms as Western Karenni. Thus the whole of Karenni came to have the same formal status of 'never having been annexed to the British Crown' (*ibid*: 12), in contrast to the rest of Burma.

In the document cited, which is the official report of the British Government's opinion-gathering committee in the Burma frontier areas before independence, there are several passing references, including some by the chair, to the curious status of Karenni, including 'Karenni States which are said to be independent', '[i]ndependence which is not free', 'the Karenni States are supposed to be independent on paper' and 'the three Karenni States claim to be independent' (*ibid*: 137, 138, 108). At one point the Karenni delegation raises the issue of land taxes unpaid by the Mawchi mine during the Japanese occupation 1942-5, and the Karenni administration's inability to force the issue:

If you claim to be independent, why can't you rescind the lease?

Because the lease was taken and given in the presence of the Governor, we cannot rescind it.

Do you call it real independence when you cannot go any further and when you cannot override the Governor?

We have real independence, but we cannot exercise it because we are weak.

(*ibid*: 116)

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The 1875 agreement has remained, almost to this day, a central plank in the continuing Karenni national opposition to the Burma union, and the project to build a Karenni nation-state. Only in 2003 have key Karenni exiled political leaders begun moving beyond the historical claim of independence towards a more pragmatic engagement with a possible federal solution to the political problems in Burma (Alan Smith, personal communication).

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