

Myanmar: How a country have 2 names.

Imagine this: you're sitting on a plane on your way to Asia and open the screen showing the flight map. As you scroll toward Southeast Asia, something catches your eye. One country has two names listed: Myanmar, with Burma in parentheses. Naturally, this raises some questions. Why does this country have two names? What do these names actually mean? And which name do the people themselves use?

Many countries have undergone a name change throughout their history, but few are as controversial as that of Myanmar. Depending on whom you ask, the country is still called either Myanmar or Burma. Some governments, media outlets, and residents even use both names interchangeably.

The debate is not just about language, but also about history, colonialism, ethnic identity, and politics. The choice between "Myanmar" and "Burma" often says something about how someone views the country's history and government.

Where does the name Burma come from? Why was the name changed to Myanmar? And which name do the people of the country themselves use? You'll find the answers to these questions in this article.



wikipedia.org

Flag of Myanmar (Burma). Source:



History name Myanmar (Burma)

To properly understand the debate surrounding the name of Myanmar, we need to go back to the country's colonial past. This is where the confusion over why the country has two names today begins.

In the nineteenth century, Great Britain conquered large parts of South and Southeast Asia and brought these territories under the administration of British India. After a series of wars between the British and the Burmese kingdom, Myanmar gradually came under British control as well. Ultimately, the territory became part of the British colonial empire from 1886 until independence in 1948, although from 1937 onward it was a separate colony within the empire.

The British called the territory Burma, a name they did not invent themselves. The name was derived from earlier European contacts with the region, particularly by the Portuguese. Portuguese traders and explorers noticed that the country's largest ethnic group called themselves Bamar.

The word *Bamar* is the native name of Myanmar's largest ethnic group. Over time, European languages transformed this name into *Burma*. The British adopted the term and used it officially for the colony. As a result, the country became internationally known as Burma, or Birma in Dutch.

When the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1948, the official English name remained Burma for many years. Generations of people grew up with this name in international communication, on maps, and in diplomacy. It was only much later that the name would officially be changed to Myanmar, triggering a very different political debate.



Location of Myanmar (Burma) on the world map.

Source: landenkompas.nl



But where does the name Myanmar come from? The answer lies in the Burmese language itself.

The name *Burma* is not entirely incorrect; it is an English adaptation of a name that had already been in use for centuries. In Burmese, there are two forms of the same name. The informal spoken language uses *Bama*, while the formal, literary form is *Myanma*. Both refer to the country's largest ethnic group, the Bamar.

When the military regime came to power in 1989, it decided to move away from various colonial names introduced by the British. As a result, the country's official English name was changed from *Burma* to *Myanmar*. From the perspective of the authorities, this was not a new name, but rather a return to a more authentic Burmese name. You could therefore say that Myanmar and Burma are essentially the same name, but come from different linguistic traditions.

However, the change was not accepted everywhere. Several Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, continued to use the name *Burma* for many years. This was primarily for political reasons. They did not fully recognize the military regime that had introduced the name change as a legitimate representative of the country and therefore chose not to immediately adopt the new name.

The debate over the name remained relevant because the military continued to play a dominant role in politics. Although Myanmar experienced a period of partial democratization between 2011 and 2021, the military retained considerable power behind the scenes. After Aung San Suu Kyi's party won the 2020 elections by a convincing margin, the military seized power again during the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état.

Since then, the country has once again been governed by a military junta led by Min Aung Hlaing. As a result, the name issue remains not only a linguistic matter for some countries and organizations, but also a political one. That is why you still see both names used today on maps, in news reports, and in international discussions: Myanmar and Burma.





The current president of Myanmar and the leader of the Junta, Min Aung Hlaing. Source: Britannica.com

Conflict West versus East

At first glance, the conflict over the name of Myanmar may indeed seem largely symbolic. Linguistically, *Myanmar* and *Burma* ultimately refer to the same historical origin: the Bamar, the country's largest ethnic group. The informal form *Bama* was adapted by Europeans into *Burma*, while *Myanmar* is derived from the more formal Burmese form.

However, the choice between the two names has taken on a clear political significance. For the military government that introduced the name change in 1989, *Myanmar* symbolized a break with the colonial past and with British influence. The name was intended to emphasize the country's own culture, language, and identity rather than a name used by Europeans.

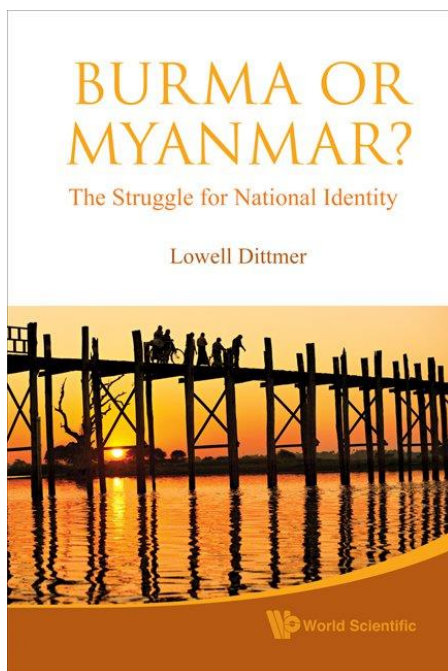
On the other hand, several Western countries deliberately continued to use the name *Burma* for many years because they did not want to legitimize the military regime. The choice of a name therefore became not just a linguistic matter, but a political statement.

It is important to note, however, that the situation today is somewhat more nuanced than is often assumed. Most international organizations, including the United Nations, officially use the name Myanmar. Many countries that previously used *Burma* primarily also now use *Myanmar* in diplomatic contexts, sometimes alongside *Burma*. There is therefore no longer a strict divide between a "Western Burma camp" and an "Eastern Myanmar camp."



The European Union, for example, regularly uses both names together, often in the form “Myanmar/Burma.” This approach attempts to respect both the internationally recognized name and the historical and political sensitivities surrounding it.

Ultimately, the debate shows how an apparently minor change to a country’s name can mean much more than simply using a different spelling. Behind the choice between Myanmar and Burma lie questions about colonialism, national identity, the legitimacy of governments, and international politics. That is why you can still see both names today on maps, in news reports, and in diplomatic documents, even though they essentially refer to the same country.



Book about the name struggle of Myanmar (Burma) written by Lowell Dittmer. Source: www.worldscientific.com

Conclusion

It is difficult to give this country an official name, because whichever name you use, you are likely to upset one group or another. Yet this shows just how much of an impact politics and legal matters can have on a country and its people. What essentially means the same thing has led to conflicts both nationally and internationally, even though the two names are simply different linguistic forms of the same name. Both names are derived from the country’s largest ethnic group.



It also goes to show how colonialism continues to have an impact on society today, and how events that took place more than 200 years ago can still cause controversy and division many years later.

So, the next time you're sitting on a plane, take a good look at the world map and decide for yourself what you want to call this country. Because, in the grand scheme of things, it really shouldn't matter.

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