

# Ethnic insurgencies and peacemaking in Myanmar

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MYANMAR is a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious society. Officially, there are 135 sub-national (ethnic) groups under eight major ethnic communities. Population estimates (the last census was in 1983) indicate that the majority Bamar (formerly called Burman) ethnic group constitutes over 60 per cent, while seven major ethnic groups and non-native (mainly of Chinese and Indian origin) groups making up the rest of the population.

British colonial rule, which separated 'Burma proper' from the frontier areas (populated by non-Bamar), had far-reaching implications for the subsequent creation of an independent Myanmar state. Myanmar nationalists, especially the Bamar majority who advocate a unitary state, accused the British 'divide-and-rule' policy of preventing the indigenous nationalities from developing a sense of belonging and bonding that could culminate in an 'imagined community'.

Consequently, nation-state building in Myanmar became a contentious exercise with many ethnic 'nations' challenging the unitary concept of the ruling elites and resorting to armed struggle. Civil war erupted soon after independence and the government had to fight a multi-front war against a multitude of ideological and ethnic insurgencies, some of which are still continuing.<sup>1</sup>

## Ethnic groups challenge the state

The seeds of rebellion among ethnic groups were sown under colonial rule and World War II, with the latter availing them the opportunity for stockpiling weapons and mastering the art of armed conflict. Traditionally, the British recruited the 'martial races', identified as Chins, Kachins and Kayins (Karens), into military service, while very few Bamars were in uniform.

World War II brought ethnic tensions between Bamars and indigenous minorities into the open as some of them who were loyal to the British crown found themselves at odds with the Bamar nationalist allies of the Japanese invaders. Heavy-handed behaviour by inexperienced nationalist commanders added insult to injury and fostered resentment among some indigenous minorities. Such experiences under Japanese occupation "revived and intensified" the minorities' "ancient antagonisms" against Bamars for their perceived hegemony. The anti-fascist resistance movement that followed (in March 1945) also had differential impacts on different ethnic communities, which affected ethnic perceptions of majority-minority relations.

The most contentious issues among the ethnic groups were the alleged Bamar dominance over indigenous minorities, the interpretation of 'autonomy' and 'rights and privileges' guaranteed by the Panlong Agreement and the right to secede (after ten years) guaranteed by the 1947 Constitution. Thus, separatist tendencies toward an independent 'ethnic nation' with its distinctive 'identity' led to armed rebellion by all major ethnic groups during the first decade of independence, as non-state armed groups (NSAG) proliferated throughout the Myanmar countryside.<sup>2</sup>

The Kayin insurgency in January 1949 by the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) then known as Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO; now Karen National Liberation Army or KNLA) was the first of dozens of uprisings by ethnic NSAGs. The Mons first joined the KNDO cause and then morphed into its own revolt and formed the New Mons State Party (NMSP) in 1962. The Karenni or Kayah rose up against the government in 1957 and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was later formed to lead its independence movement. Later, a pro-communist faction split to form the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) in 1980. The Shan independence struggle began with the armed uprising by the *Noom Suk Harn* (Brave Young Warriors) that later evolved, in 1964, into the Shan State Army (SSA) led by the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP). The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) was formed in February 1961 with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) as its military wing. The Rakhine (Arakan) "liberation" movement was formed in 1968 while the Chin insurgency came late in 1988. By the late 1980s, virtually all the ethnic insurgencies had shifted their primary objective from secession and independence to 'self-determination' and greater 'autonomy'.

## Ceasefires, dissent and defiance

The first round of ceasefires resulted from the initiative of the Directorate of Defence Service Intelligence (DDSI), not long after the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took over state power on 18 September 1988. Exploiting the split in the Burma Communist Party (BCP) in which its ethnic units (Wa and Kokang) rebelled against their Bamar leaders, the DDSI managed to secure ceasefires with three main former communist factions in the first half of 1989. The winning formula seemed to be premised on three points: the right to remain armed; the right to administer their own demarcated territory; and to conduct cross-border commercial activities.

Later, these ceasefire groups (CFG) were allowed to participate in the National Convention that was organized to formulate the fundamental principles of the new 'democratic' Constitution. Altogether 17 NSAGs entered into ceasefire arrangements with the ruling military junta represented by the DDSI; all were verbal agreements, except for the one with the KIO. Between 31 March 1989 and 6 April 1997, seventeen ethnic armed groups were officially recognized by the military junta as CFGs. With the advent of the 2008 Constitution that instituted a multi-party electoral system with provisions for autonomy and a continuing role in political governance for the military, the status quo of quasi-autonomous CFGs became untenable. The constitutional provision (article 338) that was meant to anoint the Myanmar Defence Services (MDS), also known as the Tatmadaw, as the sole armed organization, created a security dilemma for the junta with respect to the CFGs' armed wings.

In accordance with the Constitutional rule forbidding independent armed forces, the junta insisted in early 2009 that the CFGs be put under MDS control, either as a border guard force (BGF) with reduced strength and capability, or a local militia. The CFGs repeatedly expressed their preference to keep their forces intact and negotiate terms and conditions for demobilization with the new government after the 2010 elections. On the other hand, the junta (which restructured itself as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, in November 1997) refused to negotiate with the CFGs regarding the BGF scheme. Tensions exacerbated between major CFGs and the military when the MDS subdued the defiant Kokang group in August 2009 by supporting an internal revolt following violent clashes with the MDS. The pro-junta leaders who came to power then decided to join the BGF scheme. The New Mon State Party (NMSP) also declined the military's offer to transform its military wing into a smaller BGF.

Up to five deadlines, beginning with October 2009, passed and the impasse continued after the 2010 elections and the coming into force of the Constitution in January 2011. Meanwhile, five CFGs (KIO, NMSP, SSA-North, KNPP, CNF) who had rejected the BGF scheme together with the KNU and five smaller NSAGs (representing the Lahu, Arakan, Pa-O, Palaung and a splinter Wa group) formed the 11-member coalition named the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) in February 2011 to collectively work for a federal solution to the problem of ethnic conflict. However, the government did not recognize it as a representative organization for its members.

## Making peace

After the elections in November 2010, the military indicated that the ceasefire agreements had lapsed, but still did not move against the armed ethnic groups who refused to comply with the BGF scheme. After assuming power in March 2011, the elected Union Government announced, on 18 August 2011, an offer to all armed ethnic groups to enter into peace talks based on a two-step process. Though initially sceptical toward the government's peace overture, altogether 13 NSAGs eventually entered into ceasefire talks at both provincial and Union levels.

To further institutionalize the peace process, the 11-member Union Peace-making Central Committee was established on 3 May 2012. This high-level body in turn delegated the implementation tasks to the 52-member Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC). Confidence-building measures with the armed ethnic groups were stepped up under the government's new peace initiative and as a result even the non-CFGs, Karen National Union (KNU) and Restoration Council for the Shan States (RCSS), entered into ceasefire negotiations with the central and provincial governments.

Despite tangible progress in ceasefire agreements and an enhanced level of trust and confidence between the central government and most of the armed ethnic groups, the latter are still highly suspicious of the MDS' motives as the fighting continues in the Shan and Kachin states. Much of the dispute and discord has to do with lack of political dialogue, and military encroachment into CFG territory. The government's sequencing of 'ceasefire first' has been unacceptable to the KIO/KIA, which had been fighting since June 2011. The President's instruction to the MDS in December 2011 to take only defensive action towards KIA, and eleven preliminary meetings at both State (provincial) and Union levels, did not yield any ceasefire agreement. Instead, towards the end of December 2012, the fighting escalated with the KIA.

## Concluding remarks

While the UPWC has been relentlessly engaging with the new CFGs and other NSAGs to consolidate the ceasefires and move towards political dialogue, the continued violent resistance of the KIO/KIA is a vexing issue for the reformist government of President U Thein Sein. The government has also been accused of a dual-track policy of talking while fighting and some even questioned the President's ability to control the military and enforce his instructions. In the international media front, the MDS has been vilified and subjected to condemnations by ethnic activists and human rights organizations, some of whom are lobbying for a unilateral ceasefire. The military's top leaders need to handle these predicaments with finesse and patience and perhaps embrace a new security mindset to enable the MDS to become part of the solution in the peace process rather than a problem as portrayed by its detractors.

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## Notes

- 1 See, e.g., chapter 5, in Callahan, M.P. 2003. *Making Enemies; War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. In fact, the country's capital was under siege and almost fell to Kayin ethnic insurgent army in early 1949. That bitter experience left an indelible mark in the psyche of the military leaders and state managers of the day.
- 2 For a comprehensive account, see Smith, M. 1991. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London: Zed Books.

Kachin Rangers, armed resistance against Japanese invaders, funded and coordinated by the American military. Photograph reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of flickr.

