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Ethnic Politics in Burma: The Time for Solutions

Burma remains a land in ethnic crisis and political transition. In 2010 the military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) laid out the landscape for a new era of parliamentary government. In 2011 the authorities face the challenge of introducing the new political system. Ethnic divisions and political exclusions, however, are emerging in national politics, threatening a new cycle of impasse and conflict.

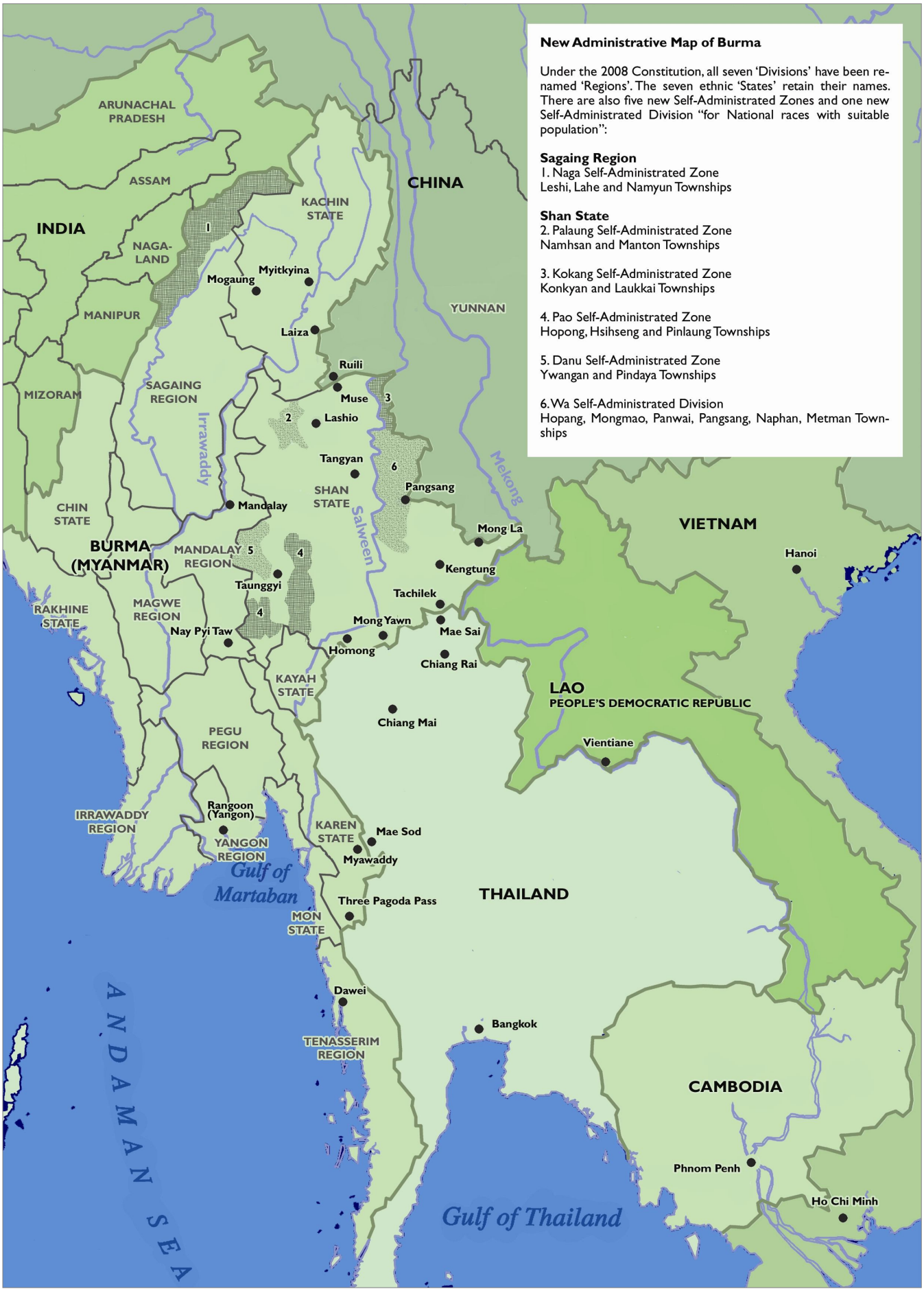
Ethnic peace and political inclusion are essential if Burma is to overcome its post-colonial legacy of state failure. Since independence from Great Britain in 1948, political and ethnic strife have continued through all eras of government. The social and humanitarian consequences have been immense. Burma is one of the world's poorest countries, with population displacement, drug-related problems and infectious disease rates disturbingly high in the ethnic borderlands.

Under the SPDC, there has been no inclusive process of dialogue involving the conflicting parties in national politics. Groups as diverse as the National League for Democracy (NLD) and ceasefire Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) have been pressured out from the SPDC's political roadmap, while the Karen National Union (KNU) and other militant forces continue armed struggle in the borderlands.

For their part, SPDC leaders have largely pursued a two-fold strategy. A new political system has been drawn up to ensure the continued dominance of the armed forces

Conclusions and Recommendations

- An inclusive endgame has long been needed to achieve national reconciliation. But political and ethnic exclusions are continuing in national politics. If divisions persist, Burma's legacy of state failure and national under-achievement will continue.
- The moment of opportunity of a new government should not be lost. It is vital that the new government pursues policies that support dialogue and participation for all peoples in the new political and economic system. Policies that favour the armed forces and military solutions will perpetuate divisions and instability.
- Opposition groups must face how their diversity and disunity have contributed to Burma's history of state failure. If they are to support democratic and ethnic reforms, national participation and unity over goals and tactics are essential. All sides must transcend the divisions of the past.
- As the new political era begins, the international community should prioritise policies that promote conflict resolution, political rights and equitable opportunity for all ethnic groups in national life, including the economy, health and education. Continued repression and exclusion will deepen grievances – not resolve them.


New Administrative Map of Burma
Under the 2008 Constitution, all seven 'Divisions' have been re-named 'Regions'. The seven ethnic 'States' retain their names. There are also five new Self-Administrated Zones and one new Self-Administrated Division "for National races with suitable population":
Sagaing Region
1. Naga Self-Administrated Zone
Leshi, Lahe and Namyun Townships
Shan State
2. Palaung Self-Administrated Zone
Namhsan and Manton Townships
3. Kokang Self-Administrated Zone
Konkyan and Laukkai Townships
4. Pao Self-Administrated Zone
Hopong, Hsihseng and Pinlaung Townships
5. Danu Self-Administrated Zone
Ywangan and Pindaya Townships
6. Wa Self-Administrated Division
Hopang, Mongmao, Panwai, Pangsang, Naphan, Metman Townships
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
ASSAM
INDIA
NAGA-LAND
MANIPUR
MIZORAM
CHINA
KACHIN STATE
YUNNAN
SAGAING REGION
Irrawaddy
CHIN STATE
BURMA (MYANMAR)
MANDALAY REGION
SHAN STATE
Salween
Mekong
RAKHINE STATE
MAGWE REGION
KAYAH STATE
PEGU REGION
IRRAWADDY REGION
YANGON REGION
KAREN STATE
MON STATE
TENASSERIM REGION
VIETNAM
LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
THAILAND
CAMBODIA
Myitkyina
Mogaung
Laiza
Ruili
Muse
Lashio
Tangyan
Pangsang
Mandalay
Mong La
Kengtung
Taunggyi
Tachilek
Mong Yawn
Mae Sai
Nay Pyi Taw
Homong
Chiang Rai
Chiang Mai
Vientiane
Hanoi
Rangoon (Yangon)
Mae Sod
Myawaddy
Three Pagoda Pass
Dawei
Bangkok
Phnom Penh
Ho Chi Minh
Gulf of Martaban
Gulf of Thailand
ANDAMAN SEA

in government. In the ethnic conflict-zones, meanwhile, a militia-building policy has been mobilised to try and pacify local resistance.

The consequence is that, at a time of promised democratisation and reform, militarisation has increased in many areas of national life. Equally important, major economic deals have been agreed with Asian neighbours in the ethnic borderlands before nationwide peace, political reform and real inclusion in decision-making have been established.

A critical moment is approaching. A new political system is being introduced, and progressive decisions can yet be made. But uncertainty is increasing. Will the new government be the SPDC in new guise or will it be a platform from which ethnic peace and multi-party democracy can truly spread? The stakes could not be higher. The decisions made by Burma's leaders in the coming year could well decide the country's future for a generation.

> *"I would like to urge you to build on the national reconsolidation that has been achieved and avoid all thoughts and notions that might lead to the disintegration of the Union."*
>
> Snr-Gen. Than Shwe, New Light of Myanmar 25 December 2010

BACKGROUND

With the February 2011 announcement of a new government, a new political epoch has been heralded for Burma/Myanmar.[1] This follows previous eras since independence: of parliamentary democracy (1948-62), military socialism (1962-88) and the military State Peace and Development Council (formerly State Law and Order Restoration Council - SLORC). During all three eras, political impasse and ethnic conflict continued and were integral to the failures of the post-colonial state. As one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, non-Burman nationalities make up a third of the estimated 59 million population.

Under the military SLORC-SPDC, a new approach was promised in the building of a multi-ethnic, multi-party democracy. A general election was held in 1990 that was overwhelmingly won by the NLD and allied ethnic parties. Meanwhile an ethnic cease-fire policy was introduced in 1989 and, in the following years, came to include a majority of the country's armed opposition forces.

Political impasse and repression, however, continued, leading to a new generation of divisions and exclusions within national politics. There were moments when new opportunities for national reconciliation appeared, marked, for example, by the ceasefires or release of NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. SPDC chairman Snr-Gen. Than Shwe frequently claimed "national reconsolidation" as the goal of the regime's "political roadmap" for reform in which all citizens were urged to take part.

Behind the scenes, however, the SPDC continued the long-standing practice of tactics to maintain the dominance of the armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*) in government. *Tatmadaw* interests were promoted, while opposition groups were repressed or marginalised, including the NLD and ethnic parties of different backgrounds. As a result, hopes for "tri-partite" dialogue between military, democracy and ethnic leaders were never fulfilled.

Fundamental to the SPDC's strategy was the formation of a new political movement that will outflank non-*Tatmadaw* parties and dominate future legislatures. As a further guarantee, under the 2008 constitution a quarter of all seats were reserved for *Tatmadaw* appointees in the new

A. Ethnic Parties January 2011[2]

1. Elected to the legislatures 2010

- All Mon Regions Democracy Party
- Chin National Party
- Chin Progressive Party
- Ethnic National Development Party
- Lahu National Development Party [a]
- Inn National Development Party
- Kayan National Party
- Kayin People's Party
- Kayin State Democracy and Development Party [b]
- Pao National Organization [b]
- Phalon-Sawaw [Pwo-Sgaw] Democratic Party
- Rakhine Nationalities Development Party
- Shan Nationalities Democratic Party
- Taaung (Palaung) National Party [b]
- Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State [c]
- Wa Democratic Party

a. party from 1990 election
b. ceasefire group origin-connection
c. government-backed: ceasefire group connection

2. Electoral parties that did not win seats

- All National Races Unity and Development Party (Kayah State)[a]
- Kachin State Progressive Party[b]
- Kaman National Progressive Party
- Khami National Development Party
- Kokang Democracy and Unity Party[c]
- Mro or Khami National Solidarity Organisation[c]
- Northern Shan State Progressive Party[b]
- Rakhine State National Force of Myanmar
- Wa National Unity Party[c]

a. withdrew due to political pressures
b. registration not accepted due to ceasefire group connection
c. party from 1990 election

3. Parties from 1990 election in 2002 United Nationalities Alliance (*boycotted 2010 election)*

- Arakan League for Democracy[a]
- Chin National League for Democracy
- Kachin State National Congress for Democracy
- Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy
- Kayin (Karen) National Congress for Democracy
- Mon National Democratic Front[a]
- Shan Nationalities League for Democracy[a]
- United Nationalities League for Democracy
- Zomi National Congress[a]

a. allied in the 1998 Committee Representing the People's Parliament with the National League for Democracy

assemblies. At the same time, opposition ethnic forces in the conflict-zones were faced with the alternatives of surrender or compromise with the new political system and the integration of their troops into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under *Tatmadaw* control. A deadline of 1 September 2010 was given.

During these events, opposition groups had the potential for influence through the choices that they made, but there was no common strategy. For example, while the ceasefire KIO attended the National Convention that drew up the new constitution, the KNU continued armed struggle in the Thai borderlands. Similarly, while the NLD boycotted the National Convention and 2010 general election, the National Unity Party (NUP - successor to Gen. Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party [BSPP]) took part in both. Already new divisions were appearing in the landscape of national politics.

It was only, however, following the 2010 election and announcement of a new government that the full scale of complexity in national politics became apparent. A snapshot of the post-election landscape reveals the difficulty of challenges as the country enters a new political era.

As expected, the three legislatures (lower and upper houses of parliament and 14 state/region assemblies) will be dominated by the SPDC-created Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and military appointees.[3] The only exception will be the ethnic state assemblies (notably Chin, Karen, Rakhine and Shan) where the 16 ethnic parties that won seats in the polls hope to have influence.[4] But at this critical moment in national transition, only three of the 22 parties elected in 2010 have any history as political or electoral movements;[5] all the rest are new (see Chart A).

In contrast, the nine ethnic parties in the United Nationalities Alliance, that won seats in the 1990 polls, could be faced with political extinction. Like their NLD ally, they boycotted the 2010 vote in protest at election conditions and the detention of political leaders (see Chart A). As a result, their future now is highly uncertain, and the new government may well consider their activities illegal.

Similar complexities exist in the ethnic borderlands. For while five ethnic ceasefire groups and four local militia agreed to become Border Guard Forces, eight groups refused (see Chart B and C). Subsequently, some of the BGF rejectionists resumed relations with the KNU and others of the dozen non-ceasefire groups and factions that still proclaim armed struggle in the borderlands (see Chart B).

Complicating the landscape further, there are over 50 other local militia (*pyithusit*) under the *Tatmadaw* regional commands in a counter-insurgency programme developed by the SPDC (see Chart C).[6] Like the BGFs, some have been formed from ceasefire units; others were formed as local auxiliaries. But their importance in ethnic politics should not be under-estimated. Several are led by candidates that stood or won seats in the 2010 election and, in the new political era, they are likely to continue playing a strategic buffer in blocking opposition against central government authority.

Against this backdrop, the sense of inclusion or exclusion from Burma's new political system is growing. Who will be "in" and who "out" is causing a conflicting array of sentiments from opportunity to fear. It is an unpredictable and dangerous mix.

For their part, at a very time when unity and consensus are needed, opposition groups accuse the *Tatmadaw* authorities of "divide and rule" to dissipate ethnic and political resistance.[7] In response, SPDC officials warned opposition groups that no tactics will deflect the *Tatmadaw*-backed government. "Any ways to achieve national reconsolidation through non-violent,

B. Armed Opposition Forces, January 2011[2]

1. Ceasefire groups (rejected Border Guard Force status)

- Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (5th Brigade)
- Kachin Independence Organisation[a b]
- Kayan New Land Party[a]
- KNU/KNLA Peace Council
- New Mon State Party[a b]
- Shan State Army-North/Shan State Progress Party[a b]
- United Wa State Army
- National Democratic Alliance Army (eastern Shan state)

a. Former National Democratic Front member
b. Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union member

2. Non-ceasefire groups

- Arakan Liberation Party[a]
- Chin National Front[a b]
- Hongsawatoi Restoration Party
- Karen National Union[a b]
- Karenni National Progressive Party[a b]
- Lahu Democratic Front[a]
- National Socialist Council Nagaland (Khaplang faction)
- National United Party of Arakan
- Palaung State Liberation Front[a]
- Pao National Liberation Organisation[a]
- Rohingya Solidarity Organization
- Shan State Army-South
- Wa National Organization[a]

a. Present or former National Democratic Front member
b. Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union member

A number of other small groups, including ethnic Burman militants, also exist on the borders. Some, such as the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, no longer pursue armed struggle. Most are affiliated to the National Council Union of Burma or Ethnic Nationalities Council.

violent, indirect and direct approaches designed to control the ruling government will never come to fruition," a commentary in the state media claimed; instead, the government should be regarded as a "democracy ally".[8]

After decades of conflict, a critical time has thus arrived for Burma's peoples. The country is slowly modernising, and it is undoubtedly more open than the isolationist state under Gen. Ne Win's BSPP (1962-88). In the intervening years, political understandings have spread, and the desire for dialogue and peaceful solutions has long been apparent in communities across the country. Asian investments also indicate that there will be a steep acceleration in energy and infra-structural projects in the ethnic border-lands in the next few years. But as the new government assumes power, vital questions remain unanswered.

Among many challenges, the way the new government pursues ethnic policies could well determine the stability of the country. The critical question is whether the new government uses suppression against perceived opponents and those outside the SPDC's roadmap for reform or will it develop policies of dialogue and inclusion

to support a new era of democracy and peace? For the moment, Burma's future is far from clear.

ETHNIC PARTIES AND OPPOSITION GROUPS

After the 2010 general election, hopes remain for a peaceful resolution to Burma's long-standing conflicts. The challenges of national reconciliation are certainly not new, and many different groups and stakeholders must take responsibility. The legacies of political grievance and national disunity have continued through every political era, and they have been marked by the emergence of military government at the centre and armed opposition groups in the borderlands.

> *"We think everything can be solved by dialogue, and not by fighting. We need development and to improve our agriculture and education system for the next generation. But this can only be achieved by peace. Once civil war occurs, none of our goals can be achieved."*
>
> Yuan Shenbin, head of UWSA education department
> 2 December 2010

What, then, is notable about the present landscape is its organisational complexity.

In 1988, for example, when the SLORC-SPDC assumed power, ethnic aspirations were largely represented by the nine armed opposition forces of the federal-seeking National Democratic Front (NDF - formed 1976). In 2011, however, as the SPDC is succeeded by the USDP-majority government, over 50 ethnic parties exist in name, all seeking to establish meaningful roles in the new political era.

Such organisations can appear bewildering in their differences: small-large, new-old, rural-urban, electoral-armed, community-linguistic. Religious-based groups are also influential, and there has been a growth in non-governmental organisations in the past two decades, reflecting the cultural dynamism of Burmese society. But, behind the scenes, there are many common aspirations and connections between the varied ethnic-based organisations in political terms. Many contemporary differences are the divisions of survival, resulting from the legacies of conflict and the SPDC's political roadmap.

A sense of urgency is therefore growing among ethnic and political leaders that these divisions must be addressed if all nationalities are to enjoy equitable rights in the union. For the moment, opinions are divided between those who believe that the new political system marks a first step from which democratic progress can be made and those who are outside the SPDC's political roadmap and argue that the new government must be opposed.

The warnings from history are clear. Previous periods of government change (in 1948, 1962 and 1988) have all been followed by cycles of conflict, and there are already signs that the threat of violence could escalate again in 2011. Fighting has been increasing in the ethnic borderlands during 2009-2010, and many community leaders fear that it could spread further in the coming year.

It will be vital, therefore, that national divisions are resolved and ethnic parties are not marginalised again from Burma's latest generation of reforms. In particular, the role of two groupings will be crucial: those of armed and political opposition groups. With over 50,000 ethnic troops under arms and a new generation of parties in formation, the political landscape is at its most important in decades.

MILITARY-BASED GROUPS

A dangerous uncertainty presently exists in the ethnic borderlands. At a time of promised reform, militarisation and warnings of

greater conflict have been increasing. This is partly due to the militia and counter-insurgency tactics of the SPDC. But it is also due to reviving militancy among ethnic organisations that oppose the political and economic direction of the country under Snr-Gen. Than Shwe. For many opposition groups, the 2010 election result and reality of the new government are wake-up calls that cannot be ignored.[9]

Against this background, a transformation is under way among armed groups that could be as defining as those that occurred during previous periods of government change. Many political relationships are unravelling and reforming.

> *"The KIO will work hand in hand with any organization or individual who is committed to a genuinely democratic Union of Myanmar to be built upon the principle of a 'sustainable perpetual peace'."*
>
> KIO Central Committee Statement
> 30 August 2010

For much of the SLORC-SPDC era, an uneasy status quo existed. Armed opposition centred around two main blocks: ceasefire and non-ceasefire forces (see Charts). The ceasefire groups eventually came to number 30 different forces and factions, of which 17 were recognised as "official" or major groups.

These largely divided into two groupings by which they represented themselves at the National Convention: a larger bloc led by former members of the NDF, including the KIO and New Mon State Party (NMSP), that sought a federal union; and a smaller bloc, headed by the 20,000-strong United Wa State Army (UWSA), made up of former members of the insurgent Communist Party of Burma which collapsed in 1989. "We think everything can be solved by dialogue, and not by fighting," said Yuan Shenbin, head of the UWSA education department.[10]

Many of the various non-ceasefire groups also had peace talks with the SPDC. Under constant military pressure, most lost considerable ground and influence during the SLORC-SPDC era. Several suffered ceasefire breakaways, while refugee numbers passed the 200,000 mark in neighbouring Thailand, India and Bangladesh. Nevertheless militant strategies persisted, with leaders determined not to end armed struggle until political agreements had been achieved.[11]

Equally important, the veteran KNU (established 1947) preferred to continue "united front" strategies against the military government, utilizing border areas to promote anti-SPDC activities in Burma and abroad. The main vehicle became the National Council Union of Burma, which included ethnic Burman groups, NLD supporters, and the National Coalition Government Union of Burma, made up of exile MPs-elect from the 1990 election.

As a result of these developments, Burma's political landscape remained divided. As the years went by, an assumption continued among different parties that an inclusive dialogue process would eventually begin. But from 2004, political trends were driven by Snr-Gen. Than Shwe in a much more uncompromising fashion.

NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi was not released from house arrest, despite United Nations entreaties; prime minister and military intelligence chief Gen. Khin Nyunt, who was the ceasefire architect, was deposed and arrested along with his colleagues; and tough tactics were resumed against ethnic opposition groups. Most notably, nine Shan leaders were arrested and given draconian jail terms for alleged sedition after they met to discuss the SPDC political roadmap. Those imprisoned included Hkun Htun Oo of the electoral Shan

Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and Gen. Hso Ten of the ceasefire Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) who received 93 and 106 years respectively.

Despite these events, most ceasefire groups continued to attend the National Convention to draw up the new constitution. Their claims for a "union" rather than "unitary" state were not accepted. But many ethnic leaders still believed that, after decades of impasse and conflict, a new election and system of government marked a better starting point for democracy than a continuation of fighting *Tatmadaw* rule. Importantly, too, there were parties, such as the ceasefire Pao National Organisation and Palaung State Liberation Party, which welcomed the delineation of new "self-administered" territories for their nationalities. This is the first time they have been acknowledged on Burma's political map.

> *"We affirm our determination to fight on hand in hand with the people inside the country, the international forces and the allies, until the emergence of a genuine federal union."*
>
> 14th KNU Congress Statement
> 21 December 2010

Relationships with the government, however, began to break down and new divisions emerged during 2009-10 as the SPDC accelerated its political roadmap. Controversies erupted on both the military and political stages.

Many ethnic leaders had wanted ceasefire groups to maintain their forces and territories until the new political system was introduced when the issues of disarmament and reorganisation of their civil administrations (such as health and education) could be negotiated with the new government.

The SPDC, however, pre-empted discussion by its surprise order in April 2009 that the ceasefire groups transform into BGF battalions under government authority. Thirty *Tatmadaw* soldiers would join each 326-troop battalion, including one of the three commanding officers. Many of the smaller groups ultimately agreed, and the SPDC also accelerated its local militia (*pyuthusit*) programme in adjoining areas.[12] During 2009-10, ceasefire groups and government-organised militia were variously ordered to become BGFs or *pyuthisit* according to SPDC criteria (see Chart C, next page). But veteran ethnic leaders from such movements as the KIO, NMSP and UWSA refused and called for further talks with *Tatmadaw* leaders.

The political climate then worsened further in August 2009 when the SPDC sent in troops against the ceasefire Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in the Kokang region to support a breakaway faction that agreed to the BGF orders. 37,000 refugees fled into China, and as many as 200 people were killed or wounded.[13] Messages continued to be exchanged between the different sides. But an influential core of ceasefire groups remained determined in their refusal, allowing a final SPDC deadline of 1 September 2010 to pass.

In a last-minute statement, the KIO reiterated its commitment to dialogue and desire for a "sustainable perpetual peace" on equal ethnic terms, as envisaged by the historic Panglong Agreement in 1947.[14] SPDC officials, however, notified the recalcitrant ceasefire groups that their ceasefire status was now on "pre-agreement" terms.

Political divisions deepened, and all sides began to increase troop training and deployments. Ceasefire groups and militia forces that had agreed BGF or *pyithusit* terms, such as the Pao National Organisation or Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), were allowed to form new parties or put up candidates for the 2010 polls. In

C. Border Guard Forces and Militia, January 2011[2]

1. Border Guard Forces (established 2009-10)

BGF Battalion Number	*Former Name/Description*
BGF 1001-3	New Democratic Army-Kachin[a b]
BGF 1004-5	Karenni Nationalities Peoples Liberation Front[a]
BGF 1006	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army-Kokang[a b]
BGF 1007	Lahu militia, Mongton (Maington), Shan state [c]
BGF 1008	Akha militia, Mongyu (Maingyu), Shan state[c]
BGF 1009	Lahu militia, Tachilek, Shan state[c]
BGF 1010	Wa militia, Markmang (Metman), Shan state[c]
BGF 1011-22	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army[a b]
BGF 1023	Karen Peace Force (ex-KNU 16th battalion) [a b]

a. former ceasefire group
b. connected party or leaders won seats in 2010 election
c. former Tatmadaw-controlled militia

2. Ceasefire groups or factions that have become militia (pyithusit)

- Kachin Defence Army (ex-KIO splinter group)
- Lasang Awng Wa Peace Group (ex-KIO splinter group)[a]
- Mon Peace Defence Group (ex-NMSP splinter group)
- Mong Tai Army Homein (Homong) Region
- Pao National Organisation[b]
- Palaung State Liberation Party[b]
- Rawang Militia (ex-Rebellion Resistance Force)[a]
- Shan State Army-North (3 and 7 Brigades)

a. Connected leader stood in 2010 election
b. Connected party or leaders won seats in the 2010 election

3. Other local militia under Burma Army Regional Commands, Shan state

There are over 50 local militia. Their strengths vary. In north Shan state, the best known include:

Common Name	*Location*
Pansay Militia[a]	Muse-Namkham
Kutkai Militia[a]	Kutkai
Tar Moe Nye Militia[a]	Kutkai
Mongpaw Militia[a]	Muse-Kyukok
Mangpang Militia	Tangyan
Monekoe/Phaunghsai Militia	Mongko
Monhin/Monha Militia	Mongyai

a. leader won seat in 2010 election

contrast, parties that were suspected of political opposition or anti-SPDC agendas were restricted and harassed.

Most noticeably, the registration of the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP) by a group of ex-KIO leaders was rejected by the Election Commission, while the All National Races Unity and Development Party (Kayah State) withdrew under pressure from USDP officials. This meant that no independent Kachin or Karenni nationality party stood for the polls in two of the most restive ethnic states in the country: Kachin and Kayah (Karenni).

Meanwhile United Nationalities Alliance parties like the SNLD that had won seats in the 1990 election decided, along with their NLD ally, not to contest the polls on the ground of political restrictions. Their aim was to make a historic protest; it is also uncertain whether their registration would have been accepted. But their absence only increased the likely dominance of the regime-backed USDP, led by prime minister Thein Sein and other SPDC generals who resigned from the military to enter politics.

The perception then grew that the SPDC was manipulating the polls in the USDP's favour when it was announced that no polls would be held on security grounds in over 300 village tracts in 32 townships in the ethnic states. Only six constituencies were affected *in toto* (four Wa, two Kachin). But the scale of these exclusions was a reminder of the continuing instability within the country. Almost overlooked, more than a dozen insurgent ethnic forces and factions still maintained armed resistance to the SPDC in the borderlands (see Chart B on p. 6).

In the event, none of the leading ceasefire or non-ceasefire groups attempted to disrupt voting on polling day. Instead, not for the first time in Burma's history, violence broke out from an unexpected quarter when a breakaway DKBA group that opposed the BGF order seized control of the key border towns of Myawaddy and Three Pagodas Pass further south.[15]

To escape the fighting, more than 20,000 refugees fled into Thailand. Both towns were quickly retaken by the *Tatmadaw*. But in the following months, clashes continued to spread, with hundreds of casualties being reported.[16] The SPDC rushed up reinforcements, using artillery and conventional warfare tactics. In response, the DKBA militants re-allied with the KNU, from which they had broken away in 1994, and both forces stepped up guerrilla attacks in the Karen state. With civilian casualties increasing, Human Rights Watch and other international organizations reiterated calls for a UN Commission of Inquiry into war crimes.[17] But as the countdown to a new government continued, there was no let-up in the fighting. Ethnic tensions only increased.

Against this backdrop, different ethnic forces began making anticipatory moves for the new political order. In private, hopes remained that the new government would wipe the slate clean from the SPDC era and be responsive to new initiatives to resolve the political impasse. But the mood was growing that parties also had to be prepared for future conflict.

A diversity of tactics were explored by the different ethnic forces. At its 14th Congress, for example, the KNU pledged to "fight on" with the people "until the emergence of a genuine federal union."[18] The SSA-N, which had seen troops defect to become BGFs or militia, restored its 1971 political front, the Shan State Progress Party. And for the first time in 15 years, talks resumed between ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups about joint cooperation.

Meetings are still continuing. But potentially the most important discussion has been the formation of a "Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union", comprising three ceasefire groups (KIO, NMSP and

SSA-N) and three non-ceasefire (KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party and Chin National Front). Leaders explained that the committee is only a first step in trying to create a new platform for dialogue and national reconciliation.[19] But with the UWSA (ceasefire), Shan State Army-South (non-ceasefire) and other armed opposition groups waiting in the wings, the new alliance was also a warning to the government that ethnic resistance groups have not gone away.

As the new government was formed in Nay Pyi Taw in early February, the stage was delicately set. Burma's new leaders claimed a mandate to determine the country's political course. But militant groups that had fought for ethnic rights since Burma's independence still persisted in the borderlands and were once again proposing to challenge the country's political system in pursuit of their goals.

> *"What I see now as the most important thing for our country is the emergence of an all-inclusive political process in which all of our people can participate. I would like everyone to work for this purpose with unity."*
>
> Aung San Suu Kyi, Radio Free Asia
> 11 January 2011

POLITICAL GROUPS

It remains to be seen how Burma's new system of elected government establishes itself in the coming year. Election restrictions and the last-minute addition of "advance votes" by the authorities were widely perceived as ensuring victory for the USDP, which claimed nearly 77 per cent of elected seats in the legislatures. Nevertheless ethnic parties constituted 16 of the 22 parties elected and, along with the National Democratic Force (formed by ex-NLD members), pledged themselves ready to promote democracy and ethnic rights through the new parliamentary system.

It will be important therefore to observe whether the new parties can really develop influential roles of their own. Many reflect the continuing struggles in ethnic politics. For example, three parties (Kayin State Democracy and Development Party, Pao National Organisation and Taaung [Palaung] National Party), have been formed by ex-ceasefire groups,[20] while others (e.g. All Mon Regions Democracy Party) include supporters with armed opposition histories. Other parties mark political innovations, such as the Kayin People's Party led by a *Tatmadaw* veteran and a KNU peace go-between. Similarly, the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party is headed by a former MP-elect from the SNLD, which successfully contested the 1990 election but was repressed by the SPDC.

Counter-balancing these trends, the SPDC sought to maintain its authority in areas where ethnic opposition remains strong. Its main vehicle was the USDP, but quiescent armed ethnic leaders were also promoted. In the northern Shan state, for example, five BGF and militia leaders were elected on a USDP ticket. In contrast, in the Kachin state, where the registration of the KIO-backed KSPP was rejected, the father and son leaders of the ceasefire New Democratic Army-Kachin were elected as an independent and member respectively of the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State, which was supported by the SPDC. Such representatives are expected to follow the new government line.

Many doubts thus exist as to whether the new ethnic and political parties can truly make impact in the new legislatures. With 25 per cent of seats already reserved for military nominees, USDP-*Tatmadaw* domination will be overwhelming in the lower and upper houses of parliament. The government will also be an executive sys-

tem under the new president, ex-Gen. Thein Sein, the former prime minister who originally led the USDP. The appointment of an ethnic Shan, Sai Mauk Kham, as vice-president alongside another senior regime official, ex-Gen Tin Aung Myint Oo, is not expected to make a political difference; both are also USDP representatives.

For this reason, the main ethnic attention in the life of the first legislatures will be focused on the new state assemblies and self-administered areas. In particular, with the exception of the Kachin and Kayah states, "other" elected parties could potentially ally in the ethnic states to control anywhere between 29 per cent (Mon state) and 45 per cent (Chin state) of seats.[21] Few parties expect such assemblies to imminently become political debating grounds for ethnic legislation. And the news that the chairs and speakers of all 14 state and region assemblies will have USDP-*Tatmadaw* backgrounds has been negatively received.

Nevertheless ethnic leaders assert that their victory in the 2010 polls provides them with a legitimate platform to promote ethnic rights in the coming years.[22] As a first step, five parties issued a joint statement in January calling for the lifting of economic sanctions, proportional ethnic representation in the state administrations, and a "general amnesty" to illustrate military government has ended and "democratic transition has begun".[23]

At the same time, opposition parties outside the parliamentary process have also attempted to bring ethnic issues to centre stage. A popular theme of discussion is the call for a new Panglong conference (Panglong-2). The aim is to bring into the 21st century the historic 1947 agreement by which the ethnic principles for the new Union were agreed by frontier area leaders with the independence hero Aung San.

There are many reasons why such a new meeting would be problematical. Who, for example, would represent the different ethnic and ideological groups in the fractious political landscape? For their part, government officials are strongly opposed. A rebuttal in the state media called the idea "a fantasy extremely opposed to reality", because such a proposal overlooked the economic infrastructure and political achievements of the SLORC-SPDC.[24]

Nevertheless hopes for such a new meeting have not retreated. The goal of a new Panglong was initially proposed at a meeting in Kalemyo last October by ethnic and political leaders opposed to the 2010 election.[25] But the call has subsequently been supported by other ethnic parties, including both elected and armed groups.[26] They do not want to confront the new government, they say, but to return to the principles of national equality promised by Aung San. "Everybody would be happy if the same attitude and the same approach could actually be implemented in coordination with the new government," said Nai Han Thar, General-Secretary of the ceasefire NMSP.[27]

Such calls for extra-parliamentary initiatives, however, are likely to be controversial and risk government suppression in the coming months. The NLD has already given general support.[28] But as Aung San Suu Kyi explained after her release from house arrest, if real national reconciliation and progress are to be achieved, the critical need is to bring all Burma's peoples together in the same processes of reform. "What I see now as the most important thing for our country is the emergence of an all-inclusive political process in which all of our people can participate," she said. "I would like everyone to work for this purpose with unity." [29]

These are sentiments with which every citizen would agree. But as the new government started up in Nay Pyi Taw, there was no indication that such an inclusive process will yet begin.

PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Burma's political landscape is at its most critical and poignant in over two decades. A general election does not resolve conflict, but it can produce important outcomes and indicators towards reform. Many uncertainties, however, presently exist in the country.

There is still time for solutions. Nothing is yet set in stone. But the manner by which the new government addresses the country's challenges in the coming months could well decide Burma's fate for another generation. Real peace and prosperity will only come by national inclusion. But as Burma's troubled history since independence has forewarned, unresolved political and ethnic crises will only provide a legacy of failure for the future. In essence, the choices come down to two avenues: dialogue or force.

In the 21st century, Burma's peoples are also faced by a host of challenges of modernity as the country opens up to international affairs. In recent years, progress has begun in addressing Burma's health crises through cooperation with international aid programmes.[30] But in many ethnic borderlands, there remains serious conflict and humanitarian emergency, with continuing loss of life and deep poverty. Around 140,000 refugees remain in official camps in Thailand, while there are over 400,000 internally displaced persons in the eastern borderlands.[31]

Equally urgent, a series of mega economic projects with Asian neighbours are on the drawing boards or underway. These include the Dawei (Tavoy) Development Project to Thailand, the oil and gas pipelines from the Rakhine state coast to Yunnan in China, and numerous hydropower dams on Burma's rivers. Many of these projects are located in ethnic borderlands, where local resentment and the sense of marginalisation have been growing.[32] The need for peace and local consultation has never been greater. Continued conflict and exclusion will deepen grievances – not resolve them.

In early February, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement, hoping that the announcement of a new government "marks the beginning of a change in the status quo". The key, he said, was that this "important opportunity" leads to an "inclusive civilian government that is broadly representative of all parties relevant to national reconciliation and more responsive to the aspirations of the people".[33]

The world is now watching what Burma's new government will do.

NOTES

1. In 1989 the military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They can be considered alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. The UN uses Myanmar, but it is not commonly used in the English language. Therefore Burma will be mostly used in this publication. This is not intended as a political statement.

2. The charts in this report are only intended as a snapshot of the diversity of the ethnic landscape during a time of historic change. Burma is a land in transition, as one military and political era ends and another begins. Some ethnic party or organisation names remain the same, while others are transforming or retiring. Parties also vary considerably in size, orientation or influence. Not all details will be exact, and more change appears certain in the coming year.

3. The USDP won 883 of the 1,154 possible seats in the different legislatures. The NUP came second (62 seats) and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party third (57 seats).

4. In these four states, the combined vote for ethnic parties came to between 37 (Shan) and 45 (Chin) per cent. For an election analysis, see, "A Changing Ethnic Landscape: Analysis of Burma's 2010 polls", TNI Burma Policy Briefing No.4, December 2010.

5. The NUP (ex-BSPP) and Lahu National Development Party, both of which were formed in 1988 and stood in the 1990 election, and the

Pao National Organisation. The PNO took its title from the ceasefire group of that name and joined with the Union Pao National Organisation that won seats in the 1990 election.

6. Since independence, the *Tatmadaw* has often created local militia or "*pyithusit*", including the KaKawYe in the Shan state in the 1960s-70s. Their role is to stop or co-opt militant opposition groups in local communities. For a 2005 analysis and maps through the spectrum of narcotics, see, Shan Herald Agency for News, "Show Business: Rangoon's 'War on Drugs' in Shan State", (S.H.A.N., 2nd edition, 2005).

7. For example, Hseng Khio Fah, S.H.A.N., "Senior Shan resistance leader: Junta out to divide and rule the Wa", 20 September 2010.

8. Kyaw Myint Naing, "What is requirement for national reconsolidation in Myanmar", New Light of Myanmar, 25 December 2010.

9. See e.g., Hseng Khio Fah, "Ceasefire armed groups 'thank' Burma Army for bringing them back to reality", S.H.A.N., 10 December 2010.

10. Interview, 2 December 2010.

11. See e.g., "Address by KNU President Saw Tamlabaw on 61st Anniversary of Karen Revolutionary Day", Office of the Supreme Headquarters Karen National Union, 31 January 2010.

12. See note 6.

13. Tom Kramer, "Burma's Cease-fires at Risk: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy", Transnational Institute, Peace & Security Briefing No. 1, September 2009.

14.Central Committee, Kachin Independence Organization, "Statement, 30 August 2010".

15. For an interview with Col. Saw Lah Pwe, the breakaway DKBA leader, see, "Surrender is Out of the Question", The Irrawaddy, 9 November 2010.

16. There are no reliable statistics for casualty numbers. The state media rarely acknowledged the fighting. For reports of battles based on opposition claims, see e.g., Kyaw Kha, "Clashes continue between DKBA faction and junta troops", Mizzima, 1 December 2010; Saw Yan Naing, "Clashes Continue in Karen State", The Irrawaddy, 27 January 2011.

17. Human Rights Watch, "Burma: Eyewitness Accounts of Abuses in Eastern Fighting: Thai Authorities Should Ensure Protection of Refugees Fleeing Conflict", 4 December 2010.

18. 14th KNU Congress Statement, 21 December 2010.

19. See e.g., Interview with NMSP General-Secretary Nai Han Thar, "We must speak in one voice", Mizzima, 25 January 2011.

20. DKBA, PNO and PSLP.

21. See note 4.

22. For an interview with Dr. Aye Maung, chairman of the Rakhine Nationals Development Party, see, "And the Winner Is …", The Irrawaddy, 5 February 2011. "We, the pro-democracy forces, want our country to be developed and peaceful," he said.

23. Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, Chin National Party, All Mon Regions Democracy Party, Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party, "Joint Statement by Ethnic Brethren Parties", 15 January 2011.

24. Banyar Aung, "Don't trivialize the national cause", New Light of Myanmar, 9 December 2010.

25. Myint Maung, "Suu Kyi floats Panglong II via modern technology", Mizzima, 17 November 2010.

26. See e.g., Ko Htwe, "Pro-election Parties Support Second Panglong Conference", The Irrawaddy, 26 October 2010.

27. See note 19.

28. See note 25.

29. Aung San Suu Kyi, Radio Free Asia, 11 January 2011.

30. See e.g., Three Diseases Fund, "Annual Report 2009", (3DF, Yangon, 2009).

31. See e.g., Thailand Burma Border Consortium, "Protracted Displacement and Chronic Poverty in Eastern Burma/Myanmar", (TBBC, Bangkok, 2010).

32. Kachin Development Networking Group, "Resisting the flood: Communities taking a stand against the imminent construction of Irrawaddy dams", www.burmariversnetwork.org, 2009; and Shwe Gas Movement, "Corridor of Power: China's Trans-Burma Oil and Gas Pipelines" (Chiang Mai, 2009).

33. Agence France-Presse, "UN chief calls on Burma to recognise opposition", 6 February 2011.

TNI-BCN Project on Ethnic Conflict in Burma

Burma has been afflicted by ethnic conflict and civil war since independence in 1948, exposing it to some of the longest running armed conflicts in the world. Ethnic nationality peoples have long felt marginalised and discriminated against. The situation worsened after the military coup in 1962, when minority rights were further curtailed. The main grievances of ethnic nationality groups in Burma are the lack of influence in the political decision-making processes; the absence of economic and social development in their areas; and what they see as the military government's Burmanisation policy, which translates into repression of their cultural rights and religious freedom.

This joint TNI-BCN project aims to stimulate strategic thinking on addressing ethnic conflict in Burma and to give a voice to ethnic nationality groups who have until now been ignored and isolated in the international debate on the country. In order to respond to the challenges of 2010 and the future, TNI and BCN believe it is crucial to formulate practical and concrete policy options and define concrete benchmarks on progress that national and international actors can support. The project will aim to achieve greater support for a different Burma policy, which is pragmatic, engaged and grounded in reality.

The **Transnational Institute** (TNI) was founded in 1974 as an independent, international research and policy advocacy institute, with strong connections to transnational social movements and associated intellectuals concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable, environmentally sustainable and peaceful direction. Its point of departure is a belief that solutions to global problems require global co-operation.

BCN was founded in 1993. It works towards democratisation and respect for human rights in Burma. BCN does this through information dissemination, lobby and campaign work, and the strengthening of Burmese civil society organisations. In recent years the focus has shifted away from campaigning for economic isolation towards advocacy in support of civil society and a solution to the ethnic crises in Burma.

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