

Prospects for Ethnic Peace and Political Participation in Burma/Myanmar

Bangkok, July 8-9, 2012

In July, TNI-BCN hosted a two-day conference, involving a diversity of ethnic groups from different areas of Burma/Myanmar,¹ with the theme “prospects for ethnic peace and political participation”.² Those taking part included 30 representatives from Burmese civil society, parliament and armed opposition groups.

Political events in Burma are continuing to unfold rapidly, but reform is still at a tentative and early stage. Under the Thein Sein government, Burma has entered its fourth era of political transition since independence in 1948. Previous hopes for ethnic peace and the establishment of democratic structures and processes have been disappointed. A military coup in 1962 ended the post-independence parliamentary era, and the national armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) have dominated every form of government since. Meanwhile conflict has continued unabated in the ethnic borderlands.

In recent months, new trends – many of them positive – have begun to reshape the landscape of national politics. Ceasefires have been agreed with the majority of armed ethnic forces; the National League for Democracy (NLD) has elected representatives in the national legislatures; Western sanctions are gradually being lifted; and the World Bank and other international agencies are returning to set up office in the country. Such developments are likely to have a defining impact on ethnic politics, which remains one of the central challenges facing the country today.

The conference focused on four main areas: the space for ethnic parties in the national and regional parliaments; the prospects for ethnic peace; peace as a national issue; and the impact of regional investment in the ethnic borderlands. In addition, given the political failures during previous times of state transition (1948, 1962 and 1988), the discussions kept in mind three underlying questions that need addressing if democracy and peace are to be achieved: is the present political system, bequeathed by the previous military government, reformable; in an often personalised environment, who are the key actors on the different political and ethnic sides shaping the country’s future; and, are divisive trends of favoured “winners” and excluded “losers” emerging again under the new governmental system?

Discussion on all themes reflected a country in uncertain but potentially fast transition, where the political landscape remains fragmented and ethnic parties often feel marginalised. In the past few months, the entry of the NLD into parliament, the spread of ethnic ceasefires and increasing Western engagement have all encouraged hopes of progressive change.

On the other hand, daily life is little changed in many of the ethnic states, with *Tatmadaw* domination continuing and ethnic parties struggling to make much impact. Military offensives, especially in the Kachin and Shan States, as well as communal violence in the Rakhine State, have caused many citizens to question the likely

shape of the future Burma/Myanmar state. After decades of conflict, building trust and ethnic reconciliation will take time.

The activities of ethnic parties in the national and regional parliaments are still at a very early stage. For the moment, there is no real cohesion between the national and regional legislatures and, at the state and region levels, much can depend on the chief ministers who are centrally appointed by the president. In addition, military commanders and the Ministry of Border Affairs still appear to exert the greatest authority in many ethnic areas. There are also divisions in ethnic politics between electoral parties inside and outside of the legislatures, some of which, like the NLD, boycotted the 2010 polls.

For this reason, ethnic parties are taking a long-term view in developing their political strategies. Coalitions such as the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum are working together to promote ethnic rights in the legislatures, while steps are being taken to unite existing ethnic parties on nationality bases (Chin, Mon, Shan etc.) before the next general election in 2015. By this stage, if the current ceasefire process develops, it is expected that armed opposition groups will join electoral politics. Federalism remains a common goal, and it is widely recognised that unity will be essential if nationality-based parties are to effectively represent their peoples and constituencies.

Already a new set of challenges is emerging in the legislatures that could be to the detriment of ethnic minority peoples. Two issues have been the cause of recent concern – laws on land rights and foreign investment – which, it is feared, could act as precursors to the expropriation of land. This is all the more troubling at a time when it is hoped that the many internally displaced persons and refugees can return home as part of the country's ethnic cease-fires. There is also a growing anxiety that the status of ethnic minority peoples could be undermined before the 2015 general

election by a national census, the first since 1983, with concerns about how nationality and ethnic identity will be dealt with in National Registration Cards.

A sense is thus developing of an expanding outreach by a centralised, Burman-majority state before ethnic rights have been effectively guaranteed in the new political system. Such concerns are compounded by government officials and *Tatmadaw* commanders wielding personal power in the states and regions, while the first-past-the-post electoral system means that Burman-majority parties are likely to remain dominant in national politics after the 2015 general election without countrywide unanimity for such control.

As yet, there have been no long-term agreements with Burman-majority parties (including the NLD) to avoid vote-splitting with ethnic parties. Support is therefore growing for an electoral system based on proportional representation. How such changes might be brought about, however, is not clear. The next general election in 2015 is therefore regarded a key date to work towards in the country's political evolution.

Closely watching these events are armed ethnic opposition groups, who view the performance of the national and regional legislatures as an important barometer in assessing the new political system. Since President Thein Sein assumed office, events in the conflict-zones have moved quickly and ethnic parties remain doubtful about the government's real objectives. The prospect of peace has been welcomed by all sides. However, over the past year, different government officials and army commanders have been involved in ethnic affairs; different tactics have been employed against different ethnic groups; agreements have not always been kept; and there has been an underlying perception by ethnic groups of a strategy of "divide and rule" on the part of government to prevent them from working together.

Of particular concern are *Tatmadaw* offensives begun under the Thein Sein government against the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Shan State Army-North, both of which had ceasefires in the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) era, and Nay Pyi Taw officials appear unable to halt military operations on the front-lines. The consequences have been profound. Hundreds of lives have been lost; over 60,000 civilians internally displaced; and many villages destroyed. The recent outbreak of communal violence in the Rakhine State further highlights the complexity of ethnic challenges in the country.

At the same time, there remain hopes that, providing the Thein Sein government is committed to democratic and ethnic reforms, mechanisms can be established that lead to peaceful solutions. The majority of armed ethnic groups now have ceasefires with the government, and Thein Sein's recent establishment of a "Union-level Peace Making Committee" is encouraging expectations that an inclusive process can be established to resolve conflict through dialogue. Peace is regarded a "national" rather than simply "ethnic" issue, and the advent of the NLD in parliament and support from democracy activists among the Burman public is furthering hopes of a countrywide movement for peace. A new "Panglong" conference is thus thought desirable to symbolise a new era of unity and progress.

The recent involvement of international agencies in conflict resolution is also raising hopes that peace processes under the Thein Sein government will be different from the SPDC era. This has become a fluid and fast-moving area, with ethnic parties expressing concern that the diversity of international groups making approaches could complicate rather than help events in the field. The agendas and relationships of international agencies are not always clear. Nevertheless there is hope that international actors, by constructively working

together, can support initiatives to bring ethnic rights and social justice to the people.

Four main groupings have lately emerged: the Myanmar (formerly Norwegian) Peace Support Initiative, which is piloting humanitarian projects in new ceasefire areas; the Peace Donor Support Group, which includes Western government donors, the World Bank and the UN; the International Peace Support Group, which is an informal coordination network of over 20 international NGOs; and the Myanmar Peace Centre, which is being established by the Thein Sein government to act as secretariat to the national Peace Making Committee and as the focal point for international actors concerned with peace. All are emerging formations, and patterns could change, depending on events within the country.

Finally, the impact of regional investments in the ethnic borderlands is a growing cause of concern. In principle, investments that are sustainable and benefit the people have not been opposed by local communities, and President Thein Sein's postponement of the China-backed Myitsone Dam in the Kachin State was welcomed as an indication that the government is listening to environmental and local community concerns. In recent months, however, the pace of economic pressure has accelerated, and many communities fear that they will be bypassed in local planning and progress. As ethnic parties point out, conflicts continue in many border areas and the new political system is not yet fully representative and functioning.

Protests have already started against projects in several parts of the country (Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Tanintharyi), and in the coming years these issues are likely to gain in importance. The ethnic borderlands are strategically located in the path of many new investment projects, and there are concerns that Burma could suffer the "resource curse" that undermined equitable

development in other parts of the world, unless ethnic peace, political reform and participatory planning are initiated from the outset.

Major economic projects are now under way, including the oil and gas pipelines to China, the Kaledan Gateway project with India and the Dawei Development project with Thailand. But this is only the beginning: China wants to open up the country to the sub-Asian region via a north-south corridor, while Japan is interested in another from east to west. Special economic zones, too, are being mooted that are expected to lead to more land expropriation, and this is deepening concerns about the future of the many displaced persons, refugees and migrant workers in the ethnic borderlands. Huge economic and humanitarian challenges remain.

How these issues will be resolved is as yet uncertain. There are, however, constructive ways forward. Ceasefire processes that lead to inclusive political agreements are regarded as essential, and it is hoped that the new parliamentary system will, in the meantime, develop the competence to effectively represent and legislate on issues of economic concern. Transparent planning processes will also be vital, and compliance with UN, ASEAN and other international standards will help all sides work together in the national interest. Clearly, there remains much to achieve during the course of the current parliament.

In summary, Burma is now at a sensitive stage in its political transition. Under the Thein Sein government, encouraging prospects for the future have undoubtedly emerged. But reform is still at a very early stage, and there should be no underestimation of the difficult challenges that lie ahead. Ethnic conflict and military-dominated government continue in many areas and, after decades of division, intensive efforts are still required to bring about an inclusive and lasting peace.

A new parliamentary system is in place, but further attention will be needed on such issues as electoral, census, land tenure rights, education, investment and economic reform to guarantee the rights of all peoples. Independent institutions must also strive to grow in an environment where power and decision-making are often in the hands of small elites. And, as events move quickly, it is vital that all parts of the country are included. The history of state failure has long warned of the debilitating consequences of political and ethnic exclusions.

NOTES

1. In 1989 the military State Law and Order Restoration Council government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They are alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. Although this is changing, Myanmar is not yet commonly used in the English language. For consistency, Burma will be used in this report. This is not intended as a political statement.
2. The conference followed the Chatham House Rule, which reads as follows: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." See: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouserule>

TNI-BCN Project on Ethnic Conflict in Burma

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.

Transnational Institute

Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Tel: +31-20-6626608

Fax: +31-20-6757176

E-mail: burma@tni.org

<http://www.tni.org/page/ethnic-conflict-burma>

Burma Centrum Netherlands

Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Tel.: 31-20-671 6952

Fax: 31-20-671 3513

E-mail: info@burmacentrum.nl

<http://www.burmacentrum.nl>