

## Political Reform in Burma/Myanmar and Consequences for Ethnic Conflict

*Chiangmai, 20-21 February 2013*

In February, TNI-BCN hosted a two-day seminar, involving ethnic groups from different regions of Burma/Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> on the theme “political reform and consequences for ethnic conflict”. Those participating included 28 representatives from Burmese civil society, parliament and armed opposition groups.<sup>2</sup>

The seminar took place at a critical time. The reform agenda under the quasi-civilian government of President Thein Sein has continued to gain domestic momentum and international approval. The socio-political landscape is undoubtedly more dynamic and open than in March 2011 when President Thein Sein assumed office. Over the past year international leaders, including US President Barack Obama, have visited Burma, while Thein Sein has been received in countries around the world, including China, Belgium, Norway and other European states.

On the ground, reform is at an early stage, and livelihoods and security remain unstable in many communities. Ethnic conflicts and military practises from the past continue, while new upheavals are occurring during a time of uncertain political and economic change. Hopes remain that Burma faces a better future. But over a thousand lives have been lost in violence since the Thein Sein government came to power, and a further 200,000 civilians have been internally displaced. As in other political eras since independence in 1948, the main casualties are ethnic minority peoples.

The seminar focused on four main areas: peace talks and ethnic conflict; political parties and civil society; economic developments in the borderlands; and the international community. In addition, it was recognised that state failure continued during previous times of constitutional change (1948, 1962, 1974 and 1988). Transition from decades of military rule remains uncharted territory for all parties and stakeholder groups. For these reasons, frank and inclusive discussions are considered vital if needs and grievances are to be addressed and Burma is to achieve a democratic era of peace and justice for all.

The spread of ethnic ceasefires with the government was welcomed. But confidence in peace initiatives and reform is being tested by worrying trends and events. These include offensives by government forces (Tatmadaw) in the Kachin and northern Shan states; continued militarization in many ethnic borderlands; Buddhist-Muslim communal violence in the Rakhine state and other areas; and land-grabbing on a disturbing scale. In consequence, humanitarian needs remain immense and, in several areas, internal displacement has continued to rise.

Criticisms are not always publicly expressed by government, opposition and international representatives involved in peace talks. But difficulties are deeply felt among communities and civil society groups on the ground. Sentiment has been growing that peace initiatives are top-down, military-based, non-transparent and

often excluding the voice of the local people.

As a result, there is little consensus about the prospects of peace initiatives underway. For while the notion of an “inclusive process” under the “Union Peace-making” initiative of President Thein Sein is being promoted, the reality is rather more complex in the field. Ceasefire talks have taken place through different government approaches to different ethnic groups; there is no over-arching strategy nor national agreement on reform schedules and goals; the Myanmar Peace Centre is regarded a government project that does not reflect non-Burman peoples; business rather than politics and communities is the focus of many ceasefire activities; international agencies have different interests and priorities; and, in several ethnic regions, Tatmadaw officers appear to be continuing long-term strategies of military pacification and “regional clearances” of their own.

Against this backdrop, two different tracks have emerged towards a nationwide peace process: a government initiative, coordinated by U Aung Min, and an ethnic-based initiative by armed members of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). A first meeting between the two sides was held in February 2013. But many difficulties lie ahead. Controversial issues include political dialogue, national inclusion, Tatmadaw agreement, economic policies, demilitarization, humanitarian access and the resettlement of displaced people, including an estimated 150,000 refugees (mostly Karen and Karenni) still living in Thailand.

To improve understanding, a popular suggestion is that there should be an ethnic peace centre as part of efforts to broaden civil society involvement and national focus on the ethnic cause. Any successful peace process must be anchored in the community. But, for the moment, the perception remains that government and Tatmadaw leaders are in no hurry, with a “hidden

agenda” as they bid to strengthen central control; they prefer to continue dealing with different ethnic groups differently; and, with few exceptions, officials are more focused on bedding in the existing political system and status quo before the next general election in 2015.

A similar sense of frustration over ethnic progress exists among ethnic political parties in the new parliamentary system. In general, greater unity is being achieved through ethnic parties in such networks as the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation. A consensus is growing towards federal goals similar to those of the UNFC. There has also been increasing inter-action between ethnic parties, armed ethnic groups and civil society in many parts of the country, especially in the Karen and Shan states. All support the ideal of parliamentary politics. However the criticism is widespread that the present political system and state legislatures do not represent ethnic needs or causes; ethnic parties are unable to promote real discussion or decision-making on critical challenges facing their peoples; and there is no indication as to how armed ethnic groups, their territories and goals can be incorporated in the new political system. Federalism remains a controversial issue.

A further concern is that Burman-majority parties, which dominate the parliamentary system, do not adequately understand or reflect the aspirations and requirements of ethnic minority peoples who make up an estimated third of the population. Ethnic groups are especially critical that Burman-majority parties – whether the pro-government Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) or opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) – have appeared reluctant to speak up or independently intercede on the violence in the Kachin state and other ethnic borderlands. To try and rectify these failings, proportional representation or the agreement of the NLD to single “ethnic democracy” parties standing for elections in the ethnic

states is being mooted. For the moment, however, both the USDP and NLD appear to count on “split” votes among parties in ethnically diverse areas. This greatly favours the prospects of nationwide Burman-majority parties in the “first past the post” system in the country’s elections.

Despite these differences, all sides recognise that constitutional amendments are essential if the present political system is to be made to work and truly represent all peoples. In particular, ethnic political parties want to establish a federal system that guarantees their political, economic, social-cultural and religious rights. Furthermore, the reservation of a quarter of all seats in the legislatures for Tatmadaw appointees is an undemocratic anomaly that requires reform agreement between political and military leaders. But there is presently little expectation of major constitutional change before the next general election in 2015. In the meantime, there are concerns that ethnic politics will continue to be eclipsed on the national stage. This would be a historic mistake. As in previous political eras, the marginalisation of ethnic interests will only sustain grievance and conflict, further perpetuating the risk of state failure.

In this reform vacuum, ethnic groups and local communities have become extremely concerned over the pace and style of economic change under the Thein Sein government, often involving Asian investors and business favourites of the ruling elite. The view is widely held that economic designs are behind many government strategies towards ethnic groups, including recent offensives in the Kachin and Shan borderlands. The China-backed Myitsone dam project in the Kachin state is currently suspended. But other major projects, such as the oil and gas pipelines from the Rakhine state to China and the Dawei Development Project with Thailand, are continuing, and displacement and the lack of local consultation or benefit are increasingly the source

of unrest and protests among community groups. Many ethnic organisations believe that there should be a moratorium on further economic projects in their territories until inclusive political agreements are reached.

Economic resentment also risks fuelling communal tensions, including with Indian and Chinese minorities, that have been reflected not only in Buddhist-Muslim or “Rakhine-Rohingya” violence but also in inflammatory exchanges on the internet and in local media. In fact, security repression of protests at the Letpadaung copper mine – a joint-venture between Tatmadaw and Chinese state-owned companies – has warned that concerns over non-consultation, displacement, the exploitation of natural resources and enforced economic projects are not simply an ethnic minority affair. It is vital therefore that transparent and inclusive decision-making processes over economic policies are prioritized at both the national and local levels. Long-overdue attention needs to be paid to the economic basis of ethnic grievance and conflict.

Finally, while the entry of international donors and agencies into Burma’s ethnic politics is generally appreciated, ethnic groups often feel that they are pursuing their own agendas and/or repeating the same errors as the government. They appear to have no common strategy or end-goal; it is often hard to understand their focus or ways of working; sanctions are being dropped and human rights issues, for long the Western priority, appear to have been downgraded; and they have not had influence in dealing with such crises as government offensives in the Kachin borderlands, Buddhist-Muslim violence, and the continuing trends of land-grabbing and economic marginalisation. Rather than prioritizing ethnic and political realities today, they seem more focused on economic engagement with Nay Pyi Taw and hoping to build up President Thein Sein

and Aung San Suu Kyi as reformist leaders for the long-term.

Over the past year, a general structure has developed among the different international peace efforts. These include the Norway-backed Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, Euro-Burma Office-supported Working Group on Ethnic Coordination and Japan's Nippon Foundation. For all, their main gateway to the country is through the Myanmar Peace Centre, which is widely regarded a government extension. Meanwhile China remains the most dominant international actor, engaging directly with both the government and ethnic opposition groups. As demonstrated by China hosting recent talks in the Kachin conflict, Chinese stakeholders are likely to continue working hard to ensure their pre-eminent position for a variety of economic, regional and security reasons that are quite different to Western agendas and perspectives.

In this changing landscape, ethnic groups often feel trapped between different Burma government and international interests. They thus hope that, in the coming year, domestic and international understanding of ethnic needs and interests are broadened. As they point out, ceasefires of varying kinds have already existed in Burma for over two decades now. The challenge is to move forward to nationwide agreements that will bring about inclusive and lasting peace. "Third party" support could be very helpful. At the same time, international actors must pay greater attention to the economic impact of investments in the borderlands. Developments that will benefit the people have always been wanted. But, despite the spread of ceasefires, perceptions of exploitation and exclusion have been increasing during the past year, and this could become a very regressive trend if urgent attention is not paid soon.

In summary, while there have been undeniably positive trends in Burma over the past year, these have not yet been translated into ethnic peace and justice. An uncertain

political era has begun, bringing both opportunities and new challenges in quick order. Many needs can be listed and, ultimately, political solutions must be agreed. But for this to be achieved, it is vital that ethnic issues are prioritized at the centre of national politics; activities are broadened at the community levels to strengthen the participation of civil society; and transparency about peace strategies and initiatives is made a bedrock for all political, military and economic actions by the different sides. Experience has long taught that ethnic marginalisation and "divide-and-rule" will lead to failure. Only by keeping ethnic challenges in clear view can confidence build among the peoples in Burma's reform process, leading to the democracy, peace and equitable development that have long been overdue.

---

## NOTES

1. In 1989 the then military 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 seminar 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>

This briefing has been produced with the financial assistance of Sweden, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bangkok, the Royal Danish Embassy in Bangkok and the Royal Dutch Embassy in Bangkok. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of TNI and BCN and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors.