

## Burma in 2010: A Critical Year in Ethnic Politics

2010 is set to become Burma's most important and defining year in two decades. The general election scheduled by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) could well determine the country's political landscape for another generation. All institutions and parties are faced with the uncertainties of political transformation. This includes the military SPDC, mass Union Solidarity and Development Association, opposition National League for Democracy and diverse ethnic nationality organisations.

At this critical moment in Burma's history, it is still not certain whether the general election will prove an accepted step in the SPDC's seven-stage roadmap for political reform or become the basis for a new generation of grievances. As the election countdown continues, new divisions are emerging in Burmese politics, warning that a unique opportunity for dialogue and national reconciliation could be lost.

An inclusive discussion and focus on the election are vital if its conduct and consequences are to have common meaning – whether in Burma (Myanmar)<sup>1</sup> or the international community. Burma's first election in twenty years (and third in fifty) marks a rare moment of supposedly national participation in deciding the representatives of central and local government. Its historic importance cannot be ignored.

In no conflict-torn country can a general election be expected to resolve all political crises overnight. But it can be an important catalyst in establishing peace by acting as an indicator of popular sentiment and precursor of change. After decades of insurgency and military rule, Burma faces many challenges.

### CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The 2010 general election could mark the most defining moment in a generation, but new divisions in Burmese politics are undermining prospects for democracy and national reconciliation
- Resolution of Burma's long-standing ethnic crises is integral to the achievement of real peace, democracy and constitutional government.
- The UN and international community need to establish a common focus on the election and its political consequences.
- Political and ethnic inclusion is essential if Burma's long history of state failure is to be addressed.
- To establish sustainable ethnic peace, there must be conflict resolution, humanitarian progress and equitable participation in the economy, bringing rights and benefits to all the country's peoples and regions.

Political violence and impasse have long underpinned economic decline and humanitarian emergency. The problems are closely interlinked. But given the primacy of ethnic conflict in all political eras since independence, precedent strongly indicates that, unless ethnic peace and justice are achieved, the legacies of state failure and humanitarian suffering will only continue.

## BACKGROUND

Conflict and ethnic grievance have continued through every stage of Burma's political history since independence in 1948.<sup>2</sup> Insurgencies broke out among such ethnic groups as the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Pao during the short-lived parliamentary era (1948-62). Armed opposition then accelerated among other nationalities, including the Kachin, Palaung and Shan, after General Ne Win seized power in a military coup and imposed one-party rule under the "Burmese Way to Socialism" (1962-88).

Burma has since remained in a militarised state under the present State Peace and Development Council (formerly State Law and Order Restoration Council: SLORC), which assumed power in 1988 after repressing demonstrations that brought down the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government of Ne Win.

A ceasefire policy was instituted by the new regime in 1989 and a general election held the following year. But insurgencies have continued in several border areas; ceasefire forces have maintained their arms; and there is as yet no transition to a democratic system of government.

The social and humanitarian consequences have been profound. Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia and ranks 138 on the UN Human Development Index, putting it on a par with Cambodia and Pakistan. There are over 180,000 refugees from Burma in neighbouring countries as well as over two million migrant workers, legal and illegal.<sup>3</sup> There are an estimated 470,000 people internally displaced in eastern rural districts.<sup>4</sup> The country remains the world's largest producer of illicit opium after Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> And treatable or preventable diseases like malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS continue to take a heavy human toll.

The whole country is affected by such suffering, but the major impact is felt in ethnic nationality regions, especially conflict-zones along the borders with Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand. One of the most

ethnically diverse countries in Asia, minority peoples make up an estimated third of Burma's 56 million, and perceptions of discrimination, poverty and governmental neglect have long fuelled conflict.

Efforts at conflict resolution date back to independence. Lobbying, however, for ethnic reform during the parliamentary era and peace talks with different insurgent groups failed to resolve the many anomalies in the 1947 constitution, which was federal in style but not in name. Subsequently, conflict only increased during a quarter century of military socialist rule under Ne Win's BSPP.

The 1974 constitution created for the first time a sense of ethnic equality on the political map. It demarked seven divisions where most of the Burman majority live and seven ethnic states: Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. But the totalitarian nature of government and draconian counter-insurgency tactics by the Burma armed forces (Tatmadaw) in the rural countryside only increased antipathy and resistance. The national economy collapsed, and in 1987 Burma was classified with Least Developed Country status by the United Nations as one of the world's ten poorest nations. Change was clearly long overdue.

1988 was a year of seismic events that witnessed mass pro-democracy protests and Ne Win's resignation but ended with another security crackdown by a new generation of Tatmadaw leaders. The new regime promised democratic change, but hopes for swift reform soon faded. Only in 2010, more than twenty years later, does the SPDC appear ready to institute a new system of government. This, in turn, is precipitating another major upheaval in national politics that is on a parallel with other tumultuous years of government change: 1948, 1962 and 1988.

For the moment, Burma's future political course remains contentious and far from clear. Will the 2010 election and introduction of a new constitution prove the basis for a new era of consensual government or will it perpetuate conflict and national division? The country is entering a critical period.

## THE CHANGING SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

From 1988 to 1991 Burmese politics underwent a major transformation that persisted in most organisational aspects for the next two decades. In 2010, however, the imminence of political change is forcing all groups and parties to reconsider their positions. In essence, to take part in Burma's new political system, all parties have to register with the authorities and transform.

Under Ne Win's BSPP government, no ethnic parties were recognised by the constitution. Instead, ethnic opposition was represented by a diversity of militant groups in two major blocks: the nine-party National Democratic Front (NDF), formed 1976, that sought a federal union; and allies of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which had remained the country's largest insurgent force since 1948.

This pattern of three-cornered conflict between the BSPP, NDF and CPB was then shattered by the 1988 upheavals that caused new groups and alignments to emerge. Four events stood out:

- The BSPP was replaced by a new system of military government under the SLORC-SPDC.
- In 1989 the new government introduced an ethnic ceasefire policy following mutinies that caused the collapse of the CPB and formation of new ethnic forces in northeast Burma. Several ethnic forces, led by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), quickly agreed to peace terms.
- The 1990 general election was overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and allied ethnic parties that gained the second largest block of seats.
- Over a dozen MPs-elect went underground to escape arrest for having tried to convene a parliament and government. They subsequently joined up with other democracy activists, thousands of whom had fled into NDF-controlled territories in the borderlands since 1988.

The most important transformation in political movements was taking place since independence. A major test of wills thus developed as to who would control Burma's transition: the Tatmadaw, the NLD or ethnic groups in the borderlands who hoped that the political pendulum could be swinging their way. For the next two decades, there would be frequent calls in Burma and abroad for "tripartite" dialogue as the most appropriate method to resolve the country's political crises.

Ultimately, it was the Tatmadaw government that maintained – and increased – national control through a combination of measures. These included the repression of the NLD and other opposition groups, the drawing up of a new constitution by a hand-picked National Convention (1993-2008), and the growth of the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA, formed 1993) to over 21 million members. In particular, Senior General Than Shwe and the Tatmadaw leaders consistently rejected tripartite dialogue and United Nations or other international initiatives seeking to bring Burma's different parties together around the same table.

Ethnic politics thus continued in complex and uncertain form. In private, there were many links between the different ethnic parties and alliances, with a common determination to be influential in the country's transition. But there was little agreement about how this should be achieved. Following the 1988-91 upheavals, three new and importantly different groupings emerged: electoral, ceasefire and non-ceasefire organisations.<sup>6</sup>

On the electoral front, 19 ethnic nationality parties won seats in the 1990 election, spearheaded by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). Subsequently, most parties allied with the NLD through such initiatives as the 1998 Committee Representing the People's Parliament. But different strategies also emerged. From 1995, protesting restrictions on freedom of expression, the SNLD and allied parties joined the NLD in boycotting the National Convention to draw

up the new constitution. But six parties, including the Union Pao National Organisation (UPNO), continued to attend.

Then in 2002 the SNLD and eight other parties set up the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) in an effort to promote the ethnic nationality cause. But like the NLD, the electoral ethnic parties grew increasingly marginalised during the long years of SLORC-SPDC government.

Ceasefire politics were similarly diverse. By 2000, over 25 ethnic forces, some of which

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*“The laws are...against the opinions of the international community and the actual desires of the people of Myanmar... All these election laws are based on the unjust and legally unapproved constitution 2008. According to these election laws, we feel that the coming elections cannot be free and fair.”*

UNA letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, March 2010

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were small militia or factions, had been accorded ceasefire status. But 16 major or “official” groups were recognized, including former NDF members such as the well-organised Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO, formed 1961) and New Mon State Party (NMSP, formed 1958).

These peace agreements brought the first cessation of hostilities and loss of life for many decades in key border areas, opening up long closed-off regions to development and trade. But political and economic progress was slow, and resentment grew over the exploitation of natural resources, such as timber and minerals, with limited benefits to the local people.<sup>7</sup>

Then at the National Convention, ceasefire representatives put forward their demands in two different blocks: a 4-party ex-CPB group, the Peace and Democracy Front (PDF), advo-

cating autonomous regions similar to those in China; and a 13-party group led by ex-NDF members proposing a federal union. Neither of these ideas was accepted; SPDC officials equate “federalism” with “disintegration”.<sup>8</sup> Ceasefire representatives nevertheless continued attending the National Convention on the basis that their demands would go into the historical record and could later be revived. But ceasefire groups grew increasingly concerned over the lack of political progress.

Non-ceasefire or insurgent groups also remained a militant presence. In 1992, a “united front” highpoint was achieved with the formation of the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB), bringing together over twenty anti-government groups. These included the Karen National Union (KNU, formed 1947), long the country’s leading ethnic force, and National Coalition Government Union of Burma (NCGUB, formed 1990) comprising exile MPs-elect. A new political dynamic appeared possible, uniting ethnic militants in the borderlands and democracy activists from the Burman majority in the cities. But differences over strategy and the growing ceasefire movement eroded the NCUB’s effectiveness.

This was highlighted when the KNU lost its headquarters on the Thai border following a 1994 breakaway by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which accepted a ceasefire with the military government. As fighting continued and refugee numbers grew, the KNU, NDF, NCUB and other militant groups maintained their advocacy for ethnic rights. In 2001, an Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) was also formed to foster broader unity in preparation for tripartite dialogue. But as the SPDC roadmap went forward, non-ceasefire strength and influence declined inside the country.

All the armed ethnic groups also came under pressure to maintain peace in the borderlands from Asian neighbours, notably China, Thailand, India and Bangladesh, who accelerated major trade, energy and infrastructure projects with the SPDC. The economic and humanitarian situation in Burma remained grave. But by the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, despite Western boycotts, Burma's natural resource wealth and strategic position were gaining Asian priority in one of the fastest-developing regions of the world. The idiosyncratic days of Ne Win's hermetic "Burmese Way to Socialism" were receding into history. While the SPDC built a new capital at Nay Pyi Taw in the centre of the country, many of the new natural resource projects, including gas pipelines and hydroelectric dams, were located in ethnic nationality regions. But it remained questionable who would really benefit.

Finally, as the socio-political landscape changed, ethnic community-based groups became more active. Ethnic leaders from faith-based organisations like the Myanmar Council of Churches were go-betweens in peace talks, while secular groups increased in number from the mid-1990s as the growth of NGOs gathered pace in the country. Some of these, notably the Shalom Foundation, concentrated on peace issues, while others like the Metta Development Foundation set up aid projects in conflict-affected areas.

In summary, political change was long delayed, but community life was by no means moribund.<sup>9</sup> With the advent of ceasefires, international business, the internet and travel mobility, Burma in 2010 was different in many social and economic respects to Ne Win's one-party state in 1988.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF THE 2010 ELECTION**

The completion of the country's new constitution during 2008 and announcement of the 2010 election gave a new impetus to political life. As details emerged, there were few surprises. Burma's future government will continue to be dominated by the military under an executive and unitary system rather than a federal or union system as proposed by pro-democracy and ethnic groups. There will be three elected bodies: a bicameral legislature at the national level comprising the People's Assembly (lower house) and the National Assembly (upper house), as well as 14 regional legislatures (for the ethnic states and

divisions). At the same time, the future President is required to have military experience and 25 percent of seats in the legislatures (as well as three key ministries) will be reserved for military appointees.<sup>10</sup>

In one significant change, there will be some redrawing of the ethnic map. Seven smaller ethnic groups not acknowledged in previous constitutions will gain territories in the form of self-administered areas (a "division" for the Wa, and "zones" for the Danu, Kokang, Lahu, Palaung and Pao in the Shan state and the Naga in the Sagaing division).

This appeared an important historical step. But concerns were growing among ethnic parties over the continued military domination of government. Not only had there been little or no input by electoral and ceasefire groups in the new constitution but there were also major uncertainties about how the 2010 election, ceasefire transition and new system of government would work. SPDC announcements were rare, intermittent fighting continued with the KNU and other ethnic forces in the borderlands, and over 2,100 political prisoners remained in jail and the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest.<sup>11</sup> Detained ethnic leaders included Hkun Htun Oo of the electoral SNLD and General Hso Ten of the ceasefire Shan State Army (North) who had received jail terms of 93 and 106 years for alleged sedition.

In the meantime, despite restrictions imposed on other political movements, senior government officials began canvassing for the USDA that was expected to turn into a pro-military party before the polls. As the SPDC's game plan unfolded, opposition groups faced the dilemma of how to respond. After two decades of SLORC-SPDC rule, many parties hoped that time was still on their side and that tripartite dialogue, supported by international pressure, was still feasible. But two government announcements indicated that there was no longer room for complacency. In April 2009 the SPDC unilaterally ordered that ceasefire groups must transform into new "Border Guard Force" (BGF) battalions under government authority before the polls. Then in March 2010, the election laws were

announced, setting deadlines for when parties must register to take part – or become unregistered and effectively illegal.

Events now began to move fast, with parties having little choice but to declare themselves on or off the SPDC's political roadmap. Hopes for alternative routes to dialogue appeared at an end.

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*“Myanmar is a multinational nation. Peaceful solution of the problems based on equality and solidarity should be the only means when there are conflicts and contradictions among the national minorities or between a big race and a smaller race. They cannot be solved by suppression or resorting to arms.”*

Bao Youxiang, UWSA chairman, November 2009

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## THE ETHNIC RESPONSE

The long-term consequences of the 2010 election and government transition may take years to become clear. In such a strife-torn country, new crises can always be expected. During 2009-10 the election did not act as a focus for political and ethnic unity. Instead, fresh divisions emerged, reflecting the fragmentation that had occurred during previous periods of governmental change. Diverse strategies were discussed, but ultimately most stakeholder groups were faced with three choices: to participate, boycott or confront the polls. All were high-risk choices that could determine the fate of different political movements for a generation.

Further shifts in the positions of different political and ethnic movements can be expected as the election approaches. In particular, the tone of future politics was coloured by two historic decisions early in 2010: the vote of the NLD central committee in March not to stand in the election on the grounds of politi-

cal repression and “unjust” electoral laws;<sup>12</sup> and the April resignation of Prime Minister Thein Sein and 26 other ministers and officials to form the new Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) from the USDA. The NLD, which for two decades had flown the main banner for Burma's democracy cause, now faced deregistration and oblivion, while continued military domination of government seemed assured via the expected USDP victory in the election, along with the reserved seats for military appointees in the legislatures.

Against this backdrop, the representation of ethnic parties began to look very different. From the outset, there were controversies and new blurring of the lines between electoral, ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups as different parties and citizens decided their future positions.

**Electoral:** A new generation of ethnic electoral parties appeared certain in national politics following the polls. Over half the forty parties registered by the end of May represented ethnic nationality groups. Some well-known names left the stage and new actors entered. Given the diversity and small size of most parties, leaders recognized that there was little chance ethnic parties would have much impact on the national stage under existing political conditions. For this reason, the decision whether to stand or not came down to two judgements: to boycott because the SPDC roadmap is not regarded as credible or to stand because, as a popular saying put it, “a constitution is better than no constitution”.

In particular, after five decades of totalitarian rule, some ethnic leaders believed that the introduction of a new “power-sharing” system of multiparty parliamentary government in which 75 percent of seats are “civilian” offered a better platform for long-term change than continued conflict and military rule. They argued that such countries as Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines had found their own ways for transition from military rule through parliamentary processes during previous decades. Pro-election leaders were especially keen that

ethnic parties stand for constituencies in the state legislatures which, otherwise, would be won without contest by pro-military and Burman-led parties, notably the USDP.

Most ethnic parties still wanted a union system, and there remained important areas of disagreement, including the powers of the ethnic states, cultural rights, security, foreign affairs, and control over natural resources. But it was hoped that reforms could be introduced in future legislation, despite the likely difficulties in moving constitutional amendments.

Based upon such considerations, the electoral landscape began to change during 2010. Only four of the ethnic parties from the 1990 general election re-registered (for example, the Union Kayin [Karen] League). They were joined by a new generation of nationality parties, reflecting the complexity of ethnic politics. The Pao National Organisation, for example, was an amalgamation of the ceasefire group of that name and the UPNO. The Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP) was formed by Dr Tu Ja and officials of the ceasefire KIO who resigned to help set up a civilian party. Among the leaders of the Kayin People's Party were a KNU peace mediator Dr Simon Tha and retired naval commander Tun Aung Myint. The Union Democracy

Party was a broader grouping, set up by veteran Shan politician Shwe Ohn to support the ethnic cause in parliament.<sup>13</sup> Other ethnic parties included Chin, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Mro, Palaung, Rakhine, Shan and Wa identities. Their common refrain was the pledge to pursue ethnic political and cultural rights in the establishment of peace and democracy.

In contrast, there were other influential ethnic movements that decided not to contest the polls. The United Nationalities Alliance of parties from the 1990 election supported the Shwegondaing Declaration of its NLD ally, stating that the party could only participate on three conditions: the release of political prisoners, constitutional amendments and international monitoring of the polls.<sup>14</sup> SNLD members also petitioned the SPDC for a meeting with Hkun Htun Oo and other de-

tained leaders in order to discuss cooperation in "democratization and national solidarity".<sup>15</sup> No response was forthcoming, and in March the UNA sent a statement to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon calling for international pressure on the SPDC to release political prisoners, halt military operations and begin tripartite dialogue with the NLD and ethnic representatives. The 2008 constitution and election laws, the UNA said, were against "the actual desires of the people".<sup>16</sup>

The UNA's decision not to take part was not the complete end of the arguments. As happened with the NLD boycott, some former members tried to support electoral movements in new guises. For example, a break-away group set up a new All Mon Region Democracy Party after a Mon Working Committee, including Mon electoral and ceasefire representatives, decided not to contest the polls. The Shan Nationals Democratic Party also included former SNLD members. But as the election drew closer, there were no guarantees that these new parties would enjoy a more durable future than the UNA parties now departing the electoral stage.

**Ceasefire:** During 2009-10, similar uncertainties beset the country's diverse ceasefire groups. In terms of history, membership, finance and territorial control, the ceasefire forces far outweighed electoral parties in their ability to operate independently and, with an estimated 40,000 troops under arms, their existence was a continued reminder of the need for conflict resolution in Burma's "neither war nor peace" impasse.<sup>17</sup>

The ceasefire groups, however, were not closely allied, consisting of former NDF parties, ex-CPB members of the PDF and various small militia or breakaway factions. Their ceasefire terms had generally allowed them to maintain their arms and territory until the introduction of a new constitution. In the meantime, while attending the National Convention, they had concentrated on building peace through business and development programmes. But there were no clear agreements on political timetables or military transition when the new constitution

was introduced. Instead, given their broader social and community structures, ceasefire leaders wanted to support new ethnic parties in the promised multi-party election and then negotiate military change with the new government following the polls. Disappointed by the 2008 constitution, they wanted to see clear evidence of political reform before agreeing to transformation.

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*“Every ethnic group wants peace and development for their state. They do not want conflict. They will respond according to how they are treated.”*

Gen. Htay Maung, KNU/KNLA Peace Council chairman, April 2010

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The SPDC, however, took ceasefire groups by surprise with its April 2009 order that the groups break down into BGF battalions, effectively under government authority. Officers over 50 should retire, and 30 Tatmadaw soldiers would join each 326-troop battalion, including one of the three commanding officers. Most of the smaller groups acceded; in the ethnic conflict-zones, the Tatmadaw has long supported local militia. But veteran nationalists from such movements as the KIO, NMSP and UWSA refused. Unease then worsened in August when the SPDC sent in troops against the ceasefire Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in the Kokang region to support a breakaway faction that accepted the BGF orders. As many as 200 people were killed or wounded, and 37,000 refugees fled into China.<sup>18</sup>

Talks then continued into 2010 and SPDC deadlines were repeatedly pushed back. The UWSA chairman Bao Youxiang told the SPDC negotiator Lieutenant General Ye Myint that a “peaceful solution” based on “equality and solidarity” should be the only means to resolve conflict.<sup>19</sup> His remarks were echoed by General Htay Maung, chairman of the ceasefire KNU/KNLA Peace Council, who

warned that the people were feeling “threatened and insecure” by government actions.<sup>20</sup> The KIO also went ahead with support for the new KSPP in the elections. But by May, no major breakthrough had occurred, with SPDC officials warning the NMSP that, if the ceasefire forces did not transform into BGFs, the situation would return to “pre-ceasefire” conditions.<sup>21</sup>

In private, none of the different sides wanted a return to full-scale conflict. Agreement was still possible if the ceasefire groups were allowed to transform on compromise terms after the polls. But military training and deployments were stepped up by different forces in both China and Thailand border areas, and local civilians prepared to leave their homes if fighting should break out. Meanwhile one ceasefire group, the Shan State Army (North), split in April over the BGF issue, and there were rumours that dissatisfaction was rising among troops in such ceasefire groups as the DKBA that had already accepted the BGF system. After over two decades of ceasefires, no clear or inclusive resolution appeared imminent.

**Non-ceasefire:** As political developments accelerated, non-ceasefire groups became further marginalised from national influence during 2010. Over a dozen armed ethnic groups and factions still exist around Burma’s borders. They are allied with Burman dissidents in such fronts as the NCUB, which includes remnants of the armed All Burma Students Democratic Front as well as exile MPs in the NCGUB. But the strength of non-ceasefire groups has been on the decline since the mid-1990s, only four movements still maintaining forces of significant size: the Chin National Front on the India border, and the KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party and Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) on the Thai border.

All non-ceasefire groups denounced the 2010 polls. At its February 2010 central committee meeting, the KNU pledged to “vigorously oppose” the election, denouncing it as an “extension” of the 2008 constitution “adopted through fraud and coercion”.<sup>22</sup> The SSA-S leader Yawd Serk warned that “large-scale

civil war” might break out.<sup>23</sup> And sporadic but sometimes heavy fighting in several border areas, especially with the KNU and SSA-S, was evidence that insurgent struggles were by no means over.

A particular new source of conflict were government business schemes with Asian neighbours, such as the proposed Hat Gyi dam in the Karen state that was backed by both Thailand and China.<sup>24</sup> But during any fighting, it was usually the civilian population that suffered the most. Despite the increasing resettlement of refugees to third countries in the West, official refugee numbers in Thailand remained around 130,000 (mostly Karen and Karenni), with up to two million migrants, both legal and illegal.

On a smaller scale, refugees and illegal migrants also remained on the Bangladesh and India borders (mostly Muslim refugees on the former, Chin and Naga on the latter). This scale of violence led to calls for an investigation into “crimes against humanity or war crimes” in Burma, an appeal subsequently echoed in a report by UN human rights Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana.<sup>25</sup>

In political terms, however, non-ceasefire groups had to watch as bystanders while electoral and ceasefire groups engaged with the SPDC. Any future peace talks with the KNU and other non-ceasefire forces could only come after the election. With the NLD and UNA boycotting the election, veteran insurgent leaders claimed that their long-standing position of no compromise with the military government without political solutions was vindicated. But they struggled to find an effective strategy to rally opposition against the polls. Pressure was also exerted on them from neighbouring governments to maintain a low profile, the Thai authorities several times raiding KNU and other opposition safe houses on the Thai side of the border.

Most anti-SPDC groups along the borders eventually came to support the 2009 formation of a Movement for Democracy and Rights for Ethnic Nationalities, bringing together the broader alliances of the NCUB,

ENC and NCGUB to call for a new “national reconciliation” programme.<sup>26</sup>

However, achieving a united voice between armed and non-armed member groups proved difficult. This was highlighted when the ENC wrote a letter to United States Senator Jim Webb after his visit to Burma. The group rejected armed struggle as a “solution” and pledged its support for “eligible ethnic groups in running for office” to ensure a representative vote.<sup>27</sup> Recognising the changing political landscape and emergence of new ethnic parties, not all non-ceasefire leaders agreed with an election boycott or disruption. If they fail to keep in touch with the people, history could pass insurgent and borderland groups by.

Community-based organisations, meanwhile, viewed the growing uncertainties and threats of new volatility in ethnic areas with deepening concern. After decades of conflict, community leaders advocated that all sides maintain dialogue to resolve political disagreements. “The ethnic minority groups in all regions of Burma need peace,” the Human Rights Foundation of Monland said. “The people in ethnic regions need development to improve their livelihoods, education for their children and health care in their communities.”<sup>28</sup>

For Burma’s long-suffering peoples, such progress is long overdue.

## CONCLUSION

In 2010, Burma is on the brink of epoch-shaping change. After two decades of military rule, Than Shwe and the SPDC generals finally appear ready to move ahead to the next stage of their roadmap for political reform. Through a combination of measures, continued dominance of the Tatmadaw and Than Shwe’s supporters in government seems assured. These include marginalising the NLD and victorious parties from the 1990 election; reserving seats for military appointees and the likely victory of the USDP in the 2010 polls; building a new capital at Nay Pyi Taw; and promoting trade and energy deals with Asian neighbours. Conflict

and divisions among ethnic nationality groups further strengthen the military's dominance. Only, it appears, will changes within the Tatmadaw itself cause the military authorities to alter course now.

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*“The ethnic minority groups in all regions of Burma need peace, and want the new government to solve their political problems and end armed conflicts through peaceful negotiations with ethnic minority armed groups.*

*The people in ethnic regions need development to improve their livelihoods, education for their children and health care in their communities.”*

Human Rights Foundation of Monland, March 2010

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Burma's troubled history since independence does not portend easy or quick solutions. Parties supporting the election believe that it could take the life of at least one parliament, until 2015, for political progress and reforms to take root. But as political momentum gathered pace in early 2010, it became clear that not only would there be little chance of amending the 2008 constitution but that the election would go ahead without the NLD and both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups whose inclusion is integral for national reconciliation. As at other key turning points in Burma's history in 1948 and 1962, a new government system is about to be introduced to a backdrop of conflict and exclusion.

The starkest warnings of Burma's plight are in the countrywide poverty and humanitarian crises. Despite the growing economic links with Asian neighbours, the military government remains among the most condemned in the international community and the subject of repeated censure by the United Nations for grave human rights abuses, including forced labour, torture and extrajudicial executions in the ethnic borderlands.<sup>29</sup> Indeed in many

ethnic areas, the new economic projects are a growing source of grievance, with local communities complaining of being bypassed and excluded.<sup>30</sup>

A series of explosions in April 2010 that hit targets across the country warned that resentment could be rising against the military government and its supporters. Various dissident groups were accused or suspected. Targets included a toll gate near Muse in the Shan state; the Mytisone and Thaukyaykhat dam projects in the Kachin state and Bago division respectively; Loikaw police station in the Kayah state; a telecommunications office in Kyaikmayaw, Mon state; and the Water Festival in Yangon, in which 10 people were killed and over 170 wounded. After another two decades of military rule, Burma remains in a state of conflict.

The international community and all political groups in Burma therefore face major challenges in their responses to the 2010 election. To date, there has been little unity and consensus. The situation is reminiscent of the 2008 referendum to which there was also a disparate response, meaning that the proposed new constitution was never fully faced up to, debated or approved by all stakeholders. The international community, too, remains divided by Western policies of sanctions and Asian policies of engagement.

For these reasons, a sustained and inclusive focus is vital on the 2010 election, both within Burma and the international community, so that its outcome can have clear and historic meaning. There are three major areas by which reform transition can be adjudged: political, ethnic and economic.

The political challenges include the construction of a democratic system of government that guarantees representation and human rights for all. The ethnic challenges include conflict resolution and humanitarian progress in the most impoverished regions of the country. And the economic challenges include equitable participation, sustainable development and progress that will bring benefits to every district and ethnic group.

In summary, without such benchmarks for inclusive reform benefiting all peoples and citizens being achieved, the election and introduction of a new government are unlikely to bring sustainable peace and reconciliation to Burma.

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## NOTES

1. In 1989 the military government changed the official name of the country 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. For historical analyses of the ethnic conflict, see for example Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London: Zed Books, 1999; South, Ashley, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.
3. Tomás Ojea Quintana, "Progress report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar", Human Rights Council, 10 March 2010, p.17.
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## 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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## Burma Policy Briefings

***Burma in 2010: A Critical Year in Ethnic Politics***, Burma Policy Briefing No.1, June 2010

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## Other Briefings

***Burma's Cease-fires at Risk; Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy***, by Tom Kramer, TNI Peace & Security Briefing Nr 1, September 2009.

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