

THE WAY FORWARD FOR PEACE, STABILITY AND PROGRESS IN BURMA/MYANMAR

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OVERVIEW OF MYANMAR

Burma, or Myanmar, is a fortunate country in many ways. It has a warm and wet tropical climate, with adequate rainfall that encourages many kinds of plants to flourish. The land is blessed with fertile low-land plains, plateaus and high ground with gentle slopes, where many varieties of vegetables can be grown. In terms of natural resources, it has timber and bamboo forests; many waterfalls and rivers in the hills that have potential for generating hydro-electric power; underground there are mineral deposits, including gold, silver, copper, iron, and lead; there are gemstones such as rubies, sapphire and jade; and deposits of fossil fuels of coal, petroleum and natural gas.

It is also well positioned to benefit from international trade and commerce, having a long coastline with sites suitable for deep-sea ports, and archipelagos where all kinds of marine life thrives. With a land area of 260,000 square miles supporting a little more than 51 million inhabitants, the country does not suffer from a high population density. With all of these benefits, one would expect Burma to be an affluent nation, and at one time it did in fact have the highest living standard of Southeast Asian countries. However, from being the “rice bowl of Asia”, Burma is now listed as one of the world’s

Least Developed Countries (LDC). The following traces the main threads of Burma/Myanmar's recent history that have led to this situation.

The Union of Burma/Myanmar is inhabited by numerous ethnic groups, many with the characteristics of an independent nationality, such as having a substantial population living together in a defined area, with their own distinct language, literature, culture, custom and historical development. Prior to the British colonial era — and even during that era — some of these groups had their own kingdoms contemporaneously with the largest of the ethnic groups, the Burmans. In such a complex country, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been discord and armed conflict for nearly seventy years between the ethnic Burman (who have controlled the government) and the other ethnic nationalities. Almost all the ethnic nationalities have been in armed resistance at some time against successive central (Burman) governments. Some of the major ethnic groups being, alphabetically: Aka, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni (Kayah), Kuki, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Naga, Palaung (Ta'ang), Pa-oh, Rakhine (Arakanese), Shan, and Wa. There are even some ethnic Burman groups which have waged armed struggle against the government.

But the conflict in Myanmar has not always been associated with diverse ethnicities — during the latter half of the twentieth century there were a number of groups based in political ideologies, such as the Red Flag Communist Party-Burma (CPB), White Flag Burma Communist Party (BCP), and the Parliamentary Democracy Party/Burma Patriotic Army. However, despite these groups receiving external support, they did not persist as have those groups based on the struggle for ethnic/national freedom and rights. The organizations based on ethnic/national freedom have never received any notable external assistance, they have persisted primarily as a result of the contributions of time and resources from their own people. Their lengthy existence is a testament to the fact that the issue of identity/nationality runs deeper than overt political issues of class and democratic struggle.

CAUSES OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE IN MYANMAR

1. The most obvious question for those not acquainted with Myanmar's recent history is: "Why have the prominent non-Burman nationalities been engaged in armed resistance against the central government for so long?". The basic answer is because the successive governments in power, espousing chauvinism/ultra-nationalism, have employed force to attempt to deny the rights of the other ethnic nationalities in order to

absorb them into, or subjugate them by, the dominant ethnic Burman group. Some of the evidence supporting this assertion is as follows: The provision for using spoken and written Burman language as the only official language in the Union means other languages serve no practical purpose. At least until recently, only the Burmese language has been taught in state schools all over the Union, from primary to university levels. Government schools teach only the Burmese language to children in villages in the remote border areas, children who have never previously heard or seen the Burmese language. Historically, other ethnic languages have not even been officially allowed in the primary schools in the non-Burman ethnic areas. Under the military government that seized power in 1988, when military officers learned that some of the nationalities were teaching their own national languages in schools in their own areas, at their own expense, they often ordered the teaching to stop. (This also happened much later, during the years of 2005 and 2006 in Mon and Shan regions.) It is our view that they were doing this systematically, knowing that language is a central aspect of culture, so destroying the language effectively destroys the culture — and the sense of identity that goes with the culture. Over time, ethnic groups could thus become “Burmanized”.

2. During its time in power, the military government that seized power in 1988 set up a National Theatre House and Padonma Theatre House in Rangoon/Yangon, and a National Theatre for Upper Burma in Mandalay. These theatres maintained and promoted Burman culture by holding yearly competitions for traditional singing, dancing and composing, and awarding prizes to competitors. This government also set up the so-called “Cultural University”. However, there was absolutely no promotion of cultures of the ethnic nationalities other than Burman.
3. In the maintenance and promotion of historical evidence relating to nationality, the government promoted research into the history of the Burman nationality only, and destroyed the histories of the other nationalities. School history books record only the history of the Burman nationality — there is absolutely no mention of the histories of the other ethnic nationalities.
4. As a part of the concealing of history, there is also discrimination in the maintenance of historical buildings. In order to highlight Burman history, the military government has spent considerable sums of money to meticulously maintain the old city of Pagan. They rebuilt the feudal palaces which had disappeared for hundreds of years in Mandalay, Shwebo and Bago. Yet on the other hand, the military government in 1991 destroyed

the best of the palaces of the Shan chiefs, the Kyaingtong Palace, which was still in good condition and had been a highlight of Shan history. In 2006, the military government closed down Thibaw Shan chief's palace to prevent people from visiting. In 2007, Nyaung Shwe Shan chief's palace was renovated — but turned into a Buddhist museum. Rebuilding the palace of the Burman king, Bayint Naung, in Bago, who ruled only for thirty years, was a conspiracy by the government to conceal Mon kingdoms and dynasties that had existed for nearly a thousand years. This promotion of the Burman language, literature, culture and heritage at the expense of other ethnic nationalities is designed to eliminate these latter groups.

All over the world ethnic nationalities attempt to ensure the survival of their culture into the future, and people sacrifice their lives to do so. It is instructive for the Burman people to remember how they themselves worried and struggled when Burman language and literature waned under the rule of the British, and have empathy for the other nationalities in Myanmar. It is this lack of empathy on the part of the Burmans in power that has caused some ethnic nationalities to commence armed resistance not long after independence. Instead of erroneously blaming the British for the instigation of Myanmar's internal conflict, it would be helpful if the Burman people re-examined and re-evaluated the attitudes and actions of those Burman leaders in power following independence.

The history of the entire territory of the current Union of Burma/Myanmar shows that it was at one time made up of the contemporary kingdoms of Mon, Burman, Arakanese and Shan peoples, and the self-administered lands of the Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Wa, etc. During the era of absolute monarchy, it was normal practice for the strong nations to attack and annex the lands of the weaker national groups for vassalage. However, when the British colonialists annexed the country into their empire, all the ethnic nationalities became slaves of the British. After living as fellow slaves for over a hundred years, the ethnic nationalities realized that any one nationality could not succeed in breaking out from serfdom, so they joined together to drive out the colonialists. In the joining of forces, all the ethnic nationalities became brothers, and the Burman leaders promised to equally share power and opportunities when victory was achieved.

When it became impossible for the British to go on controlling the entire country due to a combination of factors, they decided to give independence to the plains, or Burma Proper, and retain the hill areas.

However, the hill peoples of Chin, Kachin and Shan negotiated with the Burman leader Bogyoke Aung San and concluded the Panglong Agreement in 1947 to achieve independence at the same time, and establish a Union of States (Federal Union) based on national equality and self-determination of all the nationalities.

However, when independence was finally achieved, the Burman took over the entirety of Burma Proper, and states and “special divisions” were created for the hill peoples, under the control of Burmans. The peoples of the plains, the Karen, Pa-oh, Mon and Arakanese (Rakhine), who had struggled together for independence, were not given the opportunities and levels of independence they expected. When they made demands for some levels of autonomy, force was used to suppress them.

Since the Burman leaders had failed to keep their promise, armed resistance from the non-Burman nationalities began. Though only the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Arakanese initially took up arms, later on all of the prominent nationalities joined in the resistance. It is evident that the ensuing civil war was the result of the chauvinism/ultra-nationalism of the Burman leaders in power, and not because of the narrow nationalism and extremism of the non-Burman nationalities or as a result of actions by the British. In the analysis of the ensuing civil war, we find the following key points of development.

When the civil war, which had broken out following independence was ten years old, in 1958, the “Clean” Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) government led by U Nu invited all the armed resistance organizations to work together for peace and progress of the country, within a democratic framework and with respect for the aspirations of the people, and wiping out past happenings from the slate. In that move, the slogan “Exchange of Arms for Democracy” was used. In response to this initiative, three organizations which had taken up arms due to a lack of democracy, surrendered — the Pa-oh, Mon and Arakanese — and participated in the “Exchange of Arms for Democracy”. These organizations set up political organizations to participate in the 1960 general elections. In these elections, sadly, they encountered widespread vote stealing, cheating, intimidation and threats, and only a few of their candidates were elected. However, the non-Burman nationality members of parliament and leaders were able to work together and drafted a Federal Constitution which was submitted to replace the fake Union Constitution. With growing demands for a democracy, the Tatmadaw (armed forces) leader General Ne Win seized power on 2 March 1962, on the pretext that the country was on the brink of falling into chaos,

and ruled the country as a military dictatorship for many years. During his time, the rights of the ethnic nationalities were largely annulled or greatly reduced.

In 1963, General Ne Win's military government invited all the armed groups fighting against the government for peace talks. However, as the government's position was "Exchange of Arms for Peace", almost all the organizations did not accept it. The Karen Revolutionary Council (KRC) led by Saw Hunter Thahmwe and Colonel Lin Htyn was one of the few to join with the junta, but after two months Colonel Lin Htyn was murdered and his troops became disorganized. The leader of the Red Flag Communist Party (RFCP), Thakin Soe, tried to take advantage of this apparently good opportunity, but was arrested and jailed, leading to the demise of the RFCP. Over time, General Ne Win's military government greatly increased the strength of the Tatmadaw in an effort to wipe out the resistance forces. Using the "Four Cuts Strategy" of encirclement and annihilation, the government forces launched military operations in many areas, using large amounts of the state budget for the offensives. This military expenditure drained funds that would otherwise have gone to education, health, transport and infrastructure, and is one of the main reasons behind Burma's current impoverishment and lagging development.

Under the Four Cuts Strategy, government troops destroyed thousands of villages and forced the villagers to live in concentration camps so as to cut off links between the local people and the resistance forces. This period is well known for the extent of the atrocities and widespread human rights violations that occurred. The military forced the villagers to porter for the troops, used them as "human mine sweepers", stole household possessions, slaughtered farm animals, destroyed crops and summarily executed persons suspected of having any connection with resistance forces. When the people could no longer bear these outrages, the so-called Four-8 Mass Movement broke out and General Ne Win was forced to resign from his position as leader of the government.

During the subsequent time of the so-called Second Coup d'état, in the era of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) the military government led by Senior General Saw Maung, Vice Senior General Than Shwe and General Khin Nyunt, made extensive ceasefire agreements with the ethnic nationality resistance organizations. When the ethnic nationality organizations called for political dialogue, the military replied that as they were a government that had seized state power, they could not decide on political matters, but instead promised that there would be political dialogue after a government elected

by the people had emerged. It further had said that after the Constitution had been written, elections would be held and, during the ceasefire period before the political dialogue could held, the resistance organizations should do development work in their own areas.

However, during the ceasefire period in 2005, the military government forcibly disarmed the Palaung State Liberation Organization (PSLO) and the Shan State National Army (SSNA). In 2008, it again disarmed the so-called Red Pa-oh, or Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization (SSNLO), by force. After fraudulently adopting the Constitution in 2008 and when preparations for holding elections were made, it stopped talking about holding political dialogue. On the other hand, it started to tell the ceasefire organizations to let the older members form political parties for contesting the elections, and to make the younger ones transform either into the Border Guard Force or people's militia. It threatened to regard any organization refusing to do its bidding as an enemy and to annihilate it. Under these circumstances, organizations without a sufficiently strong revolutionary ethos fell under the control of the military government.

In the above discussion of efforts by successive Burman governments supposedly towards peace and stability, we find that they actually evaded resolving problems peacefully through negotiation with the armed resistance forces, and consistently tried to disarm, demobilize or subdue them by stratagem or force. The ethnic organizations that could not accept the SLORC and SPDC military governments' treacherous attempts to turn all the ceasefire organizations into their underlings, formed, with the ethnic resistance organizations which had carried on armed resistance, first the Committee for Emergence of Federal Union (CEFU) and then in 2011 the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), and resumed armed resistance. The alliance unified previously dispersed forces and became a strong organization. Realizing that the problem could not be resolved by military means, U Thein Sein's government made overtures for peaceful resolution of the political problem after a ceasefire. The government eventually held negotiations with the UNFC for one year and with the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) for one year and five months. However, as a satisfactory result was not gained, the government continued to hold negotiation with the Senior Delegation of the ethnic resistance forces. All these activities were not negotiations relating to political matters, but only protracted negotiations for a nationwide ceasefire in order to be able to hold political dialogue peacefully. We can say that the negotiation has become protracted like this because the Burman government is still not able to relinquish chauvinism/ultra-nationalism.

In the final analysis, the conflict in Myanmar arose because of the rejection of the aspirations of the non-Burman nationalities in Myanmar. The chauvinism/ultra-nationalism of the Burman leaders in power over the past fifty years has exacerbated the ethnic situation. The Tatmadaw's control of government and continuing suppression or elimination of human rights has alienated pro-democracy groups. A side effect of the Tatmadaw's desire to dominate and subjugate has been the diverting of funds and youthful energy from the wider economic sphere into militaristic goals. Not only has the state's income been reduced as a result of lost productivity due to conflict, but a large proportion of that shrinking budget is being used for the military rather than productive social sectors like education, healthcare, transport and infrastructure.

In order to resolve Myanmar's problems, a genuine Federal Union must be established that fosters the continuing existence of the culture and identity of ethnic groups such as the Mon. To do this will require addressing those root causes of armed conflict, particularly ethnic aspirations and human rights. The Tatmadaw will need to transform into the armed forces of this Federal Union, relinquish their involvement in civil administration and state legislature, submit to civilian control under a democratic government, and reduce the economic burden resulting from its unnecessary size (Myanmar has the largest army in Southeast Asia). If this begins to occur, we will see the Union of Burma/Myanmar progress rapidly in an environment of peace and stability.