

# CENTRIFUGAL TENDENCIES AND MYANMAR'S LONG WARS

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Nowadays most of Myanmar's severe policy conversations quickly lurch into consideration of federalism: the need to find a basis for distributing power and wealth between Myanmar's diverse regions and peoples. While the central government has long insisted on its paramount claims to define the national story, there is no doubting the requirement for other voices to have their say. Resolving generations of conflict between ethnic minorities and the central authorities is the primary concern. There are related issues of resource distribution, especially when so much of the country's wealth comes from distant corners. From the oil and gas fields of Rakhine State, to the hardwood forests of the Kayah State, to the jade mines of the Kachin State, to the narcotics hubs of the Shan State, the biggest economic prizes sit alongside persistent political and cultural flashpoints. Over past decades, the prevailing pattern has seen extractive opportunities jealously defended by those groups that command the biggest armies. The current government, elected by a democratic vote in November 2015, grapples with centrifugal impulses that have proved impossible for even the most oppressive regimes to control.

The first full year of National League for Democracy-led government has illustrated the scale of the problems at three distinct levels.

The first issue is the fragile character of the coalition government that seeks to exercise power from Naypyitaw. The NLD's key partner is the group of senior military officers who have emerged from decades of direct dictatorial rule. They understand the machinery of government, largely through lifelong exposure to the institutions and personalities that have made today's Myanmar. For them, the military's authoritarian executive culture, where an idiosyncratically meritocratic hierarchy shapes group and individual prospects, has made it possible for uniformed personnel to guide the transition to more democratic government. In that government, they work alongside elected officials from the NLD, and a range of other conservative, reformist and ethnic political interests. Under the 2008 constitution, the various components of this unstable coalition are forced to jockey for position and clout. Elections are one mechanism for reallocating portions of the available power, but, of course, there are other ways that politics happens.

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The Myanmar Parliament in Naypyitaw. On May 30th -31st 2017, Nicholas Farrelly will be joining researchers in Turin for the T.wai Myanmar Workshop.



Second, there is the threat and use of violence for political ends, including at the inter-personal level. In recent years, violence between Muslims and Buddhists has proved unpredictable and has seen the humanitarian situation deteriorate significantly for some of Myanmar's most vulnerable people, the Rohingya. Unique among the various conflicts at the country's margins, the Rohingya conundrum is not defined not by their ambitions for separation, but rather by a disputed claim to belong. That claim generates resentment, especially among the Rakhine Buddhist population of western Myanmar. For Rakhine Buddhists, the plaintive fear is that a wave of Bengali-speaking migrants will swamp their culture and communities. The level of mutual mistrust remains high, even though there are tentative initiatives aimed at creating space for coexistence. The NLD leadership has been at pains to avoid any potentially inflammatory comments, a stance which has earned condemnation from Western liberals and Islamic activists frustrated by the perceived abandonment of human rights principles in an elected political party spearheaded by a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. But the hard electoral and political calculus for Aung San Suu Kyi is overwhelming. She risks alienating millions of Buddhist voters if she is judged too cozy with Muslims. It is for this reason that at the 2015 general election the NLD failed to field a single Muslim candidate. In a tragic twist, the most prominent Muslim associated with the NLD, U Ko Ni, a key strategist and legal advisor, was assassinated in Yangon in February 2017.



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Third, the peace process has continued to struggle for momentum, dragged down by long histories of incomplete and erratic negotiation. A patchwork of agreements, ceasefires and truces co-exist with flare-ups and hot spots, some of which still see bloody fighting on a daily or weekly basis. The possibility of finding a democratic consensus, supported by all of the country's main armed groups, feels elusive, and there seem to be few genuine optimists among those who deal, on a day-to-day basis, with the politics of finding peace. The fragmentation of ethnic political interests is one part of the story, with many different groups, elected and unelected, armed and unarmed, all queuing to determine the future of their specific interests. Representation is claimed, in all cases, although the real authority of ethnic leaders has rarely been put to the test. The NLD knows that in national elections, like in 2015, its brand still cuts across supposed ethnic boundaries. Those boundaries blend and blur at different times, but are regularly used to define the extent to which political compromise is possible. The NLD also needs to manage the expectations of the government military forces, which have their own chains of command and long-term expectations. Nobody can

pretend that peace will come easily, or quickly, or cheaply.

Myanmar is hardly the only country with such a challenging set of internal political and economic dynamics. All large countries grapple with the challenges of creating coherence out of disparate local entities. In Myanmar's case the insistence on national unity and belonging, a story told in terms of "union spirit", has legitimised a set of over 100 ethnic categories at the expense of groups like the Rohingya, and the Chinese, who do not benefit from "national race" status. The formalisation of belonging has made it imperative, for the Rohingya and for many Chinese, to find mechanisms that may allow official status. Identification documents become incredibly important: defining individual, family and community opportunities. Nobody wants to miss out.

Centrifugal urges are still strong, though, among groups that perceive a better chance if they can argue for concessions beyond what has ever been offered by the central government. They want cultural, economic and political rights, including the right to determine whether or not they should retain affiliation with Myanmar's union. Such secessionist

talk has a long history of stalling, and it is in the NLD coalition's interest to ensure that the overall picture of political integration draws strength from the next stage of their drawn-out peace process. The problem, fundamentally, is that the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, notwithstanding its

strong electoral mandate, does not represent everyone in Myanmar and there are fears in ethnic quarters that the real dealmakers are still wearing Myanmar army uniforms. Elected politicians are, by nature, temporary contributors. The real battles are between those who carry guns on both sides, from the Myanmar government and from the ethnic groups. The lesson of Myanmar history is that in the battles at the margins, it is only ever the men with guns that truly call the shots. Federalism will remain a fantasy until they are all prepared to consistently accept the compromise that shared governance implies.



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