

FINE-TUNING MYANMAR'S “ETHNIC CONFLICT”: A SIDE NOTE TO THE 21ST CENTURY PANGLONG CONFERENCE

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“Ethnic conflict” as the most common reference to the ongoing belligerency between a multitude of armed groups and the Myanmar Army has become a shorthand for stakeholders and observers alike. While this designation rightfully highlights that the various ethnic nationalities are fighting for their groups’ social, political and economic position in Myanmar, it detracts from a mindset that needs to be much more fine-tuned to address the paramount political and historical failings central to achieving nationwide peace. The framing of Myanmar’s protracted wars as an ethnic conflict has two major problems. First and foremost, it conceals the political inconsistencies between how the new post-colonial entity, the Union of Burma, was imagined and agreed upon, and how it was subsequently practiced, while downplaying to a conflict what in fact qualifies as war. Second, it reinforces the normative state-centric perspective locked in hegemonic power relations that is a part of the issue. While achieving nationwide peace has been set among the top state agendas since 2011, the fighting has intensified.

Myanmar definitely is a multi-ethnic composite, and different ethnic peoples generally fringe

the majority Bamar-populated central lowlands. Myanmar’s military governments have counted a controversial 135 races to display ethnic diversity. Importantly, quoting Abner Cohen, one of the first anthropologists to propose a coherent method of understanding ethnicity, people do not kill one another because their customs are different. To understand war, the relationship between the belligerency and the processes, practices, ideas and arguments that have led to it must be examined, as suggested already by Carl von Clausewitz but also by contemporary military geographers and sound reasoning in general.

The 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference itself, with sessions held in Naypyidaw in 2016 and 2017, attests to the most contemporary relevance of the country’s historic planning by exploiting the name Panglong in its title. At Panglong conference in 1947, General Aung San and the representatives of the Kachin, the Chin and the Shan ethnic nationalities agreed on the basics for a future federal union. The new country was to combine two types of British ruled territories: “Burma Proper” (the Bamar majority lowlands) under direct British administration, and the indirectly ruled Frontier Areas (the ethnically diverse areas fringing the central lowlands). Wide autonomy, including separate constitutions, parliaments,

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The Technical Advisory Team Office of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myitkyina.

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governments and judiciary, were envisaged for the (ethnically based) states drawn up from territories that had never been under the rule of Bamar kings, to be named after the area's dominant ethnic group (which, in turn, emerged and consolidated within the wider state and nation-making processes). The constitution that emerged after the subsequent assassination of General Aung San and most of his cabinet, however, was de facto unitary and the first ten years saw centralization of the (Bamar dominated) central rule.

This constitutional failing was addressed already in 1961 by a proposal for federal amendment known as “[The Shan Federal Proposal](#)” adopted by the Shan State government, subsequently submitted by parliamentarians via legislative procedure and discussed nationally. A coup d'état by General Ne Win in 1962 halted this debate. What followed were the coercive efforts by the successive military governments to achieve strong central governance at the ethnic states' border areas in the name of unity and sovereignty of the country. A number of ethnically based armed organizations sprang up at different impetuses at areas that the central rule did not reach, to demand independence or autonomy. Such groups have managed well-established systems of command and administration, armies and territories — resulting in one of the most unique political landscapes in the world.

For example, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), have administered their territories on average for over sixty years, running governments with ministries, systems of schooling, healthcare and development, manifesting their territoriality in much a way states do and exercising public, diplomatic and international relations with other states and non-state groups. Other groups have emerged more recently out of time and case specific agreements, (geo)political configurations and power alignments, with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) or United Wa State Army (UWSA) exemplifying the latter most vividly. All groups' ceasefire statuses with the Myanmar military and relations with each other have been in continuous shift, depending on factors such as the deals offered by the incumbent Myanmar governments, usually leading to fractionalization — but also on international moral or material support, political or commercial commitments of their leaderships, continuous deployment of various strategies to meet the political goals, private and group interests, and the securing of revenues. Such organizations differ from the various [militias](#) also operating in the country under the command of or supported by the Myanmar Army and a few serving ethnic armed organizations.



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The constitutional failing as a root cause for armed struggle was addressed repeatedly during the military rule. In 1980, the KIO chairman Brang Seng at peace talks with General Ne Win demanded the inclusion of autonomous rights in the constitution. During the constitution drafting National Convention, ethnic ceasefire groups jointly or singly [submitted](#) three major proposals on autonomy. The best known is the [19-point proposal](#) (2007) by the KIO, laying out a scheme for the devolution of legislative power to the ethnic states from the right to select state chief ministers to oversee the management of land, natural resources, communications, health and education. None of the proposals were accepted.

The 2008 Constitution while having created new structures and initiated discussions on some devolution of administration sees no decentralization in the state control over rich natural resources mostly found in ethnic states. Exorbitantly high revenue from [jade](#) and [gold](#) mining has since the earlier KIO ceasefire in 1994 transformed local entrepreneurship into large-scale industries benefitting the country's military and business elites, and is, significantly, at stake if discussing any power (and fiscal) sharing.

Although the basic demands to address the constitutional failings as a root cause for armed struggle

have not changed over time, the position of its proponents has weakened from that of legislators in 1961 to ethnic armed organizations of today — even to rebels as the latter are often called. A non-state (armed) group, in the dominating statist perspective

in politics, is generally normalized as an anomaly and a challenge disrupting the idealized relationship between sovereignty and territory. The qualification of “ethnic” restricts its agency further — to a narrower set of interests that in the case of Myanmar diverts attention away from the historical constitutional failings. The “ethnic” also maps a degree of constancy and clear fault lines onto very complex and dynamic contexts where ethnic labels and alliances are in flux and continuous re-making, and the armed groups not (claiming to be) liable to represent “their” entire ethnic communities. However, the territories for which autonomy is sought are rather fixed—these are the ethnic states, now with vigorous party politics and new governance structures. This makes the political terms of peace relevant to much wider communities, also possibly across ethnic fault lines.



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