

# WHAT'S IN A TERM? THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING COMMON TERMINOLOGY FOR ETHNIC ALLIANCE-BUILDING IN MYANMAR'S PEACE PROCESS

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The ongoing national peace process in Myanmar was catalyzed by the signing of a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the Government of Myanmar and eight Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in October 2015, with two additional groups joining in February 2018. This followed seven decades of conflict between the central government and various ethnic groups around the country, which started soon after independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Over time, the state policies of the newly independent Union of Burma centralized control over ethnic peoples' territories and began to perpetuate a Bamar-centric culture that emphasized Bamar ethnicity, Buddhism and Myanmar language. Many ethnic peoples – who suffered from the relative deprivation of their social, political and economic rights – took up arms against the central state to vent their grievances. With the signing of the NCA, the battle for more equitable power-sharing between the Bamar, making up two thirds of the country's population, and the other seven major ethnic groups (Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karen, Kayin, Mon and Rakhine) shifted from the battlefield to the negotiating table.

Since the start of the negotiations, EAO signatories have made efforts to build alliances among themselves and, to a lesser extent, with the non-signatories. Neverthe-

less, an important but little-discussed challenge influencing this process lies in identifying a common term with which to refer to themselves. In both the Burmese and English languages, often with imperfect translations between the two, the terms most commonly used for this purpose include 'ethnic nationalities' (တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးစု), 'indigenous people' (ဌာနတိုင်းရင်းသား), 'ethnic minorities' (တိုင်းရင်းသားလူနည်းစုများ) and 'citizens' (နိုင်ငံသားများ).

To date, this issue has not been prioritized in the formal peace process. Yet the disagreement over terminology among ethnic groups – both armed and non-armed civil society groups – runs the risk of hampering alliance-building and weakening groups' ability to strengthen and articulate collective identities, a process that in turn shapes these actors' "understandings of their condition and of possible alternatives". In this case, the 'condition' refers to the deprivation of social, political and economic rights under the laws and policies created and enforced over consecutive decades of rule by a centralized government, both in its military and its post-2011 civilian form, perceived to have overstepped its powers into different spheres of peoples' lives. This brief hence looks at why different groups prefer different terms and



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Aung Sang Suu Kyi at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong Union Peace Conference.

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how this presents ethnic actors with obstacles to building a unified political front in the peace process.

**Ethnic nationalities.** Ethnic groups in Myanmar, particularly those that consider themselves to be founding members of the Union of Burma after independence (such as most of the Kachin and the Shan) opt to refer to themselves as ‘ethnic nationalities’ (တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးစု). Especially in English, this term implies the existence of separate ethnic nations that, despite their smaller population compared to that of the Bamar majority, are equal in status and, thus, deserve to exercise equal decision-making power in relation to the governance of the Union.

Prior to the unification of the different polities into the Union, this term was historically used by the Bamar people to refer to other, non-Bamar ethnic groups living in proximity to them, but the term was co-opted after independence by the newly established parliamentary government. The term was then translated as ‘indigenous races’ in the English version of the 1947 Constitution, and later as ‘national races’ in the English version of the current 2008 Constitution, to refer to the eight ‘races’ (and its supposed 135 sub-races) that are recognized as full citizens by the Constitution, including the Bamar majority. Some scholars, such as [Nick Cheesman](#), have noted that the military government explicitly employed ‘ethnic nationalities’ in its efforts to build unity among highly divided warring groups. Conversely, non-Bamar critics have interpreted this as an attempt by the state to prevent the term from being exclusively associated with non-Bamar groups by including the majority group under its definition. Nevertheless, popular culture tends to associate the term with only non-Bamar groups in Myanmar.

At times, the government also uses the term ‘ethnic minorities’ (တိုင်းရင်းသားလူနည်းစုများ) to refer to non-Bamar people. While factually correct, as the term ‘minority’ typically denotes a population that is smaller than another, many reject this term because it implies that minorities are secondary in status to a dominant group – in this case, the Bamar.

**Indigenous people.** Recent years have also seen a growing emphasis on rights based on the concept of indigeneity as embodied in the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which was ratified by Myanmar in 2007. The UNDRIP elaborates on rights including the right to self-determination, rights to land, territories and natural resources, and cultural rights.

In the peace process, EAO position papers commonly include reference to the UNDRIP and the term ‘indigenous peoples’ (ဌာနတိုင်းရင်းသား). Proponents of this concept argue that, aside from the UNDRIP, Myanmar is left with few domestic legal instruments that can be used by ethnic people to back up their claims. Indeed, the Constitution, the 2009 National Land Use Policy and the 2015 Ethnic Nationalities Protection Law, in using the term ‘ethnic nationality’ or ‘national races’, do not

recognize the distinct experiences of ethnic groups that have had their rights curtailed. Over time, ethnic actors have sought to find a way around the co-optation of the term by using ဌာနတိုင်းရင်းသား (*taneh taingyintha*), with ‘taneh’ referring to a specific locality.

As a matter of fact, the reworking of the term refocused attention on ethnic peoples’ claims to rights linked to their place of ancestral origin. Nevertheless, there has also been resistance to using this term for several reasons: first, ‘indigeneity’ is believed to convey a sense of backwardness; second, the concept is seen as being imported from international development discourses, and not organic to Myanmar; third, given the strong focus on a fixed place of origin, it could exclude many minorities who hail from a particular ethnic group, but who may not have been raised or reside in the original locale; fourth, this framing can create even more divisions among the numerous ethnic subgroups that reside in Myanmar’s ethnic states, as groups compete to establish who is ‘more indigenous’ to a locale.

**Citizens.** Although it does not reflect the unique experiences of ethnic people who have suffered the deprivation of various rights, the term ‘citizens’ (နိုင်ငံသားများ) is sometimes used by non-Bamar groups to define and delimit certain rights, such as the right to own land in Myanmar. In reality, as hotly debated at

the Third Union Peace Conference held in Naypidaw in May 2018, this term currently excludes many ethnic actors, especially internally displaced persons (also known as IDPs) and refugees who do not have the documents to legally prove their citizenship. In ad-

dition, the issue remains of how the state treats other groups who have been residing in Myanmar for generations but have limited citizenship, such as the Chinese and the Indians, or no citizenship at all, such as the Rohingya.

All in all, those actively involved in or supporting Myanmar’s peacebuilding process should acknowledge that the challenge among ethnic actors to reaching an agreement over terminology weakens their efforts to articulate collective identities and desired alternatives. Nation-building in Myanmar will require a balance to be struck between recognizing ethnic grievances and moving the country forward, towards inclusive secular political institutions. And for this, terminology has an important supporting role. In the long run, the term ‘citizen’ would ideally be the most suitable for building a political community in which all people, irrespective of their ethnic belonging, accept and abide by a common set of institutions that are neutral towards identity markers. Yet, other terms should also remain and be valued in order to acknowledge the rich diversity that makes up the Union of Myanmar.

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