



## BRIEFING PAPER No.18

OCTOBER 2013

# ETHNIC POLITICAL ALLIANCES

Since the 1990s, a number of political alliances have been formed to challenge Burmese Government authority over their ethnic constituencies. After the failure of the military regime to recognise the results of the 1990 general election, a number of ethnic political parties have tried to work within the Government's political system often at great cost to themselves. In some instances, this has led to parties being deregistered, ethnic political leaders being imprisoned, and other party members restricted from carrying out activities. At this moment in time, there are three main ethnic political alliances operating in the country, and each seeks a role in forming a future federal union. After the 2010 election, ethnic politics could be defined as consisting of four main actors: the armed ethnic groups, the previous ceasefire groups,<sup>1</sup> the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum (NBF), and the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA).

The United Nationalities Alliance was formed after the 1990 election and is considered one of the most influential and experienced political alliances operating in the country. The UNA encompasses a varied spectrum of ethnic political parties, dominated by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), which had contested and won seats in the 1990 general election. Originally, there were 12 different political parties:

Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD),  
Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF)  
Zomi National Congress (ZNC)  
Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)  
Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)  
Kayin National Congress for Democracy (KNCD)  
Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KNCD)  
Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KSANLD)  
Kayan National Unity and Democratic Organization (DOKNU)  
Mra People's Party (MPP)  
Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP)  
Arakan People's Democratic Front (APDF)

The United Nationalities Alliance, which currently has seven parties, had remained somewhat dormant in relation to activities inside the country. It was not until recently, with the decision to work with the UNFC in re-writing the constitution, while at the same time amending the same document with the NLD, that they have once more reasserted their position in ethnic politics.

In relation to its policies, The UNA noted in a letter and statement to U.S. President, Barak Obama, in November 2012 that:

- We believe that only getting ceasefire agreements with armed groups does not guarantee lasting peace until and unless political problems are solved with political means throughout political dialogue and negotiation.
- What the government doing for democratization of Burma is just the beginning. All the people of Burma could not enjoy democratic rights yet. There needs to be more accountability and transparency than the present situation.
- We always want and have been fighting for genuine federal union in which rule of law, equality, self-determination and human rights are restored and prevailed for all ethnic nationalities of Burma.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most prominent and influential leaders of the UNA is Khun Htun Oo of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). Khun Htun Oo, who was imprisoned by the Burmese military Government from 2005 to 2011, has emerged to be one of the most charismatic and respected ethnic leaders throughout the country.

Therefore, the decision by the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) to collaborate with the UNA was an extremely expedient one as the UNFC faced growing division within its ranks. Both the Karen National Union and the Restoration Council of Shan State had openly aired concerns about the UNFC's position. Consequently, the UNFC was able to strengthen its presence by collaborating with the UNA.

That said however, it remains unclear as to whether Khun Htun Oo, or the SNLD, are prepared to follow the UNFC's timetable or policies in the re-writing of the constitution. Most recently, Sai Nyunt Lwin, General Secretary of the SNLD, stated that:

This is not the time to argue whether or not a new constitution must be written.<sup>3</sup>

According to Shan media, he has also stated that any rewrite of the constitution would depend on the outcome of the nationwide political dialogue due to be held next year.<sup>4</sup>

Also contesting for political space in the country is the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF),<sup>5</sup> which was formed as an alliance between political parties that had successfully contested the 2010 election. In total, NBF parties were able to secure 127 seats across the three tiers of parliament. There are five parties in the NBF:

All Mon Region Democratic Party (AMDRP)  
Palon Sawor Democratic Party (PSDP)  
Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)  
Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP)  
Chin National Party (CNP)

The NBF, like the UNA, have major misgivings over the constitution and the 2010 election. According to the Brotherhood in its 9<sup>th</sup> Position statement:

We, members of the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum, had participated in the 2010 elections in the interest of democratic development, and not because we had believed that the 2008 constitution was a sound charter. . . The November 7, 2010 elections were neither free nor fair.

Regardless, individual parties involved in the NBF have been able to gain local support and see themselves as being a major political force in the 2015 election and a viable alternative to the NLD and USDP. In an attempt to expand ethnic representation in predominantly Burman areas, the NBF allowed individual representatives from some of its member parties to form a new alliance - the Federal Union Party (FUP). Burma's election laws stipulate that parties are not allowed to merge and individuals cannot be members of more than one political party, consequently the NBF allowed its members to leave the alliance to form the FUP. The Decision to form the FUP was taken in June 2013 because:

'In Rangoon and Pegu divisions, there are Mon, Rakhine, Karen and Shan ethnic groups living there. But we, as an individual ethnic political party, are not able to win the election in those divisions. Yet, if we form FUP we will be able to win the elections in the divisions too.'<sup>6</sup>

Such a sentiment was confirmed by U Saw Than Myint, former member of SNLD and one of the 16 founders of the alliance after its registration with the Union Election Commission:

We don't like the fact that [Burmese] political parties contest in our ethnic minority areas but we can't deter them under democracy. So we have formed this new ethnic party to contest in the seven [Burmese] regions.<sup>7</sup>

The chances that the FUP will be successful in contesting the election in these areas against the NLD are somewhat slim. The NLD remains popular with voters in ethnic areas and there is little to suggest that the FUP will be able to present a viable alternative.

It is also unclear as to what role armed ethnic organisations will play in relation to the political situation in the country. Recent meetings with the Government strongly suggest that a nationwide ceasefire agreement will be signed and that a political dialogue will take place prior to the 2015 election. Despite this, there is no real indication as to what armed ethnic organisations will do after such a dialogue. Most armed ethnic groups are unlikely to register as political parties with the Union Election Commission and although some organisations have shown a willingness to join with ethnic political parties in their states, the armed groups' political roles in the Union remain uncertain.

It is imperative, therefore, that armed ethnic groups and political alliances reassess their positions in relation to how they will interact with each other after the political dialogue stage of the peace process. Failure to work closely with each other and represent a united front for their individual ethnic groups could further strengthen the National League for Democracy or the Union State and Development Party in ethnic areas and therefore weaken their own positions. For ethnic aspirations to be best served, all ethnic actors must be prepared to work together and find a common middle ground prior to the 2015 election.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example the UWSA and the NDAA-ESS

<sup>2</sup> Submission revelation opinion of United Nationalities Alliance upon democratization of Burma, 19 November 2012

<sup>3</sup> 'Opposition scholar: Charter review movement "could be" a red herring', SHAN, 16 October 2013

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Formerly the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum

<sup>6</sup> 'Ethnic nationalities establish Federal Union Party', IMNA, 14 June, 2013

<sup>7</sup> 'UEC allows Federal Union Party alliance', Win Ko Ko Latt, Myanmar Times, 31 October 2013