



KAREN UNITY BUILDING INITIATIVES

Towards Sustainable Peace in Myanmar

A CPCS Learning Paper

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Karen Unity Building Initiatives Towards Sustainable Peace in Myanmar

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List of Acronyms

BCF	Bangsamoro Coordination Forum
BGF	Border Guard Force
CPCS	Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EAG	Ethnic Armed Group
KAG	Karen Armed Group
KEAP	Karen Exchange of Arms for Peace
KFUC	Karen Forces Unity Committee
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNA	Karen National Association
KNDO	Karen National Defense Organisation
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KPC	Karen Peace Council
KPF	Karen Peace Force
KUPC	Karen Unity Peace Council
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
NCA	National Ceasefire Agreement
NCCT	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
UPCC	Union Level Peacemaking Central Committee
UPWC	Union Level Peacemaking Working Committee

Karen Unity Building Initiatives – Towards Sustainable Peace in Myanmar¹

Four years after the launch of a quasi-civilian government under President Thein Sein, Myanmar² is entering a critical stage as the country approaches the general elections scheduled for November 2015. With a myriad of issues facing Myanmar's peace process, general elections could be a decisive factor in the progression towards peace. In recent years, Myanmar has witnessed a number of democratic reforms, including the release of political prisoners, economic reform and the looming prospect of a nationwide ceasefire, that have distanced the country from its past of repressive military rule. While these developments represent a notable break in the country's 60 years of protracted conflict and leave many hopeful for a new era of democracy and reform, several challenges remain, including establishing a framework for political dialogue and amending the 2008 constitution.

In this context, the Karen people have begun to challenge the current narrative of the peace process through a series of unity-building initiatives aimed at generating a more inclusive and sustainable peace in Myanmar. Having experienced a number of divisions and splits, Karen Armed Groups (KAGs) and communities have prioritised unity as a key means of achieving nationwide peace. Currently, Karen unity-building measures are carving out a space for community engagement and wider pan-Karen discussion and collaboration, working to unify the Karen people under a common vision for peace.

¹ This paper was written in early 2015, before the November 8, 2015 elections took place in Myanmar.

² In 1989 the ruling military Government changed the country's official name from Burma to Myanmar. As a result, the use of terminology referring to Burma/Myanmar is a highly contested and politicized issue. This paper will use "Myanmar" as it is referred to in its present day state rather than the more historic term "Burma." "Burman" is used to refer to the ethnic group who comprise the majority of the country's population and who speak the Burmese language as their native tongue.

With the peace process facing a number of significant challenges, these initiatives demonstrate the importance of unity in peace negotiations, providing the foundation for a national dialogue on the need for greater unity in the country.

In light of on-going unity-building measures, this paper examines the Karen history of conflict, seeking to analyse the push for greater unity amongst the Karen. It highlights Karen opinions and experiences of unity-building, derived from conversations with Karen individuals from various communities, civil society organisations (CSOs), armed groups, political parties and government offices.³ It also utilises information from conversations held with 111 community members across Karen State who have shared their opinions on the current situation in Myanmar, in regards to the peace process, forming the basis of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies' (CPCS's) publication *Listening to Communities: Karen State*.

³ The majority of these conversations took place during a three-day "Karen Unity Workshop" in March, 2015, bringing together 60 representatives from Karen Armed Groups including the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), Border Guard Force (BGF), Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), Karen Exchange of Arms for Peace (KEAP), KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) and Northern Thandauing Group as well as the "Karen National Pre-Conference" convening around 600 Karen individuals from various civil society organizations, political parties, government offices and religious institutions in July 2015.

Background: Karen Conflict in Myanmar

Initiatives aimed at increasing unity and creating avenues for greater exchange and collaboration amongst the Karen can be traced back centuries, and are rooted in the concept of a pan-ethnic Karen identity that gained popularity in the 19th century. As the third largest ethnic group in Myanmar, the Karen people encompass a number of diverse languages, cultures and religions. Recognising these distinct divisions between Karen peoples, the Karen National Association (KNA) was founded in 1881, seeking to unite all Karen people of different backgrounds into one organisation. The KNA provided a solid foundation for future Karen unity initiatives over the following decades, helping raise the visibility of and promote Karen identity, including petitioning the Myanmar Government to establish a Karen national flag and anthem in the 1930s. During this time, ideas of Karen self-determination and independence were solidified, with British colonial rulers promising the creation of a Karen State in exchange for Karen support fighting the Japanese during WWII.

In 1947, a new organisation arose out of the foundations of the KNA to advocate these Karen separatist ideals under the name of the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU espoused a number of demands, including the creation of an independent Karen State, known as Kawthoolei, a new ethnic census, as well as the continued incorporation of Karen units in national armed forces. When the British withdrew in 1948, leaving the newly independent country in the hands of a largely Burmese-dominated government, feelings of betrayal ran high among the Karen, who felt slighted and overlooked in the formation of the new state. Maintaining strong aspirations for self-determination, the KNU attempted to reach a political agreement with the new government that granted the Karen greater autonomy.

However, over the next year, tensions between the Burmese government, led by U Nu, and the KNU continued to increase. The government began asserting greater control of the national army, removing the Army Chief of Staff Gen. Smith Dun, a Karen, and replacing him with a Burmese nationalist, Ne Win. These developments were further exacerbated by reports of unrest and abuse committed in Karen communities at the hands of predominantly Burmese militias.⁴ In several incidents, Tatmadaw⁵ forces infiltrated Karen villages, resulting in large-scale killings of Karen civilians.⁶ Failure to reach any form of political agreement with the new government, combined with the deteriorating security situation, prompted the KNU to go underground on January 31, 1949, a date they since have celebrated as ‘Revolution Day.’ In the following years, the KNU operated as a *de facto* government in Karen State, with its military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), controlling large tracts of territory across the state and surrounding areas to establish seven main brigades.⁷ The KNU also instituted departments for health, education and other administrative areas, establishing a ruling authority in Karen State.⁸

Over the next 60 years, however, the KNU were unable to maintain the area of control initially established in the 1950s, and the organisation was slowly pushed back to the Thai-Myanmar border. During this time, the KNU agenda shifted from independence to self-determination and true democracy, yet throughout, the KNU maintained their position as the prime representative of the Karen people. At the 9th KNU Congress, in 1974, the KNU released the following declaration:

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Burma/Bangladesh: Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh-Still No Durable Solution” 12(3). 2000 <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-01.htm>

⁵ Tatmadaw is the official term for the Myanmar Armed Forces

⁶ Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (New York, Routledge, 2008).

⁷ The seven KNU Brigades are: Thaton (1), Taungu (2), Kyauk Kyi (3) Tavoy/Dawei (4), Papun (5), Three Pagoda Pass/Payathonsu (6) and Hpa’an (7).

⁸ Ashley South, “Burma’s Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict” (Amsterdam, Burma Center Netherlands, 2011).

“The KNU is the sole organ for the development of the Karen national cause, the elite of the Karen national revolution. The KNU is the highest organ for all Karen people and represents all Karen people.”⁹

The KNU’s position as the sole organisation of Karen people was severely threatened during the 1990s with the defection and the formation of several breakaway groups, including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) and the Karen Peace Force (KPF). The first major split from the KNU occurred in 1994 with the formation of the DKBA. The split was fuelled by deeply held grievances among many Karen Buddhists over the perceived favouritism and promotion of Christianity among Karen leaders. Concerned that their religious identities were not being respected by KNU leadership and frustrated with decades of conflict and limited tangible outcomes or benefits, a group of Buddhist Karen soldiers deserted their front-line positions and loosely organised to form the DKBA. Shortly after, the DKBA signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar military government, granting the DKBA military support from local Tatmadaw troops, particularly in offences against the KNU, a move that heightened feelings of betrayal and resentment among the KNU. Over the following years, the DKBA troops enjoyed some level of independence, but largely remained under the Tatmadaw’s operational and political control.¹⁰

After its formation, the DKBA grew, quickly overtaking the KNU as the most powerful KAG. This position was cemented in 1995 when the DKBA and Myanmar Army stormed and gained control of the last major KNU base of power in Manerplaw. The Battle at Manerplaw, which pitted Karen against Karen, not only led to a significant decline in KNU authority, but was also symbolic of the deep divisions that threatened the long-held ideal of Karen unity.

⁹ Paul Keenan “Changing the Guard: the Karen National Union, the 15th Congress and The Future” (Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, Analysis Paper No. 6, 2013, 2).

¹⁰ South (2007)

The idea of a ‘pan-ethnic’ Karen identity had been central to the emergence and development of the KNU against the rising tide of a dominant Burmese rhetoric. Until this point, it had given legitimacy to the KNU’s position as uncontested political leader of the Karen people. Yet, as the KNU experienced several splits, retreated to the Thai-Myanmar border and lost touch with the majority of the Karen population, it became increasingly apparent that the organisation was no longer the sole representative of the Karen people.¹¹

The DKBA split ushered in a new era of upheaval and discord among KAGs, and was followed by the formation of several additional splinter groups in the ensuing years (1995-2010). In 1997, a group of KNLA soldiers from the KNU’s 6th brigade defected under the leadership of Lt. Col Thu Mu Hae, effectively allowing the Tatmadaw to assert control over the area with little resistance. The new group named themselves the Karen Peace Force (KPF) and shortly after entered into a ceasefire agreement with the ruling military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) Government.¹² In exchange for their compliance, the KPF was given control over a number of ceasefire zones and granted some small-scale business concessions.¹³

The formation of the KPF intensified divisions among KAGs, inciting a growing rivalry between the KPF and DKBA. Discord between KAGs continued to grow with the defection of yet another splinter group in 2007. After decades of war, Brigade 7 Commander Brig-Gen Htein Maung split from the KNU in an attempt to meet and make peace with the Myanmar Government. He went on to form a separate organisation under the name KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC), seeking and eventually signing a ceasefire agreement with the Government.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In 1997, the SLORC was abolished and reformed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) which became the new official name of the military regime in Myanmar.

¹³ South (2007).

Confusion and discontent in KAGs grew when, in 2009, the Government announced a new program to consolidate the Tatmadaw's control over military units in the country. Ceasefire groups, including the KPF, KPC and DKBA, were ordered to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF), effectively placing the Tatmadaw in power over Ethnic Armed Group (EAG) military forces. Some KAGs, such as the KPF and DKBA, accepted the Government's decision and subsequently transformed into BGFs. However, the transition was far from smooth, particularly for the DKBA, where widespread discontent over the BGF decision ultimately instigated the formation of the DKBA splinter group Klo Htoo Baw (also referred to as DKBA Brigade 5) in 2010. The Klo Htoo Baw group refused to transform into a BGF and realigned themselves with the KNU. In the ensuing months of 2010, hundreds of ex-DKBA personnel also defected to the KNU over similar frustration and resentment at the transformation into BGF units.¹⁴

Communities were also deeply affected by the series of divisions taking place within KAGs. Ensuing splits and confusion tore at the fragile connection between Karen communities, placing families on opposing sides of the conflict. As KAG presence spread across the state, communities were caught up in the conflict, forced to flee their homes, conscripted into armed groups and suffered additional abuses such as theft of property, physical assault and forced labour. As some Karen communities came under joint control of multiple armed groups, conflicting codes of conduct, limited rule of law and lack of accountability, led to an increase in confusion and lawlessness across the region.

In recent years, Myanmar has witnessed a number of reforms that have launched the country on a path towards national peace. In 2012, the new government under President Thein Sein established a Union Level Peacemaking Central Committee and Working

¹⁴ Ibid.

Committee (UPCC) (UPWC) to implement the Government's official peace plan. In the following years, over a dozen EAGs including the KNU signed preliminary ceasefire agreements and entered into peace negotiations with the Myanmar Government. The current break in fighting and the ensuing dialogue have left many hopeful for continued peace in Myanmar.

Unity-Building Initiatives Amongst Karen

The splits in KAGs seriously challenged ideas of Karen ethnic nationalism. Unlike the KNU, the DKBA-BGF, KPC and KPF failed to articulate a clear vision of Karen nationalism, particularly as, in several cases, these groups were eventually reoriented under the control of the Tatmadaw. For the KNU, who had long heralded the idea of a pan-Karen ethnic identity, the defections highlighted the wide-ranging diversity existing within Karen: not only of language and religion, but in political leaning and opinion.

In recognition of this diversity, the KNU Central Committee established its first Karen National Unity Seminar, which took place in January 1999, to discuss ways of strengthening unity among Karen people. These seminars represented an important commitment to building unity, bringing together Karen from all different organisations including armed groups, civil societies and most recently, political parties. Regardless of political developments, the Karen Nation Unity Seminars have continued to take place over the years, most recently with the 10th seminar convening in May 2014. The seminars remain an important vehicle of unity between Karen, creating a space for individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together, celebrate their ethnic identity and discuss the future.

With renewed negotiations between the KNU and the Myanmar Government in 2012, there has been a stronger internal push for unity amongst Karen to ensure the development of peace in the region. The government peace initiative and establishment of the UPWC has laid the groundwork for substantial negotiations between the Myanmar Government and EAGs. With the KNU joining other existing Karen ceasefire groups in dialogue with the government, KAG's are aligned once again in negotiations for peace. As such, the need for collaboration and a common vision of peace for Karen

people has become more apparent. In January 2013, a meeting was convened between leading Karen individuals from various fields to discuss how to build greater unity among Karen organisations. This meeting eventually resulted in the establishment of a Karen Affairs Seminar. The aim of the seminar was to provide the opportunity to unify Karen from different groups to discuss common concerns, including sustainable peace and secure livelihoods for Karen communities. The Karen Affairs Seminar also sought to facilitate greater understanding and relationship-building between Karen from different regions so they might “embrace their diversities as strength rather than weaknesses for the journey towards sustainable peace and development.”¹⁵

The seminar has provided a tangible means for many Karen, previously isolated by conflict, to discuss and engage in decision-making and planning for their future. In particular, participants discuss how to develop economic policy, pursue a sustainable ceasefire, promote Karen culture and literature and increase local benefits from natural resource extraction.¹⁶ Ultimately, in this capacity, the seminar has demonstrated the value of establishing a forum for wider discussion and collaboration open to a range of Karen individuals.

As a result, a more permanent structure, the Karen Unity and Peace Committee (KUPC) was developed to provide extensive and sustainable support to Karen unity-building initiatives. The KUPC is a separate entity distinct from the Karen National Unity Seminar, though hope has been expressed that at a future point both structures would eventually converge. Today, the KUPC has around 60 members with representatives from Government sectors, religious leadership, armed groups, political parties and CSOs who meet together quarterly. The Committee was established with three main aims: 1) Promoting inter-

¹⁵ Karen National Union, Karen Affairs Seminar Meeting, 2013, (2-3).

¹⁶ Ibid.

organisational collaboration to preserve and promote Karen culture, language and literature, 2) Facilitating collaboration to identify actions to strengthen the existing ceasefire agreement and the creation of a constitution securing the rights of the Karen people, and 3) Developing a better and more unified nation for Karen, including appropriate administrative rule and legislative law.¹⁷

In this way, the KUPC provides a sustainable avenue for different Karen groups to collaborate on a range of issues that concern all Karen communities. Since its establishment in 2013, the KUPC has led a series of consultations in Karen-populated regions of Myanmar, convening meetings where community members can express their concerns and hopes for the future to Karen leadership. Under the KUPC, these consultations play an important role in injecting community members' voices into the largely official negotiations taking place at the top level between KAG leadership and the Myanmar Government. For the first time in decades, the KUPC has created avenues of greater interaction and exchange between Karen citizens and Karen leaders that allow active Karen engagement in determining their identities and future in Myanmar.¹⁸ By facilitating discussion between communities and Karen leadership and addressing current gaps in communication, the KUPC is helping bring the peace process to the grassroots level.

Recently, the KUPC hosted a "National Karen Pre-Conference" convening around 600 Karen individuals from various regions and backgrounds to discuss crucial issues concerning the future of the Karen in Myanmar, including education, security, development and literature. In the midst of a rapidly developing peace process, forums like the pre-conference provide an important space for greater dialogue and relationship-building between Karen, often

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ashley South, "Participation, Mobilization: The Karen Peace Dividend" The Myanmar Times, 8 April, 2015.

between individuals who rarely have the chance to meet together. The primary objective of the Pre-Conference is to inform the creation of an official document to be submitted to the Parliament that encapsulates Karen positions on a number of issues as well as a set of recommendations for Government to help meet the needs of Karen communities in the future. Later in the year, a more inclusive Karen National Conference (expected to be open to at least 1,500 individuals) will provide an opportunity to present this document to the Karen public for comments and feedback before it is submitted to the parliament.

Alongside the KUPC, KAGs have also launched their own unity initiative. Recent peace negotiations between the KNU and Myanmar Government have stressed the value of presenting a united negotiating front among KAGs engaged in the country's peace process. As the country has begun to shed its militaristic past, amidst the background of other unity-building measures, the KNU has pushed for the creation of a Karen Forces Unity Committee (KFUC), to build coordination, communication and collaboration among Karen forces and ultimately, develop a shared strategy of peace process engagement. Established in 2013, the KFUC includes 17 members, with representatives from the KNU, KPC, BGF, DKBA and KPF, who meet every three months to discuss pressing issues such as troop movements and drug prevention activities.

Since the launch of recent unity initiatives, outward signs of unity between Karen have become more evident, most recently with the Karen National Pre-Conference in July 2015. In addition, in January 2014, KAGs came together in one of the first joint public celebrations to commemorate Karen Revolution Day, as an acknowledgment of KAGs' shared cause of defending Karen self-determination and rights. Soldiers from the KNLA, Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), DKBA and KPC marched together in a symbolic show of solidarity, emphasising Karen unity under a common vision for

peace and democracy in Myanmar. “Even though we have different uniforms this morning, inside we are the same, we are united,” declared a KNU representative at the celebration.¹⁹

Again, in December 2014, several KAGs (including the BGF, KPC, DKBA and KNU) gathered to celebrate Karen New Year. This marked the first time in over 60 years that KAGs were able to celebrate the holiday together in public. At the celebration, Gen. Johnny, KNLA Brigade 7 Commander and Chief of Staff, expressed the importance of building Karen unity:

“Our Karen people need to unite. If we are not united, we won’t be able to develop and we won’t be able to meet the needs of our Karen people. Therefore we have to forgive each other’s mistakes in the past.... We will work together in the future and our Karen Armed Groups will hold our hands together.”²⁰

The establishment of Karen unity groups is illustrative of a new image of a pan-Karen ethnic identity that extends beyond KNU ideals to encompass other Karen-based organisations and political parties. Karen unity is no longer synonymous with unity in or according to the KNU, but today, realistically acknowledges and encompasses the diversity within Karen communities to advocate for the rights and security of all Karen. With the creation of the KFUC, the KNU has shed the self-projected role as the sole Karen political actor, acknowledging its position as one of many organisations representing Karen.²¹ While the KNU has played a significant role instigating unity- building among KAGs, it has not exerted overt leadership over unity movements, but instead has used them as an opportunity to reconnect with Karen communities inside the country.

¹⁹ Karen National Defence Organization, “Vision and Unity: Karen Revolution Day,” 31 January, 2014.

²⁰ Karen News, “Karen New Year Celebrated as Factions Show Unity”, 21, December, 2014.

²¹ Ibid.

Karen Reflections on Conflict and Unity

Karen unity initiatives and events indicate a shared commitment to unity among groups of Karen, despite long years of conflict and isolation. The current peace process and break in fighting has provided a space for self-reflection on the divisive effects of conflict, the diversity of the Karen people and the need for greater unity. Looking back, the Karen describe a time of upheaval and confusion following splits in KAGs. For many soldiers, this period of internal conflict provoked mistrust and suspicion, not only amongst one another, but also in the cause of struggle and revolution. One KNLA soldier describes:

“The division was in December of 1994. It was the biggest lost in the history of Karen Revolution. All Karen were heart broken. Karen killed each other and many lost their lives. In 2007 another division happened in Brigade 7. Afterwards, small groups were split again and again. We were divided into pieces. Some tried to run away. Some worked for their personal benefit. At that time, the leadership has so many challenges. At the same time many Karen were forced to go to refugee camps. Many left for the third country. Finally, I would say Karen Revolution got to the hopeless situation.”

Divisions within KAGs were also felt in Karen communities across the region. The most notable distinction between communities in Karen State exists between the Sgaw speaking Karen, who mainly reside in hillside areas and in Christian communities, and the Pwo Karen, mostly living in lowlands and amongst Buddhist communities.²² With Pwo and Sgaw Karen languages mostly unintelligible to one another, barriers of communication and interaction have played a role in segregating Karen communities. During such times of upheaval,

²² South (2007).

however, these differences between Karen are more widely felt, further isolating Karen communities from one another.

For community members, KAG splits indicated a prioritisation of individual needs over the KNU's long-held position of revolution for the rights and representation of all Karen people. Communities questioned KAGs' level of commitment to the Karen cause as they witnessed the DKBA, KPC and KPF sign ceasefire agreements with the Myanmar Government and enjoy ensuing benefits, including lucrative business opportunities and demarcated areas of control. In addition, as the KNU presence was pushed to the border areas, Karen communities' voices and needs went largely unrepresented and unaddressed in the scope of the conflict. One Karen community member captured this sentiment: "They (Armed Groups) say they are working for the people, but in reality, they are not thinking of the people. They need to change the attitude..."²³

Divisions in KAGs increased confusion in Karen communities which were now effectively ruled under the authority of multiple groups with distinct sets of rules. Loosely demarcated and overlapping areas of control meant communities were subject to conflicting regulations. As one community member described:

*"We don't have any rural laws between these areas; they are controlled by both the government and NSAGs. Both have their own policies and dual systems. We need consensus and encompassing rules and regulations because now they are confused."*²⁴

Without a systematic rule of law, community members, particularly those caught between two conflict parties, experienced increasing insecurity and vulnerability.

²³ Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Communities: Karen State* (Phnom Penh, 2014), 38.

²⁴ (Ibid: 51)

In overlapping regions of control, communities were caught in the crossfire between EAGs and the Myanmar Army as the Tatmadaw expanded their presence across the state. These communities were subject to numerous human rights abuses on both sides of the conflict. As a Karen villager recounted:

“We fall under the administration of two governments, the KNU and Myanmar government. We do not like it and feel fear from both sides because of new recruitment from the Tatmadaw and KNU soldiers. The difference is that the majority of people are willing to join the KNU, but not the government force.”²⁵”

With renewed outbreaks in violence and the expansion of military presence in Karen State, communities suffered extensive human right abuses under both conflict parties, including forced labour, such as portering, as well as physical assaults, theft of property and forced displacement.²⁶ One community member explains:

“Both sides (KAGs and Tatmadaw) treat the people of the village as scapegoats because they cannot defeat each other. There are a lot of reported rape cases and murders. Women are very afraid of the Tatmadaw. Women and girls in my village no longer feel safe walking on the street.”²⁷”

Following divisions and the ensuing upheaval and suffering at the hands of KAGs, Karen communities began to feel apprehensive and fearful of the organisations that claimed to fight in their name.

When reflecting on the causes of these splits in KAGs, soldiers point to factors including weak leadership, lack of education/knowledge and religious differences that the Myanmar Government and Tatmadaw

²⁵ (Ibid: 56)

²⁶ Physicians for Human Rights, “Bitter Wounds and Lost Dreams: Human Rights Under Assault in Karen State, Burma (Washington DC: Library for National Congress, 2012).

²⁷ Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2014 (50).

forces were able to exploit to factionalise KAGs. These divisive tactics were most evident leading up to the formation of the DKBA where, soldiers cite, the Myanmar Government spread propaganda to antagonise existing divisions and incite Buddhist KNU soldiers. These rumours exacerbated discrimination between Buddhist soldiers and Christian officers (such as food distribution inequality between officers and lower-ranking soldiers). With limited levels of education and exposure to political concepts like federalism and democracy, some soldiers were more susceptible to such divisive propaganda.

In many cases, soldiers' state, perceived alliances with Tatmadaw troops aggravated divisions between KAGs. Several KNU factions, like the DKBA, received support from the Tatmadaw, particularly in their campaign against the KNU, causing much confusion and bitterness among KAGs and surrounding communities. Soldiers who had once been fighting together under the same cause were suddenly pitted against one another, on opposite sides of conflict. "The DKBA came to our villages, we were fighting one another, killing one another," shared one KNLA soldier. "We even had to fight our relatives on the other side. We didn't want to but we had to follow orders. It was very painful," disclosed another.

Karen soldiers also acknowledge the devastating effects of internal fighting on Karen communities. As conflict broke out, they watched as villages were destroyed, thousands were forced to flee to refugee camps, families were separated and civilian casualties increased. Soldiers recognise that this period of conflict and divisions led to a tremendous loss of local support from Karen communities. "We said we are fighting for them, but we neglected them, and lost the trust and support of the people," reflected a KNLA soldier.

Looking back, Karen individuals discuss how these internal divisions strengthened the position of the Myanmar Government. Throughout the conflict, individuals explained that the Myanmar Government

employed a divide and rule strategy to weaken the opposition of EAGs. This tactic was most evident in the push to transform ceasefire groups into a BGF, a move that reoriented EAGs as agents of the Tatmadaw, significantly weakening military power without addressing the political goals of these groups.²⁸ These divisive tactics were particularly devastating in the Karen context, given the number of splits and resulting upheaval and anguish KAGs experienced. “Who died on our side? Karen. Who died on the other side? Karen. Who was smiling? The Burmese,” a KPC soldier declared. “The more we fight, the further away we are from our vision of equality and federalism,” a KNLA soldier added.

Yet, the period of conflict and ensuing divisions that undermined the force of KAGs has left people with a deep understanding and insight into the power of unity. When speaking of unity, individuals often use words including: ‘one vision/mind’ ‘success’ ‘cooperation’ and ‘strength.’ Talk of unity is closely tied to ideas of a secure future and development, and unity is stressed as an essential means of achieving peace and progress for the Karen people. Individuals discussed how unity was imperative to achieve ‘expected goals’ such as ‘freedom,’ ‘prosperity’ and ‘development.’ One KAG soldier explained:

“Before the understanding among KNU, BGF, KPC and DKBA was restored, thousands of Karen soldiers and Karen people perished. They are a great loss for the entire Karen people. Unity is very important and if we can unite, other people around will respect us. We will be able to reach our goals quickly and we will be able to build a peaceful and prosperous country.”

²⁸ Transnational Institute, “Political Reform and Ethnic Peace in Burma/Myanmar: The Need for Clarity and Achievement” (Myanmar Policy Briefing No. 14, 2015).

Another KNLA soldier reiterated: “Unity is the most needed thing for Karen people. If there is unity we will overcome all problems. If we have one mind, we will receive our expected goal and genuine freedom.” Without unity, soldiers reiterated, it would be impossible to truly succeed and attain long-fought-for aspirations of freedom and prosperity. Said one KNLA officer:

“Unity is the prophecy of the future success. There are a lot of proverbs that talk about unity including ‘if cattle are divided, the tiger will eat them’ and ‘unity brings successes’... The practical situations that we see in Myanmar as well as in this world truthfully explain to us that because of the lack of unity there are ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, political conflicts and economic conflicts. Therefore, unity is very important and directly related to building the family, building the organisation, building the country and building the business.”

For the Karen, unity-building is essential for addressing feelings of discrimination between communities and to secure lasting peace in the region. Greater unity among people in Karen State would help strengthen the peace process and combat the government’s divide and rule strategy.²⁹ “The more we see each other, talk to each other, the more we reduce tension and suspicion between us,” commented a Karen religious leader.

These sentiments of unity among the Karen were rarely confined to the Karen context. Unity was often utilised as an inclusive term. When asked to define unity, Karen groups stressed the wider universal aspect; unity was needed not only among KAGs and Karen communities, but amongst all EAGs, the entire country, even the entire world. Put most simply: “One person cannot carry the heavy burden, but many people can carry it together. That is the result

²⁹ Ibid.

of unity,” a KNLA soldier explained. Individuals alluded to unity for ‘all Karen people’ and in the larger context of the peace process, broader unity within the country: “We need unity to realise dreams of peace for the whole country (not only Karen groups) including other EAGs,” a soldier commented. “Unity is important because unity is a basic need for every country, every organisation, every ethnic group,” expressed another.

Inclusive aspects of unity were also expressed in terms of greater collaboration and engagement of all Karen people. One Karen Exchange of Arms for Peace (KEAP) soldier affirmed: “Unity (is) taking action together with all the heart, all the mind, in harmony and agreement, rather than relying on only someone.” Statements like these reveal an understanding of unity as an inclusive concept that challenges the traditional top-down method of decision-making in KAGs. Soldiers expressed feelings of isolation from decision-making, little access to knowledge on the peace process, and too much of a “willingness to trust” leadership during years of conflict. Today, unity movements denote an inclusiveness that is paving the way for greater engagement and exchange between leadership and the Karen people. A KNLA Commander commented on this change in thinking, stating: “As a leader sometimes I don’t discuss or consult others on my decisions. As a result, followers are not happy and at times even leaders must listen to followers.”

For community members, the need for greater unity was expressed as a need for increased community engagement in the peace process. “The most important point is to give priority to the Karen people’s wishes. I want community needs and challenges heard in the peace process,”³⁰ a Karen villager affirmed. Many felt recent efforts towards peace had left communities underrepresented, with limited paths for engagement, and thus, they were mistrustful of the legitimacy of

³⁰ (Ibid: 44)

the process: “In the discussions and negotiations undertaken [in] the peace process, sole participation of armed groups and government authorities is not effective. People also need to participate in the discussions. All the ethnic groups should be represented,”³¹ while another reaffirmed, “It is not a real peace process because no communities are involved.”³²

Genuine peace, Karen communities articulated, would require good leaders who consulted and created space for communities to voice their needs and challenges in the peace process. Thus, key leaders should strive to negotiate on behalf of the larger public, rather than in the interests of the armed groups. “What the government and all armed groups should accept is that they are only engaging in the peace process for the people, and not for the power and wealth of one party,”³³ a community member stated.

³¹ (Ibid: 43)

³² (Ibid: 33)

³³ (Ibid: 39)

Implications for Myanmar's Peace Process

These reflections and perceptions of unity are particularly significant in Myanmar's current political environment. Since 2012, increasing reforms have distinguished the current peace process from past cycles of peace negotiations, bolstering national hope and optimism for stability and peace.³⁴ Political prisoners have been released, economic sanctions have been reduced, and peace talks between the government and EAGs are approaching the prospect of signing a nationwide ceasefire. Yet, after three years, the peace process continues to face a number of significant challenges. With its focus on key stakeholders in top-level negotiations, the process has largely alienated civil society. Communities have mostly been excluded from dialogue between key conflict actors, with little access to information or knowledge of developments taking place behind closed doors in Yangon. For years, communities have been deeply and directly affected by clashes between parties, yet so far, the peace process has denied community members space to voice their concerns, challenges and needs to help shape the future of Myanmar.

Over the past year, there has been an increase in violent encounters between conflict parties, perpetuating widespread mistrust and confusion among citizens that has been exacerbated by 60 years of protracted conflict and failed ceasefire agreements. Incidents from the past year, including the Tatmadaw shelling of the Kachin Independence Organisation's (KIO's) training ground and which resulted in the death of 23 ethnic army soldiers in Laiza, the violent repression of student protests, renewed fighting in Northeast Myanmar between EAGs and Tatmadaw, and the continuation of economic exploitation of communities (including resource development and land-grabbing) have left many questioning the

³⁴ Transnational Institute (2015).

extent of recent reforms and the sustainability of the current peace process.

Karen unity movements are working to address these challenges by building community engagement and inclusivity among stakeholders. In an effort to connect with community members, unity initiatives are providing tangible opportunities for many Karen, previously isolated by conflict, to discuss and engage in decision-making about their future on key issues such as sustainable ceasefire and natural resource extraction. In doing so, unity movements are not only helping to meet community needs of increased engagement in the peace process, but are playing a crucial role of injecting community voices into the largely official negotiations taking place between KAG leadership and the Myanmar Government. In this way, Karen unity initiatives are helping to ensure the peace process meets the needs of the people it affects the most: the larger public.

Simultaneously, for the first time in decades, unity movements are creating avenues of greater interaction and exchange between Karen citizens, armed groups and community leaders, an essential component of trust-building. Linguistic, religious and cultural diversity have traditionally isolated Karen communities across the country, particularly during times of conflict with communities along the KAG-concentrated border areas more exposed to fighting and violence. During times of transition, these diverse experiences of conflict have generated differing beliefs on the peace process, with many remaining suspicious and mistrustful of the fledgling process, whilst others view it as a unique opportunity for achieving peace in the country. Institutions like the KUPC are working to bridge these divisions, building relationships between communities both inside and outside Karen State and the rest of the country. After two years of working transparently, the KUPC has gained the trust of the Karen, developing linkages between the diverse communities.

Participants at the KUPC National Pre-Conference referenced recent progress in building relationships between Karen, including increased opportunities for dialogue. One individual working at a CSO in Dawei explained: “In the past if there is a problem, even if a small problem, people will fight. Now if there is a problem, people come together to talk.” Another participant reiterated, “Before bringing us all together is not possible, this conference is important not so much for the issues we are discussing but for demonstrating our unity.”

Particularly for KAG-community relationships, unity events like the National Pre-Conference provide an important forum for developing mutual trust and understanding. These events have granted armed groups an opportunity to reconnect with the needs and concerns of citizens and to gauge just how representative KAGs are of community voices in official negotiations. This kind of active community engagement with armed groups has been cited as an essential element of fostering sustainable peace in a number of contexts, including Uganda, Colombia and Syria.³⁵ Greater local exchange between communities and armed groups can make important contributions towards sustainable peace, granting armed groups more weight and credibility in peace negotiations while, at the same time, bringing peace initiatives to the grassroots. After listening to a presentation from the KNU, one participant of the conference commented, “We never thought the Karen Armed Groups knew about or understood community needs, now we see they do.” By connecting diverse groups of Karen, events like the National Pre-Conference build understanding and exchange, forging connections that are essential towards establishing a united front in negotiating peace with the Myanmar Government.

Though these unity activities have initially been focused on Karen citizens, they are playing an important role in creating awareness about a need for unity across the country. As Karen have stressed

³⁵ Sophie Haspeslagh and Zahbia Yousuf (ed), *Local Engagement with Armed Groups in the Midst of Violence*, (London: Conciliation Resources, 2015).

the necessity for greater ethnic unity in Myanmar, Karen unity movements have become a vehicle to raise awareness of the power of unity. This is particularly significant, given the context of on-going peace negotiations in a country whose conflict and ensuing peace process has historically been divided along ethnic lines. In the past few years, there have been signs of greater collaboration between actors, most notably with the formation of a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), which brought together 16 EAGs to work on the text of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Karen unity initiatives helped to build this foundation of ethnic cooperation in Myanmar, promoting a common vision of ethnic solidarity and peace that encompasses all citizens. “No matter we are minority or majority, we want to live in this nation together and forever,” a KNLA soldier stated. “My hope is to build a real union with no racial discrimination so that our country will become a beautiful country with all its ethnic groups,” a community member reaffirmed.

Thus, Karen unity movements have helped create a space for support and for the development of a national identity. Building on the rhetoric of Karen unity, these groups are beginning to redirect focus from ethnic identity to a more inclusive concept of identity that embraces all citizens of Myanmar. With general elections approaching in November 2015, establishing an inclusive peace is becoming increasingly imperative to maintain recent democratic reforms over the next five years. Karen unity movements that help build inclusivity in the peace process are integral towards securing a shared vision, establishing a framework of national dialogue and building trust and confidence in a process that has recently been undermined by continued outbreaks in fighting, ceasefire agreement breaches, and human right violations. Amidst the current challenges facing the peace process, Karen unity movements are building a narrative of inclusion and hope, to sustain the country’s path towards nationwide peace.

Currently, the lack of unity in the peace process is a concern voiced among several Karen groups: “My biggest worry is the disagreement and division among the armed groups. Peace and unity cannot be rushed,” stated a KNLA officer. Soldiers reflecting on their experiences in the past stressed the necessity of avoiding further divisions and disputes. One KNLA officer expressed:

“Because of disunity, we don’t like each other although we belong to the same race. We compete with each other, we kill each other and I personally witnessed the tremendous loss we have got. And we drifted away from our goals.”

KAG representatives agreed there were a number of ways to build unity in the country and achieve desired goals of democracy and real peace. Many stressed the importance of coming to terms with the past, to forgive and to understand one another better. “If we can remove our anger, greed and illusion, if we can cultivate compassion and sympathy, if we can join our hands and help each other, we will certainly achieve unity,” commented a KNDO officer. Others expressed the need for KAGs to communicate and meet more frequently with one another in order to establish collective goals and visions and increase trust.

Both Karen communities and soldiers emphasised that unity and trust must be built in the wider context of the Myanmar peace process. “We need to unite. I believe the government and the public need to collaborate, it will get peace; we want all our leaders to unite,” a community member stated. In particular, individuals cited the need for greater adherence to and implementation of ceasefire agreements to demonstrate conflict parties’ commitment to peace and to build confidence in peace negotiations. A KNLA soldier conveyed:

“It is very important to do the practical work to show that we trust each other and we understand each other rather than just providing lip service. Practical action is harder than saying, therefore we need to implement what we’ve already agreed.”

These attitudes are particularly significant given the deep divisions that isolated Karen over the past 60 years of conflict. Only a few years ago, KAGs were pitted against one another, some fighting hand to hand in clashes, others perceived as abandoning the “ethnic cause” as part of the Tatmadaw-controlled BGF. Yet, despite these experiences, KAGs still express desire for reconciliation, compassion and sympathy among one another and for greater acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity within KAGs. “We must prepare ourselves not to oppress the other but to respect the differences between us,” commented a KNLA officer.

As Karen unity movements demonstrate, in just a few short years, the Karen people have begun to derive important lessons for the future from damaging experiences of conflict, displaying an unusual capacity for self-reflection and analysis. As a KNLA officer remarked: “When we look back on these experiences we feel disappointed but at the same time they encourage us to change for the future.” These attitudes are not only reflected in unity-building measures, but also in KAGs’ commitment towards renewed negotiations with the Myanmar Government. In February 2015, KAGs composed 3 of the 4 groups³⁶ present to sign the Deed of Commitment to Peace and National Reconciliation, the first time that President Thein Sein formally signed a commitment to build a federal union in Myanmar.

³⁶ The four groups who signed the Deed of Commitment were the KNU, KDBA KPC and Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)

However, in a politically-charged environment, current unity initiatives amongst Karen may pose some risks. Calls for unity and increasing interaction between Karen leaders, community members and armed groups may be misinterpreted as mobilisation or call to action, raising suspicion among Government officials. Similarly, focus on unity between the Karen may leave other EAGs feeling more isolated. Some may view increased Karen unity initiatives as an attempt to assert Karen domination over other ethnic groups, increasing mistrust and further polarising key conflict actors. Even within Karen groups, unity movements may spur division, as contentious issues are more widely debated and discussed. Existing groups of hardliners, more opposed to the peace process, may feel antagonised by unity movements, which may be viewed as a means of increasing engagement and thus, complicit acceptance of the current peace process.

There is also a risk that Karen unity initiatives may raise unsustainable expectations among Karen communities, particularly around standards of public engagement in the peace process. Greater exchange between Karen communities and leadership, however, is not a guarantee of increased community peace dividends. There is still the question of the EAGs' capacity to actually deliver peace to the communities, and therefore, despite increased consultations, communities may be disappointed, disenchanted and mistrustful of KAGs without witnessing any visible improvements in community standards of living over the next few years. In such cases, these risks would have significant adverse effects on the peace process, fostering mistrust and divisions rather than an environment conducive to relationship-building.

Cross-Contextual Comparisons: Unity-Building in the Asian Region

Across the region, few peace processes have fostered the same attitudes and efforts at increasing unity among individuals. In Myanmar, other groups have begun to acknowledge the value of intra-ethnic unity-building. The Karenni People's Progressive Party (KNPP), an EAG based in Kayah State, has focused attention on strengthening ties between various splinter Karenni EAGs and CSOs. "We should reunite and build trust because we all aim to work for the people," a KNPP representative commented. In recent years, the KNPP has worked to strengthen these relationships, utilising youth-focused CSOs to connect and build trust amongst Karenni Armed Groups. For the KNPP, these initiatives are an essential means of securing peaceful futures for the new generation of Karenni youth.

Aside from the Karenni context, the most notable unity-building efforts can be seen arising out of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an international institution representing 57 states that works to "safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world."³⁷ Most recently, the OIC hosted a meeting between the two Filipino Ethnic Armed Organisations, the Moro-Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF was initially formed in 1969, seeking autonomy for the dominant Muslim community of Moro people, or the Bangsamoro, living in Mindanao (Southern Philippines) from the central Philippine Government. In 1984, the MILF broke away from the MNLF over the signing of a contentious agreement with the Philippine Government. Today, both groups are engaged in separate peace negotiations with the Government of the Philippines.

³⁷ Organization of Islamic Cooperation, "About OIC," http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en

Under the guidance of the OIC, the MNLF and MILF met to acknowledge that both organisations were aligned in efforts to achieve peace and justice for the Bangsamoro people and that unity between them was “indispensable to the success of the Bangsamoro struggle.”³⁸ Recognising these shared objectives and the need for greater coordination between both parties, the MNLF and MILF jointly decided to establish a Bangsamoro Coordination Forum (BCF) in 2014. This mechanism, consisting of ten members from each armed group (20 in total), is set to convene every three months to coordinate efforts towards achieving aspirations of the Bangsamoro and promote greater engagement and discussion amongst the two groups.³⁹ The BCF serves as an important platform for MILF-MNLF cooperation as they seek to harmonise tracks of separately signed peace agreements. “We are optimistic that this Forum is reducing the gap between the different views. We are all interested in peace,” commented OIC Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani.⁴⁰

MILF-MNLF unity initiatives have yet to be more fully developed, currently confined to limited discussions between top key actors. Still, the BCF represents an important acknowledgement of the need for collaboration in peace processes in order to better meet the needs and aspirations of the Bangsamoro under a united front, to achieve a more lasting peace in the Philippines.

³⁸ Terms of Reference: Organization of the Bangsamoro Coordination Forum, 2014. <http://www.opapp.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Terms%20of%20Reference%20-%20Operationalization%20of%20the%20Bangsamoro%20Coordination%20Forum.pdf>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Carolyn O. Arguillas, “The OIC Sec-Gen meets with MNLF, MILF Leaders in Davao City; secretariat for Bangsamoro Coordination Forum set up, Mindanews, 20 April, 2015.

Conclusion

While other forms of unity initiatives like the BCF are beginning to emerge throughout the region, Karen unity-building initiatives represent a distinctive attempt to move beyond past injustices and unite under one vision in order to strengthen peace in the country. “If we work together, we can move forward together. We need to help each other. There are no boundaries in humanity and there should be no boundaries in Karen society,” affirmed a KNLA soldier. These sentiments have significant repercussions in a country that has been devastated by ethnic division and conflict for decades and whose peace process has largely been segregated along ethnic lines. Karen unity-building initiatives are cultivating awareness of the importance of a unified Myanmar, and have significant implications for the promotion of a national identity. In this way, these movements are helping lay the foundation of a more inclusive and sustainable peace process to achieve long-awaited peace for Myanmar.



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