



**Part (C)
Ethnic Issue**

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**Burma and National Reconciliation: Ethnic
Conflict and State-Society Dysfunction**

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It is maintained that Burma's 'ethnic conflict' is not per se ethnic, nor that of the kind faced by indigenous peoples of, for example, North America, but a conflict rooted in politics. Following the collapse of Burma's General Ne Win's military-socialist regime in 1988, the issue of ethnic conflict has attracted the attention from both observers and protagonists. This attention became heightened following the unraveling of the socialist bloc and the emergence of ethnic wars in those hitherto (presumed) stable socialist nation-states.

Introduction: The Problem of State-Society Dysfunction

The ethnic resistance movements in Burma were previously perceived by most observers as insurgencies by disgruntled tribal isolates fighting against the modernizing and unifying state. Especially following the emergence of new nation-states in the 1950s, political scientists cheered for the new leaders of these countries and their attempts to 'modernize' their 'backward' societies. Resistance of societal segments, especially ethnic groups, to the state was frowned upon as obstructing the laudable nation and state-building efforts of the modern state and its leaders. The ethnic conflict problem was not seen as integral to the larger, more basic problem of disjunction. This was especially the case after 1962, between the military-monopolized state and the society at large. That there was dysfunction in state-society relations in Burma is now recognized, but the ethnic dimension of state-society dysfunction has never been fully appreciated. This insight is critical for those seeking to gain a clear understanding of Burma's current crisis. The conflict in Burma is deep-rooted. Solutions can only be found if the real issues of conflict are examined, such as territory, resources and nationality, rather than the previously accepted but superficial explanations.

When resistance of societal segments is considered obstructive, especially when these segments are ethnic-based, it constitutes an important dimension of state-society dysfunction. The need for national integration in Burma



is inarguable. The problem is how it is to be defined and achieved. Integration has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, i.e. between state and society, and between the different elements of a society. Attempts at national integration ignoring these dimensions are likely to divide rather than unite. Ethnic resistance was condemned by leaders and governments of postcolonial states, and likewise by their respective former foreign patrons, as reactionary tribal holdouts.

Often, ethnic resistance was portrayed by ruling regimes as instruments of external, ‘imperialist’ powers or agents. Contributing to the confusion was a situation where cold-war protagonists were encouraging ethnic discontent and rebellion in order to destabilize the state of the rival power.

Ethnic Conflict in Burma: Some Basic Definitions

Even today, when it is recognized that the various ‘ethnic rebellions’ form a part of Burma’s state-society dysfunction, there remains some confusion regarding the nature of ethnic conflict. One current perspective sees the ethnic conflict in Burma in terms of ethnic minorities fighting for democratic rights or cultural-identity rights, or equal opportunity, like the African-American and other minorities in the United States. Even Burma’s ethnic non-Burman¹ groups and leaders, at least some of them, have been drawn into the “minority rights, equal opportunity” paradigm. Some ethnic leaders and activists have even defined themselves as ‘indigenous people’, although this term refers to native people or aboriginals marginalized and displaced by white settlers. The use of the term ‘indigenous people’ in the Burma context is odd because all ethnic segments, including the Burmans or ethnic Burmese, are indigenous in the sense that they are all native to Burma.

The ethnic non-Burman segments of Burma, especially the Shan, Kachin, Karenni, Chin, and Rakhine, are neither ethnic minorities nor indigenous peoples. As will be clarified below, they (like the Burmans) are peoples or nations. They moreover have had the experience of administering themselves, albeit under British supervision, for about five decades.² They also have, like the Burmans, their own history, or rather, a sense of history. In their own states or home territories the ethnic non-Burmans, in fact, comprise collectively the majority, and the Burmans the minority. Because of their role as cofounders of the Union of Burma, by virtue of the 1947 Panglong Accord, the ethnic non-Burman nationalities consider themselves the founding nations of the country. They have used the term ‘ethnic nationalities’ rather than ‘ethnic minorities’ to refer to themselves collectively. Burma’s ‘ethnic conflict’ is not per se ethnic but political, in a very fundamental way. The conflict is political because it is both about ethnic identity and rights, about democracy and equal opportunity, and about building nation and state. It involves political fundamentals as to how a nation is



to be built, defined or identified, by whom, and in what direction. It has much to do with problems arising from the application of nation-building formulae by the state or by a set of power-holders.

With regard to nation-building in independent Burma, it is important to recognize that the first foundation stones were laid in 1947 when the Panglong Accord was signed in the Shan State. This politically defining document was signed between U Aung San, the Shan *Sawbwa* princes and representatives of the Shan, Kachin, and Chin peoples. The Panglong Conference reached unanimous agreement that the political freedom of all peoples there represented would be hastened by immediate cooperation with the interim government. It was further agreed at Panglong that cooperation should be implemented by the governor's appointment of an additional councilor, to be nominated by the newly formed supreme council of United Hill Peoples. The councilor would assume executive responsibility for the Frontier Areas. Other agreements at Panglong provided for the enjoyment of democratic rights by all citizens, for continued interim financial aid by the center to the Frontier Areas, for local autonomy, and for immediate consultations looking toward the demarcation of a Kachin State.³ The Panglong Accord defined the political and geographical boundaries of present-day Burma: its peoples would join together in an alliance to obtain independence from Britain and to establish a union of equal and self-determining states—the Union of Burma or *Pyidaungzu*.

The Burmese word *Pyidaungzu* means a union of nation-states, implying a federation of states. Federalism is embedded in the Burmese term for the post-1948 Union of Burma. Since Panglong was a historically defining moment and the genesis of present-day Burma, the Pang-long Accord and its underlying spirit are politically hegemonic. Even the successive ruling generals (who have done much violence to the ideals of Panglong) have to pay lipservice to the Panglong Spirit, to the notion of equality between what they call 'national races'.⁴

British Colonial Rule and the Making of Burma

Like all nation-states that emerged after the withdrawal of colonial powers, such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, Burma is basically the child of the colonial order. The colonial powers re-arranged the territories that came into their hands and made them into 'modern' entities that later became post-colonial nation-states. Prior to the advent of colonial powers, Burma in its present form did not exist. There were what modern historians describe as Burmese (or Burman) kingdoms that existed side by side with the Mon, Shan, Rakhine, Manipuri, Thai, Lao, and Khmer kingdoms, and which were often in conflict with each other. Wars, both intra-kingdom dynastic fighting and inter-kingdom conflicts, were endemic. The kingdoms were however neither solely



territorial nor based on ethnic sentiments or solidarity. That is, they were not national kingdoms but dynastic or personal systems of power and domination.

In the final British annexation of Burma in 1885, the Burmese king and court had hardly any control over the areas north of the capital city of Mandalay. Moreover, an alliance of Shan princes, called the Limbin Confederacy, was poised to march on to the capital to overthrow King Thibaw (whose mother was Shan, the Hsipaw Princess). The Shan princes wanted to install their candidate, the Limbin Prince, on the throne. There was at that time no Burmese kingdom to speak of. A year after the fall of Mandalay, the British met with the Shan princes at Mong Yai and negotiated the inclusion of their principedoms in British India as protectorates under the Viceroy. The British then proceeded to reorganize the areas beyond India ('farther India' or 'British Indochina') that had come under their control. By the 1930s, British Burma was separated from India and organized into two distinct parts, namely Ministerial Burma (the homeland of the majority ethnic Burmese) and the Frontier Areas. The latter included the present-day Shan, Kachin, and Chin States, and parts of the current Karen and Arakan/Rakhine State. The present Karenni State was treated more or less as a protectorate, and the Wa area was classified as un-administered territory.

Under the British, there was still no Burma in its current form. It has been held by a number of Burman nationalists that the British deliberately divided Burma in accordance with their 'divide-and-rule' policy. What can be said about the divide-and-rule thesis, however, is that it assumes that the population of Burma was homogenous or had already been unified as a nation in the current sense of the word. In this context the term 'divide-and-rule' is untenable and fails to take account of practices that were common to all colonial powers. Rather than being moved by the 'divide-and-rule' imperative, which anti-colonial nationalists often attribute to colonial powers, the widely practiced system of direct and indirect rule was based on administrative convenience, informed by the economic-commercial viability of the real estate in question. That is to say, areas that were accessible from the sea, fertile, productive, and where an infrastructure could be built at low cost, were usually placed under direct rule, whereas the hinterland with hardly any infrastructure, controlled by traditional rulers, was loosely supervised by colonial officers.

In Burma, the Irrawaddy basin constituting the Burman homeland, i.e. Burma Proper, was ruled directly and thus became developed and reached some degree of modernization. The Frontier Areas were left to their own respective rulers and became less developed. British Burma was, like French Indochina, a mix of expedient bureaucratic-administrative arrangements, and it was this patchwork of differently administered and differently developed territories that would form the Union of Burma after the Panglong Accord.



Nation-Building Formulas and the Rise of the Military

Three major schools of thought can be distinguished with regard to Burma's post-independence (mainly Burman) leaders on nation-building. One school of thought, associated with U Aung San, the architect of independence, held that Burma was to be a union of States based on equality of all national groups. The principles of 'unity in diversity' and self-determination, implying the widest of autonomy for the States, would underpin the Union. This was the vision that led to the signing of the Panglong Accord in 1947, a year before independence.

The second school of thought was adopted by the post-Aung San AFPFL6 leaders. This vision was embodied structurally in the 1947 Union Constitution. It provided for a unitary form of state, decentralized to some degree but not federal. This formula gained ascendancy and was in force for almost twelve years, from 1948 to 1962, but was certainly not in keeping with the Panglong Spirit or with the vision of U Aung San. Nevertheless, it worked after a fashion but Burma's ethnic nationalities seethed with discontent and civil war raged. The relationship between the members was asymmetrical: there was the Mother country (*Pyi-Ma*, the Burma State) and around it revolved a set of subordinate constituent states. The relation of, say, the Shan State to the Burma State was similar to that between Scotland and England. In concept it can be said that there were seven Scotlands in Burma, all revolving around Rangoon.

The third school of thought was fascistic and narrowly ethno-nationalistic. It held that the Burmans had built an empire through defeating and conquering the lesser 'races' such as the Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and Karen. In this formula, Burma had been unified by 'Burman conquest' since the 11th century, by great kings such as Anawratha, Bayinnaung, Alaungpaya and Bodawpaya. According to this nationhood vision, the British had forcibly dismembered this unified kingdom and through their divide-and-rule policy further alienated the hitherto unified 'races' of Burma from each other. From this perspective, held by the military and successive ruling generals, nationhood and nation-building would be no problem: all national 'races' would be kept together by a strong state, and nationhood or unity would be achieved by obliterating all differences through forced assimilation or 'Burmanization'. The military looked forward to everyone becoming Burmans as in the good old days. From this point of view, cultural and ethnic diversity was deemed to be undesirable and dangerous because diversity was divisive. It was therefore imperative that the solidarity of the Union had to be maintained and safeguarded by the armed forces, otherwise the country would fall apart or become a chaotic arena of warring 'races' as in Bosnia.⁷



Although the Shan, Kachin, and other ethnic nationalities' leaders found the 1947 Constitution unsatisfactory, they went along with it until the coup in 1962, because they had been assured that it could be amended at any time in the future. Also, the fact that independent Burma immediately became a battleground between the AFPFL government and its erstwhile allies (the Red and White Flag communists, the People's Volunteers Organization, Burman army mutineers, and later, Karen army mutineers and Pa-O rebels in the Shan State) gave the non-Burman leaders very little option but to stand with the AFPFL, or rather behind U Nu. The alternative was revolution and communist victory.

In many ways, the armed struggle led by the communists and their allies strengthened ties between the leaders of the ethnic nationalities and the AFPFL. However, at the same time, the insurgents (Burman communists, and the Karen with their ethnic allies among the Pa-O and Mon) bolstered the importance of the military to the extent that during the 1950s it had become very powerful and gained much autonomy. The incursions of U.S.-backed Chinese nationalist Kuomintang irregulars in the eastern Shan State further reinforced the power and autonomy of the military. In fighting the insurgents and the Kuomintang, the military also took on administrative functions in areas where martial law was imposed. Moreover, the 1957 split in the ruling AFPFL party into two camps and many sub-factions again strengthened the position and autonomy of the military. The split created a power vacuum at the very top, and it was only a matter of time before the military ventured onto the political stage, which it did in 1958. The then Prime Minister, U Nu, was requested by Brigadiers Aung Gyi and Tin Pe to hand over power to the army, albeit temporarily, so that the political confusion stemming from the AFPFL split could be sorted out. U Nu agreed and, with the sanction of parliament, the military ruled as a caretaker government for two years. In 1960, as promised, the military held an election which U Nu won overwhelmingly on an anti-military platform. In addition, U Nu promised to make Buddhism the official state religion. In 1962, however, the military marched back to power, and has been ruling Burma ever since.

Nation-Building by Ne Win and the Military

The military's nation-building formula dovetailed nicely with its top-down idea of state-society relations, still with a command-and-control orientation. The military's fascistic view of nationhood and tight control may be owing to Japanese influence, since the army was trained by the Japanese during the Second World War. Under General Ne Win's rule, from 1962 to 1988, the fascistic, chauvinistic vision of nationhood became entrenched within the military. As a result of the outbreak of insurgencies at the onset of independence, the military was at once brought to the forefront as the defender of the new (AFPFL) state. That role garnered substantial power for the army, because the AFPFL



leaders were not only the military's political masters but also dependent on the army to fend off dangers—particularly dangers caused by the communists. The eventual effect was that the military became a power unto itself. The military took on the task of nation-building according to its notion of nationhood.

This formula has not only been destructive but also a failure in terms of creating a viable multi-ethnic nation-state. It can be said that what was of utmost concern to the military (as self-acclaimed 'nation-builders') was Chapter 10 of the 1947 Constitution, which granted the Shan State the option of secession after 10 years of union. The military, however, set out to preempt the Shan from exercising that option, whether or not they actually planned to do so. The military intimidated the population by sowing terror, and it fomented opposition in the Shan State towards the *Sawbwa* princes, whom the military accused of hatching plots to dismember the Union.

Everywhere the military went in the Shan State, they unleashed on the population their brutal power with apparent immunity. It was only after the 1988 people's uprising that atrocities in the non-Burman areas came to light. Previously, because Cold War strategies had dwarfed all other issues, and because the ethnic non-Burmese resistance was regarded as tribal rebellion, stories of widespread atrocities perpetrated by the military were dismissed as rebel propaganda. As 1958 drew nearer, the military resorted to beating and torturing village headmen, accusing them of hiding arms in preparation for an armed uprising. The military also set out to terrorize the local populace in other non-Burman areas as a display of power. Thus, the military's nationbuilding efforts created a situation where the non-Burman segments of the population were alienated by military actions carried out by and for the state. The state came to be perceived by the ethnic non-Burmans as alien to society and harmful to their welfare. The situation of 'lack of fit' between the state and the ethnic non-Burman segments, and the policy of terror by systematic atrocities, naturally provided ethno-nationalist resistance in the non-Burman States.

The military's nation-building formula, and their brutal methods, did not promote any sense of nationhood among the ethnic groups but instead created a situation of vertical dysfunction between the state and the significant non-Burman segment of the broader society. When the military seized power in 1962, they hoped to win the support of the Burman populace. The generals claimed that drastic action was necessary because the Union was threatened by the 'secessionist plots' of Shan princes. However, the cruel massacre of university students in Rangoon on 7 July 1962, four months after the coup, alienated the Burman population from the new military regime. Moreover, further imposition of repressive control in all spheres of society turned the Burman populace against the military and against the 'socialist state' which it monopolized.



The problem of state-society dysfunction was further exacerbated in 1988 when the military staged a bloody comeback following the collapse of Ne Win's military dictatorship, the military-socialist BSPP (Burmese Socialist Program Party) regime.

The Politics of National Reconciliation

Especially since 1962, state-society relations in Burma have become increasingly dysfunctional. The state generally remains unresponsive to the needs and problems of Burmese society. However, it is quick to respond to the priorities of the armed, uniformed elements within the state. A situation has developed in which the state is separated, politically insulated and isolated from its citizens. The consequence of state-society dysfunction is, as the past decades have shown, economic decay, atrophy of political institutions, corruption of the military, paralysis of the state and its problem-solving capacity, breakdown of infrastructure, and greater impoverishment of the people. The military's resistance to societal demands for political participation has resulted in political deadlock. The pressing need in Burma today is to resolve this problem of state-society dysfunction.

The ethnic dimension of state-society dysfunction in Burma has two interrelated facets. One is political, and the other has to do with the restoration of ethnic harmony. The political facet concerns the constitutional problem of how the relationship between the ethnic and territorial constituent components of the Union is to be arranged. Or, in other words, whether Burma should be a unitary or federal state. Ethnic hatred such as in former Yugoslavia, that makes it difficult to achieve national reconciliation after years of brutal military rule and widespread atrocities, does not exist in Burma. There is still an understanding among political leaders that the problem of 'ethnic conflict' is political and constitutional rather than ethnic. The leaders of the various ethnic nationalities in Burma have participated in the struggle for democracy together with ethnic Burmese on the basis of the principle of equality, national self-determination, and the shared goals of democracy and federalism. The years of shared struggle for democracy, especially after 1988, have induced closer interaction between the ethnic Burmese and the other ethnic nationalities.

As a result, a number of building blocks and even consensus have been put into place for building a peaceful, democratic, federal Burma, and for the resolution of the country's multi-faceted problems through a dialogue process. The unity achieved among the opposition may be owed to a great extent to the emergence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on to the political stage in 1988. She has over time projected an image of a leader who is staunchly democratic, intelligent, humane and fair-minded, and who empathizes with the plight of the ethnic



nationalities and their aspiration for equality, selfdetermination, human dignity and human rights.

However, other things are seldom equal. Intervening variables over which political actors in Burma have no control,⁸ always have the potential to put an end to any sort of dialogue in Burma, thus putting any national reconciliation efforts or hopes on the shelf for an indefinite time.⁹ Even if dialogue continues, the military's opposition to federalism (notwithstanding the generals' lipservice to the Panglong Spirit, equality, and brotherhood) remains a big hurdle. The main reason for the military's objection to federalism may be that federalism would bring decentralization of both power and power structures. In a federal union, power would no longer be concentrated in the centre, nor can it be monopolized by one element of the state. Power would rest in different levels of government and be made accessible to democratically empowered local communities. Thus, in a democratic federation, the state (or rather, governments at both federal, state, and local level) would necessarily have to be responsive to the priorities, needs, and problems of citizens within the broader society, and most importantly, be committed to the Rule of Law. In this way, the problem of state-society dysfunction in Burma, the main root of the country's problems, will be solved and national reconciliation achieved.

Nevertheless, given the military regime's staunch opposition to democratic federalism, there may have to be a paradigm shift in looking at how the military can be persuaded to give up its monopolistic grip on the state in Burma and its (failed) fascistic nation-building vision. The politics of transition and national reconciliation are complex and require an equal measure of firmness and flexibility.

Endnotes

* Professor Chao-Tzang Yawngwe from Vancouver, Canada, is a participant in the struggle for a federal and democratic Burma. His father, Soo Thanke, was Burma's first independent President.

1. The term 'ethnic non-Burman' is here used to denote the Mon, Kachin, Rakhine, Shan, etc. segments of the population in Burma, and to differentiate them from the Burmans (i.e. the speakers of Burmese) or ethnic Burmese. This practice is however not in common usage because many scholars use the term 'Burmese' to denote all citizens of Burma, and 'Burman' to refer to the Burmese-speaking ethnic segment—like 'British' and 'English'. This is however problematic because the term 'Burmese' refers to the language of the Burman and denote things Burman, such as Burmese food, Burmese dress, and so on. The term 'Burmese' does not come anywhere near the term 'British'.

2. Regarding self-administration, the pre-colonial period is problematic. The people as a collectivity had no say however (and whatsoever) in the management of affairs that affected their lives. At least under colonial rule, the administrators were held accountable for their actions.

3. "Report of the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, 1947". Rangoon, 1947. Part I, pp. 16-18.

4. Curiously, the term 'race' is commonly used in Burma when speaking of ethnic or national groups. There is no specific Burmese word for race, nation, or ethnic group. All are *Lu Myo* or



humankind. In Burmese, *Tarok Lu Myo* means Chinese, or ethnic Chinese. Why *Lu Myo* has been translated as 'race' is something that needs looking into. It is probably the result of the wide use of the term 'race' by the British in colonial times, when scholarship on ethnicity and race was not yet developed. In those days, even up to the early 20th century, no distinction was yet made between races, ethnic groups, tribes, etc.

5. The British annexation of Burma was undertaken in three stages. During the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-1826, the British annexed Arakan and lower Tenasserim. Lower Burma was annexed during the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-1853). In the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-1886), the capital city of Mandalay was captured and King Thibaw sent into exile in India.

6. AFPFL stands for Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, the vanguard of the Burmese nationalist movement, formed during the Second World War by U Aung San and U Than Tun.

7. This is the 'national unity' mantra of the military in Burma, employed to justify military dictatorship, military monopoly on power, as well as military terror tactics in the non-Burman ethnic areas: arbitrary killing, rape, forcible relocation of villages, pillage, plunder, extortion, and so on.

8. Such as, for example, the current increased Thai concern with the Wa and their methamphetamine production on the Thai-Shan State border, combined with renewed interest at least of the U.S. military in the Thai war on drugs. The renewed fighting on the border between the Shan army and the Burmese junta's troops has the potential of escalating into a larger Thai-Burmese border war.

9. The border dispute with Thailand has probably strengthened the hands of the junta's Secretary No. 1, General Khin Nyunt, vis-à-vis other military factions and his rivals, such as General Maung Aye and his followers. There is no external enemy, either real, imagined, or manufactured, to rally the troops. Having firmed up his position within the military, the possibility that Khin Nyunt might terminate the talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi cannot be ruled out.

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