

**Ethnic Political Platforms in Burma and Their Evolution since Independence:
With Some Reflections on the Writings of Josef Silverstein**

Martin Smith

(This is an edited version of a discussion paper presented at the seminar, 'Center-Periphery in Burma/Myanmar: The Enduring Minority Dilemma - In Honor of Professor Emeritus Josef Silverstein', sponsored by the Burma Studies Group, Association of Asian Studies Conference, Washington D.C., 5 April 2002)

Overview

Ethnic conflict has dominated the political landscape of Burma (Myanmar) since independence from Great Britain in 1948. In the process, countless lives have been lost, many communities dislocated from their homes, and a country that was deemed to have the brightest future of any of its Asian neighbors at independence has stagnated to become one of the world's poorest. In such state failures, tragedy is interwoven with irony. Burma, indeed, is the land where the anthropologist Edmund Leach carried out his ground-breaking studies into patterns of cultural inter-change among peoples. In essence, Leach concluded that ethnic and political identities are neither innate nor inflexible, but develop on the basis of understandings and cultural exchanges between different societies.

Since this time, ethnic field research in Burma has come to a virtual halt. The world of Asian studies thus owes a profound debt of gratitude to Prof. Josef Silverstein. Since the 1950s, his writings on ethnic questions have stood out as a persistent – and often lone – beacon of concerned but independent analysis. At the beginning of the 21st century, his works are as pertinent as when he first began. Not only has he crystallized complex issues in understandable form, but he has done this in a language that has become common currency in many international understandings of the country and its challenges.

A particular issue in Burmese politics over the past 60 years has been the lack of common forums or platforms where different parties and nationalities might equally work together.

As Prof. Silverstein has described, underpinning these failures is the ‘dilemma of national unity’.¹ Important ethnic questions date back to the pre-colonial past. But, in general, the modern roots of many problems can be found in the political divisions of Burma, under a diarchic system, between ‘Ministerial Burma’ and the ethnic minority ‘Frontier Areas Administration’ during British rule. Inter-communal relations were then exacerbated by conflict during the Second World War, and the challenge of national unity has remained evident in all political eras since Burma’s independence in 1948.

Parliamentary Democracy

This lack of inclusive participation in constitutional discussions was a feature of even the most celebrated treaty in modern Burmese politics, the Panglong Agreement of February 1947. This, in fact, was a meeting by Aung San with only the Chin, Kachin and Shan committee leaders of the Frontier Areas; other ethnic groups, such as the Mon and Rakhine, were not involved. A further omission occurred when the Karen National Union (KNU) boycotted the elections to the 1947 constituent assembly.

The result of these incomplete discussions at independence was a constitution that contained many inconsistencies on ethnic issues. As Prof. Silverstein has pointed out, although ‘federal’ in concept, the 1947 constitution was not in name,² leaving a legacy of unaddressed concerns for the future. For example, just four ethnic nationality states were provided for – the Kachin, Karenni, Shan and Karen – but two of these, the Karenni and Shan, were allowed the right of secession. As a result, by April 1958, when Prof. Silverstein addressed the Association of Asian Studies in New York, many of these issues were coming to the fore.³

During this turbulent passage of history, other factors came into play. The assassination of Aung San in July 1947 and the insurrection of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in March 1948 had already given perilous warnings of the instabilities to come. But in ethnic terms, the most ominous result of these unresolved questions at independence were the armed struggles that broke out among the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine and other ethnic groups during 1948-49 and have continued, in some cases, until the present day.

By the late 1950s, to paraphrase Prof. Silverstein's words, the 'dilemma of national unity' had become a 'federal dilemma'.⁴

The issue of federalism was never resolved and witnessed, first, Ne Win's 'Military Caretaker' administration during 1958-60 and, then, his assumption to power in the 1962 military coup. 'Federalism is impossible,' he said. 'It will destroy the Union.'⁵ And Ne Win was always to equate federalism with separatism.

Thus it is important to reflect that, during these difficult years, there were efforts by different parties to try and find common ways out of the political quagmire. Ceasefire talks with the government were unfortunately rare.⁶ But, among opposition groups, there were a number of other, less-publicized initiatives. As today, these generally ran parallel to political developments in the capital, Rangoon.

A particular influence in these early years was the CPB, which advocated Marxist-Leninist 'united front' strategies. In 1959, this thinking saw the formation with Karen, Karenni, Mon and Chin forces of the National Democratic United Front (NDUF), the first effective alliance in the insurgent *maquis*. The NDUF's high-point came four years later when NDUF delegates met with officers of Ne Win's Revolutionary Council during the 1963 'peace parley' in Rangoon. It should be added, therefore, that the model of 'autonomous regions' did hold attractions for some ethnic parties at this time, especially following Mao Zedong's victory in China when communist ideology appeared in the regional ascendancy.

Other nationality parties, however, rejected communism, and a number of rival fronts were formed in the same period. The best known of these was the Nationalities Liberation Alliance (1960-63), which joined the KNU together with armed Kachin, Karenni and Shan movements that were then getting underway.

But of all ethnic platforms in the parliamentary era, perhaps the most poignant was the Federal Movement, started in 1960 by the former Union President, Sao Shwe Thaik, who

who sought ways to move, by political dialogue, from the quasi-federalism of the 1947 constitution to an explicit federalism. The federal leaders, however, were never able to advance their cause because in March 1962, as they prepared to meet with the prime minister U Nu, Ne Win seized power. Many were arrested. Thus ended the brief era of parliamentary government.

The ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’

Ne Win’s coup set the stage for the second era in post-independence politics: that of his idiosyncratic ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’. Certainly, on paper, an ethnic symmetry appeared on Burma’s political map in the 1974 constitution through the creation of new Chin, Mon and Rakhine nationality states. Some of these ideas were first mooted in the one consultative group that Ne Win set up, the 1968 Internal Unity Advisory Body, which consisted of U Nu and 32 other ethnic and political leaders from the 1950s.

But, in general, Ne Win’s main priority was always the establishment of a one-party state under the control of the Burmese armed forces (Tatmadaw). After the failure of the 1963 peace parley, he continued relentless campaigns against all opposition groups. Brief peace talks did occur with the CPB and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 1980-81, but, as in 1963, these quickly broke down.

Today the rhetoric of Ne Win and his Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) are fading into history. It was a 26-year period of isolationist retreat from the world, aptly summarized by Prof. Silverstein as ‘military rule and the politics of stagnation’.⁷ It was also a time when, other than the 1963 talks, even fewer efforts were made by government to resolve Burma’s damaging ethnic and insurgency problems by inter-party dialogue.

It would be incorrect, however, to characterize ethnic politics as moribund during these long years. Indeed, with the banning of all opposition parties, the strategic balance, in many ways, swung back to ethnic insurgent groups for the first time since 1948-49. And the cause of anti-government forces appeared strengthened by two developments in the late 1960s: firstly, by the decision of the People’s Republic of China to provide military

support to the CPB (with which several ethnic forces were allied); and, secondly, by the disappearance underground of the deposed prime minister U Nu to take up arms with the KNU and other former ethnic opponents in the Thai borderlands. Within a few years, political relationships in the country had undergone a complete turn-around.

Neither, however, U Nu's Parliamentary Democracy Party (PDP) nor the CPB ever truly progressed through these realignments. Indeed, in many respects, the CPB's authority at this time was based more on military strength than popular support, especially in the ethnic minority borderlands with China where it now seized control.⁸ But in other parts of the country, political fronts continued to develop more rapidly, fuelled by the continuing unpopularity of the BSPP government.

The 1970 National United Liberation Front (NULF) – between the PDP, Karen, Mon and Chin forces – did not last long after U Nu rejected the ethnic rights of secession (although he did reportedly accept the model of federalism in a new eight-state union). But in many ways, these failures caused minority parties to consider more deeply over political strategies, and in 1976, after two earlier attempts, this led to the formation of the National Democratic Front (NDF). Consisting of nine nationality parties, in its early years the NDF's political line showed a number of ambiguities, but from 1984 the demand for the right of secession was dropped and attention mainly focused on the goal of a 'genuine' federal union.⁹

In the 1980s, this new-found unity among ethnic opposition groups was to have important impact on the changing political landscape. Certainly, from the time a common federal platform was agreed, the NDF appeared stronger. This was brought into sharp focus by the 1986 joint military agreement with the CPB, which for the first time brought all the main armed opposition groups into alliance. Although Burman-led, ninety per cent of the CPB's troops were, in fact, minority nationalities, and it was the ethnic issue that began to attract attention as NDF representatives traveled for the first time to international meetings abroad.

Indeed, as the economy slid towards bankruptcy, it was now Ne Win's BSPP and the CPB that were under the greatest pressures. Little recognized in the outside world, both were on the brink of collapse.

The SLORC/SPDC

The 1988 upheavals in Burma precipitated the most significant realignment in national politics since 1962. Ne Win's resignation in July that year triggered a remarkable series of events, including the BSPP's demise, pro-democracy protests, the re-assumption of power by Ne Win loyalists in the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), ethnic mutinies that precipitated the CPB's collapse, and, finally, the victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 1990 general election, along with 19 ethnic minority parties that also won seats.

Over a decade later, the military government, today known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), remains in power, but across the country the legacy of conflict and the sense of unfinished reform are pervasive. In many ways, once the dust had settled, by the early 1990s the previous three-sided struggle between the BSPP, CPB and NDF had been replaced by a new 'tri-partite' equation: i.e., that of the military government, the NLD and the different ethnic minority parties. Importantly, too, as the 1990s progressed, the concept of 'tri-partite dialogue' became increasingly supported by the United Nations and other concerned actors.

In the field, however, the political situation has never been straightforward. As in earlier political eras, there have yet to be common forums or consultative bodies where all the parties can equally meet. Competing political circles still exist, and it is uncertain – even in a tri-partite equation – if and how all the different sides might be brought together.

Initially, after the events of 1988, the underlying trends in Burmese politics had appeared very different. Indeed, a new cycle of insurgencies appeared imminent after the SLORC assumed power, when thousands of students took sanctuary in ethnic minority borderlands, establishing the most significant link-up between non-Burman and Burman

activists since U Nu's NULF in 1970. And this perception heightened in late 1990 when a dozen MPs-elect, headed by Dr Sein Win (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin), came into NDF-controlled territories to set up the exile National Coalition Government Union of Burma.

Once again, the situation was memorably described by Prof. Silverstein who argued that there were now 'two centres of politics' in Burma, and it was to the 'border area capital' of Mannerplaw that he believed the centre was moving.¹⁰ Certainly, this view had political basis and, eventually, the majority of border-based groups allied with the NDF in the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB), which, under the Mannerplaw Agreement of July 1992, advocated the common platform of a 'federal union of Burma'.

From this moment, however, the political landscape fragmented in new directions, and there was to be a parting of the ways between longtime ethnic allies. This division was not so much over views as over tactics. Underpinning these differences, were two factors that became increasingly important as the 1990s wore on: firstly, the new ethnic ceasefire policy by the military government, which saw the Kokang, Wa and other breakaway groups from the CPB agree truces in 1989: and, secondly, the victory of the NLD and ethnic nationality parties in the 1990 election. In many cases, there were links between aboveground and underground groups, and these new factors now combined to support a growing desire for peace.

Such moments have happened in Burmese politics before, most notably during the Six-District Peace March in 1963. But behind the peace movement of the 1990s was war weariness and a perception by minority community leaders that it was the non-Burman peoples who were, once again, suffering most for the political failures in the country. Following the CPB's collapse, struggling NDF commanders in the front-line were also affected by these pressures, and, from Kachin leaders in the north of Burma to Mon leaders in the south, there was increasing belief that, in an uncertain era of transition, they had to be inside the political process to represent their peoples. The contemporary ending of the Cold War – and some quiet words from neighboring China and Thailand – further

increased the momentum for ethnic nationality forces to try and engage in dialogue.

This, then, was the backdrop to the acceleration of the ethnic ceasefire movement in the early 1990s, which has spread to over 15 parties today, including the Shan, Pao, Palaung (Ta'ang), Kachin and Mon members of the NDF. Such agreements, however, which are military rather than political in nature, have not clarified the political stage. In essence, the result of such variant stratagems by different parties in the post-1988 era has meant that, at the beginning of the 21st century, three major groupings now exist among ethnic nationality parties.

The first are the 'legal' nationality parties, such as the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, that stood or won seats in the 1990 election. Most are allied in the 25-party United Nationalities League for Democracy that works with the NLD. Among these nationality parties, a common platform is for the creation of an eight-state federation, including a new state representing the Burman majority. The idea behind this innovation, which echoes the 1960 Federal Movement, is that such an eight-state demarcation will better guarantee equal ethnic rights in the future.

The second major ethnic grouping are those with ceasefires. These can be divided between those that are basically local militia forces, such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and those with longer political histories, such as the KIO and other former NDF members. Most have been invited to attend the government-convened National Convention, which began in 1993 to draw up Burma's new constitution. However, like the NLD and allied parties, many have doubts over representation at convention meetings. Of the ethnic principles established so far, some ceasefire parties (notably the Kokang, Pao and Wa) might be prepared to accept local 'self-administered' zones. But, in general, most parties still talk of a future federation and hopes for broader 'tri-partite' dialogue to include the NLD and non-ceasefire groups as well. For the moment, however, all groups have remained agreed behind a 'peace through development' strategy, by which it is hoped that reconciliation and aid programmes will run parallel with political reforms.

Finally, the remaining grouping in ethnic politics are those still engaged in armed struggle. By the year 2002, the main forces without ceasefires are the KNU, Karenni National Progressive Party, Chin National Front and Shan State Army (South). Most have had talks or contact with the SLORC-SPDC during the past decade, but leaders argue that, for sustainable peace, solutions can only be achieved through ‘politics first’ agreements. Behind this position is the belief that so many sacrifices have been made by their peoples over the years that they can not end armed struggle now, unless there are constitutional agreements on the table. Thus, although watching developments in Rangoon, most non-ceasefire groups have continued the ‘united front’ strategies of the past, working with the NCUB, exile groups and other opposition parties. The most publicized example of this was the controversial Mae Tha Raw Hta meeting in 1997 at which support was expressed by 17 ethnic signatories for Aung San Suu Kyi and pro-democracy groups.

Summary

The above can only be a brief summary of how the political landscape has come to stand today. Fifty years after independence, the ‘dilemma of national unity’, characterized by Prof. Silverstein, still continues. Added to this, other grave challenges have evolved during decades of conflict that also need to be factored into the processes of reform and reconciliation. Burma today displays many of the characteristics of a country of ‘complex emergencies’, where a cycle of political and humanitarian crises exist that make it very hard to address or separate one issue from another in the field. Refugees, internally displaced persons, illicit narcotics and HIV/AIDS – all are having concerning impact. Clearly, in the years ahead, greater focus needs to be given to understanding the problems of ethnic conflict and non-state formation in Burma.

Hopes still remain, however. At the beginning of the 21st century, the belief that such stasis has to be changed is widespread. And as the dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and the SPDC continues (and with UN support), many in Burma hope that a new reform process could yet start to evolve. Indeed, in private, some leaders even talk of a ‘new Panglong’ where, this time, all the peoples and parties are represented.

Thus, as Prof. Silverstein has highlighted over the years, it is vital that the underlying ethnic issues are never lost sight of. His analyses have long been prescient. In 1959 he warned: 'Only by ending the policy of forced Burmanisation and by encouraging the gradual growth of a Burmese culture which recognizes its rich and diverse sources can the people be drawn together in a viable national unity'.¹¹ What were his suggestions? Firstly, the adoption of clearer arrangements for ethnic statehood to prevent the continuing political confusions; and, secondly, greater emphasis on education and studies in the 'histories, cultures and languages of all the peoples in Burma as sources for a truly national culture'.¹²

These are calls that have important resonance today.

¹ J. Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (Rutgers University Press, 1980).

² J. Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Cornell University, 1977), pp.57-8.

³ J. Silverstein, 'Politics in the Shan State: The Question of Secession from the Union of Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 28, November 1958, pp.43-57.

⁴ J. Silverstein, 'The Federal Dilemma in Burma', *Far Eastern Survey*, 28, July 1959, pp.97-105.

⁵ *The Times*, 3 March 1962.

⁶ Essentially, these were only in 1949 with the KNU during the Insein siege, in 1958 under U Nu's 'Arms for Democracy' initiative, and with the KNU again in 1960 shortly before Ne Win returned power to U Nu.

⁷ Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*.

⁸ It can, though, be argued that the *de facto* autonomy demanded by and allowed to several of the ethnic ceasefire groups in northeast Burma following the CPB's collapse in 1989 (notably the Wa and Kokang) does have some precedent from the discussions and rights of ethnic self-administration during the CPB years.

⁹ The issue of the right of secession is still contentious among some parties (especially Karenni and Shan). But, until the 1980s, the principle of the right of secession, even though unlikely to be exercised, was thought by some non-Burman leaders to be the best constitutional guarantee or acknowledgement for the right of self-determination, which KNU leaders had always wanted.

¹⁰ J. Silverstein, 'The Civil War, the Minorities and Burma's New Politics', in, P. Carey (ed.), *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society* (Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1997), p.129.

¹¹ Silverstein, 'The Federal Dilemma in Burma', p.105.

¹² *Ibid.*