

# Ongoing struggles

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## Key Points

- Myanmar's central democratic reforms have received broad backing, enabling it to boost its legitimacy and consolidate its hold on power.
- Although tentative ceasefires have been concluded with most of the ethno-nationalist armed groups, there is no clear timeline or plan to address longstanding demands for self-rule and the protection of cultural identities.
- Meanwhile, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the principal protagonist in the struggle for ethnic rights, has been the focus of sustained military offensives.

As Myanmar's democratic reform process rumbles on, military offensives continue despite ceasefires between most of the ethno-nationalist rebel armies and the government. Curtis W Lambrecht examines the road to peace in the country.

Following 22 years of rule by military decree, Myanmar's junta orchestrated a dramatic political transition in May 2010. Although the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) remains a dominant force, the nominally democratic government has overseen political and economic reforms that have won over its most vocal critics of previous years. Most notably, the internationally renowned democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, and her political party - the National League for Democracy - has been incorporated into the government.

Western governments have responded enthusiastically to these reforms, scaling back financial sanctions, increasing foreign aid, and embracing the government diplomatically through state visits. Meanwhile, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are also dangling the prospect of future military assistance.

This international support has bolstered the fledgling government's capacity to govern and has boosted its legitimacy. It has also flipped

the approach of the democracy movement - decades-long efforts to foment a mass movement in order to overthrow the junta have been abandoned in favour of a gradualist approach to coax, capacitate, and gently cajole the new government lest political turmoil prompt a resurgence of military hardliners.

A more tentative rapprochement also appears to be occurring between Myanmar's diverse ethno-nationalist rebel armies and the new government. Over the past 18 months, 13 such groups have concluded temporary ceasefires with the new government with a view to forging a lasting solution to conflicts that have racked the country throughout its independence. According to the government's agenda, these will be followed with "solid ceasefires", "reconciliation", and "Union level peace talks which will lay the foundation for perpetual peace".

### **Kachin confrontation**

However, amid the optimism and celebration, ongoing fighting in the country's north between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) - the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) - is a stark reminder that Myanmar's ethnic problems persist, and that the new government has not eschewed pursuing military solutions.

The conflict re-erupted in June 2011 when the Tatmadaw forcefully occupied a KIA-controlled dam site, breaching a ceasefire in place since 1994. Fighting quickly intensified across Kachin State and northern Shan State. Colonel Zau Tawng, the head of the KIA's Strategic Studies Department, claimed that by December 2012, three of the Tatmadaw's regional commands were engaged in major operations on five fronts involving 132 infantry battalions and an artillery brigade.

Fighting peaked towards the end of the month when the Tatmadaw launched a concerted attack against five KIA mountain bases encircling Laiza, the KIO's capital city and headquarters, during the Christmas period. The offensive was unprecedented in its use of force, unleashing newly acquired Mi-35 'Hind-E' attack helicopters, alongside K-8 Karakorum fighter jets, and subjecting KIA bases to relentless barrage by heavy artillery.

Both sides sustained heavy losses in the fighting. An internal Tatmadaw document posted on the Myanmar language blog Moe Thiha Aung - assessed by IHS Jane's to be genuine - reports the siege left 208 servicemen dead and 769 wounded over a two-month period ending on January 15 2013. It

also noted that 263,420 rounds of 5.56 mm ammunition had been expended, and costs for auxiliary forces, reconnaissance, and securing communications lines amounted to USD34 million. Additionally, the document reported two fighter jets had been lost and two damaged, and two helicopters destroyed and two damaged. The document did not identify the aircraft, but a KIA official told IHS Jane's they included one K-8 and three G-4 Super Galeb jets, an Mi-35, and an Mi-2 'Hoplite' helicopter.

Another Kachin official confirmed there had been heavy losses on both sides and described the air assaults as being particularly gruesome, filling the hospital in Laiza with wounded soldiers. He estimated that since fighting resumed in June 2011, approximately 900 KIA soldiers had been killed or were missing in action.

### **Wolf in sheep's clothing**

In a January 2013 meeting with IHS Jane's in the KIA's command centre in Laiza, Chief of Staff General Gam Shawng downplayed the significance of political changes in Myanmar. Recalling previous conversations with IHS Jane's, Gen Shawng said his 2007 political forecast held true.

"If the Tatmadaw successfully establishes a new government the will of the people to struggle will drop, the public will come to believe the government, and it will be absolutely impossible for them to overcome the constitution," he had noted then, predicting: "ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] will say nothing but words of encouragement, and neighbouring governments will suck the government's ass."

Gen Shawng claimed these fears had been borne out, and that despite the 2010 reforms the army had successfully "transferred their mentality to the new government" in a manner he likened to the spread of a "contagious disease". Stressing the continuity in the government's approach toward the country's ethnic nationalities, he stated: "Even though the government is talking about reform and democracy, they are waging an intensive military campaign against us. They have no will for peace. They have no intention to build a federal union or restore peace. They do not compromise and they do not want a dialogue. What they seek is a top-down monologue in which the ethnic people are under them and they can instruct them and order them about."

Although government appointed delegates met with the KIO eight times in 2011 and 2012 in an apparent attempt at rapprochement, a KIO official

told IHS Jane's the negotiations were "a game" in which "nothing significant was ever discussed".

Addressing this point, Gen Shawng claimed the government "only wanted to discuss a ceasefire", and not a negotiated end to the conflict. "We asked them many times verbally and in writing if they will engage in a political dialogue," he said, adding: "[But] when we finally came close to a political dialogue with [their delegate] Aung Thaung the government replaced him with Aung Min and limited his authority to that of a mediator. Talks then became 'informal discussions'. Although Aung Min confessed a desire to discuss politics he claimed the government had instructed all political discussions must occur in parliament within the framework of the 2008 Constitution."

The government has insisted fighting must stop before politics can be discussed, but given the Tatmadaw's recent abrogation of the 1994 armistice agreement, the KIO is loath to discuss a new ceasefire in the absence of a clear timeline and a commitment to a political settlement. Gen Shawng noted that throughout the previous ceasefire the military government "deferred political discussions again and again, stating it was only a caretaker government and that only when a legitimate government came to power could political issues be discussed".

He also argued that the military government had "promised the KIO that there would be no discussion of surrender or disarmament during the interim period", but had ultimately insisted that the KIA and other ceasefire groups subordinate themselves under its command as border guard forces, a status he described as "the same as surrender".

Gen Shawng argued that the Kachin's refusal to assume good faith on the part of the government was grounded in bitter historical experience. He described how Aung San - the father of Aung San Suu Kyi - had secured Myanmar's independence through the 1947 Panglong Agreement by rallying "ethnic leaders to join a unified Burma with the promise that a federal union would be formed in which the ethnic states would be equal, and under self-rule not by Burmans but rather by their own ethnic leaders". The promise, he noted, "was never actualised", with Aung San assassinated later that year.

### **Hardline elements**

Gen Shawng therefore calculates that the latest spate of ceasefires is merely a political trap, and fears the Tatmadaw is ultimately waiting to

pounce on the ceasefire groups, who are making the mistake of "following the same steps we [the KIO/KIA] took before".

He claimed that the Tatmadaw was not interested in political dialogue, and that "the military's preference has been to rely on brute force rather than substantive negotiation about the underlying political issues". Referring to the violent suppression of peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks in 2007, he stated: "The military believes only in arms. They worship monks but they killed them mercilessly during the Saffron Revolution."

Consequently, the general said he had little hope of a political settlement while the Tatmadaw held the upper hand in the field. "The military's mentality is to arouse fear in others and then demand what they want without any compromise... Similarly unless fear is in their minds, they cannot be pressured to do anything," he said, adding that so far "the KIA has been unable to put fear in the minds of the Burmese military so they have refused to compromise".

Meanwhile, the current Tatmadaw offensive appears to have only hardened the determination of KIO officials, and imperiled future opportunities for dialogue and moderation by nearly closing off opportunities for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Although the KIO/KIA is by far the most cohesive and unified of the ethnic rebel groups, several Kachin officials told IHS Jane's that hardline elements were frustrated with the negotiation process, did not appreciate the subtleties of diplomacy, and would prefer to forego future negotiations, intensify the conflict, and openly declare independence.

In the midst of the assault on Laiza, Vice Chief of Staff General Gun Maw, a leading proponent of dialogue, informed IHS Jane's that the senior command structure was prepared to disperse across Kachin State, creating multiple centres of gravity from which future attacks would be launched. This eventuality would significantly complicate Tatmadaw military operations and future efforts at negotiation, and would also disrupt Chinese business interests in Kachin State.

One KIA officer claimed that a warning was conveyed to a Chinese intermediary that "if the Burmese launch another offensive like the one against Laiza we will engage in guerilla warfare in an intense and short way".

Should the KIA decide to take the battle to urban areas they are in a position to do significant damage. According to a KIO intelligence official, hundreds of underground operatives have been trained in munitions, and the group is capable of hitting targets throughout the country.

### **Of hearts and minds**

The Tatmadaw's heavy-handed counter-insurgency tactics appear to have similarly hardened the attitudes of ordinary Kachin civilians, fueling their long-held sense of injustice, and their animosity toward the majority ethnic Burman population.

The Kachin Baptist Convention, an association of 329 churches, released a statement amid the Tatmadaw's December 2012 offensive urging the military to cease military operations. The circular claimed that the operations had displaced 100,000 civilians, destroyed 200 villages and 66 Baptist churches, and had involved the arbitrary arrest of civilians, indiscriminate firing on refugee camps, and the harassment and rape of women.

Throughout the fighting Kachin churches have organised regular fasting and prayer chains in support of the KIO, and increased their calls for Kachin independence. Religion has traditionally been an important unifying force for the Kachin, nearly all of whom are Christian, and the conflict is increasingly being cast in religious terms. A senior KIA official told IHS Jane's that the Kachin are surrounded and assailed by "pagan Buddhists and communists with no religion", while a prominent religious leader went so far as to publicly equate the Tatmadaw with Satan in a sermon in Laiza earlier this year.

Gen Shawng, an avowed Baptist who prays three times a day, also frequently invokes the Bible in his public speeches and casts the war in religious terms. In one of his speeches posted on the internet he intoned: "God above is judging the Burmese Army and humiliating them. If they keep coming at us they will lose. Our struggle is an investment in something God condones. We are standing on the righteous path."

Although public support for the KIO flagged after it concluded the 1994 ceasefire, sophisticated public organising, propaganda drives, and nationalistic appeals over the past decade have led to a resurgence of popular support. This is reflected in its burgeoning ranks, and a KIA official claimed the renewed fighting has enraged and emboldened Kachin

of all ages to volunteer in droves, citing the case of a group of women in their 50s who arrived in Laiza during the assault of Hka Ya Bum and insisted on joining the militia.

The official declined to precisely quantify the KIO's military and paramilitary forces, but hinted that the largest of the KIA's 43 battalions comprise more than 2,000 persons each, the majority are more than 1,000-strong, and the remainder comprise 500 or more personnel. These forces include civilian security personnel, regulars, militia, and militant youth wings.

The KIO has also been careful to forge a public mandate through regular consultations with prominent members of Kachin society and public assemblies. A June 2011 forum urged the KIA to fight when necessary, to pursue a political solution, and to accept a ceasefire only as part of a permanent settlement. A subsequent March 2013 forum called for third-party intermediaries in negotiations, the maintenance of the KIA's military strength during any political dialogue, and the formalising of communication channels between the KIO and civil society.

## **Outlook**

Myanmar is in a state of significant flux and uncertainty, and its future course is consequently uncertain, but the central government's relations with ethno-nationalist forces are likely to follow one of three trajectories: the political system may be changed to accommodate ethnic nationalist aspirations; the Tatmadaw may continue its drawn out war of attrition; or the ceasefires may collapse, precipitating a larger conflict.

The Tatmadaw's air and ground offensives during the Christmas holidays heightened China's engagement, and prompted efforts at mediation by the UK, the US, and the United Nations. This may be a positive development, as noted by a KIO official who suggested: "The military may behave differently in the presence of international observers." The official also suggested that the presence of the US "may balance China", which had reportedly compelled the KIO and the Myanmar government to resume talks in early February, but then omitted language in their joint statement concerning international ceasefire monitors.

Nonetheless, a comprehensive political solution seems far off at this point as the divergent stances of the government and the ethnic groups appear to imperil the other.

The government's eight-point peace plan affirms the territorial inviolability of the state, and seeks to integrate the armed ethno-nationalist forces into the legal economy, secure their co-operation to eliminate narcotic drugs, transform their political wings into political parties, and eventually dissolve or integrate their soldiers into the Tatmadaw. The government has insisted that any amendments to the 2008 Constitution must occur within parliament.

However, this framework consigns the ethnic forces to eventual dissolution while offering minimal political concessions. The prospects of achieving some form of self-governance within parliament seem remote as the body is dominated by active and retired military officials who have been indoctrinated to associate federalism with secessionism.

Furthermore, although most of the ethno-nationalist forces reject the 2008 Constitution as a basis for any political settlement, the government seems unlikely to compromise on this point because the compact is the backbone of a system that politically ensconces the military and its allies in the establishment, and has proven extremely lucrative to them thus far.

Ultimately, the success of ethno-nationalist forces in achieving their political aspirations depends on their ability to work together, and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) represents the latest attempt to collectively negotiate some form of ethnic federalism or self-rule. Headed by the KIO, its members include the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), the Karenni Army (KA), and the Shan State Army - North (SSA-N).

However, the UNFC includes only 11 of the 21 ethnic armed groups negotiating with the government; the formidable United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Shan State Army - South (SSA-S) are not members. Furthermore, the Tatmadaw has long proven itself adept at dividing and conquering the opposition, and can exploit a number of vulnerabilities. Many of the ethno-nationalist forces are militarily weak, internally divided, and are under pressure from neighbouring governments to end the conflict. Individual leaders also stand to gain from lucrative economic sweeteners which are likely to accompany ceasefire and peace agreements.

So far co-operation within the UNFC itself has also been challenging. Members failed to collectively negotiate ceasefires. More critically, UNFC members and other groups have largely failed to support each other

militarily by engaging the Tatmadaw on multiple fronts in a bid to prevent it from concentrating its forces in offensives in one geographic area.

### **Continuation or escalation**

As such, it is more likely that the Tatmadaw will maintain its current strategy of stalling on any final settlement while maintaining its war of attrition with the armed ethnic groups, placating some while containing and slowly whittling away at others.

Although Naypyidaw appears to have intensified efforts at rapprochement, meeting with the KIO twice this year, and once with the UNFC, a KIO official familiar with the negotiation process told IHS Jane's : "The army deliberately captured strategic points surrounding Laiza. Now that the KIO is in a position of weakness they say they are willing to talk about politics."

However, he claimed the government had no interest in an actual political settlement, stating: "The Tatmadaw is drawing time. In two years of negotiations with the armed groups, they have not moved beyond an agreement on ceasefires. At the same time Naypyidaw is calling international investors and building their military forces. In three to four years the armed groups will face a very different situation that will be very dangerous for us."

He also suggested the government was deliberately delaying negotiations, stating: "The UNFC asked Aung Min frankly what the government's plan is for us. Aung Min said he is waiting for the government to provide a timeframe for all of the ethnic groups, and that the UNFC only includes 11 groups. But there are 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar that need to be considered."

While the Tatmadaw seems intent on pursuing a long-term attritional strategy, there remains a possibility that the complex web of ceasefires will collapse, precipitating a resumption of larger-scale hostilities. Since late March the Tatmadaw has been engaged in a "clearing operation" in the Tang Yan mountain range and has engaged SSA-N forces after they refused to withdraw from the area. The SSA-N is among those groups that the government signed a preliminary ceasefire agreement with, and the capture of Tang Yan would also threaten another ceasefire group, the UWSA.

Drawing parallels to the recent offensive against Laiza, which involved the Tatmadaw securing control of the surrounding hills, the KIO official said: "If the army captures the strategic mountain range it would allow them to hit Pangsang, the UWSA headquarters, with heavy artillery."

Although military co-operation among the ethnic resistance forces has been weak thus far, UNFC members may also grow frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations and the buildup of Tatmadaw forces in their areas of control. While a KIA officer stressed that "the KIA's policy is to find a solution through dialogue", several KIA sources claimed that its forces were in a state of readiness to intensify guerrilla operations and launch urban attacks.

If conflict re-erupts, the KIO is equipped to lead a co-ordinated military and political offensive, having trained and fought with several smaller ethnic forces, including the SSA-N, the Chin National Army (CNA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Palaung National Liberation Army (PNLA), and the Arakan Army. However, if a wider conflict should erupt, the role played by the powerful UWSA may prove particularly crucial. Although a KIA official claimed the group was "under the remote control of the Chinese", he added: "If a major clash erupts with the Burmese [the Tatmadaw] they may actively distribute weapons to the other armed ethnic forces allowing them to all intensify the conflict."

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