

# MYANMAR: UNDERTSTANDING POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

JAYESH KHATU

George Orwell, an imperial British police officer turned novelist, in his novel *Burmese Days* and in his essay “Shooting an Elephant”, describes the situation in the British Burma as clear when looked at from afar, but complex when one tries to go close. Such a description of the situation in colonial Burma<sup>1</sup> can be applied to the present day happenings in Myanmar as well.

Almost a decade ago, Myanmar marched towards a democratic polity, away from the military junta rule. The pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi’s vision of a democratic Myanmar was coming to a reality with democratic elections taking place in Myanmar. The world had its eyes on the political transition of Myanmar, and hopes for a stable, prosperous and vibrant Myanmar making a strong footprint at the global level were rising. But the ethnic cleansing and Rohingya crisis made the country drown in criticism about its democratic ideals and human rights violations.

Myanmar has become synonymous with Suu Kyi and the Rohingya crisis over a period of time. But the country is more than its national leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rohingya crisis. The role played by the Tatmadaw, Myanmar’s military, in the country’s politics and security is unique in the

---

Mr **Jayesh Khatu** was a Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi, from August 2018 to August 2019. The paper was written during his time at CAPS.

1. ‘Burma’, instead of ‘Myanmar’, is used in the paper to describe pre-1989 events in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar as that was the earlier official name.

**Myanmar is located strategically and remains crucial for its two big neighbours, India and China. For India, it forms a crucial part of New Delhi's Act East policy which aims at larger integration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as the farther East.**

Asian continent. The country is struggling through its democratic transition where, although the Tatmadaw, has facilitated constitutional reforms, it is unwilling to cede its powers with respect to Myanmar's defence, internal security and internal affairs. The constitutional reforms that are necessary for bringing democracy to the country in the true sense are difficult to be realised due to the Tatmadaw's hold over the country's Parliament and constitutional amendment process.

The country had boosted economic liberalisation and privatisation in 2010, but the process remains slow and leaves Myanmar behind in gaining the fruits of an open market economy and globalisation. Over and above the Rohingya crisis, are problems with respect to the Kachin, Arakan, Shan and Naga minorities that have been continuing to threaten its integrity since independence.

Myanmar is located strategically and remains crucial for its two big neighbours, India and China. For India, it forms a crucial part of New Delhi's Act East policy which aims at larger integration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as the farther East. Similarly, the country borders India's northeastern region with which it shares geographical, cultural and ethnic similarities. India has been vying to establish connectivity to its northeastern region via the Kaladan Multi-modal Project. New Delhi's active collaboration with the Nay Pyi Taw in dealing with the Naga insurgency is curbing the threat posed by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang [NSCN (K)] to the integrity of the two nations. This paper aims to understand the political and social dynamics of Myanmar to better comprehend the current socio-political turmoil that is taking place there.

## **POLITICAL DYNAMICS**

The process of redesigning the polity has been continuous in the landscape of Myanmar since its independence. Independent Burma welcomed parliamentary democracy by adopting the 1947 Constitution and forming a civilian government led by Prime Minister U Nu. The Tatmadaw staged a *coup d'état* on March 2, 1962, bringing a halt to democracy in Burma. After coming to power, Gen Ne Win launched the “Burmese Way to Socialism”<sup>2</sup> and abolished the federal system, forming a single-party state.

**Independent  
Burma welcomed  
parliamentary  
democracy by  
adopting the 1947  
Constitution and  
forming a civilian  
government led  
by Prime Minister  
U Nu.**

In 1974, a new Constitution came into effect which transferred power nominally from the armed forces to a People’s Assembly headed by Ne Win himself. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) under Gen Saw Muang was formed in 1988 to be the body responsible at the political helm following the anti-government riots. The SLORC further renamed Burma as Myanmar in 1989.

The year 1990 saw thwarted elections in which the victory of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) was ignored by the Tatmadaw whose rule continued. Demands for a democratic Constitution were gearing up and in 2004, a constitutional convention commenced its working only to successfully deliver a Constitution in 2008 that was criticised domestically as well as internationally.<sup>3</sup>

## ***A Democratic Leap***

In 2010, Myanmar held its first democratic elections since 1990 which ended decades of dictatorship in the country.<sup>4</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League

- 
2. This included state control of resources, industries with a unitary form of government at the centre, reducing foreign players’ influence and a more inward-looking economy.
  3. Tom Fowthrop, “Burma’s Sham Constitution”, *The Guardian*, March 12, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/mar/12/burmasshamconstitution>.
  4. Lee Jones, “Explaining Myanmar’s Regime Transition: The Periphery is Central”, *Democratization*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2014, pp. 780-802, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2013.863878>. Accessed on November 29, 2019.

for Democracy (NLD) boycotted the polls and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), that comprised mostly ex-military personnel and was backed by the Tatmadaw, came to power.<sup>5</sup> President Thein Sein, a former general and prime minister under the military junta became the head of the state in a civilianised administration. The NLD participated in the bye-elections held in 2012 and won 43 seats, paving the way for Aung San Suu Kyi to become a member of Myanmar's Parliament. This led to certain positive developments wherein the Western states annulled most of the economic sanctions imposed on Myanmar.

### *Who Rules Myanmar?*

In the November 2015 elections, the NLD led by Suu Kyi won a landslide victory, giving the party a majority in the combined Union Assembly, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. But the party's leader, Suu Kyi, has been often referred to as the *de facto* leader of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, where she holds the post of state counsellor<sup>6</sup> of Myanmar, equivalent to a prime minister, and the current president is Win Myint. The clarification for this nomenclature lies in the Constitution of 2008.

The Constitution of 2008 was envisaged as a way towards democracy, eclipsing the military dictatorial regimes. But after more than a decade since its inception, the dream of democracy has not been realised in Myanmar. Impediments for the same can be traced from the Constitution's inception itself where a farcical referendum<sup>7</sup> paved the way for this new Constitution which was opposed by the opposition at the domestic level and criticised internationally as well. The referendum was a fabricated act of assent by the military leadership to portray its desire to pave the way for democracy in Myanmar by keeping the real power to itself. The manner of its occurrence, and its result question the very basis of the adoption process of the current Myanmar Constitution.

---

5. Ibid.

6. Euan McKirdy, "New Government Role Created for Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi", CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/06/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-state-counsellor-role-created/index.html>.

7. The referendum which was held after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis witnessed 98.12 per cent turnout and was approved by 92.48 per cent 'Yes' vote.

The next cause of contention is Article 59 (f)<sup>8</sup> of the Constitution which prevents a person with a foreign national spouse or children from holding the office of Myanmar's president. According to this article, a person cannot become the head of the state of Myanmar if his/her family or immediate family members, especially children and husband, are not citizens of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. This was probably inserted in the document keeping in mind Suu Kyi's aspiration for leading the country.<sup>9</sup> Suu Kyi's late husband, Michael Aris, was an English historian, while her sons, Alexander Aris and Kim Aris, are both citizens of the United Kingdom. Evidently, the Article with its sub-clause in the Constitution is extremely indicative of the Tatmadaw's intention of averting Suu Kyi's accession to power.

In addition to this, there exists a 'coincidentally deliberate' clause guaranteeing 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats to the Tatmadaw's nominees in the 2008 Constitution. This democratic sway of Myanmar's military over the Assembly of the Union of Myanmar, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, is not without a purpose. A majority of the constitutional amendments in the 2008 Myanmar Constitution require 75 per cent or more of the votes of its parliamentarians as per Article 436 of the Constitution.<sup>10</sup> It has to be, thus, noted that no amendment in the Constitution is possible without the consent of these 25 per cent military nominations that form an integral part of Myanmar's polity. The USDP, a party constituting ex-military personnel, complicates the matter by tilting the power equation in the Tatmadaw's favour. This further augments the democratic myths in Myanmar's polity which remains open for further criticism.

Moreover, important ministries like defence, border and home affairs are reserved for these 25 per cent nominees of the Tatmadaw.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the

---

8. Refer, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar\\_Constitution-2008-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf).

9. KyawZwa Moe, "Making Myanmar's Constitution Democratic", *The Irrawaddy*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/making-myanmars-constitution-democratic.html>. Accessed on February 23, 2019.

10. Refer to the Constitution text, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar\\_Constitution-2008-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf).

11. Refer Article 232 (j)(2) of the Constitution text, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar\\_Constitution-2008-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf).

borders and the military remain exclusive spheres of military dominance and engaging on the issues concerning the same for a foreign power or neighbours of Myanmar has to be with the Tatmadaw directly. On the contrary, in a democratic polity like India, it is the civilian government consisting of elected representatives of the people who are at the helm of decision-making, policy formulations and who maintain relations with other countries, including its neighbours. Therefore, traits of authoritarianism are still visible in Myanmar even though the country embraced democracy almost a decade ago through its 2008 Constitution.<sup>12</sup> The mounting Rohingya crisis, in its third year now, stands as a classic example of the complexities in Myanmar's Constitution and the inability of the civilian government to address the same. But 'what grants legitimacy to the Tatmadaw?' is the question to be pondered upon.

### ***Legitimacy to the Tatmadaw***

The Tatmadaw derives its legitimacy from numerous sources which date back even to pre-independence Myanmar. The body acted as the guardian of Burma from the colonial aggression of British and later, even against the Japanese in the pre-independence era. The Thirty Thakins, of which Aung San was a senior leader, went ahead and formed the Burma Independence Army, with Japanese help.<sup>13</sup> Later known as the Burma National Army (BNA), with Ne Win as its commander, the BNA led the country towards its independence in 1948. The BNA was subsumed under a larger political alliance called the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) of which Aung San became the president in 1946. Thus, the AFPFL was formed with many civilian leaders affiliated with the BNA and having strong political aspirations.

It was the political class in Burma that invited the armed forces to take control of the political affairs of the country. The AFPFL's internal crisis led the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu to invite the Tatmadaw in 1958 to

---

12. John Garfilo, "Myanmar Almost Last in Asia-Pacific on Rule of Law Index", *The Myanmar Times*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/myanmar-almost-last-asia-pacific-rule-law-index.html> . Accessed on March 7, 2019.

13. Joyce Chapman Lebra, *Japan and the Genesis of the Burma Independence Army* (1972).

form a caretaker government.<sup>14</sup> This gave the armed forces a legitimate hold over the affairs of the state of Burma and under the Tatmadaw, the 1960 parliamentary elections were held. The armed forces handed over power to U Nu's faction of the AFPFL as it emerged victorious in the elections, setting a precedent for the other countries in Asia. This precedent lasted for two years when the Tatmadaw led by Gen Ne Win staged a *coup d'état* in March 1962. The general formed the Burmese Socialist Programme Party and gifted the nation the 'Burmese Way of Socialism'. This marked the eclipse of parliamentary democracy in Burma, with commencement of military junta rule, led by the *Tatmadaw*.<sup>15</sup>

The Tatmadaw has successfully moulded itself and functioned as per the necessities of the time and socio-political situation in the country. Gen Ne Win's rule ended with the 8888 Uprising which took place in 1988 where thousands of students, monks and masses protested against the regime over its authoritarian ways of ruling, the 1974 Constitution and the poorly implemented economic reforms also known as the "Burmese Way of Socialism". The new military junta's rule commenced with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) taking charge of the country's governance with a coup against Ne Win, further adopting an outward-looking economic model. The SLORC facilitated the general elections in 1990 in which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory. The SLORC dismissed the results and assumed power by itself. This, accompanied by the junta's human rights abuses, necessitated numerous sanctions by the West which hit Myanmar's economy badly.<sup>16</sup> The SLORC was made dysfunctional and reconstituted in 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) which retained most of the previous regime's members. The SPDC gave the country a new Constitution in 2008 adopted through a controversial

---

14. Frank N. Trager, "The Failure of U Nu and the Return of the Armed Forces in Burma," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1963, pp. 309-28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1405735>. Accessed on March 1, 2019.

15. Ibid.

16. Factbox: "Sanctions Imposed on Myanmar", Reuters, October 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-sanctions/factbox-sanctions-imposed-on-myanmar-idUSTRE79A0YR20111011>. Accessed on March 1, 2019.

**The Tatmadaw has acquired and retained power successfully in Myanmar's political set-up, in every possible way, and the extent to which democracy flourishes in Myanmar is still dictated by the armed forces. The Tatmadaw has become a powerful political force and an indispensable institution for the country over a period of time.**

referendum and facilitated a roadmap for democracy to flourish in Myanmar.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Saffron Revolution of 2007, and the economic and political protests led by the masses and majorly by the monks, necessitated more political and economic reforms.<sup>18</sup> But for the Tatmadaw, any reform, to be democratic in nature, had to involve the military leaders for keeping the union intact and maintaining territorial sovereignty.

The NLD did not participate in the 2010 general elections as a sign of protest against the 2008 Constitution. The election results went in favour of the Thein Sein-led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) which was formed in 1993 by the junta-led SLORC. It is to be noted that even in the current government set-up led by the NLD, the armed forces retain special powers and hold over the Parliament because of the 25 per cent seats' constitutional reservation and hold over important ministries like border affairs, making Myanmar a 'hybrid model democracy'. Thus, the Tatmadaw has acquired and retained power successfully in Myanmar's political set-up, in every possible way, and the extent to which democracy flourishes in Myanmar is still dictated by the armed forces. The Tatmadaw has become a powerful political force and an indispensable institution for the country over a period of time. Even though the armed forces witnessed rallies against them like the 8888 Uprising and the Saffron Revolution from the monks, it receives their support as well, especially against the minority Muslim Rohingyas. It was evident in the 2012 anti-Rohingya demonstrations by the monks, along with the commoners, in support of President Sein's proposal to deport the

---

17. n. 7.

18. "2007 Uprising In Burma", *Burma Campaign UK*, <https://burmacampaign.org.uk/about-burma/2007-uprising-in-burma/>. Accessed on March 1, 2019.



Rohingya Muslims.<sup>19</sup> On February 4, 2019, the *Myanmar Times* reported, “Thousands March to support Tatmadaw” in Yangon which has faced international criticism over its handling of the Rohingya crisis. But it is not just the Rohingyas who face persecution at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Myanmar’s multiple ethnicities like the Arakans, Kachins, Shans and Chins are still at loggerheads with the armed forces.

#### *Armed Forces’ Spending*

The military remains a powerful institution in the political life of Myanmar and expectedly, allocations for the defence sector in the government budgets over the years have been high, compared to most other countries with the similar size of economy as Myanmar, with 12-13 per cent share of the budget being allocated to defence.<sup>20</sup> Developing economies in the world face the question of defence versus development with marginalising the defence budget compared to the budget on education or healthcare. But Myanmar remains aloof from such debates and prefers higher spending on the defence aspect due to lack of indigenisation of the defence industry and growing necessities of the Tatmadaw concerning internal and borderland security.

Myanmar remains a net importer of defence equipment and, thus, the Tatmadaw seeks to expand military capabilities through significant purchases of equipment from foreign powers, with Russia historically being the major source of defence purchases by Myanmar. But the growth of China as a major power also resulted in increasing defence cooperation

**Myanmar remains a net importer of defence equipment and, thus, the Tatmadaw seeks to expand military capabilities through significant purchases of equipment from foreign powers, with Russia historically being the major source of defence purchases by Myanmar. But the growth of China as a major power also resulted in increasing defence cooperation.**

---

19. “Mandalay Monks Hold Anti-Rohingya Protests”, *The Irrawaddy*, September 3, 2012, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/mandalay-monks-hold-anti-rohingya-protests.html>. Accessed on March 2, 2019.

20. Refer Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ( SIPRI ) data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.ZS>.

of Myanmar with its northern neighbour in the recent years. Apart from technical exchanges and armed forces' training, military hardware purchases constitute a key aspect of the defence ties between the two countries. But, with ever changing global dynamics, a thrust towards diversification of the sources of its defence purchases is being undertaken. Reports of Myanmar's arms trade with Israel were making news in 2018 even when the United Nations report on Myanmar's military generals committing crimes against humanity surfaced.<sup>21</sup> Reports on Myanmar's plans to purchase six Su-30 fighter jets from Russia have also surfaced recently.<sup>22</sup>

Myanmar's Tatmadaw has faced criticism for equipping the armed forces with advanced military hardware and marching towards modernisation of the forces, on the one hand, and its atrocities on the Rohingyas and the state of civil war in the country, on the other.<sup>23</sup> With a steady rise in the capital expenditure on defence, the Myanmar government's intentions on internal peace and stability are being questioned. With friendly neighbours like India and China, the question remains: 'defence against whom?'. It is to be noted that the actual size of the forces comprising the Tatmadaw is not known in the public domain. This data deficit makes research on the Tatmadaw, its abilities and functioning an arduous task.<sup>24</sup> Andrew Selth, an academic expert on the Tatmadaw and its affairs, notes, "Ironically, the lack of hard data about the Tatmadaw, the police, and their intelligence agencies seems at times to be in inverse proportion to the number of observers who feel qualified to write about them, and to make bold pronouncements about aspects of their leadership, internal politics, and operations."<sup>25</sup> Lack of information on one of the most powerful and indispensable institutions in Myanmar's social,

21. "Israel's Dirty Arms Deals With Myanmar", *Haaretz*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/israel-s-dirty-arms-deals-with-myanmar-1.6429524>. Accessed on February 18, 2019.

22. "Amid Continued Criticism, Myanmar Still Spending Big on Military", *VOA News*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-military-spending/4234303.html>. Accessed on January 21, 2019.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Andrew Selth, *Routledge Handbook Of Contemporary Myanmar* (Routledge, 2018).

25. Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis", *United States Institute of Peace*, 2018.

economic and political spheres makes analysis of the institution and its larger impact on these spheres cumbersome.

## **SOCIAL DYNAMICS**

### *Ethnicities at Loggerheads*

Myanmar can be referred to as a land of multiple ethnicities struggling to survive under a single and unified polity. The struggle between distinct ethnicity and common Burmese identity has been the main reason for the instability that Myanmar faces today. The secessionist movements in Myanmar are a product of the colonial legacy and the formation of newly independent nation-states.<sup>26</sup> Following their 'divide and rule' policy in Burma, the British had divided the country into frontier areas amongst the ethnic minorities and the majority Burman population. These frontier areas were governed by the separately created British Frontier Services and were inhabited by the ethnic Chins, Shans, Karens and Kachins.<sup>27</sup> This resulted in the rise of ethnic-based nationalism which was markedly distinct from the majority Burmans living in the valley areas.<sup>28</sup> While the valley people were familiar with the Western notion of the nation-state system due to the colonial British efforts to inculcate this in Burma from 1826 till 1941, the other ethnicities preferred closer ties with their respective clans.<sup>29</sup> This quest for possessing a different identity in a distinct political geography remains the root cause of the conflict in the present-day Burma as well.

The Karen National Union (KNU) was the first secessionist group to be formed at the time of Burma's independence in 1947, advocating a separate nation-state for the Karens. They formed their own army named the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in 1949 to fight the national government's armed forces. Predominated by the Christian-majority Karens, the KNLA

---

26. Nehginpao Kipgen, *Myanmar: A Political History* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 9.

27. Brigadier J. F Bowerman, "The Frontier Areas of Burma", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 95, no. 4732, 1946, p. 44. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/41363324](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41363324).

28. Robert H. Taylor, "Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1982, pp. 7-22. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/24490906](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24490906).

29. Ibid.

underwent the longest civil war in independent Myanmar's history against Myanmar's government. The decline of the KNU was triggered in 1994 when its numerous soldiers defected and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which occupied the union's headquarters at Manerplaw.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, in 2012, the KNU agreed to a ceasefire with Myanmar's civilian government backed by the Tatmadaw. It has been 70 years since the conflict but it finds no end even with the existing ceasefire, as frequent skirmishes between certain splinter groups of the KNLA and the Tatmadaw still take place.<sup>31</sup>

The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), an ethno-political organisation, was formed in 1961, aiming at self-determination. With a majority Christian population in the Kachin state, the KIO formed its armed wing named the Kachin Independence Army. The KIO underwent a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw in 1994, only to be broken in 2011 due to growing mistrust between the KIO and the armed forces' intentions of peace.<sup>32</sup> Even though the organisation has weakened over a period of time due to multiple reasons, it has garnered new strength by forming an alliance of groups fighting the Tatmadaw in Northern Myanmar for their respective causes. One such group is the Arakan Army, the armed wing of the United League of Arakan. It is one of the most recent ethnic minority armed groups to fight against the Tatmadaw and the state authority. Formed in the year 2009, the group has merged in a stronger Northern Alliance along with the Kachin Independence Army and other secessionist groups. The following image gives a fair idea of the ethnic secessionist groups present in Myanmar and the complexities involved within them.

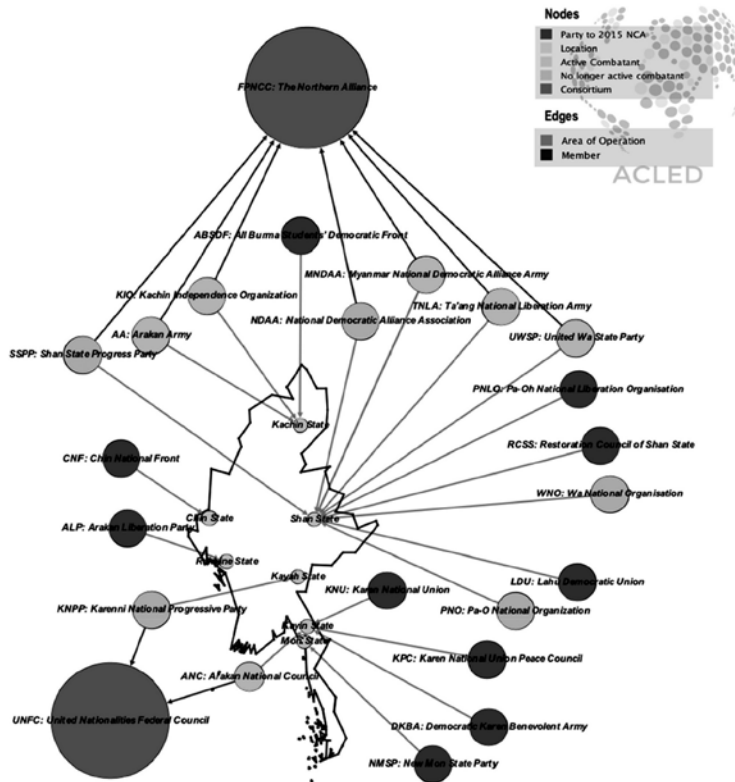
---

30. Ibid.

31. Lawi Weng, "Tatmadaw, KNLA in Standoff After Fighting Over Road Rebuilding", *The Irrawaddy*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/tatmadaw-knla-standoff-fighting-road-rebuilding.html>. Accessed on March 1, 2019.

32. Daniel Combs, "Myanmar's Fighting Season in Kachin", *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/myanmars-fighting-season-in-kachin/>. Accessed on February 28, 2019.

Fig 1: Conflict Networks



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://www.acleddata.com/2018/04/05/myanmar-conflict-update/>.

While most of the conflicts in Myanmar have ethnic dimensions, the Rohingya crisis is one distinctly based on religion and the issue of citizenship. Even though the KIO has a Christian majority population, distinct from the majority Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar, its struggle is regarded as the one based predominantly on ethnicity rather than religion. But when it comes to the Rohingya minority, the scenario becomes murkier. The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group consisting primarily of Muslims residing predominantly in the Rakhine state. The government of Myanmar fails to accept the Rohingyas as legitimate citizens of Myanmar which is evident

**The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group consisting primarily of Muslims residing predominantly in the Rakhine state. The government of Myanmar fails to accept the Rohingyas as legitimate citizens of Myanmar which is evident from the Citizenship Act of 1982 that deprived the Rohingyas of citizenship in Myanmar.**

from the Citizenship Act of 1982 that deprived the Rohingyas of citizenship in Myanmar. Under this Act, full citizenship is based primarily on membership of the “national races” deemed by the state to have settled in Myanmar before the British invasion of Burma in 1824.<sup>33</sup> Myanmar’s government, on the basis of this Act, fails to accept the Rohingyas as legitimate citizens of Myanmar and they are labelled as illegal Bengali migrants from Bangladesh. Therefore, the Citizenship Act of 1982 has severely restricted the rights of the Rohingyas and made them ineligible for basic social, education and health services.<sup>34</sup>

The Tatmadaw initiated a clearance operation in August 2017 following an attacks by the infamous group, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), on the security forces and posts in Myanmar’s Rakhine state. In response to these acts of ‘terror’ by the ARSA, the Tatmadaw went ahead in burning Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine with the aim of driving out the ARSA forces. The crisis has become regional, with Rohingya refugees fleeing and seeking shelter in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Malaysia. The atrocities by Myanmar’s military have received condemnation by the international community on a massive scale. Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini had termed the operation “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.<sup>35</sup>

---

33. “Burma/Bangladesh Burmese Refugees in Bangladesh: Still No Durable Solution, Discrimination in Arakan”, *Human Rights Watch*, vol 12., no. 3 (C), May 2000, [https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm#P132\\_34464](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm#P132_34464). Accessed on November 26, 2018.

34. Carl Skutsch, *Encyclopedia of the World’s Minorities* (Routledge), p. 128.

35. On September 11, 2017, High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. See “UN Human Rights Chief Points to ‘Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing’ in Myanmar”, UN News, September 11, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>. Accessed on 27 November 2018.

### *Natural Resources and Secessionism*

With certain ethnic groups seeking autonomy or secession and the Tatmadaw curbing the same for achieving the national unity and territorial integrity of Myanmar, control of extractive resources is also a crucial factor which cannot be overlooked in these battles between the military and the secessionist ethnic groups.

It is actually the incentives derived from extractive minerals in Myanmar which provide a strong source of income for the groups to fund their secessionist movements by conducting lucrative recruitment drives and purchasing military equipment to fight the Tatmadaw.<sup>36</sup> For instance, teak forests and hardwood in the Kachin and Shan states bordering China find an illegal route to the lucrative Chinese markets.<sup>37</sup> In a similar manner, rubies, jade and other precious gems have been smuggled illegally to the global markets from ethnic minority areas. The case of Kachin's jade had been highlighted by an Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Global Witness in 2015 which had equated illegal jade's value being half of Myanmar's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, unless there is an amalgam of interests between the concerned ethnic minorities and the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's peace process will find no positive end. Surrendering and signing peace deals for the secessionist groups means giving up their rights over the natural resources of their lands. Possession of natural resources and the illegal income derived from them would be at stake if they agree to the peace proceedings.

**Unless there is an amalgam of interests between the concerned ethnic minorities and the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's peace process will find no positive end.**

---

36. Jay Benson, "Blood Teak: How Myanmar's Natural Resources Fuel Ethnic Conflicts", *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/blood-teak-how-myanmars-natural-resources-fuel-ethnic-conflicts/>. Accessed on January 12, 2019.

37. "Kachin State Authorities Continue Illegal Timber Seizures, Myanmar Official Says", *Radio Free Asia*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/kachin-state-authorities-continue-illegal-timber-seizures-myanmar-official-says-02182016160853.html>. Accessed on February 10, 2019.

38. "Jade: Myanmar's "Big State Secret"", *Global Witness*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/oil-gas-and-mining/myanmarjade/>. Accessed on January 14, 2019.

According to the 2018 Myanmar Opium Survey released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Myanmar's opium poppy area fell to 37,300 hectares in 2018, down 10 per cent from the 41,000 hectares reported in 2017.<sup>39</sup>

The International Crisis Group (ICG), in its recent report on the drugs menace in Myanmar, made a strong mention about the enclaves which foster the drug menace in the country.<sup>40</sup> It states that such enclaves are under the "full territorial control of armed groups that have durable ceasefires with Nay Pyi Taw."<sup>41</sup>

The report focusses on the link between conflict and opium in Myanmar. According to the report, the highest levels of cultivation continue to take place in the unstable areas of the Shan and Kachin states.<sup>42</sup> With respect to the Shan state, bordering China, it states, "Good infrastructure, easy access to necessary chemicals from China and safe production facilities under the protection of government-affiliated militias and rebels in enclaves make the Shan state a major source of high quality crystal meth."<sup>43</sup> With the establishment of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), connecting the Yunnan province of China to the Shan state in Myanmar, the drug problem could possibly aggravate, with better connectivity via roads and railways promoting more illegal activities.

Alternative sources of income and livelihood should be devised in such states so that dependence on natural resources may be minimised substantially. Therefore, it is in the interest of Myanmar's government to arrive at a consensus with the armed groups with respect to sharing, and governance of natural resources and not just addressing issues like the

---

39. "Myanmar Opium Survey", UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, December 2017, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2017/Myanmar\\_Opium\\_Survey\\_2017\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2017/Myanmar_Opium_Survey_2017_web.pdf). Accessed on February 1, 2019.

40. "Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State", International Crisis Group, January 8, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/299-fire-and-ice-conflict-and-drugs-myanmars-shan-state>. Accessed on January 31, 2019.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.



federal structure and autonomy in governance. There have been efforts in this direction recently with the conduct of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference.

### *The 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference*

The 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference is a series of multi-stakeholders sessions held in Myanmar aimed at national reconciliation and long-term peace in the country. The conference was attended by representatives from the Tatmadaw, union government, Parliament and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). This peace conference is named after the 1947 original conference called by Gen Aung San, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's father, the head of the interim government of Burma. Before Burma's independence from colonial Britain, Gen Aung San had brokered an agreement for a post-independence federal union in the conference with various ethnic minority groups, granting unusual autonomy to them along with the right to secede.<sup>44</sup> The word 'secession' was included in the first Constitution of Burma, drafted in 1947, to permit the non-Bamar ethnic nationalities to acquire independence after ten years of Burma's foundation.<sup>45</sup> But Gen Aung San was assassinated within a few months of this historical peace conference and the agreement lost substance, with successive military governments failing to honour the same. The Karen National Union (KNU) was one of the first armed secessionist groups emerging in 1947, with dozens others following suit.<sup>46</sup> These armed secessionist struggles continue today, more than 70 years after Myanmar's independence and pose a bigger threat to Myanmar's territorial integrity.

---

44. Nehginpao Kipgen, "Why are 'Secession' and 'Federal Army' so Crucial to Myanmar's Peace Process?", Jindal School of International Affairs, June 2, 2017, <http://www.jsia.edu.in/article/why-are-%E2%80%98secession%E2%80%99-and-%E2%80%98federal-army%E2%80%99-so-crucial-myanmar%E2%80%99s-peace-process>. Accessed on December 21, 2018, p. 16.

45. Josef Silverstein, "Politics in the Shan State: The Question of Secession from the Union of Burma", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 18, 1958, p. 49, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2941285?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2941285?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

46. Jessica Harriden, "Making a Name for Themselves" Karen Identity and the Politicization of Ethnicity in Burma," *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 7, 2002, pp. 84-144. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/jbs.2002.0003

A negotiated settlement, paving the way for peace-building, nationwide dialogue and stability was sought through the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).<sup>47</sup> The agreement was agreed upon on March 31, 2015, consisting of the terms of the ceasefire along with their implementation and monitoring mechanisms, and a roadmap for political dialogue as well.<sup>48</sup> The Government of Myanmar and sixteen EAOs stood parties to the agreement to which ten groups became the signatories.<sup>49</sup> For aiding the senior leaderships of the EAOs and augmenting their capacity to engage effectively in adhering to the NCA, a Joint Peace Fund was established which further facilitated the establishment of the Nationwide Ceasefire-Signatories (NCA-S) EAO Office in Yangon.<sup>50</sup>

Since 2015, the government has promoted the ceasefire agreement that several ethnic minority groups have signed. The Northern Alliance includes the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and Arakan Army that have not signed truces with the government.<sup>51</sup> The third session of the 21st Century Panglong Conference was held in July 2018 after the first two sessions (August 2016 and May 2017) failed to make any headway in resolving the ethnic conflicts and reaching peace deals.<sup>52</sup> Fourteen points were signed as Part-II of the union accord during the third session, but the

---

47. Refer The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and The Ethnic Armed Organisations, [https://Peacemaker.un.org/Sites/Peacemaker.un.org/Files/Mm\\_151510\\_ncaagreement.pdf](https://Peacemaker.un.org/Sites/Peacemaker.un.org/Files/Mm_151510_ncaagreement.pdf).

48. Ibid.

49. These ten groups collectively known as NCA-S EAO (Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement – Signatory, Ethnic Armed Organisations) are: 1. All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), 2. Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), 3. Chin National Front (CNF), 4. Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), 5. Karen National Union (KNU), 6. KNU / Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council (KNU/KNLA PC), 7. Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO), 8. Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), 9. New Mon State Party (NMSP), 10. Lahu Democratic Union (LDU).

50. <https://www.jointpeacefund.org/en/who-we-are>.

51. Nan LwinHninPwint, "Government Agrees to Meet Northern Alliance as a Group", *The Irrawaddy*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/government-agrees-meet-northern-alliance-group.html>. Accessed on February 10, 2019.

52. Richard Dolan, "The Problem With the 21st Century Panglong Conference", *The Diplomat*, August 6, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/the-problem-with-the-21st-century-panglong-conference/>. Accessed on December 2, 2018.

gathering was unable to reach a consensus on an agreement in the security sector.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that non-signatories of the NCA were present in the overall conference and even vowed to continue the peace process was a significant development.<sup>54</sup>

### *Hindrances in the Reconciliation Process*

The reconciliation process falls short of achieving positive objectives due to multiple factors. The unwillingness of the seven major ethnic organisations to sign the NCA is the first hindrance for enduring peace in the conflict-ridden nation of Myanmar.<sup>55</sup> The Northern Alliance has its own agenda that does not call for a bilateral dialogue between the government and an ethnic organisation, but supports dialogue between the government and the whole alliance as an entity.<sup>56</sup>

The second major issue that makes the ongoing conflict seem to be never-ending is the question of having a federal army.<sup>57</sup> The Tatmadaw, having sufficient power and say in the Myanmar government, has always been supportive of the concept of one nation-one army-under one command. It, moreover, insists on having a single national army under the future negotiated new federal framework.<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, the ethnic armed groups are adamant on reclaiming their respective armed forces in a new possible set-up of a federal army.<sup>59</sup> They fear a repeat of history when their aspirations for autonomous divisions were suppressed brutally by the Tatmadaw.<sup>60</sup>

---

53. For details, refer, <http://www.statecounsellor.gov.mm/en/node/2048>.

54. Ye Mon, "Controversy, Progress at the Third Panglong Conference", *Frontier Myanmar*, July 16, 2018, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/controversy-progress-at-the-third-panglong-conference>. Accessed on December 20, 2018.

55. *Ibid.*

56. "Myanmar's Northern Alliance of Ethnic Armies Says It Wants Bilateral Pacts With Army", *Radio Free Asia*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmars-northern-alliance-of-ethnic-armies-02272019171225.html>. Accessed on February 22, 2019.

57. Nehginpao Kipgen, n. 44.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

The Tatmadaw's concerns are also genuine with respect to having parallel 'militias' with weaponry, along with the existing armed forces. This also augments the concerns regarding the solidarity and integrity of the nation, protecting national boundaries and commanding the armed forces. The three national duties, namely, non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of national sovereignty are underpinned by the Tatmadaw for each citizen.<sup>61</sup> The case for distinct ethnic armies stands contrary to these duties as well. According to the NCA text, all the signatories have agreed to remain in the union.<sup>62</sup> In other words, agreeing to the non-disintegration of the union means that ethnic armed groups have agreed not to support any activity or movement that could break up the country. It also means that they would not demand an independent state of their own.

Peace and development in Myanmar remain distant unless national reconciliation is aimed for. It becomes necessary to heed the grievances of the secessionist groups operating from the border areas of the country. The NLD, when it came to power, had promised rolling out economic packages for boosting the country's manufacturing and services sectors. The private sector has been apprehensive of the NLD's commitment to business, investments and industry. The NLD under Suu Kyi has been actively supporting peace and reconciliation in the fragmented landscape of Myanmar. Its involvement has been so intense that critics have been vocal in denouncing the current regime's prioritisation of peace-building over the economy and constitutional amendments as this has allowed the Tatmadaw to control and manage the political change, along with interfering in the shaping of the country's foreign policy.<sup>63</sup> Thus, it becomes essential to have an overview of the economic dynamics of Myanmar at present.

---

61. Refer Article 383 of the Constitution, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar\\_Constitution-2008-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf).

62. Refer the NCA text, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MM\\_151510\\_NCAAgreement.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MM_151510_NCAAgreement.pdf).

63. Sai Wansai, "Constitution-Making and Peace Process Stagnation in Myanmar: Will a Conditional Clause Help Restore Confidence in the 21st Century Panglong Conference?", The Transnational Institute, September 3, 2018, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/constitution-making-and-peace-process-stagnation-in-myanmar-will-a-conditional-clause-help>. Accessed on February 20, 2019.

## CONCLUSION

Myanmar has immense potential for growth and development considering factors like its natural resources' strength, strategic location of the country and demographic dividend. Despite all these, Myanmar struggles internally and remains one of the least developed economies of the world today. As analysed above, the country faces political challenges like the constitutional crisis, the institutional parliamentary crisis and the role of the Tatmadaw in its democratic set-up. The influence of the Tatmadaw has played an important role in the state-building process of Myanmar which, in turn, has given it a unique identity in the global politics. The Tatmadaw's self-allocated role of nation-building in Myanmar poses a challenge to the country's democratic functioning. 'Are the armed forces efficient in managing the affairs of the country' or 'are they acting as an impediment to the prosperity of Myanmar?' The answer is an assertive 'No' for the first question and a strong 'Yes' for the second.

Peace and development are not possible to achieve without national reconciliation. It becomes necessary to heed the grievances of the secessionist groups operating from the border areas of the country. The role of the democratic government in this regard cannot be denied. A 'hybrid government' in Myanmar complicates peace-building and development where the armed forces' security and governance roles overlap. Constitutional reforms are needed to, first, minimise, and then, completely curb the role of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's political set-up, and restrict it to security matters, paying allegiance to the will of the people at large.

Even when a country is open for foreign trade and availing economies of scale, it does not benefit if imports dominate its balance of payments. Myanmar's integration with ASEAN has helped its economy to grow and develop further, but the problem of illicit economies in Myanmar looms large. The real challenge lies in dealing with these extra-legal economies which do not add to the growth of the nation but act as a black hole in the economy. A significant question remains: 'Should development precede stability or will a stable nation-state attract growth and development?' Efforts for building a stable society in Myanmar should complement developmental goals.