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Peace process in Burma/Myanmar

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Item Type	Article
Authors	South, Ashley
Publisher	Life & Peace Institute
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-23 18:49:36
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/203097

After the general elections under a new constitution in 2010 and the dissolution of the military junta in 2011, signs of a gradual opening up of Burma/Myanmar can be perceived. However, the political, social and economic issues at the heart of country's conflict will not be easily resolved. The most significant challenges are to 'broaden' and 'deepen' the peace process and to bring fighting to an end in northern Kachin State.

Peace process in Burma/Myanmar

Fragile but hopeful signs of opening space

Ashley South

Since assuming office in the second quarter of 2011, the military-backed government in Myanmar has initiated a series of reforms, constituting the most significant changes since the military takeover of 1962. These include the negotiation of initial ceasefires with 10 of the 11 most prominent non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the country. However, intense fighting continues to rage in northern Burma/Myanmar between government forces and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), following the breakdown of an earlier ceasefire dating from 1994.[1]

Where ceasefires have taken hold, conditions on the ground have improved for civilians. However, conflict-affected communities and other non-armed actors have so far been largely excluded from meaningful participation in the peace process. Talks between the government and NSAGs are at a delicate and important stage – moving from negotiations regarding ceasefires (which have largely excluded community participation), towards the beginnings of political talks (which, if they are to succeed, must include deeper consultations). The most significant challenges facing the peace process are: to initiate substantial political dialogue between the government and the NSAGs ('broaden' the peace process), to expand participation in the peace process to include civil society, political parties and all civilian communities ('deepen' the peace process), and to demonstrate the Myanmar Army and NSAG's willingness to support the peace agenda – particularly by bringing fighting to an end in Kachin areas.

Ethnic diversity

Non-Burman communities make up at least 30 per cent of Burma/Myanmar's population. Since independence in 1948, various ethnic nationality elites have sought to mobilise populations in order to achieve greater autonomy within the context of a centralised state dominated by the Burman majority, and to gain access to political and economic resources. Over the course of a civil war which has lasted more than six decades, armed conflict in Burma/Myanmar has been marked by serious and wide-spread human rights abuses on the part of both the Myanmar Army and the NSAGs. A previous round of ceasefires in the 1990s brought respite to conflict-affected civilian populations. It also created the space within which civil society networks began to re-emerge within and between ethnic nationality communities. However, the military government proved unwilling to engage with ethnic nationalities' political demands. Therefore, despite some positive developments, the ceasefires of the 1990s did little to dispel distrust between ethnic nationalists and the government.

The election of a military-backed, semi-civilian government in November 2010 represented a break with the past. Since late 2011, the government has undertaken a series of negotiations with NSAGs. Most observers and actors accept that the government is serious about the peace process. However, questions remained regarding their ability to deliver – and particularly whether the Myanmar Army is under government control. Frustrations and grievances are especially acute in ethnic nationality-populated areas, characterised by often extreme levels of poverty and underdevelopment and widespread human rights abuses. Across much of the conflict-affected countryside, central state authority is represented by the Myanmar Army, while NSAGs are often regarded by local populations as more legitimate than the government.

In areas where ceasefires have been effective, communities have experienced the benefits of the peace process. Across much of southeast Burma/Myanmar for example, it is now far easier than before to travel, allowing villagers to spend more time in their fields and get their produce more easily to market. While these changes may not seem significant to political elites, they mean a great deal to local communities. Nevertheless, the human rights situation in remote, conflict-affected areas needs to improve further in order to reach acceptable international standards.

> ***The reform process in Burma/Myanmar may be likened to taking the lid off a pressure cooker.***

Meanwhile, the peace process is largely dependent on the resilience of the reforms at the national-elite level. The reform process in Burma/Myanmar may be likened to taking the lid off a pressure cooker. In a society where ten-

sions have been building for more than half-a-century, ethnic and other grievances can easily spill over with disturbing consequences. One example is the recent bouts of ethnic hatred in parts of Rakhine State, where elements of the Buddhist community have engaged in violent conflict with the Muslim Rohingya people, leading to over 100 deaths. These events remind us that the potential for violence derives not just from conflicts between the government and Myanmar Army and various armed groups, but also from intra-communal tensions. Outbursts of horrific violence in Rakhine constitute a complex phenomenon, involving the politics of citizenship, immigration and representation, and deep-seated mistrust of the 'other'. These issues have been exacerbated and mobilised by local and national-level political entrepreneurs, who have sometimes exploited local grievances for their own purposes. Among other things, these events indicate that there are spoilers on the side-lines, waiting to utilise tensions to provoke violence in order to undermine the reforms.

Community participation

The peace process in Burma/Myanmar is indigenous, driven in the first instance by government initiative. In the context of limited international involvement, the process has been quite ad hoc in nature. Furthermore it is highly complex, with some 20 parallel sets of discussions underway between the government and various NSAGs.

As noted, the peace process has so far been mostly characterised by negotiations between two armed actors: the government and the NSAGs. This has been appropriate in the early stages of negotiating a ceasefire. However, as the peace process deepens to include political discussions, it will be necessary to bring in other stakeholders. Peace is an issue which affects all sectors of society, and everyone in Burma/Myanmar is a stakeholder. The exclusion of communities is both unjust and liable to cause resentments that could undermine the peace process itself. In the first instance, conflict-affected communities have a claim to be included, but ultimately all Burma/Myanmar citizens are affected by these issues, and many will demand a voice in future deliberations.

Among the key stakeholders will be ethnic nationality and majority-Burman civil society networks – those based in the insurgent-influenced and opposition oriented borderlands, and also civil society actors working 'inside' the country, in government-controlled areas. Among the former, over the past two decades, activist groups have become used to controlling the political agenda, framing ethnic conflict in Burma/Myanmar for international consumption, and in the process channelling limited donor funds to conflict-affected populations. Local opposition groups face a dilemma: whether and how to reinvent themselves and work for change inside the country, or to remain in exile and become marginalised in the borderlands and overseas, growing increasingly angry as the political narrative shifts 'inside' Burma/Myanmar. (Meanwhile, civil society actors in Kachin State enjoy no such luxuries. Local communities and community based organisations are struggling to respond to a humanitarian crisis, with the Myanmar Army and KIO engaged in intensive armed conflict.)

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Such issues raise a key question: who speaks on behalf of civil society? In the past, exile-based organisations could represent themselves as spokespeople for conflict-affected ethnic communities in Burma/Myanmar – despite often having limited access to the conflict zones. However, as the peace process gathers momentum, communities will increasingly be able to speak for themselves, and should be supported to have direct access to negotiations, and to donors and diplomats supporting the reform and peace processes in their country.

Ethnic civil society Burma/Myanmar is highly diverse, including in the borderlands, where many local actors have embraced the peace process and are seeking to make it work. In the past, there was little distinction between the political positions of opposition-orientated civil society groups and the NSAGs with which they cooperated closely. However, as the peace process builds momentum, some civil society actors have grown critical of the NSAGs they have long worked alongside – accusing the latter of lacking transparency and failing to effectively engage with all who represent the interests of local communities.

Issues of citizenship and statehood

Meanwhile, civil society networks in government-controlled areas are becoming increasingly emboldened, staging protests and mobilising around previously taboo subjects – for example land confiscations and environmental issues. It is imperative that civil society actors both in the borderlands and government-controlled areas feel a sense of participation in and ownership of the peace process. The risk otherwise is that communities, and those who seek to represent and mobilise them, may feel excluded from or alienated by an elite-driven peace process. This is particularly the case for the majority Burman community, members of which generally have little understanding of the grievances and aspirations of minority communities and who could easily be mobilised to oppose the peace process, and especially the political demands of ethnic nationality politicians. There is an urgent need in Burma/Myanmar for nationwide conversation on the nature of citizenship and the characteristics and structure of the state.

These issues illustrate widespread and unhelpful assumptions regarding civil society in Burma/Myanmar, and beyond. While the sector can certainly be a vehicle for progressive political change, recent grassroots violence in Rakhine State (and elsewhere) shows that Burma/Myanmar civil society is not necessarily cosmopolitan in nature, but can include dark elements, working towards decidedly non-liberal aims. The combination of populism, contested identities and interests, and long suppressed political and communal passions can be a volatile mix.

Other elements of society with a claim to be key stakeholders include ethnic political parties, representatives of which were elected to provincial and national-level parliaments in 2010. These parties have a credible claim to legitimately represent their communities – but so far have been largely excluded from the peace process. Increasingly, above-ground, civilian



PHOTO: UN PHOTO/DAVID OHANA

The ethnic clashes in Rakhine State between elements of the Buddhist community and the stateless Muslim Rohingya people have forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes for fear of violence. In August last year 68,500 internally displaced persons were accommodated in 63 camps, among them Taung Paw camp in Myebon.

ethnic politicians are demanding a voice in the peace process, and particularly in emerging political discussions. To a degree, such actors are rivals to the NSAGs for the support of ethnic communities. Their inclusion in the peace process must therefore be handled delicately.

Those most directly affected by the peace process include communities in areas of on-going or recent armed conflict. Efforts to support the peace process, such as the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI)[2], have worked with communities in former 'black areas' to undertake participatory needs assessments, in order to implement locally-owned projects helping civilians recover from conflict. In the process, spaces have been created, allowing for substantive discussions between representatives of the Myanmar Army and government, NSAGs, the international community and displaced ethnic minority villagers. These unprecedented engagements have been profound and moving experiences for those involved.

It is essential that such efforts are replicated, in order to bring the victims of armed conflict in Burma/Myanmar into dialogue with both the government and the NSAGs. In such efforts to test the emerging peace, the roles of women and youth will be particularly important. Other ways in which the MPSI has sought to deepen participation in the peace process include supporting consultations between NSAGs and the communities they seek to represent, and also working with civil society and NSAGs to establish local monitoring of the peace process.

Fragile but promising process

As noted, intra-communal violence in Rakhine and the ongoing conflict in Kachin State threaten to undermine the peace process in Burma/Myanmar, and potentially derail the still fragile nationwide reform process. Nevertheless, prospects for peace in Burma/Myanmar remain greater than has been the case for several decades. In order for a just and sustainable peace to be achieved, it will be necessary both to broaden the peace process to include substantive political talks, and to deepen participation on the part of political and civil society actors, and communities.

In this context, the question of who speaks for local communities will become increasingly urgent. Those working to support the peace process in Burma/Myanmar have a responsibility to ensure that they engage respectfully and constructively – and above all, safely – with communities that have suffered so much, for so many years.

1 For an overview and analysis of the peace process in Myanmar, see Ashley South, *Prospects for peace in Myanmar: opportunities and threats* (Peace Research Institute of Oslo, December 2012).

2 The Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) aims to build trust and confidence in – and test – the peace process, by supporting peace agreements between the government and NSAGs. The MPSI was initiated in January 2012, when Burma/Myanmar asked the Norwegian government to help support the peace process. Since then, a number of other governments and donors have become involved. The MPSI has sought to move quickly in response to political imperatives in a fast-changing context. It is committed to substantial consultations with conflict-affected communities, civil society, and government and non-government political and military actors, and to consulting and sharing information with a broad range of stakeholders. The MPSI is committed to working in a manner which does not expose vulnerable populations or other partners to increased danger (including due to any breakdown in the peace process). It is supporting local partners (community-based organisations and NSAGs) to implement projects in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Karen and Mon States, and Bago and Tanintharyi Regions. For regularly updated information on the MPSI (in English, Burmese and minority languages), see http://www.emb-norway.or.th/News_and_events/MPSI/