Nation Building and Nationalism in Myanmar: From Military Rule to Democratic Opening

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Abstract

Myanmar is home to dozens of ethnic groups, languages, and political factions. This diversity, coupled with racially and religiously defined political ideologies, has helped to fuel one of the world's longest civil wars, spanning over half a century. This article explores the nation-building strategies pursued by successive governments since independence and their effects on the current political situation. It then focuses on the 2008 constitution, the return to democracy in 2010, and the transition to a civilian government following the 2015 election, and explores whether significant progress has been made to move the country out of civil war and into an ethnically and politically inclusive democracy

Keywords: Myanmar, nationalism, nation-building, Aung San Suu Kyi, civil war, ethnic relations

Introduction

Myanmar is a country of striking divides between urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Buddhists and non-Buddhists, and ethnically different groups. These differences have contributed to ignite and sustain one of the world's longest running civil wars, persisting, to varying degrees, since independence in 1948. With over fifty minority groups, many with military factions and political parties, the challenge for each government has been to instill a nation-wide ideology that would enhance legitimacy and loyalty to a united nation-state.[1] A definition of *nation*, given by one of the founders of nationalism studies, Anthony Smith, is a people group that "shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity, and equal rights and duties for all members."[2] As Myanmar lacks most, if not all, of these characteristics, most scholars agree it is far from achieving

[1] David Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar: Neither Nation-State Nor State-Nation?" *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2012): 223.

[2] Khin Zaw Win, "2010 and the Unfinished Task of Nation-building," in *Ruling Myanmar: From Cyclone Nargis to National Elections,* eds. Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore, and Trevor Wilson (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 19.

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nationhood.[3] Promisingly, recent steps appear to be going in a new direction: ceasefires with many armed groups have been negotiated, a new constitution was adopted in 2008, democratic elections were held in 2010, and the country was returned to civilian government in the historic 2015 elections.[4] The country's de facto president, Aung San Suu Kyi, is the daughter of the country's late independence leader, Aung San, a Nobel Peace Prize winner for her fight against the military regime, and a venerated heroine in the hearts of most citizens of Myanmar.

While the recent political opening has been lauded by the international community, ethnic communities reportedly remain wary and disconnected from the political process and dissatisfied with the new constitution, and Aung San Suu Kyi has faced international criticism for not adequately addressing ethnic discrimination.[5] As such, this paper asks what effect have the 2008 constitution and policies of the 2010 government had on ethnic opposition groups and the process of nation-building? And, while it has only been in power for one year as of 2017, what will the future hold under the new civilian government?

Building upon a brief historical context of the independence and post-independence period, this paper will analyze the political opening of Myanmar and the present situation, leading up to the 2015 election and the civilian government's first year in power. Drawing on current studies and theories, prospects for the future will be discussed. While the democratic opening is promising, the main issue that remains is finding a solution to the problem of ethnic disunity and creating a unified national identity; without an increase in cooperation and consultation with minority groups, even the new government under the popular Aung San Suu Kyi could lose legitimacy and tenuous steps forward could be reversed.

Historical Context

Many of Myanmar's current tensions can be linked to several divide-and-rule style policies enacted by the British colonial government. Before the British arrived, the Bamar (or Burman) people, who currently make up approximately sixty to seventy percent of the population, were the dominant ethnic group.[6] After the Burman monarchy was abolished in the late nineteenth[th] century, rather than keeping the traditional system intact, the British put in power those who had previously been excluded.[7] These groups, the largest of which were the Shan, Kayin (or Karen), Rakhine, Mon, Chin, Wa, Karenni, and Kachin, received improved education and access to civil service employment and were viewed as privileged foreigners or minorities, which resulted in ethnic and religious grievances and resentment from the majority.[8] As well, Protestant and Catholic missionaries arrived and the colonial administration maintained a policy of religious neutrality, leading to the disestablishment of Buddhism as the religion of the state and providing a basis for post-independence Buddhist-nationalist sentiment.[9] Finally, colonial Burma was also divided into a directly administered Burma proper and an indirectly controlled Frontier area, which heightened awareness of political and ethnic differences and served as a dividing line between economic and social growth versus poverty and stagnation.[10]

Despite colonial policies, the lead-up to independence appeared promising, with majority and minority leaders negotiating the emergent nation's structure together.[11] The first legislative elections were won handily by General Aung San, whose party was built on inter-ethnic alliances and brought ethnic minority leaders together to sign the Panglong agreement in 1947, which would set up a form of federalism in Burma.[12] However, this plan did not come to fruition as Aung San was assassinated in 1947, setting Burma on its long and destructive path through years of civil war.[13]

The first civilian, republican government under Prime Minister U Nu was faced with governing an ethnically divided territory, with little shared history, culture, or language and deeply rooted tensions.[14] As such, post-independence society was one in which people were combined "not around an imagined nation-state community…but around the newly strengthened ethnic political identities that colonial policy had generated."[15] U Nu's government attempted to build a nation-state through ethnic and religious nationalism, stressing Buddhist traditions and long-standing Burman values; these decisions upset minorities, resulting in the formation of armed insurgency groups and a cycle of rebellions and

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Myanmar Profile – Timeline," BBC.com, last modified February 18, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883.

[5] Nicholas Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict: Ethnic Political Interests in Myanmar Today," *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 2 (2014): 257.

[6] Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict," 252.

[7] Robert Taylor, "Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited," *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 3 (2005): 270.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid. 273.

[11] Ian Holliday, "Voting and Violence in Myanmar: Nation Building for a Transition to Democracy," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 1043.

[12] Ibid. 1043.

[13] "Myanmar Profile – Timeline," BBC.com.

[14] Khin Zaw Win, "2010 and the Unfinished Task of Nation-building," 20.

[15] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?" 275.

heavy-handed governmental repression that continued for 60 years.[16]

The deepening of highly politicized identities was used as justification by General Ne Win for the military to take over in 1962.[17] Ne Win implemented an intense socialist program in an attempt to build a national unity that was not based on ethnicity and religion, but rather on a secular ideology and national control of the economy, instead of colonial, Indian, or Chinese.[18] However, the methods used to play down ethnicity in politics and society, such as a ban on printing in or promoting ethnic languages and making the Burman language the official language the only one used in state schools, were perceived as "Bamarization" and had the adverse effect of creating a greater desire for autonomy amongst non-Bamar peoples in order to preserve their culture.[19] These policies, taken together as the National Language Policy, were part of a strategy to build a more homogenous country.[20] This form of exclusive nationalism fueled separatist sentiments and actions, the very issues they were meant to curtail, weakening the state to near collapse by 1988.[21] In addition, the failure of the socialist economy led to resentment from those regions that were not integrated into the national economy, exacerbating secessionist inclinations.[22]

In 1988 there was a popular uprising against the authoritarian one-party system and the economic and conflict related hardships it had created.[23] The cry for democracy and political opening was led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San. To stop the revolution, the military once again stepped in, under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).[24] SLORC announced multi-party elections, which were contested by the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi's Bamar party, and many ethnic-based parties, but no multi-ethnic alliance was formed.[25] Aung San Suu Kyi was extremely popular, but the government had her arrested before the election; even still, the NLD won with 80% of the vote.[26] However, SLORC refused to hand over power, claiming the need to write a new constitution first – a process which was not completed until 2008.[27]

Political Opening

The military-backed government, renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, began seeking and signing ceasefires with insurgent groups, reaching over twenty agreements by 2005.[28] These ceasefires were often a result of the inability of ethnic groups to enhance their positions through armed rebellion due to government repression, but many critics also interpreted it as a tactic designed to increase the military's legitimacy.[29] The focus on the ceasefires overrode considerations of economic, social, and political reform and "there was no progress [with ethnic groups] beyond the cessation of hostilities."[30] Some social and political change did begin to take place under the SPDC, especially in urban centres, with some limited institutional and policy reforms. For example, in 2004, old security and intelligence structures were dismantled, allowing for the growth of civil society and the development of grassroots organizations and think-tanks, and communications, roads, and access to visas improved; thereby increasing access to information, both from domestic and international sources.[31] Other positive steps included the release of political prisoners, the establishment of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, which was mandated to promote adherence to international and domestic human rights laws and advocated the release of political prisoners; the easing of media restrictions and censorship; and the legalization of unions.[32] Chapter VIII of the 2008 constitution, which remains in place, provided a variety of minority rights, such as the prohibition of discrimination of any form, opening of the civil service to all races, and the right to develop minority languages, literature, culture, and religion without prejudice.[33] However, these rights are subject to provisions related to unity, law, social order, and security; as such, they are, according to Asian studies and Burmese specialist David Steinberg, "effectively restricted rights, subject to the whims of authorities at various bureaucratic levels in practice if not in theory."[34]

[16] Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy," 223.
[17] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?" 279.
[18] Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy," 224.
[19] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?" 280.
[20] Lian Sakhong, "The Dynamics of Sixty Years of Ethnic and Armed Conflict in Burma," *Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies* no. 1 (2012): 8.
[21] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?" 281.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Khin Zaw Win, "2010 and the Unfinished Task of Nation-building," 23.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Sakhong, "The Dynamics of Sixty Years," 11.
[27] Ibid. 12.
[28] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?" 283.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Khin Zaw Win, "2010 and the Unfinished Task of Nation-building," 23.
[31] Marie Lall and Hla Hla Win, "Perceptions of the State and Citizenship in Light of the 2010 Myanmar Elections," in *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles, and Opportunities,* ed. N. Cheesman, M. Skidmore and T. Wilson (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012), 74-75.
[32] Udai Bhanu Singh, "Do the Changes in Myanmar Signify a Real Transition?" *Strategic Analysis* 37, no. 1 (2013): 102.
[33] Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy," 228.
[34] Ibid. 229.

The Bamar controlled military (referred to as the Tatmadaw) has historically been, and continues to be, afraid of truly multicultural policies and the notion of federalism, as they believe it could lead to secession and the destruction of the country's fragile unity.[35] As such, despite increased dialogue with ethnic leaders, the SPDC continued to pursue a national identity and ideology focused on the historical and essential role of the military as the unifier and preserver of the state.[36] Steinberg refers to this form of nationalism as the "garrison state:" a mechanism used by authorities to justify the continuation of authoritarian rule and assimilationist policies to counter perceived internal or external enemies.[37] This practice was reflected in the 2008 constitution as the constitution ensured the dominant role of the military, even under a democratically elected parliament. The important ministries of defense, home affairs, and border affairs are all held by military leaders and 25% of seats in both houses of parliament are reserved for the military.[38] In addition, seats that are allocated for ethnic areas do not necessarily need to be filled by members of minority groups, but could be won by Burmans who are from a minority region.[39]

While contested by thirty-seven political parties, the 2010 election was won by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) with over 75% of the seats, as the main opposition NLD boycotted the election due to its rejection of the 2008 Constitution and unfair election laws.[40] However, many ethnic minority parties did relatively well and gained representation in their regional assemblies; this represented a major shift in the legislative and civil service makeup of the state and provided a new political space in which ethnic concerns can now be raised.[41] And indeed there have been signs of increased dialogue. In 2010, ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups met and formed the Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union.[42] The group expanded to include twelve armed groups in 2011, renaming itself the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), and urged the international community to force the military to negotiate with ethnic nationalities for a political solution to territorial and ethnic rights disputes.[43] Internal and external pressure had some influence; from 2011 to 2012 the government, along with civil society mediators, made peace pacts with the Shan, Karen, Chin, Mon, Wa, and Karenni armed groups.[44] While these are promising steps forward, peace pacts remain unstable, as was evidenced by the reopening of hostilities between the army and the Kachin Independence Organization in 2012, with whom there had been a peace pact for the seventeen years previous.[45]

The USDP government, as well as the NLD, focused primarily on democratic elections and unity above ethnicity during the political opening. However, this ignores historical and continuing effects of ethnic conflict and disparities and perpetuates the uneven playing ground. Indeed, even the revered Aung San Suu Kyi came under criticism for her failure to speak out against the discrimination faced by minorities as she focused instead on winning the majority Burman Buddhist vote.[46] The UNFC declared that as long as nation-building is equivalent to "forced-assimilation," or the submersion of ethnic concerns under the aims of a unified state, there will be strong reactions.[47] Thus, the call for a second Panglong conference on the issue of federalism was of great importance for ethnic groups in the lead up to the 2015 election.[48]

The Lead Up to the 2015 Election

Cooperation between various armed groups and the government was perhaps at its highest level since independence in the years preceding the 2015 federal elections. However, violence, repression, and an overarching mistrust of the government on the part of the minorities remained pressing issues for national unity.[49] In addition, the slow liberalization of the economy and development in the cities, while applauded by the international community, led to a widening disparity between urban and rural dwellers.[50] As a result, while possibly more stable than in past decades, the situation in Myanmar remained volatile in the new era of democracy. Differing nationalisms and views of the state, developed through years of exclusive Bamar ethnic nation-building, continued to shape the political process. Examining these issues, it is evident that more reform will be necessary for the success of the democratic project.

Sporadic outbreaks of violence that threatened the peace process and the transition to democracy were commonplace in several areas of Myanmar in the lead up to

[35] Ibid. 230.
[36] Ibid. 224.
[37] Ibid. 227.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid. 228.
[40] Lall and Win, "Perceptions of the State." 76.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Sakhong, "The Dynamics of Sixty Years," 13.
[44] Renaud Egreteau, "Assessing Recent Ethnic Peace Talks in Myanmar," *Asian Ethnicity* 13, no. 3 (2012): 311.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Maung Zarni, "Buddhist Nationalism in Burma," *Tricycle* (2013): 53.
[47] Matthew Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-ess:' Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 16.
[48] Ibid. 17.
[49] Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict," 253.
[50] Ibid. 264.

the November 2015 election, especially in the states of Kokang and Rakhine. In Kokang, former President Thein Sein instituted military administration, giving the army executive and judicial powers in the area, and a three-month period of martial law was declared on February 17, 2015, resulting in the flight of an estimated 30,000 into China and thousands more within the country.[51] Rebel fighters continue to seek more autonomy for the region, saying their "ethnicity must have dignity."[52]

Perhaps the most desperate situation plaguing the peoples of modern Myanmar is that of the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. The Rohingya have been denied citizenship since General Ne Win's Citizenship Law was implemented in 1982, which limited citizenship to ten 'national races' and those whose ancestors settled in Burma before 1823, and the Buddhist majority insists that they are illegal aliens from Bangladesh, though many have lived in Myanmar for generations.[53] There have been no improvements in the relationship between the Rohingya and the government, parallel to those with other ethnic groups. In May of 2015, the government revoked identification cards from the group, which gave the non-citizens the ability to vote as well as access to health care and education.[54] Parliament had voted only weeks earlier to allow card holders to vote in a referendum, but following Buddhist protests in Yangon, the government announced it would revoke the cards.[55]

The denial of the right for Rohingya people to participate in civil and political life based on ethnic politics is likely to have negative implications for the long-term stability and unity of the nation-state. Violence has often been perpetrated against the Rohingya in recent years in the name of Buddhist nationalism.[56] Much of this Buddhist nationalism was constructed in the fight for independence and was never properly addressed afterwards, but rather given an environment in which it could flourish. Thus, racism against the Rohingya has become institutionalized and is the result of the five decades of repressive military rule and its propagation of a singular and exclusive definition of Burma's national culture.[57] The dominant population remains strongly ethno-nationalist, as well as Islamophobic, essentializing Buddhism as the core of an authentic Burmese nationalism.[58]

In addition to the violence in Rakhine state, there have been flare-ups between the army and ethnic groups in areas in which limited ceasefire agreements had been previously signed. In February 2015, clashes broke out in Shan and Kachin states shortly after the UNFC wrote a letter to President Thein Sein asking the government to cooperate in establishing a federal union.[59] The UNFC believed the attacks from the army could have been a pressure tactic to get the group to sign a national ceasefire proposal, which the government wanted in place before the election.[60] While the military continues to emphasize the need for a strong, centralized government, minorities are adamant about receiving greater autonomy. The instability created in response to this insistence on centralization and unity, as set out in the 2008 Constitution, has proved unsustainable and poses the risk of undoing any progress made in the last decade.

At the same time, a new cooperative dynamic was reported in the lead up to the 2015 election, with Myanmar specialist Nicholas Farrelly claiming that "the entire tone of political interaction is one of relative warmth and accommodation." [61] Substantial ideological changes, new ethnic parties and representatives, helped to begin the formation of a new political culture that is lessening the divide between majority and minority states.[62] However, even as collaboration increases between some groups and the government, many are skeptical about the democratic process, as in the past, any attempt at "nation-building" has been synonymous to the marginalization of minorities.[63] New laws that are more inclusive still face the challenge of legitimacy as their implementation comes from the very people who have perpetrated ethnic repression in the past.[64] Despite this skepticism, the prospect of a civilian government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, led to a high level of optimism throughout the country, and globally, for the 2015 election.

[51] Jonah Fisher, "Myanmar Declares Martial Law in Troubled Kokang Region," *BBC News,* February 17, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31511331.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Andrew R.C. Marshall, "In Rohingya Camp, Tensions Mount Over Myanmar Plan to Revoke ID Cards," *Reuters.com,* February 16, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/17/us-myanmar-rohingya-idUSKBN0LL05320150217.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Zarni, "Buddhist Nationalism in Burma," 52.

[57] Ibid. 55.

[58] Ibid. 53.

[59] Jared Ferrie, "At Least 20 Killed in Clashes Between Myanmar Army and Rebels," *Aljazeera.com*, February 5,2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/05/us-myanmar-clashes-idUSKBN0L90KR20150205.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict," 253.

[62] Ibid. 254.

[63] Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy," 226.

[64] Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict," 261.

The 2015 Election and Transition to Civilian Government

After almost two decades of either house arrest or severely restricted freedoms, Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to resume political activities in 2012 and led the NLD in the 2012 parliamentary by-elections, in which they won forty-three out of forty-fives seats, making the NLD the second largest party.[65] However, since the NLD opted out of the 2010 election, there were ethnic areas where they had not yet competed and had to build a presence and legitimacy through hundreds of local offices and extensive campaigning in the lead up to 2015. [66] The USDP also campaigned in ethnic areas, but because of the party's connection to the repressive military, Farrelly found that for many minorities "the choice [was] a stark one: anybody but the USDP."[67] While smaller ethnic parties played a crucial role, without an alliance they only gained a splintered array of seats.[68]

The NLD won the election with a landslide 77% of the contested seats (the military awarded themselves 25% of the seats under the Constitution), exceeding expectations in ethnic minority areas where smaller identity-based parties were predicted to dominate.[69] While Aung San Suu Kyi is the leader and face of the NLD, she remains barred from the presidency under the Constitution; as such, her close advisor U Htin Kyaw was named the President when the party officially took power on March 30, 2016, while Aung San Suu Kyi is the country's de facto leader.[70] The long and difficult struggle for this victory prompted celebrations within Myanmar and around the world and a great optimism for the future; however, progress has been slow due to the massive amount of power still held by the Tatmadaw and the continuing tensions with ethnic minority and armed groups.[71] It is on improving relationships between these two key groups – the army and the militias – that the NLD has been focused in its first year of government.[72]

Before full political inclusion can occur, the remaining armed ethnic groups that did not sign ceasefire agreements with the previous government must be brought into the peace process. To this end, the NLD has established the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre and held a "21st Century Panglong Conference" in August 2016, named after the Panglong Conference and held by General Aung San at independence. This conference, while a positive step forward, was mainly symbolic as no agreements were signed and three armed groups were not present. A subsequent 21st Century Panglong Conference is slated to take place in March 2017, and Aung San Suu Kyi invited unsigned militias to meet beforehand to discuss their demands.[73] Despite these efforts, clashes have continued to occur under the new government, such as in Shan and Kachin states, and troops were deployed to Kayin state in early 2017, causing 2,000 villagers to flee across the border to Thailand.[74] The first year of the NLD's efforts for peace show that addressing these decades-long conflicts will be a long-term test of the new democratic government.

While Aung San Suu Kyi has made steps towards including ethnic minorities in the political process, such as naming an ethnic Chin as a vice president, she has remained silent on the ever deteriorating plight of the Rohingya people, harming her international image as a symbol of freedom and democracy.[75] After attacks that were carried out by Rohingya militants on October 9, 2016, killing nine police officers, the army has carried out a "grossly disproportionate" response, which has been rife with reports of human rights abuses, mass killings of civilians, and the torching of villages, causing the displacement of thousands of Rohingya.[76] Aung San Suu Kyi has not addressed the issue, with the NLD denying the atrocities until a recent UN report prompted the government to express concern over reported human rights abuses. Resolving this crisis will be essential not only for Myanmar to fulfill its international obligation to uphold human rights, but for long-term internal stability. However, it is unlikely to be a high priority as relations with armed groups will dominate the agenda in the NLD's quest to finally achieve unity and stability.

Steinberg asserts that "Myanmar has in the modern period never been a nation-state…there is no national pervasive ideology or concepts of nationalism that

[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid. 259.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Crisis Group Asia Briefing, "The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications," *International Crisis Group* 147 (December 2015): 4.
[70] Nicholas Farrelly and Kyaw Sein, "Myanmar's Evolving Relations: The NLD in Government," *Institute for Security & Development Policy, Asia Paper* (October 2016), 9.
[71] Ibid. 6.
[72] Crisis Group Asia Briefing, "The Myanmar Elections," 11-12.
[73] Wai Mar Tun and Kyaw Lwin Oo, "Aung San Suu Kyi Invites Ethnic Militias to Meet Before Next Peace Conference," *Radio Free Asia* (Myanmar), February 2, 2017, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aung-san-suu-kyi-invites-ethnic-militias-to-meet-before-next-peace-conference-02172017151541.html.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Sampa Kundu, "Political Transition, *Tatmadaw* and Challenges for Myanmar's Democracy," *Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses* (July 26, 2016): 3.
[76] Oliver Holmes, "Nobel Laureates Warn Aung San Suu Kyi Over 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Rohingya," *TheGuardian.com,* December 30, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/30/nobel-laureates-aung-san-suu-kyi-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya.

transcend localized ethno-linguistic loyalties."[77] As noted previously, it has been the goal of each government to build this nationalism, through various methods and policies. This objective continues to be high on the priority list of the NLD, but through a different means than before, namely democracy. This cannot be a strategy in and of itself, however. One need only look at the case of Kenya[78] to realize that a veneer of democracy placed on top of deep-rooted societal issues can heighten tensions in a diverse country and lead to conflict.[79] Given these considerations, nation-building in Myanmar is required, but attention should be given to bottom-up approaches that include mechanisms to listen to the views of ethnic and religious minorities through various means. These could include an expanded and liberated civil society and the adoption of a political system that values pluralism, rather than monism.[80] Without inclusive nation-building, majoritarian democracy will prevail and ethnic voices will continue to be excluded.[81] Signing ceasefire agreements, while a difficult processes in and of itself, is only the first step in what will be a long nation-building process.

For many Myanmar residents, decades have passed in which the government neglected their needs, making greater integration seem less valuable than self-determination; it will therefore take time and proof of real change to influence the attitudes of ethnic minorities and to satisfy their desires. These include not only greater access to political life and decision-making processes, but also to state services and benefits, such as education and economic opportunity. Rural communities have been left behind economically as disparity increases while Yangon grows with increased international trade, and access to education in rural areas is low, as only the wealthy have the ability to attend newly legalized private schools.[82] As well, even though the 2008 Constitution states that citizens have the right to political participation, textbooks have not been updated since the socialist period and describe only the duties related to citizenship, excluding the rights it grants, and continue to promote an ethno-nationalist centered unity and national integration.[83] Until ethnic groups see the benefit of greater integration in terms of power sharing and recognition and protection of equal cultural status as well as in real goods and services, it is likely that clashes and disputes will continue despite the NLD's heightened focus on ceasefire agreements. It remains to be seen whether there is the will, or the ability, to take the steps necessary to address these issues in a sufficiently satisfactory way.

Conclusion

Since independence, successive governments have propagated a dangerous form of nationalism in Myanmar, rooted in the fear of losing property and status and in religious purity; to overcome this pervasive attitude and build an inclusive nationalism will require more than elections, nominal policy provisions, or economic development. Aung San Suu Kyi expressed this in her now famous essay, "Freedom From Fear:"

> A revolution which aims merely at changing official policies and institutions with a view to an improvement in material conditions has little chance of genuine success. Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration. It is not enough merely to call for freedom, democracy and human rights. There has to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of enduring truths, to resist the corrupting influences of desire, ill will, ignorance and fear.[84]

Building such a spirit and deconstructing deeply-rooted racism, fear, and misconceptions will take time as well as a legal and political environment in which reconciliation is encouraged. However, only in this setting can a new type of nationalism be formed: one that does not require only one culture, but celebrates the nation's diversity. An overarching ideology or mass public culture binds a nation-state together by creating a sense of belonging.[85] In an ethnically diverse country such as Myanmar, this can be the belief in the equality of all, where one can claim their ethnicity and have love of country at the same time because it respects and protects the rights of each group.

Myanmar has been going through positive democratic shifts in recent years and the 2015 election was

[77] Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy," 225.

[78] In Kenya, democracy provided an image of stability while corruption was rife and ethnic disputes continued to simmer and increase; multiparty elections served to exacerbated ethnic tensions by pitting groups against each other, leading to mass election violence in 2007, with over 1000 killed (See Peter Kagwanja and Roger Southall, *Kenya's Uncertain Democracy: The Electoral Crisis of 2008* (New York: Routledge, 2010.).

[79] Ibid. 226.

[80] Ibid. 27.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Perceptions of the State, 75, 80.

[83] Ibid. 83.

[84] Aung San Suu Kyi, "Freedom From Fear," in *Freedom From Fear, and Other Writings,* eds. Michael Aris and Philip Kreager (London: Viking, 1991).

[85] Win, "2010 and the Unfinished Task of Nation-building," 19-20.

an historic step towards solidifying democracy, but it is clear is that elections will not be sufficient to satisfy ethnic groups or to right decades of repression. Much of the current tension began because the Panglong agreement was never implemented due to the assassination of Aung San. Perhaps the situation today would be quite different had this not been the case; returning to these original ideals of ethnic unity with the 21st Century Panglong Conference could help restore the legitimacy of the political system among minority groups. Ethnic leaders and political parties must be fully included in the political process, with equal access to the decision-making process and the ability to increase minority rights. Without this, current areas of unrest, such what as exists in the Kokang, Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine states, will continue to see violence as the only way to protect their cultures and interests. At the present time, it is unclear whether ethno-nationalist sentiment will continue to prevail or if the NLD will be able to develop the "revolution of the spirit" that Aung San Suu Kyi called for over two decades ago. Only once all the leaders of ethnic groups view being citizens of Myanmar as beneficial to their respective member populations will a truly inclusive nationalism be born.

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