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Myanmar's Perpetual Dilemma: Ethnicity in a "Discipline- Flourishing Democracy"

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Myanmar's Perpetual Dilemma:

Ethnicity in a "Discipline-Flourishing Democracy"

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A new government was inaugurated in Burma (Myanmar) beginning January 31, 2011. However flawed the election of November 7, 2010, that brought it to power, and however tilted toward continuing military domination the 2008 constitution may have been—one that was approved by a stage-managed referendum in May of that year—a new era is opening in Burmese political life. Although it may not be apparent to outsiders, significant changes have occurred within the rigid construct of *tatmadaw* (military) control that could profoundly affect the future of that state.

Foreign interest in Myanmar for the past 20 years has been understandably concentrated on the problems of democracy and human rights. Although this is of continuing internal and external concern, the central, unresolved issue facing the state since independence in 1948 has been finding the solution to the problem of governance of this profoundly multi-cultural society. Burmese civilian and military, socialist and capitalist, governments have attempted to cope with the seemingly myriad, exceptionally diverse, one-third of the population of over 50 million people who are not majority ethnic Burman, and create an overarching sense of loyalty to a unified state. Through several political incarnations, each government has designated the country as the "Union" of Burma or Myanmar. Yet, the concept of union is fragile and often violently contested. The head of state in 1992 estimated that since independence perhaps a million lives have been lost in multiple, confusing ethnic and political struggles.

Approximately two-thirds of the country's population are ethnic Burman (or, Bamar). The remaining third comprises seven major indigenous ethnic minorities, also called ethnic "nationalities"—Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, Chin, Kayah—and more than 100 other recognized "ethnicities," many of whom are linguistic or dialect groups. Generally, the central and upper plains are predominantly populated by ethnic Burman. The minority areas are around the country's borders, in the steep, rugged highlands that ring the central valley. This difficult

terrain has been the battleground for generations of attempted rebellions by minority group armed forces.

Burma/Myanmar has careened from pseudo-decentralized control under civilian rule (1948-1962), to a unitary military-dominated socialist government (1962-1988), and centralized military rule by decree (1988-2011). At no time have the multiple ethnic groups been given the degree of autonomy they have, in differing degrees and at differing times, desired. The Myanmar government has designated 135 “nationalities” or “races,” only seven of which have designated “states” (provinces) and six additional smaller groups separate administrative units.¹ All will have very limited authority and license.

Burma/Myanmar since independence has never been a “nation-state” in which a national culture/ideology unites diverse peoples within the state, the model of which has been France since its 18th century revolution. Each government in Burma/Myanmar, however, has attempted to create this binding emotional and intellectual climate. Although every administration to some important degree has used the adherence to Buddhism as an element of that milieu and exploited it to provide legitimacy to its administration, the civilian period stressed this more than any other. U Nu, prime minister for much of that time, was elected in 1960 on the platform of making Buddhism the state religion.

The military, knowing how divisive such a move would be for many of the minorities, opposed it, and when they seized power in 1962, they instead advocated a rigid form of socialism with dual purposes: to get the economy, which had been in British, Indian, and Chinese hands before independence, back under Burman control; and to substitute a religiously neutral rallying ideology that could bring minority groups under a state-sponsored ideological umbrella. Incompetence forced the end of the socialist system as such a focus in 1988. It has since been replaced by the regime’s reinterpretation of Burmese history to ensure that the military itself becomes the intellectual and ideological center of the country, as it has become the power and authority nucleus. It seems unlikely that this will be any more successful than previous attempts

¹ The problem is that the Burmese term *lu-myo* (lit., people-type) can mean race, ethnicity, nationality, etc. (e.g., French *lu-myo*). This discussion is devoted to internal minority issues, not those of external origin: the Indians (all those from the subcontinent), or the Chinese, who have become increasingly important since 1988. The Rohingya, a Muslim minority on the Bangladesh border, are considered stateless by the Burmese government.

to create the nation-state. Inherently, this further exacerbates the minority problem as the upper levels of the military are virtually all Burman Buddhist.

Although British colonial rule may be faulted by separate administration of the Burman heartland from some of the peripheral border areas, the territorial scope of what became modern Burma was a matter of colonial convenience, unrelated to ethnic, religious, linguistic or other continuities that spill over into adjacent areas; it essentially created the backdrop of the modern tragedy that Burma/Myanmar has played on the Southeast Asian stage since World War II.

Each act of this minority drama has been rewritten by each government since independence. The present government's approach is ostensibly different; an effort seems to have been made to attempt to resolve the minority conundrum. In actuality, however, all the acts suffer from the same flawed negative emotional response to minority concerns.

The present approach began shortly after the September 18, 1988 coup that was designed to ensure continuing military control in the face of a state-wide people's revolution that ultimately failed. With the state's labor-intensive military of just under 200,000 and armed rebellions totaling over 50,000, the state's military attempts to resolve the numerous rebellions, often in remote areas and in difficult terrains, had been a failure for a generation; yet no rebellion or combination thereof could overthrow the central state administration.

The state was continuously bleeding. One military officer admitted that in one rebellion their losses were unsustainable. The center was denied access to much of its border areas and their natural resources, thus also prompting smuggling and narcotics production and distribution. The garrison state, military rule, could thus be justified by the internal and external threats of the disintegration of the Union. Suspicion of foreign entanglements was also evident, for each of the countries surrounding Burma/Myanmar (except Laos), and the UK and the U.S., had supported in some manner internal insurrections in that country and their dissidents.² No wonder that the primary, stated goal of the contemporary Burman *tatmadaw*, which had fought against these rebellions, should be the preservation of national unity.

² U.S. support to dissidents continues in Thailand through government and private funding.

Burman military administrations have been marked both by disdain of the minorities as cultural equals and fear of their potential for revolt, coupled with suspicions of foreign intent. These attitudes were exacerbated in the socialist, isolationist period of military rule (1962-88), where the minorities, because of the porous, ethnically irrelevant borders, had external contacts with their linguistic cousins the Burmans lacked, while Christian and Muslim groups had overseas religious friends. These already complex attitudes were further inflamed since 1988 when Western states, especially the United States, had called for “regime change” in that country. The fears of a U.S. invasion, however irrational to outsiders, have been continuously evident among its leadership since that time.

The beginning of the answer to this perpetual minority problem was a series of official, verbal cease-fires, totaling seventeen starting in 1989, that over time left insurgents in place controlling some territory and still armed, while a few of the rebellions continued—most prominently the Karen, drastically weakened but still in revolt since 1949—the longest such rebellion in the modern world.

The junta, similar to the military rule in the 1970s, had determined to replace their martial law with a constitution that would continue military control through other means. In contrast to the military-instigated 1974 constitution, which created a unitary, single-party, socialist state that neglected any minority concerns, the long, protracted efforts to formulate a new constitution that began in 1992 and was finally completed in 2007 made a number of innovations for the minorities, that came into effect in 2011 but the impacts are still unclear.

Although the civilian (1948-1962) central legislature was bicameral, with an upper house designed to ensure some minority voice, essential power was vested in the Burman-controlled lower house. Some minority “states” (provinces) were established, and more created over time in both the civilian and military periods, but whatever modest authority some of the minorities had in their own areas under the central civilian government was eliminated under 1962 military rule. The minorities felt subjugated and in some areas the Burman military acted as an occupying army oppressing local peoples, who were denied the opportunity to study their own languages in the officially prescribed curriculum.

Now, in 2011, under the 2008 constitution, legislatures (*hluttaws*) have been established in minority areas for the first time in the history of Burma. In addition to the bicameral central legislature, previously noted, there will be fourteen provincial ones—seven “regional” *hluttaws* in essentially Burman areas, and seven “state” *hluttaws* in predominantly minority areas. In addition six other ethnic groups have been allotted some self-government through subordinate *hluttaws*. At all levels, each *hluttaw* will have 25 percent active duty military chosen by the Minister of Defense, who must also be a military officer.³ Taut military control seems evident throughout the state.

Many Western observers have called the elections a “sham,” lacking international credibility and legitimacy. The elections were certainly manipulated to secure what the junta had wanted. Registration of political parties was controlled, highly expensive for an impoverished country and population, and even if individual ballots may have been fairly counted in some cases, advanced voting (absentee ballots) were evidently and extensively rigged. The result was that about 80 percent of the seats of the bicameral central *hluttaw* went to the government’s political party (the Union Solidarity and Development Party-USDP), one that was based on the mass organization of some 24.5 million people under explicit military domination.

Significantly, however, in six of the seven minority areas, the government’s USDP did not gain a majority, but rather a plurality. Over half the parties gaining seats were ethnically related. With their 25 percent military supplement, state dominance over minority areas remains. Yet ethnic identity obviously looms very large within Myanmar. As foreign commentators note the importance of state nationalism in many developing societies, including Myanmar, they should also note the rising tide of ethnic nationalism mirroring that at the national level. Ethnicity has been reified.

Since independence, the various minorities have felt ill-disposed toward the administration of the Burman majority. The intensity of that feeling has increased under successive Burmese governments. When there have been local, minority administrations, they have been underfunded compared to Burman areas. Yet, as some minorities claim, much of the natural resources of the state are in minority inhabited areas, and they were verbally promised by

³ The 25 percent military in the legislatures was probably based on an Indonesian model under Suharto, as the Burmese had assiduously studied and praised the longevity of Indonesian military dominance.

the architect of independence, Aung San, that they would get an equal share of state assets. Minorities have more vigorously complained that although all the constitutions of the state (including that of 2008) have titularly honored the languages, cultures, and customs of such groups, the central administration has in fact continuously mandated assimilation and denied them primary cultural rights, such as forbidding education in minority languages in the state-controlled educational system, and gradually creating glass ceilings for minority participation in the upper reaches of the military (colonel and above), and in the bureaucracy as well. Evident Burman disrespect of the minority groups, especially those that do not profess Buddhism, is widespread. Brutal treatment of insurrectionist forces in minority regions, such as free-fire zones and village destruction, is obvious. Although minority “genocide,” as some opposition figures claim, has not taken place, human rights violations are widespread and apparent.

Although some of the larger minorities had originally called for independence, that era seems over. Now, however, all of the major groups have pushed for some form of federal structure that would give those regions more autonomy. But at least since 1962, the military leadership has believed that any federal structure is the first stage toward secession from the Union. Under the junta, it was illegal for any group to undertake the planning for any constitution other than the one the military had designated and scripted, so a variety of such planning, which was fragmented but extensive, took place overseas, and universally called for a federal structure of some dimension.

If one were to approach national officials and ask them about the government’s attitude toward the minorities, they might well reply that never in the history of Burma/Myanmar have these groups been allotted so much authority. First, there have been the cease-fires. Now, for the first time in Burmese history the seven major ethnic “races” and six smaller ethnic groups have legislatures that can have a degree of self-government (even if militarily controlled). The junta has built more infrastructure in minority areas than all previous governments together, and a ministerial position (albeit constitutionally occupied by a military officer) has been created to minister to these groups. So the state has been conscious of the minority problems and attempted to deal with them, but in military and Burman terms.

This hypothetical response, however, is that the military’s answer is half right and badly flawed. Three important issues remain that will likely cause continuation of majority-minority

tension unless resolved. These are: the expectations of the minorities and their beliefs in their rights; the attitudes of the Burman authorities and the lack of national socio-economic and political mobility; and the problem of the Border Guard Forces—the issue of resolving the dilemma of the minority armies that remain in place.

The importance of more local authority in and among minority groups has grown over time, reflecting the rise of educational standards, nationalism, and identity, an identity perhaps accentuated by somewhat more benign treatment of their minorities (some the same as those in Myanmar) by the neighboring state of China, and by the oppression and attempted assimilation under which they have suffered. The calls for various forms of federalism, anathema to the military for half a century, remain unanswered and unfulfilled. How much authority the new local legislatures will have is unclear, but it is likely to be less than what was wanted.

All avenues of social mobility and advancement are under military control. This was not true in the civilian period. Political power, higher education, civil society, the *sangha* (monkhood), and the economy are dominated by the military, and the most obvious avenue to social mobility and authority (and access to the middle class) is through the military channels themselves. If present patterns continue, the middle class in Myanmar will basically be composed of retired higher-level military and the Chinese community, which now has a major grip on much of capital and thus on non-state investment and the economy. For a national ethos to prevail and be accepted, these avenues, thus access to the middle class, must be seen to be reasonably open to all ethnicities and religions. This is not presently the case.

These tensions are continuing, but an immediate minority problem will preoccupy the new government. That is: the issue of the Border Guard Forces (BGF), or how to integrate minority armies into some state controlled military institution. The cease-fires allowed minority group armed forces to hold their weapons as long as they did not attack the *tatmadaw*. Earlier plans had called for all such forces to surrender their arms before the referendum on the constitution in 2008. This did not happen, and lessons might have been garnered from similar circumstances in other countries that this was unlikely at best. Yet the 2008 constitution specifically calls for a single *tatmadaw*, so some solution had to be found. In 2009, the junta initiated a plan whereby the insurgent armies would be melded into the regular national army by ensuring that each battalion of minority forces would have ten percent regular troops, and that

one-third of the leadership of each such battalion would be *tatmadaw*, This plan would have emasculated all such forces and prevented them from ever threatening the state again. This was, of course, the intent.

No major ethnic insurrectionist group agreed, and negotiations have gone on for two years without resolution of the problem. Multiple supposed negotiations have taken place, but the central authorities have been adamant in their insistence on their terms, and various deadlines have past without resolution of the issue. Tensions have risen in some of the critical minority regions, specifically in the Kokang, Kachin, and Wa areas on the China border. China has attempted to mediate the issues with little success. In a show of force, the Burmese military wiped out the small Kokang army in August 2009, forcing some 37,000 refugees into China, much to the displeasure of the Chinese government. This action was said to have been taken on Chinese suggestions based on Chinese concerns that an illegal arms factory operated in that Kokang area that could have supplied equipment to internal Chinese Uighur dissidents; but the Burmese are said to have over-reacted to the problem, creating more difficulties than theretofore and angering the Chinese.

On September 1, 2010, the last deadline was issued by the junta, stating that thereafter the cease-fires would be void, implying that retribution would follow. The deadline was not met, the Kachin and Wa, with some 35,000 or so troops under their control, have formed an alliance to resist if attacked, and minority forces have been recruiting. So the new government will have to deal with this vital issue.

It is yet unclear how much authority these “state” *hluttaws* will have, and even if they have considerable leeway whether they will be able to institute laws or regulations that have some meaningful impact on their areas. Almost as important is whether there will be serious debates allowed on local issues, and if so, whether these will be able to be reported in the media, which have been under stringent government control. Rumors abound that these states will have the capacity to tax and generate funds, and that loans from the central government may be made available. Although such loans, if approved, might ease immediate fiscal problems, their residual effect would be to tie the minority areas even more closely to central control, which may have been a factor in this plan. If this is considered devolution of authority, it will likely have the opposite effect.

Since there is a rise in ethnic nationalism, one question is whether this ethnic nationalism can trump politics. Will, for example, a minority issue be deemed so important that both government and opposition members of a state *hluttaw* of the same nationality band together to push for, or object to, some government plan? A Chin politician has called for the teaching of Chin in the official curriculum, something that has never been allowed for any internal minority (as opposed to the Chinese). Might ethnicity in such a case prompt local calls for change, and if so, how might the central administration react (constitutionally, of course, their languages are to be fostered and protected). Perhaps equally important politically is the issue of Chinese or state-sponsored infrastructure such as the Chinese pipelines, dams, or mines that offer few rewards to local populations who often are displaced, lack employment, suffer environmental damage, and are generally more marginalized. In other words, will local issues, almost never before considered in any centrally planned activity or project in either Burman or minority areas, result in local objections that are seriously considered. This may come to pass, but it is likely to be a slow, painful process.⁴

If central, military-inspired intransigence on minority problems continues, if denigration of the minorities and their cultures is not diminished, if a compromise on the minority armies and militias is not reached, then the prospect for renewal of the virtually perennial violence increases. The result will not only be the continuing suffering of the Burmese peoples, but regional instability, increased flow of refugees, probable heightened trafficking, likely expansion of narcotics production (either that agriculturally based such as opium or chemically manufactured such as metamphetamines). Both China and Thailand would regard such developments as serious issues negatively affecting their national interests.

Thus, the international community broadly, for both humanitarian and security reasons, should attempt to persuade those involved that the minority questions should be of high priority in any discussion of the future of that unfortunate country.

⁴ At the close of the socialist period in 1988, a high socialist party cabinet official said that the *hluttaw* members were supposed to return to their home districts, learn about the problems from the people, and then report back to *the hluttaw* to deal with them. This did not happen, he said. I replied that of course it would not happen because of the fear of the military authorities under the single-party system. Personal interview, Rangoon.