

Political Parties and Peacebuilding in Myanmar

Although the democratic transition in Myanmar since 2011 is a top-down, regime-driven process, previously marginalized opposition parties are playing an increasingly important role. Ethnic-minority parties have improved on their ability to influence politics from below at both the Union and the regional/state levels, and Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) have entered the political scene. While a basis for these developments was laid in Myanmar's 2010 national elections, the great breakthrough was the by-elections in 2012 – in which the NLD won a resounding victory. An essential question in the run-up to the next national elections in 2015 is to what extent Myanmar's ethnic-minority parties may be able to take over the role played by the armed groups in promoting ethnic-minority interests.

This policy brief examines the role of Myanmar's political parties and asks: How well are they equipped for the task of building peace? Are the ethnic-minority parties ready to take the lead role in promoting the interests of their constituencies? Will this cause armed groups to fade into the background?

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The democratization of Myanmar

In 2003, after 15 years of pressure for democratization and reform following the repression of the 1988 uprising, Myanmar's military junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council, decided to boost its legitimacy by launching a seven-step 'roadmap to a discipline-flourishing democracy'. The roadmap marked the start of a tedious process of democratization, of which the drafting and endorsement of a new constitution in 2008, and general elections to the Union and regional/state legislative bodies in 2010 were the main components.

Seeking representation

The November 2010 elections were the first since the junta's decision to ignore the outcome of the 1990 elections in which the NLD had won 392 of 485 seats in Myanmar's parliament (52.44% of the total votes). The process leading up to the 2010 elections, like the one leading up to a constitutional referendum in May 2008, was denounced domestically and internationally as undemocratic. All opposition parties and political organizations in Myanmar viewed the elections as an attempt by the military to consolidate its power by seeking to legitimize its position in national politics. The three largest parties from 1990 – the NLD, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and the Arakan League for Democracy – along with several other political parties, had boycotted the elections partly because of the non-inclusive nature of the registration process, partly because they had no trust in the regime's willingness to give up power, and partly because many of their leaders were imprisoned and thus barred from running for office.

Four small ethnic-minority parties, however, decided to contest the elections. Many new parties also registered, some of which were breakaway groups from the boycotting parties. Despite the many flaws, participation in these elections was viewed as preferable to no elections at all. In the end, a total of 47 parties signed up for registration with the Election Commission, and of these 37 were allowed to run (4 parties were not approved, while 6 parties failed to meet the registration criteria).

While the elections on 7 November 2010 proceeded smoothly, there were extensive

irregularities during ballot counts. When the regime-sponsored Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) appeared to be lagging behind, the vote count was suspended in many constituencies and remarkably large numbers of advance votes were brought in, resulting in a seemingly massive turnout for the USDP in elections to both Union assemblies and all regional and state assemblies.



The reforms gain momentum

With the parliament's election of General Thein Sein as president in March 2011, the situation changed. The new president launched an ambitious reform agenda. Myanmar's parliament was allowed to play a genuine role in monitoring government policies, as well as in legislation and budgetary matters. Meanwhile, the government initiated peace talks with all major ethnic armed groups and released political prisoners. Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed full freedom, and

Thein Sein met repeatedly with her. She and the NLD reciprocated by contesting the 1 April 2012 by-elections, which were regarded as free and fair. The NLD won 43 out of the 44 seats it contested – 37 in the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives), 4 in the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), and 2 in the Hluttaws of Bago and Ayeyarwady Regions. The party lost one seat to the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party in the Amyotha Hluttaw, while the USDP won one in a constituency in which the NLD did not run (the NLD candidate had been disqualified by the Election Commission).

Although the USDP and the military – which is guaranteed 25% of all seats in all elected bodies by the country's constitution – continue to dominate both the Union and regional/state assemblies, the 2012 by-elections marked an important step towards democracy in the ethnically divided and war-torn country. Despite the restraints the 2008 constitution is imposing on Myanmar politics, ethnic-minority parties have gained valuable political experience from parliamentary work and are now able to some degree to serve their constituencies in the assemblies.

The positive experience of the 2012 by-elections has also raised hopes that the general elections in 2015 will be free and fair. These forthcoming elections will not just test the democratic transition at the Union level, but also indicate the prospect for peace and reconciliation in Myanmar's ethnic-minority states and other ethnically diverse areas.

National reconciliation

Until now, national reconciliation has been primarily a matter between the government and the ethnic armed groups (national reconciliation as ceasefire and peace) or between the government and the NLD (national reconciliation as democracy). The tripartite negotiations between the ruling elite, the NLD and the ethnic minorities that many political activists have advocated have not yet begun. Thus far, ethnic political parties have played a minuscule role in the peace process. The new arena of political cooperation and negotiation provided by the bicameral Union parliament and the regional/state parliaments – where the ruling elite must engage with Bamar-dominated opposition parties (like the NLD) as well as ethnic-minority opposition parties –

nonetheless offers a good starting point for efforts to merge the two trails of national reconciliation – democracy and peace. However, the low levels of ethnic-minority representation in the current parliaments will continue to represent an obstacle for progress in this area.

Challenges

A main problem faced by Myanmar's political parties is how to overcome splits and factionalism. There exist deep divides between the parties that boycotted the 2010 elections and the breakaway groups that decided to run. The split between the NLD and the National Democratic Force (NDF) – a party founded by former NLD-members – is particularly harrowing and the two parties seem irreconcilable. If the 2015 elections are free and fair, the NLD will most likely gain a clear majority. However, since the party has been excluded from official politics for more than two decades, it has little experience with parliamentary work and practical politics. There is no doubt that the NLD and the NDF could gain much from a merger.

Splits dating back to the 2010 elections are also found among some of the ethnic-minority parties. While these splits seem less irreconcilable than the one between the NLD and NDF, the existence of divisions between various political parties seeking to represent the same ethnic group may have even greater consequences. Myanmar's ethnic-minority parties will have to compete against an NLD fronted by the massively popular Aung San Suu Kyi. It is evident that if they are also to compete with rival ethnic parties, they will have difficulties in winning seats – particularly since Myanmar has a single-member constituency voting system that favours larger parties. Unless the system is changed to proportional representation, Myanmar may end up with an elected one-party system instead of the multiparty system the democratic movement and ethnic minorities have struggled for. Ethnic minorities may end up being poorly represented and thus continue to see the armed groups as their main voice.

Currently, lively discussions are taking place within the two major Shan parties – the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (1990) and the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (2010) – about a possible merger, with much

of the Shan population being involved in these discussions. Similar talks are being held among: the two main Mon parties, the Mon Democracy Party (known in 1990 as the Mon National Democratic Front) and the All Mon Region Democracy Party (2010); the Arakan League for Democracy (1990) and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (2010) in Rakhine State; and the Chin National Party (2010) and the Chin Progressive Party (2010) in Chin State.

This means that attempts are being made in four of Myanmar's seven ethnic-minority states to create parties strong enough to prevent total Bamar domination of the future Union Hluttaw. It is doubtful, however, that the ethnic-minority parties will unite behind demands to make the voting system proportional. This will require a revision of Chapter 9 of the constitution, and the proportional system that some smaller Bamar-dominated parties are arguing for would require parties to contest seats all over the country. Such an approach would not directly benefit ethnic-minority parties, as they can only run in a few regions and states. However, a system to ensure representation by many ethnic parties would no doubt strengthen their joint bargaining power and increase their chance to push demands for federalism, power-sharing, internal self-determination, ethnic cultural rights and redistribution of revenues – decisive issues for building peace in Myanmar. If the Union and regional/state parliaments end up without proper ethnic representation, this might jeopardize the process of reconciliation and undermine the national peace process. Yet, while Myanmar's ethnic-minority parties have a long record of building alliances behind common strategies, the main driver in electoral politics is party self-interest. This may prevent some ethnic-minority parties from joining in the calls for proportional representation. The powerful Shan and Rakhine parties are sceptical to proportional representation since they have a good chance of winning outright majorities in their own constituencies.

Two relevant questions in this regard are to what extent the NLD will field ethnic-minority candidates in ethnic-minority constituencies, and how ethnic parties would react to such a move. A positive impact of such a development might be that ethnic-minority politicians would take up influential positions within a

national party. On the other hand, ethnic parties may react negatively if the NLD is seen to be attempting to undermine their positions in their own constituencies. The NLD and Myanmar's ethnic parties may benefit from an open dialogue about such dilemmas prior to the election campaign. A possible compromise with regard to the voting system might be an approach in which half the seats are elected in single-member constituencies, while the other half are elected under a system of proportional representation – as happened in Nepal 2008.

Another problem for the political parties, notably the ones that contested the 1990 elections, is the old age of most of their leaders. The parties lack structures and strategies enabling young, particularly female talents to gain political influence. Most parties have weak democratic structures. The NLD congress on 8–10 March 2013 (the first of its kind) was not successful in reinvigorating its leadership despite the announcement by Aung San Suu Kyi that 'new blood' was needed. Some of the ethnic-minority parties that contested the 2010 elections, on their part, strive to ensure revitalization and new recruitment by working closely with civil society organizations and local communities in trying to promote policies important to their constituents.

Perhaps the most serious problem from a perspective of peace is that the entire Kachin population has so far been excluded from the political process. In order to build peace through democratization also in Kachin State, it will not be enough simply to arrive at a ceasefire. There must be a real chance of achieving both representation at the Union level and domination of the state parliament, which must get a large degree of autonomy.

Kachin State

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) enjoyed a ceasefire with the government from 1994 to 2011. Prior to the 2010 elections, in response to the KIO's refusal to permit the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to be transformed into a government-controlled Border Guard Force, the Election Commission declined the registration application of the Kachin State Progressive Party, led by former KIO vice-president Manam Tuja, who was also denied the opportunity to run as an inde-

pendent candidate. The application from the Northern Shan State Progressive Party – a Kachin ethnic party in Shan State – was also declined, as was the application of the United Democratic Party (Kachin State). A party called the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State appeared instead. This was widely recognized as a proxy for the regime and had little local credibility. The Kachin were thus left with no political representation, and in June 2011 the 17-year-old ceasefire agreement collapsed. Since then, war has raged, claiming more than 1,000 lives and leaving 75,000–100,000 people displaced. As a consequence of the war, the entire 2012 by-election was cancelled in Kachin State (elections to the three Pyithu Hluttaw seats from the Mogaung, Hpakant and Bhamo townships were suspended). To build sufficient peace to make it possible for Kachin State to have democratic elections in 2015, there is an urgent need for a breakthrough in the ongoing peace talks, a ceasefire, and an opportunity for one or more political parties to be formed. It is vital that representative Kachin parties be approved by the Election Commission and that the national census planned for March 2014 be carried out in a way that makes it acceptable to the KIO.

Rakhine State

Another difficult situation is in Rakhine State, where communal fighting between the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya led to the loss of at least 160 lives in June and October 2012, along with the displacement of over 100,000 people. Thousands of homes were torched in communal violence that primarily was directed against the Rohingya – a stateless people without recognized civil rights. The conflict in Rakhine State has roots back to the colonial era, when there was large-scale migration from other parts of British

India. However, it is clear that incidents related to the 2010 elections and the question of voting and citizenship rights for the Rohingya contributed to the conflict, as the government had allowed many Rohingya to vote by issuing identity cards in an apparent attempt to prevent the influential Rakhine political parties from completely dominating the state. The Rohingya issue is highly sensitive in Myanmar politics, and so far, hardly any political parties have shown a desire to touch it. Only the National Democratic Party for Development, with its two Rohingya MPs in the Rakhine State Hluttaw, and Shwe Maung, a Rohingya representing the USDP in the Pyithu Hluttaw from Buthidaung constituency in Rakhine State, have tried to voice their concerns for the plight of the Rohingya. These voices, however, have been effectively marginalized.

An urgent matter is for the NLD and the ethnic-Rakhine parties to seek some kind of cooperation or common understanding in Rakhine State prior to the 2015 election campaign. If the ethnic-Rakhine parties are to compete with the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi, there is a real fear that they will resort to instigating ethnic loyalties and Rakhine nationalism among the Rakhine electorate, with a potential for provoking renewed communal violence against the Rohingya.

Towards democracy and peace in 2015

There is no lack of challenges for Myanmar's budding democracy. All political parties need to develop their strategies, policies and party structures. This is likely to take time. It is nonetheless possible for democratic parties – both Bamar-dominated and ethnic-minority – to contribute to the development of a two-tier strategy for national reconciliation, aiming to secure both peace and democracy. If they

continue to build support in their local constituencies, listen to local grievances and promote relevant policies, ethnic-minority parties may provide a channel for marginalized minorities to play a role within Union politics. If they are also able to work together both within and across ethnic groups, the chances will increase for the parliamentary system to help peacebuilding. This, however, will be considerably easier if the voting system is changed to proportional representation, something that could be a good starting point for the likely transition from USDP to NLD dominance. One could also imagine the formation of a coalition government at the Union level, led by the NLD but including some experienced USDP politicians, as well as representatives of the key ethnic parties. Such a development might in turn facilitate the constitutional reforms that are needed to build a sustainable democratic peace.

In addition to the problems mentioned in Kachin and Rakhine State, violence between the Myanmar Army and ethnic armed groups continues to erupt in parts of Shan and Kayin State, despite ceasefire agreements. Democracy and a well-functioning parliamentary system, in other words, are not sufficient to build peace. Some members of the ethnic armed groups see the current system more as an instrument of cooptation than of representation. It is therefore vital for the planned revision of the constitution, initiated by the parliament, to accommodate ethnic aspirations. At some point – preferably sooner rather than later – ethnic political parties will also need to take up a genuine role in the Union-level peace process. Without such involvement, it is doubtful that Myanmar's political parties will be able to take the lead role in representing their constituencies and, in due time, make the ethnic armed groups redundant. ■

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THE PROJECT

This policy brief was produced as part of a project on 'Myanmar's Political Opening: Its Impact on Ethnic Conflicts', funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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