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Can Democracy Cure Myanmar’s Ethnic Conflicts?

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In 2015, the world’s media was transfixed by the sight of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi emerging from her long years of house arrest to lead her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), to a sweeping victory in Myanmar’s general election. To interpret the parliamentary majority won by the NLD as a mandate for a shift from decades of military rule to nascent civilian-led democracy does not do justice to the scale of the victory. The NLD took 86 percent of the seats in the national Assembly, which was the clearest statement possible that the people of Myanmar wanted and were ready for a transition to more democratic governance—and that they expected it to be implemented, not just talked about.

A delicate series of negotiations to establish the new government ensued, and is still unfolding. These talks were problematic from the outset, given that Aung San Suu Kyi was constitutionally barred from taking on the role of president. (She circumvented this hurdle to become the unofficial head of the government by assuming the new position of “state counselor” and several ministerial posts, while installing a trusted colleague as president.)

Moreover, the election campaign had not been organized around detailed policy debates, as one might find in an established democracy. Inevitably, perhaps, the NLD’s arguments were based on core principles: seeing through the democratic transition; establishing civilian rule and ending the military’s primacy; enforcing the rule of law above the rule of the gun; and meeting the general expect-

tation that improvements in the country’s social and economic conditions would arise naturally from those political changes. All of these higher principles and aspirations resonated through the campaign, but typically without a detailed delineation of what the practical policy implications or consequences of an NLD victory might be.

In part, this opacity was due to the nature of the constitution itself, which was implemented in 2008 following a highly controversial referendum. The constitution, the country’s third since independence from British rule in 1948, not only barred anyone with foreign-born relatives from becoming president (a provision tailored to disqualify Aung San Suu Kyi, whose sons are British citizens, as was her late husband); it also guaranteed that key governmental positions would remain in the hands of the military. All of the state’s major representative institutions were to have significant numbers of seats reserved for military appointees. Furthermore, the military would have ultimate control over any further constitutional changes, essentially giving the generals a veto.

In this situation, a platform or manifesto of policy ideas was bound to be limited by the politics of the possible, even after the NLD attained power. Any discussion of specific changes following the election campaign, other than whether or not the NLD would actually be allowed to form a government, was deemed of secondary importance. There was still concern even up to election day about whether the military might once again annul a result in favor of the NLD, as it had done in a crackdown following the previous election in 1990. The memory of military violence inflicted on the politically mobilized citizenry remains vivid in the minds of the democracy movement’s current generation of leaders. Their priority in 2015

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was obtaining power as a goal in its own right, hopefully without provoking a violent response.

Such a situation obviously brings with it profound difficulties, not least of which is that it prevents a clear vision of what the short- and medium-term political landscape might look like after the election. But many people from Myanmar's ethnic and religious minority communities were looking to Aung San Suu Kyi (popularly known as "The Lady") for leadership in addressing the nation's history of ethnic conflict and its increasingly bloody intercommunal violence based on religious differences.

STUDIED SILENCE

The lead-up to the elections had seen many worrying developments inflaming these entrenched social divisions. Among them were the growth of communal and anti-Muslim violence, particularly in the west of the country; the breakdown of a 17-year-long cease-fire agreement between the army and one of the country's most important ethnic movements, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), in the northeast; and repeated outbreaks of violence in the Kokang region and Shan state, in the east.

Legislation to limit interfaith marriage was introduced, with the understanding that it was intended specifically to restrict, and potentially criminalize, marriage between Buddhist Burmese women and non-Buddhist men.

The statements made about all these issues during the campaign were often opaque. People were forced to scrutinize every detail of NLD speeches, particularly those of "The Lady" herself, for clues about the party's real intent or underlying message on these matters. The constitutional context was in this respect a useful way of explaining away concerns about the lack of clarity and detail in NLD plans. However, given Aung San Suu Kyi's apparent reluctance to lead discussions of how the country's many ethnic conflicts might be resolved, some began to suspect that perhaps these contingent limitations were only part of the story.

For many who wanted clear and morally trenchant leadership, this reticence was increasingly of concern. Why, people started to ask, did Aung San Suu Kyi not issue a clearer statement against the violence that Buddhist nationalist groups were

fomenting against Muslim populations in the west of the country? Why did such statements seem to have to be coaxed out of her rather than willingly given? Why was the NLD so unforthcoming about its stance regarding the violence against and marginalization of the Rohingya Muslim communities? Why could Aung San Suu Kyi not condemn more clearly the role of the Myanmar army and air force in creating a humanitarian crisis in Kachin state? Was the loftier moral position she tried to take, deploring all acts of violence as something generally to be condemned, as convincing as it might have been had she not so unequivocally declared her "love" for the Myanmar army at the same time?

The believers were convinced "The Lady" was still playing her cards close to her chest in order not to jeopardize the transition to an NLD-led government. Yet concerns mounted about the lack of clear blue water between the NLD, the moderately reformist outgoing regime led by former general Thein Sein, and the military leaders the party had

long aspired to overturn, but with whom they would now have to coexist. The outbreaks of communal strife and the response to them during the elections and ensuing transition period all seemed to indicate that there

was still a deep-rooted problem at the center of Myanmar's political life, raising questions about how well prepared the new government would be to deal with some of the country's most pressing challenges.

The success of the democratic transition itself may hinge on the answers. It is difficult to conceive of a flourishing democracy without more concerted attempts to listen to and address the profound distrust, social stresses, and political marginalization experienced by many of Myanmar's ethnic and religious minority groups.

OLD AUTONOMY

Why should these problems be so difficult to resolve? Why has conflict become such an entrenched aspect of political behavior in Myanmar? The reasons are multifaceted, but some key elements should be highlighted. The first relates to the historical and geographical origins of the modern Burmese state.

The heartland of the Burmese kingdom in the early nineteenth century, when the British began

Burma's so-called ethnic conflicts beset the country almost from the moment of independence.

to seize control of the country, was in Ava and Mandalay—the modern nation's hot and dusty central Irrawaddy River valley region. The kingdom stretched southward along the valley; at the time of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, the Konbaung Dynasty was asserting its territorial claims toward both east and west, reflecting its historical position as one of the strongest of the Southeast Asian kingdoms.

However, the Burmese court's formal control did not extend much past Mogaung to the north; where it asserted its power militarily to the west, in the area of Arakan (Rakhine), the court's claims to natural authority rankled in a region with its own strong sense of historical autonomy from Burmese rule, and with a proud legacy of bringing Buddhism into the region that was even more prestigious than the antecedents of the Burmese court. To the east, the Shan states were equally proud of their autonomy, and could lay claim to histories, languages, and distinctive Buddhist traditions with strong links to the rulers of Lanna in northern Siam. In the south, the ancient Mon kingdoms were proud of having delivered Buddhist practices and belief systems to the region in the earliest days of the faith's expansion, and the Mon peoples had in the past asserted their own influence on the dynastic history of the Burmese kings. Historically, they were more than equal in their claims to prestige.

Away from these "valley" states, geography lent itself to further social and cultural complexity, since the Irrawaddy River valley is encircled by a giant horseshoe of hills and mountains. In these regions, which today comprise the full extent of Myanmar's modern borders, diverse cultural and social traditions had developed. There were polyglot communities of swidden farmers and traders in forest products. They facilitated trans-regional land-based communications through the lateral roads and passes that crossed their domains, especially those intersecting with the Southern Silk Road or the tramontane paths of the extended Himalayan range.

Such connections interjected these communities into the diplomatic relations among the Burmese court and the Chinese, Ahom, Manipuri, Siamese, and Lanna polities. Some of those areas were tributary to the Burmese kingdom, but many also

paid tribute to other polities. Nonetheless, these overlapping systems of sovereignty failed to extinguish resilient local identities that have in modern parlance been expressed as "independence."

COLONIAL LEGACIES

During the colonial period, Burma was for the most part ruled as a governor's province of British India. With the introduction of dyarchy (a system of partial home rule) in India, a plan was also set for increasing Burma's administrative independence from India, which was finally implemented in 1937. However, the pattern of creating separate systems for areas that were only loosely administered at the edges of imperial governance, and which had geopolitical significance as militarized buffers, meant that these hill areas, the modern state's borderlands, followed a different constitutional path from the rest of Burma.

As in India, the British administration in Burma separated many of what became the so-called ethnic

minority or ethnic nationality states into Scheduled and Excluded Areas, which were administered differently from the more central areas that became Ministerial Burma. Initially organized through a thinly resourced Frontier Areas

Administration, the border regions continued to develop a separate political identity, though the inhabitants of these areas, as in the historic valley states, had experienced intense interaction and exchange with Burmese peoples, languages, and cultures. Human mobility across this region was extensive and it continued to be so during the colonial period, when the free movement of peoples was more or less encouraged, especially where it served imperial economic interests.

However, the historical framework of loosely organized and then differently administered non-majority-Burman ethnic states made the job of postcolonial national integration that much harder. While 1948 represented independence from colonialism for the Burmese people, independence was a moot point for many who became members of "ethnic minority" communities overnight. Many had previously not felt colonized, since the hand of governmental authority had been relatively light. Independence in these circumstances meant a leap of faith that submitting to the authority of the new Burmese state as a constituent

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part of the new union would bring benefits, even though it entailed a loss of autonomy.

For many political elites from non-Burman constituencies, the key question was: Would the new state recognize them as equal partners or would it assert its own primacy—in cultural, linguistic, social, political, and economic terms? This was to be the test of whether their leap of faith had been well judged.

THE PANGLONG MYTH

The founding postindependence document of the multiethnic state was a rather rushed and inadequate affair. Reached in 1947, the Panglong Agreement, as it became known, was a slim statement, albeit very hard-won, of the intention to create a federal union in independent Burma. Major ethnic groups would have their own regional administrations and some, namely the Shan states, received a right to secede after 10 years if developments were not to their liking.

Exactly how the Panglong Agreement came into being remains something of a mystery, but clearly it was the result of internal diplomacy that sought to hasten the end of British rule. The independence leader, General Aung San—Aung San Suu Kyi's father—needed such a document to persuade the governor that he had the capacity to bring along the ethnic groups, which by this time were highly militarized following their active involvement in World War II. Yet there had been almost no negotiation between Burmese politicians and their ethnic counterparts about constitutional and political issues until this point. Furthermore, key groups such as the Karen did not attend the meeting and were therefore never signatories to the agreement.

In any case, it was soon trashed by military rule and a series of new constitutions that set aside the commitment to federalism. Since the agreement had become a foundational document for the vision of a multiethnic state in Burma, this was awkward. So, in about 1953 it morphed into a concept called the Panglong Spirit—a mythical rendering of harmonious ethnic relations that were deemed (almost entirely erroneously) to have characterized the secretive proceedings in 1947. But the spirit proved a weak tool for developing clear political and economic policy.

Burma's so-called ethnic conflicts beset the country almost from the moment of independence. (Defining these conflicts as one-dimensionally "ethnic" tends to limit understanding of the funda-

mental economic inequalities that underpin them, and instead keeps the focus on claims for territory and primordial identities.) In the months leading up to the end of British rule in 1948, and the weeks that followed, an increasingly conflict-ridden situation emerged, involving communist fighters and disaffected groups from various battalions that had fought in World War II. By 1949, the Karen National Union (KNU) had declared war against the Union of Burma government, setting off what would become the world's longest continuous internal conflict in the post-World War II era.

Over the next 10 years, the experiment with democratic governance came under increasing strain, assaulted from both within and without the Burmese political establishment. By 1962, the military had taken full control of the government, and all the border regions of the country were consumed by violence. External actors in the deteriorating Cold War environment played a significant role in these developments, especially in areas on the eastern borders, where internal upheavals in China spilled across. Beijing also had increasing influence on the Communist Party of Burma. But the key factor was a military government determined to defend its privileged position against perceived internal enemies.

The economy was nationalized and the country placed on a permanent war footing, primarily with the objective of controlling the "others within." This drive for hegemony came to typify almost the whole of the postindependence experience in Myanmar. The Panglong Spirit became a hollow piece of rhetoric used most often to put a gloss on an aggressive expansion of Burmese neocolonialism into non-Burman areas of the union.

STATE OF FEAR

Burma's emergent ideology was a nationalism rooted in ideas of threat and vulnerability. Before independence, the nationalist movement was predicated on the notion that colonial rule had fatally undermined the integrity of Burmese Buddhist society, which it was now the job of Burmese nationalists to restore. Under the postindependence premiership of U Nu, who was idiosyncratic and charismatic in equal measure, as well as intensely religious, Burmese Buddhist nationalism developed with a clear sense of its purpose: defining the authentic core of the new nation.

Yet this never led to a clear articulation of how those who were neither Burmese nor Buddhist might fit into the nation on equal terms. The Pang-

long Spirit as a myth of harmony replaced serious engagement with issues of political and economic discrimination. There was never any discussion of equality. The nationalist ideology of the new Burmese state was based not on the notion of social inclusion but rather on securing Burmese Buddhist identity against the endless threats, both internal and external, that seemed poised to undermine or possibly even destroy it. The army came to power entirely on the basis of protecting the Burmese Buddhist nation from again succumbing to control by external powers.

When the junta took control in 1962, General Ne Win developed a militarized reinvention of U Nu's idiosyncratic nationalism under the rubric of the Burmese Way to Socialism. The centrality of Burmese cultural and religious norms was accepted unquestioningly as the ideological foundation of the state. The militarized socialist economy was based on an increasingly xenophobic fear of the outside world, which was assumed to have a rapacious intent to exploit Burma.

Various groups within the country were accused of being associated with this hostile "outside." They included those whose ancestors were deemed not to have been indigenous to the country before the start of British colonial intervention in 1823 (even though the borders of the modern state were very different from what they had been at that time). Mainly this had the effect of marginalizing (and in many cases victimizing) people of South Asian and Chinese ancestry. Their communities had in fact maintained extensive and deep interactions with the Burmese kingdoms for centuries. But the large-scale Asian transmigration that had accompanied Western imperial expansion across Southeast Asia took on a politically charged meaning in relation to the rights of communities to gain citizenship in the independent Burmese state following the military takeover. Some, like the Rohingya, remain stateless noncitizens to this day.

Groups engaged in armed opposition to the military regime were also viewed as proxies for foreign intervention and a threat to the Burmese Buddhist state. In some cases, these groups were deemed prone to outside influence because of their borderland location and, frequently, their histories of autonomous statehood. The former Frontier Areas had seen some conversion

to Christianity during the colonial period. The military regime portrayed Christians as laboring under a false and misguided notion of their relationship to the Burmese state, which they had learned from disruptive missionary forces whose presence was facilitated by the colonial system. Foreign missionaries were therefore banned, but this did little to stem the tide of conversion, which continued in the postindependence era mainly in the context of civil war.

The regime's primary approach to dealing with communities that supported armed ethnic organizations was through an education system with Buddhist Burmese culture and language at its center, no matter the ethnic and religious self-identities of the students. The Panglong Spirit did not extend to recognition of multiculturalism as a component of the independent state, other than for the purposes of cultural display—most notably at Union Day ceremonies, when the material distinctiveness of the nation's many ethnic groups was promoted on stage, while their political aspirations were ignored.

The historical framework of loosely administered ethnic states made the job of postcolonial national integration that much harder.

STICKING POINT

The violence that dominated the political landscape after 1962 went through phases, and the army at times attempted to forge

multiple bilateral cease-fires with armed ethnic organizations of various sizes and capacities. The most important developments along these lines came after the violent suppression of the democracy protests in 1988 and the parliamentary elections of 1990, which resulted in Aung San Suu Kyi being placed under house arrest. In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989 and the withholding of Chinese support for some armed ethnic groups connected with the party, a number of bilateral cease-fires were signed. The most important was probably the truce with the KIO, which boasted an extensive military and civilian organization that had controlled much of the north of the country, the traditional Kachin heartland, for more than three decades.

However, these agreements never included the KNU. The Karen remained one of the most important foci of resistance to the Myanmar government along the eastern border regions with Thailand. Getting the KNU to agree to a cease-fire (or alternatively, forcing it out of existence) remained a

primary goal of the military regime. But there was never a sincere attempt to link these agreements with inclusive discussions about the political future of the country.

Since 2011, the military regime had been calling for a nationwide cease-fire agreement with the country's armed ethnic organizations as a precondition of any future political talks. The problem for many of these groups was that they never received any indication of what topics would be open for discussion. The only certainty was that the key issue for many of them—the possibility of a federal constitution—would be entirely off the table. They could only hope that a deal would bring political progress, albeit of a presently indeterminate kind.

Many armed groups today are drawing on their experience of cease-fires in the 1990s and beyond. This was an important precedent for the KIO's insistence on holding out against signing a national cease-fire agreement without firmer assurances about political talks. The outcome of the 17-year-long cease-fire in the Kachin region, which broke down in 2011, seemed to be merely economic exploitation of natural resources and land grabs by Burmese government cronies, Chinese business interests, and present and former ethnic armed elites. Meanwhile, the region faced deteriorating social conditions including high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment, drug addiction, and a lack of educational and other civic infrastructure.

Signing a national cease-fire is not necessarily going to remediate these problems unless there are guarantees that it would lead to a full and inclusive political debate. This remains the central sticking point for many armed groups, and it is why, even today, the agreement has yet to be fully concluded—though 8 of the 15 groups involved in the talks, including the KNU, did sign it in October 2015.

The NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership has done little to change the situation. The party faces acute skepticism over its willingness to allow fuller discussions that might include the possibility of federalism. To many, the NLD seems just as incapable or disinclined to add more flesh to the bones of a national cease-fire agreement as the military-civilian regime before it. Essentially the new ruling party is asking citizens for another leap of faith.

UNFINISHED HISTORY

The latest attempt to build trust is Aung San Suu Kyi's call for a 21st-Century Panglong Conference to start at the end of August. In some respects, this could be seen as her attempt to bring about a resolution of the unfinished history of the first Panglong Agreement. It could also be a way for her to reclaim the postcolonial moment of national reconciliation that her father was denied when he was assassinated in 1947, a few months before the Union flag was raised.

However, the initiative is very fragile and could yet unravel. Groups that have not signed the national cease-fire agreement might be excluded from the conference. The terms of discussion are not clear. The government's reluctance to lay all possibilities on the table, including proposals for a more federalist system with greater regional autonomy—the main point of the Panglong Agreement of 1947—suggests a lack of capacity to engage fully with the aspirations and concerns of non-Burman and non-Buddhist peoples.

The NLD's lack of a clearly elucidated plan for resolving Myanmar's ethnic and religious conflicts reflects the reality that these problems are deeply rooted in the politics and history of the country. The irony of proposing to resolve them by reviving the symbolism of a highly contentious historical agreement—which was completed secretly to facilitate a political transition but in the end simply embedded a Burman/Buddhist-dominated political and economic system—is not lost on those who are now called upon to take the same leap of faith, this time with General Aung San's daughter.

Part of the problem is that Burmese politicians of all persuasions are reluctant to lay out a clear vision of what a modern, multiethnic, and multi-faith Myanmar might look like. They all seem equally bereft of inspiration for negotiating a path to a peaceful and inclusive state in which the hopes and aspirations of non-Burman and non-Buddhist communities would be protected. How to develop the education system to promote inclusion and diversity; how to address economic and social inequalities, and navigate a route to social reconciliation? Neither the Panglong Agreement nor the Panglong Spirit are adequate to represent these very new and very modern social aspirations effectively. It is time to find new ways of talking about these issues in modern Myanmar. ■