

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR THE MYANMAR PEACE PROCESS

TABEA CAMPBELL PAULI

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About the author

Tabea Campbell Pauli is a researcher on the Myanmar peace process. Through her bachelor's degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh, followed by an MSc (cum laude) in International Development Studies from the University of Amsterdam, she has focused on issues of peace education and social justice in multicultural and multi ethnic communities. She currently resides in Yangon, Myanmar.

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The Salween Institute for Public Policy blends objective analysis and hands-on community empowerment programs to frame policy debate and help shape public policy in Burma/Myanmar based on social justice, environmental responsibilities and ethnic rights to self-determination.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AA	Arakan Army
ALA	Arakan Liberation Army
CNF	Chin National Front
CSO	Civil society organisation
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
EAO	Ethnic armed organisation
FBO	Faith-based organisation
IDP	Internally displaced person(s)
JPF	Joint Peace Fund
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KPSN	Karen Peace Support Network
LDU	Lahu Democratic Union
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
NA	Northern Alliance – Burma
NCA	Nationwide ceasefire agreement
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NRPC	National Reconciliation and Peace Centre
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
PNLO	Pa-O National Liberation Organisation
SSPP/SSA	Shan State Army – North
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
USA	United States of America
UWSA	United Wa State Army
WNO	Wa National Organisation

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE MYANMAR PEACE PROCESS

At the time of writing, Myanmar is laying down the direction that came out of the April 2016 elections and the transfer of leadership to Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD government. Her party has been in power for over half a year now, which has allowed citizens, stakeholders, and international onlookers to gain an idea of the direction and progress of peacebuilding in Myanmar. Recent resurgences of conflict in several ethnic states, as well as accusations of violence against civilians by the Tatmadaw, have tested the will of the new government to confront these issues and their ability to hold military forces accountable to the nation's laws and constitution. Sceptics would say that the outlook is not promising, and shows a separation between government and military more than anything else. However, since the transfer of power, civil society has continued to become stronger and extend influence and activities across the country. Furthermore, the government continues to open its borders and welcome an ever-growing number of foreigners, bringing business, capital, and technical expertise into the country. In these circumstances of rapid change, relaxation of many of the tighter regulations around life in this country, and hope for greater opportunities, many people are keeping a close watch of how the peace process evolves.

This paper is an outcome of several conversations with key actors at the forefront of peacebuilding

activities in Myanmar, who work in various fields, from EAOs to national NGOs, INGOs and CBOs. In addition, many reports, opinion pieces and news articles were used to create an analysis of recent and current events in Myanmar's transition to peace, and a perspective on how significant obstacles may be overcome in order to sustain progress. There is a particular focus on identifying key challenges facing the success of the peace process, while also highlighting major opportunities. First off, it is important to understand how complex the landscape of conflict and peace is in Myanmar, due to the country's recent history, and the positions of many different actors. The main challenges which are identified as endangering the achievement of peace, are (1) the serious lack of trust between peace process stakeholders, which results from the complexity of Myanmar's recent history, (2) the challenge of achieving real inclusion in current peace-related negotiations, in terms of maintaining transparency, and recognising diversity. Considering these issues, it is important to think about the direction, and progression, of this peace process, the evolving end goals, and the changing roles of the different actors and stakeholders. The conclusion of this paper is a discussion of the oft-cited solution of a federal governance system for Myanmar, the challenges that may be anticipated, and what kind of preparations may be effected at this point.



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PEACE AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR: WHO, WHERE AND WHY?

The process of establishing peace in Myanmar involves a multitude of actors, and targets conflicts between ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military forces), but also amongst EAOs in different regions. Following half a century of conflicts, a peace process was instigated by the military government in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when bilateral ceasefires were signed with several EAOs. These efforts were continued by former president Thein Sein's government, which introduced multilateral negotiations for a national ceasefire. In 2015, a first draft of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was published, and gave a preliminary idea of the plans to end conflict, and how a sustainable peace would be built in Myanmar, following a seven-step roadmap. While most EAOs have existing bilateral ceasefire agreements with the Tatmadaw, at present only twenty are involved in NCA talks. Such

agreements are considered a matter of necessary procedure for the peace process to progress.

Non-signatories are normally barred from joining national-level peace talks, as well as political dialogue, the next step in the roadmap.

The subsequent steps include the creation of a Pyidaungsu [Union] Peace Accord which is acceptable to all parties, and outlines the concrete process through which peace will be achieved. The Accord must then be ratified in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament) before being implemented (NCA, 2015).

In the bigger picture, the process of transitioning from conflict to peace in Myanmar is unfolding on several levels. Centrally, the government and Tatmadaw are leading the formal, national, union-

level process, in which the major concern is currently the negotiation of the NCA with EAOs. At this stage, other groups such as CSO or FBOs are largely excluded from the formal process, as this is understood by many NCA parties to be a military discussion and agreement, and that the time for non-military groups to become involved will be after the NCA is established and political dialogue begins. As a result, many of these groups are carrying out peacebuilding-related activities outside of the formal process, while effecting great changes in the lives of many Myanmar citizens.

Simultaneously, discussions at the international level, between national governments of Myanmar and, among others, China, USA, India, Japan and EU, as well as international donor agencies and funding bodies, have a great amount of influence

over the direction of the peace process, the involvement of stakeholders, and the post-conflict economic and political landscape.

These different levels are not isolated; decisions made on one impact others in many ways. Indeed, the terrain of who is doing what and where in Myanmar's peace process is

far from straightforward, and for some there is a real fear that the complexity of this situation could lead to inefficiency or even corruption if it is not managed in a coherent and coordinated manner. The following section unpicks some of these complexities, attempting to follow the intertwined threads to their individual sources and positions. The many different actors in this landscape have interests varying from overlapping to opposing, which it is necessary to unravel in order to begin discussing progress.



EAO's Plenary Meeting, Maijayan

THE COMPLICATED TERRAIN OF PEACE AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

The conflict in Myanmar is the world's longest running civil war, its causes are deep-rooted and interconnections complex. Over the years, as parties established their positions, the differences between them became firmly entrenched, and many groups found themselves gradually isolated from others. Many communities in border states have now lived for many decades in more or less autonomous systems of self-governance, under the authority of EAOs. Alternative economic, political and social institutions exist in many of these areas, which are often deeply connected to the state of conflict. For example, many EAOs and the populations they govern, depend on illicit border trade with neighbouring countries for their livelihoods. So-called 'conflict entrepreneurs' generate income through trade in weapons, illegal drugs, gems, natural resources, endangered animals, and even trafficked people, across frontiers (see e.g. Nyein Nyein, 2016). Through taxation and protection systems, different groups gain immense revenues from these systems, while effectively condoning human rights abuses, land-grabbing and environmental destruction in Myanmar (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016a). In these systems, exploitation and corruption are rampant and deeply entrenched. It is hard to imagine how they might be dismantled following the NCA, for the communities to begin rebuilding a peace-focused society, and a transparent, democratic political system.

At the time of writing, there are several active conflicts in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin states. A closer look at the situation in Rakhine, and the ensuing reactions, gives an idea of some of the many complex layers and interconnections of governance in Myanmar. Violence in mixed Muslim and Buddhist communities has caused massive displacement in

the state, and increased the vulnerability of Muslim and poor families in particular, as the Tatmadaw has intervened. Under the auspices of regaining control of the territory, it has been accused of horrific crimes against civilians (predominantly Muslim), by inhabitants, journalists and aid workers in the area. This includes extra-judicial killings and sexual abuse (Rahman & Safi, 2016). Apparently, the army has impunity for many of these kinds of actions, based on the military-drafted constitution of 2008 (MacGregor, 2016a).

The government's responses have been entirely insufficient, to the point of being collaborative, with the Tatmadaw's dangerous, racist, and perhaps genocidal position, as members of the targeted Rohingya community are still denied basic rights around citizenship, movement and protection (Rahman & Safi, 2016).

**“This agreement aims
to secure an enduring peace
based on the principles of
dignity and justice, through
an inclusive political dialogue
process involving all relevant
stakeholders”**

- NCA, 2015



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Many take Aung San Suu Kyi's government's perceived inaction around this issue to signify that it does not have control over the Tatmadaw, or, more sympathetically, that it is conceding on this issue in order to preserve a working relationship upon which the success of the whole peace process rests (Horsey, 2016; Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016b). The severity of this situation, along with new clashes between the Tatmadaw and the so-called Northern Alliance – Burma (NA), in Northern Shan and Kachin States have dampened the hopes of many people, especially international onlookers, who lauded Myanmar for its rapid democratisation earlier in 2016. For many, it seems that Myanmar remains a country run by its military (MacGregor, 2016b), and that peace is not a realistic prospect until these deep-seated issues in the foundations of its political system are addressed, and full democracy becomes a reality.

Indeed, the complicated position of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's political system is a significant variable in predictions around peace prospects. The 2008 constitution gives it significant influence in Myanmar's governing structure (it controls defence,

border and interior affairs, and one quarter of seats in parliament, effectively a veto power), as well as impunity for actions many would consider illegal, or against human rights (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016b). Furthermore, the constitution contains provisions for the Tatmadaw to retake power from the government, in the form of 'emergency' protocol articles, which many see as a constant threat of Myanmar reverting to the authoritarian and oppressive systems of before (Khin Zaw Win, 2016). This duality of strong Tatmadaw involvement in political and legislative issues results, for many people, in an unpredictable, and perhaps illogical governance system. While some of the more authoritarian actions of past military governments have been undone since the NLD took power, others remain. One example is section 66(d) of the notorious Telecommunications Law, whose stated purpose is to stop illegal or immoral activity on the internet and through mobile technology. In reality, however, it is often employed seemingly arbitrarily, to prosecute those who criticise or mock state leaders, but not those who engage in hate speech or sexual abuse through these mechanisms. In sum, 'old habits still remain' (Swan Ye Htut, 2016).



21st Century Panglong Conference, Naypyitaw

A LACK OF TRUST BETWEEN PARTIES

The issue of trust is an important concept, but very hard to pin down, in terms of Myanmar's peace process. As previously outlined, there are many different actors and stakeholders involved to varying degrees, who hold different positions, speak from different experiences, and represent different interests. Due to the long history of conflict in this country, these positions are deep-rooted, and for many, change is a difficult pill to swallow because of fears around loss. A successful peace process will necessarily include the reorganisation of many systems, the loss of jobs, such as soldiers in EAOs, and the moving of many families across and into the country. To be able to plan, prepare and execute these immense changes, through transparent, representative and socially just negotiation, a certain level of trust between all those involved will be required.

The insights in this section are based on a discussion with a Myanmar official working in an organisation central to the formal peace negotiations. She argues that the lack of trust is the biggest challenge facing Myanmar's end to conflict, as there are deeply suspicious and negative relationships between most stakeholders. For instance, recent clashes between the Tatmadaw and several EAOs in Northern Shan State have weakened the goodwill between those groups at the negotiating table, which can only slow

“Just like between two people in a relationship, trust can only be built by proving trustworthiness and goodwill”

the progress of peace talks further. The official stated that ‘just like between two people in a relationship’, trust can only be built by proving trustworthiness and goodwill. Concretely, this would mean active participation, for leadership to meet in person, to behave respectfully, and interact cordially. It would mean that positions would be made clear to other stakeholders, and not changed without warning. Most of all, it would mean that promises would be kept, such as ceasefire agreements.

Such trust-building can only occur naturally over time, and is central to achieving peace agreements that are satisfactory for all parties. Following the recent instances of conflict between Tatmadaw and EAO forces, as well as civilians, in several parts of the country, the official states that trust levels are right now at a low point, which is further impeding advances in the peace process. Mistrust is also cited as the reason for which it will be impossible to uncover the roots of the communal conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim groups in Rakhine (Nyan Lynn Aung, 2016). What is required is for stakeholders to continue coming together to share experiences and interests of the country's many different communities at the negotiating table. This links to the following section, which discusses the challenges but also importance of achieving real inclusivity in the peace process.



THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSION: A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

At this point in the formal peace process, the central concern is having the NCA signed, and subsequently progressing to the stage of political dialogues. The signing process is still underway, and facing increasing obstacles which is slowing the overall progress. In October 2015, eight of a total of twenty-two EAOs signed the NCA, namely the ABSDF, ALA, CNF, DKBA, KNLA, KNU, PNLO and RCSS. Non-signatories included the UNFC members AA, KIA, MNDAA, NMSP and TNLA. The reasons for their exclusion from the NCA are various. Most prominently, the AA, TNLA and MNDAA have been blocked by the Tatmadaw from participating in the NCA, on the grounds that they were created in the time after the peace process was formally initiated by the previous government.

**“People of all ethnic,
political, religious and
geographical backgrounds
need to come together in one
voice to stop the war before
it is too late”**

- Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016

For that reason, they do not have bilateral ceasefire treaties in place with the Tatmadaw, and do not have a clear disarmament process laid out, which is seen to be a criterion to joining the NCA. Additionally, there is an argument that the Tatmadaw does not want to legitimise these organisations by including them in the agreement, thereby encouraging the

‘proliferation’ of new organisations (SHAN, 2015). The exclusion of these three groups was taken by many other EAOs as a blatant disregard of the government’s commitment to an ‘inclusive’ and ‘nationwide’ peace process. Consequently, although it was invited, the KIA refused to sign the NCA in solidarity with these three EAOs, demanding that the process first become truly inclusive. At the same time, other organisations including the ANC, LDU and WNO were excluded on the grounds that they are non-military, and therefore not significant stakeholders in the ceasefire negotiations. The NSCN and UWSA are both actively pursuing independence from the Union of Myanmar, and hold bilateral ceasefires with the Tatmadaw, choosing to forego the multilateral NCA.

The case of the AA, TNLA, MNDAA and KIA warrants further discussion. They have come to be known as the Northern Alliance – Burma (NA), and in October 2016 engaged in offensives against the Tatmadaw in Northern Shan and Kachin states. This is variously seen as a show of force by the Tatmadaw, to subordinate these groups, as a protest by the EAOs against their exclusion from the formal ceasefire discussions and pressurise the government to let them move straight to the political dialogue stage, or as moves by the EAOs to consolidate, or even increase their territories, as talks of federalism begin to take momentum (Khin Zaw Win, 2016; UNFC, 2016). The case of the NA certainly highlights two significant facts, firstly that the Tatmadaw is the main agent in Myanmar’s peace process and not the government, and secondly, that it is at this point proving itself to be unwilling to work with other stakeholders in order to keep the peace process moving forward.

Against this backdrop of fraught relationships, Zipporah Sein, vice chairwoman of the KNU, stresses the importance of EAOs coming together to preserve momentum in the peace process. ‘The unity of the EAOs is [their] main strength’ in the negotiations, which is rooted in many shared experiences of violence and oppression throughout past military rule. She argues that EAOs’ best chance for winning their own fight is to set aside their differences, trust and enable each other in the pursuit of their common goals. Simultaneously, ‘the Burmese government or military should not divide us by refusing [to let] some EAOs sign the NCA’ she states. Not considering the legitimacy of their standpoints, this form of exclusion is dangerous in that it consolidates divisions between EAOs, threatening their ‘unity’. This can be seen as a ‘divide-and-rule’

tactic by the Tatmadaw, which is able to apply more pressure to those non-signatory EAOs, and increase its own negotiating power. In addition, the exclusion of key groups in peace talks runs the risk of alienating them, and the communities they represent, from the project of building foundations for peace, and the society that is created upon them in the future. ‘Unless and until all stakeholders are involved in this peace process they will not feel that they belong to it’, argues Lian Sakhong of the CNF (DHF, 2015). This is not only true for EAOs, but for all stakeholders in Myanmar’s peace process, many of whom are currently excluded from crucial meetings and negotiations. The following section examines the positions of a few key groups, including women and political parties.

THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSION: A DIVERSITY OF VOICES

The NCA negotiations, seen by many as a primarily military event, have been exclusive to military stakeholders, with the Tatmadaw and government on one side, and the EAOs on the other. However, considering that the NCA covers many non-military topics such as federalism and governance, as well as the protracted nature of this stage, many in Myanmar argue that these non-military stakeholders should be included at this stage of the peace process, instead of waiting for the political dialogues to commence. This could include women, youth, civil society and faith-based organisations, but also IDPs, ethnic minorities, refugees, the LGBT+ community and people with disabilities. By including a real diversity of voices, the wide-ranging discussions around peacebuilding can benefit from the collective knowledge of all relevant stakeholders, while diversifying power relations and broadening the priorities that are addressed. These voices are critical to the knowledge base required to build a socially just, representative

and equitable post-conflict society. The unequal playing field of peace-related talks remains a vestige of Myanmar’s recent past in which an ‘inherently authoritarian’ Tatmadaw dictated political and economic structures that maintained a deeply unjust status quo (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016b). Following the 2008 constitution, the Tatmadaw has a rightful place in these peace discussions, so it becomes a question of how to level the playing field, so that all groups may voice their concerns, interests and knowledge, for the holistic benefit of the progression of the peace process.

Many observers to the peace process argue that the level of inclusion of civil society actors is insufficient. The KPSN points out that the NCA text itself only focuses on military aspects in two chapters, whereas the rest relate to topics that are relevant for non-military actors, in particular CSOs.



For that reason, they argue that it makes sense for these actors to be involved in negotiations from stage one of the process (DHF, 2015; NCA, 2015). The particular advantage of CSOs is seen to be in their position as ‘frontline’ actors, engaging in communities on the ground, in real time. This is thought to give them ‘the institutional knowledge of the historical context of problems, and various methods to address them’ (Lee & Painter, 2016), which the public political structure of successive governments may lack. On the other hand, CSOs often do not have strong or positive relationships with Myanmar’s government, nor with the Tatmadaw, which stems from their ideological backgrounds as rights-driven, grassroots activists and advocates. Perhaps due to their historical relegation to the ‘unofficial’ sectors of development and peacebuilding, it is argued that CSOs do not have the political capacities to make informed and realistic decisions and compromise on issues around ending conflict. However, their particular area of expertise should guarantee their place in the broad project of building a stable, sustainable, socially just society in Myanmar. Importantly, CSOs often have close relationships on the ground, in particular with marginalised or minority communities, as well as INGOs and other actors of the international community in Myanmar, which are an important gateway for accessing resources, funding and expertise on many issues.

There is a strong argument that political parties must also play a far greater role in peace negotiations than they currently do. The basis for this argument is that these parties occupy a middle-ground between the Tatmadaw and the EAOs, as legitimate, civilian and democratic entities, able to articulate many of the ideas and concerns of their constituents, particularly those from ethnic states. Furthermore, many anticipate that these parties will become the

power-holders and decision-makers in a future system of governance. For this reason, it is vital that they be included in and supported to engage in union-level peace talks, but also that training and capacity-building be provided to them now, to enhance their skills in negotiation, debate and public consultation, and their knowledge of federal, democratic political operations.

Another significant challenge to an inclusive peace process is supporting the inclusion of women’s voices. Although women have occupied central positions in the conflict, as leaders, combatants, peace protesters, rights advocates, prisoners, and victims of violence (Taylor, 2016), there is a serious lack of women’s involvement in the formal peace process. They are un- or under-represented in EAO leadership, Tatmadaw and government delegations. Such an absence of gender parity threatens real equality, justice and democracy in post-conflict Myanmar, as women’s input on every issue, from security and foreign policy to healthcare and education, is crucial to ‘the peaceful resolution of a critical and life-defining issue’ such as this conflict (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016a). Furthermore, it is only through the inclusion and respect of women’s voices that the institutional sexism and gender discrimination, which results in horrific violence and abuse of women in many parts of the country, can be stopped (Taylor, 2016). Currently, women’s inclusion is often relegated to token participation, and restricted to an archaic and patriarchal understanding of ‘gender issues’, such as child-rearing and other aspects of family life, in the most narrow sense (Lee & Painter, 2016). It can also be hard for women, once officially included, to be taken seriously as skilled, knowledgeable and valuable participants. Therefore, a critical component of progressing peace talks is to support women’s

capacities to participate to the best of their abilities, and to enable each other's voices to be heard, but also to support women's groups and networks.

Finally, the discussion of inclusion must also be extended to other marginalised groups such as IDPs and refugees within, and outside of Myanmar. Many of those belonging to the international diaspora have a deep understanding and critical perspectives on the transition from conflict to peace, based on better access to a variety of news and analysis sources (DHF, 2015). Their perspectives and experiences would be a valuable source of input, and strengthen the democracy of political opinion and decision-making processes



in Myanmar. Perhaps it is now in the hands of the government to attract many of them back to Myanmar, by developing the economic and social infrastructure

required for them to continue to thrive, and support the improvement of life for all Myanmar citizens. Thus, the transition from conflict to peace in Myanmar provides new roles and opportunities for different groups, that were perhaps unavailable previously. This idea is explored further in the

following section, with particular regard to the evolution of leadership positions, at state and national level in Myanmar, and the changing roles of the international community, through the transition.

EVOLVING ROLES

• NATIONAL AND STATE LEADERS

Some of the strongest voices of leadership in Myanmar's ethnic states are currently within the system of EAOs; beyond just military force, many of them form de-facto governance structures in these areas, with alternative economic and social systems to support local communities, where the central government's influence is absent. As peace negotiations progress, a significant question mark surrounds the future of these EAO power structures in ethnic states, and their alternative systems. When these communities finally enter peace time, what will happen to the thousands of EAO leaders across Myanmar? How will they, and their systems, be reconnected with centralised structures of governance? While their leadership has played a key role of the progression toward peace thus far, it must not be forgotten that these are largely war-time leaders, and that their skills and knowledge lie in military pursuits.

An important part of conflict to peace transition is the shift to civilian, democratically-elected government, at all levels and in all regions. There is a question, then, around whether EAO leaders are, and should be, able to make this transition to state leaders, who require a different set of knowledge and skills to be successful. What is clear is that there will be some sort of power vacuum as the era of EAOs ends, in the near future of the peace process. What is unclear is who will rise to fill it, as the new mouthpiece for the communities in ethnic states. As was discussed in a previous section, many in Myanmar are beginning to look to political parties for representation, within a parliamentary system of democracy at the union level. These political parties will be looked upon to lead their constituencies in a democratic system, but also and increasingly, to lead the move toward this 'true democracy', which for many includes reforming or even scrapping the 2008 constitution, and drafting the legislation for a new system.



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Changes will also occur in the central government in Naypyidaw. It must not be forgotten that the NLD was borne out of a system of oppression, and grew in direct opposition to military-based authority. To this day, this remains a key component of the party's identity, as does Aung San Suu Kyi's past as a prisoner and symbol for democracy in Myanmar. Without diminishing the power of these images, NLD statespersons must make the transition to 'ordinary' politicians, with clear values, objectives and policies in mind, within a multi-party democracy. They must prove themselves, not only as revolutionaries, but as skilled and competent policy- and decision-makers

during peace time. These shifts in Myanmar's leadership structure will require capacity-building and training, to strengthen such positions, where experience and expertise in peace-time governance are currently lacking (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016b), and to prepare these leaders to make informed decisions around the political, economic and social systems for Myanmar, as well as post-conflict reconstruction, and national reconciliation. Furthermore, major changes are foreseen for the system of democratic representation in Myanmar, where in future the voices of the country's regions and states must be heard much more clearly in the capital.

• INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY – AS DONORS, NEIGHBOURS, EXPERTS

At the same time, the roles played by the international community in Myanmar must evolve to mirror the transition from conflict to peace. As the country has opened its borders more and more in the last years, Myanmar's neighbours have had varying degrees of influence. The peace process marks an opportunity for foreign investments in Myanmar to grow and multiply, as trade routes, industrial production areas and infrastructure become more secure (Lun Min Mang, 2016). Thus, Myanmar continues to attract the attention of neighbouring countries as a strategic location in Southeast Asian trade networks, between economic giants India and China, and sharing a long border with Thailand. Neighbouring countries have a particular influence in Myanmar's ethnic states, because many of the indigenous and native communities in them 'transcend international boundaries', and live on both sides of the border. This also means they must continue to be involved in issues of political representation of such minority groups, both nationally and internationally (DHF, 2015). For instance, China has close ties with EAOs from its border areas, in particular the MNDAA. While the

Tatmadaw is concerned about these groups' agendas as 'Chinese proxies', the Chinese government plays an important role as a third-party observer and even mediator in talks between them. This issue of future relationships with neighbouring countries must be negotiated carefully by the different stakeholders, as a matter of national and regional foreign policy.

On the other hand, the international community occupies an important role as donor and technical expert within Myanmar's peace process, through the high number of INGOs, funds and diplomatic envoys currently involved. Their actions in this particular area warrant great thought and reflexivity around how they are best able to support the national processes. A local civil society leader argues that the international community is in danger of doing more harm than good here. He is sceptical that these actors are able to properly understand the causes and also solutions around conflict (DHF, 2015). The danger is that decisions involving large sums of money could be made based on wrong assumptions or information, which could in turn lead to

unintended support of particular groups or interests. In particular, since the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD government, a number of international actors have shifted their focus and support in that direction, on the basis that the transition to democracy has 'solved' the key issues around conflict, and that the best course of action is to strengthen this government's ability and influence. However, the lack of democracy was never the single problem at the centre of conflict in Myanmar. The much more deep-rooted issues concern representation, self-determination, minority culture rights and control over land and resources. For many of these issues, the central government does not represent the voices and interests of all citizens, in particular those from ethnic states.

“It is necessary to create a good environment in which peaceful dialogue and negotiation can be held and arranged for all-inclusiveness, for the establishment of a genuine democratic federal union”

- UNFC, 2016

For that reason, it remains crucial for the international community to continue supporting the groups which do represent them, including EAOs, CBOs, FBOs and ethnic political parties. The goal is to maintain as much impartiality as possible, and a level playing field between all stakeholders in the peace process. The question then becomes how to manage such important opportunities as international funding bodies to avoid corrupt, exploitative and generally harmful practices. While such opportunities for funds and technical expertise,

which are necessary to support the complicated and expensive peace process, are undoubtedly a huge asset in Myanmar, those involved must continue to evolve alongside the changes in the peace transition, to support local stakeholders and processes in the best way possible.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

The landscape of conflict in Myanmar is extremely complex, due to the different positions and relationships of warring groups, the fragmentation of the many diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic communities across the country, and the abundance of natural resources and the revenues they create. It would seem that signing an NCA is only the very first step on a long road to reach positive, productive and sustainable peace for all. Based on discussions with several officials working in the peace process in different capacities, the conversation about positive peace and Myanmar's political future invariably turns to federalism.

At independence in 1948, the country's leaders envisaged a federal union based on the divisions of ethnic states and regions. For many, this continues to be the most viable option for a peaceful, democratic Myanmar, in which ethnic groups have the autonomy and self-determination which many of them have been fighting for since independence. This has been underlined by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's recent proclamation of a commitment to a “genuine federal system in Burma, with equal rights and self-determination” for all' (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016a).



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However, reaching agreement on a federal system is not a smooth path. Firstly, the serious lack of citizenship skills and knowledge of political systems, stemming from a long absence of thorough civic education, means that many people, including key leaders and decision-makers, lack the capacity to plan and implement such a system. Secondly, the negotiations to reach an agreement about the divisions of power will be complicated by the many different interests and positions of stakeholders. Designing a federal system will require attention on every level of decision-making, in political, economic and social policy from taxation and revenue distribution, to foreign policy, to education and linguistic freedom. A critical part of this discussion will be around the regulation national resource extraction, and the redistribution of the immense revenues seen by this industry. It also relies on a change from military to civilian leadership bodies that operate in a representative system of democracy.

At present, for many this is the only realistic option which could see all warring parties' demands satisfied, in a democratic, sustainable way. A federal system would support cooperative, reconciliatory and collaborative relationships between all groups, with an emphasis on finding common

ground and compromise around shared goals (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016a). It would see Myanmar move away from the default oppositional stances which characterise many of the relationships between its different groups.

They would need to consolidate their interests and organise them into specific positions to bring to the democratic negotiation table, based on the different needs and values of communities across the country. In the face of this list of some of the immense challenges facing Myanmar's peace process, it is important to highlight the single most important opportunity for overcoming them. The many different sources that contributed to this paper point to the potential presented by Myanmar peoples' will for peace. Across the country, protests calling

for an end to conflict are taking place, while young people are enrolling in education programmes at ever-higher rates, to embrace the opportunities that are beginning to appear as a result of the progress of peace transitions. As 'popular momentum' builds (Lahpai Seng Raw, 2016a), and the voices of Myanmar

communities, both within the country and across the world, become louder in their demands for an end to conflict. These voices come together across ethnic, political, religious and geographical divides, with the potential to create a sustainable, democratic, and socially just peace in Myanmar.



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