

FUTURE OF THE INTERNAL CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

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Abstract. The conflict in Myanmar “formerly known as Burma” is one of the main ongoing internal conflicts in the world. This conflict is due to ethnic, religious and historic reasons. Each party involved in this conflict wants to control and dominate the other parties, in a process that lacks to democracy “through power”. This paper will tackle the issue of the internal conflict in Myanmar by showing some historic facts and presenting main details about the conflict. In this study conflict mapping will be used to illustrate the positions of each party involved in this conflict. This study suggests options to transform the conflict and to create sustainable peace in Myanmar. In this paper empirical approach will be used to state some facts about the conflict in Myanmar. Also, normative approach will be used to ask about the internal conflict in Myanmar and its future.

Keywords: Myanmar, internal conflict, conflict mapping, conflict transformation, peace building

Introduction

Myanmar, which used to be called “Burma” (Houtman, 1999), is one of South East Asian Nations. It broke away from the Indian administration in the first of April 1937 following a vote on independence. Its capital is “Naypyidaw”. Myanmar is bordered by China from the northeast, bordered by India and Bangladesh from the northwest, and shares borders with Laos and Thailand. Its southern border is a coastal area overlooking Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. The area of Myanmar is 680 thousand square kilometers, with population of approximately 40 million. There are different ethnic groups in Myanmar and there are many spoken languages, and most of the population speaks the language of Myanmar “official language”. The number of ethnic groups in Myanmar is estimated to 135. The population is divided as following: Bamar (68%) (US Department of State, 2005), Shan has a population of 10%, Kayin with a population of 7%, Rakhine with a population of 4%, and many other ethnic minorities (Luce, 1986). The CIA indicates that Myanmar is inhabited by the majority of Burman people at 68%, while the other part of the population is from other ethnic minorities at 32%, noting that 89% of the country’s population is Buddhist. Myanmar was under the British mandate and became independent in 1948 (Dittmer, 2010). After that, uprisings and ethnic conflicts began in the country continuing into 1949 (Fuller, 2013).

Myanmar had been under military rule since 1962 after the successful military coup by General Ne Win. (Myint-U, 2006). The military remained ruling the country until the military council announced it a Socialist Republic headed by Ne Win in 1974 (Fink, 2001). Organizations that belong to some ethnic groups (e.g. Karen, Shan the east of Myanmar) were created to counter the government (Fink, 2001). Also, the bad treatment of the ethnic minority of the Rohingya people in the west led to the formation of small armed groups. Due to the bad situation, around 160000 Burmese refugees fled to Thailand and other places of refuge (Nallu, 2012).

The protests began in Myanmar on August 8, 1988 and people demonstrated against the regime, on 18 September the uprising ended causing thousands of deaths by the military. Aung San Suu Kyi is the icon of those demonstrations, and her party (the

National League for Democracy) succeeded in the 1990 elections, but the military council thwarted the party's access to power and placed her under house arrest (Han, 2003). Since 2006, the army has targeted the Karen National Union in Karen State. Excessive violence has led to large numbers of displacement; noting that about 62% of the Myanmar refugees are Karen (Karen News, 2012). In 2011 the army targeted a rebel group in the Shan state. In January 2012, an agreement was reached with the Karen rebels, according to which the army halted military operations. The agreement provided for the release of 6,000 KNU prisoners under a government amnesty and commutation of sentences for 38964 prisoners.

The actor analysis or relationship to the mapping

The internal conflict in Myanmar is a conflict between the “*Tatmadaw*” of the government and ethnic minority groups because these groups felt that they are marginalized and the government refused to become a federal government. Rebellious actions are mostly concentrated in the Kachin district, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) carries out its military actions in coordination with the KIO (Fuller, 2013). As in any conflict, there are some international actors, in the internal conflict in Myanmar the United Nations is playing the role of peacemaker and trying to find a common space for having a solution. Also, there are a lot of INGOs working in Myanmar and supporting the ethnic minority groups (refugees, poor and displaced people, etc.).

Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia are opening the door for receiving refugees. In 2012, around 140,000 of the Rohingya (Muslim minority group) have fled to Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia, The United Nations notes that the Rohingya are among the most persecuted minorities in the world (Smith, 2014). The UNHCR monitors the displacement situation in Myanmar; it has more than 240,000 registered internally displaced people. More than 100,000 have been displaced from Kachin and northern Shan states. The UNHCR always provides humanitarian aid and assists more than 810,000 stateless people. The UNHCR assists communities hosting internally displaced people, often concentrated in the south-eastern Myanmar.

Thailand supports anti-government fractions and considers that they are working for democratization. A large group has sought refuge in Thailand. The lack of border control has contributed to the increase in smuggling, crime and illegal border crossing (Pinheiro, 2007). China assisted Communist Party of Burma in the past; however, the Chinese openness and involvement with international organizations have made the Chinese government prefer stability in Myanmar over the party's interest. Noting that China is Myanmar's most important trading partner, the importance increases due to Myanmar's geostrategic position on the Belt and Road Initiative. Recently the director of the Communist Party of China said “*We will support any government, whoever wins the election*” (Fan, 2012). On the same level, India hopes to counter China economically in Myanmar, and it is supporting the government in order to secure its border and to stamp out Indian separatist groups. Myanmar has prominent relations with Russia; it is interesting that Myanmar is cooperating with Russia on a joint controversial atomic research program, but Russia supports the rights of ethnic minority groups (Shendrikova, 2017). There's an alliance between the government of Myanmar and the army, the army is the military wing of the government and they have the same agenda. The United States supported the anti-government groups because they are working for democracy and for their rights. In August 2011 diplomatic relations between the United

States and Myanmar have been restored, and the US has appointed a “Special Representative” with the aim of developing bilateral relations (Barta, 2012).

Issues and challenges

The internal conflict in Myanmar is mainly between the government that is supported by the military and the anti-government groups (composed mainly of the ethnic minorities) (Kaicome, 2019). In this conflict there are many serious and major issues; such as: the ethnic cleansing (crimes committed against Rohingya group), the government does not recognize that the Rohingya are Myanmar citizens. Rather, it considers them to be a Bengali people who reside illegally in Myanmar, and therefore they are not entitled to Myanmar citizenship according to the 1981 Citizenship Law (Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, 2005). The Myanmar government has always dealt with the Rohingya in a racist manner, in terms of the right to education, worship, marriage, childbearing, travel and so on (Wang, 2017). The Myanmar army has carried out immoral killings against women, children and men. In September 2013, the Myanmar government at the United Nations refused to sign the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, due to the cases of rape and violence that were carried out. Since 2011, more than 250,000 people have been displaced within Myanmar, and a large number have fled to other countries, including Thailand, Malaysia and Bangladesh (Pinheiro, 2007).

Immoral acts increased in Myanmar, such as human trafficking and torture of persons belonging to ethnic minorities. There are more than 5,000 child soldiers in Myanmar, which does not apply to international norms. In a 2013 report, the US administration issued a report titled "Trafficking in Persons" that indicated an increase in forced labor cases in Myanmar, often in ethnic minority areas. Arbitrary arrests are frequent in Myanmar against members of ethnic minorities, most of whom are Kachin and Rohingya. The military in Myanmar has been suppressing freedoms, especially recently after the military coup; the suppression of political freedoms and the prosecution of some individuals for their membership in some political and social societies, which constitutes a flagrant violation of human freedom of expression.

The main issue for anti – government groups is to be recognized and to obtain their rights (such as political participation, so all ethnic groups and minorities will be represented and take a part in decision making and they will not feel any more that they are marginalized), also the Rohingya group is suffering of persecution, lack of rights and statelessness. The government's issue is the threat from armed groups, and it conveying a message to the international community that there are some groups ruining the economy and the society and their weapon is illegal and must not be used against us.

Past challenges

The government of Myanmar led by the former military man “*Thein Sein*” is making a huge and large economic, political and social shift; as a result a lot of the past challenges were ended (Kaung, 2011). In April election the government invited international independent persons to monitor the elections. The government responds to international partners to put an end for the internal conflict, for example, the release of some political prisoners was part of the solution. The government of Myanmar was isolated for so many years, with two decades of economic sanctions on US and European direct investments. President Thein Sein noted that the military regime has weakened Myanmar and slowed the development process. The regime in Myanmar has

gradually moved from military repression to civilian democracy, which encouraged states and organizations to invest in Myanmar, in an environment of freedom and democracy. The government in Myanmar has made tremendous efforts to spread democracy and end the persecution of minorities. Suu Kyi and thus the National League for Democracy (NLD) were allowed to run for elections, demonstrations could be made and the margin is greater for union action and Internet freedom. The feedback from the international community has been positive towards the reforms of the Myanmar government. Werner Hoyer, a German politician and president of the European Investment Bank, said that reforms in Myanmar are encouraging, but the lesson remains in maintaining the reform approach. Hoyer considered the release of political prisoners an excellent step, and the government should also involve ethnic minorities in the governance process. The United States upgraded its diplomatic and economic ties with Myanmar after the steps made by the government towards democracy (BBC News, 2016).

Current challenges

Although the government made a shift in its policy, but Myanmar is still facing many challenges and in order to sustain the reform process it must: Redefine and professionalize the role that the army plays on the political and economic levels, the military must not dominate and take control over the economy and the reforms must include the economic development to make the country stable and to end poverty. Firmly establish the legal basis and strengthen the judicial authority, justice is vital to the progress of Myanmar and it is a threat for that the government must establish the rule of law by empowering the courts and make them independent. It is the duty of the government to promote and protect individual freedoms. There is no legal umbrella for individual rights. The approved legal articles date back to 1962 and mainly stipulate security at the expense of freedoms (International Federation for Human Rights, 2009).

Develop effective formulas for ethnic equality, the origin of the internal conflict in Myanmar is ethnic and minority rights for that the government must recognize these groups in governing the country. Instill social and religious tolerance, religious violence and conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims must be stopped by the police and all the country leaders and officials must address for tolerance and accepting the other (Lone, 2016). Root out corruption, Myanmar is suffering of a huge economic problem that is corruption and it ranked second in 2010 in a census of corruption conducted by Transparency International, which was conducted on 178 countries. The reforms are supposed to include the entire population in Myanmar. The government must attract foreign investment and thus develop the economy, create jobs and improve working and living conditions for farmers and the advancement of the economy. Address land and property rights, emerging investors and traditional farmers are threatened by the entry of large firms and agricultural mechanization, so the government has to support the farmers and individual initiative. Development projects must reach all citizens, especially workers, and the state must guarantee the right to property, which is protected by law. Economic development should not be preferred to the detriment of the environment and social development. Therefore, a wise policy must be developed.

When investors come to invest in Myanmar they will interact with all communities and ethnicities for that the disputes over land ownership, which often take on an ethnic or religious character, are not expected to end. Human rights violations; international organizations and NGOs are criticizing the current ruling regime in Myanmar for

violating the human rights (International Federation for Human Rights, 2009). Myanmar has been subjected to economic sanctions by the US, Canada, the European Union and other countries, harsh penalties against the Myanmar army, including the freezing of the assets of the Military Council abroad and the ban on military travel. ASEAN has opposed the use of sanctions against Myanmar (O’Kane, 2019).

Positions and interests of the actors

As mentioned before, the military conflicts is between the government and mainly the KIA factions, in addition to the affected ethnic minorities and populations (CAN, UWSA, NDAA Mongla, SSA – S, SSA – N, WNA, MNDAA, LDF, PSLF, PPLA, KnA, KNLP, KNDO/ KNLA, DKBA, MNLA) (Al Jazeera Official Portal, 2012), it is notable that the Rohingya National Army is fighting against the regime in Arakan. In this conflict there are states and organizations that provide weapons, also the unsecured borders especially with Thailand, is being used by the rebels for drug trafficking and bringing weapons. The international community is playing a major role in this conflict; some regional states (Thailand, India and China) have a vital interest in the stability of Myanmar and ASEAN would play a major role in ending this conflict, also some international states (Russia, USA and the European Union) have some indirect influence on this conflict and some interests, but their concern is related to the difficult humanitarian situation. We must not forget the major role of the media in this conflict and how it influences the public opinion (Dolan and Gray, 2014). Most of the refugees hosting states (Thailand, Bangladesh and Malaysia) are supporting the rights of the ethnic minority groups.

The ethnic conflict is on two levels; ethnic and political conflict between the state (Tatmadaw) and the KIA with the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, and the ethno-social conflict between Rohingya (Muslims) and the Buddhist ethnic groups (Freeman, 2017), this conflict is characterized by its religious nature and in this conflict all the international community is concerned (UN and INGOs), the media is also shedding the lights on the violation of human rights (International Federation for Human Rights, 2009). Some regional countries (Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh) are supporting the minorities (here the Rohingya) to survive (Pinheiro, 2007). Logically democratic countries are always in a political, economic and social stability. But in Myanmar, this country that is constituted of many ethnic groups, the people are revolting against the regime, because they want their freedom, human rights, political participation and for the lack of recognition. The Burmese government supported by the military, is taking control over the economy and politics and working on establishing good ties with the international community.

Both of the armed groups and Kachin Independence Army are working to gain regional autonomy, while the Rohingya are working to gain citizenship equal rights, survival of their ethnicity and being able to have food, shelter and water (DPA, 2012). But the underlying interest of the government for not giving Kachin and other provinces their independence and keeping them under its control is of their geographic location (borders with China, Thailand and India), which gives the government of Myanmar a strategic political and economic position in the region, and the other important issue is that these provinces contain natural resources that the country uses in trading with the international community (Kumbun, 2017a), for these reasons the government is not able to recognize the minorities and give them the freedom.

Options

After a long internal conflict in Myanmar, a peace process was launched in August 2011 (Lwin and Kaspar, 2019); some groups agreed on cease fire but not the whole armed groups in Myanmar's conflict. The negotiators reached an agreement on March 31, 2015, and the agreement was signed under the supervision of government agencies (Lwin and Kaspar, 2019). After a few months of the agreement, some leaders of the armed groups met on June 9, rejecting the decisions of the agreement and indicating the provisions that must be amended. Accordingly, talks were held between the parties in July and August. Main issue is the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which needs to take a hard and brave decision if it is to overcome its concerns. A ceasefire restores confidence between the government and armed groups, and will have important implications on the elections. The lack of a deal will make it hard and difficult to undergo elections, especially in the places of clashes, and Lack of trust and constant infighting exacerbate mistrust and brake the solution. The initial agreement may pave the way for an expanded agreement that includes all parties. Failure to reach an agreement will exacerbate the problems and increase the pace of armed fighting. Fighting is always an option, especially in Shan and Kachin states. It destroys all efforts to create a solution. Some cling to their Burmese nationalism at the expense of national affiliation and the high conditions for the Burmese make it difficult for the government to create a solution that satisfies everyone (Asian Review Official Portal, 2017).

The peace process in Myanmar is taking place at the national level and without mediation, the international community is just giving advice, in such a situation the international actors in the conflict together with the UN must make pressure on the military to agree with the proposed peace process and on ceasefire (McVeigh, 2019), and not to always try to support the government or be on the safe side without any decision. Or, Myanmar will miss an opportunity, unparalleled in sixty years, that includes a settlement to resolve political and security crises. Therefore, all parties are responsible for achieving success and resolving crises. The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement signed on August 6 includes a preamble and seven chapters. Among the most important provisions of the agreement are acceptance of the other and the strengthening of confidence. This document is a basic text in the path of the solution, as it affirmed all previous agreements. As for armed groups, the agreement confirmed that the NCA is not responsible for the ceasefire clause alone. It was noted that Myanmar is a secular state and the state recognizes all peoples and ethnicities; this recognizes and the give the rights for are religions (Buddhists and Muslims, etc.) and make them equal in the country, which may not suit the Buddhist community (Pagnucco and Peters, 2015).

A total cessation of all forms of militarization and armament was indicated in the ceasefire areas, except in some stipulated special cases. It was agreed to restore the authority of the state and the law in the areas of the cease-fire and to remove mines so that they would be free from danger. Coordination with armed groups when the troops are deployed so that clashes do not take place, and that the number of armed personnel is determined in advance, the deployment of forces should take place in the designated areas only, as for unarmed personnel, they can move around freely. As for the armed forces, they are not entitled to enter areas that are still under the control of armed groups. The provisions were not limited to organizing the military presence, but also to prohibit sexual assaults, displacement, child recruitment, forced labor, and others. All NCA signatories must inform their forces within 24 hours, and then inform them of the

detailed provisions within a period not exceeding 5 days, so that everyone is aware (Ślodkowski, 2015). NCA guarantees that no person who has been involved in military action will be arrested, except in some cases stipulated. This is a modern agreement unlike any other, as it deals with a ceasefire and refers to military and political details. It is a hybrid agreement that brought most of the parties together with the aim of making peace without political and military restrictions. In order to achieve national success, all 14 parties should agree to sign the agreement in addition to the KIO, but reaching a comprehensive agreement that satisfies all parties is difficult to achieve. The second option is to unify the armed groups for the decision to “not sign” without including the other three groups. However, this option is difficult to achieve because some groups have previously announced their intention to sign. The third option is that some of the participating groups will sign and others will refrain from signing, in which case the effect of the agreement will depend on the “who” of the signatories.

The KNU and RCSS / SSA-S have expressed their intention to sign, but if the UWSP (the largest group) refuses to sign, the peace process will not stop being the UWSP has been in a steady ceasefire since 1989. The KIO is a major and large group. It is in constant clashes with government forces without signing a ceasefire. The areas controlled by the KIO are characterized by insecurity (Kumbun, 2017b). The KIO cannot take any formal action without the consent of its community and religious leaders, but these parties remain reluctant to sign the NCA or the ceasefire agreement. It is a defining moment for the KIO to demonstrate its patriotic loyalty despite all the impediments to signing the NCA. It is the most important decision that determines the future of Myanmar. Completing the NCA without the signature of the KIO would be a dead letter without great realism. Indeed, it may have a negative impact on the unity of groups and security stability in Myanmar and it may create a rift between those who support and oppose the NCA. In the event of failure to reach the signature on the NCA, some of its problematic clauses must be reviewed in order to suit all parties without objection. The signature will strengthen democracy and grant the government more popular power (Eleven Media Group Official Portal, 2019).

The army may not have a place in the peace process, but it affirmed its commitment to the terms of the peace agreement. However, the military leadership has expressed concern about the peace process that may partially hamper its work. The exclusion of the army from the meeting on September 9 has a negative impact on the spirit of the agreement, given that the commander in chief of the army did not fully support the agreement. The failure to reach further potential concessions by some armed groups may be a reason for re-engagement and insecurity in several areas of Myanmar. Therefore, reliance is not large on this agreement, which may be deficient. A ceasefire in some areas is part of the solution, but the main goal is to reach a comprehensive ceasefire at the national level, which could create an atmosphere of comfort and national peace. The preference for the Burman Buddhist affiliation over the national will obstruct the peace process and enter the country into a cycle of disagreements and violence, this situation may make it difficult for the government to achieve federalism and inclusive development (International Crisis Group, 2017). Moving forward with the peace process without actually signing the NCA will result in a missed opportunity to reach a final political and military solution to the deep-rooted crisis in Myanmar. The security tension will negatively affect the economy, security and politics. Therefore, reaching a solution may lead to the stability that Myanmar has long lacked. The solution must address the extension of security to all areas and the development of rural

provinces, especially the border areas. Reaching a real solution requires efforts from all armed groups in order to achieve the national interest. Hence, it is necessary for the KIO to sign, and for the national interest to prevail over the interest of the community (Myint, 2016).

The peace process does not depend on foreign interference. However, the international community may play a positive role in bringing closer and expediting the solution through diplomatic endeavors. International actors, including the US, the EU and China, support the peace process and the transition to a fully democratic system. Positive international attitudes push armed groups to be part of the solution and sign the NCA (European Union External Action Service, 2015). Some private meetings have already been held to agree on some items. However, the comprehensive solution requires public commitments. In this context, the United Nations and China have made persistent diplomatic efforts, and these efforts are still in place. The United Nations and China have relations with all groups and have the advantages of a successful mediator (Horsey, 2015). Neutral external parties such as the United Nations may have a major influence on advancing the peace process and reaching a common space. The neutral international parties cannot be dispensed with for the smooth functioning of the democratic process, such as monitoring elections. The signature of the NCA and other texts of the peace process must be carried out under international supervision, in order to give it a formal and binding character for all parties. Reaching a comprehensive solution that satisfies all parties requires the active and positive intervention of the United Nations, and the Secretary-General may have to intervene personally at times. Some may refer to the role of the United Nations in the peace process in Myanmar as direct interference in internal affairs. However, the role of the United Nations is necessary for the agreement to be internationally recognized; the United Nations also has a role in the post-signing of the NCA to ensure that all the terms of the agreement are applied without defect.

The United Nations has a role in the humanitarian and social support for the displaced and those affected by the clashes. It also has a role to oversee the rebuilding of the ceasefire areas in cooperation with the government and contributing organizations, and a political role in ensuring the continuity and smooth functioning of democracy. It is important to note that there's a person that can play the role of the mediator in this conflict which is "Suu Kyi", some Myanmar politicians have indicated that Suu Kyi's political presence provides an environment conducive to the military in a peaceful transition. For the military, Suu Kyi is a distinguished ally (Hodal, 2013). Like the Dalai Lama in Tibet, Suu Kyi is the most influential figure in Myanmar. She is able to form popular opinion in support of political reform and the settlement of the military conflict. Therefore, Suu Kyi is an essential part of the Myanmar peace process, and it is imperative that you supervise all the details of its implementation. She is the person authorized to lead national initiatives in accordance with the 1947 Panglong Conference for Autonomy and the Inclusion of Ethnic Minorities in Governance.

Conclusion

Myanmar is a unique country because of its ethnic diversity but in 1948 and after its independence from the United Kingdom, an internal conflict occurred between the ethnic minorities and the government supported by the military. This kind of war or conflict is very complex and takes a long time to be solved, and its economic, political

and social repercussions are very huge on the country; that's why the internal conflict in Myanmar is one of the most terrible internal wars in human history. Today the armed parties together with the government and the military and after long lasting conflict, they are convinced that by power no one will eliminate the other or will dominate the other and they are convinced that Myanmar is their everlasting home that gathers them even if they are ethnically different but that may be source of power and together they may form a wonderful mosaic. The most important thing is that power didn't change anything and after a long lasting conflict all the parties are convinced that diplomacy and dialogue is the only way and solution so they started the peace process that consists of a nationwide ceasefire agreement. The Myanmar experience is a good example for all the countries that are suffering of no stability or conflicts because of ethnic, religious, social or political diversity.

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Conflict of interest

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