

GUEST COLUMN

The Quest for Karen Unity

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If the Karen National Union wants to continue playing a useful role in Burma, it should stop trying to impose an artificial unity on Karen society



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Karen identity means different things to different people. Since before Burmese independence in 1948, elites have sought to mobilize political support around competing ideas of "Karen-ness".

The best known nationalist projects have been those emerging in western-oriented, mostly Christian-led, S'ghaw dialect-speaking communities. For many observers and supporters, the militarized nation-building project of the Karen National Union is the only authentic expression of Karen nationalism in Burma. Indeed, international agencies have played important roles in legitimizing the KNU's version of Karen nationalism, especially through the provision of humanitarian relief to displaced people, via organizations linked to the KNU.

However, the KNU is only one among a number of actors on the Karen political stage and represents only one strand of Karen nationalism.

A less well-known version of Karen nationalism is associated with the "Union Karen" perspective, prevalent in Rangoon and the Irrawaddy Delta. This less aggressive but no less nationalist position has been adopted by elites who have sought an accommodation with the state of Burma, rather than challenging its foundations. However, since the imposition of military rule in 1962, and especially following the events of 1988-90, the Union Karen voice has been marginalized, in comparison with the uncompromising rhetoric produced by opposition groups along the Thai border.

Union Karen networks operate under the patronage of a few mostly elderly leaders, many of whom are retired state officials, or politicians who returned to the legal fold in the 1950s and 1960s. These civil society networks are engaged in a number of community development projects inside Burma, many of them associated with Christian churches.

Since pre-colonial times, Karen society has produced other, sometimes competing, expressions of nationalism, which have generally not been granted legitimacy by outsiders.

Locally-centered sects, led by charismatic figures credited with occult powers, have long been active among Karen communities in Burma and Thailand. The most well known have been the Telecon and Likae cults, and “God’s Army”—which emerged in the aftermath of the 1997 Burmese army offensive against the KNU in Tenasserim Division.

Outsiders have generally regarded these movements as historical or cultural oddities. But this is not the case with the Buddhist sangha. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army is of particular interest, as it represents a Karen nationalist project in direct military and political competition with the KNU. The Buddhist-nationalist idea of Karen-ness is derived from many of the same historical roots as the KNU, with additional themes drawn from Buddhist tradition.

Although it often acts as a proxy for the regime, and members have committed serious human rights abuses, the DKBA has a clear ethno-nationalist agenda. There are a number of Karen language schools, and at least one cultural museum, in DKBA-controlled areas.

Traveling in Burma, I have met many Buddhist people who do not hesitate to identify themselves as Karen but do not recognize the KNU leadership. People from these communities tend to despise the military government and respect Aung San Suu Kyi. They would like to support a specifically Karen solution to their everyday problems of under-development and insecurity. Many are disappointed by the outcome of the DKBA adventure but have also been alienated by the KNU. They are available for political mobilization—but within what framework, and according to what idea of Karen-ness?

Since before independence, there have been various attempts to impose a unified identity upon this diverse society. Christian elites in particular have often presented themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the Karen, suppressing alternative voices in the process. Such nation-building projects are fundamentally undemocratic and divisive, resulting in the new conflicts, such as the DKBA rebellion.

I am very sympathetic to the deeply-held aspirations to self-determination of many members of the Karen and other ethnic communities in Burma. However, history has proved the quest for Karen unity to be elusive.

In contrast to efforts to establish a single Karen identity and political leadership, a consociational approach could be considered—an approach that recognizes deep divisions but nonetheless maintains relative stability through dialogue. It would recognize Karen social and political diversity and accept the segmented nature of this plural society as a starting point.

Rather than trying to change Karen society, a consociational approach would aim to work with elites, building models of cooperation between different sectors of the community. The diversity of Karen society may then become its strength, rather than a source of weakness.

The main elements of consociational democracy are rule by coalition, the provision of minority vetoes, proportional representation in decision-making and the allocation of funds and services, and federalism. The basic idea is that if cooperation and good will can be achieved between elites, then unity in diversity may be accepted and even celebrated.

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