

Mon Nationalist Movements: insurgency, ceasefires and political struggle

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly outlines the development of Mon ethnicity as a politically salient characteristic, during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Burma. It goes on to describe the emergence of Mon ethno-nationalist movements (both insurgent and non-armed) in the post-independence period. The paper examines the ways in which nationalist elites have mobilized support around ideas of Mon ethnic identity, and the various political strategies adopted in relation to 'others' - including elaboration of a federalist platform, in alliance with other ethno-nationalist groups; cooperation with the 'pan-Burmese' democracy movement; and uneasy accommodations with the militarized state.

The paper outlines the dynamics of armed ethnic conflict in 'Monland', and reviews the political and humanitarian impacts of this 'low-intensity' civil war, as well as positive and negative developments since the ceasefire agreed in 1995 between the military government and the New Mon State Party. It examines how Mon civil society groups in Burma have over the past decade promoted community development, and limited democratization 'from below', within the constraints of an oppressive and predatory state structure.

The paper concludes with an assessment of the strategic options available to Mon and other ethno-nationalist communities in 2007. This includes a critical analysis of federalist politics, and the roles of armed ethnic groups. The arguments and analysis are primarily drawn from the author's two books: *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: the Golden Sheldrake* (RoutledgeCurzon 2003; reprint edition 2005) and *States of Conflict: Ethnic Politics in Burma* (Routledge 2008 - forthcoming).

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This paper briefly outlines the development of Mon ethnicity as a politically salient characteristic, during the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Burma.¹ It goes on to describe the emergence of Mon ethno-nationalist movements (both insurgent and non-armed) in the post-independence period. The paper examines the ways in which nationalist elites have mobilized support around ideas of Mon ethnic identity, and the various political strategies adopted in relation to 'others' - including elaboration of a federalist platform, in alliance with other ethno-nationalist groups; cooperation with the 'pan-Burmese' democracy movement; and uneasy accommodations with the militarized state.

The paper outlines the dynamics of armed ethnic conflict in 'Monland', and reviews the political and humanitarian impacts of this 'low-intensity' civil war, as well as positive and negative developments since the ceasefire agreed in 1995 between the military government and the New Mon State Party (NMSP: the most important armed Mon group of recent years). It examines how Mon civil society groups in Burma (including the Buddhist *sangha*) have promoted community development, and democratization 'from below', within the constraints of an oppressive and predatory state structure.

The paper concludes with an assessment of the strategic options available to Mon and other ethno-nationalist communities in 2007 (including in the context of the 'saffron revolution' of August-September this year, and its brutal suppression). This overview includes a critical analysis of federalist politics, and the roles of armed ethnic groups. The arguments and analysis are primarily drawn from the author's two books: *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: the Golden Sheldrake* (RoutledgeCurzon 2003; reprint edition 2005) and *States of Conflict: Ethnic Politics in Burma* (Routledge 2008 - forthcoming).

The Problematics of Identity

The history of Burma has been fraught with violent conflict, much of which has been inspired by notions of ethnicity. Categories of ethnic identity have often been regarded as unproblematic phenomena, reflecting unchanging characteristics, which define an individual or group of people. However, the nature and significance of ethnicity as an identity category have changed over the centuries, depending on political and economic circumstances.

¹ In June 1989 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta re-named the state *Myanmar Naing-ngan*. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed - e.g. Rangoon became *Yangon*, Pegu became *Bago*, Moulmein became *Mawlamyine*. In some cases, these changes represented a 'Burmanisation' of indigenous names; in others, the new word more closely resembled local pronunciation than had the old colonial-era Romanization.

During the pre-colonial period, ethnic identity, based on language and cultural inheritance, was only one of a number of themes in social and economic life. The primary marker of individual and communal identity was position in the tributary hierarchy - i.e. where people lived (Ava or Pegu) and what they did (peasant or prince) was of more importance in determining identity than the language spoken at home or in the market.

Mon National Identity²

Well over one million Mon-speaking people live in Burma and parts of neighbouring Thailand, where today they constitute ethnic minorities.³ However, this has not always been the case.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to sketch the complex, fascinating - and sometimes controversial - history of the pre-colonial Mon civilization. A number of writers have described the rise of the Mon civilization in lower Burma in the first millennium CE (e.g. Guillon 1999; see also Aung-Thwin 2005). Better-documented are the fourteenth-sixteenth century Mon kingdom of Hongsawatoi, centred at Pegu, which briefly re-emerged as an important power in the eighteenth century (Guillon 1999).

Mon civilisation was among the most influential in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, acting as a vector in the transmission of Theravada Buddhism and Indianised political culture to the region. This civilising role helps to explain the enduring prestige attached to the Mon heritage. Mon nationalists have looked back to the classical era as a golden age - a source of inspiration and legitimisation.

However, as noted above, ethnicity was only one factor among several in determining identity in pre-modern Southeast Asia. As Victor Lieberman (1978: 480) has demonstrated, the 'Mon' kingdoms of lower Burma were in fact expressions of something more complex: "the correlation between cultural, i.e. ethnic, identity and political loyalty was necessarily very imperfect, because groups enjoying the same language and culture were fragmented by regional ties." Lieberman demonstrates that religion, culture, region and hierarchy status all helped to determine personal, group and regime identity in pre-colonial times. As authority was vested in the person of the monarch, it was he (or in the case of the great Mon Queen Shinsawbu, she), rather than any abstract idea of ethnic community, that commanded primary loyalty. A Burman king could act as the patron of Mon princely clients, and vice-versa.

For example, the leader of the last great Mon uprising in pre-colonial Burma, the Smin Daw Buddhaketi, who drove the Burmans from Pegu and ruled much of lower Burma from 1740-47 (Gravers 2007: 9-10) may actually have been a Karen (PaO) or Shan speaker. More important at the time however, were his (probably fabricated) royal credentials, and status as an aspirant Buddha (or *min laung*). The Smin Daw drew support from various 'ethnic' groups - while Burman, Karen and Mon clients of 'Burman' king opposed his rebellion. However, Lieberman (1978: 480) does concede

² Section based on South (2005: Part 1 & 2008: Ch.1).

³ The total Mon population in Burma is probably about one-and-a-half million people. At least 30% of those living in Mon State are Burmans, Tavoyans, Pwo and S'ghaw Karen, and Bengali Muslims. Among the Mon population, sizeable groups live in adjoining areas of Karen State, and to a lesser extent also in Pegu Division. (South 2005: 57-63 & 2008).

that the edicts of king Alaungphaya made a clear ethnic distinction between his own (Burman) followers and those of the Mon (or 'Talaing', as they were derogatively called by the Burmans). Indeed, ethnic polarisation accelerated rapidly under Alaungphaya.

Lieberman's caveats notwithstanding, Mon and Burman ethno-linguistic identities were well-established before Europeans began to arrive in significant numbers in Southeast Asia, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the adoption of such ethnonyms did not imply that individuals or communities subscribed to a homogenous political-cultural identity, people have nevertheless represented themselves as either 'Mon' or 'Burman', depending on the political situation. Kings, colonialists and modern politicians have used such ethnic labels to mobilize and control power bases.

Colonialism and the Consolidation of Ethnic Identity

British rule in lower Burma lasted for more than a century, from 1826-1949 (not including the Japanese occupation of 1942-45). During the British and Japanese periods, Burma was affected by huge social, political and economic changes. The creation of a modern, bureaucratic state involved processes of administrative standardization and the objectification of previously fluid and hazily-defined social realities, such as the concept-category of ethnicity.

As Robert Taylor (2006: 9) notes, "whether intentionally or not, the consequence of the policies pursued by the British reified ethnicity and made religion an issue in the politics of Myanmar." Over time, the 'rationalisation of the state' and introduction of capitalist economic measures led to the breakdown of traditional social bonds, and the reformation of patron-client relations. The changing socio-economic environment caused Mon and other predominantly lowland peoples to change their patterns of residence, livelihood and education. Indeed, so great was the erosion of Mon culture and language under the British that, by the time the colonialists departed, there were very few Mon speakers still living in the Irrawaddy Delta or Pegu, the ancient Mon homelands. According to the last colonial census, by 1931 all but 3% of the Mon population was confined to Amherst District, in what is today central Mon State (South 2005: ch.6).

Following the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, the British divided the colony into the central lowlands of 'Burma Proper', where the great majority of Mon and Burmese speakers lived, and a mountainous horseshoe of ethnic minority-populated 'Frontier Areas', on the periphery of the state. The economic changes and infrastructure developments of the colonial period did more to integrate lowland Burman/Burmese society, than it did to link Burma Proper with the highland Frontier Areas.

The adoption of Burmese as the language of state accelerated processes of assimilation, at least in Burma Proper. Over the course of the nineteenth century, large numbers of Mon speakers came to adopt the Burmese language, and associated forms of political culture. The 1921 census recorded 324,000 Mons "by race", but only 189,000 speakers of Mon. The descendants of these non-Mon speakers would today be classified as ethnic Burmans - i.e. as Burmese speaking citizens of a relatively new entity: the colony (and potential state) of Burma (South 2005: chs.2 & 6).

The British generally treated the ancient Mon culture and history with benign neglect, while the bulk of official attention focused on potentially restive 'hill-tribes'. Colonial rule fostered the emergence of self-consciously distinct ethnic minority groups, who were encouraged to identify themselves in opposition to the Burman majority (South 2008: ch.1). Second and third generation elites from within these 'imagined communities' went on to lead Burma's ethnic nationalist movements in the turbulent years directly preceding and following the Japanese invasion of 1941.

From Independence to Military Rule

Burma gained independence on 4 January 1948, six months after the assassination of the independence leader, General Aung San. The first decade of independence was marked by a chaotic period of parliamentary politics, and widespread insurgency. The late 1940s and '50s saw large numbers of often loosely-organized communist and ethnic nationalist militias take up arms against the 'Rangoon Government' (which at times controlled only the capital and its immediate environs). The remnants of civil war in Burma today constitute the longest running armed conflict in the world.

By the mid-1950s, the *Tatmadaw* (armed forces) had managed to push the insurgents back to the mountains and borderlands. The civilian administration had been secured, but at the cost of empowering the army, and convincing key *Tatmadaw* leaders that only they could save the country from insurgency.

The military assumed control of Burma 1958-60, as a 'caretaker government'. Following a brief return to civilian rule under U Nu (1960-62), military rule ran the country continuously since 1962, when General Ne Win's *Tatmadaw* again seized power. From 1962-74 Ne Win ruled Burma through a Revolutionary Council. Following the promulgation of a new constitution in 1974, he continued to dominate the country, via the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which continued the trend of the 1960s towards international political and international isolation. Ne Win's disastrous 'Burmese Way to Socialism' transformed the once-vibrant economy into one of the least developed countries in the world.

Meanwhile, ethnic and communist insurgents controlled much of the countryside. Their 'liberated zones' constituted unofficial *de facto* mini-states, with in some cases quite substantial administrations - including for example, departments of health and education, which attempted to provide minimal services to the populations under their control.

Militarization and Nation/State-building⁴

In the militarised context of post-independence rebellion and counter-insurgency, the *Tatmadaw* moved to capture this state, in order to defend a particular idea of the nation, the origins of which lie in the colonial era and the Second World War (Callahan 2003). Despite ostensible changes in ideology and political programme, the key concept of an independent nation, identified with the Burman cultural centre, and a strong state, with the capacity to shape state-society relations, has remained a constant.

⁴ This section is developed from South (in Gravers 2007).

The *Tatmadaw* regards itself as the principal agent for implementing policy upon - and defending the state from - the complexities of Burmese society. This exercise in nation/state-building has seen diverse (and according to the military, divisive) minority cultures, histories and socio-political aspirations subsumed under a homogenizing 'Burmese' national identity. In a rare public justification of such policies, shortly after seizing power in 1962, General Ne Win denied the need for a separate Mon culture and ethnicity, arguing that the Mon tradition had been fully incorporated into Burmese national culture, and thus required no distinct expression (South 2005: 79).

Ethnic Nationalism

The earliest expressions of armed Mon nationalist feeling were the great uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - although these should not be interpreted as manifestations of a simple ethnic identity (South 2005: ch.5). During the last years of colonial rule, in 1939, Mon intellectuals and cultural revivalists founded the All Ramanya Mon Association (ARMA), the first explicitly Mon socio-cultural organization of modern times, which was revived in the mid-1940s. ('Ramanya' is a variation on the traditional name for the pre-colonial Mon civilization: *ibid.* ch.6).

Following the devastation of the Second World War, in the chaotic years before and after Burmese independence, elites within the Mon, Karen and other minority communities articulated claims to social and political autonomy, on the basis of ethnicity (South 2005: ch.7). As Gravers (1999: 145) puts it, "identity thus becomes the foundation of political rights." He calls this process "*ethnicicism* ... the separation or seclusion of ethnic groups from nation states in the name of ethnic freedom ... where cultural differences are classified as primordial and antagonistic."

The first explicitly political Mon nationalist organization was the United Mon Association (UMA), established in November 1945 by Nai Po Cho, a Moulmein-born Christian and English lecturer at Rangoon University (South 2005: ch.7). Among the UMA's lasting contributions to the Mon nationalist movement was the adoption of Mon National Day (a lunar event, occurring each February), celebrating the legendary foundation of Hongsawatoi. The Mon nationalist movement had not yet articulated a militant separatist agenda. Campaigning for official recognition of the Mon language and the establishment of a Mon polity within the emerging Union of Burma, the UMA positioned itself as a distinctly Mon contribution to the struggle for Burma's independence.

The UNA worked closely with Aung San and U Nu's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which was dominated by Burma Independence Army (BIA) veterans who had fought alongside, and later against, the Japanese. However, there was from the beginning a tendency to factionalism within the Mon nationalist ranks, and conflict soon arose due to Nai Po Cho's closeness to the Burman-dominated AFPFL.

The BIA veterans in the AFPFL and *Tatmadaw* insisted that Burma was a unitary state, and strongly opposed any breakaway entity, such as that already proposed by the Karen nationalists. Their counsel prevailed, and the British failed to make good on their war-time promises to Karen leaders, of post-war independence - or at least autonomy - for 'Karenistan'.

In an attempt to address the 'ethnic question', in February 1947 Aung San convened a Conference of the Nationalities, at Panglong in Shan State. In exchange for their acceptance of a new Union of Burma, the government-in-waiting issued guarantees of autonomy to Chin, Kachin, Karenni and Shan leaders present at the gathering. However, only representatives of those peoples identified by the British as resident in the Frontier Areas were invited to the conference, which concluded on 12 February (celebrated since as Burma's Union Day). As this restriction was based on a rather simplistic identification of ethnicity with geographical location, neither the Mon nor the Arakanese-Rakhine were represented at Panglong.

By early 1947 many Mon politicians had become alienated from Aung San and the AFPFL, and their lack of support for ethnic minority aspirations. Radical Mon leaders increasingly preferred to throw in their lot with the ambitious Karen leadership which, sensing that the promises to be made at Panglong would never be fulfilled, had played little part in the conference.

Elections to a Constituent Assembly were held in April 1947, but these were boycotted by the majority (but not all: South 2008) of Karen and Mon nationalist parties. In August the Mon Freedom League (MFL) was established, and declared that "the Mons now demand their full birth-right for creation of a Mon State exercising full right of self-determination." The bulk of the Mon nationalist movement was now demanding full independence from Burma (Nai Shwe Kyin 1999). However, several prominent Mon politicians continued work with the AFPFL, hoping to promote Mon rights within the mainstream of Union politics (South 2005: ch.7).

In late 1947 the MFL and the recently-formed Mon Affairs Organisation (MAO) were superseded by a new group, the Mon United Front (MUF) - which Nai Po Cho's UMA refused to join, accusing it of separatist and militant tendencies. Soon afterwards, the first Mon armed organization of modern times was established - the Mon National Defence Organisation (MNDO). This militia was modelled on the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), which had been founded the previous year, as the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU - established in February 1947).

In July-August 1948 the MUF-MNDO raided the village of Zarthabyin, and later briefly occupied Moulmein and Thaton towns, together with the KNU. Although the siege of Moulmein lasted only a week (*ibid.*), this marked the beginning of a Mon separatist insurgency, which got fully underway the following year, after the KNU went underground in January 1949.

By 1950, in addition to two different communist factions, the Mon, Karen, Karenni and Pa-O ethnic nationalists, together with the Muslim *mujahed* of Arakan, were also in revolt. However, with a few exceptions - such as the Mon-Karen alliance - the various insurgent groups failed to co-ordinate their actions, and were often in direct competition for control of strategic positions and resources. The military situation on the ground was extremely complex. Numerous militias patrolled the countryside, and were often only loosely-aligned with or controlled by any central leadership.

In the early 1950s Mon nationalist politicians from Burma started to cultivate contacts with Mon communities in Thailand, and through these the Thai armed forces. In late

1951, Nai Ba Lwin and colleagues re-organised the Mon armed groups as the Mon People's Solidarity Group (MPSG), forerunner of the Mon People's Front (MPF). Nai Ngwe Thein (later Nai Aung Htun) was chairman of the new group, with Nai Tun Thein as General Secretary. (1951 was also the year that Nai Ba Lwin adopted the *nom de guerre* 'Nai Shwe Kyin', in honour of the *Shwegyin* Buddhist sect, renowned for its strictness and discipline.)

Although it continued to be handicapped by factionalism, the MPF was the most powerful Mon insurgent force of the 'parliamentary era' (1948-58). It was also the first organisation to explicitly demand the creation of an "Independent Sovereign State ... of Monland."

A combination of fiery nationalist rhetoric, plunder gained during the civil war and the power of the gun allowed the insurgents to mobilize sections of the rural peasantry to the ethno-nationalist cause. However, by the late 1950s, the armed Mon nationalists had succumbed to serious ideological divisions, with elements among the MPF leadership led by Nai Shwe Kyin subscribing to more left-wing views than the majority. A more immediate concern was the insurgents' failure to bring sustain early victories on the battlefield. After a series of military set-backs, by early 1958 the MPF leadership was ready to negotiate a ceasefire with the government.

Prime Minister U Nu hoped to gain political support (to leverage internal power struggles within the AFPFL), and Buddhist merit, by resolving the country's outstanding security issues. He therefore offered a conditional amnesty to Burma's various insurgent groups. Crucially, for the first time, he also proposed the formation of two new Union States, for the Mon and Rakhine-Arakanese. Needing no further encouragement, in July 1958 MPF leaders agreed a ceasefire with the *Tatmadaw*.

In total some 5,500 insurgents accepted U Nu's 'peace package', including about one thousand MPF fighters. For a few months, the mainstream Mon nationalists enjoyed the benefits of legality, and seemed to be on the verge of real political breakthroughs. In August 1958 Nai Aung Htun and the MPF leadership met with their old colleagues in the UMA. Further meetings were conducted throughout the month with the ARMA, the Mon *sangha* and students, and U Nu's lieutenants. The ethno-nationalists were able to establish a series of Mon language schools, and competed fairly successfully in elections from 'within the legal fold' (in 1960: *ibid.*). However, the military coup of 1958 disrupted their activities, and Ne Win's take-over in 1962 put an end to efforts to work within the mainstream of Burmese politics, until the 1990s.

The New Mon State Party

The day after the MPF's 'surrender', Nai Shwe Kyin and a small group of followers established the New Mon State Party (NMSP). According to Nai Shwe Kyin (NMSP 1985), the NMSP - which was to be in the vanguard of the armed struggle for Monland for the next forty years - aimed "to establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free nationalities exercising the full right of self-determination inclusive of right of secession."

Over the following decades, the NMSP and its armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA, established 1971) suffered many set-backs, while retaining the broad

support of large sections of the Mon community. (For a detailed history of Mon nationalism and civil war in Burma, see South 2005; see also Martin Smith 1999.)

In its early years, the NMSP received considerable support from the much larger and better-resourced KNU. In 1976 the KNU and allies established the National Democratic Front (NDF), Burma's most effective ethnic insurgent alliance, with its headquarters at Mannerplaw. In a major policy shift, in 1984 the NDF changed its position from one of principled secessionism (i.e. the advocacy of outright independence) to a demand for substantial autonomy for ethnic nationality states within a Federal Union of Burma. This was an important change in emphasis: Ne Win and the *Tatmadaw* had accused the insurgents of scheming to wreck the Union. Now though, the ethnic nationalists were aiming at a democratic, federal transformation of the Union, rather than a total repudiation of the state of Burma.

Soon after re-establishing itself in the mid-1960s, the NMSP organised a school system, which reflected the traditional importance of education in Mon Buddhist culture, and of language to ascriptions of ethnic identity. The Mon National Schools played a key role in the NMSP's projection of a distinctly Mon national culture, underpinning the party's secessionist (and later, federalist) policies. As the Thailand-based Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HRFM), observes (*The Mon Forum* August 1998), the state and NMSP education systems' objectives have conflicting aims:

“The government education system aims to implement government's protracted assimilationist policy by pushing the non-Burman ethnic students to learn and speak Burmese.... The main objectives of the Mon education system are to preserve and promote Mon literature ... Mon culture and history, to not forget the Mon identity.”

The manner in which 'ordinary' Mon people have responded to the nationalist agenda is largely unknown. The great majority of Mon-speakers are poor rice farmers, and day-to-day survival is their prime consideration. However, the *Tatmadaw* has played a part in affirming a distinct Mon identity: villagers have routinely been persecuted *because* of their presumed ethnicity, and as a result many have had little choice but to flee to NMSP-controlled territory. If nothing else, the displacement and flight of villagers to border areas, where they are dependant on the NMSP for basic security and the provision of minimal services (and sometimes food), is likely to have deepened perceptions of the Burmese state as radically 'other,' and reinforced civilians' public identification with a distinct Mon ethnicity (see Lang 2002).

Parties to the civil war in Burma have tended to define themselves in opposition to each other. The on-going insurgency has served as a pretext for the expansion of *Tatmadaw* powers, and the militarization of state and society, which in turn has further provoked the incidence of rebellion. These cycles of conflict have seen the emergence of hard-liners on all sides.

For many insurgent groups, identity and the claim to legitimacy have come to reside in the act of rebellion itself. By the 1970s, the civil war had become institutionalised, and in many cases the revolutionaries began to resemble warlords - “strongmen able to control an area and exploit its resources while at the same time keeping a weak central authority at bay” (Duffield 2001: 175). The political culture of the liberated zones reflected the political economy of these conflict areas, and the largely extractive nature of many insurgent groups' relations to natural resources and the

peasantry (their ethnic minority brethren, in whose name the revolution was being fought). Life in the 'liberated zones' thus became characterised by top-down tributary political systems, similar to those in government-controlled areas, aspects of which recalled pre-colonial forms of socio-political organisation (South 2005: 129-30 & 341-42).

In particular, insurgent commanders were quick to suppress perceived schisms in their ranks, and to discourage the expression of diverse opinions, and socio-political initiatives beyond the control of militarised insurgent hierarchies. As David Steinberg observes (in Ganesan & Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007: 119), "a 'loyal opposition' is an oxymoron when power is personalized." One consequence of the obsession with unity has been the endemic factionalism of Burmese opposition politics, with most groups unable to accommodate socio-political (or personality) differences among their members. Such tendencies have led to the suppression of pluralism in ethnic opposition circles, and the development of rigid political cultures in non-state controlled areas.

Thus, since the 1950s, aspects of resistance to the forces of assimilation have themselves taken on the characteristics of 'cultural corporatism'. Ethnic nationalist movements became prone to homogenising concepts of identity, which were often profoundly undemocratic.

1988 and 1990: hope and despair

As a result of nationwide protests which gripped Burma between March-June 1988, New Win stepped down from power. For a while, in August 1988, it seemed that 'people's power' might prevail, and usher in a new era of democracy in Burma. However, in mid-September the *Tatmadaw* massacred thousands of unarmed citizens, while re-imposing its control over the country, in the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

In a surprise move - which owed much to international condemnation of its brutal suppression of the democracy movement - in May 1990 the SLORC held elections. These were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi - the daughter of independence hero Aung San. However, the generals refused to allow the NLD and its allies to form a government, and instead imprisoned several hundred more civilians.

Since 1992, the regime has been dominated by Senior General Than Shwe, Commander-in-Chief of the *Tatmadaw*. In November 1997 the junta was re-configured, as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). By the turn of the new millennium, the military Government had greater control over Burma than any previous regime. However, military rule did not go unchallenged - even on the streets of Yangon and other cities.

A Boost for the Border-based Insurgents

Between 1988-90, some 10,000 students and other refugees from the democracy uprising - and the 1990 elections and their fall-out - fled to border areas controlled by the Mon, Karen, Karenni and Kachin insurgents. They established a series of camps,

where 'student soldiers' received basic military training and supplies from the battle-hardened insurgents.

The events of 1988-90 had focused international attention on the situation in Burma, and it seemed that at last a degree of unity had emerged between the ethnic insurgents and the previously largely urban-orientated, Burman-dominated pro-democracy opposition. The new alliance represented a real threat to the legitimacy of the SLORC.

In November 1988 the NDF (including the NMSP) and twenty other anti-SLORC groups formed the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), a broad-based, joint ethnic minority-Burman opposition front. In the DAB 'liberated zones', the early 1990s witnessed a degree of optimism absent from the ethnic insurgencies for more than a decade. According to the eminent Burma scholar, Joseph Silverstein (in Carey 1997:129-30):

"during this time, the centre of Burmese politics was gradually shifting to the border area capital (that is, Mannerplaw), where the KNU and its guests, the DAB and the NCGUB, had their headquarters. In this process, a new national politics was beginning to emerge which had the potential for re-shaping the relations between the ethnic minorities and the Burmans on the basis of national unity and peaceful democratic politics".

Unfortunately however - as Silverstein later recognized - this optimism among border-based opposition groups and their supporters was short-lived. Following the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989 (see below), the armed opposition found itself weaker militarily than at any time since independence. The next decade would see the end-game in Burma's complex and protracted civil war, played out along the Thailand border. Meanwhile, opposition political formations became increasingly reliant on refuge in neighbouring countries, and exile overseas. Indeed, the patronage of foreign governments and donors kept the exile alliance afloat longer than might otherwise have been expected.

In December 1990 the DAB and the National League for Democracy [Liberated Area] (NLD-LA) joined forces with the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), a 'government-in-exile' established at Mannerplaw in December 1990. In 1992 this alliance became the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the highest body of the armed resistance, and opposition-in-exile (South 2005: ch.11). The following decade, in 2001 the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) was established, to prepare ethnic nationality groups for 'tripartite dialogue' between ethnic groups, the military regime, and the NLD. During its Fourth Council in April-May 2006, the ENC was reorganized along State lines. By 2007, representatives of the Mon and the six other 'major nationality groups' (except the Kachin) had prepared draft state constitutions, thereby building capacities for future constitutional negotiations (South 2008: ch.3).

Beyond the Border

Since 1991, the UN General Assembly has called annually for a tri-partite solution to Burma's problems, involving the military government, ethnic nationality representatives, and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD. Of these three potential parties to dialogue, the ethnic nationalist bloc is the most diverse, and has not always presented

a coherent political platform. Consequently, its leaders have risked being marginalised in discussions over the country's political future.

The ethnic nationalist community in Burma is composed of three broad sectors:

1. Insurgent groups still at war with the military government (including the KNU), most of which are members of the rump NDF, and support exile political formations;
2. Armed ethnic organizations which have agreed ceasefires since 1989;
3. The United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), established in 2002, and representing sixty-seven ethnic nationality candidates elected in 1990.

Most UNA members had been part of the loosely organized United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), the umbrella group of ethnic nationalist parties which contested the 1990 election. In 1990, under the Bo Aung Kyaw Street Declaration, the UNLD and NLD agreed in principle to establish a democratic federal union of Burma (see below). Like the UNLD, the UNA has always worked closely with the NLD, and the mainstream, urban-based democracy movement in Burma. Prominent member-parties include the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF), with 5 MPs-elect; the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), with 22 MPs-elect; and the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), with 11 seats.

The MNDF was established in 1988. Although it was outlawed in 1992, it continued to be led by two veteran Mon politicians, Nai Tun Thein and Nai Ngwe Thein, who had been prominent members of the MPF in the 1950s, but had not followed Nai Shwe Kyin back underground to join the insurgent NMSP. Instead, the MNDF leaders had bided their time, before re-emerging in the heady days of 1988-90, to lead a Mon political movement which aimed to work alongside the mainstream (NLD-led) pan-Burmese democracy movement (South 2005: ch.9).

None of the UNLD/UNA member-groups participated in the government-organized National Convention (see below). Their absence - and that of the NLD - created a political opening for the emergence of a new generation of ethnic nationalist politicians, associated with the groups which had agreed ceasefires with the government since 1989.

The Ceasefire Movement

Until 1989, the *Tatmadaw* had been fighting two inter-connected civil wars - one against the ethnic nationalist insurgents, the other against the CPB. With the collapse of the latter in early 1989, the communist 'Peoples Army' disintegrated into four main ethnic militias, representing its Kokang, Wa, Kachin and Shan-Lahu elements (South 2008: ch.5).

The NDF sent delegates to seek an alliance with the ex-CPB groups, but - after decades of war - they found the new military government's offer more attractive. The SLORC Secretary-1, and head of Military Intelligence, (then) Major-General Khin Nyunt, devised a classic divide-and-rule strategy, under which ceasefire agreements were struck with individual insurgent groups, while the SLORC refused to negotiate with any joint front, such as the NDF or DAB.

Between 1989-95, ceasefire arrangements were brokered with some twenty-five insurgent organisations, starting with the ex-CPB militias. With their former communist foes in northern Shan State neutralized, the new military government could concentrate its forces against the ethnic rebels and their Mannerplaw alliance. From 1991, agreements were struck with several NDF member groups. At least a dozen local militias also agreed unofficial truces with the *Tatmadaw* during this period, including several armed factions which had split from mainstream NDF groups.

In the case of some NDF member organizations - e.g. the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 1994 and the NMSP the following year (see below) - ceasefires were negotiated under pressure from the Thai and Chinese authorities. Mostly however, these groups agreed to end hostilities because of the *Tatmadaw*'s military superiority, because of a deep war weariness among both the civilian population and their leaders, and in expectation of receiving development and economic assistance from the government and international community.

In most cases, the ex-insurgents were allowed to retain their arms (but see below), and granted *de facto* autonomy, and control of sometimes extensive blocks of territory, in recognition of the military situation on the ground. The military-political space created by the ceasefires also gave the ex-insurgents access to (if not control over) areas and populations which they were previously denied, and opportunities to organize among communities, which they could only contact clandestinely, before the cessation of armed conflict.

The NMSP Ceasefire

In 1990, following the fall of the NMSP headquarters near Three Pagodas Pass, the first regular Mon refugee camps were established in Thailand, where nearly 50,000 Karen and Karenni refugees were already living along the border, further to the north. By 1995, the Thai military authorities had more-or-less forcibly repatriated all but 2500 of the nearly 10,000 Mon refugees, moving them into the NMSP-controlled 'liberated zones'. (UNHCR refused to criticize this case of *refoulement*.) By pushing the civilian victims of the civil war back across the border, the Royal Thai Army and National Security Council pressured the NMSP into agreeing a ceasefire with Yangon, which in turn would open the way for the economic exploitation of newly pacified parts of lower Burma (see COHRE 2007).

Ceasefire negotiations between the NMSP and SLORC, which began in late 1993, were finalized on 29 June 1995. The terms of this truce were similar to those agreed with the KIO the previous year, under which the ex-insurgents would continue to control specified areas, in recognition of the situation on the ground. The NMSP was granted twelve (mostly adjacent) cantonments, constituting a ceasefire zone spread out along the Ye River in southern Mon State (and including parts of Tavoy District in Tenasserim Division, which the party was supposed to vacate the year after the ceasefire - but in fact still occupied, more than a decade later). The NMSP also continued to administer two small, but prosperous and fairly densely populated, ceasefire zones further to the north, in Moulmein and Thaton Districts (South 2005: ch.11 & 17).

At the time of the ceasefire, the government offered the NMSP some development assistance. General Khin Nyunt also promised that the human rights situation in Mon State would improve.

For a decade after the ceasefire, the government provided the NMSP with 3.5 million Kyat (c. US\$3500) a month (and sometimes rice too), to replace lost revenues, as a result of the party having access to less income from taxation. However, this financial support was terminated in mid-2005, due to the SPDC's dissatisfaction with the NMSP's strongly articulated demands, voiced at the National Convention (see below). At around the same time, a logging concession in the Kanni area, on the Ye River - which benefited the NMSP leadership, if not the local population - was also cancelled by the regime.

Although critics have accused ceasefire group leaders of profiting financially from these agreements, this has generally only been true of narco-trafficking militias in northern Burma. Since the ceasefires, the NMSP's coffers have been depleted, due to reduced opportunities to collect taxes in areas previously patrolled by their troops, combined with their leaders' inability to exploit the few economic openings presented by the post-ceasefire situation. The ex-insurgents have not demonstrated much commercial acumen: while the NMSP-controlled Rehmonya International Company made some money from short-term logging and fishing licenses, its trading and transport ventures have not flourished.

Together with the KIO and some other ceasefire groups, the NMSP has repeatedly called for political engagement with the government. However, since the mid-1990s, the party has tended to oscillate between two strategic poles: at key moments, the NMSP has supported the NLD, attempting to pressure the government into reform. However, party leaders have often been forced to back down, and accept the government line. Unsurprisingly, such inconsistency has provoked criticism, both from the SPDC and the opposition. It has also led to power struggles and defections within NMSP ranks (see below).

Having agreed to a cessation of hostilities, the NMSP leadership had no clear vision of the party's future role (South, in Gravers 2007). Many of those who supported the agreement saw no option, other than to pursue a new, closer relationship with the military government; others remained sympathetic to the armed and political opposition, and proposed an open alliance with the NLD. In the context of such debates, a new Mon umbrella group emerged, following a Congress of Mon National Affairs held the year after the ceasefire (South 2005: ch.16). The Mon Unity League (MUL) went on to play an important role in Mon politics, acting as a link between the NMSP, Burmese and Mon groups in Thailand and overseas, and the growing international campaign for democratic change in Burma. In 2007 the MUL was re-organized, to focus on promoting the activities of Mon grass roots and civil society organizations. The previous year had seen the launch of a new Mon umbrella political organization, the Mon Affairs Union (MAU), in which the NMSP played a leading role.

Intra-Mon Conflict Since the Ceasefire

Since 1995, a total of five ex- MNLA factions have split from NMSP, and several more small anti-ceasefire local militias have emerged, especially in those parts of Ye and Yebyu Townships from which the NMSP was forced to withdraw following the ceasefire. The most significant of these has been the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP; later, the Mon Restoration Party), led by veteran NMSP Central Committee member, Colonel Nai Pan Nyunt (*ibid.* ch.19-20).

Nai Pan Nyunt went back to war on 9 September 2001, taking about 150 MNLA troops with him. He claimed that his primary reason for defecting from the NMSP was its leaders' inability to prevent the confiscation of Mon lands (see below), particularly in villages previously under his control. The NMSP however, accused him of instigating rebellion to avoid facing corruption charges brought against him by the party leadership.

From positions on the frontiers of the main NMSP ceasefire zone, Nai Pan Nyunt's men harassed the *Tatmadaw*, while negotiating an alliance with another anti-ceasefire faction, the Mon National Defence Army (MNDA - or 'Mon National Warrior Army'). The emergence of another anti-ceasefire faction, so close to its headquarters, threatened the basis of the NMSP's truce with the SPDC. Some party activists, and many MNLA veterans, joined forces with Nai Pan Nyunt; others sensed an opportunity for the NMSP to throw off the much-resented ceasefire agreement, and return to a policy of outright, armed opposition to the SPDC.

On 29 November 2001 Nai Pa Nyunt's faction united with the MNDA to form the HRP, and the Monland Restoration Army (MRA), fielding more than 300 troops. The new force began collecting taxes on the road and in villages near Three Pagodas Pass, and was soon recruiting in the area, and laying landmines (as was the MNLA).

With several MNLA-HRP - and *Tatmadaw*-HRP - clashes reported January-March 2002, the future of the Mon ceasefire looked highly precarious. However, by the end of the year, loyal MNLA troops had expelled the main HRP force from the vicinity of the ceasefire zones, and Nai Pan Nyunt's men found themselves either trapped along the border, or pushed back into the MNDA base areas in southern Ye Township.

By late-2003 the HRP rebellion had all but petered out. Many troops returned to the MNLA, while Nai Pan Nyunt and a few followers moved down to the old NMSP Mergui District base in Tenasserim Division, 280 miles (450km) to the south (opposite Thailand's Prachuab Kiri Kahn Province) - an area from which the MNLA had withdrawn under the 1995 ceasefire agreement. The rump HRP continued to receive some support from Mon exile groups overseas and in Thailand (including some radical monks).

Nai Pan Nyunt re-formed his group as the Mon Restoration Party (MRP) in August 2007, and began to collect taxes from the long-suffering villagers of southern Ye Township (IMNA 1-9-2007). However, by now this small outfit was marginal to the larger Mon and Burmese political scene. Nevertheless, with the MRP replacing (and absorbing) the remnants of the MNDA in Ye Township, the *Tatmadaw* continued to abuse the human rights abuses of villagers in the area, with impunity (see, for example, *The Mon Forum* February 2007).⁵

⁵ The decline in Nai Pan Nyunt's fortunes was symbolized by a horrific event which occurred on 18 September 2004 (the sixteenth anniversary of the SLORC), and epitomized the sort of ugly local conflicts which have for half-a-century undermined the solidarity of Burma's ethnic nationalist movements. That morning, a unit of the KNLA's 11 Battalion stormed the HRP headquarters near Nong Hoi, killing all five of Nai Pan Nyunt's daughters, and two Mon soldiers, and injuring the HRP chairman and his wife (IMNA 20-9-2004). Although this killing has never been properly investigated, it seems to have been spurred by a conflict of economic interests, centered around territorial control, and the taxation of local villages.

Other Mon splinter groups still active in 2007 included remnants of the Mon Army Mergui District (MAMD), based south of the Maw Dawng Pass in Tenasserim Division (South 2005: ch.17). The MAMD had split from the NMSP the year after the ceasefire, and subsequently made its own deal with the *Tatmadaw* in June 1997. Based in three villages in the Chaung Chee area, the MAMD sent one delegate to the National Convention. A very small 'Mon Peace Group' based on the southern Tenasserim coast also sent one delegate to the convention.

Post-Ceasefire Rights Violations in Mon States

According to the TBBC and Mon Relief and Development Committee (MRDC), the population of the Mon ceasefire zones in 2006 was about 60,000 people - including some 2000 newly-arrived internally displaced persons (IDPs), who had fled human rights violations since 2005 (TBBC 2006).⁶ In August 2005, the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) reported that the following abuses were prevalent in Monland (especially in non-ceasefire areas of southern Mon State): extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions; arbitrary detention; torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; rape and sexual violation of women; forced labor on road construction, in army and police camps, and on infrastructure projects; forced portering for the *Tatmadaw*; land confiscation; movement restrictions; and denial of the right to education.

Land Rights Violations

Some of the most serious post-ceasefire problems in Mon State related to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights. In October 2003 the HURFOM published *No Land to Farm*, a report documenting the confiscation of 7,780 acres of land from Mon farmers, between 1998-2002. Adding insult to injury, farmers were often forced to work on the confiscated lands, building barracks and growing crops for the *Tatmadaw*. Some affected households retained limited access to their lands - usually on payment of a fee to *Tatmadaw* officers (see COHRE 2007).

Post-Ceasefire Rehabilitation⁷

Notwithstanding the many problematic developments, there have been some important 'peace dividends' since the ceasefire. Among the most significant of these has been the re-emergence of 'civil society' networks among Mon communities.⁸

⁶ For an analysis of patterns of forced migration in Burma, see South (2007).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of post-ceasefire developments in Mon areas, see South, in Gravers (2007).

⁸ The concept of 'civil society' used here is derived primarily from de Tocqueville (1994), and denotes voluntary, autonomous associations and networks which are intermediate between the state and the family, and concerned with public ends. These include a broad range of CBOs and NGOs, media and social welfare organizations, as well as religious and cultural groups (traditional and modern), and more overtly political organizations. However, commercial companies, and political parties seeking to assume state power, are not part of civil society - although they may promote or inhibit its development. From a Gramscian perspective, civil society is conceived of as a contested realm, in which competing forces and interest groups seek to establish positions, in a protracted struggle for power (Gramsci 1971). Functioning civil society networks are essential for the achievement of 'bottom-up' social and political

Along the Border

As noted above, the ideals of democracy have not always reflected in the practices of armed ethnic groups in Burma. However, in recent years, civil society networks have begun to expand in some non-government controlled areas. The decline of Burma's main insurgent groups, in the 1980s and '90s, opened the space for the emergence of new and more participatory forms of social and political organization within opposition ethnic nationality communities. A number of NGOs were organized by Chin, Kachin, Shan, Lahu, Karenni, Karen, Tavoyan, Mon and all-Burma student and youth, women's, environmental and human rights groups in the border areas.

Representing new models of organization, these networks constituted one of the most dynamic aspects in an otherwise bleak political scene. As a result of their activities, those engaged in the struggle for ethnic rights and self-determination in Burma were obliged to acknowledge the importance of women's rights, community-level participation and democratic practices - not just as distant goals, but as on-going processes.

A particularly dynamic sub-sector of the border-based local NGO scene was composed of cross-border relief and development groups. In the early 1990s, Karen - and later Chin, Shan, Karenni and Mon - teams began to provide humanitarian relief, and undertake some community development and educational work, among displaced communities, in what had once been the 'liberated zones' (behind the front-lines of war), but were now mostly zones of on-going armed conflict (or ceasefire zones). In doing, so they helped to develop community networks of trust and support, and to strengthen civil society, under the most difficult of conditions (South 2007 & 2008: ch.6).

In the case of the Mon 'refugees', in the decade following their forcible repatriation in 1995-96, the TBBC and other INGOs worked with the MRDC to develop basic infrastructure (schools, bridges, wells and hospitals) in the resettlement areas, as well as supporting community-based projects, and providing humanitarian supplies (rice and medicines).⁹ In mid-2007 the MRDC reported that 11,649 people were living at four main NMSP-controlled resettlement sites (MRDC July 2007). Most of these people

transition in Burma, and for conflict resolution at both the national and local levels. In order for democratic change to be sustainable, the country's diverse social and ethnic communities will have to enjoy a sense of ownership in any transitional process, and equip themselves to fill the power vacuum that may emerge, either as a result of abrupt shifts in national politics, or of a more gradual withdrawal of the military from state and local power. Such an approach involves a broad understanding of democratization, including community participation, and the promotion of civil society as an engine for change. For an analysis of the strategic roles of civil society actors in Burma, see South (2004).

⁹ In 2005 (following their withdrawal from the Karen refugee camps in Thailand), MSF-France were blocked by the Thai authorities from working across the border, in the Mon ceasefires zones (where they had been active since the mid-1990s). When MSF withdrew at the end of the year, the Mon returnees were left without medical support, in an area characterized by very high levels of drug-resistant malaria. Fortunately, in 2007 the TBBC mobilized a small group of INGOs and donors, to respond to this health crisis. However, in order to encourage the Mon returnees to grow more of their own food, the TBBC's support to this population was pegged at 60% of estimated needs (IMNA 20-6-2007).

remained in limbo, living in camp-like conditions just over the border, with only limited access to agricultural land.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the majority of Mon civilians - including most of those in the NMSP-controlled ceasefire zones - lived in longer-established ('organic') villages, beyond the resettlement sites. For many of these people, the post-ceasefire period had seen increased agricultural production, and new opportunities to trade across the former front-lines of conflict.

Inside Burma

As noted, the ceasefires are not peace treaties, and generally lack all but the most rudimentary accommodation of the ex-insurgents' political and developmental demands. Furthermore, ethnic nationalist cadres are generally more familiar with the 'top-down' approaches used in military and political campaigns, than with 'bottom-up' development and conflict resolution methods. As elsewhere in the country, local initiatives are frequently undermined by poor governance, parallel exploitative practices, and a lack of strategic planning and implementation capacities. Nevertheless, the ceasefires have created some opportunities for the reconstruction of war-torn communities.

According to the Human Rights Foundation of Monland's *Mon Forum* (May 2005):

"although there have been many negative developments after the 1995 ceasefire between the NMSP and SPDC... the people in Mon areas could travel and communicate easily and could launch the community's practices more than before the ceasefire. This is also the positive development after ceasefire for the Mon CBOs."

Examples of Community-based Organizations (CBOs) in Burma include farmer field schools and other rural interest groups, village development committees, community savings groups, early childhood centres, and local Parent-Teacher Associations. A ground-breaking survey conducted in 2003-04 by Brian Heidel, of Save the Children UK, found that some 214,000 CBOs were operating throughout the country, plus a total of 270 local NGOs.

A number of Mon CBOs and NGOs have been active in the fields of culture, community development and education. For example, since the ceasefire, the NMSP-affiliated Mon Women's Organization (MWO) has succeeded in extending its income generation, adult literacy and other training activities beyond the NMSP-controlled zones, to Mon communities across lower Burma. Efforts to promote gender equity within the male-dominated NMSP received a small boost in 2006, when the party selected its first woman Central Committee member, who was given responsibility for running the Education Department.

Like the KIO and other armed ethnic groups, the NMSP administers a substantial education system, which relies on both community and international donor support. Despite some serious setbacks, during the 2006-07 school year the party managed to run 186 Mon National Schools and 189 'mixed' schools (shared with the state system), attended by nearly 58,236 pupils (NMSP 2007), 70% of whom lived in government-

¹⁰ From north to south, the Mon resettlement sites were located at Halochanee (near Three Pagodas Pass), Che Deik, Bee Ree (near the NMSP HQ, or 'Central') and Tavoy District.

controlled areas. Students who pass through the NMSP-run high schools were able to sit government matriculation exams, and enter the state higher education system.

The success of the NMSP education system has served to bolster the party's standing and perceived legitimacy within the Mon community. It is therefore not surprising that local *Tatmadaw* commanders and government officials often moved to close down Mon National Schools. Although this suppression is well-documented (e.g. *The Mon Forum* January & December 2005), most of these schools re-opened after a short hiatus, or were replaced by new Mon National Schools opening elsewhere. (However, since 2005, the NMSP schools have come under renewed and concerted pressure by the state authorities.)

Although the NMSP and other ceasefire groups have provided the political and military space within which civil society re-emerged after the ceasefires, the key actors have often come from religious and social welfare networks. These include ethnic minority literature and culture promotion groups, many of which were established in the 1950s, only to be suppressed after 1962, and then re-emerge in the context of the ceasefires.

For example, long before the NMSP ceasefire, Mon literacy training and cultural education had been organized, on an *ad hoc* basis, by individual monasteries across Mon State. The year after the truce, between April-May 1996, about 10,000 students received training under the auspices of a new Mon Literature and Buddhist Culture Association (MLBCA), working together with the Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC). The trainees studied Mon language, culture and ethno-history, sitting competitive exams in each of these subjects. By 1997, nearly 27,000 students participated, and by 2000 the number had risen to 46,435 (*Mon Language Literacy Training Course 2005 Report*). Despite some attempts by the government and military authorities to restrict their activities, over the next few years the MLBCA extended the literacy trainings from the countryside to several towns across Mon State. By 2006, 63,310 state school students (60% of them girls), studied Mon in over one hundred monasteries and schools, in 14 township across lower Burma (Mon and Karen States, and Tenasserim Division).

Only a small proportion of the funds for this major initiative came from foreign donors, the rest being raised within the community, at pagoda festivals etc. Members of the *sangha* in particular were able to mobilize the Mon community to support the literacy programme, while at the same time negotiating with the military authorities to allow the trainings to go ahead.

In June 2007 reports began to emerge that the township authorities in Mon State were refusing to allow Literature and Culture Associations to renew their official registration (IMNA 6-6-2007). It seemed that the military regime was moving to suppress autonomous civil society (and potential political) actors, in the run-up to a possible referendum and elections, following the completion of National Convention (South 2008: ch.6).¹¹ The military regime is likely to step up its suppression of 'grass

¹¹ Another vibrant sector of Mon civil society since the ceasefire has been among artists and traditional performance troupes. More explicitly ethno-nationalist activities are conducted by Mon National Day celebration committees - although the authorities generally restricted the celebration to the boundaries of Mon State.

roots' organisation and civil society actors, following the events of August-October 2007, when the Buddhist *sangha* were at the forefront of popular protests against the military regime (see below).

The National Convention

Since its refusal to recognize the popular will of the Burmese people, as reflected in the results of the May 1990 election, the military government has resisted all options but a managed (by the military) transition to some type of 'disciplined' or 'guided' (by the military) democracy. On 30 August 2003 Burma's newly-appointed prime minister (and Military Intelligence chief), General Khin Nyunt, announced the resumption of a National Convention to draft a new constitution, followed by a referendum and eventual elections - as part of a seven-stage 'road-map to democracy'. (Burma has had two previous constitutions, promulgated in 1947, and in 1974 - under which a Mon State was demarcated.)

The SPDC was clearly positioning itself to control a transitional process, the perceived legitimacy of which would depend on who participated in the National Convention, under what conditions, and how the resulting constitution was endorsed and promulgated. Despite serious misgivings in many quarters, Khin Nyunt's 'road-map' became the only political in town - at least at the national-elite level of politics.

Three days before the National Convention re-opened, on May 14 2004, Burma's two main opposition parties announced that they would not join the proceedings (although they had not in fact been invited). The government had failed either to release Aung San Suu Kyi, or to reassure the NLD and UNA that it would permit genuine debate over key issues. The convention was therefore widely perceived as illegitimate - both inside Burma and abroad.

The Ceasefire Groups Make their Move

While the UNA parties (including the MNDF) made common cause with the NLD, and boycotted the National Convention, most of the ceasefire groups participated - initially, with a sense of guarded optimism. This was to be the most important national-level political arena since the 1990 election - and perhaps even since the military takeover of 1962. While the National Convention was unlikely to result in an acceptable political settlement to the country's many problems, it would at least provide a forum for the ceasefire groups' to promote the ethnic nationalist agenda.

Most of the 1,076 delegates to the National Convention were hand-picked by the government. Therefore, the over one hundred representatives from twenty-eight ceasefire groups were among the few participants who could claim some independence from the regime.

Although the ceasefire groups were a mixed bunch, they did share a number of common concerns. In their deliberations at the National Convention they were able to develop coherent positions on several key issues. If nothing else, the ceasefire groups' participation in the convention created opportunities to focus on the centrality of the 'ethnic question' in Burmese politics. Whether or not their demands were accepted, in expressing their concerns, the ceasefire groups laid important groundwork for the future.

In June 2004 representatives from thirteen ceasefire groups, led by the NMSP and KIO, made a joint submission to the National Convention outlining their main demands. This document called for the promulgation of state constitutions, proposed that all residual powers lie at the state level (rather than with central government), and demanded the formation of local ethnic security forces (a new role for the ceasefire armies). Although rather vague in parts, the ceasefire groups' demands included formation of a federal union of Burma, under the rubric of 'ethnic or national democracy'. However, they were soon informed that their proposals would not be included on the convention's plenary agenda. They were told that - as the National Convention was recalled to conclude the work suspended in 1996, and to propagate the regime's 104 proposals - their submissions would be noted, but not included in the draft constitution.¹²

The Consequences of Regime Consolidation

In a dramatic development, which caught most observers by surprise, in October 2004 Khin Nyunt and his Military Intelligence network were purged - thus consolidating the power of Senior General Than Shwe. The ceasefire groups had been among Khin Nyunt's major clients; the existence of these agreements lent the ex-prime minister considerable kudos and political power. After his fall, *Tatmadaw* field commanders in border areas inherited responsibility for relations with the ceasefire groups, and were given scope to move against non-compliant organisations, as the opportunity arose.¹³

The fall of Khin Nyunt reinforced expectations that the SPDC would eventually order the ceasefire groups to give up their weapons - possibly on promulgation of the new constitution. Senior *Tatmadaw* commanders generally considered the continued existence of armed non-state groups as an affront to their authority. The SPDC was therefore serious in its intent to disarm the ceasefire groups, sooner or later. This was perhaps the issue that was most likely to provoke a re-newel of armed conflict. If and when the government forced the issue of disarmament, some ceasefire groups might re-invent themselves as government-orientated militias, or local police forces - in which case any surrender of arms would be largely symbolic. However, the NMSP, KIO, UWSA and some other organizations had indicated that they would not accept disarmament by the military government - although it was always possible that a few old weapons and ammunition stockpiles could be decommissioned. A probable scenario was that, if/when they were ordered to disarm, elements of most ceasefire groups

¹² On 13 February 2005 six ceasefire groups, including the NMSP, issued a statement, repeating their demands at the National Convention the previous year, and calling for a review of the draft constitution's Principle No. 6, which provided for the military to continue to play a leading role in politics. They also asked for non-ceasefire groups to be granted observer status at the convention, and for the proceedings' minutes to record dissenting views.

¹³ In late April 2005 two battalions of the SSNA ceasefire group were pressured by the *Tatmadaw* Northeast Command into surrendering their weapons. Then, on 29 April, another northern Shan State-based ceasefire group, the (ex-NDF) Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA), was also forced to surrender its weapons. The military government seemed to be intent on picking-off the ceasefire groups one-by-one, persuading the smaller and less well organized militias to disarm first - before perhaps moving on to the better established Wa, Kachin, Mon and other forces. In response to these developments, in late June the SSNA leader, Colonel Sai Yi, took three battalions (but only a hundred-or-so men) back to war with Yangon, merging his forces with the SSA-South. This was the first time in a decade that a ceasefire group had resumed armed conflict with the military government.

would comply, while other units (in some cases, the majority of the ceasefire group's forces) would resume armed conflict.

In the meantime, since 2005 *Tatmadaw* commanders have been stricter than their Military Intelligence predecessors, in their interpretation of the ceasefire agreements. For example, the MNLA has found its troop movements increasingly restricted, and several ceasefire groups have had their engagement in tax collection activities curtailed.

Meanwhile, in response to criticism from the ethnic communities they seek to represent, a few ceasefire groups have grappled with internal reform. The NMSP and KIO in particular have demonstrated a degree of democratic political culture, reflecting their twenty years of participation in pro-democracy alliances, such as the NDF and DAB.

Policy-making within NMSP leadership circles usually involves a degree of debate and disagreement - which has sometimes resulted in damaging schisms and splits. However, the party has proved fairly responsive to pressure from constituencies inside Burma, and from overseas-based exile and activist groups (which are often disproportionately represented in public advocacy). Since the late 1990s, both the NMSP and KIO have attempted to elicit public participation in decision-making, by consulting with religious and civil society leaders from their communities, regarding whether and how to engage with the military government.

For example, the Kao Wao News Agency (23-9-06) reports that, over the 2006 rainy season, the NMSP leadership "sought out public opinion on whether it should attend the National Convention." The following year, the party held a further series of public meetings, in order to gauge the feeling of the Mon community (IMNA 3-9-2007). The NMSP was in a particularly difficult position. The three small blocks of territory granted it under the June 1995 ceasefire agreement were vulnerable to *Tatmadaw* incursion. Neighbouring Thailand, whose security establishment had helped to push the NMSP into the ceasefire, was unlikely to be sympathetic to any resumption of armed conflict in Mon areas. Furthermore, the party was militarily weak, and had few financial resources with which to wage a sustained military campaign.

Despite these constraints, the NMSP has been the most outspoken of the ceasefire groups. Indeed, since December 2005, the party has refused to endorse the National Convention, sending only a small team of 'observers' to the forum. Although some activists would have liked the party to go further in its defiance of the government, the NMSP could have done little more, without definitively breaking the ceasefire - and bringing humanitarian disaster to Mon State.

From Convention to Constitution?

In early June 2007 the SPDC announced that the final session of the National Convention would begin on 18 July. Asked about the conventions' resumption, a senior NMSP leader quoted by the Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA 12-6-07) said that the party "harbours no hope from the National Convention." The same month, on the twelfth anniversary of the NMSP-SLORC ceasefire (IMNA 29-6-07), Nai Hongsa, the party's General Secretary, stated that:

“the ceasefire is in a deadlock. The relationship between us and the junta is not good but there is still no serious pressure. It means both sides are trying to maintain the ceasefire agreement.”

A few days before the National Convention re-started for the last time, a coalition of twelve UNA member-parties (elected in 1990) urged “the military regime to draft a true constitution that creates a union” (*The Irrawaddy* 12-7-2007: www.irrawaddy.org), along the lines envisioned at Panglong in 1947.¹⁴ In the meantime, relations between the SPDC and several other ceasefire groups (including the Wa) were also to deteriorating. Nevertheless, the government still seemed intent on buying ceasefire group support for the constitution drafting process, by offering concessions over the issues of most concern to ethnic nationalist communities - such as regional autonomy, language use and local control over resources. This strategy would allow the government to dilute ethnic State-level demands, by offering concessions to several relatively small groups, at the Sub-state level. It would also expose long-standing tensions between the post-1988, predominantly urban-based democracy movement (which was determined to see a democratically elected central government), and the movement for ethnic rights, dating from the years before independence.

Alan Smith, one of the most astute analysts of constitutional issues in Burma, has worked on strategy with a number of key ethnic nationalist actors, including both National Convention delegates, and those who have boycotted the process. He notes (2007) that the creation of ethnic State legislatures may actually facilitate the participation of local political and civil society organizations, in at least some sectors of public life. According to this view, *any* constitution is better than continued direct rule by the military. Although the space available to ethnic nationality and other parties under the new constitution is likely to be very limited, it will at least allow them to participate in above-ground politics, from ‘within the legal fold’.

In the meantime, it was unclear how the next stage of the SPDC’s ‘road-map to democracy’ would proceed, after the National Convention concluded its deliberations on 3 September 2007. During the final session, delegates discussed the role of political parties, conditions for declaration of a state of emergency, and creation of the national flag and anthem. Presumably, these and the other elements of the draft constitution would be edited into a document, to be presented to the Burmese people in some kind of referendum. However, the events of September-October 2007 made it likely that any proposals presented by the SPDC, even in the form of a tightly-controlled referendum, would be rejected by a fearful but angry populace.

‘The Saffron Revolution’

The military government - which has ruled Burma, in one form or another, for forty-five years - remains deeply unpopular. However, the *Tatmadaw* is the most cohesive and powerful institution in Burma, dominating many aspects of political, economic and

¹⁴ Among the ceasefire groups, the KIO took the lead, by presenting a detailed proposal, outlining a series of amendments to the draft charter. This nineteen-point document (KIO July 2007) called for changes to the proposed state structure and legislative powers, to allow greater autonomy for ethnic nationality areas. Indeed, the KIO urged “in the strongest sense possible, that a specific constitutional mandate be included for a federal system of union”

social (even cultural) life in this beautiful but troubled country. In many respects, the *Tatmadaw* is the state - and it is fearsomely jealous of this prerogative.

In August and September 2007 members of the 88 'Generation' of student activists led a series of small demonstrations in Yangon and some other urban centres, in protest against a huge increase in fuel prices, caused when the government removed state subsidies on 15 August. The fuel price rise had a devastating impact on many sectors of the already impoverished population, especially in urban areas (where annual inflation was at least 40%) - illustrating the degree to which livelihoods had been eroded under the SLORC-SPDC. In late August and September about 180 protest leaders were arrested by the authorities - an action which was condemned by most western governments.

Although many (perhaps the great majority) of citizens supported these brave actions, most were too fearful of the well-entrenched military regime to participate directly in the demonstrations. However, the situation changed in early September when - at first in parts of central-northern Burma, and later in the month on the streets of Yangon and Mandalay - hundreds, and then thousands, of monks took part in the protests against the government, chanting the *metta* [loving kindness] *sutra* as they marched. For several days, the saffron-robed monks' protest went unmolested by state security forces. Indeed, on 22 September they were even allowed to meet briefly with Aung San Suu Kyi - exchanging words across the locked gates of her compound (where 'the lady' remained under house arrest).

Over the following days, large numbers of civilians began to join the protesting monks. While the *Tatmadaw* might be reluctant to open fire on the *sangha*, the soldiers had no such compunction when the monks were joined by tens of thousands of other civilians. Starting on 26 September, the security forces conducted a series of night raids against the most activists monasteries in and around Yangon, arresting hundreds of monks (many of whom were subsequently released - although others were reportedly killed). During this period, the government also cracked-down on the protestors (who were no longer protected by the presence among them of large numbers of monks). Estimates of the number of people killed, since the violence escalated on 27 September, vary from ten (according to government sources) to some two hundred (according to some opposition activists, based on eye-witness accounts); many hundreds more were arrested (Associated Press 4-10-2007).

Images of the demonstration, and the subsequent brutal crack-down, were broadcast around the world, on the web, and especially by Burma's intrepid bloggers (at least until the authorities closed down most people's access to the internet). In response, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari visited the country, and was able to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi and (eventually, after a somewhat humiliating delay), with Gen. Than Shwe. However, the SPDC's subsequent offer to hold only conditional talks with Daw Suu Kyi revealed the UN's lack of leverage with the SPDC, despite the renewed attentions of the Security Council.

The suppression of the 'saffron revolution' marked a huge set-back for democratisation in Burma. While it illustrated the potential power of civil society and

the *sangha* , the spontaneous demonstrations also signalled the marginalisation of exile and most other opposition groups, who played little part in the protests.

Legitimacy, Ethnicity and Territory

The events of August-October 2007 radically undermined the military government's claims to legitimacy. The standing of other parties is somewhat less clear.

The claims of Burma's armed ethnic groups to be the sole legitimate representatives of 'their' communities have long been problematic (Robinne and Sadan 2007). Insurgent elites and opposition politicians enjoy differing degrees of (often contested) legitimacy among the communities they seek to represent. They tend to be motivated by a combination of deeply-held political and social beliefs, and varying measures of political and economic opportunism (i.e. most individuals and organizations are characterized by a complex and shifting combination of 'greed and grievance').

The notion of armed conflict waged in the name of a particular ethnic group is problematic in other ways also. As Leach argued half a century ago, vis-à-vis the Kachin and Shan, ethnicity is not an essential characteristic, but is relational. As noted, the idea that ethnicity is a 'natural' (or primordial) quality of individuals or groups of people is derived from colonial era classifications, viewed through the lens of more than fifty years of bitter conflict.

The fixation with ethnicity in Burma has led to a conflation of ethno-linguistic nation, political state and homeland territory, translating socio-cultural heritage onto a geographic landscape. As Gravers notes (2007: 13), "the major difference between the pre-colonial period and the present is that ethnicity ... has become ... mapped in the modern nation state." Often based on ideas of a 'pure' ethnic homeland, the close association of ethnicity and territoriality has had bloody inter- and intra-national history over the past two centuries (Hobsbawm 1990). The homeland has often been perceived by members of the dominant nationality as theirs alone, consigning ('other') minority groups to the status of outsiders. In Burma, the identification of ethnicity with a particular territory has resulted in sometimes highly unrealistic territorial claims.

For Mon nationalists, the desire to restore the glories (and even the supposed frontiers) of the pre-colonial 'Ramanyadesa' has sometimes obscured the fact that the relatively small contemporary Mon population has little realistic future, other than as part of the Union of Burma. Particularly given the proximity of Mon-populated areas to the central Burman-populated heartlands, the project of a wholly independent Monland is hardly viable.

While the military government continues to promote a strong, unitary state as the solution to Burma's 'problem of diversity', conflict is likely to persist. In response, ethno-nationalists have explored a range of approaches to 'unity amid diversity'.

Federalism and Elections

In the 1970s and '80s the NMSP, KNU, KIO and allies worked hard to establish the ethnic insurgencies on a coherent (non-communist) political footing. The formation of

the NDF in 1976 was a major achievement, which for the first time instituted federalism as the basis of the ethno-nationalist platform. However, in the 1990s the federalist position was modified by the inclusion of new political demands, emanating from the urban-based (predominantly Burman) democracy movement.

In a January 2007 lecture in Stockholm, given on the occasion of receiving the Martin Luther King Prize, Dr Lian Sakhong, General Secretary of the ENC, called for a re-conceptualization of Burmese politics. He stated that 'nation-building' of a kind which involves notions of "one ethnicity, one language and one religion" is inappropriate to a multi-ethnic society, such as Burma. Dr Lian instead proposed a model of 'state-building' in which "the state knows only citizens no matter what nationality each individual belongs to, no matter what kind of religious belief he or she worships, no matter what kind of language he or she speaks." He also stated that "the only solution ... is to establish a genuine Federal Union of Burma, which will guarantee the fundamental rights for all citizens of the Union".

Federal systems are characterized by power-sharing (or mixed sovereignty) arrangements, between a central (federal) government and constituent (state) governments. This apparently simple formulation raises questions regarding the type of federalism that is best suited to Burma's complex society.

Two sets of approach coalesce around notions of 'territorial' or 'rights-based' (or 'corporate') federalism. The former identifies particular ethno-linguistic groups with specific territories - as proposed in the draft constitutions developed by the NCUB and ENC (see Yawngkhwe & Sakhong 2003, and Williams & Sakhong 2005). The identification of ethnicity with territory (albeit with very different permutations of power) is also central to the SPDC's constitution-drafting process.

Inspired by the 'spirit' of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, the NCUB charter proposes the establishment of eight ethnic states - including one for the Burmans - each with a legislative assembly. According to this model, ethnic self-determination is tied to control over spatially-bounded 'homeland' territories (e.g. Mon State), within which it is assumed that the Mon (for example) constitute the majority. This formulation includes provision for minorities within a particular State (e.g. Karen in Mon State, and vice versa), through the creation of local sub-states (Yawngkhwe & Sakhong 2003: 107).

In contrast to exclusively territorial solutions, models of rights-based (or corporate) federalism are more flexible: people of a particular ethnicity (e.g. the Mon) would retain certain rights - for example, regarding language use and political self-determination - wherever they live (South 2008: ch.7). However, such models of formally symmetrical federalism are only one of way of safeguarding "the fundamental rights for all citizens of the Union" (to quote Dr Lian). Alan Smith (2005 & 2007) has explored other forms of de-centralization, appropriate to a diverse and a multiethnic state such as Burma. These include various types of asymmetrical territorial arrangement, such as local autonomy.

In practice, since the mid-1990s, the NMSP and other ceasefire groups have enjoyed a variety of different types and degrees of (asymmetrical) regional autonomy, under their agreements with the military government. (The insurgent-controlled liberated zones also demonstrated *de facto* local autonomy, until the majority were overrun in

the 1980s and '90s.) The challenge facing these non-state actors is how to safeguard the forms of local (elite) control they currently enjoy, under new arrangements which may emerge out of the government-controlled constitution-drafting process (or in the unlikely event of the opposition alliance being able to implement its draft federal constitution). In considering their strategic options, ethnic nationality leaders would be wise not to focus exclusively on territorial-based federalism, but consider the full range of structures for self-determination, including aspects of corporate federalism, and de-centralization.

The great majority of the Mon population - living beyond the ceasefire zones - will be largely unaffected by the NMSP's territorial calculations. Of more concern to these communities is the degree to which they are able to exercise basic rights, and enjoy human security. As Smith (2007: 207) notes, sustainable conflict resolution in Burma requires more than simple territorial autonomy for ethnic minority/nationality groups. It is also necessary to reform the state's abusive treatment of its citizens, and to explore a new politics, which "can satisfy the demands of a complex multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural society." Such an approach would move beyond a fixation with territory, to focus on rights-based issues and processes of democratization more generally.

It seems unlikely that the government-controlled constitution-drafting process will result in a charter which includes significant elements of the federalist platform. Whatever its deficiencies however, any future election will confer at least a degree of legitimacy upon those elected. Ethnic nationalist elites and their communities are therefore likely to be faced with a dilemma, regarding whether and how to participate in any elections which may be organized by the SPDC (under a new charter or otherwise).

A further set of issues will involve whether to support all-Burma parties (such as the NLD), or to endorse for specifically ethno-nationalist groups - raising the subsidiary issue of tactical voting and the formation of electoral alliances. Historically, elites representing some ethnic groups, such as the Mon, have successfully competed in elections in Burma (e.g. in the 1950s and in 1990), while others, such as the Karen, have not.

A significant indicator for the future will be whether the ceasefire groups are prepared to risk testing their electoral popularity. In June 2007 an NMSP official told the BBC that the SPDC had asked the party to compete in elections in 2008 (BBC online 4-6-2007: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/burmese.shtml>). In August the government began to register (and issue identity cards to) the residents of Kachin, Mon and other ceasefire zones, reportedly in preparation for the registration of voters (*The Irrawaddy* 5-9-2007 and *Kao Wao* 7-9-07).

Concluding Remarks

Over the past half-century, the NMSP and other Mon armed groups have formed alliances with insurgent (and more recently, ceasefire) and exiled opposition organisations, with an emphasis on promoting the federalist cause. In contrast, the MNDF and other above-ground Mon groups - while also maintaining strong ethno-nationalist positions - have cooperated with pan-Burmese (but in practice

urban/Burman-dominated) parties, such as the NLD. A third set of Mon socio-political actors have worked for gradual change at the community level, through the implementation of development projects.

The degree of competition for influence within the Mon nationalist community, between armed organisations (e.g. the NMSP) and non-armed groups (e.g. the MNDF), should not be over-stated. There are strong linkages within and between these networks, and the overlapping civil society sector - all of which have come to rely on external (overseas-based) financial and political support (including from INGOs and other donors).

For the MNDF, the key event of the past two decades has been the 1990s election, the results of which are still considered to underwrite the party's legitimacy. For the NMSP, the most important 'fact on the ground' is the ceasefire agreement with the military government.

The NMSP-SLORC ceasefire has produced un-even results - including the continuation of various rights abuses, and a return to armed conflict in some areas. Furthermore, it has not resulted in significant progress on the national political stage. Nevertheless the truce has delivered some benefits to local communities, and created the political space within which a re-emergent Mon civil society has begun the urgent task of rehabilitating conflict-affected communities, building capacities for peace, and models of 'democracy from below'. In general however, the NMSP has been slow to recognise and encourage the strategic importance of the civil society sector - which has come under new threat of suppression, following the events of August-October 2007.

One of the most important and interesting questions, twelve years after the ceasefire, is what the future holds for the NMSP. The party still retains most of the characteristics and political culture of an insurgent organization. Will the NMSP be able to re-invent itself as a dynamic political party (and rival to the partly dormant MNDF) - or will it continue to guard the frontiers of the 'ceasefire zone', and exercise a declining influence over the wider Mon population?

The latter is probably the default position - at least until the SPDC moves against the remaining armed groups in Burma, or the central government undergoes radical change. In this case, the party should re-examine its relations with the more dynamic elements of the Mon community in Burma and the borderlands. Rather than simply tolerating civil society networks, the NMSP should seek to actively promote, protect and facilitate their work. In this way, the *de facto* NMSP local government may gain some credit for creating the space within which grass roots democracy can re-emerge in Monland, while its leaders continue to call for change at the national-elite level of politics in Burma.

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