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# The Dynamics of Sixty Years of Ethnic Armed Conflict in Burma

## INTRODUCTION

The Union of Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, which continues to suffer one of the longest internal ethnic armed conflicts in modern times. As a post-colonial modern nation-state, the Union of Burma was founded by pre-colonial independent peoples, namely the Chin, Kachin, Shan, and other peoples from what was termed Burma Proper, who in principle had the rights to regain their national independence from Great Britain separately and found their own respective nation-states. Instead, they all opted to form a Union together by signing the Panglong Agreement on 12 February 1947, based on the principles of voluntary association, political equality, and the right of self-government in their respective homelands through the right to *internal* self-determination, which they hoped to implement through a decentralized federal structure of the Union of Burma. In order to safeguard the above principles, the “right of secession” from the Union after ten years of independence was guaranteed to *every* State, that is., all ethnic nationalities who formed member states of the Union, as it was enshrined in Chapter X, Articles 201-206 of the 1947 Constitution of the Union of Burma, and adopted as one of the founding principles of the Union.

Burma, however, did not become a federal union as it was envisaged in 1947 at the Panglong Conference. Instead, it became a quasi-federal union with a strong connotation of a unitary state where a single ethnic group called the Burman/Myanmar people controlled all state powers and governing systems of a multi-ethnic plural society of the Union of Burma. Closely related to this constitutional problem, which created the root cause of ethnic inequality and political grievances, another major problem that confronted Burma from the very beginning was what social scientists called “state formation conflict” which brought the country into civil war soon after independence. The “state formation conflict” broke up because the “made-up” of the Union was not inclusive.

Since the Panglong Agreement was signed by peoples from pre-colonial independent nations, that is., the peoples who were conquered independently by the colonial power of Great Britain, not as part of the Burman or Myanmar Kingdom; three major ethnic nationalities from Burma Proper, namely, the Arakan, Karen, and Mon peoples were not invited officially to the Panglong Conference. They were represented by General Aung San as peoples from “Burma Proper”, that is., a pre-colonial Burman or Myanmar Kingdom. The futures of these peoples, especially the Karen who had already demanded a separate state, were not properly discussed at the Panglong Conference, which eventually triggered the first shot of ethnic armed conflicts in the

form of a “state formation conflict” in 1949. Unfortunately, ethnic issues in Burma remain unsolved and as a result over sixty years of civil war continues today.

In addition to this state formation conflict, which is a conflict between the government and the identity-based, territorially focused, opposition of ethnic nationalities; another dimension of internal conflict in Burma, that arose out of independence, was the misconception of “nation-building” for “state-building”, or what became the confusion between “nation” and “state”, which resulted in the implementation of the “nation-building” process as a process of ethnic “forced-assimilation” by successive governments of the Union of Burma. The “nation-building” process with the notion of “one ethnicity, one language, one religion” indeed reflected the core values of Burman/Myanmar “nationalism”, which originated in the anti-colonialists motto of “*Amyo, Batha, Thatana*”, that is to say, the *Myanmar-lumyo* or Myanmar ethnicity, *Myanmar-batha-ska* or Myanmar language, and *Myanmar-thatana* of *Buddha-bata* or Buddhism, and it has become after independence the unwritten policies of “Myanmarization” and “Buddhistization”, and a perceived legitimate practices of ethnic and religious “forced-assimilation” into “*Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo*” (that is, to say ‘to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist’), in multi-ethnic, multi-religious plural society of the Union of Burma.

In the process of implementing the “nation-building” with the notion of “one religion, one language, one ethnicity”, the successive governments of the Union of Burma, dominated and controlled by ethnic Myanmar, have been trying to build an ethnically homogenous unitary state of *Myanmar Naing-ngan*, in which the language of *Myanmar-batha-ska* will be the only official language and Buddhism will be the state religion; as the saying goes ‘*Buddha-batha Myanmar Lu-myo*’. When the “nation-building”, not “state-building”, process was implemented by using coercive forces for assimilation; the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan, and other ethnic nationalities, whose combined homelands cover sixty per cent of the territory of the Union of Burma and composed more than forty per cent of the country’s population, were left to an either-or choice: either to accept forced-assimilation or resist by any means, including armed resistance. Fortunately or unfortunately, they all opted for the second option, resulting in over sixty years of civil war.

In this paper, I will analyse the dynamics of internal conflict that caused the conditions for over sixty years of civil war in Burma. In so doing, I will first investigate the root cause of ethnic armed conflict, and argue that the constitutional crisis and the implementation of the “nation-building” process with the notion of “one religion, one language, and one ethnicity” are the root cause of internal conflict and civil war in Burma. The political crisis in Burma, therefore, is not only ideological confrontation between democratic forces and the military regime but a constitutional crisis, compounded by the government’s policy of ethnic “forced-assimilation” through the “nation-building” process, which resulted in militarization of the state, on the one hand, and “insurgency as a ways of life” in ethnic areas, on the other.

## NATION-BUILDING AND THE PROBLEM OF ETHNIC FORCED ASSIMILATION

For newly independent countries like Burma in 1948, independence was not the end of the search for sovereignty but the beginning of a twin process of “nation-building” and “state-building”. In a homogenous “state” or “nation-state” where the boundaries of the state or nation-state coincided with the extension of an ethnic population or a single language group, and where the total population of the nation-state share a single ethnic culture, “nation-building” and “state-building” are blended and even seen as a single same process. In such a situation, modern nation-state assumes the existence of “national identity” with the notion of “one ethnicity, one language, and one religion” (Cf. Sakhong in Williams and Sakhong, 2005: 11-27).

In a modern nation-state, which receives its legitimacy from the people; a state requires some degree of identification from its citizens. Thus, in order to provide the citizens a feeling of community of statehood, especially in a homogenous nation-state, it is essential to build a “national identity”, which is usually created by the state out of the national characteristics, such as history, culture and language. In a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural plural society, a modern nation-state also requires building a “state-identity”,

which is usually created out of the founding ideology and uniqueness of a particular “nation-state”. While “nation-building” is a process of building a community of shared values through rites and rituals, culture and language, collective memories and historical experiences; “state-building” on the other is a process of constructing political institutions, establishing common economic and legal systems, promoting economic development, and protecting the security and well-being of its citizens (Cf. Fukuyama, 2006: 3).

Since the emergence of the Westphalia model of “nation-state”, which assumes a nation-state as a homogenous country where the boundaries of the “state” and “nation” coincided, it must be noted that religion plays an important role in the “nation-building” process. The ruler, according to the “Westphalia Agreement” of 1648, was entitled to enforce religious uniformity within his realm, as it was stated: *cuius regio, ejus religio*. In modern Burma, the Westphalia model of the “nation-state” reinforces the old notion of “*Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo*” (to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist), in which religion and ethnicity are not only blended but the kings were regarded as “the defenders of faith, the promoters of Buddhism, builders of pagodas, and the patrons of the sangha”(J. Schector, 1967: 106).

As the old saying of *Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo* so clearly put it, Buddhism, indeed, had been inseparably intertwined with the Myanmar national identity. Historically, Buddhism had played a most important role in binding together diverse ethnic groups such as the Burman, Mon, Shan and Rakhine (Arakanese).<sup>1</sup> Thus, it was quite reasonable for leaders like U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the Union of Burma, to believe that Buddhism could make a significant contribution to some aspects of national assimilation through the “nation-building” process.

However, although Buddhism had been a powerful integrative force in traditional Burman/Myanmar society, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural modern nation-state of the Union of Burma is a very different country from that of the pre-colonial Myanmar Kingdom. The Chin, Kachin, Shan and other ethnic nationalities in the Union of Burma became member states of the Union in order to speed up their own search for “freedom”, as it was stated in the Preamble of the Panglong Agreement. Thus, for them, the basic concept of independence was “independence without assimilation”, that is, what political scientists used to term “coming together”, or “together in difference”, or “unity in diversity”, which implies that nations come together in order to form a modern nation-state in the form of a Federal Union, or *Pyi-daung Suh* in Burmese.

*Pyi-daung* in Burmese means a “nation” or “country”, and *Suh* means “together” or “combining”. A combination of the two terms: *Pyi-daung Suh* means the nations coming together to build a state or a Union with the purpose of sharing and ruling the Union together; while maintaining the right of *internal* self-determination and the autonomous status of their respective nations and homelands with the purpose of self-rule. Thus, *Pyi-daung Suh* is a combination of “shared-rule” and “self-rule”; “shared-rule” for all ethnic nationalities who are the member of the Union, and internal “self-rule” for their respective homelands.

Within this concept of “coming together”, it is important to differentiate between “nation” and “state”; and thereby between “nation-building” and “state-building” to understand what Hannah Arendt refers to as a “secret conflict between state and nation”. According to Arendt,

[The nation] presents the ‘milieu’ into which man is born, a closed society to which one belongs by the right of birth; and a people becomes a nation when it arrives at a historical consciousness of itself; as such it is attached to the soil which is the product of past labour and where history has left its traces. The state on the other hand is an open

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<sup>1</sup> Burmese political history from the Pagan Dynasty (1044–1287) to the British conquest (1824–86) was characterized by endless struggle between the Burman, Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. However, by adopting Buddhism from each other during their long struggles for power and domination, these four ethnic groups shared common values with regard to political systems, customary law and culture, stemming from their common religion of Buddhism.

society, ruling over territory where its power protects and makes law. As a legal institution, the state knows only citizens no matter of what nationality; its legal order is open to all who happen to live on its territory (cited by Beiner in Villa, 2000: 53).

The state, far from being identical with the nation, is “the supreme protector of a law which guarantees man his rights as man, his rights as citizen and his rights as a national” (ibid). By signing the Panglong Agreement, the Chin, Kachin, and Shan co-founded a state or a nation-state or a Union, which is an administrative and legal unit, but they still wanted to keep their own “nation”, a concept which according to Weber belongs to the sphere of values: culture, language, religion, ethnicity, homeland, shared memories and history, a specific sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups or people.

A modern “nation-state” of the Union of Burma is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country where many different ethnic groups who practice different cultures, adhere to different religious teaching, and speak different languages are “coming together” to form a new “nation-state” of the Union of Burma. Thus, the boundaries of the “state”, which is the “nation-state” of the Union of Burma, and the boundaries of the “nations”, which is the “homelands” of ethnic nationalities or “ethnic national states”, do not coincide and the population of the Union of Burma cannot share a single ethnic culture, or a single language, or a single religious faith.

In multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural countries where the boundaries of “state” and “nation” are not coincided, there is always a source of friction and conflict when the government implements a nation-building process based on the notion of “one religion, one language, and one ethnicity” through using coercive force for assimilation. The nation-building, as mentioned, belongs to “subjective values”: values that cannot be shared objectively but differentiate one group of people from another. Thus, the very notion of nation-building is “hostile to multiculturalism and diversity” (Saunders et al, 2003: 198). Unfortunately, this conflict is exactly what has occurred in Burma during the past sixty years.

Since independence, the successive governments of the Union of Burma implemented “nation-building”, not purely as “state-building”, for the entire Union of Burma. Nation-building, for U Nu, Ne Win, Saw Maung and Than Shwe, was simply based on the notion of “one ethnicity, one language and one religion”—that is to say, the ethnicity of *Myanmar-lumyo*, the language of *Myanmar-batha-ska* and the state religion of Buddhism. Thus, what they wanted to achieve through the “nation-building” process was to create a homogeneous nation of *Myanmar Naing-ngan*, by drawing its political values from the cultural and religious values of *Myanmar-lumyo*, *Myanmar-batha-ska* and *Myanmar-thatana* of Buddhism. While U Nu (1948-1962) opted for cultural and religious assimilation as a means of a nation-building process by promulgating Buddhism as a state religion, General Ne Win (1962-1988) imposed the national language policy of *Myanmar-batha-ska* as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. Supplementing U Nu’s policy of state religion and Ne Win’s national language policy, the current military regime is opting for *ethnicity* as a means of national integration, by imposing ethnic assimilation into *Myanmar-lumyo*. They, thus, changed the country name from Burma to *Myanmar* in 1989.

Since all these ethnic nationalities in Burma could not find any other means of solving the political crisis, they have resorted to armed-struggle. Growing conflicts and over sixty years of civil war have crystallized a sense of ethnic identity in what was before often only a linguistic or ethno-religious category and still divided by religion and ethnic origin; it is this conflict with the state in which the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan and other ethnic nationalities are involved that have given the members of each ethnic group a wider self-awareness and a sense of their common history and destiny which strengthens their aspirations for a separate ethno-national identity in Burma.

The very different forms of ethno-national identities, created by the mobilization and transformation of formally passive *ethnicity* mainly through armed-struggle, have become rooted among ethnic communities in Burma. Through civil war and armed conflict, their ethno-nationalism has become the vehicle for a new national identity that draws many members of the community into new types of politicized vernacular culture and creates a different kind of participant society, or what Martin Smith called, “insurgency as a way of life.” In today’s Burma, while ethnic and political grievances have fuelled conflict in every governmental era, there have been “corollary factors underpinning the twin phenomena of insurgency as a way of life and the militarization of the state in post-colonial Burma” (Smith, 2007: 1). I shall come back to the militarization of the state, but we shall first analyse the constitutional crisis which was the root cause of ethnic inequality and political grievances since independence.

## U NU’S POLICY OF STATE RELIGION, CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS, AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY

At the Panglong Conference in 1947, the Chin, Kachin, Shan and other non-Burman nationalities were promised, as Silverstein observes, the “right to exercise political authority of administrative, judiciary, and legislative powers in their own autonomous national states and to preserve and protect their language, culture, and religion in exchange for voluntarily joining the Burman in forming a political union and giving their loyalty to a new state” (Silverstein in Lehman, 1981: 51).

Unfortunately, Aung San, who persuaded the Chin, Kachin, Shan and other non-Burman nationalities to join Independent Burma as equal partners, was assassinated by U Saw on July 19, 1947. He was succeeded by U Nu as leader of the AFPFL. When U Nu became the leader of the AFPFL, Burman politics shifted in a retro-historical direction, backward toward the Old Kingdom of Myanmar or Burman. The new backward-looking policies did nothing to accommodate non-Myanmar/Burman nationalities who had agreed to join Independent Burma only for the sake of “speeding up freedom”.

As a leader of the AFPFL, the first thing U Nu did was to give an order to U Chan Htun to re-draft Aung San’s version of the Union Constitution, which had already been approved by the AFPFL Convention in May 1947. U Chan Htun’s version of the Union Constitution was promulgated by the Constituent Assembly of the interim government of Burma in September 1947. Thus, the fate of the country and the people, especially the fate of the non-Burman/Myanmar nationalities, changed dramatically between July and September 1947. As a consequence, Burma did not become a genuine federal union, as U Chan Htun himself admitted to historian Hugh Tinker. He told Tinker, “Our country, though in theory federal, is in practice unitary” (Tinker, 1997: 13).

On the policy of religion, U Nu also reversed Aung San’s policy after the latter was assassinated. Although Aung San, the hero of independence and the founder of the Union of Burma, had opted for a “secular state” with a strong emphasis on “pluralism” and the “policy of unity in diversity” in which all different religious and racial groups in the Union could live together peacefully and harmoniously, U Nu opted for a more confessional and exclusive policy on religion by applying cultural and religious assimilation as the core of the “nation-building” process. The revision of Aung San’s version of the Union Constitution thus proved to be the end of his policy for a secular state and pluralism in Burma, which eventually led to the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion of the Union of Burma in 1961.

For the Chin and other non-Burman nationalities, the promulgation of Buddhism as the “state religion of the Union of Burma” in 1961 was the greatest violation of the Panglong Agreement in which Aung San and the leaders of the non-Burman nationalities agreed to form a Union based on the principle of equality. They therefore viewed the passage of the state religion bill not only as religious issue, but also as a constitutional problem, in that this had been allowed to happen. In other words, they now viewed the Union Constitution as an instrument for imposing “a tyranny of majority”, not as their protector. Thus, the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion of Burma became not a pious deed, but a symbol of the tyranny of the majority under the semi-unitary system of the Union Constitution.

There were two different kinds of reaction to the state religion reforms from different non-Burman nationalities. The first reaction came from more radical groups who opted for an armed rebellion against the central government in order to gain their political autonomy and self-determination. The most serious armed rebellion as a direct result of the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion was that of the Kachin Independence Army, which emerged soon after the state religion of Buddhism bill was promulgated in 1961. The “Christian Kachin”, as Graver observes, “saw the proposal for Buddhism to be the state religion as further evidence of the Burmanization [*Myanmarization*] of the country,” (Graver, 1993: 56), which they had to prevent by any means, including an armed rebellion. The Chin rebellion, led by Hrang Nawl, was also related to the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion, but the uprising was delayed until 1964 owing to tactical problems. Thus, the Chin rebellion was mostly seen as the result of the 1962 military coup, rather than the result of the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961.

The second reaction came from more moderate groups, who opted for constitutional means of solving their problems, rather than an armed rebellion. The most outstanding leader among these moderate groups was Sao Shwe Thaik of Yawnghwe, a prominent Shan *Sawbwa*, who was elected as the first President of the Union of Burma. Although a devout Buddhist, he strongly opposed the state religion bill because he saw it as a violation of the Panglong Agreement. As a president of the Supreme Council of United Hills People (SCOUHP), formed during the Panglong Conference, he invited leaders of not only the Chin, Kachin and Shan, the original members of the SCOUHP, but also other non-Burman nationalities — the Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Rakhine (Arakan) — to Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State, to discuss constitutional problems. Unfortunately, these problems still remain unsolved. The conference was attended by 226 delegates and came to be known as the 1961 Taunggyi Conference, and the movement itself was known later as the Federal Movement.

At the Taunggyi Conference, all delegates, except three who belonged to U Nu’s party,<sup>2</sup> agreed to amend the Union Constitution based on Aung San’s draft, which the AFPFL convention had approved in May 1947. At the AFPFL convention, Aung San had asked, “Now when we build our new Burma shall we build it as a Union or as Unitary State? In my opinion, he answered, “it will not be feasible to set up a Unitary State”. He strongly argues that “we must set up a Union with properly regulated provisions to safeguard the right of the national minorities” (Aung San in Silverstein, 1993). According to Aung San’s version of the constitution, the Union would be composed of ethnic national states, or what he called “Union States” such as the Chin, Kachin, Shan and Burman States and other ethnic national states such as Karen, Karenni (Kayah), Mon and Rakhine (Arakan) States. The “original idea”, as Dr. Maung Maung observes, “was that the Union States should have their own separate constitutions, their own organs of state, *viz.* Parliament, Government and Judiciary” (Maung Maung, 1959: 170).

U Chan Htun had reversed all these principles of a Federal Union after Aung San was assassinated. According to U Chan Htun’s version of the Union Constitution, Burma Proper or the ethnic Burman/Myanmar did not form their own separate ethnic national state; instead they combined the power of the Burman/Myanmar ethnic national state with sovereign authority of the whole Union of Burma. Thus, while one ethnic group, the Burman/ Myanmar, controlled the sovereign power of the Union, that is, legislative, judiciary, and administrative powers of the Union of Burma; the rest of the ethnic nationalities who formed their own respective ethnic national states became almost like “vassal states” of the ethnic Burman or Myanmar. This constitutional arrangement was totally unacceptable to the Chin, Kachin and Shan who had signed the Panglong Agreement on the principle of equality, a view that was shared by the other nationalities.

They therefore demanded at the 1961 Taunggyi Conference the amendment of the Union Constitution and the formation a genuine Federal Union composed of ethnic national states, with the full rights of political autonomy, i.e., legislative, judiciary and administrative powers within their own ethnic national states, and self-

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<sup>2</sup> Those three delegates who did not agree to the idea of a federal Union were Za Hre Lian (Chin), Aye Soe Myint (Karen), and Sama Duwa Sinwanaung (Kachin).



determination including the right of secession. They also demanded separation between the political power of the ethnic Burman/Myanmar national state and the sovereign power of the Union, i.e., the creation of a Burman or Myanmar ethnic national state within the Union.<sup>3</sup>

The second point they wanted to amend on the Union Constitution was the structure of the Chamber of Nationalities. The original idea of the creation of the Chamber of Nationalities was that it was not only to safeguard the rights of non-Burman nationalities but also the symbolic and real equality envisaged at the Panglong Conference. Thus, what they wanted was that each ethnic national state should have the right to send equal representatives to the Chamber of Nationalities, no matter how big or small their ethnic national state might be. In other words, they wanted a kind of Upper House similar to the American Senate.

But what had happened, based on U Chan Htun's Union Constitution, was that while all the non-Burman nationalities had to send their tribal or local chiefs and princes to the Chamber of Nationalities; it allowed Burma Proper to elect representatives to the Chamber of Nationalities based on population. Thus, the Burman or Myanmar from Burma Proper, who composed the majority in terms of population, was given domination of the Union Assembly.

In this way, the Union Assembly, according to U Chan Htun's version of the Union Constitution, was completely under the control of the Burman or Myanmar ethnic nationality. Not only did the powerful Chamber of Deputies have the power to thwart aspirations and the interests of non-Burman nationalities, but the Burmans also dominated the Chamber of Nationalities. That was the reason why the total votes of non-Burman nationalities could not block the state religion bill even at the Chamber of Nationalities. Thus, all the non-Burman nationalities now viewed the Union Constitution itself as an instrument for imposing "a tyranny of majority" and not as their protector. They therefore demanded a change from such constitutional injustice at the 1961 Taunggyi Conference.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Federal Movement and the Taunggyi Conference can be viewed, as noted by Shan scholar Chao Tzang Yawngghwe, as "a collective non-Burman effort to correct serious imbalances inherent in the constitution" of 1947 (Yawngghwe in Silverstein, 1989: 81).

In response to the demand of the 1961 Taunggyi Conference, U Nu had no choice but to invite all the political leaders and legal experts from both Burman and non-Burman nationalities to what became known as the "Federal Seminar" at which "the issues of federalism and the problems of minorities would be discussed with a view to finding a peaceful solution" (Silverstein in Lehman, 1981: 53). The meeting opened on 24 February 1962 in Rangoon while parliament was meeting in regular session. But before the seminar was concluded and just before U Nu was scheduled to speak, the military led by General Ne Win seized state power in the name of the Revolutionary Council. In the early morning of 2 March 1962, he arrested all the non-Burman participants of the Federal Seminar and legally elected cabinet members, including U Nu himself, dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution and thus ended all debate on federal issues.

In this way, U Nu's great hope of a Buddhist state religion as the unifying identity of the Union of Burma proved to be one of the decisive dividing factors that led to his own defeat and the end of the parliamentary experiment in Burma. Buddhism, which used to be a vital source of political legitimacy for traditional Burmese kingship, could no longer provide the values needed to create a modern Burmese national identity in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural plural society of the Union of Burma.

## NE WIN'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY, SCORCHED EARTH CAMPAIGN, AND MILITARIZATION OF THE STATE

Since the independence movement, "nationalism" had been an enduring element of the Burmese concept of

<sup>3</sup> See *Documents of Taunggyi Conference, 1961* (Rangoon: Published by the SCOUP, 1961) in Burmese.

<sup>4</sup> See *Documents of Taunggyi Conference, 1961* (in Burmese).

political legitimacy, the “*sine qua non* of political life”, as Steinberg so aptly puts it. As we have seen, U Nu apparently mixed nationalism with Buddhism in his attempt to legitimize his government. General Ne Win, on the other hand, mixed nationalism with socialism, and he also used military leadership as a means to introduce socialism into the country.

Nationalism, for both U Nu and Ne Win, was simply based on the notion of “one ethnicity, one language, one religion”, that is., the *Myanmar-lumyo* or Myanmar ethnicity, *Myanmar-batha-ska* or Myanmar language, and the *Myanmar-thatana* of Buddhism. Although their approaches to ethnic and religious “forced-assimilation” were different, U Nu and Ne Win both had the same goal of creating a homogeneous people in the country. While U Nu opted for cultural and religious assimilation into Buddhism as a means of “forced-assimilation”, Ne Win removed the rights of the country’s religious and cultural minorities, especially minority’s language right, as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state, under the motto of “one voice, one blood, and one nation”, and adopted the “national language policy” as a means of ethnic “forced assimilation”. U Nu and Ne Win thus complemented each other, although their approaches in depriving cultural and religious minorities of their rights were different in nature.

The elimination process of ethnic rights began with the promulgations of the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law and the 1965 Censor Law. As these two laws made stumbling blocks for the publications of ethnic languages, including the curriculums and teaching materials for both secular schools and Sunday Schools, the Chin and other ethnic nationalities in Burma were unable to promote their language under the military dictatorship. Since the basic rights to promote the non-Burman/Myanmar languages, cultures and belief systems were severely curtailed, the incentive for preserving, protecting and promoting through teaching, learning, writing, circulating, practicing and propagating of their own languages, cultures and religions has become a life and death matter for the Chin and other ethnic communities in Burma. This is a life and death matter because the survival of ethnic nationalities in Burma as distinctive peoples who practice different cultures, speak different languages, and worship different religions, depends so much on whether they are able to preserve, protect and promote their ways of life as fundamental rights.

Accumulation from the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, the 1965 Censor Law, and the 1966 Revolutionary Council’s decree, which declared the *Myanmar-batha-ska* or *Maynmar-sa* as the medium of instruction at all levels of schools, colleges and universities; General Ne Win’s national language policy finally reached its peak when the 1974 Constitution was promulgated, which adopted the *Myanmar-batha-ska* as the *official language* of the Union of Burma. Although, ethnic languages were allowed to use for the communication purpose between the central government and ethnic states, as stated in Article 198, no mechanisms or institutions were provided to preserve, protect and promote ethnic languages. Since the highest law of the land allowed the existence of the *Myanmar-batha-ska* as the only “official language”, the rest of the ethnic languages, including the Chin and its various dialects, were legally “unofficial” and therefore could be discriminated against “legitimately” in various means by using all kind of state mechanisms and existing laws.

General Ne Win, in fact, deployed the *Tatmadaw* to implement his “national language policy” as part of the military campaign against ethnic minority groups in the country under the “four-cut” strategy, which was implemented within the framework of “people’s war doctrine” with the motto of “one voice, one blood, and one nation”. Although he adopted the “national language policy” as a means of ethnic “forced-assimilation”, Gen Ne Win thinly disguised this policy under the programme known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism” (BWS) as its “nation-building” process. In order to implement his BWS programme, General Ne Win established the “Burma Socialist Program Party” (BSPP), and used the armed forces, known as *Tatmadaw*, as the nucleus of “nation-building” not only by building the *Tatmadaw* as a national institution and a state mechanism, but also by promoting members of the armed forces as the “the guardian of the people and protectors of the Union” (Selth, 2002: 37). As part of his ambitious to build an army state under the disguise of



the need for a strong army that would prevent the Union from its collapsed, General Ne Win adopted the “people’s war doctrine” as the military doctrine of the Tatmadaw in 1965, and formed hundreds of militia organizations all over the country, known as *Kar-Kwe-Ye* (KKY) in Burmese, and applied the “four-cut” strategy against ethnic armed groups.

The “four-cut” strategy was first practiced in 1966 but officially adopted as the Tatmadaw military’s doctrine in 1968, which aims at “to cut food supply to the insurgents; to cut protection money from villagers to the insurgents; to cut contacts (information and intelligence) between people and the insurgents; and to make the people cut off the insurgent’s head, that means, involving the people in fighting, particularly the encirclement of insurgents” (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009: 26). The third aspect of the “four-cuts strategy” is directly linked with the “national language policy” of campaigning against ethnic nationalities; for this strategy is about to cut off people to people contact, information, and intelligence. I have argued elsewhere about the link between the “national language policy” and “four-cut strategy” as follows:

In order to cut “information” off in ethnic areas, successive military regimes in Burma have prohibited the publication of any information in ethnic languages. So, there is no independent newspaper, no independent radio station and no printing house for any ethnic language. This strategy is implemented hand in hand with the government policy of “national language”: through which ethnic languages are systematically eliminated. While ethnic languages are systematically eliminated and even destroyed, the national language of *Myanmar-batha-ska*, the dominant Myanmar language, is protected and promoted by using state mechanisms. The regime as also forced the non-Myanmar or non-Burman ethnic nationalities to speak the *Myanmar-batha-ska* at all the government’s official functions and forced them to learn the *Myanmar-sa*, which is the only official language in the country (Sakhong, 2010: 193).

The national language policy was thus implemented hand in hand with the military campaign of the “four-cut strategy”, which was also known as a “scorched earth” military campaign, in ethnic areas. While the “scorched earth” campaign was designed as a short-term strategy against ethnic nationalities in the country, the “national language policy” was adopted as a long-term strategy to build a “homogenous” country through a so called “nation-building” process.

In 1974, when the new constitution was promulgated, General Ne Win was able to fulfil his vision of building the army state, and the divisions between the state, the army, and the party (BSPP) ceased to exist. The army and the party were not only the supporting mechanisms and institutions of the state but part and parcel of the state because the state was meant to exist for the army and the party, and vice-versa. In this way, General Ne Win used the army (Tatmadaw) and the party (the BSPP) not only as a mechanism of building the army state with the notion of “one voice, one blood, one nation”, but also as a means of building ethnically homogenous unitary state with the notion of “one religion, one language, one ethnicity”. In the process of building ethnically homogenous army state, the fundamental rights of all citizens, political equality of ethnic nationalities, and internal self-determination for all member states of the Union are all eliminated. By eliminating cultural, religious and language rights of ethnic nationalities through the laws made by the BSPP in the name of the state, the notion of “unity in diversity” as “political values” ceased to exist in Burma.

## THE ETHNIC NATIONALITIES’ RESPONSE TO CONSTITUTIONAL DICTATORSHIP AND THE 1988 POPULAR UPRISING FOR DEMOCRACY

By the time the new constitution was promulgated in 1974, and General Ne Win became U Ne Win, the President of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, all the ethnic nationalities in Burma had insurgent groups. Most notable of these were the Karen National Union (KNU), the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO), the Shan State Army (SSA), the New Mon State Party (NMSPP), the Karenni National Progressive Party

(KNPP), the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) and the Chin Democracy Party (CDP). The Chin Democracy Party was founded by John Mang Tling, a former parliamentary secretary of the Union of Burma, who went underground and joined U Nu, who also went underground and formed the Parliamentary Democracy Party (PDP), and took up arms to overthrow General Ne Win's military regime in 1969.

The most effective reaction from the various ethnic nationalities to the promulgation of a new constitution in 1974 was undoubtedly the formation of the "Federal National Democratic Front" in 1975, which was eventually transformed into "the National Democratic Front" (NDF) in May 1976. The significance of the NDF was that it was formed exclusively by the non-Burman ethnic nationalities, with the aims and objectives of "the establishment of a genuine federal union, based on the principles of national self-determination, political equality and progress of all nationalities", declared its intention "to abolish national chauvinism, military bureaucratic dictatorship and the unitary system", and expressly ruled out a "one-party state" (Kiang S. N. Aung, 2000: 78-79).

Despite the success of the "four-cut" campaign against communist insurgency led by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in the Delta and Pegu Yomas, the NDF members of ethnic nationalities, most notably, the KNU, KIO, and SSA were capable of controlling a vast areas in the respective regions as "liberated areas", as Martin Smith observes, and "they were well armed and trained and capable of out-fighting the *Tatmadaw* in conventional and guerrilla warfare", and "each could put several hundred troops into battle, if occasion demanded, before they retreating back into safe mountain strongholds". He continues:

Buoyed by the booming black market and anti-government disaffection, many ethnic forces grew markedly in strength. Armed opposition controlled virtually the entire eastern borders of Burma, from the Tenasserim division in the south to the Kachin state in the north. The three strongest ethnic forces, the KNU, KIO, and SSA, each maintained over 5,000 troops in the field and, and like the CPB's People's Army, were capable of fighting the *Tatmadaw* in the fixed positions of conventional war, which was vital for the defence of border strongholds and trading posts (Smith, 2007: 36).

The black market taxation, one of the main financial sources for ethnic armed groups, ironically was sustained and prolonged by Ne Win's regime. Because of mismanagement, nationalization, centralized socialist economic policy, and isolationism, Burma was economically unable to sustain but relied on the black markets for its consumer goods that came from neighbouring countries crossing the borders that were controlled by ethnic armed groups: the Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan from the eastern borders of Thailand and China; the Kachin from northern borders of China, and Chin from the north-western borders of India, and Arakan from western borders of Bangladesh. Viewing that ethnic armed groups had controlled all the black markets, which in turn influenced the financial markets, Ne Win's once again applied the "four-cut" strategy, this time "to cut off the financial resources" to ethnic armed groups. He thus announced the demonetization of the country's three highest denominations of banknotes: Kyats 25, 50 and 100, on 5 September 1987. The government openly admitted that the demonetization was aimed at "insurgents and black marketers" (Lintner, 1999: 338).

The regime's four-cut strategy missed its target this time. The ethnic armed groups, who never trusted the regime in Rangoon, were "chiefly based in border areas and kept most of their funds in Thai or Chinese [or Indian] currency" (ibid). The black marketers might have suffered temporarily but they were able to make up for the loss after a few more trade deals. The ones who suffered the most were the ordinary people, who lost their saving. It was estimated that "sixty to eighty per cent of all the money in circulation in Burma had become worthless, in one sweep" (ibid). The announcement came at a time when the final exams were approaching for the students at Rangoon University and Rangoon Institute of Technology, and "there was a spontaneous outburst of violence minutes after the announcement had been made" (ibid). The student demonstrations spread to several campuses but the government responded swiftly by closing all the universities and colleges in the country.

The schools were reopened a month later but closed again in March 1988, when a brawl in a tea shop, which led to the death of a student at the hands of the Police, resulted in violent campus wide disturbances. The government responded once again by closing all the universities and in an attempt to calm the situation promised an inquiry. Believing the environment to be more stable, universities were reopened in June. However, violence once more broke out at the failure of the government to bring to justice those responsible for the student's death. Unrest soon spread nationwide and martial law was declared. A general strike on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1988 was bloodily suppressed with thousands of demonstrators and students gunned down in the streets. On the 18<sup>th</sup> September student led demonstrations were once again brutally crushed and soon gave way to an army staged coup, but it was only after Ne Win resigned from his combined-post as the head of the state and the Chairman of the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP).

In final analysis, Ne Win's policy of imposing ethnic "forced-assimilation" through the "nation-building" process with the notion of "one religion, one language, and one ethnicity", especially when his "national language policy" was combined with the "scorched earth" campaign against ethnic nationalities, proved to be one of the main factors that brought him down after 27 years in power.

### THE NEW REGIME'S POLICY OF FORCED-ASSIMILATION, MYANMARIZATION, AND MILITARIZATION

In 1989, the new military regime, known as the 'State Law and Order Restoration Council' (SLORC), under the leadership of General Saw Maung, announced that the country's name be changed from "Burma" to "Myanmar". The change of the country name from "Burma" to "Myanmar" indeed was the highest level of enforcing ethnic forced-assimilation through the "nation-building" process with the unitary version of "one religion, one language, and one ethnicity".

The term "Myanmar", indeed, refers exclusively to one particular ethnic group in the country, while the term "Burma" refers to a post-colonial multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-culture plural nation-state of the Union of Burma. Ever since the first Myanmar Kingdom of the Pagan dynasty was founded by King Annawrattha in 1044, the term "Myanmar" has been used to denote the ethnicity of Myanmar, which is in turn inseparably intertwined with Buddhism, as the saying goes: *Buddabata Myanmar Lu-myo* (broadly, the implication is that to be "Myanmar" is to be Buddhist). The Myanmar Kingdom from the beginning of Pagan Dynasty in 1044 to the end of Kungbaung Dynasty in 1885 was nothing to do with the Chin and other ethnic groups, who joined together in a union, the Union of Burma, in 1947 on the principle of equality. The term Myanmar, therefore, does not include the Chin, Kachin, Shan, and other nationalities who became the members of the Union only after signing the Panglong Agreement.<sup>5</sup>

The regime's political objective is clear: the implementation of ethnic forced assimilation through the "nation-building" process, and the establishment of a homogeneous country of *Myanmar Ngaing-ngan*, with the notion of one ethnicity of *Myanmar-lumyo*, one language of *Myanmar-batha-ska*, and one religion of *Buddha-bata* or a state religion of Buddhism. They argue, however, that the Tatmadaw is the only patriotic institution that is capable of implementing the "nation-building" process, or what Sr. General Than Shwe called "national reconsolidation". As stated as one of its main objectives of the national convention, the armed forces will "participate in the national political leadership role of the state", meaning: no government in Burma would be formed without the participation of and the leading role taken by the Tatmadaw.

Soon after its came to power, the SLORC abolished the 1974 Constitution, together with the Pyitthu Hluttaw, but promised a new election which was eventually held in May 1990. To participate in the election

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<sup>5</sup> . It might in parenthesis be noted that there is controversy over the use of the terms Myanmar, Bama, Burman, and Burmese, revolving around the question about whether the terms are inclusive (referring to all citizens of the Union) or exclusive (referring only to the Burmese-speakers).

the BSPP changed its name to the “National Unity Party” (NUP) and also began to canvass. However, it soon became evident that the NUP was losing to the “National League for Democracy” (NLD), especially due to the popularity of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. After slanderous attacks on her in the media had failed, the government had both Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo arrested on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1989. Despite the fact that two of its main leaders were under house arrest and disqualified, the National League for Democracy was still able to win 392 (80%) of the 485 seats. The military-backed party, the National Unity Party (NUP), won only 10 seats (2%). The balance of power was held by the ethnic parties, the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD) – 67 seats (16%) and 10 independents (2%).

Despite the party’s clear victory, the SLORC refused to hand over power to the NLD claiming that a constitution needed to be drafted first. The NLD and the newly formed United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), an umbrella group of ethnic party representatives, issued a joint statement calling on the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to convene the Pyithu Hluttaw in September, 1990. Despite such calls the SLORC refused to honour the election result and instead sought to hold on to power claiming that a National Convention would need to be convened to write a new constitution. After two years of political impasse, and with members of the NLD still in jail or under house arrest, the SLORC announced, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 1992, that it would hold a National Convention, which was eventually convened in 1993.

After 14 years of deliberation and several sessions, constant suspensions and reopening, the National Convention was concluded on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2007. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2008, the SPDC stated that a National Referendum to adopt the constitution would be held in May 2008. In spite of the fact that Cyclone Nargis struck the country on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2008 causing widespread devastation, the regime insisted on continuing with its plan to hold the referendum, except for a few townships where the destruction occurred most, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2008. The regime announced that the draft Constitution had been overwhelmingly approved by 92.4 per cent of the 22 million eligible voters, stating that there had been a turnout of more than 99 per cent.

In order to build a homogeneous nation-state of *Myanmar Ngain-ngan*, in which the military will take the leading role in national politics, the 2008 Constitution was designed in such a way that the armed forces would remain above the law and be independent from the government, and, therefore, would dominate and control the three branches of political power. To control the legislative power at both the Union and State and Regional Assemblies, the 2008 Constitution reserves 25 percent of the seats in all legislative chambers for the military personnel’s. In this way, according to the 2008 Constitution, a total of 386 military personnel will be appointed as lawmakers; (110 out of 440 seats for lower house; 56 out of 224 seats for upper house; and 220 out of 883 seats for 7 states, 7 regions and 3 autonomous regions).

The executive power of the state, according to the 2008 Constitution, will be totally under the control of the armed forces. The President and two Vice-presidents, who are the head of the state and represent the country, will be elected not by the public but by the Presidential Electoral College, consisting of three groups of parliamentarians: upper house, lower house and military appointed lawmakers. Each group will nominate one candidate for the presidency. Members of the Electoral College will then vote for one of the three to become president. The candidate with the most votes takes the top job and the unsuccessful candidates will become vice-presidents. All will serve five year terms. In this way, the military constitution has by-passed the public in presidential election process, but guaranteed the armed forces, as decision makers, participation in the highest level of national politics. In addition to the 386 military personnel already appointed as lawmakers, the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Service will appoint three generals as ministers of defense, the interior and border affairs. The president can also select military officers to head other ministries. Armed forces members serving in government, parliamentary or civil service roles accused of a crime will be tried by a military court martial court rather than a judicial one.

The 2008 Constitution creates a powerful body, the “National Defense and Security Council”, consisting of 11- member committee tasked with making key decisions. While the president will serve as the Chairman, military personnel will occupy five of the 11 places on the National Defense and Security Council. In this way, the armed forces will control the decision making process at a political body which is granted the right to declare “state of emergency”. The “state of emergency” in the 2008 Constitution, unlike a democratic constitution, is a mechanism created for the armed forces to control the state. Through the right to declare “state of emergency” the highest law of the land granted the chief of armed forces the right to take over the state power, or the constitutional right of a military coup. With presidential approval, the armed forces chief can assume sovereign power and declare a state of emergency, with full legislative, executive and judicial power. In this way, the armed forces will remain above the laws and control the state.

After making sure that the domination of the military in the new government was properly designed in the new constitution, which was eventually approved by using all available state mechanisms and military might through the national referendum in 2008, new general elections were held in November 2010, and installed a new military-dominant-civilian-government in March 2011.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the military regime had accelerated its seven-step roadmap since 2004, tensions between ethnic armed groups and the Burma Army, Tatmadaw, have intensified. As the tension has increased, ethnic armed groups from both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups have discussed joint cooperation should the SPDC launch an offensive against them. In May 2010, the first meeting between the two sides of ethnic armed groups, ceasefire and non-ceasefire, was held. At the second meeting in September 2010, they jointly formed a committee, the “Committee for the Emergence of a Federal Union” (CEFU), comprising three ceasefire groups: KIO, NMSP, and SSA-N (Shan State Army-North), and three non-ceasefire groups: KNU, KNPP (Karenni National Progressive Party), and CNF (Chin National Front).

In February 2011, CEFU was transformed into the “United Nationalities’ Federal Council” (UNFC). As the “committee” is transformed to the “council” its members increased, from 6 to 12 armed groups with approximately 20,000 troops; and supported its formation process by the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), which is a political alliance of all ethnic nationalities from seven ethnic states. The ENC and UNFC are committed to collaboration on political and military matters with the final objective of achieving a genuine federal union of Burma. This has been a solid work in progress over the last decade. The UNFC issued a statement soon after it was formed, and urged the international community “to force the Burma Army to negotiate with the ethnic nationalities in order to find a political solution”. They also declared in the statement that “we will wage unconventional warfare until the Burma Army negotiates.”<sup>6</sup>

The formation of the UNFC, similar to the formation of the NDF in 1976, indicates that so long as the government practices the policy of ethnic forced-assimilation in the name of “nation-building” process, there will always be strong reactions from ethnic armed groups, as Nai Han Tha, General Secretary of UNFC, recently said, “we can continue our struggle for another sixty years” (Radio Free Asia, 11 Sept 2011). Sixty years of ethnic armed conflicts and civil war have proved that the policy of ethnic forced-assimilation through the “nation-building” process with the notion of “one religion, one language, and one ethnicity” is unsuitable for multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural countries like the Union of Burma. The Myanmar ethno-nationalism with the motto of “*Amyo, Batha, Thatana*”, which serves as the foundation for enforcing the policy

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<sup>6</sup>. UNFC’s Statement, on 17 February 2011.

of ethnic forced-assimilation into *Buddha-bata Myanmar-lumyo*, has always been confronted by strong reactions from the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kerenni, Mon, Shan and other ethnic nationalities.

Unfortunately, both the government's policy of ethnic forced-assimilation and the ethnic nationalities reactions of holding arms are not the solution for Burma. Such practices and reactions have resulted only in the militarization of the country, on the one hand, and "insurgency as a ways of life" in ethnic areas, on the other. What the Union of Burma as a multi-cultural plural society needs is not "nation-building" but "state-building", not a centralized unitary state but a decentralized federal union, not an army state but an open society where many different ethnic groups who speak different languages, practice different cultures, and follow different religious teachings can live peacefully together.

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