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PEOPLE'S MILITIA FORCES

TIME TO RE-ASSESS THE STRATEGY?

Since the 1950s, various Burmese Governments have officially created and sanctioned the operations of militia forces in the country's ethnic states. These groups have been used primarily as a military force to fight against ceasefire and non-ceasefire ethnic groups, to control the lives of ethnic populations, and to further secure the country's border areas.

These militias have become notorious for taxing the local population, drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and a wide variety of human rights abuses. They have been allowed to do this with the express permission of local military commanders who have themselves earned money from the variety of illegal activities that the groups operate. In fact, article 340 of the 2008 constitution states that:

With the approval of the National Defence and Security Council the Defence Services has the authority to administer the participation of the entire people in the Security and Defence of the Union. The strategy of the people's militia shall be carried out under the leadership of the Defence Services.¹

As the country seeks to move forward its democratic reforms, further emphasis needs to be placed on regulating these militias whose control over local populations can only destabilise any future peace agreements with ethnic resistance movements. While some of these groups had previous ceasefire agreements with the Burmese Government, a number of them were created to further expand control over the area and act as a counter to ethnic forces.

Known as People's Militia Forces (PMFs) or Border Guard Forces (BGFs)² they continue to exploit the local population and their existence is detrimental to any future progress being made in ethnic areas. In addition, it is possible that these forces, with the collusion of local army commanders, may seek to derail the current peace process to further maintain their control over the population and the lucrative drugs trade. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual notes that '...If militias are outside the host nation government's control, they can often be obstacles to ending an insurgency.' and that, '...Militias may become more powerful than the host nation government, particularly at the local level.'³ While such forces may have been considered a necessary force in the eighties and nineties (see figure 1) when armed resistance was at its peak, the reliance on state militias now needs to be reconsidered.

The first notable militia in Burma was the Sitwundan created in 1948 to counter the influence of communist and ethnic forces, especially the Karen.⁴ This was followed in 1955 by the Pyu Saw Hti which was based on Israel's settlement defence system.⁵ However, it was the formation of the Ka Kwe Ye (KKY) units after Ne Win rose to power, that militia units were able to exert their influence over Shan State. A number of drug dealers including Khun Sa and Lo Hsing Han were allowed to exercise control over their territories in return for not

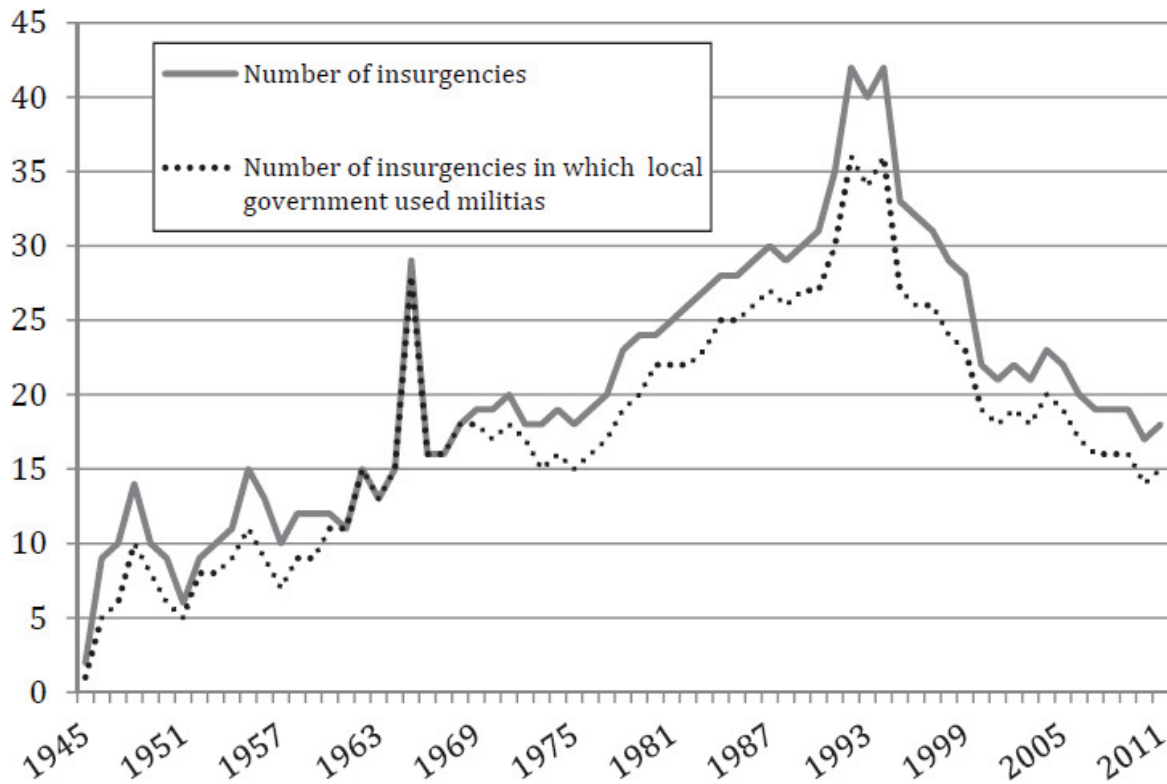


Figure 1 - THE USE OF MILITIA IN INSURGENT CAMPAIGNS SINCE 1945 - THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF MILITIAS, SETH JONES, RAND NDRI 2012

supporting Shan separatists. However, due to their widespread involvement in the drug trade, the KKY units were ordered to disband in 1973. Regardless, many of the unit's commanders turned to insurgency and continued to deal in drugs.

The drug trade continues to flourish and while the UWSA is still considered to be a major trafficker, local militias now play a significant role with the permission of local Burma Army commanders. In its recent report on the drug trade in Shan State, Shan Herald Agency for News noted that

Burmese military commanders [are] giving the green light to People's Militia Forces (PMFs)- the paramilitary forces built up among the local populace by the Army - to establish their own drug production plants and trafficking networks and thereby wrest the market away from the ceasefire groups.

And that there has been:

A massive increase in poppy cultivation, and heroin and methamphetamine production in the Burma Army-People's

On 27 March, 2010, militia leaders who were attending the 63rd anniversary of Burma's Armed Forces Day ceremony in Tachilek were reportedly told by the Tachilek area commander Col Khin Maung Soe on the sidelines: "This is your great opportunity. You would do well not to let it slip by. My only advice is to sell as much drugs as you can across the border (i.e. in Thailand) but not on this side of the border."

Shan Drug Watch, Oct 2011, Issue 4

Militia controlled areas, far more than in areas under rebel-ceasefire control.⁶

In other areas, where drugs are not so widely available, local militia commanders and Burma Army units exploit the local population through taxation, bribery, forced labour and military duty. Almost all villages in ethnic states have been forced to recruit local militia units in their respective areas. Senior General Than Shwe instructed local military authorities to form 1 militia battalion in each quarter of a town and each village tract. Burma has 13,725 quarters/village tracts. Although the Burma Army has not been able to reach this goal yet, the short-term aim appears to be having a militia battalion per township.⁷

For example, one Karen source noted that infantry Battalion 124 and 603, which are under the command of the southern military command, ordered the training of 50 villagers from five wards in Than Taung Gyi town, Taungoo district:

Recruitments are made for people's militia every year. Each person has to serve as a militia for at least one year in rotation. If three people serve this year, the other three have to serve next year. The recruitment depends on the size of the village. If a person doesn't want to attend the militia training, he has to hire another trainee. Some villages which have enough money hire trainees for Kyat two lakhs. If a village has to send five trainees, it spends Kyat 10 lakhs . . . After the militia training, the trainees have to follow the army's patrol columns. In a platoon, there are 5 to 6 soldiers and 5 to 6 people's militia men. In Htan Ta Pin town, people had to serve as militia for 10 years but villagers in Than Taung Gyi Township have had to serve as people's militia since 1997.⁸

The situation is similar in Mon State with one Mon Human Rights group noting that there was an increase in the recruitment of local militia units prior to the 2010 election:

. . . there were just 10 militia, 5 security troops, and 3 to 4 police previously based in his village. Now local SPDC authorities are now trying to involve villagers in the recruitment of security and militia troops. . . . they have requested at least 50 extra members in the different groups . . . the militia members in Kyaikmayaw Township have salaries, earning 60,000 to 100,000 kyat a month through various taxes and extortions levied on their fellow villagers. In addition each militia member's uniform costs 20,000 kyat which villagers are forced to pay for. According to Kyaikmayaw residents, the SPDC gives the militias in the township broad license to extort money.⁹

A situation that was echoed in 2009 in Arakan (Rakhine) State which according to sources had, in 2009, about 6,900 members in militias, but authorities had plans to increase that number to 11,000 prior to the election.¹⁰

The reason for the training of militia forces, at least according to one trainee in the program, was recounted by the Militia's trainer from IB No. 62 as:

. . . if there is a demonstration in the future, we, trainees have to confront the demonstrators and if necessary, they need to shoot the demonstrators with guns equipped by the army.¹¹

The Burmese government's control over ethnic population through the use of militias is further supported by the lack of opportunities for local residents. As noted earlier, militia members can be paid as much as 100,000 kyat consequently, as one villager noted:

I think most of the villagers are not interested in joining the militia training. But they [the military] can persuade the residents who are jobless by giving them some opportunity to get some business using their power in the area. It's probable that they will collect at least 20 people, and maybe more people, to serve in the militia in our village.¹²

However the costs to local villages are a huge burden:

Yapu villagers were ordered to pay 600,000 Kyat for their village's Peoples' Militia Force [approximately 65 soldiers] to buy uniforms, hats, badges and to provide a stipend for the militia privates' families. This order was given by LIB No. 410, a battalion that was installed for security along the Kanbauk to Myaing Kalay gas pipeline.¹³

In addition to these costs, each family has to pay 2,500 to 3,500 kyat a month. Failure to pay could result in arrest. In addition, the recruitment of local militias has had a major impact in often poverty ridden villages and towns as noted by one local government official:

The civil militia training has been on since 2004, every year supervised by the Matupi township Tactical (2) LIB 140 camp. This has forced the youths to flee to neighbouring countries to evade training.¹⁴

There had been a major increase in the training of local militia forces prior to the election. However such forces continue to be a major burden to local communities. The use of militia forces, and their upkeep, increases poverty in already poor areas and further adds to suspicions of the Burma Army and the government.

Now that the government has embarked on a number of peace initiatives it is essential that the role of militias in the lives of local ethnic populations be reduced. While it may be argued that the situation is not sufficiently peaceful enough to begin disbanding local militias, their continued existence, the cost to the community, and the human rights abuses they perpetrate need to be sufficiently addressed. As Seth G. Jones notes in the Strategic Logic of Militias:

...to be effective over the long run, governments need to establish tight control mechanisms that prevent militia from challenging the state and committing human rights abuses that can undermine local support...Consequently, the emphasis of policymakers should be on the quality of regulation, not on whether a militia is inherently desirable or undesirable.¹⁵

The continued militarisation of the country and the army's role in society has not declined through the inauguration of a nominal civilian government. The People's Military Service draft law issued on December 17, 2010, which states that men between the ages of 18 and 45 and women between the ages of 18 and 35 have to serve in the military for two years, further exacerbates an already unendurable situation and continues to lead to people fleeing to neighbouring countries.

For the living standards of local people to be improved, the anxiety felt by local communities in relation to the militarization of their lives needs to be removed. If the government wants to see enduring and lasting peace then the use of militias, and the Military Service draft law, which further entrenches fear of the military, needs to be reassessed and a new strategy formulated.

Notes

¹ Article 340 of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Information, September 2008

² People's Militia Forces are forces that have often been recruited by the Burma Army for anti-insurgency campaigns and village security. Border Guard and Home Guard Forces are groups that had previously signed peace agreements with the Government and then became part of the Border Guard Force program.

³ 'The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', David Petraeus, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5, p87

⁴ The Sitwundan were used to police Karen areas and were responsible for a number of massacres of the local population. Their action would finally lead to the Karen rebellion.

⁵ 'Burma Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity', Martin Smith, Zed Books, 1999 p.95

⁶ Shan Drug Watch, Oct 2011, Issue 4

⁷ NDD commentary # 301, 15 July 2007

⁸ 'Villagers forced to take militia training, Saw Khar Sunyar, KIC, 23 October 2010

⁹ Mon Forum, Issue No 11/November 2009

¹⁰ 'Locals ordered to serve in militias' BNI, 2 September 2009

¹¹ Mon Forum, Issue No 11/November 2009

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Junta conducts civil militia training' BNI, 3 February 2010

¹⁵ 'The Strategic Logic Of Militias', Seth Jones, Rand National Defence Research Institute, 2012