



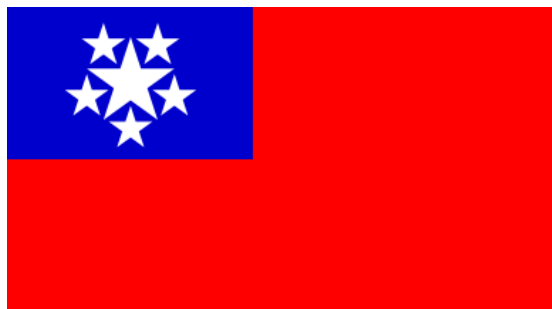
State or Ethnic Federalism?

By Harn Yawnghwe

According to State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the 21st Century Panglong Conference that is being held from 31 August to 4 September 2016, will discuss how a Federal Union can be established. But what kind of federalism do the stakeholders really want? Do they even want the same thing?

Following independence in 1948, the quest for a federal union was put on hold after the new-born nation was convulsed by the revolution declared by the Burmese Communist Party and joined by the People's Volunteer Organization. Three of the four battalions of the Burma Rifles also mutinied.

The earliest concept of federalism was between the four signatories (British Burma, Federated Shan States, Kachin Hills and Chin Hills) and Kayah State. Although the Karenni States did not sign the Panglong Agreement to join the Republic of the Union of Burma, they were annexed as Kayah State. That is why, at independence, the Union flag had a star surrounded by five smaller stars. Five constituent states making up the Union – represented by the larger star. Later, with the establishment of Kayin State, the larger star was re-interpreted as the Pyi-ma (mother state - former British Burma) surrounded by the five Pyi-ne (subsidiary states) – Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Shan States.

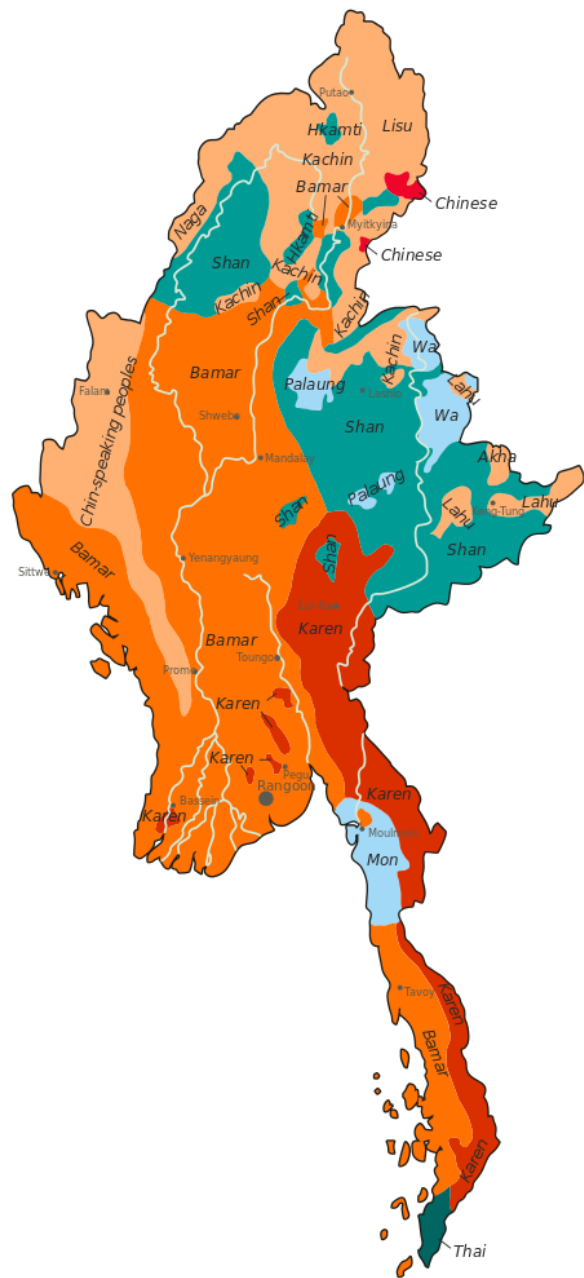
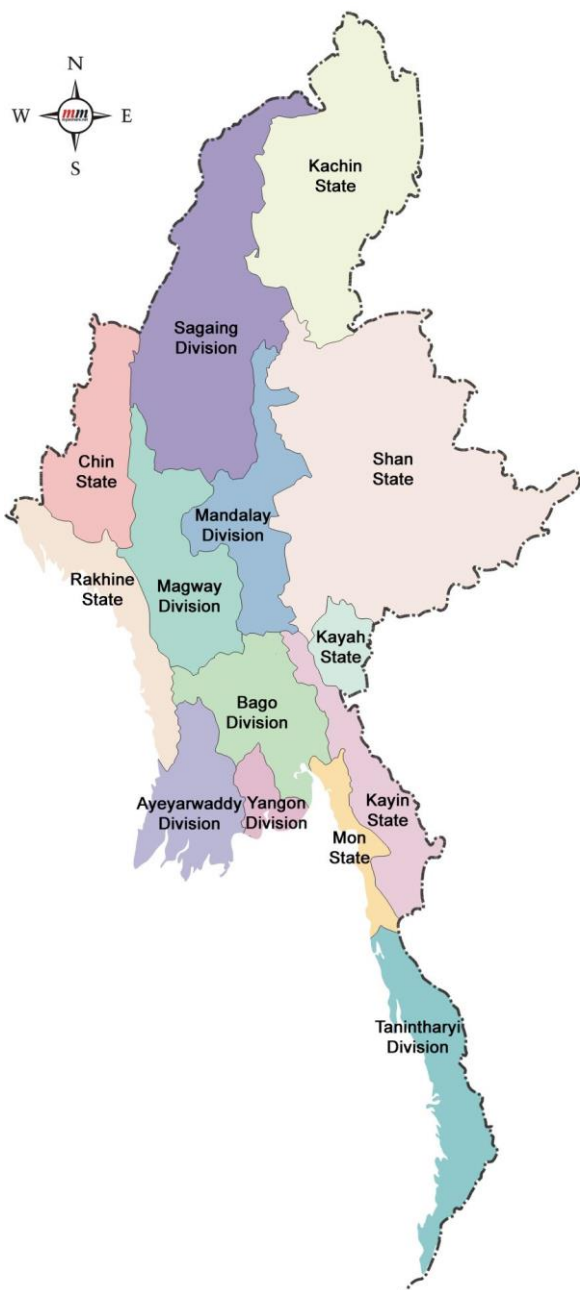


But the concept of six constituent states (including former British Burma) remained. It was revived by the Taunggyi Conference of 1961 that called for a Bama State. Later after 1974, when the Mon and Rakine States were constituted, the concept was expanded and became the 8-state federation.

In 2008, the Than Shwe regime unveiled a new constitution. It called for decentralization and gave equal status to the seven ethnic states and seven regions/ divisions (of the Pyi-ma). In response, the exiled Federal Constitution Drafting & Coordinating Committee proposed a federation of 14 states.

While the debate between 8 and 14 states continues, many of the minority ethnic groups fearful for their identity and culture, would like to see autonomous ethnic states. The precedence for this was set by the self-administered zones / division established by the 2008 Constitution: Naga SAZ, Palaung SAZ, Kokang SAZ, Danu SAZ, PaO SAZ and the Wa SAD. While the Constitution defines the SAZs and SAD, it does not spell out what criteria has to be met to qualify for an SAZ.

Whatever solution is finally agreed upon, it will require a leap of faith on the part of the many minorities that they will not be discriminated against because of their ethnicity or religion. Unfortunately, the record of the past seven decades does not inspire confidence. But unless a solution can be found, Myanmar could end up with even more divisions and conflicts.



The Republic of the Union of Myanmar – shown by States / Divisions-Regions, and by Ethnicity