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Finding Common Ground

Ethnic Political Parties and the 2020 elections

As Myanmar moves towards the 2020 election, ethnic political parties now, more than ever, need to work together and find common ground if they ever want to influence the future politics of the country and ensure ethnic equality.

Minority ethnic groups make up a third of the country's 51.5 million people.¹ Currently, ethnic politics can be defined as consisting of five main actors: merged ethnic political parties, the NCA non-signatory armed ethnic groups, NCA signatory groups, the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum (NBF), and the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA).

All of these groups have divergent interests and it is these interests that may weaken ethnic policymaking in the future. While all groups profess a singular goal – ethnic equality and a genuine federal union, it is how they work together, if they can, that will ultimately decide the future of ethnic representation in the country after the 2020 election.

One of the main ethnic alliance is the United Nationalities Alliance which was formed after the 1990 election and was considered one of the most influential and experienced political alliances operating in the country.² The UNA encompassed a varied spectrum of ethnic political parties, dominated by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), which had contested and won seats in the 1990 general election. Originally, in the UNA there were 12 different political parties. Today, there are 15 parties:

ELECTION RESULTS	1990	2010	2015
Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)	11	-	-
Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)	3	-	-
Kachin State National Congress for Democracy (KNCD)	3	-	-
Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KSANLD)	2	-	-
Kayan National Party (KNP)	-	-	2
Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF)	5	-	-
Mon National Party (MNP)	-	-	3
Mra People's Party (MPP)	1	-	-
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD),	23	-	40
Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP)	1	-	-
Zomi Congress for Democracy (ZCD)	-	-	6
Zomi National Congress (ZNC)	2	-	-
Total	51	0	51

In 1990, the alliance won 51 seats out of 485 seats, or 10.5 per cent of the total. The UNA boycotted the 2010 elections and in 2015, it won 51 seats out of 1,171 or 4.4 per cent.

The United Nationalities Alliance had also worked closely with the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) an ethnic alliance of armed groups with what were considered similar objectives.

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

In relation to its policies, The UNA noted in a letter and statement to U.S. President, Barak Obama, in November 2012 that:

- We believe that only getting ceasefire agreements with armed groups does not guarantee lasting peace until and unless political problems are solved with political means throughout political dialogue and negotiation.
- What the [Thein Sein] government is doing for the policymaking of Burma is just the beginning. All the people of Burma could not enjoy democratic rights yet. There needs to be more accountability and transparency than the present situation.
- We always want and have been fighting for a genuine federal union in which rule of law, equality, self-determination and human rights are restored and prevailed for all ethnic nationalities of Burma.³

Also contesting for political space in the country is the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF),⁴ which was formed as an alliance between political parties that had successfully contested the 2010 election. In total, NBF parties were able to secure 127 seats across the three tiers of parliament. There were originally five parties in the NBF:

ELECTION RESULTS	1990	2010	2015
All Mon Region Democratic Party (AMDRP)	-	16	1
Arakan National Party (ANP)*	-	-	46
Chin National Party (CNP)	-	9	0
Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP)	-	-	2
PaO National Organization (PNO)	-	10	10
Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP)	-	9	0
Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP)	-	35	-
Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP)	-	58	1
Ta-ang (Palaung) National Party (TNP)	-	6	12
“Wa” Democratic Party (WDP)	-	6	3
Wa National Unity Party	-	-	1
Total	-	149	76

* Note: ANP is the merged RNDP (NBF) and ALD (UNA).

In 2010, the NBF won 149 seats out of 1,137 seats or 13.1 per cent. In 2015, it lost half of its seats retaining only 76 out of 1,171 seats or 6.5 per cent.

In the 2015 election, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide, ten ethnic parties won only 76 seats or 11 per cent of the total. According to one report from TNI,

. . . the landslide victory of the NLD, which won 79 per cent of the elected seats in the national legislature, was surprising to many observers. . . But perhaps most surprising was the limited success of ethnic-based parties, many of whom failed to secure a single seat.⁵

While ethnic parties still remain members of the two alliances, a number have also merged with other state-based parties along ethnic lines. The Kachin State People’s Party has been formed by three Kachin parties,⁶ the Kayah State Democratic Party has been formed by two Kayah parties,⁷ the Karen National Democratic Party has been formed by four Karen parties,⁸ the Chin National League for Democracy has been formed by three Chin parties,⁹ and the Mon Unity Party has been formed by two Mon parties.¹⁰

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

Armed ethnic groups have, for the most part, deferred purely political aspirations towards the political parties already in existence, primarily due to the fact, as noted earlier, that all profess the same goal – genuine federalism. That said, however, political alliances have had a tendency to lean towards other non-ethnic political parties, for example, the NBF is more likely aligned with the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) while the UNA is inclined to share allegiance more to Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD despite its lacklustre record on supporting ethnic issues.¹¹

More recent party affiliations have been complicated by the number of new party mergers. This in itself, therefore, asks the question - if independent parties do not follow the line of their alliance where will it leave ethnic politics in the future? As is often the case in the country, ethnic space and the right to represent it is heavily contested. This results in split narratives that weaken ethnic objectives leaving the two main parties the UNLD and the NLD to garner much of the ethnic vote as was seen in 2015 with the NLD.

It is this divergence that could ultimately involve serious concerns for a future federal union. While ethnic parties' voices may be heard, they will be little more than a whisper in comparison to those of the two main parties which are unlikely to put ethnic equality at the forefront of their agendas.

The NLD-led government has, thus far, provided little in the way of evidence that it is seeking to put ethnic parity at the head of its policymaking. While it is true the government has attempted to continue the peace process it has done so in what some observers might consider its own misguided fashion while destroying the trust that was built up during the Thein Sein government.¹²

As is often the case when dealing with Myanmar, generalised terms such as federalism may in itself be an amalgamation of what certain parties define it to be and not what most would consider the ideal. This would dilute what each ethnic group, armed and not, would like to see as the general objective.

For the most part, all ethnic stakeholders seek to be able to, in the words of the late KNU leader Saw Ba U Gyi, control their own political destiny, including the economic resources of their state. However, at the moment, without a more cohesive broad-based coalition of all ethnic parties, and non-state armed actors, such an undertaking is unlikely as the election nears, unless a more united set of policies is decided upon.

Further complicating matters is the ethnic breakdown in each state many of whom are of different ethnicities. Ethnic political parties should seek to represent all constituents within their state's borders. If this cannot be done, and perceived bias is believed to be part of the parties' policies, then those underrepresented people may be forced to choose one of the two larger parties or smaller parties representing their own interests. Therefore, parties that represent a predominant ethnicity in any state need to factor in policy changes that reflect all who live within the state to ensure votes are not lost to the USDP or NLD. The TNI report also notes,

Other ethnic parties that did well in their respective areas were those representing smaller nationality groups that are concentrated in particular geographic areas, including the self-administered territories.¹³

The stalled peace process between ethnic groups and the Government (including the Tatmadaw), has as its stated objective – the establishment of a future federal democratic nation. This means that if the peace talks survive the general elections in 2020, the next phase of the negotiations

AUTHOR | Paul Keenan

will be negotiating federal arrangements between the Government and the ethnic armed groups plus the State Governments.

If the ethnic parties in each State cannot work together and do not win enough seats to form a State Government, the NLD Union Government will be negotiating with NLD State governments, or, alternatively, the USDP Union Government will be negotiating with USDP State Governments, rather than with ethnic armed groups and ethnic parties in each state.

Therefore, if ethnic political parties and alliances do not address such issues and fail to achieve a singular ethnic front against the USDP and NLD then they risk further imperilling the type of federalism and ethnic equality they seek. Instead, there is a strong possibility that federalism will be achieved not based on ethnic desires but by what the two main parties, whoever wins, decide.

Notes

¹ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/ethnic-based-parties-in-myanmar-aim-high-for-2020-elections/85461> accessed 17 August 2019

² <https://www.facebook.com/UnitedNationalitiesAlliance/>

³ Submission revelation opinion of United Nationalities Alliance upon democratization of Burma, 19 November 2012

⁴ Formerly the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum. <https://www.facebook.com/nbf.myanmar/>

⁵ 'The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?', TNI, 17 December 2015

⁶ The Kachin Democratic Party, the Kachin State Democracy Party and the Union and Democracy Party of Kachin State.

⁷ Kayah Unity Democracy party and the All Nationals' Democracy Party.

⁸ Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party, Ksren Democratic Party, the Karen State Democracy and Development Party and the Karen National Democratic Party.

⁹ Chin National Democratic Party, Chin Progressive Party, and the Chin League for Democracy.

¹⁰ All Mon Region Democracy Party and the Mon National Party.

¹¹ Email correspondence with leading ethnic observer, 29 July 2019

¹² Personal conversation with ethnic organisation advisor.

¹³ 'The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?', TNI, 17 December 2015