

Democratization and Ethnic Conflicts interlinked? The Case of Burma

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Introduction

Burma¹ is one of the most diverse states in the world. With ethnic minorities constituting more than one third of the population, it became very vulnerable to violent clashes between different ethnic groups. Before gaining its independence in 1948, ethnic confrontations were often used by the British colonial forces to divide, weaken and rule the country. Since then, Burma has been almost constantly destabilized by conflicts between the Burmese majority and the country's ethnic minorities. After a military junta consolidated its power and established a dictatorship, the situation stabilized and many ceasefires were set. Most of these agreements were reached in exchange for promises of greater independence. However, few of those promises were kept in a long run. As a result, with a new direction towards democratization, old grievances came to the surface and unsatisfied ethnic groups gained new tools to fight for their rights.

The developments of the last few years have set new challenges for the leaders of the country. As ethnic turmoil spreads throughout Burma, the process of

liberalization is threatened. The previous assumption that the move towards democracy would be the solution to all of the country's problems has to be reassessed as it seems like the two processes, democratization and the spread of internal violence, are interlinked.

The aim of this policy paper is to analyse the relationship between the two ongoing processes in Burma: the liberalization of Burmese society and rising tensions between various ethnic groups leading to violent clashes and destabilization of the country. I claim that there are three ways in which ongoing reforms can lead to destabilization of the country. Firstly, relatively fast liberalization of the Burmese society is not accompanied by the same progress in democratization of political institutions. Secondly, liberalization has unleashed a deeply rooted hatred and mistrust that has existed between different ethnic groups for almost a century. Thirdly, the military junta has an interest in obstructing the democratization process with the use of ethnic conflict, and therefore might be actively involved in it.

¹ The official name of the country is Republic of the Union of Myanmar, however, many countries, including the US and the UK decided not to accept the name "Myanmar", which was given to the country by the autocratic military regime and continue using the name "Burma" instead. Many

others, including the UN, use the name "Myanmar". While the EU adopted a compromise, "Burma/Myanmar", in this position paper I chose to use name "Burma". This decision was made for the sake of consistency, not as an expression of my political position.

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In the first section, the policy paper will describe the progress made in the area of democratization in the last decade. The second part will deal with recent developments in the relationships between different ethnic groups. The last chapter will try to find possible links between these two phenomena in order to address them and reach peaceful democratic reforms.

Democratization progress

The first small step towards democratization was initiated in 2003 when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) launched its ‘roadmap to a democracy’. The aim was to slowly introduce a ‘genuine and disciplined’ democratic system with a new constitution and free and fair elections.² However, the new constitution introduced in 2008 was a result of a highly fraudulent and undemocratic referendum, and it therefore failed to create a basis for fair democratic representation in the country. Subsequent elections that took place in 2010 were also not considered fair as many opposition parties, most notably the New League for Democracy (NLD) and representatives of the country’s ethnic minorities, were not allowed or decided not to take part.

A surprising breakthrough happened when new president Thein Sein took over in 2011. He freed thousands of political prisoners

(see G1), relaxed the censorship, legalized demonstrations, and put lots of effort into the peace-making process with ethnic minority insurgents. Prior to this, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD party’s long-time leader, was released from her house arrest, commencing a dialogue with the government and rebuilding her political party. In a 2012 by-election, the NLD and other opposition parties were finally allowed to contest the military in parliament and the issue of human rights was discussed in the legislative body for the first time since independence. Thein Sein does everything he can to open up the Burmese nation, lure foreign investment and gain international recognition of the regime.

As we can see, in the case of Burma, democratization has been a state-controlled and top-down process initiated by the military and, only later, by the president. Although significant progress was made towards democracy, the political system remains deeply flawed, mainly because the government is not willing to give up its power so quickly. For example, the junta included in the 2008 Constitution clauses that secure its power. Clause 109 states that from the 440 seats in the Burmese House of Representatives, 25% will be held by “Defence Services personnel nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services”.³ Proposed policies require 75%

² Khin Maung Win, H-E. U. (2014). Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward. In: *Burma Today News: Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies*.

http://burmatoday.net/burmatoday2003/2004/02/04/0218_khinmgwin.htm.

³ Burmese Constitution, 2008

http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf.

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of parliament’s votes to become law, meaning that the military retains effective veto powers. Furthermore, the constitution provides for a legal “coup d ’état”: clause 413 affirms that if the nation is in a state of emergency, “the President shall declare the transferring of legislative, executive and judicial powers of the Union to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services”.⁴ Moreover, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 177 political prisoners⁵ still remain behind bars,⁶ foreign investment is mainly in the hands of the wealthy elite with strong ties to the military, and rural areas still remain largely untouched by the liberalization process.

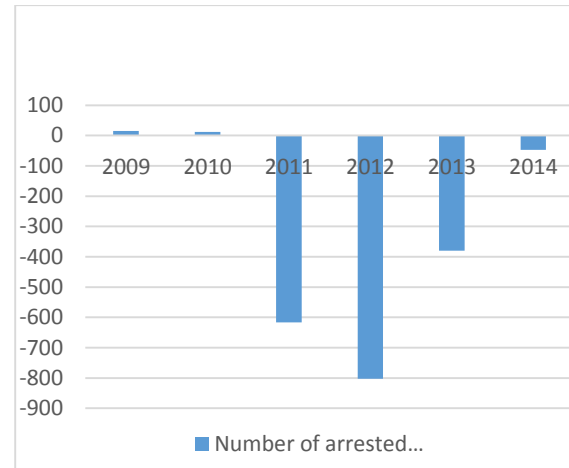
According to the Freedom House, Burma underwent the strongest period of democratization between 2011 and 2013. The country’s score for political rights dropped from 7 to 6, while the score for civil liberties dropped from 7 to 5.⁷ The country is still considered to be “not free”, but there is an undeniable move in a new, more democratic direction.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Anyone who is arrested, detained, or imprisoned for political reasons under political charges or wrongfully under criminal and civil charges because of his or her perceived or known active role, perceived or known supporting role, or in association with activities promoting freedom, justice, equality, human rights, and civil and political rights, including ethnic rights, is defined as a political prisoner. (AAPP definition).

⁶ Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Current Political Prisoner List in Burma 2015 <http://aappb.org/2015/02/currently-political-prisoners-list-and-in-burma/>.

G1: Number of arrested/released political prisoners



Source: AAPP

Development of ethnic tension

Burma’s population of 51.4 million⁹ is comprised of 135 ethnicities spread across 7 states and 7 further sub-state divisions. In the last 25 years, most of the ethnic groups have signed ceasefire agreements with the junta, but over a dozen groups still exist that continue to resist. These groups speak their own languages, have own cultural practices and actively fight for self-determination.

⁷ Freedom House evaluates countries in the range from 1 to 7, while 1 signifies the best level of democracy and 7 signifies the worst.

⁸ Freedom House. 2015. Freedom in the World Report. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/myanmar#.VQqw gY6G-AU>

⁹ Myanmar Population and Housing Census, Provisional Results, 2014, Census Report Volume 1, Department of Population Ministry of Immigration and Population.

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Since 1995, the number of casualties in battles between different ethnic groups and between them and the junta has rapidly decreased (see G2). The reasons are the fall of the Communist Party of Burma, the army's strict and repressive policies and the launch of countless new ceasefire agreements. Fewer casualties and greater internal security has led to a general improvement of living conditions of citizens from ethnic minorities.¹⁰

In 2011, however, with the beginning of the democratic transition and liberalization, Burma saw a revival of ethnically motivated violence in several states. These have most notably occurred in the states of Kachin and Rakhine, but there have been violent clashes reported in Shan and Kayin states too.

The resurgence of the Kachin conflict in June 2011 ended a 17-year old ceasefire. The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and its Kachin Independence Army (KIA) felt betrayed by the Burmese regime after they were not allowed to participate in the 2010 election. The 2012 by-election in Kachin state was postponed due to continuous fighting. KIO wants political concessions and greater autonomy for the Kachin.¹¹ The central government does not want to lose access to the territory's rich

natural resources, and a renewed offensive by the Burmese army in the winter of 2012 cast doubts on possibility of early peace. The peace-making process has so far led only to an increase in violence.

The second imminent internal threat arises from the Rakhine state, where Rohingya Muslims are in a continuous struggle with Rakhine Buddhists. The region's Buddhists demand the expulsion of the Rohingya, who are considered to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Bangladesh, however, does not consider them Bangladeshi citizens either. The Rohingya lost their citizenship in 1982 and more recently laws have been passed to cut their rights even more. President Thein Sein has responded to the anti-Muslim atmosphere by introducing four new laws called the Protection of Race and Religion Bills. If passed by parliament, the new laws will interfere with interfaith marriages, religious conversions and birth rates. According to Religious Conversion Law, for example, those who want to change faith have to first obtain permission from the local authorities.¹²

Although the fighting first started in the Rakhine state, conflict has spread into other parts of the country, embroiling Buddhists and Muslims from other ethnic backgrounds. The violence was triggered by communal riots in 2012, which erupted

¹⁰ Nilsen, M. (2013). Will democracy bring peace to Myanmar?. Peace Research Institute Oslo. s. 117.

¹¹ Ibid., s. 120.

¹² Radio Free Asia. 2015. Civil Society Groups Urge Myanmar to Drop Bills to 'Protect' Religion, Race.

<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/bills-01292015150834.html>.

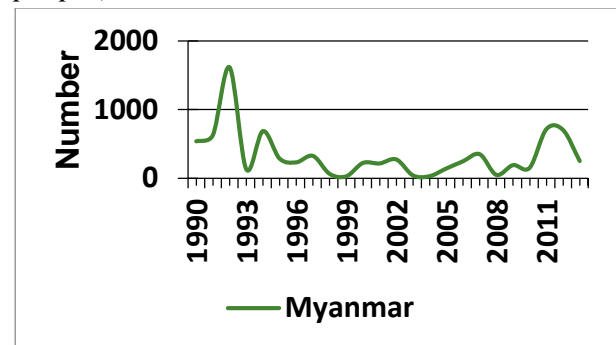
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after a Rohingya allegedly raped a Buddhist girl.¹³ In retaliation, an angry mob executed 10 Muslims, and in doing so began a circle of violence, which resulted in approximately 200 killed,¹⁴ more than 100,000 displaced and thousands of homes burned.¹⁵ Four months later, violence targeted at Muslim minorities broke out again across the whole Rakhine State and spread into other parts of the country. In 2014, violent riots intensified in the second-largest city, Mandalay, leaving two dead. Apart from bigger incidents, smaller communal unrests have been reported on a regular basis throughout the last few years. One of the main instigators of the riots was the recently established 969 Movement led by the radical Buddhist monk U Wirathu and other organizations with an anti-Muslim agenda.

Even among the groups that signed ceasefire agreements, a satisfactory peace was not reached. Many agreements explicitly stated that the ceasefire is only temporary. The ethnic groups were promised many advantages and further autonomy in the new Constitution in 2008, but the expected improvements did not come. Therefore, many of them feel disappointed and betrayed, making

relations between the Burman majority and the country’s minorities even tenser. The overall internal security situation in Burma has a fluctuating trend. Ethnically motivated violence is present all over the country, particularly in the border regions and remote places in the mountains. However, the negotiations and efforts of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), established in 2013 by various armed ethnic rebel groups to serve as a platform for discussions with the government on the ceasefire deal,¹⁶ have shown its first results. The draft text of ceasefire agreement was agreed in the end of March 2015, but further negotiations are required, if the lasting peace is to be reached.¹⁷

G2: *Battle-related deaths (number of people):*



Source: The World Bank

How does democracy create war?

¹³ Walton M.J. and Hayward S. (2014). Contesting Buddhist Narratives Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar, *East-West Center*. s. 7.

¹⁴ Vast majority of the victims were Rohingya.

¹⁵ Roos, J. (2013). *Conflict Assessment in Rakhine State*. Danish Refugee Council report. February/March.

¹⁶ Radio Free Asia. 2014. New Committee Formed to Draft Myanmar Nationwide Cease-Fire Pact. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/nationwide-ceasefire-03102014163312.html>.

¹⁷ BBC. 2015. Myanmar army and rebels sign draft ceasefire agreement. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32126918>.

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Many authors have pointed out that in certain cases democratization can produce internal instability in a country.¹⁸ Mansfield and Snyder claim that the road to democracy is a rocky transitional period, and therefore many countries may experience internal conflicts.¹⁹ As we saw in the last two chapters, this is the case in Burma. Since 2011, the country has seen how ethnic tension has been replaced by open violent clashes.

According to Tristan Bouan there are three ways in which democratization can contribute to internal instability: Firstly, conflicts can be the result of a government's inability to meet the new demands of democratization. This is connected with a failure to create proper democratic institutions, such as the rule of law and an independent judicial system, prior to the liberalization of civil society. As we can see in the case of Burma, an important factor destabilizing the domestic situation is the diffusion of social media into the social life of the Burmese people. Although convenient for the liberalization of society, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and cell-phones have become important tools for transmitting hate speech and initiating riots. Groups and people that were not allowed to

speak out 10 years ago are now able to transmit their political ideologies, and because modern political institutions are not properly developed, freedom of speech has become counter-productive, leading to a spread of violence and turmoil. The main face of the hate messages in social media, leaflets and propaganda in the Rakhine state is the 969 Movement led by monk U Wirathu and the recently established Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha). As Bouan points out, the people of Burma, who were previously only exposed to the propaganda of the military junta, lack any critical thinking. This is why people are very sensitive to hateful social messages, and why anti-Muslim organizations are gaining tremendous influence. The state is not only unable to reintroduce stability, but it also openly supports these movements.²⁰

Second, democratization leads to violence by reviving problems that existed a long time before the democratization process even started, but which were pragmatically suppressed by the previous regime.²¹ In the case of Burma, ethnic violence was already present prior to the Second World War when the Burman majority fought on the opposite side than the minority groups.

¹⁸ See also: Horowitz D.L. (1993) Democracy in divided societies. *Journal of Democracy* 4(4): 18–38., Hegre H, Ellingsen T, Gates S and Gleditsch N.P. (2001) Toward a democratic civil peace? Democracy, political change, and civil war, 1816–1992. *American Political Science Review* 95(1): 33–48., Mansfield, E. D. and Snyder, J. (1995) *Democratization and the Danger of war*, Council on Foreign Relations, Nevers, Renee. (1993)

Democratization and Ethnic Conflicts, Princeton University Press.

¹⁹ Mansfield, E. D. and Snyder, J. (1995) *Democratization and the Danger of war*, Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁰ Bouan. T. (2014) How can Democratization lead to ethnic conflicts?. Mahindra United World College of India, s. 8-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, s. 10.

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After gaining independence, incidents only increased and the assassination of Aung San,²² the author of the Panglong agreement, which granted greater autonomy to minorities, made the situation even worse. The results of mutual negotiations were never fulfilled, and ethnic groups never got what they were promised. When the junta came to power in 1962 and General Ne Win staged a coup d'état, the authoritarian regime stifled all other demands of ethnic minorities in Burma. Thanks to threats and repression, the situation stabilized, but the tension and feeling of betrayal remained. This sense was strengthened when new ceasefire agreements were set in the 1990s based on promises of new political rights, which were never met. This is the reason why recent negotiations between the Burmese government and Burma's ethnic groups rarely reach positive solutions. A sense of "we" and "them" is deeply rooted in the minds of minorities in Burma and historical experience will not allow them to trust mutual cooperation. When the state secretary of a minority party, Chin National Party, expressed his opinion about Aung San Suu Kyi, he noted: "We respect her, but we can't trust her. After all, she is Burman too."²³ So we can see that deep mistrust and grievances were hidden within society for more than 70 years and democratization

only helped to reveal them. Free expression and liberalized political structures only became a vent for these old tensions.

Thirdly, in certain cases, those political elites that lose their position in the democratization process may try to forcibly stop it. One of the ways of preventing or forestalling democracy is through the support or direct creation of ethnic conflicts. Opponents of democratization can in this way show how crucial they are for the maintaining of order and peace in their country.²⁴ It would not be the first time the junta was involved in something like this. For example, during the Depayin massacre in 2003, the angry mob which attacked a nation tour led by NLD and its supporters, was sponsored by the government. Although the killing was blamed on Suu Kyi, independent sources confirm that the incident was government-organized.²⁵

The typical characteristic of violent clashes in the last few years, especially those motivated by religion, was that authorities and police refused or were not willing to intervene. The President ordered the junta to stop fighting several times, but they did not obey. What is more, in the Shan state, it was the junta that broke the ceasefire. Because many witnesses claimed that some

²² Father of Aung San Suu Kiy.

²³ The Hindu. 2013. Myanmar ethnic parties demand 'real federalism'.

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/myanmar-ethnic-parties-demand-real-federalism/article3294905.ece>.

²⁴ Bouan. T. (2014) How can Democratization lead to ethnic conflicts?. Mahindra United World College of India, s. 12.

²⁵ Statement on 'Myanmar: Massacre at Depayin' received by Commission on Human Rights. 2014. <http://www.alrc.net/pr/mainfile.php/2004pr/45/>.

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riots carried signs of pre-planning and professional organization, some analysts point to the possibility of political motivation. This argument was strengthened when some local residents said that the violence was triggered by people from the outside. In the case of the Mandalay conflict, riots were triggered just before Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD was supposed to carry out its campaign for constitutional amendment. There is not enough proof, however, to connect the military junta and these events, but we can assume that the junta will reach for radical solutions to keep its position for a little bit longer. If the junta does not support ethnic conflicts directly, it may use radical groups like the 696 Movement which are sometimes seen as pawns of military's interests.

Conclusion

It is clear that the ongoing process of liberalization that has been taking place in Burma since 2011 has been closely interlinked with the increasing number of violent clashes between diverse ethnic groups. With the new wave of democratization, a hope for greater autonomy rose among minorities, who started to call for a new Panglong agreement, greater independence from the central government and more political rights. At the same time, hatred and mistrust has spread over the entire county, destabilizing it internally.

There are three explanations of how this may have happened. As social mobilization and political participation increases whilst institutionalization and political organization lack the same progress, instability and disorder in the country may rise.²⁶ In this way, radical movements such as U Wirathu's movement can become influential mediators of hatred and violence in Burma.

The other way that democratization can lead to ethnic clashes is by releasing old, deep-rooted tensions hidden in the society. Burma has a long history of violent confrontations based on ethnic backgrounds. The liberalized regime has not been able to address the fear and hostility embedded in the people and mediate a peaceful solution. It would be political suicide for any politician to support the Rohingya, therefore, the issue remains unresolved and ethnic violence continues to be a new way of expressing old emotions.

The last connection between democracy and internal conflicts may be dissatisfaction of the political elites with democratic development. They may support ethnic conflicts as a tool to discredit liberalization. The military sometimes incites conflict by direct fighting that is not approved by government. However, as much as it would serve the junta's interests, we cannot prove an indirect connection between the military and violent incidents among different religious groups.

²⁶ Huntington S., 1968. *Political Order in Changing Society*. Yale University Press.

The democratic development of Burma requires a deeper focus on diminishing these problems. Wider and deeper dialogue between military, ethnic groups and democratic forces has to be established in order to eliminate mutual mistrust and provide for better coordination of diverse demands. The call for federalism and further self-determination has to be properly discussed to avoid feelings of injustice among different groups and to reach a peaceful solution. A new constitution enabling better representation and the rule of law would be beneficial for further democratization, as well as for limiting the junta's ability to participate in ethnic clashes. If all these steps are taken with patience and resolution, the rocky transition process could become much smoother.

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