Ceasefires and Civil Society: The Case of the Mon

by Ashley South

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Introduction

'Civil society' may be defined as "the set of intermediate associations which are neither the state nor the family."[1] These include more-or-less formally organised religious and cultural networks (traditional and modern), and community and social welfare groups, as well as more overtly political organisations. However, political parties and other organisations seeking to assume state power are not part of civil society.[2] The term may though, include some types of business support organisation, although it is normally restricted to the non-profit sector.[3]

According to de Tocqueville and others (especially American theorists), the existence of civil society is central to democracy. These forms of association act as a check on both state power and undue private influence, encouraging the participation of social groups in political processes (understood in the widest sense). According to David Steinberg, "the significance of the term… lies in the hypothesis that if civil society is strong … then this … somehow translate(s) into overall trust in the political process of democracy or

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[1] McLean (1996).
[2] Ethnic nationalist organisations which take on state-like characteristics do not constitute civil society. However, like other state structures, they may either encourage or suppress the development of civil society.
[3] Steinberg, in Burma Centre Netherlands and Transnational Institute (1999), pp. 2-3.

democratization and leads to the diffusion of the centralized power of the state. Civil society is thus seen as an essential element of political pluralism."[4]

In her influential essay, *Bringing The State Back In*, Theda Skocpol outlines a Tocquevillian concept of state-society relations: "the organisational configuration (of states) ... affect political culture, encourage some kinds of group formation (but not others), and make possible the raising of certain political issues (but not others)."[5] According to Skocpol, the forms of association adopted by social groups ('civil society') are conditioned by the structures and strength of the state.

We should therefore expect that changes in state structure, whether gradual or revolutionary, will result in **the emergence of** new forms of social identity and organisation (whether more or less 'progressive'). This chapter will examine the manner in which Burmese political culture and concepts, particularly in the field of ethnicity, have been influenced by the development of the state. It will also examine the emergence of new forms of (post-ceasefire) state-society relationship, and what affect these might have on political culture in ethnic minority areas.

However, social groups' relationship with the state is not passive. Although the manner in which agents of political change *conceive* of their task may be determined by - or in reaction to - existing configurations of the state, social and economic groupings may nevertheless influence, and precipitate the transformation of, state structures. This chapter will examine the extent to which the re-emergence of civil society networks in ethnic minority areas might contribute towards processes of political transition in Burma.

Discussions of social identity and organization in Burma have tended to focus on the topic of ethnicity. Is this complex phenomenon a product of historical state formation, or

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[4] Steinberg (2002), p. 102; for an extended discussion of civil society in the Burmese context, see *Ibid*. pp. 101-20.
[5] Skocpol (1985), p. 21.

does it have an independent existence? Conversely, how have concepts of ethnicity affected forms of social and political organisation, and with what consequences?

The Historical Development of Ethnic Identities in Burma

<u>The Precolonial Era</u>. In *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, Anthony Smith asks whether state structures determine ethnicity. He reviews Anderson and Gellners' accounts of the development of nationalism, and the related concept of ethnic identity, within the context of an emerging modern bureaucratic capitalism. Both share "a belief in the contingency of nationalism and the modernity of the nation.... Yet there are also difficulties with this view. For we find in pre-modern eras, even in the ancient world, striking parallels to the 'modern' idea of national identity and character."[6] Smith demonstrates that many contemporary nations and nationalist movements are closely related to - if not actually derived from - 'primordial' *ethnie*. Nevertheless, the forms in which ethnicity is expressed and mobilised are subject to particular historical ('situational') processes. Such developments are illustrated by the case of the Mon.

The one million-plus Mon-speaking people today living in Burma and neighbouring Thailand constitute an 'ethnic minority'. However, this has not always been the case. From early in the first millennium, for a period of more than a thousand years, Mon and Khmer kings ruled over much of mainland Southeast Asia. Across northern and central Thailand until six or seven hundred years ago, and in central and lower Burma for another three hundred years, the bulk of the population were ethnic Mons. The classical period of Mon history came to an end in 1757, when the great Burman warrior-king Alaungphaya defeated the last Mon ruler of Pegu. Thousands of his followers were driven into exile in Ayuthaiya (Thailand), where they settled in the border areas adjoining Burma. At times over the two-and-a-half centuries since the fall of Pegu, it has been supposed that Mon was a dying language and the people in the twilight of their history. The Mons' very success has threatened to be their undoing.

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[6] Anthony Smith (1988), p. 11.

Mon civilisation was among the most influential in precolonial Southeast Asia. Significant aspects of the language, art and architecture, political and legal arrangements, and above all the religion of the great Thai and Burman civilisations were derived from the earlier Mon society, which acted as a vector in the transmission of Theravada Buddhism and Indianised political culture to the region. This civilising role helps to explain the enduring prestige attached to the Mon heritage across mainland Southeast Asia.

Mon nationalists have looked back to the classical era as a golden age - a source of inspiration and legitimacy. They have struggled to defend the historical Mon identity from assimilation into that of the Burman and Thai majorities.

However, ethnicity was only one factor among several in determining identity in pre-modern Southeast Asia. Victor Lieberman states that the 'Mon' kingdoms of lower Burma were in fact expressions of something more complex, and that "the correlation between cultural, i.e. ethnic, identity and political loyalty was necessarily very imperfect, because groups enjoying the same language and culture were fragmented by regional ties."[7] He argues that religion, culture, region and position in the tributary-status hierarchy all helped to determine personal, group and regime identity in precolonial times. As authority was vested in the person of the monarch, it was he[8], rather than any abstract idea of ethnic community, that commanded primary loyalty. A Burman king could act as the patron of Mon princely clients, and vice-versa.

Lieberman concedes, however, that the edicts of the king Alaungphaya made a clear ethnic distinction between his own (Burman) followers and those of the "Talaing (Mon) renegades."[9] Indeed, ethnic polarisation accelerated rapidly under Alaungphaya, who played the 'race card' to his advantage.[10]

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[7] Lieberman (1978), p. 480.
[8] Or - in the case of the Mon - very occasionally, she: see Guillon (1999) and South (2003).
[9] Lieberman (1978), p. 480.

Certainly, Mon and Burman identities were already well-established before the arrival in Southeast Asia of the first Europeans, and since no later than the mid-eighteenth century, individuals and communities have represented themselves as either 'Mon' or 'Burman', depending on the political situation. Kings and modern politicians have used such ethnic labels to create and control power bases, which since the colonial period have tended to become ossified as ethnic communities.[11]

The Colonial Era. Before the British annexation of Burma, the Mon had already become a subject people. Their ancient culture and language persisted, but the era of Mon political dominion was at an end. Although the advent of British rule was to remove the immediate fact of Burman domination, this was replaced by another, in many ways more insidious regime, under which Burmese demographics underwent a significant shift.

Following the first two Anglo-Burmese wars (1824-26 and 1852), large numbers of ethnic Burmans moved south into lower Burma, taking advantage of new opportunities in agriculture and business. The Mon and other minority groups also changed their patterns of residence, livelihood and education. Indeed, so great was the erosion of Mon culture and language under the British that, by the time the colonialists finally departed, there were very few Mon speakers still living in the Irrawaddy Delta or Pegu, the ancient Mon homelands. According to the last colonial census, by 1931 all but three per cent of the Mon population of Burma was confined to Amherst District, in what is today central Mon State.[12]

The previous 1921 census had recorded 324,000 Mons "by race", but only 189,000 "speakers of Mon."[13] The descendants of these non-Mon speakers would today be

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[10] *Ibid*. p. 472.
[11] See Aung-Thwin (1998), p. 147. Mikael Gravers also warns against adopting ethnicity as the sole criterion of identity, arguing that religion (or cosmology) is at least as important: Gravers (1999), pp. 19-35.
[12] South (2003), p. 22.
[13] Quoted in *Ibid*. This was almost unchanged from the 1911 census, which had recorded 320,629 Mon, of whom not more than half spoke the language. The 1881 census had recorded 154,553 "pure" Mon and

classified as ethnic Burmans - i.e. as Burmese speaking citizens of a relatively new entity: the state of Burma.

In 1886, following the Third Anglo-Burmese War, Burma was fully incorporated into the Empire, as a province of British India. The British divided the colony into the central lowlands of 'Burma Proper' (where the great majority of Mon speakers lived) and a horseshoe of ethnic minority-populated 'Frontier Areas', on the periphery of the state. In the former, the British governed by direct rule, thereby ensuring the destruction of the traditional Burmese polity. In the Frontier Areas, they followed the more common British colonial model of indirect rule (also adopted by the French in Laos and Cambodia), governing via local potentates. Crucially, the two zones were never integrated administratively. This tended to reduce the scope of those 'colonial pilgrimages' which might have fostered a stronger sense of pan-Burmese identity among the colonised, at least within elite circles.[14] Unlike the diverse peoples of Indonesia (all of whom were ruled by the Dutch from Java, thus helping to forge the idea of a unified Indonesian nation) - but like those in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos - the separate identities of *Bama* and non-Burmans were reinforced by the colonial experience.

Notwithstanding the lack of colonial administrative integration, the adoption of Burmese as the language of state helped to accelerate processes of assimilation. As noted above, over the course of the nineteenth century, large numbers of Mon speakers came to adopt the Burmese language, and associated forms of political culture.[15] Although the colonial authorities instigated optional civil service examinations in Mon, and between 1937-42 funded a Mon literacy and population survey, the British administration generally treated the ancient Mon culture and history with benign neglect. The bulk of official attention focused on potentially restive 'hilltribes', such as the Karen and Kachin,

177,939 "mixed" Mon-Burmans. Thus over a period of forty years, while the population of Burma increased, the number of Mons apparently remained static. Interestingly, the 1891 census had recorded a population of 466,324 Mon (including 226,304 Mon speakers), an increase of forty-six per cent over the figure for 1881. This may be explained by the demise of the Burman monarchy, and subsequent decline of fears associated with being identified as Mon.

[14] On integrative/ exclusive patterns of nation-building in Indonesia and Vietnam, see Anderson (1991), pp. 114-19.

who were more amenable to the colonialists' self-imposed civilising mission.[16] Nevertheless, Mon elites were able to assert themselves through the patronage of religious works: Mon language schools were established by monks, and by 1847 the Baptists were publishing Mon tracts in Moulmein. Later, a Mon Buddhist press was set up on Bilu Kyun Island, and the Hanthawaddy Press was established in Rangoon, which printed Mon language history texts, as well as a regular journal.[17]

The British introduced capitalist economic measures, which over time led to a degree of social mobility and the breakdown of traditional bonds. This "rationalisation of the state" involved the replacement of patron-client relations with an administration based on modern, objective definitions of the role of state agents.[18] As an indirect result of the realignment of traditional power structures, increasingly large numbers of people ceased to identify with a particular region or ethnicity, but came to regard themselves as 'Burmese' - i.e. as citizens of a new entity: the colony (and potential state) of Burma.

Thant Myint-U has described how the British empire's extended assault on the peripheries of the once poly-ethnic Konbaung empire reduced the latter to an ethnic Burman, "relatively homogenous core which … made easier a stronger sense of local patriotism."[19] The traditional social, economic and political structures of Upper Burma were overthrown, and replaced by an administration geared to the needs of British India. (Although the *sangha* did survive the colonial period, its traditional educational role and close identity with the state were both undermined.) Thus, members of the Burman majority found themselves marginalised within the colonial state, with little reason to identify with its ethos or structures, but considerable reason to resent those who did. Colonial state policy resulted in the creation of a large pool of disenfranchised and disaffected people, available for mobilization by educated elites.

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[15] South (2003), pp. 18-25.
[16] See Mandy Sadan's chapter in this volume, which examines the construction of Kachin identity during the colonial era.
[17] South (2003), pp. 90-94.
[18] Taylor (1987) and Furnivall (1991).

Meanwhile, the colonial authorities attempted to establish a "level playing field" among the various ethnic peoples of Burma.[20] They were quite successful in ensuring equality of opportunity for different groups in the country, and large numbers of minority people received an education, and went on to types of employment, that would not have been open to their ancestors. The British thus fostered the emergence of self-consciously distinct 'ethnic minority' groups, who were encouraged to identify themselves in opposition to the Burman majority. Second and third generation elites from within these 'imagined communities' went on to lead Burma's ethnic nationalist movements in the turbulent years directly preceding and following the Japanese invasion of 1941.[21]

The Second World War and Since. Unlike the hill Karen, the Mon did not play a significant role in assisting British officers operating behind enemy lines in Burma during the war. However, large numbers did join the Burma Independence Army (BIA), and a Mon Youth Organisation (MYO) was formed in 1941, several members of which later fought with the BIA against the departing Japanese forces.[22]

The wartime regime in Burma outlawed the teaching of minority languages, espousing a quasi-National Socialist ideology of "one voice, one blood, one nation."[23] Although, by late 1945, Dr Ba Maw' administration had been thoroughly discredited, non-Burman groups were alarmed by the racial chauvinism inherent in the wartime government's pronouncements. As Taylor observes, by the end of the war, "ethnicity, religion or Communism inspired more loyalty than did the state."[24]

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[19] Thant Myint-U (2001), p. 253.
[20] Taylor (1987), pp. 66-67.
[21] Robert Taylor has demonstrated how modern forms of ethnic nationalism in Burma are partly derived from the racial theories, ascriptions and administrative procedures of the colonial period: *Ibid.* p. 286, and see Taylor (1982). As with other minority groups in Southeast Asia, Karen (but rarely Mon) ethnic identity has been labeled an artificial construction, derived from speculative missionary ethnography and politically expedient colonial classification. However, such assertions fail to appreciate the complexity and agency involved in articulations of ethnic identity. Although this 'imagined' identity may be constructed from disparate (including non-indigenous) elements, it is nonetheless authentic for that.
[22] South (2003), p. 95.
[23] Taylor (1987), p. 284.
[24] *Ibid.* p. 285.

Within a year of independence, Arakanese, Karen, Mon and other ethnic nationalists had take up arms against the state, as had the powerful Communist Party of Burma. Over the following decade-and-a-half, several more groups were to join the insurrections; many articulated some kind of ethnic nationalist agenda.

In this militarised context of rebellion and counter-insurgency, the *Tatmadaw* moved to capture the state, in order to defend a particular idea of the nation, the origins of which lie in the colonial era and the Second World War. This conflation of state and nation - in the form of a politicised army - has profoundly influenced the development of Burmese political culture.[25] Despite ostensible changes in ideology and political programme, the key concept of an independent nation (identified with the Burman cultural centre) and strong state, with the capacity to shape state-society relations, has remained a constant, with the *Tatmadaw* regarding itself as the principal agent of implementing policy upon - and defending the state from - the complexities of Burmese society.

Mary Callahan demonstrates how the army developed and projected the idea of an independent Burma, centred on a highly politicised *Tatmadaw*, dominated by ethnic Burman officers.[26] These veterans of the chaotic war years were influenced by memories of the divisive colonial regime, and were determined to prevent the disintegration of the union. When the *Tatmadaw* assumed state power, its leaders identified the interests of this - the most 'patriotic' institution in Burma - with those of the state. The young officers who assumed control, first of the *Tatmadaw* and then of state, had been exposed to competing versions of what an army might be, and how it might relate to the state and wider society (as had the leaders of various ethnic nationalist and communist armed groups opposed to them).[27]

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[25] For an account of these factors from the perspective of the *Tatmadaw*, see Maung Aung Myoe (1998).
[26] Callahan (1996).
[27] As with the different 'imagined communities' of the nation, these were essentially modular concepts, constructed by Burmese actors according to their understanding and experience of the British colonial, Japanese and other armies. Again, it is important to stress that this 'pirating' of modular forms (Anderson's phrase) constituted a dynamic re-interpretation of the colonial legacy. Anderson implies that an 'imagined' community is 'fabricated', a view which effects its perceived legitimacy: Anderson (1991), p.6. Gravers employs Chatterjee's critique of Anderson to question whether national identity in developing countries must be passively, "trapped within the imaginations of state and nation inculcated by their

The Suppression of Burmese Civil Society

1958-1988. According to Callahan, having experienced the ultimate authority of military over civilian administration under both the British and Japanese, in the 1950s leaders of both the *Tatmadaw* and civilian government began "institutionalising the primacy of coercion in state-society relations."[28] At an October 1958 *Tatmadaw* conference (held following the first Ne Win coup), the Psychological Warfare Directorate distributed a detailed critique of civilian-constitutional politics. This document attacked the citizen's right "to express his views and desires upon all subjects in whatever way he wishes."[29] A blue-print for later military pronouncements, it proposed replacing the 1947 constitution with one written by those "who have more specialised knowledge", rather than "unscrupulous politicians and deceitful Communist rebels and their allies" (including recently surrendered Mon and other ex-insurgents: see below). Callahan claims that "the significance of this paper cannot be overstated... the constitution was no longer sacred."[30] It laid the basis for the suppression of Burmese civil society in the 1960s.

As the state extended its control over previously autonomous aspects of social life, civil society networks - which were not yet well-established - could no longer operate independently. Meanwhile, opposition to the regime was either eliminated, driven underground, or forced into open revolt. After 1962-63, the existence of renewed armed opposition to the military government provided a pretext for the further extension of state control, and suppression of diverse social groups deemed antipathetic to the modernizing state-socialist project. The Ne Win regime's suppression of non-Burman cultural and political identities, epitomised by the banning of minority languages from state schools, drove a new wave of disaffected ethnic minority citizens into rebellion.[31]

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former colonial masters, or are they able to create models based on their own cultural imaginations and their own genuine practices?": Gravers, in Tonnesson and Antlov (1996), p. 242.
[28] Callahan (1996), p. 128.
[29] Quoted in *Ibid*. p. 478.
[30] *Ibid*. p. 479.

According to Steinberg, "civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered."[32] Under the 1974 constitution, all political activity beyond the strict control of the state was outlawed.[33] By 1980, even the previously independent *sangah* had been brought under at least partial state control.[34] (Nevertheless, Burma's 250,000 monks and novices retained a prestige and influence which extended across all strata of society. Among the few institutions in Burma not directly controlled by the state, the *sangah* - and Christian churches - remained among the potentially most powerful sectors of civil society.)

1988-2002. Since the early years of independence, control over state power has been contested by a variety of identity groups, while its structures have profoundly affected perceptions and modes of social organisation. Popular participation may be mobilised either for or against an authoritarian regime, and it seemed for a few weeks in the summer of 1988 that 'people's power' might prevail in Burma, as it had two years previously in the Philippines. The failure of the 1988 'Democracy Uprising' in Burma - like that of the May-June 1989 'Democracy Spring' in China - was in large part due to the underdeveloped nature of civil society in these states.

A lack of democratic culture prevented powerful gestures of political theatre from initiating sustained political change. Unlike those in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, in the Philippines in 1986, or in Thailand in 1992, the Burmese and Chinese democracy activists had little social space within which to operate, or to build upon the people's evident desire for fundamental change. In particular, Burma and China had no counterpart to the Catholic Church or trades unions, which played important roles in the Polish and Filipino democracy movements.[35] The BSPP regime had succeeded in denying social groups a foothold in mainstream politics or the economy, except under

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[31] On the Burmanisation of the civil service and education, see Brown (1994), pp. 48-49.
[32] Steinberg, in Burma Centre Netherlands and Transnational Institute (1999), p. 8. See also Steinberg (2002), pp. 105-8, and in Pederson, Rudland and May (2000), pp. 106-12.
[33] Taylor (1987), pp. 303-09.
[34] *Ibid*. p. 112.

strict state control. Potential opposition was thereby marginalised, and could emerge only in times of crisis and upheaval, presenting the military with a pretext to clamp-down on 'anarchy' and 'chaos' (thus the State *Law and Order* Restoration Council).

Under the SLORC, state-society relations were further centralised. Particularly following the ascension of Senior General Than Shwe in 1992, social control was reinforced by the reformation of local militias and mass organisations, and the indoctrination of civil servants. The police, and even the Fire Brigade were brought under military control, and the SLORC established a number of government-controlled non-government organisations (GONGOs!). By 2002, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) - established in September 1993, along the lines of the pro-military GOLKAR party in Indonesia - had a membership of some 16,000,000 people, many of whom were reportedly pressurised into joining. Its objectives included upholding the regime's 'Three National Causes' and the 'promotion of national pride.' Beyond this highly circumscribed sector, 'civil society' and the operation of independent political parties, such as the National League for Democracy (NLD), were severely restricted, as were freedoms of expression and association, and access to information and independent media.

In May 1999 the Ministry of Information published a *Declaration of Defence Policy*, which outlined the regime's largely successful attempts to modernise and expand the *Tatmadaw*. In classic SLORC-style (influenced by the formulaic structure of traditional Buddhist doctrine), this document underlined the leadership role of the *Tatmadaw*, and outlined 'Twelve Objectives' and 'Four Desires' of state policy. These included opposition to "those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views", and "the preservation and safeguard of culture and national character." The regime exhorted patriotic Burmese to "crush all destructive elements as the common enemy" (a motto emblazoned on bill-boards across the country in the 1990s).[36] As

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[35] Furthermore, capital markets and outside forces (e.g. US pressure) played more important roles in determining the course of events in the Philippines and Thailand than they did in isolated Burma and China, with their relatively 'closed' societies.
[36] Quoted in Maung Aung Myoe (1999), p. 18. The 'Three National Causes' were announced as the basis of SLORC rule in September 1988: *ibid.* pp. 3-14.

Andrew Selth noted the same year, "the armed forces now see themselves as embodying the state." Clearly, the SLORC-SPDC did not accept the notion of a 'loyal opposition'.[37]

Nevertheless, one consequence of the ceasefire process (discussed in more detail below), and the partial 'opening up' of the Burmese economy in the early 1990s - in an attempt to attract more resources, and modify the military regime's poor international image - has been the gradual re-emergence of civil society in parts of Burma. Since the early-mid 1990s, the NGO sector in particular has undergone a significant regeneration. It currently includes some forty international and more-or-less officially registered local agencies, as well as various Burmese religious, cultural, social, professional and educational associations.

Among these are a number of organisations working in ethnic minority-populated areas, including both indigenous NGOs and some international agencies working through local staff. Although their access to the most needy rural populations (including internally displaced persons) is highly restricted, and the political aspects of their programmes are usually obscured by a humanitarian-welfare gloss, these pioneer NGOs have played an important role in the development of civil society networks, under the most difficult and repressive of conditions.[38] In some cases, they have been assisted by enlightened state employees, who may work surreptitiously towards non-SPDC sanctioned ends. Such elements of the state sector may bridge the public-private gap; although civil society has been repressed in Burma, it can re-emerge in the most unlikely places.[39]

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[37] Selth (1999), p. 2. According to another recent report, "the *Tatmadaw* believes that it exclusively embodies the nation's destiny and goals, and it is intolerant of political pluralism which is viewed as damaging to national unity and therefore to national security": International Crisis Group (2000), p. 9.
[38] See Steinberg (2002), pp. 115-120. However, the discussion here ignores the activities of local NGOs which may be working towards both community development *and* political goals. Steinberg diagnoses the Burmanisation of the state, and the marginalisation of ethnic groups, but does not acknowledge that the latter may nevertheless engage in community mobilisation.
[39] See *ibid*. p. 104. In his study of the 1989 democracy movement in China, Craig Calhoun makes an important point regarding state institutions and civil society: "it is important to separate the questions of whether the particular organizational bases are internal to the state and whether they are able to resist the exercise of central power": Calhoun (1994), p. 168.

The Ethnic Dimension

The distinction between 'Burmese' and 'Burman' nationalism has not always been clear; indeed, the former has often been subsumed under the latter. According to D.R. SarDesai, nationalism in Southeast Asia "has been in most cases a response to imperialism and the political and economic exploitation of the governed. In a certain sense, nationalist revolutions were the creation of Western colonial powers themselves."[40] This has also been true of ethnic nationalism in Burma, vis-à-vis the Burman-dominated central government, which has been accused of practicing 'internal colonialism'.

Tatmadaw ideologues have viewed their task as one of 'national salvation': the army has sought to defend the unitary, socialist state, which emerged from the heroic struggle for independence. As the *Tatmadaw* assumed control of key institutions, it sought to impose a model of state-society relations, in which the (ethnic minority) periphery was dominated by a strong (Burman-orientated) centre. As pluralism was suppressed, it was replaced with a state-sponsored nationalism. The process of 'Burmanisation' saw diverse (and according to the military, divisive) minority cultures, histories and socio-political aspirations subsumed under a homogenising 'national' identity, derived from the Burman historical tradition.

On the subject of state building, Clifford Geertz has cautioned that communal 'primordialism' (defined by reference to 'blood ties', race, language, region, religion and custom) threatens to overwhelm and fragment many third world countries, unless ethnic groups can be persuaded to integrate with the state, recognising its authority over certain key aspects of political life. However, in *The Integrative Revolution* he is alert to the possibility of a particular ethnic group coming to dominate the state. Indeed, Geertz cites Burma as an example, in which "peripheral groups ... are naturally inclined to see (the state) as alien ... vigorously assimilationist ... (and prone to a) 'Burmanisation' ... which traces back to the very beginnings of the nationalist movement." He characterises

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[40] D.R. SarDesai (1994), p.135. David Brown makes a similar point: Brown (1994), p. 2.

ethnic conflict in modern Burma as a struggle between "one central ... group and several ... opposed peripheral groups ... the Irrawaddy Valley Burmese versus the various hill tribes."[41]

Writing about Burma, David Brown describes a "situation where the state acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community … in which recruitment to the state elite … and government is disproportionately and overwhelmingly from the majority ethnic group... The ethnocratic state is one which employs the cultural attributes and values of the dominant ethnic segment as the core elements for the elaboration of the national ideology …. and its political structures serve to maintain and reinforce the monopolization of power by the ethnic segment."[42] Similarly, Gustaaf Houtman calls Burma a 'culture state', where the military government is bent on consolidating the 'Myanmafication' of culture and history, and suppressing Burma's diverse social identities.[43] In its appeal to a monolithic national identity, 'Myanmafication' displays aspects of fascist ideology. Furthermore, the emphasis on Burmese (read Burman) purity, and the denial of minority cultures, has led to a characteristically totalitarian re-writing of history.

In a rare public justification of such policies, shortly after seizing power in 1962, General Ne Win denied the need for a separate Mon culture and ethnicity. According to Ne Win (who apparently claimed to be of mixed Mon ancestry[44]), the Mon tradition had been fully incorporated into Burmese national culture, and thus required no distinct

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[41] Geertz (1963), pp. 136-37 (parenthesis added). Anthony Smith claims that "in order to forge a 'nation' today, it is vital to create and crystallise ethnic components." Anthony Smith (1988). p. 17. However, echoing Geertz's warning, he notes that "the result of turning nationalism into an 'official' state ideology is to deny the validity of claims by any community which cannot be equated with an existing state....If the state does not itself possess long and inclusive traditions, its dominant ethnic community is liable to seek to impose its traditions on the rest of the state's population, and this usually ignites the fires of separatism": *ibid.* pp. 222-23.

[42] Brown (1994), pp. 36-37.

[43] Houtman (1999), pp. 142-47. Mikael Gravers refers to a process of "cultural corporatism", in which an "imagined Myanmar has one singular cultural essence, which is embodied in all individual citizens": Gravers (1996), p. 240.

[44] Guillon (1999), p. 213.

expression. In August 1991 the then-SLORC Chairman, General Saw Maung, made a similar speech, in which he denied the need for a separate Mon identity.[45]

The process of Burmanisation - or 'Myanmafication' - has been illustrated, since the early 1990s, by the construction of a series of museums across the country, which are intended to institutionalise and reproduce 'Myanmar national culture.'[46] A particularly striking example is the reconstruction of the Kambawzathadi Palace at Pegu, on the supposed site of the mid-sixteenth century capital of king, Tabinshwehti, and his successor, Bayinnaung. Since 1990, the royal apartments and audience hall have been excavated and rebuilt in concrete. As historians have little idea what the original palace looked like, the new buildings are modelled on nineteenth century palace designs from Mandalay.

The Kambawzathadi Palace project received a major boost in September 1999, when it was visited by Lt.-General Khin Nyunt - an event which made the front page of *The New Light of Myanmar*.[47] However, what the government-sponsored literature on Kambawzathadi mentions only in passing is that the new palace was in fact built upon the much older remains of the sixteenth century Mon capital of Pegu. In fact, parts of these largely un-excavated ruins are still visible as a series of grassy mounds and depressions, between the newly-'rebuilt' royal chambers and the foot of the great Shwemawdaw Pagoda (Mon: *Kyaik Mawdaw*). If properly examined, this archaeological site might yield important information regarding the historical development of mainland Southeast Asian polity and religion. As it is however, the neglected remains of Hongsawaddy are a symbolic reminder of the balance of power in modern Burma.[48]

The Ethnic Nationalist Reaction

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[45] An extract from this speech is quoted in Gravers (1996), p. 240.
[46] See Houtman (1999). Although such museums represent the state's definition of ethnicity, institutions such as the Mon museum in Moulmein, the Karen museum in Pa'an and the (private) PaO museum in Taunggyi may nevertheless help to create a space for the examination of minority history and culture.
[47] *The New Light of Myanmar* (20-9-99).
[48] See South (2003), pp. 33-34.

In the chaotic years between 1945 and independence, elites within the Mon community articulated claims to social and political autonomy, on the basis of ethnicity.[49] As Mikael Gravers puts it, "identity thus becomes the foundation of political rights." He calls this process "*ethnicicism* … the separation or seclusion of ethnic groups from nation states in the name of ethnic freedom … where cultural differences are classified as primordial and antagonistic."[50]

By 1950, two communist factions and a number of ethnic insurgent groups, including the Mon People's Front (MPF), had taken up arms against the government and *Tatmadaw*, and established 'liberated zones', from where they hoped to achieve independence, or at least substantial autonomy from Rangoon (the communists of course, sought to overthrow the U Nu regime). Like several other insurgent organisations however, the MPF agreed a ceasefire with Rangoon 1958, and subsequently attempted to pursue its goals from with 'the legal fold'. However, one young MPF cadre, Nai Shwe Kyin, together with a small group of followers, rejected the agreement and, the day after the MPF 'surrender', established the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which was to be in the vanguard of the armed struggle for Monland for the next forty years. According to its founder, the NMSP aimed "to establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a confederation of free nationalities exercising the full right of self-determination inclusive of right of secession."[51]

Given the traditional importance of education in Mon Buddhist culture, and of language to ascriptions of ethnic identity, it is not surprising that the NMSP organised a school system, soon after re-establishing itself in the mid-1960s. The first of a newly reorganised system of Mon National Schools were opened in 1972-73, and by the mid-1990s the NMSP was running a high school, several middle schools and nearly one

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[49] See Nai Tun Thein (1999) and South (2003), pp. 100-08.
[50] Gravers (1999), p. 145; see also, Brown (1994), pp. 3-4.
[51] NMSP (1967), p.1.

hundred primary schools.[52] These offered Mon language teaching in all subjects at primary level, except for foreign languages (English and Burmese). However, due to a shortage of Mon-speaking teachers, middle school history was taught in Mon, with other subjects in Burmese, while the medium of high school instruction was usually Burmese.[53] The Mon National Schools played an important role in the NMSP's projection of a distinctly Mon national culture, underpinning the party's secessionist - and later, federalist - policies. However, in purging the curriculum of the Burmanisation of history and culture, the Mon education system tended to overcompensate, and perhaps over-emphasise the glorious history of the Mon.[54]

The Thailand-based Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HRFM), observes that the state and NMSP education systems' objectives "are opposite. The government education system aims to implement government's protracted assimilationist policy by pushing the non-Burman ethnic students to learn and speak Burmese.… The main objectives of the Mon education system are to preserve and promote Mon literature … Mon culture and history, to not forget the Mon identity."[55]

Somewhat ironically, the *Tatmadaw* has played a part in this affirmation of Mon identity. As Hobsbawm notes, "we know too little about what … goes on, in the minds of most relatively inarticulate men and women, to speak with any confidence about their thoughts and feelings towards the nationalities and nation-states which claim their loyalties."[56] The manner in which 'ordinary' Mon people have responded to the nationalist agenda is often unclear. The great majority are poor rice farmers, and day-to-day survival is the prime consideration. Nevertheless, Mon villagers have routinely been persecuted *because* of their ethnicity, and as a result many have had little choice but to flee to insurgent-controlled territory. It is a truism of cultural studies that differentiation

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[52] NMSP(15-12-94), p. 27. In December 1994 the party's Fundamental Political Policy and Fundamental Constitution of Administration stated that the following were the "basic enemy of the Mons: colonialism, bureaucracy policy (capitalism), dictatorship, majority Burmanisation." The NMSP constitution reflects longstanding commitments to both Mon national liberation and leftist political analysis.
[53] Thein Lwin (3-3-2000).
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] *The Mon Forum* (August 1998).

reinforces identity. Despite the government's avowal that a separate Mon ethnic and national identity is redundant, its oppressive policies have ensured that - at least among the displaced populations along the border with Thailand - the notion of a distinct Mon identity lives on. If nothing else, the displacement and flight of villagers to border areas where they are dependant on the NMSP for basic security (and often food), is likely to have reinforced their public identification with Mon ethnicity.[57]

Since the 1970s, many thousands of displaced Mon villagers have 'voted with their feet', seeking refuge in the insurgent-controlled 'liberated zones' (and later, refugee camps) along the Thailand-Burma border. However, state-society relations in the Mon and other 'liberated zones' have tended to mirror those in 'Burma proper', in reaction against which the insurgents first took up arms.

Joseph Silverstein argues that the political language and concepts of the Burmese opposition are at least partly derived from those of the military government.[58] Similarly, in her study of Burmese political culture, Christina Fink notes that "the military's propaganda and ways of operating have profoundly shaped even those opposed to military rule."[59] Like its military opponents, the NLD has often been intolerant of internal dissent. The importance of unity in Burmese political culture is no doubt a legacy of the liberation struggle, and the fractious early years of independence. Its centrality to Burmese politics attests to the degree to which the military, with its paranoia regarding foreign-sponsored disintegration of the union, has imposed its narratives of power on society. This observation recalls Skocpol's analysis of the effects of state structures on social groups' formation and political awareness, and is relevant also to the armed ethnic opposition.

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[56] Hobsbawm (1990), p. 78.
[57] See Hazel Lang (2002).
[58] Silverstein, in Rotberg (ed. 1998), pp. 12-27.
[59] Fink (2001), p. 5. According to Taylor, the philosophy of the NLD - in its early years at least - was influenced by the left-wing ideology of the *Tatmadaw* and BSPP.

Both sides in the civil war in Burma have long defined themselves in opposition to each other. For many insurgent groups, identity and the claim to legitimacy have come to reside in the act of rebellion itself. By the 1970s, the civil war had become institutionalised, and in many cases the revolutionaries began to resemble warlords. The political culture of the 'liberated zones' reflected the largely extractive nature of many insurgent groups' relations to natural resources and the peasantry (their ethnic minority brethren, in whose name the revolution was being fought). Life in the 'liberated zones' thus became characterised by a top-down tributary political system, similar to that in government-controlled areas, aspects of which recalled pre-colonial forms of socio-political organisation.[60]

Although (especially after 1988) most ethnic insurgent groups claimed to be fighting for 'democracy', this ideal was not always reflected in their practices. Rebel leaders tended to discourage the expression of diverse opinions, and socio-political initiatives beyond the direct control of the militarised insurgent hierarchies were generally suppressed. One consequence was the endemic factionalism of Burmese opposition politics, with most groups unable to accommodate socio-political (or personality) differences among their members[61]; another was the suppression of pluralism in ethnic opposition circles, and the development of rigid political cultures in non-state controlled areas.

Thus, aspects of resistance to the forces of assimilation themselves took on the characteristics of 'cultural corporatism'. Ethnic minority opposition (in this case, Mon) civil society became prone to a homogenising concept of identity, which was in some respects profoundly undemocratic. The Mon and other ethnic nationalist movements had to contend with a contradiction between their message of democracy and national liberation, and a patriarchal tradition. The challenge - and opportunity - facing such

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[60] See South (2003), pp. 129-30 & 341-42.
[61] According to this reading, the 1994 Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) rebellion among the KNU ranks may be seen as subaltern reaction against an unrepresentative and unresponsive elite, which became problematised in religious terms, but was as much an expression political (class-based) grievances.

movements in the post-ceasefire era is how to combine the struggle for ethnic rights with an appreciation of democracy as a process, rather than a distant end state.[62]

The NMSP leadership seems genuinely committed to a vision of a democratic Burma, based on respect for individual and group rights. However, the party has limited experience of fostering democratic practice in the areas and sectors under its control. The NMSP-SLORC ceasefire has at least created the military-political 'space' within such efforts may be promoted.

The Significance of the Ceasefires

As a result of the series **of ceasefires negotiated** between the military government and insurgents since 1989, the security situation in **much** of rural Burma has improved **significantly**. However, villagers in many areas remain subject to a wide range of human and civil rights abuses, perpetrated by the *Tatmadaw* and - to a lesser extent - by various armed ethnic groups.

Between 1995-2001, five small ex-NMSP splinter groups resumed armed conflict with the *Tatmadaw* (and sometimes with the NMSP also)**; in late 2001 another, militarily** more significant **anti-ceasefire Mon** armed group **emerged, and proceeded to undermine** security across much of Mon State. **However, by late 2003, the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP) had dwindled in support and capacity.**

Among other, more self-interested reasons, these Mon anti-ceasefire factions were motivated by complaints of continued *Tatmadaw* human rights abuses, and in particular, by a campaign of uncompensated land confiscation initiated in 2001.[63] One predictable

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[62] See David Tegenfeldt's chapter in this volume, which examines - and outlines an approach to the transformation of - ethnic conflicts in Burma, through the lens of identity construction (focusing on the case of the Kachin).

[63] **The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) has documented the confiscation of at least 7,780 acres of farmland from Mon farmers, between 1998-2002. Adding insult to injury, farmers have sometimes been forced to work on the confiscated lands, building barracks etc. on behalf of the *Tatmadaw*. The problem is felt particularly acutely in areas previously contested between the NMSP and *Tatmadaw*, from which the MNLA pulled-out following the ceasefire - thus withdrawing a minimal level of protection to villagers, and allowing the *Tatmadaw* to more easily**

consequence of the renewed instability in Mon State was the revival of the *Tatmadaw's* notorious counter-insurgency policy.[64]

The nature of the ceasefire process and 'ceasefire groups' in Burma are not uniform, although in nearly all cases the ex-insurgents have retained their arms, and still control sometimes extensive blocks territory. (However, the Mon ceasefire zone consists of little more than the Ye River watershed and a few isolated outposts further to the north.) In many quarters, the ceasefire agreements are regarded as little more than a cynical exercise in *real politick*, benefiting only vested interests in the military regime and insurgent hierarchies. However, to other observers and participants, they represent the best opportunity in decades to work towards the rehabilitation of deeply troubled ethnic minority-populated areas. **For the NMSP and other ceasefire groups, the truces also represent opportunities to mobilise among their constituencies in government-controlled areas - activities which were previously only possible on fear of arrest.**

The ceasefires are not peace treaties. These agreements generally lack all but the most rudimentary accommodation of the ex-insurgents' political and developmental demands. Nevertheless, they have created some military and political 'space', within which community-level associational networks may re-emerge. Other factors behind the tentative revival of Burmese civil society over the past decade include the partial opening up of the economy in the early 1990s, and the cover and the limited support given by the international community.

Many of Burma's fledgling civil society networks are associated with progressive elements among the country's International NGO community. This phenomenon reflects a trend among donors towards supporting local NGOs, which are considered to implement relief and development programmes more effectively than government departments. (Furthermore, in the case of Burma, many INGOs and UN agencies have

access areas it could previously only enter at risk of attack: HURFOM, *No Land to Farm: A Comprehensive Report on Land, Real Estate and Properties Confiscation in Mon's Area, Burma (1998-2003)* (October 2003).

been reluctant to enter into partnership with the military-dominated state.) The presence of INGOs in Burma - especially in ethnic minority-populated areas - has to some extent, and in some places, helped to create an environment conducive to the development of local counterpart NGOs.[65]

In the case of the Mon, several Thailand-based INGOs had previously supported projects in the NMSP 'liberated zones', including aid to the Mon refugees, the last of whom was repatriated by the Thai authorities in 1996.[66] A few Thailand-based INGOs remain in contact with the party, and with local groups working under its umbrella. In general, these organisations have encouraged their Mon partners to retain an oppositionist stance vis-à-vis the Burmese military government. Since the 1995 ceasefire, to which it agreed with considerable reluctance, there have been extensive debates within the NMSP - and the wider Mon nationalist community - regarding the wisdom of engaging with the SPDC and integrating the remaining NMSP-controlled zones with those controlled by the government.

Until 2002-03, the party had generally been wary of pursuing contacts with the international community via Rangoon, choosing instead to distance itself from the SPDC, while continuing to receive limited cross-border international support. **However, in recent years the NMSP has taken tentative steps to engage more constructively with Rangoon-based international agencies.**

Nevertheless, since the ceasefire, the party's women's and education departments have succeeded in extending their activities beyond the NMSP-controlled zones, to Mon

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[64] See South (2003), Part Six, and *The Mon Forum* (**2002-04** *passim*).

[65] International agencies working inside Burma (and along the Thailand border) may be divided between donors - which are often able to support the development of local groups' capacities, and may not be operational in the field - and implementing agencies. The latter, although they may address urgent humanitarian needs, can sometimes divert talented individuals away from indigenous organisations, towards their own programmes. Agencies may adopt aspects of both roles, as when an implementing organisation also funds local partner groups. **For a detailed analysis of the relationship between international agencies and Burmese civil society, see South, 'Political Transition in Myanmar: A New Model for Democratisation',** *op. cit.*

[66] See South (2002), Part Five.

communities across lower Burma. The Mon Women's Organisation (MWO) has implemented community development, income generation, adult literacy and capacity development programs in a number of areas, and has developed a strategic partnership with the Metta Development Foundation. (Established in 1998, and one of **the few** legally registered local NGOs in Burma, Metta has projects in Shan, Karenni, Karen and Mon State, and in the Irrawaddy Delta).

Meanwhile, despite some serious setbacks, during the **2003-04** school year the NMSP managed to run 187 Mon National Schools and 186 'mixed' schools (buildings shared with the state system, where the use of minority languages is still banned). The Mon National Schools taught more than 50,000 pupils, approximately seventy per cent of whom lived in government-controlled areas, and would not previously have had access to an indigenous (Mon) language education. Illustrating an important aspect of the post-ceasefire educational environment, a handful of graduates of the two Mon high schools have had the opportunity to continue their studies at state further education colleges.

However, although the NMSP and other ceasefire groups have generally provided the political and military cover within which ethnic minority networks may develop, the key civil society payers have often not been the (ex-)insurgents. Those who have taken the lead in community initiatives over the past decade include members of semi-dormant religious and social welfare networks, as well as those who campaigned for ethnic minority parties in the May 1990 general election. In the case of the Mon, the latter include individuals associated with the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF), which won five seats in the 1990 polls, but was outlawed in 1992.[67]

A number of ethnic nationality social and welfare organisations - in particular, literature and culture promotion groups - were established well before the 1990s, but in recent years have become more active, and concerned with a wider range of issues. As in other parts of Burma, the re-emergence of such networks in Mon areas has been

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[67] South (2003), pp. 328-29.

particularly notable in the field of education. As the state school and higher education systems have continued to deteriorate, alternative models have emerged, such as the Mon *sangah* and Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC)s' Summer Mon Literature and Buddhist Teachings Training.

A successor to the All Ramanya Mon Association (ARMA) and other cultural and youth groups of the 1930 and '40s, the MLCC pioneered Mon literacy training in the 1950s, seeking to expand and consolidate the Mon language skills, and thereby the cultural and historical awareness, of the Mon community in Burma. Although it was largely dormant during the repressive Ne Win era, monasteries across lower Burma continued to teach Mon throughout 1960s-80s and, since 1996, the MLCC has re-emerged as a leading player in this field, organising a series of successful Mon language and literacy training courses, taught by Mon educationalists and monks. Like the Karen and other Literature and Culture Committees, the MLCC is among the handful of specifically 'ethnic' organisations tolerated by the military regime. It maintains branches in Rangoon and at Moulmein University, and in village monasteries across Mon State and in Pegu and Tenasserim Divisions.[68] Supported by local donations and international funds, in **2004** some 55,000 school students (70% of them girls) attended summer vacation courses in Mon language and culture-history, conducted in over one hundred monasteries and schools, in sixteen township across lower Burma. Most of these were situated in government-controlled areas. Although NMSP was limited to an indirect fund-raising role, this programme would not have been allowed by the regime before 1995 ceasefire.

However, patterns of development - and stagnation - among Burma's ethnic minority communities are mixed. As Martin Smith has observed, the situation on the ground varies from district to district.[69] While some aspects of the situation in Kachin State (exemplified by the formation of the Kachin Consultative Assembly in October 2002),

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[68] *Ibid.* p. 37.
[69] Martin Smith, in Burma Centre Netherlands and Transnational Institute (1999), pp. 46-48.

northern Shan State, and Mon and Karen States are quite encouraging, others are much less so.

This fact is illustrated by an important anomaly: civil society networks may re-emerge among war-torn communities without insurgent groups associated with that population necessarily renouncing armed struggle. For example, the number of religious (Christian and Buddhist) and other Karen groups participating in community development activities has increased markedly over the past five years. These developments have occurred despite the on-going and chronic Karen insurgency (and intra-Karen factional fighting), and continued government restrictions on travel and organisation. However, the opposite is also true: not all ceasefires result in the emergence of functioning civil society networks. Those parts of Shan State controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) since its 1989 ceasefire agreement with the SLORC are still characterised by a very circumscribed civil society. The UWSA's 'top-down' command style, and associated distrust of autonomous community organisations, owes much to Burmese - and Wa - political culture, and to ideas of the 'leading role of the party' inherited from the Communist Party of Burma (of which the UWSA was an element until 1989). These factors are exacerbated by the limited social and economic opportunities in the Wa sub-state, the minimal quantity and poor quality of education and health services, the degraded natural environment, and the pervasive corruption, political violence and 'warlordism' associated with the booming drugs trade in the region.[70]

The re-emergence of civil society networks in some parts of Burma raises a number of important issues. These are addressed at the levels of local, national and international analysis.

Local Democracy. One consequence of Burma's fifty year civil war has been the erosion of pluralism and democratic practices, in both non-state and (especially) state-controlled regions. Emergent civil society networks in ethnic minority areas, beyond the direct

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[70] However, the UWSA is not a monolithic organisation. Some Wa leaders are attempting to promote a community-based approach to development, as part of a Wa state-building exercise.

control of either the militarised state or often authoritarian (ex-)insurgent groups, represent alternative forms of social and political organization, and opportunities for local democratisation (or at least, liberalisation). **This type of 'small d' democratisation (or 'democracy from below') will be essential if any elite-led political transition in Burma is to be sustained, and positively effect the lives of people living in inaccessible, minority-populated border areas.**

It is possible that, by participating in such community development programmes, activists may be diverted into 'safer' and less challenging activities, thus depoliticising the struggle for ethnic rights in Burma. However, many of those involved in 'above ground' social networks - including members of the MNDF, an (outlawed) political party - are in fact still closely involved in politics. Implicitly, they are also challenging NMSP commissars for leadership of the Mon community, obliging the latter to re-assess their strategies, decision-making processes and policies.

As a political party, the NMSP is not part of civil society. Could it - or the social welfare, youth and women's departments under its control - be re-invented as a development agency? At present, having given up their largely symbolic armed opposition to Rangoon, the NMSP and other ceasefire groups are in danger of becoming marginalised within their own communities, unless they can re-invent themselves as *post*-ceasefire organisations. Such re-positioning must be accompanied by a re-conceptualisation of political ideals and processes, reflected in the party's policy and practice. The aging NMSP leaders have to determine where they stand on the big issues of Burmese politics. In particular, they must adopt a consistent policy towards the mainstream democracy movement (i.e. the NLD, but also the MNDF), and explain this position to constituencies inside Burma, in the border areas and overseas.

The on-going realignment of Mon society in Burma is mirrored in developments over the past decade within opposition circles along the Thailand border. Mon exile groups across the border, and in the remaining 'liberated zones', tend to operate under the umbrella - but often beyond the direct control - of the NMSP. The democratisation and

increasingly sophisticated political analysis of such activist groups bodes well for the future.[71]

Political Transition. A functioning civil society is a prerequisite of democratic transition. It is essential that groups and networks representative of Burma's broad, plural society equip themselves to fill any power vacuum that may emerge, either as a result of radical shifts in national politics, or of a more gradual realignment, and accompanying withdrawal of the *Tatmadaw* from state power. The ability of Burma's diverse social groups to re-assume control over aspects of their lives, which since the 1960s have been abrogated by the military, will depend on the strength of civil society.

Although grass-roots mobilisation often takes place under the guise of 'apolitical', local self-help, welfare and community development activities, it nevertheless represents a challenge to the military regime's authoritarian policies. The creation of locally-rooted associational networks undermines the ideological and practical basis of centralised military rule, creating spaces for the development of community autonomy, at least in limited spheres (e.g. language use). As Steinberg states in a recent article, the development of civil society in Burma "widens the space between the state and society, giving people greater freedom from government control. Such pluralism is an important base on which more responsive and responsible governments can be built."[72]

However, although it may be necessary to build democracy 'from the base up', the re-emergence of civil society networks is not in itself sufficient to affect political transition. This will require a concerted, explicitly political act of will on behalf of Burmese politicians. Members of the predominantly urban-Burman political elite in Rangoon, represented by the NLD, have proved that they are ready to take these risks, as have a number of ethnic leaders, who in July 2002 formed the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), representing parties which participated in the 1990 elections (including the

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[71] See South (2003), pp. 284-87.
[72] Steinberg, in the *International Herald Tribune* (28-8-2002).

MNDF).[73] Recent developments indicate that the NMSP is also attempting to make its presence felt in the national political arena, although with limited success.

International Responses. Post-ceasefire politics in Burma's ethnic minority areas have generally been under-reported, in comparison with the 'national level' struggle between Daw Aung San Su Kyi's NLD and the SPDC. The situation of a number of well-armed ceasefire groups in northern Burma has attracted some international attention, as many have been active in narcotics and amphetamines trafficking, the social effects of which are felt in Thailand and the west. However, the international community has been slow to recognise the significance of other ceasefire groups, such as the NMSP and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), which remain politically engaged - although their influence on events from 'within the legal' fold has been limited.

Nevertheless, since the ceasefire, Mon nationalists - including those who never took up arms, or had long ago renounced armed conflict - have found some limited space and funds with which to work towards the re-emergence of civil society within their community. If the international community is serious in its desire to support political transition in Burma, it can play an important role in encouraging the development of such networks in ethnic minority areas.

As Steinberg suggests, donors should "encourage local elements of civil society that can act as points for eventual political pluralism."[74] However, these groups' capacity to absorb funds and implement effective projects is limited, and may remain so for some time. Therefore, donors wishing to help develop local civil society networks - and thus secure the fragile ceasefire process across much of rural Burma - must be prepared to commit to long-term partnerships, and to ensure that their interventions are made in consultation with local communities and their representatives.[75]

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[73] The UNA is a successor the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), an umbrella group of ethnic nationality political parties elected in the May 1990.
[74] Steinberg (2002), p. 120.
[75] For a detailed discussion of civil society and democracy promotion in Burma, see South, 'Political Transition in Myanmar: A New Model for Democratisation', *op. cit.*

Conclusion

Changes in state structure have profoundly affected the historical formation and mobilisation of ethnic identities in Burma. Since 1962, the 'ethnocratic state' has suppressed non-Burman political identities and the operation of civil society, with profound consequences for the conceptualisation and expressions of ethnicity.

The altered relationship between the central government (and Burmese military) and some minority groups (and ethnic insurgents), as a result of the ceasefire process, constitutes a significant realignment of state-society relations. As a result, new forms of social and political organisation have begun to emerge within the Mon and other minority communities, which have the potential to affect state structures, including those of the 'liberated zones'. Whether the re-alignment of ethnic minority politics ultimately feeds back into the loop, and contributes towards transition at the national level, will depend on how politicians react to political opportunities - and attendant risks.

Meanwhile, the NMSP is in danger of becoming marginalised, unless it can respond to the new environment with a new strategic vision. The ceasefire groups are uniquely positioned to take the lead in redefining the nature of civil-military relations in Burma. Ultimately, for both the *Tatmadaw* and the armed ethnic groups, the transition from insurgency to relative peace and stability - of which the present military regime is so proud - is less difficult than that from dictatorship to democracy. The first phase (peace-making) is a prerequisite of the second phase (peace-building), but the latter addresses more fundamental issues.

After decades of conflict, and amid on-going repression, opportunities exist for conflict resolution and political transition in Burma. To varying degrees, the SPDC, the NLD and ethnic minority leaders have all expressed their desire for peaceful social and political development. Although the scope and mechanics of any transition will be negotiated among elites, in order for recovery to be effective, members of the country's diverse

social and ethnic groups must enjoy participation and a sense of 'ownership' in the process. Post-conflict transformation thus requires the rehabilitation of Burmese civil society. This difficult and uneven process is already underway, and is worthy of support.

Foreign governments, UN agencies and INGOs should work to empower those non-regime groups attempting to work inside Burma, under the most challenging circumstances. They should also continue to bring pressure on the SPDC to initiate political reform and enter into dialogue with representatives of Burma's ethnic minority and opposition groups.

Although the international community can play an important role in facilitating political transition, the success of this process will depend on the Burmese state and social groups. Based on a reading of British and French history, Skocpol suggests that "states not only conduct decision-making, coercive, and adjudicative activities in different ways, but also give rise to various conceptions of the meaning and methods of 'politics' itself, conceptions that influence the behaviour of all groups and classes in national societies."[76] The field of political culture - attitudes to and valuations of power and politics - is often stubbornly resistant to change. As Alan Smith and Khin Maung Win observe, the absence of consensus and "accumulated distrust and unwillingness to compromise between and centre- and Burman-dominated state … and non-Burman ethnic groups" is the most serious obstacle to political transition.[77]

In a recent report for the Minority Rights Group, Martin Smith concludes that "conflict resolution, demilitarization and the building of civil society will be vital bridges in achieving reconciliation in the country and supporting the creation of conditions in which democracy can take root and minority rights be enjoyed."[78] However, as he - and many ethnic minority leaders - recognise, if it is to be sustained, peace and reconciliation must be accompanied by a just settlement of state-society issues.

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[76] Skocpol (1985), p. 22.
[77] Khin Maung Win and Alan Smith, in Sachsenroder and Frings (1998), p.132.
[78] Martin Smith (2002), p. 34.

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