

From ceasefires to lasting peace?

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SINCE late 2011, the government has agreed ceasefires with most – but not all – non-state armed groups in Myanmar. This peace process represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic conflicts. However, unless both the government and non-state armed groups demonstrate commitment to resolving underlying issues, the peace process is in danger of failing.

The government and army

The peace process is largely dependent on the resilience of reforms at the national level. However, the government's ability to deliver change is hampered by deep-rooted conservative-authoritarian cultures, and limited technical capacities. The president and his team have promised so much that Myanmar may experience a "revolution of rising expectations", with its people becoming frustrated if the government is unable to deliver.



General Mutu Saipo (right) of the Karen National Union (KNU) shakes hands with Colonel Tin Win during a break in peace talks at a hotel in Yangon on April 6.
Pic: AFP

The reform process can be likened to taking the lid off a pressure cooker. In a society where tensions have been building for more than half a century, grievances can easily spill over – with disturbing consequences. One example is the recent violence in parts of Rakhine State and the ethnic hatred it unleashed. Frustration is also acute in other ethnic minority-populated areas of the country, which are characterised by extreme levels of poverty and under-development, and widespread human rights abuses in the context of armed conflict.

After decades of fighting, there is very little trust between many ethnic communities and the government. In order to demonstrate its commitment to the peace process the government needs to produce concrete results. Many conflict-affected communities in southeast Myanmar have reported improved security conditions over the past year and greater freedom of movement. Nevertheless, observers question whether the Tatmadaw is prepared to follow the agenda laid down by the government's peace negotiators. For example, clashes have continued to occur across much of central and southern Shan State, even after three rounds of talks with the Shan State Army-South. The inclusion of the Tatmadaw's deputy commander-in-chief and other senior officers in the government's new national peacemaking body is intended to demonstrate the Tatmadaw's commitment to the ceasefires. However, while clashes continue in areas where truces have been agreed, many will continue to question the credibility of the peace process.

Even more troubling is the conflict in Kachin State, where the outbreak of fighting in June 2011 marked the end of a 17-year ceasefire between the government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). As a result of this resumption of armed conflict, thousands of people have died. More than 80,000 people are internally displaced along the border with China, while there are tens of thousands more IDPs in the conflict zones and government-controlled areas. Unless this conflict is resolved, the whole peace process – and the larger reform agenda – could be jeopardised. Elsewhere, for example in Karen State, confidence in the peace process would be increased if the Tatmadaw was able to withdraw from at least some frontline positions.

Another caveat: although the president and his peace envoys are demonstrably sincere and serious in wishing to find a solution to Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, they lack an in-depth understanding of the issues. This is hardly surprising given their status as retired Tatmadaw officers and members of the ethnic Burman elite. In order to move the peace process on to a more substantial footing, it will be necessary for Myanmar's political leaders to gain a better understanding of ethnic aspirations and grievances.

This observation raises a broader concern regarding national reconciliation: while ceasefires and peace agreements between the government and non-state armed groups are necessary, they will not be sufficient to achieve lasting ethnic peace. What is required is a deep and wide-ranging national conversation, and one that involves members of the Burman majority reassessing their relationships with their ethnic minority brethren.

Nevertheless, the current period represents the best opportunity in many years to resolve ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. As with the reform process more broadly, however, the new opening is largely dependent on the president and his close advisers. On the side of ethnic nationality communities also, personalised politics predominates.

Ethnic actors

Myanmar's ethnic communities are highly diverse. Among the main stakeholders are non-state armed groups. These include local militias with little or no political agenda, as well as more politically mature organisations. Some of these, such as the United Wa State Army – Myanmar's largest non-state armed group – are striving for local autonomy, with their leaders having significant economic interests. Others are more committed to a federalist agenda. These include groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU), historically the country's most important non-state armed group.

The KNU is indicative of the characteristics of many armed groups in Myanmar: while it has strong popular appeal in many

(particularly Christian) communities, the KNU cannot take the support of all Karen (particularly non-Christian) communities for granted. Furthermore, like their counterparts in armed conflicts across the world, personnel within Myanmar's non-state armed groups are often motivated by a mixture of genuine social-political grievances and aspirations, in combination with deep-rooted economic agendas – “greed” and “grievance” motivations.

Other key stakeholders among ethnic communities include above-ground ethnic political parties, many of which did well in the 2010 elections but have been largely excluded from the peace process. Another key sector is civil society, including national non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), as well as less formally organised associations and grassroots networks operating within and between ethnic communities. Last – but definitely not least – are “ordinary” citizens and civilians: the ethnic communities who have suffered from decades of armed conflict.

This brief review of stakeholders introduces an important aspect of the peace process: so far, discussions have largely been confined to two sets of armed actors: the government (and Tatmadaw) and non-state armed groups. It is important to broaden the process, to include political and civil society actors, and communities affected by conflict. Some non-state armed groups have engaged in consultations with ethnic civil society and political stakeholders. In order to further promote local participation, communities can be mobilised to monitor the ceasefires agreed between the government and armed groups. For example, the May 7 agreement between the Chin National Front and government mandates a network of Chin churchmen and women to monitor the peace agreement; similar arrangements are under discussion in the peace talks with the Shan, Kayah and Karen (officially known as Kayin).

Peace and conflict agendas

Resolving Myanmar's ethnic conflicts will require substantial and sustained community participation, and changes in values and identities, including on the part of the Burman majority. Also fundamental to any resolution of ethnic conflict will be a political settlement acceptable to key elements among different stakeholders – in particular to leaders of the Myanmar government and army, and non-state armed groups. This is the issue at the heart of the peace process.

The government and most of its erstwhile battlefield foes have undertaken initial peace talks. With the important exception of Kachin State, fighting has decreased significantly and in many areas come to a halt. The international community has responded by supporting locally led and owned initiatives to test the peace process, to build trust on the ground and to support the recovery of conflict-affected communities. Without a broad political settlement however, these positive developments will be insufficient to maintain the momentum of peace.

The president has indicated his willingness to address some of the key issues of concern to ethnic communities. The question is when serious political talks will start, and how. If the government can demonstrate a willingness to engage on key political questions, it will generate much goodwill among the country's diverse ethnic stakeholders, ensuring that the peace process continues. The time has come to set the agenda and timeframe for substantive discussions.

At present, among ethnic minority politicians, two broad sets of opinion can be discerned. One set of actors believes it is first necessary to agree a comprehensive political settlement, before conflict can come to an end. This is the position of the United Nationalities Federal Council (an alliance of armed ethnic groups). It is also the KIO's position.

Most of Myanmar's non-state armed groups are divided between “hardliners”, who are committed to this all-or-nothing stance, and more pragmatic leaders. The latter seek to engage in peace talks in order to achieve a lasting political settlement. Advocates of this approach consider peace to be something achieved by doing, with both sides moving forward step-by-step as trust is built. According to this approach, peace and political settlement are not things that can be agreed in abstract, before the violence ends.

As noted above, actors on all sides of Myanmar's armed conflicts are motivated by a combination of political, humanitarian and economic factors. Some armed ethnic groups have become used to controlling populations (including IDPs and refugees) in the border areas. Many among these ethnic communities display strong, but not un-critical, support for the armed groups in question. Nevertheless, there is a fear among the leaderships of some armed groups that by engaging in the peace process they will lose control of client populations as civilians resettle in areas under greater government influence.

During the last round of ceasefires in the 1990s, most of the larger non-state armed groups retained their arms, as well as control of sometimes extensive areas of territory where they functioned as de facto local administrations. It remains to be seen whether the present peace process will see armed groups maintain their jungle enclaves or if they will be able to reinvent themselves and re-engage with communities in government-controlled areas. The latter scenario could see some non-state armed groups re-forming as above-ground political actors.

Historically, the government has been widely regarded as illegitimate. As a result, armed opposition groups have not been called upon to demonstrate their own credibility. However, as the government gains more domestic and international legitimacy, it will become increasingly difficult for opposition groups to justify holding arms. The tendency in Myanmar and Southeast Asia over the past two decades has been for non-state armed groups to become increasingly marginalised. Therefore, the current opening may represent the last best chance for such organisations to negotiate a settlement.

Armed groups must decide whether they will get a better deal from the present government, or from a future National League for Democracy-led administration. The U Thein Sein administration is clearly motivated to settle peace agreements with armed opposition groups. Most current government leaders are unlikely to be in office after 2015. They therefore have another two years to construct their political legacy. In contrast, a future civilian-led government may have high levels of international and domestic legitimacy, putting it in a stronger negotiating position vis-à-vis armed groups. On this calculation, armed opposition groups may have more leverage over the current government than they will in relation to its successors.

Another constraint on both government and non-state armed groups is their weak governance capacities and lack of technical expertise. Key actors lack the skills or political will to regulate extractive and other industries that are likely to make inroads into remote, conflict-affected areas post-ceasefire. Therefore, the future for many ethnic areas may be one of economic exploitation and environmental degradation. Fortunately, such concerns are at least partly offset by the burgeoning civil society networks that exist within and between different ethnic communities. In the future, local NGOs will need to take on an important oversight role in the resource-rich borderlands.

Such observations remind us that there are potential losers as well as winners in the peace process. Those who stand to gain most from the end of armed conflict are civilian communities who have suffered decades of civil war. Among those who perceive the peace process as threatening are some exiled activist groups, who are used to dominating the political agenda. Some of these groups and individuals feel threatened by the peace process, as they see diplomatic and donor interest shifting away from the borderlands to focus on what is happening "inside" Myanmar.

Many actors have legitimate concerns regarding the peace process. The government should demonstrate its commitment to peace by initiating political dialogue as soon as possible and bringing the Kachin conflict to a speedy end.

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