

The Peace Process in Myanmar: Challenges and Prospects

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Myanmar's three-year-old peace process is nearing a critical moment. Agreement on a nationwide ceasefire is expected at a summit in Kachin State in late September. Yet, issues that have plagued ethnic organizations throughout the ceasefire process promise to make the follow-on political dialogue phase problematic and protracted. These issues include eliminating confusion between what a ceasefire and a political dialogue entail, establishing a clear ethnic leadership for the process, settling conflicts within ethnic organizations, and improving trust between the government and the ethnic groups.

A central problem is confusion which issues to include in the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) which should be covered in the political dialogue. Ethnic leaders insist on a number of political issues be included in the ceasefire draft that would be better raised in the dialogue process. Rather than negotiate a strictly military agreement to suspend fighting until a political settlement is reached, ethnic leaders are pushing political guarantees from the government. In addition to issues such as the demarcation of territory, status of forces, and a code of conduct for military forces, ethnic organizations have raised central political issues such as a federal system and revision of the constitution. While important issues that need working out, their inclusion has clouded the discussion and significantly slowed down the process.

Still, this attitude among ethnic leadership is understandable given the historical background of their struggles. In the late 1980's and early 1990's a number of ceasefires were agreed to, particularly in northern Myanmar. However, despite assurances of political dialogue, the military government

refused to discuss political issues, moving instead to pacify ethnic leaders with economic concessions.

A need for an executive body to coordinate the actions of the National Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) was recognized at the recent Laiza Summit in July, there is debate over who should be included. The NCCT envisions leaders from each of its constituent ethnic armed organizations. However, the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) believes it should act as the executive body.

The UNFC, originally a military alliance and largely controlled by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), does not include all of the members of the NCCT. Most notably, two of the largest the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA) ? remain outside the grouping.

The main concern is that members of the NCCT do not believe UNFC' s interests are synonymous with their own. A number of groups in the NCCT disagree with the UNFC' s stance of not recognizing the 2008 Constitution, thus challenging the legality of the government to negotiate. There is also much concern over the strong leadership role taken by the KIO. In late August, the Karen National (KNU) walked out of a high level UNFC meeting over this issue and the direction the KIO was pushing the UNFC. The dominance of the KIO, which is still in engaged in active fighting with the government, has led to accusations that it is pushing its own agenda over that of the collective group. It has become clear that the KIO intends to lead the UNFC to usurp the powers of the NCCT leadership in negotiating terms at the upcoming September summit with the government.

Disputes over the terms of the ceasefire have deepened factional cleavages in some organizations. Rather than presenting a united front at discussions, the leaderships of some organizations remain divided internally over the terms of the ceasefire, or even whether they should enter into a ceasefire at all. Within the KNU leadership, for example, a shift from a more hard-line element to one more accommodating to ceasefire terms and a political dialogue has created serious divisions in the organization.

Decades of civil war created deep distrust in the government and military one and the same for most of the period among many ethnic groups. The KNU, for example, has been fighting for over sixty years, participating in several rounds of failed ceasefire negotiations. A ceasefire agreed in 2004 fell apart when the military government launched an offensive two years later. As far back as 1962, apparently productive talks were terminated by the military after seizing power in a coup that year.

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the KIO both of which had ceasefires with the government for much of the 1990s and 2000s are particularly distrustful of the current government. This attitude is due in great part to a refusal by the previous military government to take ethnic demands seriously, particularly during the National Convention that drafted the current constitution.

Historical mistrust has in some cases been reinforced by Myanmar Army to continue to strengthen its hold over ethnic territory and reinforce existing positions. Ironically, these moves are facilitated by the delays involved in finalizing a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

The delays brought on by confusion over the role of a ceasefire, leadership of the ethnic side of the process, factional infighting, and mistrust of the government have served to not only hinder ethnic aspirations, but also to diminish the reputation of the government. The inability of government negotiators to bring a swift end to conflict has earned them criticism domestically and internationally. It may have also somewhat weakened the position of government vis-a-vis the military through the army's ability to consolidate its hold over ethnic areas and gain more territory.

The difficulties encountered in the ceasefire process can only be amplified when the political dialogue process begins. The diversity of political issues to be discussed has the potential to amplify confusion over what was already decided in the ceasefire, ownership disputes of the dialogue, factional infighting, and mistrust. If ethnic organizations want to avoid a prolonged peace process, they will need to work through these issues and form a more unified approach.



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