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Title: Recognition and Rebel Authority: Elite-Grassroots Relations in Myanmar's Ethnic Insurgencies

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Recognition and Rebel Authority: Elite-Grassroots Relations in Myanmar's Ethnic Insurgencies

ABSTRACT: This article contributes to the emerging scholarship on the internal politics of non-state armed groups and rebel governance by asking how rival rebel leaders capture and lose legitimacy within their own movement. It explores this question by drawing on critical social theory and ethnographic field research on Myanmar's most important ethnic armed groups: the Karen and Kachin insurgencies. The article finds that authority relations between elites and grassroots in these movements are not primarily linked to the distributional outcomes of their insurgent social orders, as a contractualist understanding of rebel governance would suggest. It is argued that the authority of rebel leaders in both analysed movements rather depends on whether they address their grassroots' claim to due and proper recognition, enabling the latter to derive self-perceived positive social identities through affiliation to the insurgent collective. This contributes to our understanding of the role that authority relations between differently situated elite and non-elite insurgents play in the factional contestation within rebel movements. In addition, the original empirical findings help to explain why Myanmar's much hailed peace process has hitherto received limited local support, particularly from the grassroots of ethnic insurgency movements.

Keywords: Insurgency, Authority, Non-State Armed Groups, Recognition Theory, Social Identity Theory, Myanmar/Burma

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INTRODUCTION

Students of armed conflict have recently started to question the oft underlying assumption that insurgency movements are unitary actors whose behaviour is the result of purposive strategies in reaction to their external environment (Pearlman 2009, Bakke et al. 2012, Cunningham et al. 2012, Staniland 2014). One of their core findings is that the conduct of rebel groups is often driven by dynamics internal to the organisations, most importantly fragmentation and internal contestation between rival factions. Stable support networks are essential for success in the ‘dual contest’ that insurgent elites engage in, i.e. their fight against the state as well as their competition against rivalling elites within the same group (Cunningham et al. 2012, p. 69).

This article contributes to this emerging scholarship by focusing on the role that authority plays in the internal contestation within ethnic insurgencies in Myanmar, which have struggled against the Myanmar central government for more autonomy and minority rights for many decades.¹ Authority is crucial as ‘fear alone does not suffice to sustain rule in the long term’ (Kalyvas 2006, p. 115), as Stathis Kalyvas reminds in his study of civil war. In fact, contrary to contemporary orthodoxies that associate insurgency foremost with “warlordism” and the pure coercion of civilians, rebel leaders often rely on building legitimate authority relations to local communities and their movement’s grassroots in their quest for political power (Mampilly 2011, Staniland 2014, pp. 1–24). As in other fields of political inquiry, questions of legitimacy, therefore, become ‘quite literally, the key to politics’ (Jost and Major 2001, p. 4) when studying insurgency. For investigating authority processes in Myanmar’s ethnic rebel groups, this article, therefore, asks: how do rival rebel elites come to be viewed as more or less legitimate by their movement’s grassroots in relation to one another?

To address this question, the article builds on scholarship that understands legitimate authority relations between elites and grassroots of insurgency as an implicit social contract (Wickham-Crowley 1987, Mampilly 2011). While agreeing with the importance of reciprocal relationships, it will be demonstrated that deliberations over distributional outcomes alone are insufficient for explaining how elites capture and lose legitimacy in Myanmar’s ethnic insurgencies. By drawing on critical social theory as well as on findings from extensive ethnographic field research on the Karen and Kachin insurgencies, it is argued that leadership authority in these movements largely depends on processes of social identification and claims to recognition. Rebel elites that satisfied their grassroots’ claim to recognition by way of fair

¹ For a good background on the social roots of Myanmar’s civil war see Smith (1999, pp. 27-100) and Holliday (2012, pp.25-40).

and dignifying treatment enabled the latter to derive self-perceived positive social identities from affiliation to the insurgency, which resulted in feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. This legitimized the collective and its leaders, generating leadership authority. Elite behaviour, which was perceived as unjust and disrespectful by the insurgent grassroots, however, threatened this positively self-perceived insurgent social identity. This eroded elite authority and led to internal contestations with rival factions. Besides contributing to the literature on rebel groups, the article's findings explain the reescalation of the Kachin conflict and highlight the shortcomings of the Karen ceasefire. What emerges, in particular, is that a sustainable settlement between the country's ethnic armed groups and the central government needs to address the claims to due and proper recognition among insurgent grassroots rather than satisfying elite interests only.

To present these findings, this article will first explain the current tensions between the KNU's grassroots and its incumbent leadership, which illustrates the issues to be explored next. It will then conceptualize insurgency as a social process, stressing the essential role of authority relations between differently situated elite and non-elite actors. Building on this, it will review the concept of an implicit social contract for rebel authority and show its relevance for the Karen case. By doing so, it will, however, be suggested that distributional outcomes of governance arrangements alone cannot explain elite authority within both rebel movements in question. The article will then propose a different approach, using Recognition Theory and Social Identity Theory to explain elite authority and internal contestation in both, the Kachin and Karen insurgencies.

BENEATH THE KAREN CEASEFIRE

In October 2013 a series of bombs hit various sites frequented by foreigners in Yangon and Mandalay. The rumour mills in the country's teahouses were grinding wildly. Conspiracy theories were spun and fingers pointed into usual directions, including Myanmar's marginalized Muslim community and the country's armed forces, the *Tatmadaw*. Government investigators, however, soon presented a suspect believed to be linked to the Karen National Union (KNU). The country's oldest ethnic insurgency movement had signed its first ever ceasefire agreement with Naypyidaw in the previous year and has since surprised national and international

observers with its ‘growing friendship’² to Myanmar’s establishment. The bombing suspect was portrayed as belonging to rogue elements of the movement, a peace spoiler who also wanted to scare off foreign investors from the recently opening and liberalising country. Top KNU leaders were quick to join U Thein Sein’s government in condemning the terrorist acts and promised to assist in the official investigations.³

The bombings took place shortly before a meeting of the KNU’s educational arm, which for many years has operated an extensive parallel schooling system in areas controlled by the insurgency along the Thai-Myanmar border. I was invited to join the gathering that took place at the KNU’s teacher training college in northern Karen State, an area locally known as *Mutraw*. This remote and densely forested border area is the last remaining strong-hold of the Karen insurgency, which has lost large swathes of its “liberated territory” to military offensives since the early 1990s. Most of *Mutraw*, however, remains under staunch control of the insurgency’s 5th Brigade, a unit that is often regarded as the “hard-line” faction within the movement’s armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The government suspected the bombers to originate from this area. Gathering in one of the half-open bamboo stilt-barracks, the KNU education workers, who joined the meeting from various parts of Karen State, listened to a broadcast on a multi-band radio, and fiercely discussed the news of the bombings in the far-away urban centres, where most of them have never been to. Nobody knew whether the bombings were really carried out by one of their own men. Yet, they strongly condemned their leadership for publicly promising full cooperation in the government investigations rather than protecting someone who was potentially a Karen revolutionary. When I brought this topic up during an interview with a Karen political activist, who is well-networked within the KNU, he responded in the same way, blaming the current rebel leadership for being too “soft-soaped”. In his words:

‘This is absurd, you know, it’s like discrediting your own organization. How can you even trust this Government with information? But you see, some of our leaders had a secret meeting with the government and excluded the other leaders. Now they can point the fingers at them for not cooperating. But the ones who are cooperating, they are already submitting to the laws of the government. This is a big issue. We never accepted the government’s law. We have our own system, our own laws. Don’t they

²Yan Naing, “The Growing Friendship Between Naypyidaw and the KNU,” *The Irrawaddy*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/multimedia-burma/growing-friendship-naypyidaw-knu.html> (accessed August 30, 2014).

³ Yan Naing, “Who’s Behind the Bombings in Burma?,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 18, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/news-analysis/whos-behind-bombings-burma.html> (accessed August 30, 2014).

fight for all this anymore? So can you see now why we are frustrated with this kind of leadership these days?’⁴

This situation illustrates the various issues that the article will explore. It sheds light on the complex and often uneasy relationship between a movement’s leadership and its grassroots. It highlights processes of authority, which this article posits are central for understanding these vertical relations. The situation, furthermore, shows how authority of differently situated rebel leaders interacts with dynamics of group fragmentation and internal factional contestation. Moreover, these observations reveal the internal tensions that can arise in rebel groups whose leaders are negotiating with the government. These issues seem central for understanding non-state armed groups and their behaviour more generally as well as the Myanmar’s protracted armed conflict in particular. In order to explain how processes of authority interact with group fragmentation and factional contestation, and ultimately, drive collective behaviour, the following section first conceptualizes the relations between differently situated but interdependent elite and non-elite actors of insurgency as a social process.

AUTHORITY IN THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF INSURGENCY

In a study on peasant revolutions, James Scott noted a frequently observed gap between the motivating ideas at the elite and non-elite levels of popular insurgencies. This can often make the relationship between rebel leaders and their rank-and-file an uneasy one. Scott writes that ‘doing justice to radical movements requires not only the analysis of the ideas and activities of radical elites but also the recovery of the popular aspirations which made them possible’ (Scott 1979, p. 98). This article contributes to the study of armed group politics, with this insight in mind. Political Scientists have recently returned to investigating internal dynamics of non-state armed groups by questioning the oft underlying assumption that insurgency movements were unitary actors whose behaviour could be interpreted as the maximisation of their perceived external utility (Pearlman 2009, Bakke et al. 2012, Cunningham et al. 2012, Staniland 2014).

What emerges from their studies is that many non-state armed groups are heterogeneous movements, where differently situated actors form malleable alliances, fragment into factions along various fault lines and wield different sources of authority corresponding to their location within a fluid network of power. These internal cleavages entail contestation for leadership between rival factions, which, in turn, develops a momentum of its own in driving armed group

⁴ Interview with Karen environmental and social activist, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 30 October 2015.

behaviour. It, therefore, appears that the conduct of non-state armed groups cannot be inferred from elite decision-making alone, but needs to be analysed as the outcome of a multifaceted social process between differently situated but interdependent elite and non-elite actors. Wendy Pearlman writes that a ‘movement’s conflict behavior takes shape less as a choice on the part of a coherent entity than as an evolving social process in which these differently situated actors launch and sustain their participation for different reasons’ (Pearlman 2010, p. 202).

To understand this social process of insurgency, this article builds on Pearlman’s conceptualisation of insurgency as composite-actors (Pearlman 2010), comprising of *incumbent leaders*, *aspirant elites*, and *the grassroots*. While this is a first helpful guide for conceptualising different positionalities of insurgent rival elites and mass-level actors of insurgency, the article proposes an important departure: Rebel groups do not emerge out of the blue but are ontologically embedded in a certain socio-temporal space within which they should be analysed. In William Reno’s words, ‘social context matters a lot, perhaps more than individual motives in shaping the uses to which violence is put’ (Reno 2009, p. 371). Insurgency embedded in wider social networks does, therefore, not possess determinate boundaries. In fact, insurgency cannot be extricated from its social environment for several reasons:

First, fluid overlaps between combatants and civilians are a defining criterion of most non-state armed groups, which provides an essential advantage in fighting asymmetric warfare against a militarily superior state (Schlichte 2012, p. 722). Second, integrating the structures of insurgency within the social institutions of local communities through parallel governance structures is a key feature of popular insurgency movements that control territory (Mampilly 2011, p. 12). Third, popular insurgency is often embedded within the everyday mesh of society through kinship, which can generate strong networks of support and loyalty from families of fighters (Kalyvas 2006, p. 125). Fourth, active membership and passive support of insurgency are difficult to distinguish and can fluctuate over time (Wood 2003). Fifth, in places of protracted social conflict a wide ‘network of insurgent organizations’ (Ibid., p. 190) can emerge, comprising of other social actors, such as agricultural cooperatives, churches, student associations, or activist groups (Ibid.).

Understanding insurgency as a network that spans across different nodes within wider society reveals that these fluidities happen on both, the elite and non-elite, levels of insurgency. Rebel leaders stand in a complex relationship to other social elites, e.g. community leaders or businessmen. While the latter are not part of the “rebellion proper” they often are tightly networked with the insurgency for which they sometimes fulfil crucial functions, including

mobilisation, funding, intelligence, and legitimisation. Depending on their interactions with incumbent and aspiring elites they can become an integral part of the insurgent landscape and its internal contestations. On the *grassroots* level the distinction into “rebels proper” and civilians is even more difficult. *Grassroots* could, for instance, be the foot soldiers of guerrilla armies or administrators of a rebellion’s political wing. They can also comprise of civilians and members of community-based social organisations, who despite not being officially part of the rebel movement are inclined to the insurgent cause. They have their own motivations for supporting the rebellion as well as opinions regarding the insurgency and its elites. Their popular support is crucial to form and sustain armed rebellion by way of recruits, intelligence, and shelter for challenging a militarily superior state army (Staniland 2014, pp. 1-24). Rival rebel elites, arguably, also need to be able to draw on stable support networks in order to be successful against internal competitors. Hence, the grassroots of a movement does not consciously direct or intend to direct the conduct of the collective, but elites’ dependencies on their support makes them an important part of the insurgent power equation nevertheless.

The fundamental challenge that arises for rebel leaders then, is how to ensure active support for or at least passive compliance among the grassroots with their insurgent social order as a counter-project to the incumbent state as well as to rival insurgent elites. Pure coercion, at least, does not create sustainable systems of compliance, obedience and support, as argued by generations of political theorists, from Machiavelli to Max Weber (Zelditch 2001). To achieve this, rebel elites, therefore, need to turn “naked power” into authority, which in Weber’s words, is ‘ein Sonderfall von Macht’ (Weber 1980, p. 541), meaning a ‘special kind of power’ (Uphoff 1989, p. 295). In contrast to other forms of power, authority rests on ‘a certain minimum of voluntary submission; thus an interest [...] in obedience’ (Weber 1947, p. 342) on the part of the person subject to authority. Coercion is transformed into authority by processes of legitimation (Weber 1947, p. 342, Zelditch 2001). This turns legitimacy⁵ quite literally into ‘the key to politics’ (Jost and Major 2001, p. 4).

Rebel leaders are often aware of the importance to build and maintain legitimacy among the masses for waging effective guerrilla war and building of alternative political orders

⁵ Legitimacy here is not used as a normative but as a descriptive concept, which stresses the perception of actors themselves. The article therefore, follows Morris Zelditch who defines something as legitimate ‘if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures accepted by a group’ (Zelditch2001, p. 33).

(Mampilly 2011, pp. 11-13). In fact, many historic leaders of successful popular insurrections - including Mao Zedong, Ernesto Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Min - attributed their success first and foremost to the building of legitimate authority relations to the peasantry. While one could explain their reasoning as left-wing political ideologies of Cold War insurgencies, their organisational ideas have long been studied by rebel leaders around the world, irrespective of their political agendas (Mampilly 2011, p. 11). This is also true for the Karen insurgency in Myanmar, whose organisation in local, regional and central committees has been inspired by Maoist ideas despite their anti-communist stance in the Cold War (Smith 1999, pp. 93-94). For analysing empirically how the authority of rebel elites arises and erodes, this article asks under what conditions does the grassroots of a movement accept or reject different leaders and their proposed insurgent social orders as legitimate. In Weber's words, when do the grassroots of insurgency have an 'interest [...] in obedience' (Weber 1947, p. 324)?

To address this question in the case of ethnic insurgency movements in Myanmar, the article has chosen an ethnographically informed qualitative approach. This entailed elite interviews as well as extensive field research during which I lived and travelled with differently situated elite and non-elite actors involved in or affiliated with the Karen and Kachin insurgencies for about nine months. I gained access to both movements as a researcher who was interested (and sympathetic) to their cause, which I demonstrated by writing on the conflict in media outlets. Upon my interlocutors' requests, I also conveyed multiple seminars on issues surrounding international politics and research methods for low-ranking rebel officers and members of insurgent-affiliated activist groups and humanitarian organisations. Much of the following analysis is, therefore, based on informal conversations rather than structured interviews. While this runs counter to the methodological concerns surrounding objectivity and external validity of positivist empirical research, it was necessary for exploring a little researched phenomenon by providing a window 'onto hidden politics and an opportunity to recalibrate the vision of histories and explanations told from above' (Allina-Pisano 2009, p. 71). Reflecting about the difficult power relations during ethnographic knowledge production, including my own role as a researcher and potential entanglement in 'webs of local associations' (Van Maanen 1991, p. 39), I triangulated information by confirming it with differently situated insiders and outsiders. Following James Scott, this article does, therefore, not aim to establish a generalizable theory of authority relations in rebel movements but to provide a 'plausible account' on the modalities of leadership authority in the Kachin and Karen insurgencies that should be 'judged by the standards of its logic, its economy, and its consistency with other

social facts' (Scott 1985, pp. 46-47). In doing so, I attempt to contribute to the wider debate on authority and non-state armed groups in a modest but meaningful way.

Implicit Social Contract – 'We fight to protect our people, ourselves'

Studies on rebel authority mostly point to the importance of governance arrangements for establishing reciprocal relationships between "rebel rulers" and local communities (Wickham-Crowley 1987, Mampilly 2011). In his research on rebel groups in Latin America, Timothy Wickham-Crowley has built on Barrington Moore's conceptualisation of peasant-landlord relations as an "implicit social contract" that entails contractual obligations for both sides, such as taxation for protection (Moore 1978, pp. 17-31, Wickham-Crowley 1987, p. 477). Wickham-Crowley argues that rebel authority in "liberated territories" is built on a similar mutual understanding between civilians and rebels: civilians are to support insurgent rule or at least not to resist it, in turn, rebels are expected to defend the local populace from external enemies, maintain internal order, and improve the population's welfare. Wickham-Crowley stresses these interdependencies, writing that '[w]here guerrilla authority arose, it could also decline. When guerrillas do become the legitimate regional authorities in the areas they control, they must assume the obligations thereof' (Wickham-Crowley 1987, p. 492). Understanding insurgency as embedded within wider social networks, it appears that rebel governance arrangements in local communities also play an important role for the authority of rebel elites among the grassroots of their movements. This is because the grassroots - e.g. the rank-and-file of the rebel army - are not separate from local communities. When rebel groups fail to deliver protection and social services, the authority of rebel leaders, therefore, also suffers among their own rank-and-file. To some extent, these interdependencies help to explain the different relationships of differently situated Karen rebel leaders with their grassroots.

During the heydays of the Karen insurgency the "liberated" territories - locally known as *Kawthoolei* – spanned all along the Thai-Myanmar border from Shan State in the north to the Tenasserim Region in the south.⁶ While the KNU still operates in large parts of these areas, it lost most of its territorial control to competing non-state armed groups, pro-government militias, and the counterinsurgency. This has affected southern and central parts of Karen State particularly severely (South 2008, p. 55). In these areas the loss of territory has crumbled the once extensive rebel governance system that included taxation and conscription in return for basic health and education services as well as protection. This has severed the once close-knitted relationship between local communities and local KNU units in central and southern

⁶ For more background on the Karen conflict and the KNU see South (2011).

Karen State. Today many local Karen in these areas, who formerly supported the KNU, have difficulties discerning between the KNU and other armed actors - including the Border Guard Force (BGF) pro-government militias and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) - from whom they primarily experience extortion and predation in their day to day lives. Speaking about the KNU in these parts of Karen State, one local Karen English teacher - who formerly taught in KNU operated schools close to Myawaddy in central Karen State - put it this way: ‘Today it does not matter who they are, they just come into your village and demand money. But they do not give anything in return. They just make our lives more difficult.’⁷

In contrast, a trip to KNU-held parts of the north-eastern Karen State feels like a journey back in time, where one can still breathe the revolutionary air of *Kawthoolei*. The rugged hills of what is locally known as *Mutraw* district are some of the most remote and underdeveloped areas of Southeast Asia. Lacking any noteworthy infrastructure, most villages are only accessible by long and tedious hikes on small foot paths through the dense rain forest. Much less affected by *Tatmadaw* offensives of the 1990s and 2000s or the emergence of rivalling armed groups than KNU units in central and southern parts of Karen State, the 5th Brigade of the KNLA is still in firm control of large pockets of territory in *Mutraw*, where the KNU maintains an extensive and remarkably well-functioning insurgent state. In contrast to other parts of Karen State, most children in *Mutraw* attend school in KNU operated primary and middle schools, where they learn Sgaw Karen as the first language and study a history curriculum that has little in common with its official counterpart.⁸ It provides an extensive narrative of the decades-long ethnic armed struggle, including the biographies of legendary Karen martyrs and meticulous accounts of historical battles. Teachers graduate from two years courses at the local teacher training college with certificates and ceremonies. Small health stations provide healthcare and disciplined KNLA units provide security together with affiliated militias organized as the Karen National Defense Organisation (KNDO).

Villagers pay taxes to the local KNU administrators and send one son per family to serve in the KNLA’s 5th Brigade. Conscripts usually serve for up to seven years in the most basic conditions. While they are being provided with food, shelter and some “luxury” allowances, such as cheerot cigars, they are not compensated monetarily for their service in any significant way. This arrangement works because KNU staff and soldiers in *Mutraw* are deeply embedded within the local communities and mostly receive additional pocket money from their

⁷ Conversation with Karen teacher, Mae Sot, Thailand, 12 November 2013.

⁸ For more information on the KNU education system, see Lall and South (2014).

families. This has constructed a tightly knit social network where insurgents and non-insurgents as well as their interests are difficult to distinguish. The KNU in *Mutraw*, thus, appears to have maintained a well-working implicit social contract with local communities. A local KNU administrator, who served the Karen movement for almost all his life, explained this as follows:

‘We all earn our living as farmers here. As KNU members we also have our farms. Even if we are in the army, we come back to help our families with the harvest if we have the time. We do not say: “Give me money and then I will serve in the army!” It’s not like that. We fight to protect our people, ourselves. Our soldiers are all very motivated. [...] To organize all this we have a policy to pay taxes depending on the acres that you farm. Some people can follow it [the policy, i.e. pay], but some cannot. They don’t have to give money to the administration. We don’t have cash in our hands very often here. Instead, they give food, and we use the food to support soldiers on the front. [...] Most people understand that civilians have to feed the government [the KNU], and in return, the government will have to look after its people. So people try to pay tax to their best ability.’⁹

While the situation in *Mutraw* illustrates the importance of working rebel governance systems for authority relations between rebel elites and the grassroots of a movement, they also reveal that authority is about more than just distributional outcomes of public goods provision. In fact, it can be doubted that reciprocal relationships between elite and non-elites of insurgency are entered or left in a calculated manner after deliberating over material pay-offs.¹⁰ A functioning social contract rather seems to embed insurgency inextricably as part of local social identities, in a way where fighting “to protect our people” becomes fighting to protect “ourselves”. The next section will, therefore, explore processes of social identification as the pivotal condition behind rebel authority within Myanmar’s insurgencies.

Recognition and Social Identity - ‘We are not hardliners, we are steady’

In his comparative historical analysis of feudal authority relations between landlords and peasants Barrington Moore noted that the peasantry often relied on services by the landed class but rose against the latter in case of non-delivery. Yet, he also stressed that these uprisings were not only the result of undelivered material promises but often emerged from experiences of injustice that abrogated the perceived moral obligation to obey traditional rulers (Moore

⁹ Interview with KNU administrator, Mutraw, 23 October 2013.

¹⁰ While this notion of strategic contractualism – i.e. the idea that local communities strategically sell their allegiance to the highest bidder among local authorities - has been forwarded in the anthropological study of local political authority of “strongmen” elsewhere (Barth 1959), its underlying methodological individualism has been criticized for blinking out other constraining and motivating factors, such as power relations (Asad 1972).

1978). Axel Honneth picked up Moore's observations to substantiate his formulation of recognition theory (Honneth 1996, p. 167). Honneth posits that the claim to recognition as a morally responsible person by wider society is a core motivational driver behind human behaviour, anchored in each individual (Ibid., p. 163). Experiences of personal abuse, social exclusion, and perceptions of insult contravene this claim for recognition. Such feelings of disrespect can, then, form the 'moral context for societal conflict' (Ibid., p. 162) and 'become the motivational basis for collective resistance [...] if subjects are able to articulate them within an intersubjective framework of interpretation that they can show to be typical for an entire group' (Ibid., p. 163). Jurgen Haacke points out that recognition, social conflict, and legitimacy, are, therefore, inherently intertwined as the claim to recognition essentially becomes a 'normative judgement about the legitimacy of social arrangements' (Haacke 2005, p. 187). When this claim is satisfied, social orders are stable. When it is not, collective resistance can come about.

The struggle for recognition as a motivating dynamic seems particularly obvious in the context of ethnonational insurgency, where claims to recognition of minority identities and rights are explicitly made in light of perceived and manifest cultural and socio-economic discrimination and feelings of being looked down upon.¹¹ This is arguably true for other group conflicts as well. Indeed, Edward Azar's classic promulgation of protracted social conflicts rests on a very similar premise, locating the main reason why social groups take up arms against others in the 'denial of separate identity of parties involved in the political process' (Azar 1986, p. 30). Wood's work on the peasant insurrection against feudalism in El Salvador shows how this plays out. Following her account, the support for insurgency and justification of violence among the peasantry in El Salvador was mainly motivated by feelings of pride derived from partaking in a collective political project that was attributed with moral principles, the defiance of discrimination and violence perpetuated by the state, and the pleasure in experiencing agency by way of changing entrenched unjust societal structures (Wood 2003, pp. 231-240). Such motivations are also common for other kinds of social protest movements, whose members build communal identities of protest upon feelings of purpose and companionship in a similar fashion. In extreme cases of experienced violence and injustice, motivations surrounding participation, defiance, and agency, i.e. the struggle for recognition, can even serve to reassert a basic 'claim to dignity and personhood' (Ibid., p. 233). Wood describes this as the workings of an "insurgent identity":

¹¹ For a good analysis of institutionalized discrimination against ethnic minorities in Myanmar see Walton (2013).

‘An insurgent might act out of pride in acting as an insurgent, thereby expressing his insurgent identity and membership in the insurgent community. He might act on moral principles, to build a more just world or to express outrage, but also to experience pride in having the courage to have done so. He might act to assert his political efficacy, even his capacity to make history, capacities long denied by landlords or state authorities.’ (Ibid., p. 237)

Group value models in social psychology argue in a similar vein, stating that feeling recognized as a valued member of a collective that is associated with high social standing and moral principles leads to feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Tyler 2001). Recognition might, therefore, well override frustrations about the suboptimal distributive outcomes of the same social group (Ibid., p. 426). In other words, feelings of recognition or misrecognition, are therefore, partly tied to one’s social identity, which is ‘that part of an individual’s selfconcept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’ (Tajfel 1978, p. 63). The relationship with group authorities provides such status-relevant information to their grassroots (Tyler 2001, p. 422). Through the use of fair procedures and dignified treatment authorities convey both, the moral principles of a group as well as their recognition of others as valued group members. If decision-making and treatment are perceived as unjust, social identity is threatened. This can lead to feelings of indignation over social orders and, ultimately, resistance to them (Ibid.). Alpa Shah’s analysis of Maoist insurgents in Naxalite communities of rural India supports this argument, showing the importance of everyday elite behaviour for building rebel authority, particularly ‘their ability to develop intimate social relations of dignity and respect with the people’ (Shah 2013, p. 496):

‘In everyday life it was often the small things that mattered in the relative reach of the Maoists in comparison to that of the Indian state: for instance, the tone of voice in which one was spoken to, the way one was greeted, the way one’s house was entered, whether one sat on the floor like everyone else or required a chair to be found. In contrast to the state officials, the Maoists (whose leaders were also outsiders - often high-caste Bihari men) had made it a point to be gentle and kind in everyday interactions.’ (Ibid.)

Authority in Myanmar’s ethnic armed groups is also dependent on whether or not group membership generates positive self-perceived social identities for the movement’s grassroots, hence, ultimately whether elite behaviour satisfies the latter’s claim to recognition. Myanmar’s approach to counterinsurgency and conflict containment has led to mounting tensions in this elite-grassroots relationship. Since the 1990s, the *Tatmadaw* has attempted to pacify many of the country’s insurrections by negotiating separate ceasefire agreements with individual armed groups. While these armistices did not lead to substantial political dialogue, they allowed insurgents to retain their arms and govern pockets of territory (Smith 1999, pp. 421-441).

Moreover, these pacts encouraged armed group involvement in what has been referred to as the country's 'ceasefire capitalism' (Woods 2011): the collaborative exploitation of the area's natural riches by army generals, rebel leaders and businessmen from neighbouring China. The co-optation of rebel leaders by economic means has often led to remarkably durable stability and allowed the state to territorialize parts of its formerly off-limits borderlands to an extent that has not been possible by military means only (Smith 1999, p. 441).

The increasing involvement of rebel leaders in business ventures, as well as the corruption sparked by this among the higher echelons of ethnic armed groups,¹² has however also posed serious challenges to the social identities of their insurgent grassroots. Feelings of misrecognition by their own leaders have indeed become a major source of alienation among many grassroots of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups for many years. As will be argued below this can lead to the eroding legitimacy of incumbent rebel leaders, steer factional infighting, and explain grassroots support for the more "hard-line" factions. While this has been an issue among ceasefire groups in the country's north, including previously the Kachin insurgency (Brenner 2015), similar sentiments are taking hold among the Karen rebel grassroots.

At a group interview with KNU education workers from different parts of Karen State, people expressed their outrage at Myanmar's chief peace negotiators, Railway Minister U Aung Min, who reportedly promulgated his economistic reading of the Karen conflict after a meeting with the incumbent KNU leaders, stating that if 'they become rich, no one will want to hold arms. If their regions are developed, no one will hold arms. If we do all these [sic.] for them they will automatically abandon their arms.'¹³ One KNU teacher clarified that 'they know that our Karen people are thirsty for money and material goods because most of us local people and KNU members are poor. So they think that we will agree with them, once they give us a car or motorbike. But our main point is to get our country back. We have not fought for the last 60 years to get some cars.'¹⁴ Others expressed their worry that some of their leaders who signed the ceasefire and push the peace process might not see it the same way: 'We don't know exactly why they signed the ceasefire now, they keep everything top secret. But we see that they get nice cars. I think that the government also gives them money and positions.'¹⁵ Another rebel educator expressed that the alleged behaviour of his new leaders today makes it difficult for

¹² For background information, see Sherman (2003) and Brenner (2015).

¹³ Phan, Zoya. "Listen to us: Stop ignoring our concerns." *Karen News*, December 10, 2013. <http://karennews.org/2013/10/listen-to-us-stop-ignoring-our-concerns.html/> (accessed April 28, 2014).

¹⁴ Focus group interview with KNU education workers, Mutraw, 24 October 2013.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

him to identify with the organisation as ‘[m]ost of them are poisoned by the enemies, their hearts have change and they believe our enemies because of their gifts. That’s why they don’t stand firmly on our revolutionary principles. We feel bad about our organisation because they deviated.’¹⁶

Similar to the insurgent rank-and-file, traditional KNU supporters within the wider insurgent network in Karen State have also grown increasingly alienated by the incumbent KNU leadership. This was evidenced when the KNU signed the controversial Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), as the only sizeable ethnic armed group in Myanmar. In a public letter forty-one Karen civil society organisations (CSOs) condemned the NCA as a deeply flawed process and portrayed the KNU leaders who signed it as a small clique of corrupted elites, who represent neither the Karen revolution nor the local communities, who bore the brunt of civil war. The CSOs¹⁷ – which are based in Myanmar, along the Thai-Myanmar border, and overseas – wrote:

‘We, Karen CSO’s [sic], are alarmed by the fact that:

1. Currently, the small group of KNU leaders has demonstrated a chronic lack of transparency and accountability to the Karen people and to their own organization by making the undemocratic and non-inclusive decision to rush to sign the NCA [...].
2. Currently this group of KNU leaders is in Yangon with the expectation of signing NCA [sic.]. They do this in violation of KNU and KNLA official procedures and without properly informing or receiving the majority’s consent from members of the KNU’s Central Executive Committee or the Central Standing Committee.
3. These senior KNU leaders refuse to heed the concerns and voices of other Karen leaders, of civil society organizations, of community groups and the local people whom they claim to represent.’¹⁸

In an interview the founder of one of the signing organisations, a well-known and well-connected Karen activist, explained how the incumbent KNU leadership’s behaviour makes it difficult for the Karen grassroots to still identify with the KNU. According to him, the increased corruption among the KNU’s higher echelons has brought about a ‘moral self-destruction [that] has negatively affected the KNU leaders’ relationship with the normal soldiers [which has] started to split the movement.’¹⁹ The new leaders have also ruptured the movement’s

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For a good analysis on the development of civil society organisations in Myanmar’s militarised ethnic border regions, see Fink (2008).

¹⁸ Karen Civil Society Has Lost Trust in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) Negotiations as a Gateway to Political Dialogue, 4 October 2015, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/2015/10/karen-civil-society-has-lost-trust-in-the-nationwide-ceasefire-agreement-nca-negotiations-as-a-gateway-to-political-dialogue/>

¹⁹ Interview with Karen activist, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 30 October 2015.

relationship with Karen CSOs, many of whom emerged from within the traditional social network of the Karen revolution. The above quoted activist explained that this became most obvious to him at a meeting between Karen CSOs and the KNU in 2013, where the response of a senior KNU leader alienated many participants, who came to raise concerns over the manifold environmental and social issues that local communities experience in post-ceasefire Karen state:²⁰

‘Suddenly the General Secretary became angry and answered in the most inappropriate, crazy way you can imagine. He said that the KNU is not the saviour of the Karen people. I mean if he would have said that they are not solely responsible for all this, ok, but he basically said that this is none of their concern. Many people were really upset and angry. This told us very clearly that they do not listen to our concerns. It is the complete opposite than what they have told us for years, I mean that the KNU represents the Karen as a political organisation or even like a de-facto government. Usually you tell your government if you have problems and it should not answer that this is not its problem.’²¹

The activist highlighted that the previous KNU leadership in contrast had consulted with the Karen civil society and listened to the concerns of local communities. This internal opposition - made up of what is now often referred to as the “hard-line” faction – indeed garners significant support among the disillusioned grassroots of the KNU outside the 5th Brigade. One senior “hard-liner” explained to me that he regards the ways the new leadership came into power as illegitimate. According to him, the new leaders were responsible for signing the 2012 ceasefire in a rush to the detriment of the Karen people. While everyone was committed to uphold the ceasefire now that it was inked, he wants to renegotiate its terms of conduct, particularly issues of demarcation and demilitarisation. He asserts that the current leadership has simply given up too much on the movement’s revolutionary principles. Staying true to those did, therefore, not warrant calling him a “hard-liner”:

‘Some people criticize that we are hardliners who don't like peace and just want to continue fighting. I say that this is not true. We are not hardliners, we are steady. Maybe it is fair to say that we are hardliners in the right respects.’²²

²⁰ While physical security has improved in eastern Myanmar with the KNU ceasefire in 2012, other social and environmental problems have reportedly deteriorated. These include, land confiscation for economic usage by companies and the military, adverse side-effects of unsustainable natural resource extraction, and the increasing narcotics problem among local youth (Karen Human Rights Group 2015).

²¹ Interview with Karen activist, Chiang Mai, 30 October 2015.

²² Interview with senior KNU leader, Mae Sot, 15 November 2015.

Judging from above observations, large parts of the KNU grassroots agree with this reasoning and support his faction that opposes the current ceasefire conduct, despite having suffered the brunt of decades-long civil war. Considering the movement's current Vice-chief of Staff, a key figure among the Karen "hard-liners", helps to explain why this is the case. Having trained and fought as a commando soldier, the relatively young Gen. Baw Kyah Heh has a reputation as a fierce warrior. He also used to be the long-term commander of the strong 5th Brigade in *Mutraw* before serving in his current role as the KNLA's Vice-chief of Staff. While many other high-ranking KNU leaders have long indulged in comparatively luxurious lifestyles in Thai exile, Baw Kyah, as he is often fondly referred to, continues to live among his soldiers in the dense forests of *Mutraw*. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many KNU grassroots regard him as the personified opposite to the incumbent top leaders and alleged corrupted lifestyles. According to one KNDO sergeant, the current top KNU leader, Chairman Gen. Mutu Sae Poe, 'is old now, very old and should retire but he wants to hold on to power like a dictator. You know, like the guy in North Korea or Ne Win, Pol Pot, Gaddafi, all these very old dictators.'²³ A young administrator at the KNU Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) tells that Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh, in contrast, is 'strong and passionate'²⁴ and shows that he cares by 'listening closely to the people.'²⁵

In addition, the popular general has repeatedly and publicly criticized the ceasefire process for its lack of political dialogue on the underlying causes of conflict because 'business development and other issues have taken over the agenda.'²⁶ When I met the highly praised young general, I encountered a shy and soft-spoken man, who considered his answers very carefully. While his heavily armed bodyguards prepared rice with pumpkin curry and fermented fish paste for lunch, he expressed grave concerns over what the increased commercialisation of Karen State is doing to the Karen insurgency:

'If we work together with all the businessmen coming here, we will turn into businessmen ourselves. I mean, we are members of the armed resistance. We shouldn't engage in business too much. But the Burmese government and some of our own leaders don't see it this way. You know, the ceasefire has largely been driven by business interests. This is our concern.'²⁷

²³ Conversation with KNDO sergeant, Mutraw, 23 October 2013.

²⁴ Conversation with KDHW member, Mae Sot, 02 November 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gen. Baw Kyah Heh cited as in Eh Na. "KNU Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh Exposes How Ceasefire Agenda has Shifted to Business." *Karen News*, September 5, 2013, <http://karennews.org/2013/09/knu-gen-baw-kyaw-heh-exposes-how-ceasefire-agenda-has-shifted-to-business.html/> (accessed January 23, 2016).

²⁷ Interview with Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh, Law Keeh Lar, 06 December 2014.

These insights suggest that rebel authority largely depends on whether elite behaviour conveys recognition to a movement's grassroots, which enables the latter to derive self-perceived positive social identities through their affiliation to the insurgency. In the case of the KNU it seems that the behaviour of incumbent elites has posed significant social identity threats to large parts of the movement's grassroots. This also highlights the fragile internal power equilibrium upon which the politics of armed group is based, particularly that the eroding legitimacy of incumbent leaders can easily empower aspiring ones and steer internal contestation. The article will next analyse how similar processes have indeed led to the reescalation of conflict in the case of the Kachin in northern Myanmar, where young officers have taken over the helm from their superior, who had also experienced an erosion of legitimacy during long years of a ceasefire. This has empowered less compromising forces from within the movements, which ultimately contributed to the breakdown of the Kachin ceasefire after 17 years. Local Karen are eyeing the Kachin case, drawing parallels between both movements' fates, as expressed by one political activist:

‘[W]e are trying to use the Kachin as a precedent, as a kind of example that we need to learn from: the pattern, the sequence [...]. So the Karen, where we are going now is repeating what the KIO has done in the past 17 years, or 20 years. [...] Maybe the leaders, the KNU leaders, might think that these things are avoidable and we can solve them along the way. But I think that they don't know how to deal with them.’

Rebuilding the Kachin Insurgency – “...he is a good gangster now”

The KIO in Kachin State was the most important armed group to sign a truce with the *Tatmadaw* in the 1990s, which was ‘integral to the security in northern Burma’ for 17 years (Farrelly 2012: 54).²⁸ Since its breakdown in 2011, Myanmar has witnessed the worst fighting since the late 1980s.²⁹ This was particularly puzzling as Kachin rebel leaders had seemed more interested in lining their pockets from the proceeds of the region's jade and timber industries than in waging revolutionary warfare for many years (Sherman 2003). While the ceasefire as well as the increased revenues permitted the organization to expand its public goods provision, including services and infrastructure, little of the wealth trickled down to local communities or the grassroots of the movement. The settlement also left underlying grievances about ethnic and

²⁸ For more background on the KIO see Smith (1999, pp. 60–87, 190–198, 301–33).

²⁹ Bertil Lintner. “New Approach Needed for Genuine Peace Process.” *The Irrawaddy*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/commentary/new-approach-needed-for-genuine-peace-in-burma.html> (accessed January 23, 2016).

political marginalisation unaddressed. While it might sound counter-intuitive, the ceasefire did also not mean an end to insecurity for many local Kachin. Unsustainable mining and logging operations rather brought large-scale environmental degradation, land grabs, and militarisation, which led to new forced displacement (Global Witness 2009). In its wake a rampant narcotics and HIV/AIDS problem has choked the region's disillusioned youth (Kachin Development Networking Group 2007). These developments planted the seeds for new grievances within local communities and the Kachin movement, which were now not only directed at the Myanmar government, but also against Kachin leaders that were perceived to be corrupt (Brenner 2015).

This undermined the authority of the incumbent Kachin leadership, a process that was particularly severe among its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Witnessing their superiors' self-enrichment, infighting, and amicable ties with the *Tatmadaw* as well as experiencing their own inability to protect Kachin civilians, the morale within the middle and lower ranks of the KIA deteriorated and many hundreds of soldiers deserted. A Kachin veteran remembers these days as 'really dark. We just didn't know what to fight for anymore'.³⁰ These developments gave rise to a new faction within the KIA, which was comprised of young aspiring officers led by Brigadier Gun Maw, who today, promoted to Major-General, serves as the KIA's Vice-chief of Staff. Faced with the near collapse of their insurgency, these young officers were determined to rebuild legitimate authority relations to the movement's grassroots. One of their close companions, however, explained how difficult it was to rebuild trust among local communities, many of whom were at the time 'afraid of the KIA. Even though they are Kachin, they were afraid of the KIA. [...] Afraid because before that most of the KIA leaders were like businessmen.'³¹ Therefore, the young officers sought to cooperate with the only institution that most local communities still identified with at a time where the government and the insurgency were viewed with significant mistrust: the powerful Kachin churches.³²

A Catholic father in a rebel-held town of northern Myanmar described how he first met the young Brig. Gun Maw in the early 2000s, stressing the rebel officer's approachability and popularity. Similar to the KNU's grassroots' perceptions about Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh today,

³⁰ Conversation with KIA soldier, Laiza, April 2014.

³¹ Interview with EEDY co-founder, Maijayang, April 2014

³² Since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century, Christianity—particularly the large Baptist Church—has had a significant influence on the construction of modern Kachin identity. Although the KIO was never a religiously-inspired movement, the interests of the KIO and the Kachin churches have historically overlapped to significant degrees. This is not least because most Kachin ethno-nationalist leaders were educated in church institutions, such as the Kachin Theological College in Myitkyina (Sadan 2013).

Brig. Gun Maw was perceived as the exact opposite to the old, corrupt, and secretive incumbent leaders. In the priest's own words:

'At that time he was a very active young officer. He had a lot of friends in the towns. He is a very friendly person also, he had a lot of friends among the university students, even though they were very much younger. He was a friend of them. Everybody was talking: Gun Maw, Gun Maw! The elders were different, very secretive, they didn't listen to the younger ones, including their ideas. So they didn't let the younger ones or the civilians know. Because of this they [KIO leaders] became divided. [...] Gun Maw and other young officers did not like this. They said: let the people know all the ideas, people should know what we are discussing and where we are going. Only then they will come and cooperate with us.'³³

Gun Maw's consultative approach turned out particularly successful in generating authority among the organisation's grassroots, which ultimately enabled the young officers to take over leadership of the KIO in 2008.³⁴ A Kachin political activist explained this with Kachin traditions, stressing: 'If you want to understand the Kachin rebellion, you need to understand Kachin society first. We are very loyal but we want to be asked. The leaders cannot leave us out of their decisions. But once a decision is made we will follow.'³⁵ In their attempt to build and expand consultative mechanisms between KIO leaders, KIO grassroots, and wider Kachin society, the rising faction relied heavily on the wide-reaching networks and the uncontested legitimacy of the Kachin churches. The catholic father, who was enchanted by Gun Maw's approachability, proudly explained the key role the churches played in reviving the movement's authority:

'I advised him about the importance of organising the local, the village level. Just like the Vietnamese did. But here we need to organize through the religious churches. So our churches became a great force in that. Because when the people from the different towns and the different villages when they came here and saw me with my clothes in white among the other people [the KIO officers] who came for the meeting [consultation], they were very inspired. They saw that there is change.'³⁶

I attended one of these consultative meetings in Laiza, the KIO's capital. It was held in a former Chinese casino, whose business dried up after the ceasefire broke down and Chinese tourists stayed away. The large building complex served as the operational headquarters of the

³³ Interview with Kachin religious leader, Laiza, March 2014.

³⁴ For more information on the internal power struggle within the KIO see Brenner (2015).

³⁵ Conversation with member of the Kachin National Organisation, London October 2015.

³⁶ Interview with Kachin religious leader, Laiza, March 2014.

KIA and was fondly called “the war room” or “the Pentagon” by KIA soldiers. At the event, young men and women in colourful traditional costumes were welcoming the families of KIA soldiers to gather in one of the large and empty casino rooms-turned-meeting-halls. In the court yard, heavily-armed commando units waited for the arrival of a senior KIO leader, who was supposed to address the soldiers’ families. Eventually an elderly general arrived in a \$300,000 bullet-proof, luxury-edition Hummer SUV. To my surprise he was not one of the young officers but one of the movement’s old former strongmen, who had made a fortune from jade mining but was said to have lost his revolutionary ideals along the way. After the old general had addressed the crowd with a long speech about the need to endure current hardships for the freedom of future generations, he patiently responded to many questions of concerned parents asking about current developments on the frontline, where their sons and daughters were battling against the militarily much superior *Tatmadaw*. When the meeting finished after more than three hours, the general disappeared as quickly as he came.

I asked a local aid worker who helped me translate at the meeting to explain why people would now trust the same old leaders that they have considered as “warlords” just a few years ago, especially as he still displayed his jade millions brazenly up until this day. He looked at me a bit amused and shrugged his shoulders: 'Sure he is a gangster, but he is a good gangster!'³⁷ After having heard this comment, a local journalist and KIO insider laughed out loud:

- 'Hahaha. Ja, [he] is the good gangster. Yes, sure. He is a good gangster now because he is guided by some good people these days. So we retain the good things for him. We should give him good things, so that he decides good things [...] He has a lot of money [...] But now, Daba Gun Maw and Daba Gam Shwang, they advise him and organize him in the right way. Now he knows the political side of our struggle more. Before that he didn't know this well.'

- 'So when he overthrew Zau Mai in 2001, it wasn't about politics?'

- 'No, no, no. You just said it, he is a good gangster. Just like that.'

- 'So?'

- 'At the time it was all about the jade business. But now he changed. His political stand is good. Just now.'³⁸

This situation illustrates the importance of elite interaction with their grassroots for building authority within non-state armed groups. It appears that perceptions about the legitimacy of rebel rulers among the grassroots of a movement is not so much shaped by material interests or binary judgements over the morality of elite behaviour. To be sure, the

³⁷ Conversation with local aid worker, Laiza, April 2014.

³⁸ Interview with local journalist, Maijayang, April 2014.

rampant corruption among the higher echelons of the Kachin insurgency during the ceasefire years has been a cause of growing resentment among the movement's impoverished rank-and-file as well as local communities. It seems, however, that this is not to do with distributional outcomes but depends on whether or not elite interaction with their grassroots conveys respect and dignity to the latter, satisfying their demand for due and proper recognition. Only then can affiliation to insurgency generate positive self-perceived social identities for the insurgent grassroots. In a conversation about the entanglement of one of the new KIO leaders' family involvement in the jade trade, a diaspora supporter of the KIO has put it this way: 'Come on, don't be naïve. They are no angels. They also profit from the jade. But these days, they care about the local population and the KIO.'³⁹

CONCLUSION

This article has contributed to the emerging scholarship on armed group politics by focusing on the role that authority processes between rebel leaders and their grassroots play in the internal contestation between rival rebel factions. It has explored this in the cases of the Karen and Kachin insurgencies in Myanmar. Findings from ethnographic field research suggest that reciprocal exchange relations, including the provision of public goods, can contribute to building rebel authority by way of an implicit social contract, as previously argued by scholarship on rebel governance. The article has, however, contended that in Myanmar's restive borderlands these relations are not entered in a conscious and deliberate manner over calculations of distributional payoffs. Drawing on Recognition Theory and Social Identity Theory, it was shown that rebel authority in Myanmar rather depended on whether elite interaction was perceived as dignifying and respectful by non-elite members and supporters of rebellion, which enabled the latter to derive self-perceived positive social identities through affiliation to the insurgency. Elite behaviour, which was perceived as unjust and disrespectful by the insurgent grassroots threatened their self-perceived positive insurgent social identities. This eroded rebel authority and led to contestation and resistance from within. These insights helped to explain the growing internal opposition against the KNU's conciliatory incumbent leaders among the Karen grassroots and the latter's support for the movement's "hard-line" faction, which is increasingly pitched against the incumbent leadership. They also help to understand how young Kachin rebel officers were able to regenerate authority within the KIO in a similar situation. This allowed them to rebuild stable support networks but also contributed

³⁹ Conversation with a member of the Kachin diaspora, London, 12 November 2014.

to the insurgency's less compromising outlook in its negotiations with the government. This implies that a sustainable settlement of Myanmar's decades-old civil war needs to move beyond the hitherto practiced elite pacts and address the claims to due and proper recognition among the grassroots of insurgency.

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