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Beyond Armed Resistance: Ethnonational Politics in Burma (Myanmar)

Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung

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List of Acronyms

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AMRDP	All Mon Region Democracy Party
BSPP	Burma Socialist Program Party
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNU	Karen National Union
KPP	Kayin People's Party
KSDDP	Kayin State Democracy and Development Party
KYO	Karen Youth Organization
NDF	National Democratic Force
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NUP	National Unity Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council

SNDP	Shan Nationalities Democratic Party
SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

Executive Summary

Scholarly and policy analysis of the ethnic minorities in Burma (Myanmar) has long been dominated by a focus on ethnonational armed resistance groups and ceasefire groups (former armed groups that made provisional ceasefire agreements with the government between the late 1980s and 2011). Yet most members of ethnic minorities do not participate in armed conflict. This paper begins to redress this imbalance by shedding light on the activities of these non-armed members of ethnic minorities in Burma and how they have in various ways affected the legitimacy both of the state and of the armed resistance organizations, issues of political reconciliation, and the survival, health, and political status of Burma's ethnic minorities.

The first part of the paper gives a brief history of the emergence of ethnonationalist sentiment and the various armed resistance movements in Burma. It also discusses the division between the non-armed majority and the armed resistance movements under successive Burmese governments. Focusing on the Kachin, Karen, Mon, and Shan ethnic groups, it describes nine major economic, political, and geographical categories of civilian experience, followed by four contributions that non-armed members of ethnic minority groups may make to the political system: (1) supporting the status quo, (2) transforming or undermining the status quo, (3) promoting collective identity and culture and addressing humanitarian needs, and (4) helping to mediate ceasefire agreements. These activities add up to a complex picture that defies easy generalization but clearly shows the importance of the political attitudes and activities of non-armed members of ethnic

minorities and their influence on political and social dynamics in contemporary Burma.

Non-armed members of ethnic minority groups, when they have remained quiescent or supported the government, have undermined the legitimacy of armed resistance groups and enhanced that of the state. This is most obvious with members of ethnic minorities who are part of the ruling establishment and whose actions (or inactions) have enhanced the political and economic power of the ruling elite and may continue to do so. Government employees, members of pro-government parties and organizations, business people, and even some members of disadvantaged and marginalized populations have also provided the state with varying degrees of active and passive support.

On the other hand, members of the same groups have also helped realize some of the stated goals of the armed resistance by working to preserve ethnic identity and culture, protect the interests of local populations, and expand opportunities to independently initiate and implement activities beyond the control of state authorities. A number of important forces that tend to undermine rather than reinforce the status quo are quietly emerging and expanding among minority civil society organizations, opposition political parties, the staff of international and local nongovernmental organizations, and ordinary citizens, as well as reform-minded individuals within the establishment.

Ethnonational politics beyond the armed insurgency have become, over time, a more important site of political change and resistance. Few non-armed members of ethnic minorities, who have to survive in an atmosphere of restriction, intimidation, and bitter polarization, can hope to exert much direct pressure on the government. Instead, they have usually sought accommodation and attempted to exploit whatever gaps in state control become available to them—carefully trying to carve out spaces within which they can act more freely, testing the limits of state control, and adapting their activities accordingly. This process is likely to continue, even in light of the junta's resolve to unilaterally impose its version of a new constitution and integrate armed ceasefire groups into Burma's national army, and despite the overwhelming majority of votes received by the pro-government party in the 2010 election.

Non-armed ethnic minority actors have played an important role in ceasefire negotiations and in post-ceasefire Burma. Several key individuals have helped to mediate ceasefires between the government and rebel groups. Though their number has been small, their role sheds light on the limitations of the ceasefire agreements, factors that affect the success of ceasefire negotiations, and the part played by third-party mediators. They have played significant roles at crucial junctures in the history of Burma's armed resistance, and will likely continue to play a major role in future national reconciliation processes and inter- and intra-ethnic affairs, either publicly or behind the scenes.

There is an urgent need for more study of the role of "quiet," non-armed members of ethnic minorities in Burma's ethnic politics. For the international community, policy responses must look beyond the role of armed groups and become more sensitive to the needs of the diverse members of ethnic communities. Without exaggerating the opportunities, it is important to be aware of the full range of nonviolent political actions that exist among ethnic minority populations—actions that might perpetuate the status quo but might just end up transforming it.

Beyond Armed Resistance:
Ethnonational Politics in Burma (Myanmar)

Introduction

Conventional studies of ethnic politics in Burma (Myanmar) have focused predominantly on ethnic violence and armed resistance to state authority.[1] However, most members of the country's many ethnic minorities—or nationalities, as they are known in Burma—have pursued quiet and unobtrusive lives and, to varying degrees, have used nonviolent means to promote their personal and collective interests within the limits permitted by the military state. The role and significance in Burma's ethnic politics of these actors, referred to in this paper as "non-armed," have largely been ignored.

Since the military government signed ceasefire agreements with most ethnonational armed resistance organizations in the 1990s, there is a need to move the non-armed members of ethnic minorities from the margins of academic discussion and policy analysis to the mainstream. And yet they continue to receive very little attention in foreign media, and their role has not been systematically analyzed.[2] This paper identifies diverse elements of non-armed ethnic minority populations, analyzes their major areas of activity, and demonstrates how their re-

spective positions and activities have affected the legitimacy of both the state and the armed resistance organizations, the survival of the ethnic minority groups themselves, and issues of political reconciliation.

To the extent that they have remained quiescent or supported the government, non-armed members of ethnic minority groups have undermined the legitimacy of the armed resistance and enhanced that of the state. At the same time, many have helped realize the stated goals of the armed resistance insofar as they have been able to preserve their group's identity and culture, protect the interests of local populations, and create self-governing spaces. They have played an important role in ceasefire negotiations, and their role in post-ceasefire Burma is increasingly significant—especially in light of the junta's adamant resolve to unilaterally impose its version of the new constitution and to integrate armed ceasefire groups (former armed resistance groups that signed provisional ceasefire agreements with the government between the late 1980s and 2011) into Burma's national army, and the overwhelming success of the pro-government party in the 2010 election.

The first part of this paper gives a brief history of the emergence of ethnonationalist sentiment and armed resistance and discusses the roots of the division between the non-armed majority and their ethnic brethren in the armed resistance under successive Burmese governments. It then provides a rationale for its focus on Kachins, Karens, Mons, and Shans and an overview of nine categories of non-armed populations. Finally, it discusses four major areas of non-armed activity and assesses the impact of non-armed ethnic minority group members on the legitimacy of the Burmese state, the survival of the armed resistance groups, and the prospects for political reform.

This paper is not intended to romanticize the role of non-armed members of ethnic communities in Burmese politics. They include a wide range of actors with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and political beliefs. Some are apolitical, focused on personal survival or economic advancement, while others have attempted to promote collective welfare and bring

Unarmed minority ethnic populations include a wide range of actors with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and political beliefs

positive (albeit piecemeal) change within the authoritarian political setting. Others are without doubt self-seeking and have conspired with state authorities to promote their own interests at the expense of the community. The purpose of this paper is to bring these insufficiently studied actors to the center of the study of ethnic politics in Burma and to suggest that policy should be sensitive to the needs of the diverse members of ethnic communities in that country and elsewhere.

Ethnonationalist Movements in Burma

Data on the ethnic composition of Burma are unreliable at best and unavailable at worst. The last census conducted by the Burmese government in 1983 indicates that ethnic Burmans constitute about 69 percent of the population, with the rest divided among the Shan (8.5 percent), Karen (6.2 percent), Arakanese (4.5 percent), Mon (2.4 percent), Kachin (1.4 percent), and a hundred smaller language groups (Government of Burma 1986). Burmans, along with Mons and some Karens, live in lowland areas in the Irrawaddy delta and in central and southern Burma, surrounded by minority populations who live in the highland areas bordering India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand.

The British occupation of Burma, which extended to the entire country by 1885, heightened existing hostilities among these ethnic groups and created new forms of rivalry by constructing and reifying new ethnic categories. Members of some non-Burman groups, such as the Karen, Chin, and Kachin, benefited disproportionately from Western missionary efforts and British recruitment policies for the army, police, and bureaucracy. In addition, there was very little interaction between majority ethnic Burmans, living in directly ruled Ministerial Burma, and minority groups from the Frontier Areas, which were ruled indirectly through traditional chieftains. Nationalist movements opposing British rule were thus initiated and dominated by Burmans, who eventually sought support from Japan during the Second World War. Members of some groups, such as the Karen, Lahu, Chin, Naga, and Kachin, fought for the British in that war, anticipating that the British would return the favor once hostilities ended.

When Aung San, a leading Burman nationalist, and his colleagues realized that the Japanese had made false promises to them, they formed a loose coalition known as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom

League (AFPFL) and established secret contact with the Allies, aiming to eject their new oppressor. After the war, the Burman nationalist leaders were able to negotiate the country's independence from the British despite the initial misgivings of many groups in the Frontier Areas, such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Kayah, and Chin, who preferred to remain autonomous under British rule.

The Mon and Arakanese, who lived on the plains in Ministerial Burma, also expressed a desire to establish separate states and justified this goal by tracing their origins as independent kingdoms before their invasion by Burmese kings. However, following a series of meetings, in 1947 a number of Shan, Kachin, and Chin leaders signed an agreement with Aung San and other leading Burmese nationalists at Panglong in the present Shan state, under which they accepted that they would be part of an independent Burma. The Panglong agreement laid down the basic principles for the establishment of a future federal union that would recognize the political and economic equality and right to self-determination of non-Burman and Burman nationalities alike (Walton 2008: 889–910).[3]

The British and the Burman nationalists agreed to hold an election in 1947 for a constituent assembly that would draw up a new constitution. This hastily worded constitution created three new states in the Frontier Areas—the Kachin, Shan, and Karenni (later Kayah) states—each of which had remained relatively autonomous under traditional rulers in the precolonial period. The constitution gave the Shan and Kayah states a conditional right to secede after 10 years. The status of the government's territorial authority over the Karens was left open in the constitution and was intended to be decided after independence in January 1948.

The leaders of the various ethnonational groups were first thrown into disarray when they confronted the Burman nationalists' proposals for particular political and territorial arrangements to be incorporated in the 1947 constitution. Some groups, such as the Mon and Karen, were divided over the proposals, while others, such as the Shan and Kachin, accepted them with a number of conditions (South 2003: 115; South 2008: 25–26).

The Karen Youth Organization (KYO), for instance, expressed its willingness to compromise on the status and extent of any Karen state. On the other hand, the Karen National Union (KNU), formed in 1947 as a Karen umbrella organization, wanted to include a large

proportion of the Karen-populated areas of Lower Burma (south and southeastern Burma) amounting to almost one-third of Burma's territory, in a future Karen state (Smith 1999: 87).

Burman nationalist leaders proposed that, because of the difficulties involved in determining a mutually agreed territory and status for the Karens, discussions on a Karen state should be postponed until a legislative assembly was elected in 1947. However, while these issues were still pending, the Karen were guaranteed minority rights, which included 22 reserved seats in the Chamber of Deputies (or lower house of parliament), a Karen Affairs Council, and a dedicated minister who would have control of all administrative, educational, and cultural affairs relating to the Karens. However, the KNU boycotted the election for the constituent assembly in 1947, removing itself from participation in the discussions that would have taken place in the legislative assembly. The KYO maintained its more accommodating stance, and all 18 of its candidates ran unopposed for the Karen constituencies as a result of the KNU's boycott. The Mons also disagreed on whether they should join mainstream politics and participate in the 1947 election for the constituent assembly, or boycott it unless they were given a separate Mon independent state.

In contrast to the Karens and Mons, some Shan and Kachin leaders seemed at first to be satisfied with the constitutional arrangements that had created separate states for them and, in the case of the Shan, the right to secession after 10 years (Silverstein 1980: 22–25). The Kachins relinquished the right to secede in return for the incorporation of two major cities into their state. The Kachin and Shan state councils were empowered to make laws—subject to the approval of the relevant union (federal) institutions—and to raise funds through taxation. Local chiefs or *saophas* enjoyed administrative, judicial, and taxation powers over their traditional domains (Silverstein 1980: 201). A Shan *saopha*, Sao Shwe Thaike, became the first president of the union, a position that was later rotated to a Burman and then a Karen politician.

A Shan chief, Sao Shwe Thaike, became the first president of the union, a position which was later rotated to a Burman and then a Karen politician

Most residents of the Shan state, however, were aggravated by the army's interference in their local administration and the mistreatment of people in many parts of the state during the period of martial law (1952–54), as the military sought to repel encroaching Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang) forces. These were remnants of Chinese troops, backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency, who fled into Burma and set up military bases in the Shan state in an attempt to regroup and regain their homeland from communist control. The Kachins, who had been pressured by the government into giving up three villages in a border settlement zone to China, also became frustrated by government failure to provide economic assistance and infrastructure, and by the promotion of Buddhism as the state religion by U Nu (the first prime minister of independent Burma).

Under the elected AFPFL government that came to power in 1948, the newly independent country was soon mired in civil war, as left-leaning and communist members of the ruling elite and various ethnic groups, including a number of Karen, Mon, and eventually Kachin and Shan organizations, took up arms against the state for independence or greater autonomy. Following a major split within the AFPFL, the military, led by General Ne Win, served as a caretaker government from 1958 to 1960 in an attempt to restore stability to the country and prepare for a nationwide election. This relatively successful attempt at rule enhanced the confidence of the generals and facilitated their seizure of power in 1962—ostensibly to reunite the country and prevent it from falling to multiple insurgencies. Burma was to be ruled by the iron-fisted, authoritarian Ne Win and his socialist-leaning government for a further 26 years.

Initially, many members of ethnic minorities supported armed revolt, but few were willing to risk their lives. Many were simply apolitical; others were preoccupied with economic survival, had family responsibilities, lived far from the conflict areas, were unaware of the sources of conflict, or believed the risks to be too great. Some had negative personal experiences of the armed resistance groups, disagreed with their principles and practices, or simply rejected violence as a means of addressing their wrongs.

In addition, both U Nu's and Ne Win's governments attempted to exploit differences and tensions within the minority communities by taking a relatively hands-off approach toward the quiet segments

of the population in government-controlled areas. The two leaders also co-opted prominent ethnic minority leaders into the government, and negotiated ceasefire agreements with armed insurgent groups led by minority ethnic groups while pursuing a hard line against members and alleged supporters of armed resistance groups. In particular, General Ne Win's notorious "four-cut policy," which involved the forcible relocation of whole villages in order to deny the rebels sources of recruits, food, intelligence, and funding, succeeded in wresting control from communist and Karen resistance groups in the Irrawady and Pegu Yoma regions by the 1970s.

Despite territorial losses and massive casualties, ethnonational armed resistance groups continued to control large areas along Burma's borders with Thailand and China during the Ne Win period, thanks to the presence of abundant natural resources in the rebel-controlled areas, taxes on goods levied at border posts, an opium economy, and tacit support from the Chinese Communist Party and the Thai government and army. This period thus saw a variety of authorities competing for control over Burma's territories, which were generally divided between "hard-core" or "white" government-controlled areas, "black" rebel-controlled areas, and "gray" contested areas.

Since the 1970s, the armed resistance has been increasingly composed of individuals marginal to mainstream Burmese life. Many are young and unemployed and have little formal education. Most are from conflict zones, which have experienced the worst human rights violations. Many are also the children and grandchildren of people who joined the armed resistance at its onset. No study has systematically examined the reasons why people from various parts of the country joined armed resistance, but the literature on ethnic politics in Burma tends to suggest that the majority of rank-and-file fighters joined by choice. Others had been forcibly recruited—particularly, but not limited to, child soldiers, some of whom were "volunteers" although under age. (In some places, such as those controlled by the KNU, each family

Since the 1970s, the armed resistance has been increasingly composed of individuals marginal to mainstream Burmese life

had to give one son to the armed resistance group, but this had become less common by the early 1990s.)

Non-armed members of ethnic minorities who lived in areas controlled by the government, on the other hand, were largely spared the insecurity and violence experienced by their counterparts in the war zones, although they had no more guarantees of advancement than the majority Burman population. The relatively predictable situation in government-controlled areas, coupled with legal restrictions against communication with members of armed resistance groups, has widened the gap between the latter and members of the same ethnic groups who do not live in conflict zones. Many non-armed ethnic minority citizens express strong nationalist sentiments and are sympathetic to ethnicity-based resistance groups, but prefer living quietly in government-controlled areas and engaging in nonviolent struggle, rather than openly challenging the government or directly supporting the armed resistance.

The collapse of the socialist government and the success of ceasefire agreements between the military regime and many armed resistance organizations in the 1990s, however, have altered the circumstances facing the various ethnic groups (Smith 1999; South 2008). In 1988, unprecedented numbers of non-armed civilians in government-controlled areas participated in a nationwide series of demonstrations against the socialist government. The uprising prompted a brutal crackdown and another military coup. The military assumed a new name, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), promised to hold a multiparty election in 1990, and took swift advantage of a mutiny by ethnic minority commanders against the Burman-dominated Communist Party of Burma (CPB) leadership to successfully negotiate ceasefire agreements with a number of former communist groups.

Many non-armed ethnic leaders participated in the 1990 election by running as candidates for the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and a variety of ethnicity-based parties. Although the NLD was victorious, the SLORC refused to hand over power (Tonkin 2007: 33–54).[4] Instead, the SLORC oversaw the formation of a highly controlled national convention in 1993 to draw up a constitution, and established networks of pro-junta organizations to mobilize civilian support, while simultaneously consolidating its rule by detaining and restraining members of op-

position parties. Armed ceasefire groups and handpicked individuals and groups, such as academics, workers, and members of political parties, were invited to attend the national convention, which was held on and off for 14 years until 2008.

By the mid-1990s, the ceasefire agreements had spread to involve 17 major groups, including important organizations with strong ethnonationalist aspirations such as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the Shan State Army (SSA). A majority of armed groups reached ceasefire agreements with the government (Oo and Min 2007). Most of them were given territory, access to arms, and business opportunities, and allowed to have contact with their counterparts in the government-controlled areas, who helped promote reconstruction and development in the ceasefire areas.

The ceasefire accords also enabled the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, the new name adopted by the SLORC in 1997) to concentrate its resources on mounting a strong military campaign against the remaining armed resistance groups. In 2009 only four major groups remained in armed resistance—the KNU, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the SSA-South, and the Chin National Front. They continued to engage in low-intensity warfare against the Burmese military, drawing on dwindling economic and manpower bases (Smith 2007: 48).

The military junta was also given a boost by changes in the external geopolitical environment. The Thai government, which had previously supported a number of armed resistance groups as a buffer against the Burmese government and the activities of the Communist Party in Thailand, adopted a "constructive engagement" policy toward Burma in the late 1980s to secure lucrative logging, fisheries, and gas pipeline deals. The profits from the ensuing sell-off of natural resources to Thailand enabled the Burmese junta to buy much-needed arms, ammunition, and aircraft from neighboring countries, particularly China. The Chinese government itself switched to a pro-Burmese policy after its decades-long support of the CPB. Since the late 1980s, China has become a strong political ally and major economic partner of the Burma government. This has prompted India, previously a strong proponent of democratic reform in Burma, to adopt a more favorable stance toward Burma's government as well.

Some non-armed populations have relied on armed organizations that are parties to a ceasefire (such as the KIO, NMSP, and United Wa State Army) to make any formal inputs at the national convention on the drafting of the constitution. These groups were seen as able to take more risks because they are armed; the stronger ones in particular were regarded as having more clearly formed views on constitutional reform (anonymous staff member, nongovernmental organization, Rangoon, July 2008).[5]

However, the SPDC shelved proposals submitted by these groups for autonomous regions with genuine political, social, economic, and ethnic rights. It conducted a nationwide referendum on its version of the constitution in May 2008, despite the ongoing emergency in the delta region, where Cyclone Nargis had struck at the beginning of the month, killing approximately 150,000 people and displacing two million others. The state-run media boasted that 99 percent of eligible voters had participated in the referendum, with 92.4 percent voting in favor of the new constitution.

The military's constitution calls for a new round of legislative elections and prescribes a continuing and dominant role for the Burmese military in government by reserving 25 percent of the seats on various representative bodies (as well as cabinet positions) for military appointees. It restricts the position of president to a person "well-acquainted with the affairs of the union such as political, administrative, economic, and military." It also requires integration of ceasefire groups into the Burmese army if they continue to bear arms, or their disarmament if they turn themselves into political parties in order to contest elections.

The SPDC soon succeeded in bringing ceasefire armed groups under its control by transforming a few larger groups based close to the border into border guard forces and smaller groups farther from the border into people's militias, technically under the control of the Burmese army. The two strongest ceasefire groups, those of the Kachin and the Wa, together with the Mon ceasefire group (and a couple of smaller ones) refused to disarm until the regime addressed outstanding constitutional issues, believing that without access to arms, they would be unable to negotiate a final settlement on equal terms or protect their people from a regime infamous for its human-rights abuses.

The government launched a series of military campaigns against ceasefire groups that refused to disarm, beginning in August 2009 against the Kokang group (which was eventually defeated by government troops), continuing in 2010 against the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) splinter group, in March 2011 against the remnants of SSA-North and the Shan State Progress Party/SSA, and in June 2011 against the 8,000-strong KIO (TNI 2011a; Ba Kaung 2011). As of June 15, 2011, the situation between the Mon and Wa ceasefire groups on the one hand and the government on the other hand remained tense, and the government had reportedly attempted to impose economic sanctions against the Wa group.

The SPDC's deployment of these coercive and manipulative measures assured an overwhelming vote for the pro-government party in the November 2010 election and the military's continuing dominant role. Yet politics should not be viewed as limited to the performance of a national government. Such a perspective ignores activities undertaken by individual citizens and nongovernment groups, which exercise various forms of social and economic control outside the government. It also neglects the ethnic minority leaders who were elected as pro-government candidates, the large number of ethnicity-based parties that won seats in both the 1990 and 2010 elections, the hundreds of cultural and religious groups that have expanded their activities over the past 20 years of SPDC rule, and ordinary non-armed members of ethnic minorities who remain an important voting block as well as a source of support for various political forces within the country.

Politics involves not only the government's performance but also activities undertaken by individual citizens and nongovernment groups, which exercise various forms of social and economic control outside the government

Considering these previously neglected actors will result in a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary politics in Burma. It will also make it possible to analyze the roots of the various ethnic

groups' multiple, often contradictory, positions and to assess more accurately their potential impact in the post-election period.

Four Ethnic Nationalities

This paper focuses on four ethnic nationalities—the Karen, Mon, Shan, and Kachin—partly because they have had long-established ethnonationalist sentiments and links with the strongest armed resistance organizations, and partly because of the difficulties involved in gaining access to other ethnic communities. It is hoped that the detailed analysis presented here will shed light on the variations in political dynamics that may occur within a single ethnic population in Burma, and thus provide a starting point for wider comparison and further studies of the remaining ethnic minority groups.

The Karen, Mon, Shan, and Kachin have had long-established ethnonationalist sentiments and links with the strongest armed resistance organizations

Each of these four ethnonationalist groups includes subgroups, many of which have not been successfully integrated into the nation-building project of the larger group. In particular, Kachin and Karen are collective names for a number of language subgroups that were lumped together by the British. The group known as Karen encompasses more than 20 language groups, many mutually unintelligible. Karens come from diverse religious, cultural, and regional backgrounds; the two dominant groups, making up 80 to 85 percent, are the Sgaw (mostly Christians and animists living in the hill regions) and the Pwo (mostly lowland Buddhists).

Karens form the second-largest minority in Burma with a population variously estimated at three to four million. The last census, conducted by the Burmese government in 1983, indicated that Karen constituted 6.2 percent (or 2.2 million) of the total 35,442,972 population (Government of Burma 1986). The population of Karen therefore is now estimated to be 3.34 million out of the total 2011 population of 53,999,804 (CIA 2011). However, members of ethnic

minorities dispute the official population data, which they claim are underestimated. Some Karens, for instance, estimate the Karen population at 7 million.

About 15 to 20 percent of Karens are Christian, 5 to 10 percent are animist, and the remainder are Buddhist. Only a quarter live in the present Karen state, which includes parts of the central Pegu Yoma mountain range and the eastern hills along the Thai border, while the rest are spread all over Lower Burma in the Irrawaddy delta and the Tenasserim region. Those who live in the plain and delta areas interact extensively with the majority Burmans, and many have adopted various aspects of Burman culture. A large segment of these delta residents rely on farming, fishing, and other related industries.

Most of those living in Burma's Eastern Pegu region, the Karen state, and the Tenasserim region speak Sgaw or Pwo Karen and retain many distinctive features of Karen culture. They are predominantly from rural areas and engage in agriculture (permanent or shifting) or work in rubber plantations, coastal fishing, or teak and other hardwood industries. Many also work as migrant laborers and traders in Thailand; some are either internally displaced or live in refugee camps in Thailand's Burma border areas as a result of the ongoing conflict.

While the KNU has continued armed resistance in the Thai-Burma border areas, many of its splinter groups, including a segment of the DKBA, signed ceasefire agreements with the SPDC in the 1990s and were given opportunities to engage in business in the Karen and Mon states. Some of these groups are small (consisting of a few dozen family members) and have focused on their economic survival, while others, such as the DKBA and the KNU/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council, have followed an explicitly nationalistic agenda and organized activities to maintain their collective presence and identity. Most have already been disarmed or separately brought under the control of the national army as border guard forces under the 2008 constitution (as in the case of the Karen Peace Force and a segment of the DKBA), while a few individuals and groups went back to armed struggle or joined political parties and contested the 2010 election. Prominent members of the two leading Karen political parties in the 2010 election, however, were predominantly retired civil servants or other non-armed people within and outside the Karen state.

The Kachins are also diverse, consisting of a collection of loosely affiliated tribes and clan lineages, but they generally refer to themselves as a nation of six "tribes": the Jinghpaw (the largest group, whose language has historically been the one most commonly used among Kachins), Lhaovo, Lachik, Zaiwa, Rawang, and Lisu (Lahtaw 2007: 238–39). A scholar of the Kachins notes:

> I view these six as the "official tribes," selected and presented as such by the nationalist elites (dominated by the Christian and Jinghpaw). However, this definition as a nation (and the Jinghpaw domination) has been internalized by most but not all "Kachin." Still, it has been quite a successful nationalist project in the big picture, maybe the most successful amongst Burma's ethnic minorities. (Karin Dean, e-mail communication, November 8, 2009)

The greatest numbers of Kachins, who are estimated to number around 750,000 in 2011 (based on their 1.4 percent share of Burma's total population in 1983), occupy parts of northeastern Burma, but a few also live in adjacent territories in China and India (Government of Burma 1986; CIA 2011). Kachin community leaders in Burma, however, estimated their numbers to be at least 1 million (two anonymous Kachin Christian pastors, Rangoon, July 2011). Kachin were originally animists, but the vast majority have converted to Christianity (notably Baptist with pockets of Roman Catholicism), thanks to foreign and Karen missionary activity since the British occupation. Most Kachins live in mountainous country at a low population density; they have traditionally subsisted on the shifting cultivation of rice.

The region's economy is mainly based on agriculture, but it has more than its share of natural resources such as such as gold, jade, and timber, and has been home to scores of rich local entrepreneurs, particularly jade and ruby merchants. However, many Kachins increasingly feel left out of the growing commercialization of agriculture, intensification of natural resources exploitation, and other state-initiated activities that have benefited non-Kachin residents (particularly Chinese investors), displaced local populations, and destroyed the environment.

All the armed resistance groups in Kachin areas signed ceasefire agreements with the SPDC regime in the 1990s, and a few, such as

the New Democratic Army-Kachin, Kachin Defense Army (an ex-KIO splinter group), and Lasang Awng Wa Peace Group, have been transformed into border guard forces or people's militia (TNI 2011b). Members of the Kachin State Progressive Party (KSPP), which is made up of ex-KIO leaders, were not allowed to register or participate in the 2010 election, due probably to the KIO's refusal to turn itself into a border guard force. A 16-year ceasefire came to a halt when the KIO and government troops resumed fighting in June 2011.

Divisions within the Shan have historically been more geographical than linguistic or religious. They are the largest minority in Burma, with an estimated population of 4.6 million, or 8.5 percent of the total populations (Government of Burma 1986; CIA 2011). Some Shans live in Kachin state and the plains of the Mandalay region, but the majority reside in the mountainous Shan state in northeastern Burma, which borders on China, Laos, and Thailand. The majority practice Theravada Buddhism and speak Shan, which belongs to the Tai family of languages. The Shan state (which covers almost a quarter of the total area of Burma) has the largest territory and concentration of cultural and language groups of all seven ethnicity-based states in Burma.[6]

The Shan state contains six to seven million people, "of whom a little more than half are ethnic Shans" (Smith 1999: 193). Other groups include Pao, Palaung, Kachin, Danu, Lahu, Inthar, Wa, Kokang, and Akha. Bertil Lintner, a well-known journalist who has written extensively on Burma, describes the region's past feudalistic practices and geography as a major impediment to establishing a common identity among the Shans: "The Shan States have never been effectively united since the days of the Mao Empire [in the 10th century AD]. Petty chieftains and local war-lords belong to the tradition of this region and their different armed bands have operated separately because of the steep mountain ranges and thick jungles which divide them" (Lintner 1984: 415).

Like the rest of Burma, the Shan state is predominantly rural. Many young Shan men now work in Thailand—where they typically find low-paid work in construction, factories, and restaurants—due to the limited economic opportunities and ongoing conflict at home. The Shan state, however, is rich in mineral resources and famous for its precious stones, metals, and horticulture. It is also part of the Golden Triangle, which produces much of the world's opium and heroin.

Because of the Shan state's strategic, security, and economic significance, the government has tried to preempt or crush any potential unifying force within the state and to encourage divisions that would undermine any broad-based national movement there. For instance, after 1989, the government placed the Shan state under three military command divisions—the Triangle Region Command, the North-East Command, and the Eastern Command—and encouraged non-Shans, particularly from the Wa and Pao, to become rivals to the various Shan groups.

Many of the major armed resistance organizations in the Shan state, which had waged war against the Burmese military regime in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, signed ceasefire agreements with the government, and a few, which had been forced to disarm, formed political parties and won a few seats in the 2010 election. Exceptions to this pattern are the United Wa State Army and remnants of SSA-North, which have refused to disarm, and the SSA-South, which has continued to fight a guerrilla war in the central and southern Shan state. These various groups in the Shan state have developed different relationships and enjoy varying degrees of autonomy, making it difficult to establish a broad-based Shan movement.

In addition, four of the five entities with the status of self-administered zone and one with the status of self-administered division under the 2008 constitution are in the Shan state, further undermining Shan groups' ability to exercise absolute control of the region.[7] Regardless of these obstacles, the Shan parties have done remarkably well in garnering support among Shan populations. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) was the runner-up (after the NLD) in the 1990 election, while the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) received the third-largest vote in the 2010 election.

The Mon are probably the only major national group in Burma with few obvious internal differences. The Mon-speaking population constitutes about 2.4 percent of the population, according to Burma's official data in 1983, with an estimated population of 1.2 million in 2011 (Government of Burma 1986; CIA 2011). Some Mon activists in exile claim that their population is as large as 4 million. Mons live on the plains in the Mon state, in the Pegu region and the Irrawaddy delta, and along the southern Thai-Burma border. There are few variations in Mon regional dialects. They share many cultural

characteristics with the majority Burman population, similarly living mostly in lowland areas and being predominantly Buddhist. Those who hold strong Mon nationalist aspirations, however, do not feel they belong to Burma, since Mons were among the earliest people to settle in Lower Burma and once had an independent kingdom and a rich civilization (see South 2003).

The Mon state's economy is based mainly on timber, rubber, rice, and other cash crops, coastal fishing and related industries, and extraction of onshore and offshore mineral resources, particularly natural gas. One nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff member working in the Mon state estimated there are at least 100 ethnically Mon individuals who own over 100 acres of rubber plantation each (anonymous NGO staff member, Rangoon, March 2011). The majority of these may be absentee landlords who are migrant workers in Thailand and whose remittances help sustain the region's economy.

The major Mon armed resistance group, the NMSP, signed a ceasefire agreement with the SPDC in 1995, while the smaller Hongsawatoi Restoration Party has continued to fight the government. The situation between the NMSP and the government has remained tense since 2010 due to the former's refusal to become a border guard force, but this did not have an adverse effect on the electoral outcome for the All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP), which is mostly composed of retired civil servants and Mon community leaders. It is the only Mon-based party that ran, and it won the fifth-largest vote in the 2010 election. A smaller Mon ceasefire group, the Mon Peace Defense Group (ex-NMSP), has become a people's militia (TNI 2011b).

The armed resistance movements that purport to represent these different ethnic groups have distinct histories and origins. Karens and Mons took up armed rebellion in the early years of independence due to their unhappiness with the political status and territorial boundaries of the Karen and Mon states. The Shans and Kachins seemed at first

The Karen and Mon took up armed rebellion in the early years of independence; the Shan and Kachin armed resistance movements did not arise until the late 1950s and early 1960s

to be satisfied with constitutional arrangements that created separate states for them and, in the case of the Shans, the right to secede after 10 years. The Shan and Kachin armed resistance movements, which did not arise until the late 1950s and early 1960s respectively, were inspired by growing concern about lack of genuine local autonomy, abuse and mistreatment of local populations by the army, and, in the case of the Kachin state, the official promotion of Buddhism as a state religion at the expense of other religions.

The Shan and Karen are Burma's two largest minorities, and both took up armed rebellion with relatively strong public support and arms and ammunition, but they are now severely divided over several issues. Although many Karen and Shan splinter groups and rival armed groups signed ceasefire agreements with the government and have become border guard forces and people's militias, the two main armed organizations, the SSA-South and the KNU, are still fighting. They are troubled by internal dissension as well as dwindling resources due to diminishing opportunities to profit from cross-border trade (Smith 2007; South 2008, 2011).

The two major armed organizations of the Kachin and Mon, the KIO and the NMSP, both of which signed ceasefire agreements, have faced different problems. The ceasefire has reduced violence; facilitated freer movement; and promoted development, humanitarian, and cultural activities. But it has also led to a greater military presence, intense exploitation of natural resources, and development-induced displacement (Oo and Min 2007; South 2007, 2008). In addition, the ceasefire ended in April 2009, when the government attempted to disarm these groups and integrate them into the national army, eventually declaring those who refused to do so to be insurgents.

Non-armed People's Strategies and Perspectives

Members of ethnic minority groups who choose not to engage in armed resistance are referred to in this paper as non-armed—and as "quiet," partly because they do not attract attention from the outside world and partly because many of them have resorted to a low-key, nonadversarial approach to addressing their personal and collective needs. They represent a majority of each ethnic group. This paper does not include in this category armed groups that are observing a ceasefire, or paramilitary groups and private armies that operate within

Table 1. The Shan, Karen, Kachin, and Mon Experience in Burma

	Shan	Karen	Kachin	Mon
Location	Shan and Kachin states, Mandalay and Sagaing regions	Irrawaddy, Pegu, Rangoon, and Tenasserim regions, Karen state	Kachin and northern Shan states	Mon and Karen states, Tenasserim region
Estimated population	4.8 million	3.3 million	750,000 to 1 million	1.2 million
Majority religion	Buddhist	Buddhist and animist	Christian	Buddhist
Beginning of armed resistance	1959	1949	1961	1949
Current status of armed resistance groups	Non-ceasefire: • Shan State Army-South • Shan State Progress Party/ Shan State Army Ceasefire: • Shan State Army-North • Shan State National Army (a segment became a people's militia in 2010) • National Democratic Alliance Army (became a border guard force in 2010) • Mong Thai Army	Non-ceasefire: • Karen Nation Union • Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (5th Brigade) Ceasefire: • Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (a segment became a border guard force in 2010) • Karen Peace Force (became a border guard force in 2010) • Thandaung Peace Group • P'doh Aung San Group* • Karen National Union-Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council	Ceasefire: • Kachin Independence Organization (1994–2011) • New Democratic Army-Kachin (became a border guard force in 2010) • Kachin Defense Army (become a people's militia in 2010) • Kachin Solidarity Council, Rebellion Resistance Force (became a people's militia) • Lasang Awng Wa Peace Group (turned militia in 2010)	Ceasefire: • New Mon State Party (1995–2011) • Mon Army Mergui District • Mon Peace Defense Group (became a people's militia in 2010)
Ethnic parties that won seats in 1990 and 2010 elections	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy won 21 seats in 1990 and Shan Nationalities Democratic Party won 57 seats in 2010.	Phalon-Sawaw (Pwo-Sgaw) Democratic Party won 9 seats and Kayin People's Party won 6 seats in 2010.	Kachin State National Democratic Front won 3 seats in 1990.	Mon National Democratic Front won 5 seats in 1990. All Mon Region Democracy Party won 16 seats in 2010.

Sources: South 2008; Smith 1999; TNI 2011b. Information is accurate as of June 2011.
* P'doh Aung San is a United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) member who was elected to the Karen state parliament.

(rather than against) the state, which are important subjects in their own right (see South 2008; Kramer 2007; Oo and Min 2007).

The fact that many members of ethnic minorities live quietly does not imply that all of them are loyal to the state, support the military regime, oppose the armed resistance groups, or are passive or apolitical. In any minority population, some people support the government in power; others avoid politics and focus on making ends meet on a daily basis. Others question the legitimacy of armed rebellion but use nonviolent means to preserve and promote their group's identity. Others may believe in the legitimacy of armed rebellion, but opt to pursue passive resistance and support armed rebels indirectly. The "quiet" include the apolitical, those who collaborate with the state, former rebels,[8] and those who work through institutional channels or undertake passive resistance.

The fact that many members of ethnic minorities live quietly does not imply that all of them are loyal to the state, support the military regime, oppose the armed resistance groups, or are passive or apolitical

Significant categories of actors among the "quiet" or non-armed members of Burma's ethnic minorities are described in the following sections.

Self-Employed People

The "self-employed" category covers a wide range. At the low-income end, it includes small landholding farmers, fishermen, merchants, home-based shop operators, food hawkers, carpenters, pedicab drivers, and brokers (*pweisa*) or middlemen who charge fees to provide various services. The members of this group probably constitute the majority of Burma's employed ethnic minority populations. Specific data on employment in various sectors are unavailable, but the proportion of self-employed individuals is likely at least 60 percent of the employed non-Burman population, given that 66 percent of the population in Burma still lives in rural areas and most of them are self-employed in farming and fishing (Nu 2010).

A second, much smaller category of the self-employed is made up of owners of small, medium, and large enterprises. These individuals make up approximately 5 percent of the employed non-Burman population in Burma. They are better off than the first group of self-employed citizens, engaging in all types of businesses including paddy and cash crop production, money lending, transportation, wholesale shops, fish and prawn breeding, salt making, food processing, restaurants, and trade, while a handful of them operate large-scale commercial agriculture, fishing, mining, timber extraction, service industries, and wholesale enterprises. Some of them, particularly in the Shan state, are involved in opium production and trade. Members of non-Burman ethnic groups have in the past dominated certain industries (such as Kachins in gemstones, Karens in timber extraction, and Mons in rubber plantations), but they have been increasingly marginalized by the growing presence of large-scale agribusiness, mining, and infrastructure development enterprises owned by the military's associates and foreign companies.

Generally speaking, non-Burman business owners and employers are highly aware of international and domestic issues, thanks to Internet and satellite news. Some of them are quite critical of the regime's practices in private conversation, but most work closely with local or regional authorities to secure smoother business transactions and avoid political activities that openly challenge the government (interviews with businessmen and businesswomen in Burma, 2008–2011).

Civil-Service and Public-Sector Employees

This category includes retired and active military and civilian government officials, teachers, university professors, doctors, nurses, lawyers, and factory workers who are employed in public-sector and state-owned enterprises. The majority of them live in government-controlled areas, although a small number work for local government branches and public institutions in the ceasefire areas.

There are no readily available and reliable data on public-sector employment, but the government was the largest employer in post-independence Burma until the end of the socialist period in 1988, and it has continued to provide a significant share of employment since that time. Government employees probably account for 10 to

20 percent of employed people in Burma. While Burmans make up the majority of civil servants across the nation, this proportion varies by sector and region. For instance, non-Burman nationalities tend to dominate the lower rung of government jobs in minority-populated areas, particularly in primary and middle schools and the health-care sector. Minorities, however, are underrepresented in the armed forces, in senior government positions, and in areas outside ethnicity-based states.

Most state employees earn low salaries, but many of them have used their official positions to supplement their income by providing extra services or charging fees for services that are supposed to be free of charge or for favorable treatment. Compared to their counterparts who work in the private sector or for NGOs, government employees are subject to a wide variety of institutional constraints and are more likely to adhere closely to official policies and less likely to speak out against the regime.

Private-Sector Employees

A smaller portion of ethnic minority populations are employed in locally owned businesses and joint foreign ventures, such as private schools; hospitals; construction, media, and service industries; and garment, shoe, and cosmetic factories—as teachers, doctors, managers, secretaries, security guards, drivers, domestic or factory workers, or clerks. The number of private-sector employees was small during the socialist period, but has grown due to increased foreign investment and privatization of state-owned enterprises since 1990. Most such employees are unskilled and earn only the minimum wage, while a few professional employees are better off. This part of the non-armed ethnic minority population is dispersed among the majority Burman population. As individuals, they have widely varying political awareness and engagement.

The number of private-sector employees was small during the socialist period, but has grown due to increased foreign investment and privatization of state-owned enterprises since 1990

Professionals Working for International Organizations

This category includes employees of intergovernmental organizations (such as the United Nations and its affiliated agencies), international NGOs (such as World Concern, World Vision, and Save the Children), and foreign embassies. One website on Burma listed 55 international NGOs and 13 UN agencies as operating in Burma in 2010 (*NGOs in the Golden Land of Myanmar* n.d.). Only a relatively small number of individuals work for international organizations, but the number has been slowly increasing, especially since the military regime opened the door to foreign investment and aid agencies in the 1990s. Since then, members of ethnic minority groups, like the majority Burmans, have been able to find employment in intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations as program directors, project managers, administrators, field staff, secretaries, and security guards.

Although statistics are not available, a recent survey of 87 individuals from different nationalities suggested that there has been a popular perception among Burmese citizens that Christians have more contacts and better English language skills and, as a result, a better chance of securing employment at an NGO. Burmans, this survey suggested, felt they were discriminated against when it came to NGO employment (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2010: 85).[9]

Most of those who hold upper- and mid-level positions in intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations are highly educated (a few are foreign-educated), speak English, and earn higher salaries than their counterparts in the government sector. They are more likely to be well traveled, to interact with foreigners, and to be exposed to ideas from outside the realm of official ideology. Quite a few have been under the authorities' close surveillance due to the nature of their organizations, which require them to get involved in social, economic, and political development at the grassroots level. Most international organizations are based in major cities and government-controlled areas, although a few have branches operating in remote government-controlled and ceasefire areas.

Members of Local NGOs and Community-Based Organizations

Various ethnicity-based religious and nonprofit organizations attempt to address the spiritual, social, and humanitarian needs of their communities and preserve their culture and identity. An example of

the latter category are the Mon, Karen, Kachin, and Shan culture and literature associations that exist in townships across the country to promote the literature of ethnic groups by offering summer language training (interviews, Burma, 2008–2011). The numbers and activities of these organizations have expanded since the early 1990s, after the military regime lifted some restrictions on civil society activities and on foreign visas.

Brian Heidel of Save the Children UK, for instance, estimates that approximately 270 local NGOs and 214,000 community-based organizations were operating in 2004 (Heidel 2006).[10] Seven out of the 64 local NGOs whose members were interviewed for Heidel's study were ethnicity-based organizations (Heidel 2006). A comparable proportion can also be seen in the 2009 *Directory of Local Nongovernment Organizations*, which indicates that 10 out of 86 organizations listed are either ethnicity based or headed by individuals from non-Burman backgrounds. (This directory, however, includes only a selective list of NGOs; it does not include local literature and culture organizations and other small, low-profile NGOs.)[11] Prominent local NGOs that are headed or operated by non-Burmans include Metta (Kachin), Shalon (Kachin), the Knowledge Development Network (Karen), and the Karen Women Action Group. Non-Burmans also work for local NGOs that are not ethnicity based but, rather, focus on issues such as education, health care, and development.

Some individuals who work for such organizations are paid salaries, but membership in most local organizations is voluntary, and members are drawn from a diverse group of the first three categories of non-armed ethnic minority populations: everyone from farmers and daily wage earners to business tycoons and civil servants.

Members of Government-Organized "NGOs"

This category includes members of state-controlled mass organizations such as the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Maternal and Child Welfare Association, and Myanmar Red Cross Society. The USDA, the largest welfare and social organization in Burma, was formed in 1993 as a popular support base for the military regime. It claims over 20 million members—a huge number given that the total estimated population is 54 million (CIA 2011)—including people with a diverse range of socioeconomic,

ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The USDA is often seen as the mouthpiece of government, and its members frequently participate in state-orchestrated events. Top-ranked military officials have dominated the upper echelon of the organization, but members of minority ethnic groups (including ordinary citizens, civil servants, teachers, university professors, and business tycoons) also join its rank and file. Most members of minority ethnic groups who join the organization are civil servants, and they do so as a means of acquiring certain benefits, such as promotions, scholarships, overseas study opportunities, or protection against unfavorable official policies. The USDA was transformed into a political party as the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in 2010 to compete in the election.

Members of Pro-Government Political Parties

Since the formation of the regime, members of ethnic minorities have joined or supported pro-government parties—the Burma Socialist Program Party in the 1974 election, the National Unity Party (NUP) in 1990, and the (USDP) in 2010. The USDP and the NUP were the two best-organized and -funded parties, with candidates running in almost all constituencies in the 2010 election (TNI 2010). The USDP was led by the former prime minister and current president of the Union of Myanmar, Thein Sein, and several serving ministers who resigned from the military (International Crisis Group 2010: 10).[12]

In addition to the USDP and the NUP, there are smaller parties that have close institutional or personal contacts with the military

Because of the numerous and cumbersome official restrictions, as well as suspected vote rigging (such as votes that were cast in advance of the election, which turned out to be votes for the USDP), the USDP won an overwhelming majority in both the upper and lower houses of the national legislature and garnered approximately 77 percent (883 out of 1,154) of all elected seats in national and regional legislatures (TNI 2011b).

The NUP is conventionally perceived as an establishment party, because it is the successor to the Burmese Socialist Program Party of

the Ne Win period and because its current chairman, Tun Yi, is a former deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces. It took a pro-military stance in the 1990 election, under which it won only 21 percent of the vote and 10 seats. However, simply labeling the NUP a pro-government party is somewhat misleading, since it ran against USDP candidates in 2010, winning some of these races. It was the second-largest party in the 2010 election, fielding over 1,000 candidates and winning 62 seats in national and regional legislatures (TNI 2010).

Among the members of the Burman-dominated USDP and NUP elected to serve in national and regional legislative assemblies are a small number from minority backgrounds, including Karen, Kachin, Shan, and Mon. For example, Sai Mauk Kham, a Shan national and USDP member, was elected to the national parliament and is the current vice president of the Union of Myanmar. Mann Maung Maung Nyan, a Karen national and NUP member from Irrawaddy, was elected to the national parliament and nominated for chairman as well as vice chairman of the national lower house. U Lajawn Ngan Seng, a Kachin businessman and USDP member, was elected to the national parliament and now serves as a chief minister in the Kachin state.

In addition to the two establishment parties described above, several smaller parties have close institutional or personal contacts with the military. Examples are the Pao National Organization, the Ta-ang Palaung National Party, the Karen State Democracy and Development Party, and the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State, against whose candidates the USDP, which fielded candidates in almost all available constituencies, did not run. U Khat Htein Nam, who won the Amyotha Hluttaw seat of Myitkyina as a Unity and Democracy Party candidate, publicly described the USDP as a "brother party" and pledged to "cooperate with the USDP in our region" (MyoMyo 2010: 5).

Members of Opposition Political Parties

Members and candidates of opposition parties (such as the NLD in 1990) and ethnicity-based parties participated in the 1990 and 2010 elections. The public stance of those who ran for office in those elections was to challenge or reform the military-dominated government using conventional, nonviolent means sanctioned by the authorities.

It is, however, appropriate to think of the opposition as a broad spectrum, with the NUP the weakest in its opposition to the views and policies of the USDP, and other parties, such as the NLD and the 88 Generation of Students and Youths, as showing stronger opposition.

The most outstanding example of an opposition party that situated itself at one extreme end of the opposition spectrum is the NLD, which contested the 1990 election. In that election the NLD, which won an overwhelming share of the vote and 392 out of 485 seats, relied heavily on support from candidates representing minority ethnic groups. Of the seats won by the NLD, 79 were located in the seven ethnicity-based states, although these candidates were not necessarily from minority backgrounds themselves. Judging by the names of candidates, 11 out of the 20 successful NLD candidates in the Shan state were of non-Burman nationality, along with 6 out of 10 in the Karen state, 6 out of 14 in the Kachin state, and 2 out of 15 in the Mon state (Han 1990).

In the 1990 election the NLD, which won an overwhelming share of the vote, relied heavily on support from candidates representing minority ethnic groups. … The NLD was automatically deregistered because of its decision not to participate in the 2010 elections

The NLD was automatically deregistered because of its decision not to participate in the 2010 election. When that happened, some of its former members founded the National Democratic Force (NDF) to contest the election, though it nominated relatively few candidates.[13] Due to the split within the NLD and the ability of ethnicity-based parties to garner support in their respective communities, a much weaker NDF was unable to generate much support from ethnic minorities.

Between the two extremes of the USDA and the NLD/NDF are 21 ethnicity-based parties, more than half of the total number of parties (37) that contested the 2010 election. These include SNDP, the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP), the Kayin People's

Party (KPP), and the Phalon-Sawaw (Pwo-Sgaw) Democratic Party. Such parties represent a wide range of groups with varying relationships with the Burmese military. Most state that they are neither pro- nor anti-establishment but are motivated mainly to promote the welfare and culture of their respective grassroots populations and to foster harmonious inter- and intra-ethnic relationships in Burma (interviews, Burma, 2010–2011).[14]

Civilians under the Control of Armed Organizations

Perhaps two million members of ethnic minorities lived in ceasefire areas between 1990 and 2010. Some were teachers, health care professionals, humanitarian workers, clerks, or administrative staff working for the ceasefire groups or for government departments and state-owned enterprises. But most were farmers, agricultural laborers, or daily wage earners. Residents who live under the KIO, NMSP, and non–border guard force DKBA have recently encountered situations long experienced by their counterparts in rebel-controlled or -contested areas. Those in the latter, estimated at no more than half a million, live in precarious conditions, have limited access to education and health care, and occasionally find themselves squeezed between state authorities, ceasefire groups, and armed insurgents. Some of them have to move constantly and hide in the forests to avoid fighting between the military and the rebels or among various armed groups, or to escape abuse and exploitation by these parties. They attempt to survive from one day to the next by cultivating crops, foraging for food, and subsisting on other local resources. In some cases, members of a given family might work for the local SPDC militia, others for the ceasefire groups, and yet others for rebel organizations (Karen Human Rights Group n.d.; Thailand Burma Border Consortium n.d.).

Some residents have to move constantly and hide in the forests to avoid fighting between the military and the rebels or among various armed groups, or to escape abuse and exploitation by these parties

Flexible Identities and Fluid Categories

These nine categories of non-armed populations are, of course, neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. The first six categories are organized according to employment, while the next two go by party membership. These first eight categories are based in government-controlled areas, whereas the last category applies to the areas controlled by armed organizations. The latter says nothing about party membership or employment, although it may overlap with the first two categories. In addition, the people living in the areas controlled by government, ceasefire, and armed insurgent organizations may travel from one area to another with amazing ease, or engage in several activities at a time. The status of some civilians living under ceasefire groups has also changed for the worse due to hostile relationships between the new government and a few ceasefire groups in the post-election period.

In addition, an individual may belong to a variety of organizations and practice a mixture of actions depending on the political context. For instance, it is entirely possible for an ethnic minority business tycoon to collaborate with local military officials to get favorable deals at the expense of the general population, while also carrying out activities that promote the culture and identity of his or her ethnic group, and to run as a candidate for a pro-government party while also fraternizing with his or her ethnic counterparts in the armed resistance. Individuals who claim to promote the collective interests of the community or who work for NGOs may engage in activities that enrich their families and relatives at the expense of the community. There are also a few ethnic minority members of USDP who are capable, resourceful, respected, and prominent leaders with a good track record of community engagement.

For analytical purposes, dividing non-armed populations into nine different categories is helpful. However, it is important to note that these categories represent ideal types and that they have fluid boundaries in practice.

Political Options

With the above caveats in mind, we can assess a range of strategies that non-armed ethnic minorities might pursue in their attempts to advance their individual and collective interests, and the effects of those strategies on the political system. The following categories are

not exhaustive, but they represent four main types of activity that have been carried out by non-armed members of ethnic minorities.

Supporting the Status Quo

Many non-armed people in Burma attempt to deal with the acute social and economic problems they face by taking actions that are piecemeal and personal in nature rather than by acting collectively to pressure the government to enact broader structural solutions. Some activities and expressions, whether overt or subtle, direct or indirect, may reinforce existing political and economic practices and provide support for the current regime.

Acquiescence to the government by civil servants, professionals, and the general population, their compliance with restrictive laws and regulations, and their voluntary or involuntary participation in the daily operation of the government have made it possible for successive military governments to legitimize their existence, undertake "state-building" projects, and construct their own versions of acceptable ethnic expressions and practices.

This process was already evident under the socialist government (1974–1988), which sought to legitimize its actions, maintain strong centralized power, suppress the armed resistance, and deny opportunities for genuine self-determination in part by showcasing non-armed civilians as good citizens who were to be clearly differentiated from their armed counterparts. It did this by acknowledging the existence of seven ethnicity-based states, publicizing the history and culture of non-Burman groups, celebrating their respective national days, involving them in the celebration of Union Day (an annual, nationwide, state-orchestrated activity to showcase the unity and culture of different national groups in the country), and appointing them to high-ranking government positions.

One notable exception to this trend was Burma's national army, which was predominantly made up of non-Burman minority groups during the British era and which saw the formation of the Karen, Chin, and Kachin Rifles at the end of World War II, but which, after the Karen insurrection in 1949, gradually became dominated by Burmans. A few members of ethnic minorities, however, were allowed to make it to the top. For instance, Colonel Lahpai Hkun Nawng, a Kachin, served as principal of the Defense Services Academy

between 1957 and 1968, and then was managing director of the Myanmar Mineral Development Corporation until his retirement in 1974. Brigadier General L. Kum Hpang, the highest-ranking Kachin in the Burmese Army, served both as commander of the Northern Command and chairman of the Kachin state Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) Regional Party Committee.[15] General Tin Oo, the powerful joint secretary of the BSPP, who earned his rank as an intelligence officer rather than as a field commander and who was once rumored to be one of the chosen successors of General Ne Win, was a Mon (Silverstein 1982: 182; Steinberg 1984: 198).

A few elite members of minority ethnic groups were also elected or appointed to central and local executive governing bodies, and their participation enhanced the state's legitimacy—a tactic also used by the previous civilian government in the 1950s. The socialist period also witnessed the rise of substantial numbers of ethnic minority group members to top-level civil service positions and other professional jobs. Prominent examples include Tun Aung Chain (Karen, head of the history department at Rangoon University), Elinore Khan Kyi (Karen, head of the English department at Rangoon University), Naing Pan Hla (Mon, historian), Sai Aung Htun (Shan, historian), U Sumlut Naw (Kachin, headmaster of Myitkyinar College), and Jubilee San Hla (Karen), Saing Htun U (Shan), and Sai Htun Hla (Shan), who served as regional commissioners for the General Administration, a central government organ.

Ordinary members of ethnic minorities in government-controlled areas also joined the BSPP as members or voted for it in order to acquire benefits or to avoid official reprisals. Some such people, in fact, state in private that death, torture, political instability, and displacement of their communities were mainly the result of the armed insurgency and that the rebel groups had done little to accomplish their stated goals of creating greater autonomy, maintaining economic and cultural survival, and achieving development for their communities (six anonymous sources, Rangoon, Irrawaddy, and Karen states, 2005–2010).

Since the SLORC (later renamed SPDC) came to power in 1988, Burma's educational curriculum, its government policies, and the ethnic composition of its ruling elite have become increasingly Burman and Buddhist (Houtman 1999; Hlaing 2008: 161). Rather than

generating more resistance, the primary effect of this development, and of the continuation of military rule, has been to make many younger people with minority ethnic backgrounds more politically acquiescent and preoccupied with their physical and economic survival.

The dominance of the Burmese language in schools and the media has produced a new generation of non-Burmans who are increasingly assimilated into the majority population. Many now rarely speak or write in their own language, know very little about their history, and limit the expression of their ethnic identity to fashion statements (such as wearing modernized versions of their ethnic dress on special occasions).[16]

The SPDC period also saw a decline in the numbers of members of minority ethnic and religious groups with top-level government or military roles. In particular, members of religious minorities complain that it has been increasingly difficult for them get into the military academy or to get promoted to a senior position in civilian or military service. One young Karen Christian man, for example, said that his interviewers suggested he change his religious identity when he went for an interview for entrance to the military academy. Two Christian army captains known to the author (one half Karen and half Burmese, the other Burmese) did not get promoted to major, while all their Burman Buddhist colleagues were promoted (anonymous sources, Rangoon, July 2010 and March 2011).

Entering the military academy and getting promoted within the military service do not seem to be such an issue among minority groups who are Buddhists (interviews with Shan Buddhists, Taungyi, February 2011). A popular saying in Burma is that people who are members of the ABC group (AIDS patients, hepatitis B patients, and Christians) are systematically discriminated against in government employment. Individuals from minority backgrounds who are highly ranked officials or heads of university departments have become extremely rare. There are reportedly no regional commissioners with minority ethnic backgrounds, while there were quite a few in the socialist period (anonymous retired government employee, Rangoon, March 2011). The ex-chairman of the Chin state Peace and Development Council and current chief minister of the Chin state is a Chin, but he is Buddhist.

In addition, the official easing of restrictions on foreign travel and the inflow of international agencies and foreign firms have allowed many of the best and brightest young non-armed members of ethnic minorities, who in past times might have been employed in top-level positions in the government, either to leave the country for jobs and educational opportunities elsewhere, or to work for intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, or private companies. The popular perception in Burma is that majority Buddhist Burmans dominate the government sector, while minority ethnic groups predominate in intergovernmental and nongovernmental employment and occupy jobs in foreign embassies and private firms as a result of their active networks and English language skills (interviews, 2004–2010; Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2010: 86). Arguably, such employment helps to ease the discontent that might otherwise arise from their marginalization within the government sector (as does the departure of at least two million migrant workers to neighboring countries, a significant number of them from minority backgrounds).

Majority Buddhist Burmans dominate the government sector, while minority ethnic groups predominate in intergovernmental and nongovernmental employment and occupy jobs in foreign embassies and private firms as a result of their active networks and English language skills

Nevertheless, there still are a few members of minority groups who are retired or employed in the government service or live quiet lives as teachers, professors, health care professionals, clerks, or administrators. Many such people, as well as prominent entrepreneurs and ordinary people from minority backgrounds, have been coopted by the regime or are being pressured to support it. They do so by participating in a range of activities, from merely voting for the regime's proposed constitution and political party, to joining government-controlled organizations, participating in state-orchestrated mass events, or even, for a few, attending meetings of state-controlled

bodies such as the national convention, or running as candidates for pro-regime parties.

Like the National League for Democracy when it won the election in 1990, the USDP in 2010 relied heavily on the participation of ethnic minority candidates. A close look at the names of USDP candidates who won seats in the national, state, and regional legislatures in 2010 shows that a considerable number of them belong to minority ethnic groups. For instance, 5 out of 13 USDP candidates who won seats in the Kachin state legislative assembly, and 8 of the 15 USDP candidates who won seats in the lower house in the national legislature from the Kachin state have Kachin names. In the Shan state, 7 out of 23 victorious USDP candidates in the national lower house, and three out of six successful USDP candidates in the national upper house have non-Burman (mostly Shan) names.

The current chief minister in the Shan state, Sao Aung Myatt, an ex-army officer and USDP member who was elected to national parliament, is a Danu. The current chief minister in the Kachin state, a businessman and USDP member who was elected to the Kachin state parliament, is a Kachin. In the Karen state, five out of six successful USDP candidates in the state legislature, one out of four successful USDP candidates in the national lower house, and four out of six successful USDP candidates in the national upper house have Karen names. Two out of six USDP seats in the lower house in the Mon state are held by individuals with Karen and Mon names respectively (*Myanmar Alin*, supplementary pages, November 17, 2010).

To the extent that "quiet" members of ethnic minorities withhold support from their ethnic counterparts in the armed resistance, vote and run for office for pro-government parties, or participate in the daily operation of the government or in state-orchestrated functions, they undermine the legitimacy of the armed resistance and strengthen that of the Burmese government and military state.

Many skeptics, particularly opposition and human rights activists in exile, have predicted that this category of activity will remain a dominant feature in the post-SPDC period. This narrow and rather bleak interpretation, however, ignores the diverse categories and fluid identities that exist within the non-armed populace, and thus their equally important potential role in bringing about change within the system.

The next two categories of activity could be seen as countervailing trends to the regime-strengthening activities described above.

Transforming or Undermining the Status Quo

Some non-armed ethnic minority actors attempt to overthrow the regime by providing covert support to rebels, or to transform the status quo by bringing about piecemeal changes within the established system. The first category has become less frequent and important since ceasefire agreements were concluded with most armed groups. But working from within for change has arguably become more common.

Edward Aspinall, writing on the Suharto regime in Indonesia, argues that most authoritarian regimes provide at least some spaces in which political actors can work inside the "formal structures of the regime—legislatures, parties, and the like" in order to pursue "'work-from-within' strategies of political reform," and that this form of "semi-opposition" is often associated with "compromise, partial and often unclear goals, and the utilization of regime language and ideological formulas to argue for political change" (Aspinall 2005: 7). Working from within has been advocated by some USDP members as well as ordinary and elite ethnic minority actors who have formed, joined, and run for office representing political parties that are not part of the ruling establishment but that have been allowed to participate in elections.

The prominence of political parties as a means of bringing about political change first became evident in 1990. At that time, many people believed that the parliamentary road was a way to bring about the end of the military regime. Many people with ethnic minority backgrounds participated in the election in 1990 by standing or voting for the NLD or for various ethnicity-based parties. Of the 93 parties that participated in the election that year, 36 were regarded as ethnicity-based (M. Han 1992).

While many of these parties focused generally on the promotion of a multiparty democratic society, human rights, rule of law, and peace and equality among national groups, a few ethnicity-based parties ran with a specific platform of promoting the culture of their group and supporting self-determination and the "Panglong spirit" (some even called for another Panglong conference). Such parties emphasized nonviolent but confrontational approaches to challenging military rule in Burmese politics (M. Han 1992: 16). Nineteen of these

parties won seats in 1990, with the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) winning the second-largest number of seats of any party, but most failed to win substantial support from their constituencies due to the relative popularity enjoyed by the NLD and the lack of time, resources, and personnel to mobilize popular support.

Although the NLD won by a large margin, none of the elected ethnic minority parliamentarians associated with the NLD or with the ethnicity-based parties were able to bring about positive political change after the military crackdown that followed the regime's defeat in the election. Those who openly criticized the authorities were arrested. Members of parliament and ordinary citizens learned from this painful experience that open confrontational approaches had failed to overthrow the resilient military regime, which continued to rule the country for another 10 years.

Despite the unhappy outcome of the 1990 election for opposition parties, when the prospect of elections reappeared, many members of ethnic minorities again found political parties and electoral contests an attractive option—mainly because they saw the election as the only alternative to the existing deadlock and were willing to take advantage of a number of opening spaces promised by the new constitution. The new constitution created 1,154 elected seats: 168 in the upper house (Amyotha Hluttaw), 330 in the lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw), and 656 in regional and state legislatures.

A major development in the new constitution was the establishment of 14 regional legislatures and governments. Some observers and ethnic minority leaders interpret this as a positive sign that the regime will offer limited local autonomy for the first time since the military took power in 1962. They hope that the new local parliaments will allow ethnic communities to have a greater say in managing their own affairs and local resources, and allow local governments to be more representative of local communities and more responsive to local needs. In particular, they hope that these local parliaments will enhance opportunities to promote their cultures and languages, including by developing local media and education systems, and to challenge the central government's unilateral imposition of economic policies that have adverse effects on local populations (such as those leading to large-scale exploitation of land by outsiders or the national government for tea, biofuel, or other plantations [interviews 2010–2011; Horsey 2010: 8]).

Another elected position created by the 2010 constitution that is expected to give ethnic minority leaders a certain degree of influence is that of regional ethnic affairs minister—an official designated to deal with affairs related to his or her ethnic community, elected for any officially recognized ethnic group that constitutes 0.1 percent or more of a state or region's population. Thus the Karens are given one minister for Karen affairs in each of the Irrawaddy, Pegu, Tenasserim, and Rangoon regions and the Mon state. The Shans get one minister each in the Kachin state and the Mandalay and Sagaing regions. The Mons get one minister in the Karen state, and the Kachins get one minister in the Shan state.

Many candidates from ethnicity-based parties vied for these positions, partly because they had a better chance of winning, as these seats were to be contested and elected only by members of the relevant ethnic group. The positions were also seen as attractive because they are part of the executive branch, which was perceived to have greater power and influence over important policy matters than the legislative branch. This optimistic interpretation of the role of ethnic affairs minister, a role that is not clearly explained in the constitution, may not be confirmed or disproved for years (interview with an ethnic affairs minister, Rangoon, February 2011).

What actors pursue change-from-within strategies? One such group is made up of reformed-minded ethnic leaders who joined the USDP with a desire to promote their communities' interests and peaceful coexistence among different nationalities, and to secure greater political and economic progress. A few observers in Rangoon commented that the regime's ability to recruit influential and respected ethnic community leaders as USDP candidates made it difficult for ethnicity-based parties to field candidates with comparable status and qualifications (three anonymous sources, Rangoon, 2010–2011).

In the past, some government officials belonging to ethnic minorities have asserted that they were able to use their positions of authority to help shield grassroots populations from the excesses of the state and of the armed resistance. A former BSPP member from the Karen state, for instance, told the author: "Having lived in the 'black' areas, I had to interact with both officials from the KNU and BSPP and mediate between them. Sometimes I was able to persuade the local military officials to be lenient to former KNU youngsters

who wanted to leave the resistance movement." A Mon activist and academic now living in the United States recalled that General Tin Oo, a Mon national, was very well liked by local people because he implemented many development projects, such as roads, bridges, and dams, when he was posted to the Mon state (PonNya Mon, e-mail communication, November 3, 2008).

If some government officials and other members of the establishment were able to protect the interests of their communities under the politically constrained circumstances of the socialist era, it is not unrealistic to expect that a few of today's ethnic minority USDP leaders might have even greater opportunities to push for positive changes. This is especially so in light of a series of reform measures that have been initiated by the current government to tackle poverty and inefficiency, enhance state capacities, and unshackle private enterprises.

A second group pursuing change from within is made up of members of parliament from the various ethnicity-based parties, who may be able to use their positions of power to increase minority access to decision making, carve out more autonomous space, and represent the interests of their communities. Unfortunately, many of the ethnicity-based parties, with the exception of those representing the Shan and Mon, are small and failed to make effective nationwide appeals beyond their local constituencies in the 2010 election.

In addition, many ethnic minority groups are represented by several competing parties, making it difficult for them to form umbrella groups that transcend regional and ideological divisions. The Karen, for instance, are represented by three political parties: the Kayin People's Party, the Phalon-Sawaw (Pwo-Sgaw) Democratic Party, and the Kayin State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP). The Shan and Mon fared better in the election because they were geographically concentrated and each group was represented by only one broad-based ethnic party. The

Many ethnic minority groups are represented by several competing parties, making it difficult for them to form umbrella groups that transcend regional and ideological divisions

SNDP, which is made up of some former members of SNLD (which was automatically deregistered in 2010 following its decision not compete in the election), got the third-largest vote in the election overall with 5 percent of the seats, and the AMRDP won the fifth-largest vote.

Other ethnicity-based political parties that could potentially have garnered strong community support were simply unable to register. For instance, while the Kachin State Progressive Party was supported by Kachin ceasefire, religious, and civil society groups, the party's application was rejected by the election commission, reportedly in retaliation for the KIO's refusal to serve as a border guard force. Another Kachin party, the Northern Shan State Progressive Party (which is affiliated with the Kachin State Progressive Party) was also denied registration.

One may question the potential influence of these ethnicity-based parties, since the number of seats they won was small compared to those of the USDP. For instance, although ethnic parties constitute 17 of the 22 parties that won seats, the second- and fifth-largest winners, the SNDP and the AMRDP, secured only 57 seats and 16 seats respectively out of a total 1,154 elected seats for different legislatures (TNI 2011a: 14). The two Karen parties in 10th and 11th place garnered only 9 seats and 6 seats respectively.

Although the USDP won an overwhelming majority in both the upper and lower houses in all seven regional legislatures in Burman-dominated areas, making it difficult for ethnic parties to have an impact at the national level, it does not have a majority in some regional legislatures, particularly in the Karen, Shan, Chin, and Arakan states. For instance, in the Karen state, the USDP won only 30 percent of the seats, with the rest split between two major Karen parties and a Mon party.[17] In addition, the newly formed Karen state government—which is composed of one army officer, four USDP members, one member of the Kayin State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP, a USDP ally), two Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party members, one Kayin People's Party member, two AMRDP members, and one independent—looks more like a coalition dominated by the USDP than a USDP monopoly. In the Shan state, the USDP and the Shan party secured 35 percent and 21 percent of seats respectively (Horsey 2010: 5).

Thus, in the Karen and Shan states, ethnic parties have more than 25 percent of the seats, allowing them to serve as a potential countervailing force against USDP and military domination, since they theoretically could initiate impeachment of regional public office-holders if they agree to vote as a block (Horsey 2010: 5).

Many politicians (both pro- and anti-regime) who participated in the recent election rationalized their involvement by saying that the election, even if rigged, was the only way to expand channels for expressing ethnic minority (or other) grievances and to openly discuss policy matters. The beginnings of a work-from-within strategy arguably became visible as early as the first national parliamentary sessions (January 31 to March 23, 2011), when some members of parliament asked questions of cabinet ministers that had never previously been discussed in public, even if the questions were avoided or insufficiently addressed (*The New Light of Myanmar*, March 17, 2011).

Since the election, the media have also pushed for greater opportunities to cover lively social and political debates. These trends, combined with a string of official reform initiatives and efforts by civil society organizations to alleviate poverty, preserve space and identity, and create greater political awareness among ordinary people, are for now the most likely countervailing force to the centralizing trend in the aftermath of the 2010 election. Civil society efforts are described in more detail in the following section.

Since the election, the media have also pushed for greater opportunities to cover lively social and political debates

Promoting Ethnic Identity and Addressing Humanitarian Needs

Many non-armed members of ethnic minorities are also active in trying to preserve and maintain their group's identity and culture and to address its social, economic, humanitarian, and spiritual needs. A broad range of activities aimed at achieving such goals are carried out by religious, cultural, and other civil society organizations, which have greatly expanded in numbers since the 1990s, as well as by private citizens and civil servants.

Spaces for the promotion and preservation of minority cultures still exist in official life, despite the Burman-centric nature of the regime and official discourse, giving rise to a range of ethnic associations that have survived since the socialist period. When Ne Win's Revolutionary Council seized power in 1962, the Burmese language became the sole medium of instruction in all school and university classes (except, of course, for English-language classes), and minority languages were allowed to be taught only up to the fourth grade in minority-populated areas. However, ethnic minorities were still allowed to develop and promote their cultures and languages as long as their activities did not undermine national unity and socialist development (Hlaing 2008: 161).

Thus, both Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches in areas populated by minorities have continued to offer language courses in after-school hours and during the summer holidays. The most prominent examples have been the activities of the Karen and Kachin Baptist Conventions,[18] which have emphasized spiritual development as well as cultural and language preservation for their respective communities (Thawnghmung 2008; South 2008). Individual Buddhist monks from Mon, Karen, and Shan backgrounds have also worked to promote their group's identity, but their activities have usually been confined to specific geographical areas and linked to prominent figures—unlike the two Baptist groups, which have operated through well-organized, regionally based associations that have existed since the British occupation.

Karen, Kachin, Mon, Shan, and other cultural and literary organizations have also been active at the state and township levels, as well as in universities and colleges. These groups have published calendars, offered language courses, promoted traditional dance and other cultural activities, and coordinated cultural, religious, state-day, and New Year festivals.

These organizations have been founded by, and have attracted and produced, community leaders and aspiring politicians, enabling them to acquire experience and skills in leadership, management, and organization, to establish contact with their respective communities across the country, and to foster ethnonational aspirations in nonviolent ways. For instance, many of the successful Shan, Karen, Mon, and Kachin candidates in the 1990 and 2010 elections were also prominent members of literature and culture associations.

Although he was a Rangoon resident, Khun Htun Oo, the president of the SNLD, was a well-known figure among the Shans and was the chairman of the Shan Literature and Culture Organization (M. Han 1992: 28).[19] Some candidates who won seats under the Mon National Democratic Front ticket in 1990 had also become recognized figures through their involvement in Mon literary and cultural organizations. For instance, the president of the Mon National Democratic Front, Nai Tun Thein, who took up arms between 1949 and 1958 and was detained by the revolutionary government between 1963 and 1969, served as president of the Mon National Celebration Committee and the Mon Literature Contest subcommittee from his release until 1988 (M. Han 1992: 254). Naing Khin Maung, another successful candidate from the Mon National Democratic Front, was deputy director of the Central Government Accounting Office and president of the Mon Literature and Culture Association in the 1970s and 1980s (M. Han 1992: 256). Dr. Sai Mauk Kham, the current vice president of the Union of Myanmar and a USDP member, is a former chairman of the Shan Literature and Culture Association in Lashio. U Tun Aung Myint, a Karen Affairs minister in Rangoon region and prominent leader of the Kayin People's Party (KPP), has also served as chairman of the Karen New Year's Celebration Committee.

The period of the SPDC regime witnessed the rapid growth of humanitarian activities in government-controlled and ceasefire areas. Some religious, private, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations used their positions to improve the lot of ethnic minority members by providing humanitarian relief; technical, vocational, and leadership training; and education and political awareness training in those areas.

Many employees of such organizations have taken a low-profile or even anonymous approach, believing that they can accomplish more without attracting the attention of the government, while simultaneously fostering good relations with their Burman counterparts and government officials. One prominent Karen working for an NGO in Burma told the author that he was able to persuade high-ranking Burmese officials to allow economic activities that would benefit ethnic minority communities by avoiding language that might sound intimidating to military personnel, using concepts that they could relate to, identifying shared interests, and convincing them of the need to promote outcomes that are beneficial for both parties. He

said, "There are so many areas of activities you can carry out safely and effectively to promote the interests of the Karen people without raising the Karen flag" (anonymous high-ranking Karen staff member of an international NGO, Rangoon, June 28, 2010).

Non-armed organizations (particularly NGOs) that are based in major cities and government-controlled areas have also been able to extend their activities by cooperating with members from the same ethnic minority backgrounds in the armed ceasefire groups in ceasefire areas. This is one reason that cultural preservation projects of the Kachin and Mon, which have the smallest populations of the ethnic groups considered in this paper, have recorded significant achievements. In both cases, ceasefires saw intense flows of communication and interaction between civilian groups and armed ceasefire groups, as well as a rapid increase in humanitarian, cultural, educational, and development activities in both ceasefire and government-controlled areas. For instance, the NMSP was able to work with its non-armed counterparts to develop Mon language curricula and manage 186 Mon national schools and mixed schools by running them cooperatively within the government system (South 2004: 240). Likewise, Kachin ceasefire groups were able to establish their own education system, allowing students to take exams within the government system.

The Kachins' situation in particular has been helped by the intervention of wealthy Kachin jade and ruby merchants with nationalist leanings who have sponsored a variety of cultural events, community development projects, and other activities in the Kachin state aimed at promoting Kachin identity and interests. One Kachin community leader working in both government-controlled and ceasefire areas remarked: "We tried to complement the Kachin Independence Organization [the main armed Kachin ceasefire group] by

Wealthy Kachin jade and ruby merchants with nationalist leanings have sponsored a variety of cultural events, community development projects, and other activities in Kachin state aimed at promoting Kachin identity and interests

participating in the post-ceasefire reconstruction. We both promote the nationalist cause drawing on our different strengths—although our purposes may not always be the same" (anonymous source, Rangoon, July 2008).

For the Kachins, one result of increased communication between armed and non-armed organizations has been the establishment of the Kachin Nationalities Central Committee for the Preservation of Traditional Culture (in the Jinghpaw language,Wunpawng Htunghking Hpung). This is the first umbrella organization dedicated to preserving the traditional culture of six subgroups within a single Kachin language group and to uniting these subgroups through the establishment of a dispute-resolution mechanism and the celebration of the traditional *manao* festival.[20] This celebration in the capital of the Kachin state is an example of the way the Kachin people have overcome personal, ideological, religious, and language divisions to collectively engage in cultural activities that require a commitment of time and money.

From the conclusion of the Kachin ceasefire agreement in 1994 until fighting resumed in June 2011, non-armed Kachins worked with the Kachin ceasefire groups to establish a standing committee in the Kachin state to celebrate *manao*, to which they invited Kachins from all over the world, as well as regional military commanders, government officials, foreign diplomats, and non-armed and armed ethnonational groups. One non-armed member of the Kachin umbrella group proudly recalled a particular festival:

> We invited everyone to participate. All the armed groups must lay down their arms if they want to participate. It is just like an old Olympic festival where warring groups lay down their arms. People do not see each other as enemies during the festival. The military officials joined in the dancing, as did the various Kachin and other non-Kachin ceasefire groups and foreign diplomats. We were able to perform the ceremony without any violence and without any security guards, despite the massive numbers attending. (anonymous Kachin man, Kachin state, July 2008)

Manao has served as a grassroots version of Union Day, since participation not only is voluntary but also allows participants to

temporarily set aside their differences, share in a brief interlude of peace and tranquility, and engage in dialogue and cultural exchange.

As with the Kachins, the ceasefire agreements between Mons and the SPDC from 1995 to 2009 led to the maintenance of ethnic culture in both ceasefire and government-controlled areas. One sign of this has been the emergence of a new Mon umbrella organization, which attempts to link Mons across areas administered by different authorities. The purpose of the Organization for the Preservation and Promotion of the Mon Nation (which includes members from government-controlled areas and ceasefire areas as well as from overseas) is to develop the Mon nation by encouraging the use of the Mon language and Mon names.

In addition to this initiative, Mon civilians in government-controlled areas have continued to promote an impressive array of cultural activities. They have been able to celebrate the officially sanctioned Mon national day annually in government-controlled areas, where they perform flag-raising ceremonies and hold competitions for prose and poetry in the Mon language, including translations from Mon to Burmese and vice versa. Activists also offer language training in summer schools, promote traditional dance, conduct academic seminars in Mon, organize exams for Buddhist monks (and provide assistance to senior monks taking the Buddhist exams administered by the government), offer English courses to those wishing to study abroad, host important religious festivals, and publish calendars.

Thus, non-armed actors and their ex-rebel counterparts have been able to promote joint activities by applying the skills and expertise of the former and utilizing the space and resources made available by the latter in the ceasefire areas. Ceasefire groups, for instance, had the financial resources and relative autonomy to manage their affairs in the areas they dominated. This allowed them to sponsor cultural, humanitarian, and educational projects, which tended to be run by educated elite civilians.

Of course, non-armed organizations are limited, in both government-controlled and ceasefire areas, to working within the parameters set by more powerful actors, namely the ceasefire groups and the government. Their activities focus more on service delivery and capacity building, and occasionally data collection, than on advocacy. Ashley South, a leading expert on ethnic politics in Burma, shows

that in government-controlled areas, "other aspects of civil society have been thoroughly up-rooted by the state and are still largely absent, especially in the field of public advocacy. One must, therefore, look to the opposition-controlled border areas, and refugee and exile communities, to find elements of a free media, human rights organizations or trade unions" (South 2008: 199).

One Kachin community leader who spoke to this author agreed that while the non-armed members can help promote capacity-building and other social, cultural, and humanitarian activities in both government-controlled and ceasefire areas, they are not in a position to push for overt political change:

> Under present circumstances, neither political parties, the UN, nor grassroots communities has the clout needed to put pressure on government to undertake political reform. Only the ceasefire and armed groups, which have access to arms, have the weight or means to push for political change. . . .
>
> There is also another function that non-armed populations cannot carry out, especially in the area of formal education. Non-armed organizations must be subject to the government curriculum and cannot teach their own languages in public schools in government-controlled areas. An armed ceasefire group which is allowed to set up its own education system will do a much better job instilling nationalist ideas and promoting its own language.
>
> For instance, the KIO education system has run schools up to high-school level where, in addition to following the government curriculum which enables students to sit government exams, they offer courses in Kachin language, history, and politics. The Mon national school goes one better—it has its own curriculum, and all materials are translated into Mon (interview, Rangoon, July 2008).[21]

However, the armed groups are used to military governance and nondemocratic approaches to decision making, which may or may not reflect the views of the populations they claim to represent. For instance, as Tom Kramer, a longtime observer of Wa armed groups, explains, "most UWSP [the United Wa State Party, another ceasefire

group in the Shan state] leaders were military commanders in the CPB People's Army. Few have any experience in civil administration and the UWSP, like most ceasefire groups, is mainly ruled by military people in a military style" (Kramer 2007: 39).

A Kachin pastor noted to the author: "Whereas people identified themselves very closely with the KIO leaders during the civil war, nowadays there seems to be very little consultation and interaction taking place between the leadership and the grass roots. Most of the ordinary non-armed ethnic citizens feel they have been excluded from the process of decision making by the top leadership in ceasefire organizations, who now have better communication with their counterparts in the government" (interview, Burma, 2008).[22] Similar views have been expressed by NGO members, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens among the Karen and Mon populations in the areas controlled by ceasefire groups. A Mon community leader commented that corruption and self-seeking behavior among the ceasefire leaders have alienated the population (interview, Mon state, June 2008).

A Mon community leader commented that corruption and self-seeking behavior among the ceasefire leaders have alienated the population

These attitudes toward the ceasefire groups may have changed, particularly among Kachin non-armed populations, who are infuriated by the recent military campaign against the KIO. One Kachin national based in Rangoon told the author that the KIO refusal to become a border guard force made it very popular amongst ordinary Kachins and that official crackdown on the KIO has inspired Kachin people who had previously disapproved of KIO practices to reunite with the organization. Karin Dean, a leading scholar on Kachin issues, also remarked that the KIO has made considerable efforts over the past years to improve its image and consult with ordinary Kachins and seems to enjoy the support of most Kachins in government-controlled areas, who are fed up with the regime and its development initiatives, which have had disastrous ecological impacts in Kachin state (Karin Dean, e-mail communication, August 5, 2011).

Non-armed groups, particularly civil society organizations, have made significant contributions toward rebuilding the community in post-ceasefire periods by providing humanitarian, technical, and professional assistance as well as introducing alternative visions, ideas, and practices into ceasefire areas that have historically been exposed to military governance, top-down policymaking, and authoritarian cultural practices. They have done so by incorporating education and awareness-raising on the promotion of peace, human rights, democracy, and good governance in their programs.

While the Kachin and Mon ceasefires, which lasted for almost two decades, saw increased levels of exchange and cooperation between civilian groups and their armed counterparts, Karen and Shan civilians living in government-controlled areas have continued to face official restrictions on contact with their counterparts in the border areas who are still fighting government forces. Karens and Shans have not been able to carry out a similar level of educational and cultural activity to that implemented by the Mon and Kachin groups.

Regardless of these political impediments, however, Karen civilians have continued to carry out an impressive array of religious, cultural, and humanitarian activities in government-controlled areas. One figure who stands out is Taungalay Sayadaw, a Pwo Buddhist monk from Paan who is well known for his promotion of humanitarian, educational, and cultural projects. He is a leading member of the Karen Literature and Culture Promotion Committee, which is attempting to develop a uniform script and computer font for the Karen language, offers summer language courses, encourages the composition of Karen-language prose and poetry, and promotes traditional Karen dance and kickboxing. In 1996, he established a secular, Western-style school, which has educated around 400 primary- and middle-school students. Alumni include over 20 college graduates who are now teaching at his school.

Looking out over a rolling plain from his monastery, where several new buildings were under construction, Taungalay Sayadaw told the author of his ambitious plans to establish high-school-level education and a Karen college. He would also like to buy more land (he says he has already purchased 10,000 acres) to protect the environment; preserve natural resources; and help achieve sustainable and environmentally sound development, full employment, and high living standards for the Karen people (also see South 2011: 26).

Another charismatic monk who led cultural, religious, and humanitarian projects was the late Abbot U Vinaya at the Thamanya monastery near Hpa'an in the Karen state. U Vinaya was an ethnic Pao who offered shelter, food, and protection to civilians fleeing forced labor and other military abuses. He died in 2003, but his successors have continued to carry out similar work on a reduced scale (South 2011).

Local development and charitable activities carried out by monks are not the only forms of activity undertaken by Karen citizens. Some Karen Buddhists organize their cultural and humanitarian activities under the leadership of lay people, while others have formed civil society organizations—such as the Knowledge Development Network, Karen Development Committee, and Karen Women Action Group—to promote development among the Karens (see South 2011). The DKBA has coordinated limited cultural and humanitarian activities jointly with civilian Karen groups. Many of the cultural activities have also been carried out under the supervision of the Karen Baptist Convention, and quite a few under literature and culture associations.

The cultural, social, and humanitarian activities of the non-armed Shans have been limited compared to those undertaken by their Karen, Kachin, and Mon counterparts. This may be the result of the rugged, mountainous terrain in the Shan state, which hampers communication among residents, and of divisions within Shan groups and government efforts to prevent the development of a broad-based ethnonational movement in the Shan state (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2010: 146).[23] The Shans have suffered from the suppression of their civil and political organizations. The arrest and imprisonment in early 2005 on sedition charges of a number of prominent Shan leaders, including Hkun Htun Oo of the SNLD (the largest ethnicity-based party, which won the second-largest number of seats in the 1990 election) and Hso Ten of the SSA-North ceasefire group, reflects the government's attempt to undermine Shan efforts to create an inclusive and broad-based organization that would represent the interests of the Shan state (Smith 2007: 50).

The rugged mountainous terrain in Shan state hampers communication

The government has attempted to suppress not only opponents but anything that would remind the Shan people of their rich cultural heritage and historical origins. In 2007, all the artifacts, furniture, and records in the former home of Yawnghwe Saopha (a Shan *saopha* who became the first president of independent Burma), which had been known for decades as the Saopha Haw Museum, were removed by the government and replaced by statues of Buddha; the building was renamed the Buddha Museum. According to local people, the original materials were shipped to Naypyitaw by order of the minister of culture (two anonymous sources, Shan state, June 2008).

Following years of sustained attacks on all fronts, Shan cultural activities are now confined to small-scale events by literary and cultural organizations in colleges and townships. Such organizations offer Shan language and writing courses in the summer, publish calendars, host meetings, organize welcoming ceremonies for university freshmen, and coordinate New Year, Shan State Day, and Buddhist religious festivities. These activities are localized and confined to the Shan state and the Mandalay and Yangon regions.

Ethnonationalist sentiments have not died out among the Shans. Martin Smith, an expert on Burma's ethnic politics, has noted the growth of such sentiments among the younger generation, as well as "signs of the revival of Shan nationalism and militancy" in the Thai border area under the new SSA-South (e-mail communication, December 15, 2008). The success of the SNDP, which garnered the third-largest number of votes in 2010 election, has been another sign of the survival of Shan nationalism. Nevertheless—unlike the non-armed Karens, Mons, and Kachins, who have made tremendous advances in social and humanitarian activities—the younger Shan generation has done little in the way of development work, humanitarian and social efforts, or attempts at cultural preservation.[24] One Shan intellectual interpreted the limited Shan cultural activities as a result of government restrictions:

> There are Shan who are wealthy and hold high government positions, but their goals are limited because of what they have seen happening among members of their ethnic groups who are politically active. While they may make one-off donations

> to social and religious organizations, they are afraid of organizing any activities that would attract attention from the government. There are very few powerful and wealthy individuals willing to take initiatives that would involve a long-term commitment to collective and organized nonpolitical activities (interview, Shan intellectual, Rangoon, August 2008).

Across the board, cultural and humanitarian activities by private citizens, civil society groups, faith-based organizations, and NGOs have increased due to relaxation of official restrictions inside the country. These activities, however, have been smaller and less frequent in the Shan state than among the Mons and the Kachins, who, until the new constitution came into effect, enjoyed greater autonomy and more interaction between different communities and areas. In the latter groups, non-armed people were able to use their expertise to deliver services, conduct training, and offer alternative ideas in areas traditionally exposed to top-down military decision-making styles. Karens in government-controlled and ceasefire areas have generally been prohibited from communicating with their counterparts in the armed resistance, but Karen organizations have been able to carry out social, humanitarian, and cultural activities in those areas.

Unfortunately, the escalation of fighting between the KIO and government troops, and simmering tensions in the NMSP-occupied areas, represent a setback to whatever progress occurred during the 15 years of the ceasefire period and will likely result in the reimposition of government control and restrictions in the former ceasefire areas. In addition, a deterioration of the general political atmosphere within the country is not impossible, given the unpredictable nature of the policy environment in Burma and changes in international politics. If this does not happen, it is likely that the scale and depth of social, humanitarian, and development activities will grow, and that civil society groups will slowly but surely take on previously prohibited activities (such as data collection and advocacy). It is likely, in other words, that international and local NGOs, civil society groups, and private citizens will increasingly try to utilize existing spaces as well as those expanded by reform-minded elected and appointed government officials.

Brokering Ceasefire Agreements

A handful of ethnic minority leaders served as mediators during ceasefire negotiations between the SPDC and the armed groups in the late 1980s and 1990s. Although this role was limited to a few individuals, it sheds light on the unique position occupied by some non-armed ethnic minority actors who have contacts with both the Burmese authorities and the armed resistance. Mon, Karen, Shan, and Kachin mediators included religious and community leaders, retired civil servants, elected members of parliament, and businessmen. While some were pressured to serve as mediators, most participated in ceasefire negotiations willingly, but they could do so only because they were recognized by the regime.

Analysis of the KIO and KNU ceasefire negotiations can shed light on a number of circumstances that differentiate successful ceasefire negotiations from failures, and on the part played by third-party mediators in bringing about these outcomes. In addition, the KIO and KNU negotiation processes represent a larger pattern of ethnic negotiations involving the Mon and Shan. For instance, many of the mediators were members of the relevant minority group rather than impartial third parties. Most served as carriers of information between the two sides; other roles included facilitating contacts with the government, clarifying and interpreting messages, helping ease tension, providing their opinions to both sides, and organizing meeting places.

Unlike the international mediators who sometimes play a role in settling internal conflicts, they were typically unable to set or control meeting agendas or even make seating arrangements. Consequently, these ethnic minority mediators were perceived as biased by those who sat at the opposite ends of the table, making it difficult to earn trust from both sides (interviews with mediators and an NGO staff member, Kachin state, July 2008, and Rangoon, February 2011). Only a few of them were able to help devise compromise positions between

Ethnic minority mediators were perceived as biased by those who sat at the opposite ends of the table, making it difficult to earn trust from both sides

the armed groups and the government or to facilitate common positions among various factions within their own ethnic group.

The ceasefire agreement negotiated between the KIO and the SPDC in 1994 was mostly facilitated by the Reverend Saboi Jum, a former general secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention, his brother U Hkun Myat, who is a prominent businessman, the Reverend Father Lawhkum Lawt Naw, a Catholic priest, and U La Wawm, a Kachin former ambassador to Israel and the Philippines. Despite internal tensions and language differences, a shared religious background helped create favorable conditions for dialogue among the KIO leaders (many of whom were members of the Kachin Baptist Convention) and various factions within the Kachin armed groups—although the dialogue was not without criticism from some quarters.

At the time of the negotiation, the KIO was experiencing tensions with its Fourth Brigade, which had already made a ceasefire pact with the government. Kachin negotiators were able to convince the various armed groups of the futility of fighting one another, and persuaded the remaining non-ceasefire elements of the Fourth Brigade to join the KIO in collective negotiations for a truce (interview with the Reverend Saboi Jum, Kachin state, June 2008). In the end, the Kachins were able to negotiate relatively favorable terms for themselves, despite the fact that they had entered negotiations much later than the ceasefire groups formerly aligned with the CPB.

In contrast to the Kachin case, a series of negotiations between the SPDC and the KNU resulted in failure, due mainly to disunity and hard-line attitudes among a segment of the armed resistance. In 1989, the SLORC signed bilateral ceasefire agreements with various ethnic armies that had mutinied against the CPB. When it offered the KNU a unilateral ceasefire proposal in 1992, the KNU adhered to the policy formulated by the Democratic Alliance of Burma, an umbrella organization for armed and non-armed resistance groups, by demanding that the SLORC negotiate a nationwide ceasefire and political settlement with the Democratic Alliance. The KNU leadership further requested a political dialogue between the alliance and the military junta, to take place outside Burma with the assistance of an international mediator or observer (interview, P'doh Manh Sha, Mae Sot, November 2006). These demands were rejected by the SLORC. The KNU felt betrayed when its two main

NDF allies, the KIO and the NMSP, signed ceasefire agreements of their own.

Renewed interest in negotiation was initiated by KNU leader Bo Mya (probably without consulting his subordinates) in the mid-1990s, when he sent a letter to Rangoon with a specific request to include Karen leaders in government-controlled areas as mediators. This request was followed by the formation of the first group of five Karen mediators—Alfonso Soe Mayint, a former KNU leader turned AFPFL/BSPP member and official; Hanson Tadaw, a former professor of geography who published several works on the Karen and who ran in the 1990 election as a candidate for the Karen National Congress for Democracy; the Reverend Mar Gay Gyi, then general secretary of the Myanmar Baptist Convention; Padoe Richard, former general manager of Myanmar Timber Extraction Enterprises and youngest brother of Thra Tha Toe (KNU general secretary in the late 1940s); and Professor Tun Aung Chain of the University of Rangoon's history department.

The team members were mainly self-selected, with the group being formed in response to General Bo Mya's request for Karen leaders "who cared about Karen issues" to get involved in ceasefire mediation. This led to a series of meetings among prominent and politically active Karen leaders, who drew up a list of individuals who should be included in the negotiation process. The team was also accepted by the SPDC and became its designated mediators on the Karen issue (interviews with negotiation team members, Rangoon, 2008–2011).

Despite their credentials, this group was unable to offer solutions acceptable to both sides. The KNU leaders rejected Burmese government demands that they enter the legal fold, renounce armed insurrection, and lay down their weapons after a new constitution was established. They believed these demands would have involved admitting their extralegal status, surrendering, and abandoning the revered four principles of the late president of the KNU, Saw Ba U Gyi (Smith 1999: 449).[25] Negotiations broke down after the SLORC negotiators argued that they represented a transitional caretaker government only, and that dialogue could only be meaningfully undertaken with officials who took office after future elections.

Thus, the negotiations faced serious hurdles from the start. The fact that all five principal mediators were Christian and Sgaw Karen

from Rangoon (outside the Karen state) made things even harder. This ethnic and religious composition did not bode well for the majority of armed and non-armed Karen Buddhists, who lived in both government- and insurgent-controlled areas, or for the Karen communities in the Karen state, who consequently felt alienated from the negotiation process (interviews, Rangoon and Karen state, 2005–2008). In addition, some of the mediators were poorly regarded by grassroots KNU members because of their perceived close association with the government and their history of public statements opposing the KNU.

The first mediation team, nevertheless, was able to secure another round of negotiations between a segment of the KNU that favored negotiation and the SLORC on January 15, 2004, when KNU leader Bo Mya led a delegation of 20 Karen officials to Rangoon to discuss an official ceasefire.[26] This resulted in a verbal ceasefire agreement with the SPDC (known as the Gentlemen's Agreement) that acknowledged the continuing discussions over the resettlement of internally displaced Karen refugees and the resolution of issues arising during the interim period. However, these efforts faltered due to the dismissal in October 2004 of General Khin Nyunt, a major architect of previous ceasefire deals.

In response to dissatisfaction over the composition of the first mediation team, a group of religious leaders from the Karen state formed the Nine-Member Committee (also called the Karen Peace Committee) in the early 2000s, made up of Buddhist monks, Anglican bishops, and Baptist pastors, both Sgaw and Pwo. It said that its role was to act as a broker in the negotiation process between the KNU and the government on behalf of the Karen population. Its leaders argued that they better represented local Karen communities with their diverse religious and linguistic backgrounds and that they had been elected by grassroots communities in the Karen state (interview with members of the Nine-Member Committee, Karen state, July 2005). It was not clear whether the group was endorsed by the KNU.

Despite the caliber of its members, the post–Khin Nyunt SPDC regime did not acknowledge the Nine-Member Committee and made very little use of its services. Instead, in the mid-2000s, it picked a third group of mediators to resume negotiation with the KNU. Of the members of the first group, only the Reverend Mar Gay Gyi (the youngest) was included in the new team. It was composed of Karens

in their 40s and 50s—a businessman, doctors, retired civil and military personnel, and a university lecturer—who had already had some connection with top KNU leaders and worked with members of the first negotiating team before and during Bo Mya's visit in Rangoon in 2004.

Most of the members of the third team came from the Karen Development Committee, an informal network promoting education, health, and economic development in the Karen communities, which had good standing with some military authorities. The third team was composed predominantly of members of the Sgaw Christian elite; however, it included a delta-born Buddhist Pwo Karen woman to facilitate better communication with the Pwo Buddhist segment of the KNU, particularly KNU General Secretary Padoe Manh Shah, a resident of the delta who was known to oppose ceasefire negotiations.

A few members of this third group came under severe criticism by various segments of the Karen population for undermining the KNU when they brokered a ceasefire agreement with a splinter group from the KNU's Seventh Brigade in 2006.The non-armed Karen community split between those who supported the third mediation group and those who opposed it, and tensions among these groups remain severe.

The Karens' search for peace and reconciliation has thus been hampered by divisions within the community and even between mediators. Underlying these divisions is the fact that different Karens favor different strategies to promote change. Some have opposed any kind of ceasefire negotiation (which they suspect would be manipulated by the military), involvement in the military-controlled national convention, and the 2010 election. Others support a ceasefire agreement as long as it is negotiated by the KNU collectively, sets out mutually acceptable conditions, and improves the situation of Karen civilians living in the conflict zone (Karen Issues, mediated forum e-communication, 2005–2008). Still others favor some kind of ceasefire arrangement, but believe that the Karens must continue to have access to arms as a means of defense and as a bargaining chip. These disagreements are further exacerbated by religious, language, ideological, and geographical differences.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the experiences of the mediators involved in ceasefire negotiations. First, it is important

to recognize their limitations. Most were not independent or neutral, nor did they have the power to enforce agreements or to make them permanent and sustainable, as is obvious from the renewed fighting between parties to the ceasefire. The negotiators' unusual insider status and the constrained and divisive atmosphere in which they operated made it difficult to earn the complete trust and confidence of the negotiating parties. Many mediators have been criticized by their constituencies for having ulterior motives or vested commercial interests, and have even been called traitors.[27]

Second, while some negotiations, such as those secured by the Kachins and Mons, were conducted with relative success, others, such as those involving the Karens, were held back by structural and institutional limitations. These included the timing of the negotiations (the agreements in the first wave of ceasefire negotiations came with more rewards and fewer restrictions than those reached in later waves), the nature and composition of the ethnic groups involved, the strategic importance and size of the armed groups involved, the degree of unity within the armed organizations, and their relationships with the Burmese opposition movement in exile.

Despite these limitations and differences and the infrequent nature of the ceasefire negotiations, ethnic minority mediators constitute an important element of the non-armed population that is worthy of close observation. They have played significant roles at crucial junctures in Burma's history, and will likely continue to play a major role in future national reconciliation processes and inter- and intra-ethnic affairs, either publicly or behind the scenes. The broader political and institutional environments and the incentives, values, ideologies, and objectives of individual power holders will still dictate the outcome of future negotiations, but for better or worse, the contributions of ethnic minority mediators will remain indispensable in addressing Burma's unresolved ethnic issues.

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Conclusion

It is difficult to predict the political landscape that will unfold in Burma in the aftermath of the 2010 election, given the lack of transparency in Burmese policymaking and the many issues that have yet to be resolved. The situation of several groups that have refused to disarm remains unclear. In addition, it is difficult to know how much power elected representatives will be allowed to exercise, or the extent to which they will be able to utilize constitutionally provided spaces to extend their influence.

Despite the uncertainty, it is highly likely that the non-armed members of Burma's ethnic minorities will play an increasingly important political role. Nonviolent efforts to bring about change from within the system have become more prominent, especially in light of the new opportunities (and pitfalls) linked to the political transition that began in early 2011.

Some members of ethnic minorities are part of the establishment; their actions (and inactions) have enhanced the political and economic power of the ruling elite, and will potentially continue to do so. In addition, business owners whose interests are intrinsically tied to the regime, along with some segments of poor and underprivileged populations, have undermined the legitimacy of the armed resistance, at least to the extent that they have remained politically quiescent or provided varying degrees of support to the state.

However, a number of forces that tend to undermine the status quo are quietly emerging and expanding among civil society organizations, opposition political parties, the staffs of international and local NGOs, and ordinary citizens, as well as reform-minded individuals within the establishment. Clearly, few members of non-armed minorities—who have had to survive in an atmosphere of restriction and intimidation and operate in a bitterly polarized political environment—could hope to exert much pressure on the government. Rather, they have sought accommodation and attempted to exploit whatever space was available to them. Over time they have tried to slowly, quietly, and subtly carve out larger spaces for themselves, continuously testing the water and adapting their activities to prevailing political conditions.

Such actors now may have a chance to more fully utilize the growing access to policymakers and to push for further positive political changes for their communities. Change from within could become a dominant feature of the post-2010 period, as long as the

new government at least minimally honors constitutional rights and its commitment to reform. The impact of individual and group efforts to create change by trying to expand non-state spaces, address humanitarian needs, and promote group identity could transform Burma's political landscape by introducing more pluralism, self-governance, and autonomy and by challenging the ruling ideology.

It is by no means clear that such activities will ultimately enhance or legitimize armed resistance organizations. A majority of nonarmed members of ethnic minorities are sympathetic to the armed resistance, and a few will continue support it. They see armed resistance as a bargaining chip or a major source of defense and power for their ethnic group, and advocate for diverse strategies to be carried out simultaneously on all fronts. Some of them, however, may have supported the principles and goals of the armed movements but not their methods. Their success in bringing about change from within and their emphasis on nonviolent methods could undermine the legitimacy of the armed resistance as the principle avenue of political struggle and expression for minority groups. Others may be in a position to broker another round of ceasefire agreements, which could avoid further deaths, destruction, and instability.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of nonarmed members of ethnic minority communities are either apolitical or unable to engage politically because their priorities are simply to survive and make ends meet on a daily basis. Many will welcome even slight improvements in their living conditions, manifested in better economic conditions, increased employment options, and less interference in their daily affairs by state officials. If the past is any clue to the present, their daily activities are more likely to be in reaction to policies that have immediate and direct bearing on their lives than to be motivated by abstract principles or by

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political bickering at the national level (Thawnghmung 2004; Nash 1965). Such ordinary members of the ethnic minorities nevertheless remain an important and distinctive electoral constituency, whose needs and concerns must be given close attention and addressed by any political parties that are interested in getting reelected.

Equally important is the role of a handful of prominent ethnic minority leaders who served as mediators in ceasefire negotiations. Though few in number, and by no means representative of the populations on whose behalf they have claimed to speak, they have exerted a powerful influence on their communities, albeit with mixed outcomes. Many of them remain active in the post-ceasefire period, and their activities and opinions are likely to help shape the outcome of future negotiations between the government and armed resistance groups, as well as evolving national reconciliation processes.

The political roles and perspectives of Burma's ethnic minorities are highly complex. Variations exist even within single families; individual views change across time and space. Additional analysis of these nuances and variations will help identify individuals, groups, and modes of political action that could help either to perpetuate the status quo or to transform it. Not all members of the establishment support the status quo, and not all of those outside the establishment (members of civil society organizations, political parties, and religious organizations) adhere to democratic practices.

Endnotes

1. In 1989, the military junta replaced the existing names for the country and its townships, cities, streets, and ethnic groups with names it considered to be more authentically Burmese. Burma became Myanmar and its citizens Myanmars; Rangoon became Yangon; and the Karen ethnic group was renamed Kayin. The term "division" was changed to "region" by the 2008 constitution. Thus Yangon division became Yangon region, Pegu division became Pegu region, and so on. This document uses the country name Burma and the pre-1989 names for places and ethnic groups. These terms are commonly used in English language publications, including many of the sources cited in this study.
2. Exceptions are South 2007 and 2011, TNI 2010 and 2011a-b, and Horsey 2010.
3. The Panglong agreement did not represent the views of all ethnic nationalities. The Karen attended the conference only as observers, while the Mon and Arakanese were excluded because they were considered part of Ministerial Burma, which was already assured of independence as one united entity. The Shan and Kachin leaders who signed the agreement represented only part of their respective communities.
4. Tonkin shows that the SLORC realized, just prior to the election, that its prospects for winning were dim, and insisted on the drafting of a new constitution by elected representatives and a general referendum on it. SLORC promised to transfer power to the new government that would be established under that constitution. Tonkin argues, therefore, that a more appropriate charge against the SLORC would be failure to allow elected members to play a major role in drafting the new constitution, rather than failure to hand over power.
5. The names and identities of respondents in Burma, and the exact locations and dates of interviews, have been kept confidential for the safety of the respondents.
6. The 1974 constitution divided the country into seven states and seven divisions. In each of the seven states, a minority ethnic group was the majority population. The seven divisions had Burman majority populations.

7. The new constitution retains the seven states and seven divisions that were formed under the 1974 constitution, but renames the divisions as regions. Five self-administered zones and one self-administered division have been added, along with the Naypyitaw Union Territory.
8. The Burmese term *alin win* (literally "entering into the light") has been used by successive Burmese governments to refer to those who abandon armed resistance and agree to abide by the law sanctioned by the government.
9. A Burman NGO staff member was quoted in this report as saying, "In the NGO arena Myanmar is the minority and ethnic groups the majority. This is because most NGO leaders are from ethnic groups and are concerned for their groups."
10. Heidel's calculation of the numbers of community-based organizations is itself based on an estimate and not on actual data; in addition, some NGOs exist in name only and have not been able to accomplish anything substantive.
11. The 2009 *Directory of Local Nongovernment Organizations* was obtained from a small, local NGO in Rangoon. It does not list a publisher and apparently was meant for internal circulation.
12. The party registration law prohibited civil servants and members of the armed forces from forming or joining political parties, and prohibited parties from accepting or using direct or indirect state support. Prime Minister Thein Sein and more than 20 ministers and deputy ministers resigned from the armed forces to register a political party. However, they retained their cabinet posts, arguing that ministers are not civil servants.
13. There were 163 NDF candidates, mainly in the Yangon and Mandalay regions. This number made them the third largest party in the 2010 elections.
14. One Karen party candidate put it this way: "We are neither green [representing the SPDC] nor red [representing the NLD], but are yellow [in between]" (interview, Yangon, August 2010).
15. He was assassinated in 1985, and conflicting claims about who killed him have yet to be resolved.
16. Interestingly, many musicians with national reputations are members of an ethnic minority, particularly Kachin, Karen, Shan, or Chin. These include Sai Sai Kham Hlaing (Shan), L. Seng Zi (Kachin), Naw Naw (Kachin), L. Lung Wa (Kachin), Rebecca Win (Kachin), Mi Mi Khei (Karen), Lay Lay Wah (Karen), Breakie (Karen), and Saw Ku Hser (Karen). The lyrics and performance styles of this new generation of singers are creative attempts to modify and express their ethnic identity in ways that suit modern Burmese audiences and official discourse, while simultaneously presenting themselves as patriotic citizens of Burma. The most prominent example of this phenomenon is a music video titled "Ta Mye Tei Mar" or "From the Same Land," in which musicians dressed in ethnic costumes (traditional fabrics tailored in western style) and sang songs (in a fusion of traditional and western styles) about the need to promote harmonious ethnic relations in Burma.
17. Even so, the pro-government forces secured a majority in the state through the combination of USDP seats and those reserved for the military.

18. The Kachin Baptist Convention is an umbrella organization that has about 330,000 members and claims to represent about 65 percent of the Kachin.
19. Oo was born in Thein Ni in Shan state, became assistant to the Indonesian military attaché in 1960, and was later a representative for a Japanese news agency.
20. *Manao*, in Kachin, means dance and religious festival. Traditionally, the *manao* festival involved performing traditional dances and sacrifices to propitiate powerful spirits over several days, under the sponsorship of wealthy *duwa* or Kachin traditional leaders. It was celebrated in both good and bad times. The Kachin Baptist Convention, which had banned *manao* as antithetical to Christian belief, incorporated a Christianized version of the ceremony in 1977 as an integral part of Kachin tradition.
21. Karin Dean points out that the KIO also has post–high-school education, such as a teacher training college, which has impressive facilities including a library and computers (e-mail, August 4, 2011).
22. Consequently, a number of Kachin pastors and theology professors claimed that the Kachin Baptist Convention, rather than the ceasefire or armed insurgent groups, has more influence and closer and better relationships with the Kachin grassroots population.
23. A young Shan-Pao woman from southern Shan state, for instance, was quoted as saying, "Northern and Southern Shan don't meet each other often because of transportation limitations. If I want to go from northeastern to southern Shan state it will take two to three nights."
24. It is possible that such activities exist but were not found during this study. However, an analysis of the activities of community-based organizations in Burma reveals that they were more concentrated in villages and wards in Chin, Mon, Kayin, and Kayah states than in Shan state. For instance, it has been estimated that the numbers of community-based organizations per (urban) ward in Chin, Mon, Kayin, Kayah, and Shan states were 12.5, 17, 12, 8, and 3.5 respectively (Heidel 2006: 45; see also Center for Peace and Conflict Studies 2010: 183).
25. Saw Ba U Gyi's death in 1951 at the age of 46 elevated him to the status of martyr among the Karen, comparable to the veneration accorded to General Aung San. The main principles he advocated were recognition for the Karen state, control by the Karen of their own destiny, the right to bear arms, and refusal to surrender.
26. This was initiated by General Bo Mya in order to bolster his power; he had been demoted to vice president of the KNU and was rightfully concerned about his declining health and influence over the armed movement.
27. One of the most frequently mentioned was Lo Hsing-Han, who played a crucial role in negotiations between the largest Wa armed group and the SLORC. In return, he received various concessions, including permission to build a vast industrial estate and modern port on the outskirts of Rangoon (Oo and Min 2007: 32).

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About this Issue

This paper sheds light on the activities of non-armed members of ethnic minorities in Burma, insufficiently studied actors in the conventional study of ethnic politics in Burma that has long been dominated by a focus on ethnonational armed resistance groups and ceasefire groups. Focusing on the Kachin, Karen, Mon, and Shan ethnic groups, the study describes nine major economic, political, and geographical categories of civilian experience, followed by four contributions that non-armed members of ethnic minority groups may make to the political system: (1) supporting the status quo, (2) transforming or undermining the status quo, (3) promoting collective identity and culture and addressing humanitarian needs, and (4) helping to mediate ceasefire agreements.

The study demonstrates the need to be aware of the full range of nonviolent political actions that exist among ethnic minority populations and argues that policy responses must look beyond the role of armed groups and become more sensitive to the needs of the diverse members of ethnic communities.

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Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung is associate professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Her research interests are Southeast Asian politics, Third World politics, Burmese politics, ethnic politics, and political economy. She is the author of ***Behind the Teak Curtain: Authoritarianism, Agricultural Policies, and Political Legitimacy in Rural Burma/Myanmar*** (2004) and ***The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends*** (2008). She has published articles on Southeast Asia and Burma in edited books and academic journals on Asia. Her forthcoming book, ***The 'Other' Karen in Burma/Myanmar and the Dilemmas of Ethnic Minorities***, will be published by Lexington Books.

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