

'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

Political Transition in Myanmar:  
A New Model for Democratisation

Ashley South

'Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs',  
Vol. 26., No.2, August 2004  
(Singapore on Institute of Southeast Asian Studies)

ABSTRACT:

This article examines social and political transition in Myanmar (Burma). Strategies for transition in Myanmar have tended to focus on elite-level politics, rather than grass-roots democratisation and social mobilisation. However, both approaches are necessary - although neither is sufficient in itself. While change at the national/elite level is urgently required, sustained democratic transition can only be achieved if accompanied by local participation.

The tentative re-emergence of civil society networks within and between ethnic nationality/ minority communities over the past decade is one of the most significant - but under-examined - aspects of the social and political situation in Myanmar. 'Development from below', and efforts to build local democracy from the 'bottom-up', using local capacities and social capital, are underway in government-controlled areas, and in some ethnic nationality-populated ceasefire and war zones (including insurgent-controlled areas), as well as in neighbouring countries. However, the sector is still under-developed, and changes coming from civil society will be gradual, and need to be supported.

This article examines the strategic challenges facing ethnic nationalist leaders and communities at this key period in Myanmar's history. It also addresses the roles that foreign aid can play in supporting the re-emergence of civil society in Myanmar, and advocates a policy of selective (or targeted) engagement'.

BIOGRAPHY

Ashley South is an independent consultant and analyst, specialising in ethnic politics, displacement and humanitarian issues in Myanmar. He is the author of a political history of lower Myanmar: Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake (RoutledgeCurzon 2003). His current research on displacement in Myanmar is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Political Transition in Myanmar:  
A New Model for Democratisation

Despite appearances to the contrary, the outlook for political transition in Myanmar is not entirely bleak. However, observers and activists must consider a broader range strategies for democratisation.

The past year has seen a flurry of political activity in and on the country, including the government's 'road-map' to democracy (see below). However, the openings for change that have emerged are quite limited. Given the oppositions' lack of leverage, and the ineffectiveness of sanctions, the military junta will probably continue to determine the course of events. Strategies for democratisation have generally responded to the regime's initiatives in one of two ways: either by seeking some room for manoeuvre within government-controlled forums (such as current National Convention), or by boycotting these - and reinforcing a polarisation of Myanmar politics which began in the 1960s, and has served the entrenched military government better than it has the increasingly marginalised opposition forces.

Opposition groups have focused on elite-level regime change, and the need to install a more accountable government in Yangon. Such approaches are based on an assumption which is shared by the military regime: that political transition in Myanmar must come from the top-down, and be directed by the central government.

'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

(Even in a best-case scenario, the government-controlled the National Convention will only concern elite-level transition.)

This notion ignores the role of civil society - which will be essential to any process of sustained democratisation. While change at the national level - whether revolutionary or gradual - is urgently required, sustained democratic transition can only be achieved if accompanied by local participation.

In the current political climate, with only limited options available for national-level transition, re-emergent civil society networks represent an important vehicle for long-term, 'bottom-up' democratisation in Myanmar, especially in ethnic nationality areas. Furthermore, civil society actors often have access to conflict-affected areas which are out-of-bounds to international agencies. Local NGOs can implement community development and humanitarian projects in border areas, in ways which build local capacities and human capital.

Although Myanmar-watchers (particularly overseas-based activists) often assume that there is no civil society in the country, this far from true. The tentative re-emergence of civil society networks within and between ethnic nationality communities has been one of the most significant - but under-examined - aspects of the social and political situation in Myanmar over the past decade. Efforts to build local democracy are already underway - in government-controlled areas, in some ethnic nationality-populated ceasefire and war zones, and in neighbouring countries. Although these local initiatives will not bring about national-level change in themselves, any centrally-directed reforms are unlikely to succeed unless accompanied - or even preceded - by such grass-roots participation.

This article argues that a combination of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' strategies for democratisation are necessary, but that neither is sufficient. It examines the strategic challenges facing political leaders and communities, and particularly the ethnic nationalities, who constitute 30-40 % of the population. It also addresses the role that foreign aid can play in supporting the re-emergence of civil society in Myanmar.

The promotion of civil society in Myanmar should be a priority for international donors. Rather than sitting on the sidelines, while the situation goes from bad to worse, the international community (the US, EU and UN) should engage with Myanmar in a constructive - if selective - manner. In this case, humanitarian and development aid are not substitutes for political intervention - but a way into political action. Of course, humanitarian principles demand that aid be given impartially, and not to further political agendas. Nevertheless, all aid has political impacts, and these should be properly calculated.

Unless otherwise indicated, data comes from the author's research in Myanmar, Thailand and China, conducted between 2001-04.

#### Elite-level Politics and the National Convention

Few would deny the urgent need for change in Myanmar but what kind of transition, and how? Some activists assume - even hope - that a repeat of the 1988 democracy uprising is likely, and that change will come abruptly. However, most key players expect a more gradual realignment, with less bloodshed, and advocate for a negotiated process of democratisation. Many are pessimistic, and draw on the experience of other countries in the region to suggest that the best hope is for gradual regime reform, without any appreciable degree of power-sharing with the opposition. Although the tactics adopted by stake-holders in these different scenarios may vary, many strategic considerations remain the same.

There are three potential parties to political transition in Myanmar: the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military regime, the urban-based democracy movement, led by Daw Aung San Su Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), and various ethnic nationality parties. While the NLD and most democracy groups in exile have consistently demanded recognition of the 1990 election results as a basis for a political settlement, they have mostly come to accept the necessity for compromise, and dialogue with the SPDC. However, Daw Aung San Su Kyi's efforts to mobilise her supporters, and test the limits of the generals'

'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

tolerance, came to a bloody end on 30th May 2004, when a government-organised mob ambushed her motorcade, killing and injuring dozens of her supporters. With 'the lady' in detention, international efforts to foster bi-partite dialogue between the SPDC and NLD came to a halt.

Since its refusal to recognise the results of the May 1990 general election, the military government has resisted all options but a managed (by the military) transition to some type of 'disciplined' or 'guided' (by the military) democracy. On 30th August 2003 Myanmar's newly-appointed prime minister (and Military Intelligence chief), General Khin Nyunt, announced the resumption of a National Convention to draft a new constitution - part of a seven-stage 'road map to democracy'. (The original NC was convened in 1993, and suspended in 1996). The military government was clearly positioning itself to control a transitional process, the success and legitimacy of which depends on who participates in the NC, under what conditions. Endorsed by China, ASEAN and the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Myanmar, Razali Ismail, Khin Nyunt's 'road-map' became the only political game in town - at least at the national/elite level.

However, after much back-room plotting and brinkmanship, the prospects of the government-controlled NC producing significant change currently seem quite limited. Three days before the NC re-opened, on May 14th 2004, Myanmar's two main opposition parties announced that they would not join the convention. The government failed to reassure the NLD and the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA - a coalition of ethnic nationality parties: see below), that it would permit genuine debate over key issues. Although these concerns were well-founded, the NLD and UNA do not appear to have a realistic 'plan B' - and elite-level politics in Myanmar is once again dead-locked, with the government holding most of the key cards.

Although most of the 1,076 delegates to the NC have been hand-picked by the government, they include over one hundred representatives from armed ethnic nationality groups, which have ceasefires with Yangon (see below). Nevertheless, in the absence of the NLD and UNA, the NC process is far from inclusive. In effect, hard-liners within the SPDC have ensured that the convention is tightly controlled by the regime, at the expense of its perceived legitimacy - both within Myanmar and abroad.

With both the SPDC and NLD sticking to their principles, it might appear to some observers that the urban-based (predominantly Burman) political elites are not really trying to find solutions to Myanmar's protracted crises. Unlike SPDC or NLD, the ceasefire groups have at least attempted to make the NC work - and use this historic opportunity to raise some of the issues which concern them, for the first time since independence.

The stakes are high, and some analysts suggest that Khin Nyunt (the 'good cop') has been set-up to fail - while protecting Senior General Than Shwe (the 'bad cop' and junta chairman) from the need to reform. However, Khin Nyunt is clever and ambitious, mindful of his place in history - and therefore motivated to make his road-map work. In this, he may gain some support from army officers who oppose Than Shwe's increasingly personalised style of rule, and diversion of resources from the military to the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA - a mass movement established in September 1993 under the SPDC Chairman's patronage). Nevertheless, Than Shwe still calls the shots, and has seemingly suppressed open discussion of key issues within the NC.

The third set of political actors in Myanmar had been largely side-lined within the UN-brokered 'peace process', which came to a halt following the brutal events of 30th May. The 1994 and all subsequent UN General Assembly resolutions regarding Myanmar have called for a tri-partite solution to the country's problems, involving the government, NLD (and other parties elected in 1990), and the ethnic nationalities.

Many ethnic nationality cadres are wary of the NLD leadership, which is largely composed of ex-Myanmar Army officers, who share a common political culture and conceptions of state-society relations based on a strong, centralised state. However, most ethnic leaders have trusted Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to demand their inclusion in any negotiations which may come out of bipartite talks in Yangon.

### 'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

This was a risky strategy: if an agreement had been reached between the SPDC and NLD, the process would have gained considerable momentum before ethnic nationality representatives were brought into the picture. In this case, the latter risked further marginalisation, faced with two options: either be co-opted into endorsing an agreement which they had little part in negotiating, or insist on convening a possibly lengthy inter-nationalities consultation process. In the context of any pre-existing deal between the NLD and SPDC, such a demand might have exposed the ethnic nationalities to accusations of obstructing national reconciliation. Either scenario would suit the 'divide and rule' strategy of elements in Burman political society.

#### Opportunities and Challenges

Following a half-century of (mostly) low-intensity civil war, ethnic minority-populated areas of Myanmar are mired in a state of profound humanitarian crisis. Needs are especially acute in the fields of food and livelihoods security, education and health, and civilian protection. T

The possibility of expanded participation in the National Convention created an opportunity to re-present the importance of the 'ethnic question' in Myanmar, and the roles the ethnic nationalities might play in breaking the political deadlock, and beginning to address the urgent humanitarian situation. To capitalise on this limited opportunity, the different ethnic nationalist blocs would have to agree on basic strategy, and develop common positions on the main issues to be included in tri-partite negotiations.

The ethnic nationalist community is composed of three elements:

1. The United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), representing sixty-five ethnic nationality candidates elected in 1990, which has always worked closely with the NLD;
2. Some twenty armed ethnic organisations which have agreed ceasefires with Yangon since 1989, retain their arms, and sometimes still control extensive blocks territory;
3. Those insurgent groups still at war with the government, most of which are members of the National Democratic Front (the NDF, established in 1976, several members of which have ceasefire agreements). Although the insurgents remain politically and symbolically important, their military strength has declined significantly in recent years.

The challenge facing Myanmar's ethnic nationality leaders is how to engineer a degree of coherence between and within these different sectors. In doing so they risk being exposed as divided - or naive and unrealistic - over key issues, and once again consigned to a marginal role as crucial decisions over the future of the country are made by the urban political elite.

#### The Ceasefire Movement: 1989-2004

The history of insurgency and political failure in Myanmar are closely interlinked. Since independence in 1948, and especially following the military take-over of 1962, representatives of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities have been excluded from meaningful participation in national-level politics. Historically, the 'ethnic question' has been at the heart of Myanmar's protracted political, social and humanitarian crises.

Although much recent political science literature has focused on the 'opportunity motives' for insurgency, Myanmar's rebellions have long been driven by a mixture of genuine grievances and political-military-economic opportunism. Nevertheless, in recent years, a relatively stable 'peace-making' environment has emerged in many border areas.

Until 1989, the Myanmar Army had been fighting two inter-connected civil wars - one against the ethnic nationalist insurgents and another against the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). With the collapse of the latter in early 1989, Yangon could concentrate its forces against the beleaguered ethnic rebels. The junta devised a classic 'divide and rule' strategy, under which ceasefire agreements were struck with individual insurgent groups, while refusing to negotiate with any joint front, such as the NDF. To the consternation of the embattled ethnic allies on the Thailand-Myanmar border, between 1989-95 ceasefire arrangements were made with a total of fifteen insurgent organisations, including Shan, Pa-O, Palaung and Kachin NDF member-groups. Whether the ceasefire process can be

### 'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

sustained, and move from the current 'negative peace' - characterised by the relative absence of violence - onto a positive, 'peace-building' phase, will be fundamental to the success of reconstruction and national reconciliation efforts.

The nature of the ceasefire agreements are not uniform, although in all cases the ex-insurgents have retained their arms, and still control sometimes extensive blocks of territory (in recognition of the military situation on the ground). The ceasefires are not peace treaties, and generally lack all but the most rudimentary accommodation of the ex-insurgents' political and developmental demands. In some quarters, these agreements have been dismissed as benefiting vested interests in the military regime and insurgent hierarchies. However, they also represent opportunities to work towards the rehabilitation of deeply troubled communities.

However, ceasefires do not guarantee sustainable peace and development. Major displacements of civilian populations have occurred after ceasefires were agreed between the government and armed ethnic groups in Kachin (1994) and Mon (1995) States. Although armed conflict-induced displacement came to an end in these areas, families and communities continue to lose their land and become displaced, as a result of increased natural resource extraction (logging, and jade and gold mining) and infrastructure development. Another cause of post-ceasefire displacement is increased militarisation (despite the cessation of armed conflict) and the Myanmar Army's expansion into previously contested areas.

#### The KNU Ceasefire

A potentially significant development occurred in December 2003, when the Karen National Union (KNU), the last major insurgent group in Myanmar, agreed a ceasefire with the military government - although the details of this arrangement are still being worked-out. The KNU's fifty-five years of dogged resistance to the Myanmar military (the KNU went underground in 1949) has given the Karen ethno-nationalist movement a special symbolic weight in Myanmar politics. If Karen leaders in exile and inside Myanmar can grasp the moment, they may be able to engage politically with the regime from 'within the legal fold', while addressing the urgent needs of Karen society.

It is however, an open secret that the KNU is being pushed by the Thai government into a hasty agreement with Yangon. Understandably, Thailand wants rid of the 150,000 (mostly Karen) refugees in the kingdom, and is keen to exploit the economic opportunities that peace may bring to its borders. However, Thai pressure risks splitting the KNU into pro- and anti-ceasefire (and -NC) factions, and could yet wreck the fragile truce. Thailand's long-term interests would be better served by allowing the Karen to proceed at their own pace.

The apparent end to armed conflict in Karen State comes as increasing numbers of INGOs enter Myanmar. International agencies may, for the first time in decades, have the opportunity to address the deep-seated humanitarian and development problems in border areas - if they work in partnership with local civil society, in ways which address some of the root causes of the armed conflict.

In their talks with the government, KNU negotiators have emphasised the extent of the displacement crisis in Myanmar, and suggested that the plight of up to million internally displaced people (IDPs) be addressed, before any refugee repatriation is undertaken. Most aid workers agree that the time is not yet right to begin sending refugees back from Thailand.

Any attempts to assist displaced Karen villagers must take account of the on-going problems experienced by conflict-affected populations in other parts of Myanmar. The protection of civilians must be a priority. At a minimum, land-mine clearance should proceed any major re-settlement initiative.

Quite properly, UNHCR has discussed refugee repatriation options with the Thai authorities, and with the Myanmar government. However, crucial aspects of UN (and INGO) access to proposed IDP and refugee repatriation-resettlement zones have yet to be agreed.

In March 2004 UNHCR announced that it had negotiated access to refugee return

### 'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

areas in eastern Myanmar. With funding of about \$1 million for 2004, UNHCR will support projects in community health education and de-mining. Under its arrangement with the government, the UN refugee agency has gained access to seven of the eleven townships in Myanmar (Tenasserim Division, Mon State and Karen State) from which the majority of refugees in Thailand have fled - i.e. for the first time, UNHCR will have access to Thailand border areas via Yangon. Having visited several of these areas, in mid-2004, UNHCR was making initial preparations to up-grade infrastructure in areas of possible refugee return; health and education programs are reportedly to be implemented through the Myanmar Red Cross (heavily infiltrated by Military Intelligence) and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (led by General Khin Nyunt's wife).

Unlike along the Thailand side of the border, where it has three field offices, UNHCR is apparently not going to open offices in return areas (e.g. the Karen State capital, Pa'an). The UN will be present by proxy only, will not be operational on the ground, and will not therefore be able to provide a protective presence.

#### Inter-ethnic Politics

There is a fairly high degree of coherence between the policies of the UNA parties and the rump NDF. More problematic are the positions of various ceasefire groups. The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and New Mon State Party (NMSP) have taken the lead among a group of six politically engaged ceasefire groups, most of which are ex-NDF members. The NMSP in particular plays an important role, with a foot in all three camps of the ethnic nationality community: it is the closest of the ceasefire groups to the rump NDF, and also enjoys good relations with the UNA leadership.

However, the positions of a number of ex-CPB and other militias in northern Myanmar have been less clear. Wa, Kokang and PaO leaders may feel that there is more to be gained by following the SPDC line, and staying clear of politics, in order to concentrate on local community and economic development programs (including, in some cases, the drugs trade). Some observers have expected the SPDC to offer further concessions to individual ceasefire groups, in exchange for their support (or at least, acquiescence) in efforts to complete the National Convention.

However, since late 2003 the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and other northern Shan State ceasefire groups have adopted positions similar to the KIO-NMSP camp - i.e. that the 'sixth objective' of the NC, which guarantees "military participation in the future state" is unacceptable, and that amendments are necessary to some of the 104 articles of the proposed constitution, agreed between 1993-96.

Despite the military government's longstanding policies of 'divide and rule' vis-à-vis the ethnic nationalities, in mid-2004 they seemed more united than at any time in recent years. However, it was still far from unclear whether their concerns would be addressed by the NC. Indeed, on May 11th the ceasefire groups were informed that their demands would not be met by the government. It seemed therefore that the National Convention would not be open to genuine political debate or social comment.

The issue of federalism illustrates the gulf between the government and ethnic nationality representatives. Although this is anathema to the generals in Yangon, most ethnic nationality parties in Myanmar are committed in principle to a federal solution to Myanmar's constitutional crisis. However, there are different 'federalising' and 'federating' processes, various kinds of relation between the states and union, and different types of federal structure. In recent years, ethnic nationality and pan-Myanmar democracy groups in exile have begun to discuss such arrangements in detail, paying special attention to the situation of minorities within ethnically-defined states - e.g. the Wa and other minorities in Shan State.

#### The Limits of a Top-Down Approach

Given the competing/complementary 'constructive engagement' policies of ASEAN and China, and the limited impact of US, UN and EU fulminations against the SPDC, it is difficult to see how pressure can be brought to bear on Yangon, beyond indirect support for the 'progressive' Khin Nyunt faction. Furthermore,

the opposition - and the ethnic nationalities in particular - have limited leverage vis-à-vis the government. Given its past record and recent pronouncements, it is therefore quite likely that the SPDC will refuse to discuss issues such as federalism and power-sharing, or even sensitive areas like human and group rights.

Remaining for a moment at the level of inter-elite negotiations, it is worth considering whether - in the event of continued deadlock - social welfare and humanitarian issues could be used to facilitate processes of dialogue, and eventually social and political transition. In addressing subjects like displacement (refugees and Internally Displaced Persons), education or HIV/AIDS in the first stage of any 'confidence-building' process, stake-holders might be brought into needs analysis, planning, implementation and monitoring-evaluation activities, which could be used to foster models of collaboration. Cooperation in the humanitarian sector might later be expanded, and developed into broader, more explicitly political discussions of state-society and centre-periphery relations. A focus on IDPs in particular, would help to ensure ethnic nationality participation in such processes, as most of Myanmar's two million-plus displaced people are from ethnic minority communities.

For humanitarian issues to become vehicles for transformative dialogue and peace-building would require careful preparation, including consultation with affected communities, and local and international agencies. This is one example of how elite-level 'blue-print'-style approaches - based on a policy of 'coherence' - can be complemented by more participatory approaches, which involve and empower a wider range of actors. Given the government's lack of incentive to engage in dialogue, civil society-based 'development from below' approaches may be considered valuable in their own right, as well being as an alternative means to gradual democratisation.

#### Civil Society: a Vehicle for Democratisation

In this article, the term 'civil society' is derived from de Tocqueville, and denotes voluntary associations and networks which are intermediate between the state and the family. These include a broad range of community-based organisations (CBOs), media and social welfare organisations, as well as religious and cultural groups (traditional and modern), and more overtly political organisations. However, political parties seeking to assume state power are not part of civil society - although they may promote or inhibit its development.

Functioning civil society networks are essential for sustained, 'bottom-up' social and political transition in Myanmar, and for conflict resolution at both the national and local levels. It is essential that the country's diverse social and ethnic communities enjoy a sense of ownership in any transitional process, and equip themselves to fill the power vacuum that may emerge, either as a result of abrupt shifts in national politics, or of a more gradual withdrawal of the military from state and local power. The ability of people to organise, and re-assume control over aspects of their lives which since the 1960s have been abrogated by the military (including insurgent armies), will depend on such grass-roots mobilisation.

Popular participation and civil society networks are necessary, whether change in Myanmar comes suddenly, or is more incremental. Indeed, the failure of the 1988 'Democracy Uprising' in Burma - like that of the 1989 'Democracy Spring' in China - can in part be attributed to the suppression of civil society under authoritarian rule. A lack of democratic culture prevented powerful political gestures from initiating sustained change. Unlike those in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the Philippines in 1986 and Thailand in 1992, the Burmese and Chinese democracy activists had little social space within which to operate, or to build upon the people's evident desire for fundamental change. In particular, Myanmar and China had no counterpart to the trades unions, which played important roles in the Polish and Filipino democracy movements. The regime had succeeded in denying social groups a foothold in mainstream politics or the economy, except under strict state control. Potential opposition was thereby marginalised, and could emerge only in times of crisis and upheaval, presenting the military with a pretext to clamp-down on 'anarchy' and 'chaos' (thus the State Law and Order Restoration Council - SLORC).

### 'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

Myanmar Army ideologues have long viewed their task as the defence of a centralised, unitary state, which emerged from the struggle for independence. The military has sought to impose a model of state-society relations, in which the (ethnic minority) periphery was dominated by a strong (Burman-orientated) centre. As pluralism was suppressed, it was replaced with a state-sponsored nationalism. The process of 'Burmanisation' saw diverse (and according to the military, divisive) minority cultures, histories and aspirations subsumed under a homogenising 'national' identity, derived from the Burman historical tradition.

In the 1960s, as the state extended its control over previously autonomous aspects of social life, civil society networks could no longer operate independently. Opposition to the regime was either eliminated, driven underground, or forced into open revolt. The existence of renewed armed opposition to the military government provided a pretext for the further extension of state control, and suppression of diverse social groups deemed antipathetic to the modernizing state-socialist project.

According to David Steinberg, "civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered." The 1974 constitution effectively outlawed all political activity beyond the strict control of the state. Particularly hard hit were trades unions and most professional associations (e.g. journalists' groups). However, other aspects of civil society survived, albeit in a dormant form.

Since 1988, state-society relations have been further centralised, and social control reinforced by the indoctrination of civil servants, reformation of local militias, and creation of new mass organisations, like the USDA. Beyond this highly circumscribed sector, the operation of independent political parties, such as the NLD and UNA, has been severely restricted, as have freedoms of expression and association, and access to information and independent media. Nevertheless, elements of civil society have survived, and are beginning to re-emerge.

#### Civil Society Actors in Myanmar

Overseas-based activists and Myanmar-watchers sometimes assume that there is no civil society in the country. This is far from true. Extensive civil society networks, building on local capacities and social capital, exist in and between the ceasefire and warzones of Myanmar, as well as in areas under government control (the majority of the country).

#### Zones of On-going Armed Conflict

Although, especially since 1988, most insurgent groups have claimed to be fighting for democracy in Myanmar, this ideal is not always reflected in their practices. Many aspects of life in the 'liberated zones' have been characterised by a top-down tributary political system, aspects of which recall pre-colonial forms of socio-political organisation. Insurgent leaders have tended to discourage the expression of diverse opinions, and socio-political initiatives beyond the direct control of militarised hierarchies have often been suppressed.

However, in recent years, civil society networks have begun to expand in non-government controlled areas. As their ex-cold war patrons, China and Thailand, withdrew support from Myanmar's ethnic insurgents in the 1980s and '90s, the rebel armies declined in military - and thus political - significance. Ironically though, the decline of the old insurgent paradigm opened the space for the emergence of new and more participatory forms of social and political organisation among opposition ethnic nationality communities. In the 1990s a number of local NGOs were organised by Chin, Kachin, Shan, Lahu, Karenni, Karen, Tavoyan, Mon and all-Myanmar student and youth, women's, environmental and human rights groups in the border areas. These began to occupy the political space created by the declining influence of mainstream armed groups. Representing new models of organisation, these networks constituted one of the most dynamic aspects in an otherwise bleak political scene. As a result of their activities, those engaged in the struggle for ethnic rights and self-determination in Myanmar have been obliged to acknowledge the importance of women's rights, community-level participation and democratic practices - not just as distant goals, but as on-going processes. Since the 1990s, the NMSP, KNU and other armed organisations have been challenged to reassess their records, and examine the

degree to which their strategies reflected these ideals.

In a parallel development, the refugee and other relief and welfare organisations along the Thailand border also grew in interesting ways. Like the women's and youth wings associated with most insurgent groups, the Karen, Karenni and Mon refugee committees were originally controlled by dominant factions within the insurgent hierarchy. As the latter lost ground throughout the 1990s, the number of refugees in Thailand grew annually, and assumed a new importance as civilian support base, source of recruits and safe haven for the armed groups. However, as the refugee situation along Thailand border was gradually internationalised, with the presence of more INGOs - and since 1998, UNHCR - the refugee committees were obliged to become more responsive to (if not more representative of) their clients, the refugees.

A particularly dynamic sub-sector was composed of local relief and development groups which continued to work cross-border, with displaced communities inside Myanmar. Since the early 1990s, Karen - and later Chin, Shan, Karenni and Mon - teams have provided humanitarian relief (food and medicines) and undertaken community development and educational work among displaced communities, in what had once been the 'liberated zones' (behind the front-lines of war), but were now mostly zones of on-going armed conflict.

For example, there is a network of some 400 Karen village schools inside Myanmar, most of which are loosely supervised by the KNU Education Department (KED). In many areas, these schools consist of little more than a few bamboo benches under the trees, which must move repeatedly, as villagers are displaced by the on-going armed conflict. In the face of such difficulties, many IDP communities attempt to provide their children with some form of continuity, and a basic education. In a sometimes uneasy partnership with local teachers and self-help organisations, the KED attempts to standardise the curriculum and examinations within this massively under-funded system, which still enjoys close links with schools in the refugee camps.

Like the new refugee-based organisations, IDP assistance groups have developed relatively independently of their 'parent' insurgent organisations - although they still rely on the latter for security, and share most of the same broad ethno-nationalist goals. In demonstrating transparency and accountability to donors and beneficiaries (their local communities), these civil society networks have emerged as important models of social mobilisation.

#### Ceasefire and Government-Controlled Areas

Although the state generally inhibits their formation, a variety of local civil society networks exist among ethnic nationality communities 'inside' Myanmar. These include Christian and Buddhist organisations, and many traditional village associations (e.g. funeral societies), as well as more formally-established CBOs and local NGOs (e.g. literature and culture associations and business-support groups).

The tentative re-emergence of civil society networks among and between local communities in Myanmar is a complex phenomenon, owing much to the political space created by the ceasefire process since 1989. Other factors in the realignment of state-society relations during this period include the increased presence of INGOs in Myanmar, and the partial opening of the economy in the early 1990s.

Villagers in many ceasefire and adjacent areas continue to have their rights abused by the Myanmar Army (and local militias). However, the ceasefire process has generally resulted in a decrease in the most extreme and arbitrary types of violence associated with the armed conflict, while increasing opportunities for travel and trade.

The ceasefires are not peace treaties, and generally lack all but the most rudimentary accommodation of the ex-insurgents' political and developmental demands. Furthermore, ethnic nationalist cadres are generally more familiar with the 'top-down' approaches used in military and political campaigns, than with 'bottom-up' development and conflict resolution methods. As elsewhere in the country, local initiatives are frequently undermined by poor governance, parallel exploitative practices, and a lack of strategic planning and

implementation capacities. Nevertheless, the ceasefires have created some opportunities for the reconstruction of war-torn communities.

Patterns of development - and stagnation - are mixed. Over the past ten years, extensive community networks within the clan-based Kachin society have re-emerged in the space created by the relatively stable Kachin ceasefires. Meanwhile, further to the south, since the 1995 NMSP-SLORC ceasefire, the Mon Women's Organisation (MWO) has succeeded in extending its community development, income generation and adult literacy activities beyond the NMSP-controlled zones, to Mon communities across lower Myanmar.

Like the KIO and other armed ethnic groups, the NMSP administers education and health systems, which rely on community and donor support. Despite some serious setbacks, during the 2002-03 school year the party managed to run 187 Mon National Schools and 186 'mixed' schools (shared with the state system), attended by more than 50,000 pupils, 70% of whom live in government-controlled areas. (Strictly speaking, as it is implemented by the NMSP Education Department, this is a para-state - or local authority - system, rather than a civil society initiative.)

Although the NMSP and other ceasefire groups have provided the political and military 'space' within which civil society may re-emerge, the key players over the past decade have often been members of religious and social welfare networks. Many of these were established in the 1950s, only to be suppressed after 1962. In recent years, the Chin, Karen, Mon, PaO, Shan and other Literature and Culture Committees have been among the few specifically ethnic organisations tolerated by the government. As the state education system has deteriorated, such groups have pioneered alternative community education approaches. For example, in 2003 about 55,000 school students attended Summer Mon Literature and Buddhist Teachings Trainings across lower Myanmar.

The motivation for such local initiatives is usually welfare- or development-oriented, rather than explicitly political. Whatever their individual views, the initiators of 'development from below' are primarily religious or community workers.

Thus far, few indigenous NGOs have been allowed to register legally with the authorities. The two most well-known were established after the KIO ceasefire. The Shalom Foundation was founded in 2001 by the Reverend Saboi Jum, a key figure in the ceasefire process. It employs 12 full-time staff, and works on mediation and conflict resolution issues, building capacity in these key sectors.

The Metta Development Foundation was established in 1998, and by 2003 had a budget of over \$500,000, and 13 full-time staff. Although its importance to the broader scale of development initiatives in Myanmar should not be overestimated, Metta is often viewed as a success story, which other fledgling local NGOs might emulate. Metta has projects in Shan, Karenni, Karen and Mon States, and the Irrawaddy Delta, which employ participatory methods, leading to the creation of CBOs, and action plans and project proposals. Metta also implements income generation projects, health worker training, water and sanitation projects, and a number of successful rural development schemes.

However, Metta Director Daw Seng Raw, has complained that:

"many ethnic groups feel extremely disappointed that in general foreign governments are not responding to the progress of these ceasefire or indeed even understand their significance or context. Rather, it seems that certain sectors of the international community have the fixed idea that none of the country's deep problems, including ethnic minority issues, can be addressed until there is an over-arching political solution based upon developments in Rangoon. In contrast, the ceasefire groups believe ... that simply concentrating on the political stalemate in Rangoon and waiting for political settlements to come about ... is simply not sufficient to bring about the scale of changes that are needed."

New organisations like Metta and Shalom are not countrywide institutions or membership groups, but often act as facilitators and innovators for

longer-established associations. In many cases these are religious bodies - among the few non-government controlled social institutions allowed to exist in Myanmar.

The Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and other churches in Myanmar have well over two million members. Although most of their activities are religious-pastoral, the churches devote considerable energy and resources (including some international funds) to education, social welfare and community development projects, including in armed conflict-affected areas. However, they also face considerable skills and capacity constraints.

Although emergent civil society networks in Myanmar are often associated with Christianity, many Buddhist associations exist too. Many senior monks may have been co-opted by the military regime, but the sangha still has great potential as a catalyst in civil and political affairs. However, Buddhist and other traditional networks tend to be localised, and centered on individual monks, who may not conceptualise or present their aims in a manner readily intelligible to western agencies. Such non-formal approaches are therefore often 'invisible' to western (and western-trained) staff.

#### Foreign Aid and Civil Society

In June 2001 the heads of mission of eight UN agencies in Yangon publicly expressed their concern over the "silent humanitarian crisis in the making", stating that "assistance to Myanmar is a moral and ethical necessity." They further noted that "strengthening human capital, developing leadership capacity, and encouraging a more dynamic civil society will contribute to laying the foundations for democratic processes."

International humanitarian agencies have developed a language of partnership with affected communities, and generally try to elicit local participation in their programs (as codified for the emergency sector in the SPHERE Project, initiated in 1997). On the Thailand border in particular, such doctrines have helped to create the space for more responsive and participatory community organisations to emerge among refugee communities. However, INGOs along the border rarely employ local people in senior decision-making positions, and their programs sometimes inadvertently undermine local initiatives (e.g. INGO-funded refugee camp education and health projects draw local teachers and medics away from under-resourced indigenous health and school systems).

Meanwhile, a number of Myanmar-specific NGOs and donors have been rather uncritical in sustaining organisations and individuals within the Myanmar opposition. Foreign aid has sometimes supported elements within ethnic nationality and democracy groups, without considering the degree to these are accountable to the communities they claim to represent.

International agencies based in Yangon also have a mixed record in their relationship with civil society groups. Since 1993, UNDP activities in Myanmar have been restricted to "programmes having grass-roots-level impact in a sustainable manner." This mandate, which is highly unusual for the UN, is designed to limit the agency's engagement with the government. The UNDP Human Development Initiative works "particularly in the areas of primary health care, the environment, HIV/AIDS, training and education, and food security." Now in its fourth phase, funding for the initiative has been halved, in part due to scepticism over the agency's ability to implement the kind of locally-owned programs required.

Unlike most UN agencies, the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) engages directly with ceasefire groups. In partnership with the government and UWSA, the UNODC has built schools, dams and other facilities in the wa sub-state, and has had some success in reducing opium cultivation in Kokang and UWSA-controlled areas. However, according to a recent assessment, "community development concepts ... sometimes conflicted with the top-down (wa) Authority approach. When efforts were made to involve the villagers ... the Authority felt threatened." Although the UNODC has responded to UWSA calls for more infrastructure and agricultural assistance, efforts to promote community development and the emergence of CBOs have been largely unsuccessful. However, the UN has recently negotiated an agreement with the UWSA, under which community-based development methods will be tolerated by the wa authorities.

Another area where the UN may address humanitarian needs, while developing the roles and capacities of local civil society, is HIV/AIDS programming. International agencies in Myanmar have access to a \$35M fund, as part of a coordinated HIV/AIDS campaign. Donors view this initiative as a test case for whether the UN system in Myanmar can carve out a sphere of greater independence, and exert a greater influence over government policy. Another key issue is whether the UN and INGOs can establish mechanisms for building CBO aid absorption capacity in this sector.

Like the UN agencies, most INGOs in Myanmar concentrate on humanitarian needs, although some (e.g. CARE, SCF-UK, Swissaid, World Concern and World Vision) implement a broader range of development-oriented programs. While many international agencies would like to develop deeper partnerships with civil society groups in Myanmar, the great majority of UN and INGO projects are implemented directly at the village level, by-passing local NGOs - although sometimes fostering the emergence of CBOs.

Limited coordination between international and Myanmar actors can result in the former replicating indigenous programs, undermining local initiatives in the process. For example, in 2003 at the jade mining centre of Hpakant (Kachin State) two UN agencies, three or more INGOs and two local NGOs are planning or already implementing HIV/AIDS projects. It is therefore encouraging that representatives of international (including UN) agencies and local NGOs met at the Shalom Centre in May 2003, to discuss the coordination of development activities in Kachin State.

As noted above, INGOs should endeavour to employ local staff in decision-making positions - but this can create problems. As has been the case along the Thailand border, international agencies in Myanmar have sometimes recruited staff from CBOs and local NGOs, contributing towards a 'brain drain' of individuals away from indigenous to international organisations, which offer higher salaries and more opportunities for skills development.

Only one Yangon-based INGO works exclusively through local partners. It receives project proposals from CBOs and local NGOs every week, which often demonstrate a lack of strategic planning. In an effort to address such concerns, many national INGO staff - and some from local NGOs - have received training at specialised institutes outside Myanmar. Among the most significant capacity-building networks is the Thailand-based Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) which, since 1996, has provided grass-roots leadership training and support for management skills and participatory techniques to several hundred Myanmar nationals. For many members of the sangha in particular, these trainings have been their first exposure to community development methods.

Although the role of foreign aid is limited, it can contribute towards the creation of an enabling environment, strengthening local efforts to achieve peace and development. It is vital that donors and international agencies entering Myanmar - either via refugee communities, cross-border or through Yangon - realise that they are not operating in a void. Impressive local initiatives exist, and are worthy of support. The challenge is how to foster the growth of civil society, without overwhelming its limited absorption capacities.

Donors should not just concentrate on a narrow set of professionalised (western) NGOs. Rather, by fostering the development of local NGOs and civil society, a 'nexus' between development and democracy may gradually emerge.

However, Myanmar civil society is still under-developed, and changes coming from the sector will be gradual. It will take decades to re-shape state-society relations in Myanmar: civil society is a long-term vehicle for socio-political change. Nevertheless, humanitarian and longer-term development assistance in remote, armed conflict-affected areas can be implemented in ways which address underlying structures of violence and injustice.

Conflict resolution must go beyond the necessary first stage of ceasefire negotiation. Given that displacement may not come to an end with the cessation of armed conflict, any negotiated settlement to Myanmar's protracted state-society and centre-periphery conflicts must address issues of land and

other social and economic rights, and take account of the complexity of displacement crises in rural Myanmar.

Many of the problems faced in armed conflict-affected areas are common across Myanmar. However, the stakes in the ceasefire zones and adjacent areas are higher, as the breakdown of the ceasefire process would undermine actual and potential peace-building and development initiatives. Although the impact of the ceasefires has been mixed, the consequences of their failure would be devastating. However, if the ceasefires can be turned into vehicles for the reconstruction of local communities and economies, they may promote reconciliation and reform in Myanmar, and over time foster the emergence of genuine peace.

#### Humanitarian Access

International organisations do not have direct access to most armed conflict-affected zones in Myanmar. The UN system and INGOs should challenge the government for greater access to needy populations.

In the meantime, local NGOs operating on both sides of the 'front line' are implementing important humanitarian and community development projects, in areas of current or recent armed conflict, such as Karen State. In the context of a KNU ceasefire, and increased international attention to the humanitarian crises in rural Myanmar, it is important that aid interventions be conducted in partnership with these local actors, and that opportunities of empowering civil society are not overlooked.

Local, national and (to a very limited degree) international organisations did help to re-settle IDPs and refugees, and reconstruct displaced communities, in the Kachin and Mon States in the 1990s. Following ceasefires in these areas, refugee repatriation was arranged by NGOs, (ex-)insurgent groups and local refugee committees, under pressure from the host country (China and Thailand). However, both the 1992-94 Kachin IDP and refugee resettlement (60- 70,000 people), and 1996 Mon refugee repatriation (10,000 people) were undermined by a lack of international support, and obstructed by the military government. They therefore failed to move beyond the ceasefire stage, to address underlying issues - i.e. there was no 'peace-building' stage.

#### The Limits of a Bottom-Up Approach

Critics of a civil society-based approach to democratisation in Myanmar may accuse local networks of being compromised and co-opted by the regime, or at least naively apolitical ('subaltern civil society'). However, many local NGOs and CBOs have forged the space within which to work for 'development from below', and build networks of independent, community-level participation. These locally-rooted associations undermine the ideological and practical basis of military rule, creating autonomous spaces, at least in limited spheres.

However, local NGOs and CBOs have limited capacities, and it is important to re-state that most are focussed on welfare initiatives (including - but usually implicitly - social change), rather than political goals. Many (especially non-Christian) local associations are unfamiliar with the rational-bureaucratic frameworks employed by donors, which may lead to non-formal CBOs 'falling beneath the radar' of international observers. Furthermore, the civil society sector is not immune to rivalries, opportunism, 'rent-seeking' or corruption.

The most substantial constraint on the growth of civil society in Myanmar is government distrust. Nevertheless, the past five-ten year have seen a partial (and contested) re-adjustment of state-society relations.

Efforts to empower civil society and support 'bottom-up' democratisation in Myanmar have been hostage to other political agendas - in particular, the struggle for national-level political change. The NLD and other stake-holders want to see a national/ elite-level political settlement in place, before they endorse local development activities. It is argued that relief and development work 'inside' the country will 'let the SPDC off the hook', by providing goods and services that are the responsibility of government. Although such caveats should be taken seriously, local NGOs and CBOs are able to deliver humanitarian and other forms of assistance in ways which build local capacities, strengthen protection, and contribute towards longer-term reconstruction efforts - results

'Contemporary Southeast Asia' August 2004

which cannot be depicted as strengthening the SPDC. Nevertheless, many agencies are constrained in the ability to support the re-emergence of civil society in Myanmar, due to the western (especially US) sanctions regime.

Having it Both Ways: Towards a Hybrid Strategy

The re-emergence of civil society networks is not in itself sufficient to bring about national-level political transition. This will require concerted, explicitly political actions by political elites. In the meantime, civil society networks can prepare the way for democratic participation, and are worthy of support in their own right - regardless of national-level politics.

Myanmar presents a structured - and highly dynamic - environment of conflict. Ceasefires on the ground are an essential first step towards addressing the needs of rural communities, and building local participation and 'democracy from below'. In the meantime however, sustainable change is still (urgently) required at the elite level.

In the current political climate, with only limited options available for national-level transition, re-emergent civil society networks represent an important vehicle for long-term, 'bottom-up' democratisation in Myanmar. Local NGOs and CBOs promote grass-roots social mobilisation and - potentially - political participation. As well as their intrinsic value, these local networks can form the base for democratisation at the national level, and help to ensure that political transition is sustained, and takes root in local communities. The promotion of civil society in Myanmar therefore relates to the constitutional concept of 'countervailance', in which sovereignty resides in plural points of power, with checks and balances to preclude the centralisation of authority.

The voluntary sector in Myanmar is still under-developed; changes coming from civil society will be gradual, and need to be supported. International donors should therefore foster supportive, long-term relationships with local associations. (Efforts should be made to avoid working only with elites: analysis and planning should focus on the participation of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and other marginalised and potentially vulnerable groups). Myanmar needs better-targeted aid - but not necessarily much more money.

Different actors can play different roles, based on a shared vision of a future democratic Myanmar. Some agencies will take a 'hard-line' position, campaigning against the regime from outside Myanmar, while others adopt a 'softer' mode, to work inside the country. Such a coordinated approach is in line with calls by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Myanmar for an 'orchestrated' international strategy. This approach is likely to appeal to regional (ASEAN and Japanese) governments, and might be termed 'selective (or targeted) engagement'.