

Participation, mobilisation: The Karen peace dividend

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RECENT negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups have made significant progress toward a nationwide ceasefire agreement to resolve more than half a century of armed conflict.

The two sides have agreed a draft common text, which now must be endorsed by senior leaders. However, differences remain on key issues, which will require further negotiations even if the ceasefire is signed. In the meantime, the clock is ticking toward elections scheduled for November, which will likely displace peacebuilding efforts from a central position on the national political agenda.

Beyond peace talks between the leadership on both sides, the situation on the ground is both complex and contested. In areas where ceasefires are holding, conflict-affected communities have experienced some of the benefits of peace. At the same time, however, ethnic nationality communities have been exposed to an increase land grabbing and other threats. Nevertheless, ceasefires in southeast Myanmar have created the space within which the Karen National Union (KNU) and other stakeholders are mobilising a vibrant Karen political community.

Leadership-level negotiations

When nationwide ceasefire negotiations resumed on March 30, both the government's Union Peacemaking Work Committee and the armed groups' Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team were keen to move forward quickly – and neither wanted to be seen as delaying progress toward an agreement.

Therefore, some important but still contested elements were removed from the draft text, for discussion at a later stage. These included arrangements which are necessary to consolidate existing ceasefires. Since February, trust between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups has been further eroded by the outbreak of fighting in the Kokang region of northern Shan State. This development has played into the hands of the Myanmar army, or Tatmadaw, providing a rare boost to the popularity of military leaders in the run-up to elections. Thankfully, in the immediate aftermath of the agreement on the nationwide ceasefire, fighting in northern Myanmar has reduced significantly.

One important breakthrough that allowed the draft ceasefire to go ahead was the government side's acceptance of "interim arrangements" regarding the authority of ethnic armed groups in areas substantially under their control, and the status of their governance and service delivery systems, which remain the most effective ways of providing health and education in many conflict-affected areas.

These non-state service delivery systems need to be supported during the – probably lengthy – period between the agreement of preliminary ceasefires and achievement of a comprehensive political settlement. Unfortunately, however, there is a danger of the opposite happening. In some areas, the peace process is serving as a vehicle for the militarised state to push into previously inaccessible, conflict-affected areas – sometimes with the collaboration of international aid agencies.

Finalisation of the nationwide ceasefire may unblock progress toward political dialogue around issues which have structured half a century of armed conflict in Myanmar . Key stakeholders have started to talk about restructuring state-society relations in, exploring options and positions. Some progress has been made in agreeing a framework for political dialogue.

While exploratory trust-building talks are welcome and necessary, it seems unlikely that a concrete mechanism for political dialogue can be agreed during the run-up to elections, when the government will be increasingly regarded as a "lame duck" administration. Key actors are unlikely to hand such a political prize to the president at this stage in the game and will not want to commit to a binding framework for dialogue this side of the polls.

As a result, substantial and sustainable political dialogue is unlikely to begin before early-to-mid 2016. Further, future political negotiations should involve a wide range of stakeholders, including not only the government, Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups, but also political parties (or their representatives in parliament) and civil society actors. These talks are likely to be highly protracted.

The window of opportunity for ethnic armed groups to leverage their positions to maximum advantage is therefore closing. If the elections are seen as free and fair, the next government will enjoy high levels of domestic and international legitimacy. There is no guarantee that the next government will accord armed groups the same privileged negotiating status they have enjoyed since 2011. Indeed, some key actors regard the groups as little more than warlord organisations, with suspect economic motives. While there may be some truth to such perceptions, it would be unfair to ignore the significant political legitimacy that several ethnic armed groups enjoy among the ethnic communities they seek to represent.

The situation on the ground

Since 2012, most – but not all – of the country's ethnic armed groups have negotiated bilateral ceasefires with the government. These individual agreements contain a number of broad but often vaguely defined commitments, action on which has largely been side-tracked during the past two years by negotiations toward a nationwide ceasefire. Hopefully, progress in multilateral negotiations will encourage the government – and particularly the Tatmadaw – to move forward in implementing bilateral ceasefire agreements with key armed groups, such as the KNU.

In areas where ceasefires are holding, conflict-affected communities have experienced significant “peace dividends” but have also been exposed to new threats. Villagers report reduced fear and human rights violations, improved freedom of movement and access to their fields and to markets, and greater freedom of association and expression. Nevertheless, many problems remain, including widespread land-grabbing in conflict-affected areas, in the context of increasing natural resource extraction and large-scale agriculture plantations.

If negotiations can begin to address some of these concerns – and also other issues, such as language rights and usage in schools and government administration – this could deliver benefits to conflict-affected communities and demonstrate the potential of the peace process. It could also help to restore the KNU as a potent political force in Myanmar.

The KNU was a political party in the mid-1940s, before going underground as an armed movement in 1949. The story of the next 60 years was one of gradual retreat to the Thai borderlands. It is a tribute to Karen insurgents and communities’ tenacity that the KNU and allied groups were able to hold on for so long. Nevertheless, for at least two decades it has been obvious that the movement was in serious trouble, pegged back to a few areas of control and the refugee camps in Thailand.

The real political challenge facing the organisation has been how to “get back into Myanmar” and connect with the great majority of Karen people living in government-controlled areas – including non-Christians and non-Sgaw dialect speaking groups. The KNU leadership sees the peace process as an opportunity to reform the organisation, re-connect to the Karen community “inside” Myanmar and rediscover its original identity as a pan-Karen political movement.

In this context, it is as important for the KNU (and by extension other ethnic armed groups) to demonstrate a commitment to issues of concern to ethnic communities – such as natural resource management and development projects in ethnic areas – as it is to maintain their governance and service delivery regimes. The importance of recognising and supporting ethnic armed group administrations and health and education systems during the interim between ceasefires and a political settlement in Myanmar cannot be neglected but potentially more important is the KNU strategy of political mobilisation.

Karen unity and diversity

In the Karen context, discussions of political mobilisation often focus on calls for “unity”. In the past, this has generally been equivalent to demands for different members of the diverse Karen community – Christian, Buddhist, animist and even a few Muslims; speakers of a dozen different dialects; those living in towns, the countryside and the jungle – to submit to the leadership authority of a single organisation.

As history has demonstrated, this has never been a realistic project. It is noteworthy that the current KNU leadership puts less emphasis on demands for unity under the KNU. Instead, the KNU seeks to cooperate with other stakeholders – including the six other Karen ethnic armed groups, and Karen political parties and civil society actors – and collaborate on a range of issues of concern to Karen communities. This approach may be termed “consociational”, inasmuch as political coherence derives

from an alliance of leaders from different segments of the community, rather than a single unified command structure.

The approach is exemplified in the work of the Karen Unity and Peace Committee (KUPC). Established by Karen civil society and political leaders in the context of the peace process, over the past two years the KUPC has undertaken more than 40 consultations in Karen-populated parts of the country, ranging from southern Tanintharyi Region to western Ayeyarwady Region. The KUPC has also convened meetings where community members can engage with, and express their concerns and aspirations to, both KNU and state officials.

These meetings would have been unimaginable before the peace process, and constitute a real “peace dividend” for the Karen community. They demonstrate the potential of the KNU policy to use the peace process to open up space for political participation and mobilisation. For the first time since independence, Karen leaders and “ordinary” citizens can come together to discuss key issues and begin to define their identities, interests and positions in relation to the political, social and economic questions of the day.

What is also noteworthy is that the KNU has participated fully in the KUPC consultations, while not demanding the leadership role. While the KNU is – and will likely long remain – a key political organisation for the Karen, with a unique history and special legitimacy derived from decades of armed struggle, it does not now claim to be the only political actor representing this community. By adopting this more mature and realistic position, the KNU is reinventing itself, and using the peace process as an opportunity to reinvigorate the Karen political community.

Over the past two decades, since the fall of its old headquarters at Mannerplaw, the KNU has been in “survival mode”. While the peace process remains problematic, it is providing opportunities for the KNU and other ethnic political leaders to adopt new strategies in the long struggle for self-determination in Myanmar.