The Role of People's Security in Peace Building

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Peace building is essentially the process of consolidating ceasefires signed between armed political actors by strengthening institutional capacities and rebuilding conflict-affected societies to foster an environment for lasting and inclusive peace.

It is a liberal intervention, usually from the West, and thus peace itself - normatively understood as the absence of fighting - is not the only goal. Many totalitarian states for example have achieved that through brutal suppression and decisive military victories. Liberal 'peace building' initiatives can easily become broader state-building projects, aimed at producing a certain type of peace, one that goes hand-in-hand with the fostering of democracy, law and order, development, human rights and free market capitalism all with an emphasis on state centralisation and global integration.

There is a prevalent understanding that civil conflict arises where there are divides along ethnic or other lines and real or perceived disparities between those closest to the state and others. Therefore, peace building theory posits that the state must reach out to conflict-affected populations, providing them with a tangible benefit from the peace, known as a 'peace dividend', to get them behind the process and to alleviate grievances and tensions.

Focusing mostly on the peace process between the Myanmar Government and Karen National Union (KNU), this paper will argue that such a focus on the needs of populations is particularly important in Myanmar, where for decades the state and competing ethnic armed actors have essentially been fighting over people. However, while the nature of conflict in Myanmar appears to have been misunderstood, a number of 'peace building' projects linked to the state's broader pseudo-liberal economic state-building project appear to be in fact threatening the endeavour for lasting peace.

People's War. People's Peace?

People are the primary object that armed actors in Myanmar's decades-long conflicts have been fighting over. Therefore, at the heart of a programme for peace, must be a peaceful consensus on how, and by whom, people should be governed.

The Tatmadaw's People's War Doctrine developed in the 1960s in essence renders people a mobolisable resource that needs to be managed in order for leaders to achieve their political aims. The doctrine was developed to make the entire citizenry exploitable for military goals, especially in the event of a foreign invasion. Though this has never happened, the doctrine has arguably shaped successive regimes' approaches to governance significantly and has certainly impacted

counterinsurgency strategy.

People are central, too, to the motivations and pursuits of the country's myriad ethnic armed groups (EAGs), the majority of which claim to be fighting for the self-determination and other interests of their people. As a result, in many cases far better services have been provided to people by EAGs than the Government. In these areas traditional hierarchies based largely on respect for elders, patrons, protectors and providers have translated into dedicated support by ethnic populations for their respective EAGs.

In turn, since the 1960s the Tatmadaw has responded with population-centric military strategies most popularly characterised by their 'four-cuts strategy', which aimed to cut off all relations between ethnic populations and EAGs to starve the latter of sanctuary, funds, intelligence, recruits and other provisions, and turn the populations on them. Beginning as a multi-faceted popular support campaign, the strategy has manifest most vividly over the decades in mass displacement operations, centering on the total decimation of entire communities and forcible relocation of millions of people, out of EAG territories and into Government controlled pacified areas. To varying degrees, such operations have come hand-in-hand with a wide range of intimidation methods including burning of villages; destruction of food stores; laying of landmines in residential areas, fields and pathways; extrajudicial killing; arbitrary arrest and torture; as well as sexual and other forms of physical abuse.

Empowering People for Peace

Three reasons a focus on people is crucial to lasting peace in Myanmar:

1. Akin to the broader struggle for democratisation in Myanmar, an evolution away from dependence on armed actors will take years and depends primarily on the emergence of a capable and empowered citizenry, with an established educated middle class, to open up new spheres of influence from below. Capacity building at a grassroots level is key, with the civilian population as the primary focus.

2. At present, large swathes of ethnic populations are trapped in a vicious cycle of marginalisation, whereby state oppression and abuse has kept them withdrawn - or in extreme cases, on the run - from the state, strengthening their dependence on and allegiance to EAGs. As a result, such populations are then persecuted further by the state, subject to population-centric military strategies described above and the abuse by soldiers acting with near impunity. I refer not just to those who have at times lost their homes and gone on the run, but to millions of people who have never had a real home, such as over-60s I have interviewed that have been on the run since they were toddlers.

3. Finally, judging by research I conducted in 2012 on the involvement of under-18s in Karen EAGs and Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, for many young males passively enduring such hardship and subjugation is not an option. While Government initiatives over the years pacified or even coopted EAG leaderships, desire for direct military action at a local level - not to mention widespread dependence on anti-personnel explosives to protect schools, clinics and other local service structures - have remained central to survival. No matter what gains are made today between political elites at the negotiation table, these highly militarised areas, fraught with insecure and hopeless populations

will not see peace until people are able to envision a future where peace means promotion of their everyday existence and ability to determine their own futures.

Aspirations for Development

Assumptions are often made about what a 'peace dividend' would look like in a given war-torn community. Typically, international actors work alongside or back the state to target key development indicators, thus building the society's confidence in the peace building process. In Myanmar's case, as well as the provision of basic supplies to IDPs, government-linked and NGO initiatives have begun probing a number of issues, including demining and economic development, both of which remain extremely contentious issues with EAGs and associated civil society networks. Other projects receiving overseas development backing, many loosely in the name of peace, have focused on broader centralisation efforts such as building roads and government schools, particularly in areas where EAGs have lost leverage as a result of the ceasefires. Meanwhile, the state itself, has to date seemingly dedicated negligible government funding to such initiatives, while it continues to spend over USD 2 billion per year on the military.

In the case of the Government's ceasefire with the KNU, research I conducted in April - June 2013 found that inchoate peace projects have done little to outbalance the perceived greater insecurity stemming from the Tatmadaw's relentless growth and ever-aggressive posture, and in some cases have in fact heightened such fears significantly. While the numbers of Tatmadaw outposts are increasing and bamboo fortifications are replaced with concrete, the burgeoning Myanmar Air Force is repositioning machine-gun mounted combat helicopters and test dropping bombs from its jets, all within clear sight of local communities.

Through initial consultations with locals and ground troops of the Karen National Liberation Army, I have found that, for example, while the Norway-backed Myanmar Peace Support Initiative's pilot projects have been well received, their limited scope thus far has allowed only minor confidence building among locals. The positive influence had by such projects is also in competition with that of vigorous advances into the region by extractive and industrial agricultural business ventures, and overseas development projects focused on the building of roads and other infrastructure conducive to state centralisation. Roads in such areas have direct strategic consequences at a time there are no guarantees ceasefires will hold and while villagers are seeing the Tatmadaw gain unfettered access to all villages for comprehensive reconnaissance operations. Further, even non-military related development projects introduced in coordination with state mechanisms with limited acknowledgement of existing governance structures (particularly schools) have been treated with great skepticism, as either part of a broader *Bamanisation* agenda or as subversive to local societal structures. Indeed, such schemes are clearly a direct effort to undermine structures tied to alternative power structures and boost the state's influence, while attempting to win the hearts and minds of EAG-linked populations.

While stating such fears, consulted locals stressed that their societies' own development aspirations had been obstructed only by the persistent decimation of their villages, farms and transport routes, by the military they see growing around them unhindered. As one man said, 'if we had not had to rebuild every house in every village so many times in our lives, we would have developed very far.' As

is often heard, another explained, 'we have no plans to build strong homes yet, because they will just burn them down within 2 or 3 years… their development is just for their power.' In essence, to feel the benefits of peace, people don't need token development projects, they need security assurances, so they can start developing for themselves. The failure of numerous initiatives to build projects around this indicates a greater emphasis on building a centralised economy than on fostering an environment conducive to lasting peace. In the process, such endeavours risk severely undermining efforts made to this end and strengthen state plans to eliminate popular forms of opposition through force and coercion.