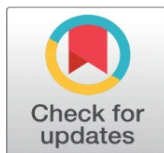


PROBLEMS OF ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN MYANMAR: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges faced by ethnic communities in Myanmar, a nation celebrated for its extensive cultural and ethnic diversity, comprising over 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. While this diversity holds the potential for enrichment, it has historically been a catalyst for conflict and systemic marginalization, further intensified by political instability and authoritarian rule. The research delves into the historical context, tracing the roots of factionalism to British colonial policies and highlighting the disappointment derive from the Panglong Agreement, which was intended to establish ethnic rights and autonomy. The paper validate that the political exclusion inherent in a governance structure dominated by the Bamar majority has established armed conflict for an extended period. It also critically examines human rights violations, particularly those affecting the Rohingya community, alongside broader trends of economic exclusion, violence, and social discrimination impacting various ethnic groups. By analyzing the interconnections between historical injustices, political dynamics, and socio-economic inequalities, this study aims to illuminate the challenges confronting ethnic communities in Myanmar and underscore the necessity for inclusive governance and equitable development.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, Panglong Agreement, Rohingya, Violence, rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian nation rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, boasts a population made up of more than 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. However, this diversity, while a potential source of strength, has also been at the crux of some of the country's most pressing and enduring challenges. Ethnic communities in Myanmar have experienced decades of systemic marginalization, discrimination, and violence. These challenges have been intensified by political instability, authoritarian rule, and a lack of meaningful inclusion in national governance. In 2021, the military in Myanmar removed a democratically elected government from power. The governing military junta has suppressed dissent and eroded democratic freedoms. The escalation of armed conflict has raised concerns about violations of human rights. Human rights defenders, pro-democracy groups, and community leaders in Myanmar are actively working to combat the widespread human rights abuses and political repression.

2. Historical Context of Ethnic Problems

The historic situation of ethnic issues often owes much to an interaction of variables like colonialism, political demarcation, often without regards for the given existing ethnic lines, historical claims, unequal political strength between communities, and scarcity of resources in areas, with such tensions escalating to conflicts with identity based on ethnicity when made worse by a politically or economically unstable situation.

British Divide-and-Rule Policies:

In Colonial era, Colonial officers adopted a strategy of divide-and-rule, reinforcing the distinctions that existed between a dominant Bamar ethnic majority, and a string of ethnic minority groups that live in acentric peripheries of the country. British rule essentially depended on some ethnic minority populations, such as the Karen, Kachin, and a few others for the administration and the colonial armies. This resulted in planting deep seeds of dislike and mistrust between the two groups. Ethnic minorities who had grown accustomed to a trace of regional autonomy saw their role curtailed once the British moved to centralize administrative control in Burma (Myanmar). As a result, these divides were not fully articulated by post-colonial leaders. This continued into the post-independence period of 1948, when the newly formed Union of Burma could not find much cohesion within ethnic minorities for a nationality framework.

Panglong Agreement and its Collapse:

The Panglong Agreement of 1947 was supposed to serve as a foundation for unity. A conference was held in Panglong with members of the Executive Council of the Governor of Burma, Saohpas, and representatives from the Shan States, Kachin Hills, and Chin Hills. The conference members believed that cooperation with the Interim Burmese Government would help the Shans, Kachins, and Chins achieve freedom faster. They agreed to appoint a Counsellor for Frontier Areas, selected by the Governor, who will also be a member of the Executive Council without a specific portfolio. This Counsellor will have two Deputy Counsellors from different races who will work together on local affairs. The Counsellor will represent Frontier Areas in the Executive Council, while the Deputy Counsellors can attend meetings on related topics. The arrangements will ensure that the Frontier Areas retain their internal administrative autonomy. A separate Kachin State is considered desirable but will be decided by the Constituent Assembly. Frontier Area citizens will enjoy fundamental democratic rights, and financial arrangements will be examined for the Kachin and Chin Hills, maintaining their financial autonomy. Brokered by national independence leader Aung San, this agreement guaranteed ethnic minorities a degree of autonomy, self-governance, and equal rights. However, after Aung San's assassination in 1947, the promises of the Panglong Agreement were never fully implemented. Ethnic minorities felt betrayed, which fueled distrust in the central government and led to decades of armed insurgencies.

Political Marginalization of Ethnic Communities

One of the most pressing challenges for ethnic communities in Myanmar is political marginalization. The country has been a unitary state dominated by the Bamar majority. Ethnic voices have often been excluded from key decisions related to governance, legislation, and national development.

Centralized Governance System : The ethnic communities of Myanmar have been systematically marginalized in a centralized system of governance. While the 2008 Constitution provides ethnic regions with various degrees of self-administration, these are far from being authoritative or autonomous bodies. Political decision-making powers are within both ethnic regions and the nation at large rest almost exclusively in the hands of the military, or can say Tatmadaw. Minority leaders and ethnic representatives enjoyed a very little power within the national political system despite the calls for increased federalism.

Failed Transition to Federalism: As mentioned, one of the core demands of Myanmar's ethnic communities is the establishment of a federal system that ensures their rights to self-determination and autonomy. Successive governments have failed in this regard since they often promised to bring federal reform. Here, the ruling elite, most of whom are Bamar, coupled with the military, view federalism with an element of suspicion, often fearing it may lead to secession or undermine centralized control. This unwillingness to meaningfully include ethnic groups in the making of decisions exacerbates mistrust and perpetuates conflict.

Armed Conflicts : Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have been central players in Myanmar's ethnic politics. As Myanmar's armed resistance against the February 2021 coup approaches its second year, there is growing demand for ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to join the resistance movement. The call for unity is supported by international observers and the opposition National Unity Government (NUG). New groups like the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA) are emerging and collaborating with the NUG, raising questions about their EAO status. Political significance has been identified as one of the shifts in definition for EAOs over time, and recently in its negotiations during the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Groups that might have worked directly with military regime lose EAO status thus impacting the political legitimacy of those groups. The definition might have to shift along with the political situation. Groups such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and others have been waging long-standing insurgencies against the central government. Successive governments have failed to resolve these conflicts, leaving large parts of the country in violence, displacement, and destruction.

Human Rights Violations and State-Sponsored Abuses

Human rights violations against ethnic minorities are among the most profound and disturbing problems facing Myanmar today. These abuses, often perpetrated by the military, have ranged from forced displacement and sexual violence to extrajudicial killings and religious persecution. Since the February 1 coup of 2021, Myanmar's military has brutally suppressed the opposition of tens of millions against its rule. The junta has committed widespread killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests, torture, and sexual violence: acts that may constitute crimes against humanity. The junta's repression has subjected people to significant restrictions on freedoms of speech and assembly.

Ethnic minorities in Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Shan States have been victims of war crimes from intense military operations. The military has used "scorched earth" tactics, such as the burning down of villages in the Magway and Sagaing regions. It has ignored international calls for accountability and has worsened the economic situation in the country to bring increased suffering and fear among the populace. Since the coup, more than 16,000 pro-democracy supporters have been arbitrarily arrested. Many detainees have reported torture, sexual violence, and deaths in custody linked to mistreatment. Several reports indicate at least 273 deaths have occurred in police or military custody. The junta has held unfair trials and continues to inflict harsh sentences. The security forces have killed at least 2,400 persons as of November 2022. National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has faced multiple charges and now stands to serve a total of 33 years in prison after the recent convictions. The junta had announced a prisoner release in November, which included several who were arbitrarily detained. Four men were executed in July 2023, the first death sentences since more than three decades ago. The trials, held behind closed doors, were not of international standards. Military shelling and airstrikes have caused civilian casualties and destroyed infrastructure, and thousands of people have fled. The Internet remains blocked in regions with opposition to the junta. In September 2023, a military airstrike hit a school in Sagaing and killed at least 13 people, including seven children. Another airstrike was directed at an IDP camp the same day and caused more victims. The military also bombed a concert in Kachin State, killing at least 80 people. Since the coup, nearly 1 million people have been internally displaced, with 70,000 fleeing to neighboring countries. The junta has blocked crucial humanitarian aid, which has exacerbated the suffering of displaced populations. New travel restrictions on aid workers and attacks on health facilities have violated international laws. In the international sphere, the formal legal processes, the inquiring investigations of human rights abuses, and calls for accountability continue. Sanctions were imposed on junta associates by even mighty nations like the US and UK. The consensus from ASEAN is challenged with the junta's moves; Russia has been a close ally. Resolutions issued by the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council have condemned Myanmar's military actions.

Rohingya Crisis : The plight of the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar has been described as one of the world's most severe human rights crises. The Rohingya, living primarily in Rakhine State, are a stateless minority denied citizenship under Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law. They face systematic discrimination, including restrictions on movement, marriage, access to education, and healthcare. In 2017, the Tatmadaw launched a brutal "clearance operation" in Rakhine, following an attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This operation led to widespread massacres, mass rapes, and the destruction of countless villages, resulting in the displacement of over

700,000 Rohingya into neighboring Bangladesh. The United Nations has described the military's actions as "genocide." Rohingya are subjected to systemic abuses, including movement restrictions and aid blockages. Many Rohingya face arrest for unauthorized travel, and a significant number are held in detention camps. The junta continues to restrict civic space and persecutes activists, with severe penalties for opposing the regime.

Abuses in Other Ethnic Regions : While the Rohingya crisis has gained international attention, other ethnic communities have also suffered egregious abuses. In Kachin and Shan states, for instance, thousands of civilians have been displaced by ongoing conflict between ethnic armed organizations and the Tatmadaw. Reports of forced labor, summary executions, and the use of child soldiers have surfaced repeatedly. Women in ethnic areas have also been particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, often perpetrated

Root Causes of Ethnic Conflict

Colonialism : The British colonization of Burma in the late 19th century led to the establishment of colonial structures that created friction among ethnic groups.

Government efforts at unification: The government efforts to unify the country under control of Bamar have continued to clash with the desires of ethnic minority groups

Poverty: Poverty is another significant factor that has made the issue of complicated ethnic and religious violence in Myanmar.

Transition to democracy: Conflicting interests between a more democratic state and military rule

Natural wealth: The regional natural wealth in the form of the Bawdwin mine and the Shwe Gas and Oil Pipeline route has led to conflict.

International actors: International actors' presence in the region has led to conflict.

Ethnicity and outdated notions of it: The outdated notions of ethnicity have taken over Myanmar's political, economic, and social spheres.

Buddhism: The role of Buddhism in the conflict is complex with monks calling for violence to be inflicted on their Muslim neighbors.

Rohingya Crisis and Human Rights violations:

The Rohingya is an ethnic minority especially Muslim that has lived for centuries in a predominantly Buddhist Myanmar. This state is earlier known as Burma. In spite of having been in Myanmar for generations, the Rohingya's are not recognized as an official ethnics group. And they have been denied citizenship since 1982, which makes them the world's largest stateless population.

Being stateless, Rohingya families are also have no basic rights and protection, and thus this make a scope for exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and abuse on extremely high level. So after decades of suffering from violence, discrimination, and persecution in Myanmar, the Rohingya's largest exodus began in August 2017 after a massive wave of violence which was started in Myanmar's Rakhine State. That forced more than 742,000 people - half of them children for seeking refuge in Bangladesh. Some reports showed a massive human right violation as entire villages were set to fire to the ground, thousands of families were either killed or separated. As of 2023, there were more than 1. 3 million internal displacements in Myanmar based on violence since the military coup in February 2021. There were over 2. 6 million internally displaced people in the country by the end of the year. Moreover, about 1. 3 million refugees who remain mostly in Cox's Bazar Bangladesh depend on humanitarian assistance and include nearly 1 million without any nationality status. Life is hard for these Rohingya refugees who would come to risk dangerous sea journeys for a hope of a better life. Description of atrocities committed against the Rohingya: State violence, disenfranchisement, and displacement.

Economic Exclusion

- Lack of infrastructure and investment in ethnic-minority areas.
- Trade monopolized by militarized elites.
- Poverty rates disproportionately higher in Chin and Rakhine states.

Violence and Militarization

- Presence of over 20 ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) involved in decades-long insurgencies.
- Human rights abuses by the military (Tatmadaw) and EAOs.
- Ceasefires and peace agreements often unsuccessful due to mutual mistrust.

Social Discrimination

- Prevalence of ethnic stereotypes and exclusion of minorities.
- Role of ethno-nationalism in shaping policies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Myanmar's rich ethnic diversity has been overshadowed by systemic marginalization, political instability, and ongoing conflicts. Historical grievances, colonial legacies, and broken promises of federalism have fueled deep mistrust between ethnic minorities and the central government. The military coup of 2021 has further exacerbated repression, human rights violations, and violence, particularly in ethnic regions. Without meaningful political reforms, inclusive governance, and respect for human rights, Myanmar is unlikely to chart a peaceful way forward.

Solutions to these systemic issues require strong steps toward federalism, distribution of resources with equity, and protection of rights of ethnic minorities. The root causes of discrimination must be addressed, and those responsible for human rights violations must be held accountable. One key solution could be a fully recognized citizenship rights of all ethnic minorities with respect to Rohingya which could allow them access to basic services and freedom of movement. And also addressing discrimination policies and promoting inclusive political dialogue with meaningful participation from all communities, including through a federal system that grant greater autonomy to regional ethnic groups.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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None.

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