

**State of Strife:
The Dynamics of
Ethnic Conflict in Burma**

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Martin Smith

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List of Acronyms

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
KaKweYe	Government home-guard militia in late 1960s to early 1970s
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KMT	Kuomintang
KNLP	Kayan New Land Party
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KNUP	Karen National United Party
MTA	Mong Tai Army
NCGUB	National Coalition Government Union of Burma
NCUB	National Council Union of Burma
NDF	National Democratic Front
NDUF	National Democratic United Front
NEC	Northeast Command
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy

NMSP	New Mon State Party
NULF	National United Liberation Front
PDP	Parliamentary Democracy Party
PNO	Pao National Organization
PVO	People's Volunteer Organization
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
SSA-S	Shan State Army-South
SSNA	Shan State National Army
SUA	Shan United Army
SURA	Shan United Revolutionary Army
Tatmadaw	national armed forces of Burma
U.K.	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNA	United Nationalities Alliance
U.S.	United States
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
UWSA	United Wa State Army

Executive Summary

Since independence from Great Britain in 1948, Burma has been the scene of some of the longest-running and most diverse ethnic insurgencies in the contemporary world. Such struggles have transcended all three eras of post-colonial government, becoming one of the most dominant characteristics of a country where political life in both government and opposition has become deeply militarized. The very durability of this impasse, which has seen Burma decline to become one of the world's poorest countries, raises fundamental questions about the nature of conflict, nation-state formation and the drivers of socio-political change if the country and its long-suffering peoples are to achieve peace and democracy.

This study analyzes the dynamics of conflict that have caused the conditions of internal war to become so uniquely entrenched in one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia. It highlights the fact that, while ethnic and political grievances have fueled conflict in every governmental era, there have been corollary factors underpinning the twin phenomena of insurgency as a way of life and the militarization of the state in post-colonial Burma. A historic inter-mix of cultural, military, socio-economic and international causes has been integral to sustaining Burma's conflict environment at different times.

This monograph is organized into three main sections. Through the spectrum of conflict analysis, the first, "A Land Trapped in Conflict,"

examines the factors behind Burma's long-standing structures of conflict and their socio-political consequences. While Burma reflects elements of the modern "greed and grievance" debate, it can be better characterized as a land in a "conflict trap." The dilemmas of national unity and traditions of armed struggle date back to the colonial era, and they have found new expression in every political era since independence. For this reason, Mark Duffield's paradigm of "emerging political complexes" rather than "complex political emergencies" is an apt characterization of how different societies and armed movements have been able to adapt and survive. This does not mean that post-colonial Burma has remained on the point of state disintegration. However, against this backdrop of conflict, the consequences for nation-state formation have been extremely debilitating, with the contemporary state displaying different elements of a "failed," "weak" and "shadow" state.

The second section, "The Cycles of Conflict," details the political landscape and evolution of Burma's ethnic struggles during the six decades following independence. In every era, political disaffection with the central government has continued, and armed opposition movements have controlled large territories where they have adjusted their strategies to changing geo-politics and military conditions. The conflicts in Burma have never been static, and in every era new factors have arisen sustaining armed struggle.

Five main cycles of conflict stand out:

- the outbreak of violence in the parliamentary era after the British departure;
- the militarization of government under Gen. Ne Win;
- the international escalation of conflict around Burma's borders from the late 1960s;
- the decline of Gen. Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" to final collapse in 1988;
- the present-day era of the military State Peace and Development Council.

Throughout these political transitions it is impossible to separate ethnic politics from national politics and the problems of instability in the country at large. Over the decades there have been important influences on ethnic insurgent movements by the Communist Party of Burma as well as by

different pro-democracy forces. In the late 1960s, the deposed Prime Minister U Nu took up arms with former ethnic opponents in the eastern hills. International interventions along both the China and Thailand borders have also been important in sustaining armed opposition, while Burma's thriving black market economies have long been pivotal in the financing of insurgencies on a countrywide scale. The issues of conflict and illicit narcotics, especially, have become closely inter-linked.

The study argues that during the past two decades a greater understanding has developed among leading stakeholders about the need for fundamental change. A majority of ethnic nationality parties have modified their political stands from often separatist demands in their formative years to pro-federal positions today. Democratic aspirations in Burma were also confirmed by the victory of the National League for Democracy in the 1990 general election, and there is general recognition among both the country's peoples and the international community that sustainable solutions can only be achieved through peace and dialogue. A detrimental feature, however, of Burma's conflict trap is how rarely and slowly processes of national reconciliation have been initiated or sustained. Military-based government has continued.

The third section, "The Contemporary Landscape," therefore examines the current socio-political situation, including the ethnic ceasefires initiated by the SPDC. Decades of conflict have caused a legacy of deep poverty and humanitarian suffering, with indicators of serious health crisis in the country and growing numbers of refugees abroad. Burma's transitional challenges are, in turn, creating dilemmas for the international community. For while the West has largely concentrated on promoting human rights and isolating the military government, Asian neighbors are proving more influential in sociopolitical trends and intergovernmental relations with Burma by maintaining economic engagement in the field. Indeed, with Asian investments in infrastructure and energy accelerating in the borderlands, the study argues that the political economy may well become the key in determining Burma's political future.

Formidable challenges continue to face Burma, including ethnic peace, democratic reform, demilitarization, economic progress and addressing humanitarian needs. In Burma's conflict trap, these issues can not be divided into different hierarchies or prescriptive fields. In particular, the country's troubled history since independence has long since