

**The United Wa State
Party:
Narco-Army or Ethnic
Nationalist Party?**

Policy Studies 38

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Tom Kramer

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List of Acronyms

ATS	amphetamine-type stimulants
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCDAC	Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KKY	Ka Kwe Ye
KMT	Kuomintang
KOWI	Kokang and Wa Initiative
MTA	Mong Tai Army
NDF	National Democratic Front
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
SSA North	Shan State Army North
SSA South	Shan State Army South
SUA	Shan United Army

SURA	Shan United Revolutionary Army
UNDCP	United Nations Drug Control Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
U.S.	United States
UWSA	United Wa State Army
UWSP	United Wa State Party
WADP	Wa Alternative Development Project
WFP	World Food Programme
WNA	Wa National Army
WNC	Wa National Council

A Note on Terminology

In 1989 the military government changed the official international name of the country from “Burma” to “Myanmar.” It also changed the international (English) names of some ethnic groups and geographical entities, including cities and rivers, to remove any legacy from the colonial past or because it felt the new names better reflected the Burmese pronunciation. “Karen” thus became “Kayin,” “Rangoon” became “Yangon,” and “Irrawaddy” became “Ayeyarwady.” Opposition groups have rejected these changes, and the new usage has become the subject of a heated political debate. Although the UN uses “Myanmar,” it is not commonly used elsewhere in English language material on the country. Therefore “Burma” will be used throughout this paper. For the same reasons I will use the pre-1989 names of ethnic groups, places, and rivers. This is not intended to make any kind of political statement. Furthermore, I will use “Burmese” to refer to inhabitants of the country and “Burmans” to refer to members of the largest ethnic group.

Burma is administratively divided into seven “divisions” (*taing* in Burmese), which are predominantly inhabited by the majority Burman population, and seven ethnic minority “states” (*pyi-neh* in Burmese): Mon, Karen, Kayah, Shan, Kachin, Chin, and Rakhine. In English, “state” unfortunately also refers to the national entity based in the capital city that attempts to regulate and reorder populations and resources throughout an

internationally-recognized territory. In Burmese, there is no equivalent for the latter; one might use *asoya* (government) or *naing-ngan* (country), depending on the context.

The main political aim of the United Wa State Party (UWSP) is to achieve the formation of a Wa State, or a Wa *pyi-neh*, falling directly under responsibility of the central government in Rangoon. However, the military government has been reluctant to give minority groups anything that could be explained as going in the direction of independence or federalism. Following truces with minority independence armies, it has given the territory under control of the ceasefire groups such as the UWSP a new (possibly temporary) status called *atu deitha*, or “Special Region.” These are grouped together within different ethnic minority states (the *pyi-neh*) and subsequently numbered.

UWSP-controlled territories are thus referred to by the government as “Shan State Special Region No. 2,” indicating that the UWSP was the second group in Shan State to sign a ceasefire agreement with the government. UWSP leaders say in correspondence with the government they have always used the term *Wa pyi-neh* (Wa State), while the government always has used *Wa atu deitha* (Wa Special Region). According to the UWSP, government officials have told them they could only get a future status as an administrative region that would be less than a “state” (*pyi-neh*) but more than a “district” (*khayaing* in Burmese).

Neither the *pyi-neh* nor the *atu deitha* are mono-ethnic, nor can they be seen as representing the whole ethnic group. The Wa Special Region contains other ethnic groups, including Lahu, Lisu, and Chinese, and Wa people also live outside UWSP areas. In Shan State, apart from the majority Shan population, who are mainly valley dwellers cultivating wet rice, a large number of smaller ethnic groups, including the Palaung, Lahu, and Akha, live in the surrounding mountains, where they practice upland rice cultivation. At the same time, a significant Shan population lives in Kachin State, and many Burmans live in the cities and larger towns of Shan and Kachin States. Furthermore, some of the “divisions” have a substantial non-Burman population, such as the Karen in Irrawaddy Division.

The use of the term “ethnic minority” to describe the non-Burman population can also be problematic, and has been resented by some writers because “it gives the impression to outsiders that they are talking about only 1–2% of the population.” These non-Burmans therefore prefer the