

Analysis on Peacemaking Efforts during the Military Governments in Myanmar (1988- 2010)

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I. Introduction

The Myanmar successive governments have pursued the peace initiatives in different forms since the beginning of the country's independence in 1948. Prior to 1988, all peace efforts had resulted in limited success. However, a new initiative for peace emerged after the military government came to power in 1988. From 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), a military government known later as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) pursued a new era of ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed groups. The Military Intelligence (MI), led by General Khin Nyunt, negotiated ceasefire deals with armed ethnic groups one after another. The government reached ceasefire deals with a total of 40 groups prior to 2010 in different sets of unwritten gentleman agreement. The research paper analyzes how ceasefire deals were implemented by the SLORC/ SPDC governments from 1989 to 2010. It also explains why some armed ethnic groups agreed to ceasefires while others did not. The research approach is applied with analytical and descriptive methods.

II. The SLORC/ SPDC Governments' Peace Initiatives

The SLORC replaced the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) after the military crushed down against the national mass uprising in September 1988. In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government introduced a new ethnic ceasefire policy, which was to have a major impact on insurgent politics in much of the country. The ceasefires focused on three points: the right to remain arms; the right to administer their own demarcated territory; and to conduct cross- border commercial activities. Later, these ceasefire groups (CFGs) were allowed to participate in the National Convention that was organized to formulate the fundamental principles of the new Constitution.

The first round of ceasefires resulted from the initiative of the Directorate of Defence Service Intelligence (DDSI). In 1988 the Myanmar military government, under the initiation of Military Intelligence Chief, Gen. Khin Nyunt, started making ceasefire offers to different ethnic armed groups, trying to end the conflict without having to agree to a political solution. A key development occurred in 1989, when ethnic minority troops in the north east of the country mutinied against the largely Myanmar leadership of the Communist Party of Myanmar, causing it to collapse (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2003, 23). The troops formed several new organizations along ethnic lines. The SLORC was quick to seize the opportunity, offering advantageous ceasefire agreements to the new groups, thereby neutralising its largest military threat. Exploiting the split in the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in which its ethnic units (Wa and Kokang) rebelled against their Myanmar leaders, the DDSI managed to secure ceasefires with four main former communist factions in 1989. On 5 May 1992, in a provocative editorial of the state-run Working People's Daily, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) appealed to the ethnic insurgent groups throughout Burma to lay down their arms, and join the regime in bringing about national reunification. On this basis, the ethnic ceasefires spread from a slow beginning to include 40 ethnic forces by the end of 2009.

II.1. Ceasefire Agreements with Ethnic Armed Groups

The military government had undertaken to sign the ceasefire agreements with communist ethnic armed groups. In 1989, the CPB collapsed due to ethnic mutinies that saw the emergence of four new ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) along the China border: the United Wa State Army (UWSA), "Kokang" Myanmar National Defence Alliance Army (MNDAA), "Mongla" National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and New Democratic Army-

Kachin(NDA-K) (Beyond Panglong, 2017, 13). In the aftermath of the CPB collapse, the SLORC government offered ceasefires to the four breakaway groups, all of the EAOs accepted the government's offering.

The military government has managed to sign cease-fire agreements with them in exchange for government concessions to their demands for: a) recognition as lawful organizations, b) the right to retain their armies without interference from the SLORC, and c) control of their own territories. In addition to these concessions, these groups were allowed to continue their involvement in the lucrative northeastern drug trade in heroin. The leaders of these armed groups include ex-CPB commanders like Phon Kyar Shin(Kokang), Phon Kyar Phu, Kyauk Mi Hlaing (Wa), and Kyauk Khun Hsar (Maing Yan/Maing Khat), all of whom were heavily involved with the drug trade (S'Aung Lwin, 1992). The Border Area Development Program (BADP) was announced in May 1989, following the SLORC's first cease-fires with the ethnic breakaway armies from the Communist Party of Burma. In 1992 a ministry was formed for "Progress of Border Areas and National Races" which had taken up projects for schools, hospitals, health centres, bridges and dams in border areas occupied by cease fire groups. These ceasefire areas became a main focus of the government's Border Areas Development Programme, and new roads and towns were built in a number of formerly war-torn areas, including at Laukkai and Mongla. Ethnic Wa and Kokang groups were considered among the main culprits, along with Khun Sa who surrendered the MTA to the government in a 1996 ceasefire (Smith, 2002,19).

The military government had initiated to sign the ceasefire agreements with the NDF members and non-communist EAOs. At first, the ceasefire offer appeared a bid to win time while the SLORC entrenched in government, but in the following years the peace offer was also rolled out to other ethnic armed organizations, including NDF members, three of whom soon agreed: the SSA/SSPP (1989), Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP: 1991) and Pa-O National Organization (PNO: 1991). The terms were very simple, allowing EAOs the right to maintain their weapons and territories, and only one party (later, the KIO: 1994) ever had a written agreement (Beyond Panglong, 2017,15). These included the important NDF members as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), NMSP and SSA (North). For the first time in decades, fighting halted in many war-torn areas.

The SLORC/SPDC governments settled these ceasefire deals with individual armed groups and refused to talk to the coalitions of groups to negotiate collectively. The regime, for that reason, was accused of applying 'divide and rule' tactics with the various armed ethnic groups. On the other hand, power politics among ethnic armed groups in alliance was also the bane of disunity. Despite ethnic alliances, such as the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) in the early-1990s, individual members of ethnic armed alliances decided to pursue bilateral ceasefire deals with the regime one after another.

Following ceasefire deals with communist EAOs, the military government then went on to secure further ceasefires with many of the country's non-communist EAOs as well, including the KIO, Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP), New Mon State Party (NMSP), and Pa-O National Organization (PNO). While veteran EAOs like the KIO, NMSP, and Shan State Army (SSA) continued to push for a political settlement, others among the new ceasefire EAOs began to cooperate with the Tatmadaw against other EAOs, and a number even came under its command (Jolliffe, 2017, 12). Soon after, members of the pro-federal National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of ethnic armed opposition groups formed in 1976, came under increased military pressure, and a number of them also agreed to cease-fires (Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle, 2012. 3). Some of them, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) and New Mon State Party (NMSP), felt that after decades of war and destruction, the cease-fires were an opportunity for a new effort to find a political solution to the conflict at the negotiating table.

III. Deals with Non-ceasefire Groups

Even though regarded with suspicion about the real intentions of the military government, ceasefire agreements increased during the 1990s. However, other present or former NDF members such as the Karen National Union (KNU), Chin National Front (CNF) and Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP) refused to enter into cease-fires, as they wanted to reach a political agreement first. Later, some other armed groups, such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which broke away from the KNU in 1994 after an internal conflict, also entered into separate cease-fire agreements with the military government (Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle, 2012,3). Most significantly, the ceasefires have not resulted in political settlements addressing the root causes of the armed conflict. Some ceasefires have subsequently broken down, while others have prompted new armed groups to form. Many ethnic groups have maintained active resistance against the government (Havel, 2005,15). These groups include the Chin National Front, Shan State Army-South, KNPP, and KNU. The KNU, one of the largest ethnic

opposition groups, agreed to an informal ceasefire in December 2003, but still has not signed any formal documents with the SPDC.

IV. Ceasefire Dynamic after the downfall of Gen. Khin Nyunt and the MI

The military government settled these ceasefire deals with individual armed groups and refused to talk to the coalitions of groups to negotiate collectively. The regime, for that reason, was accused of applying ‘divide and rule’ tactics with the various armed ethnic groups. On the other hand, power politics among ethnic armed groups in alliance was also the bane of disunity. Despite ethnic alliances, such as the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) in the early-1990s, individual members of ethnic armed alliances decided to pursue bilateral ceasefire deals with the regime one after another.

Leadership struggles within the DAB between the Karen National Union (KNU) and KIO resulted in KIO’s unilateral withdrawal from the alliance. Consequentially, the KIO signed a ceasefire agreement with the military government in 1994. The KNU, which stood in firm solidarity with border-based pro-democracy opposition groups, and the Restoration Council for Shan State (RCSS) became the only remaining major armed groups continuing their fight with the regime by the late-1990s. Historically, these ethnic alliances did not solidify their military and political influence in Myanmar’s opposition movement since armed rebellion erupted in 1948. Factional characteristics of alliance politics among ethnic armed groups was one of the predicaments eventing armed groups from establishing more cohesive and effective alliances.

Despite the legitimacy crisis of the military regime, an emerging pattern of ceasefire deals between the government and armed ethnic groups brought about a new dimension of cooperation between the government and non-state armed groups. When the MI took charge of the ceasefire processes with armed ethnic groups, it nurtured considerable confidence with the armed rebel groups not necessarily because they considered Gen. Khin Nyunt a moderate. But the MI was able to maintain a good relationship with the groups. The MI was the primary institution that connected with ceasefire groups and was empowered to make critical decisions in relation to the ceasefire groups. Those decisions ranged from offering business concessions to exempting those groups from prosecution for criminal violations in some cases. The MI was the only primary institution that armed groups were required to deal with. Prior to the downfall of Gen. Khin Nyunt’s MI in 2005, the Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP) was the only group that broke the ceasefire and returned to fighting under the deal brokered and implemented by the MI (Min Zaw Oo, 2014,10). All other groups maintained their respective ceasefires with the government over two decades with a relatively small number of ceasefire violations.

Notably, ceasefire deals under the military government were implemented without clear codes of conduct endorsed by both parties. Nor was any form of ceasefire monitoring established. Both sides, however, set up liaison offices to resolve disputes between two parties. Both sides were able to more or less clearly demarcate the borders of controlled territories. Technically, liaison and demarcation became two critical pillars to implement ceasefires under the Tatmadaw government. Moreover, most ceasefire groups established business companies inside the country and became large tycoons dominating the country’s economic landscape. Especially for the groups extraction industries, setting up business companies inside the country was a way to launder illegal money(Min Zaw Oo, 2014,11). Business interests of ceasefire groups also became a critical underlying reason not to break ties with the regime despite distrust.

The ceasefire dynamic shifted in around 2007, especially after the downfall of Gen. Khin Nyunt and the MI. Intrafactional conflict within the military regime removed Gen. Khin Nyunt and his associates from power in October 2005. The purge also destroyed the whole apparatus of the MI and consequently hampered the ceasefire mechanism established between the government and armed ethnic groups. The debacle of the MI also paralyzed well-developed liaison communication between two parties meant for resolving crises. In the meantime, some ethnic armed groups were worried that the removal of the MI would jeopardize the existing equilibrium of the ceasefire arrangements. Growing distrust led some groups, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), to accelerate recruitment and re-armament in 2007. Military Security Affairs (MSA), which replaced the MI, assigned a few senior staff to reach out to the ethnic armed groups to try to maintain friendly relationships. However, the newcomers needed time to build up their relations with ethnic armed groups and could not restore confidence to the previous level despite their attempt. Mistrust and concerns from both sides gradually escalated in the period from 2006 to 2010. Another underlying element of this escalation was the introduction of a constitution approved in a questionable referendum in 2008. The regime was in preparation for a transition in 2010 and its leaders thought the existing armed groups under the current ceasefire deals would not be constitutionally legal. The government at this time considered that non-state armed groups should be transformed into the Border Guard Force (BGF) to become a

part of Tatmadaw. By extension, these groups would be constitutionally legal. The BGF was a form of an armed unit that was neither militia nor part of the regular army. Some ethnic armed groups criticized that the government's plan to form the BGF was intended for undermining the command and control of existing commanders of ethnic armed groups (Min Zaw Oo, 2014, 12). Some of the ethnic armed groups refused to transfer their armed units into BGF.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the military government did not anticipate the total disarmament of ethnic armed groups under ceasefire deals. Nor did the regime expect the BGF to be fully incorporated into the Tatmadaw. The military already understood that most ethnic armed groups would refuse disarmament. For the military leaders at that time, the BGF was a way to resolve the discontent between the reality and the constitutional requirement. The structure of the BGF did not exclude ethnic commanders. In all the BGF battalions, even up to the present, all commanders, including company commanders, are ethnic minority leaders from previous ceasefire groups. Only three junior officers and 27 non-commissioned officers from the Tatmadaw were included to handle administrative functions in each BGF battalion. However, some groups, understandably, did not want to be integrated into the Tatmadaw without a proper political settlement. The government, nonetheless, considered that the BGF was a legal transformation of non-state armed groups into a military unit that was not in contrast with the provisions of the 2008 Constitution (Min Zaw Oo, 2014, 12). For the military government, the BGF was an answer to accommodate the constitutional constraints and the intent of ethnic armed groups to maintain their weapons.

The military government had undertaken peace initiatives for ceasefire or disarmament with 40 groups from 1998 to 2010. Out of 40, only 25 groups remained as armed groups that agreed to a ceasefire with the government by 2009. The rest of armed groups that joined the process were either disarmed or incorporated into 'People's Militia'— paramilitary units composed of armed local civilians under the control of the Tatmadaw. The representatives of the Tatmadaw approached the remaining 25 ceasefire groups that had joined the ceasefire process. Out of 25 groups, five groups agreed to transform into BGFs and 15 transformed into the People Militia. Five organizations refused transformation either to BGF or militia. These five organizations were the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Karen Peace Council (KPC), and the National Democratic Alliance Army (also known as Meila Special Region 4). Despite their refusal, the KIO was the only group which saw a return to open conflict with the military. The other four groups rarely experienced even minor clashes with the Tatmadaw after the ceasefire broke down in 2010. Despite the tension around 2009 and 2010, both the Tatmadaw and these ceasefire groups tried to avoid major clashes to maintain the status quo except in the case of the KIO where a series of minor incidents escalated to major fighting in June 2011 which became particularly intense in December 2012 (Min Zaw Oo, 2014, 13).

In the perspective of the Tatmadaw government, the past ceasefire process was to some extent a success. Out of 40 armed groups that joined the ceasefire process, only five groups refused to be integrated into some form of Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR) in the last 23 years. Only two ceasefires with the KNPP and the MNDAA collapsed in over two decades. The rest were either disarmed or integrated into the Tatmadaw's command structure. It was numerically significant. On the other hand, ethnic armed groups, including some of those who agreed to disarm, felt the previous ceasefire process did not engender a political solution to resolve ethnic problems in Myanmar. Some of them regret being disarmed. In some cases, new armed groups emerged to replace disarmed groups. Nevertheless, the previous ceasefire process imprinted an institutional memory for both the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups to measure against the current one. The Tatmadaw especially has had to adjust itself to meet new challenges under a new ceasefire process implemented by the new 'political' government that came to power in 2011. Kokang armed group, also known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, was forcibly disbanded after the ceasefire broke down in August 2009. A larger part of DKBA agreed to transform to BGF battalions while a faction defected and later signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in November 2011 (Min Zaw Oo, 2014, 13). A faction of the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP) transformed to a militia group under the Tatmadaw's command structure while the other faction continued fighting. However, SSPP also signed a ceasefire agreement with the new government in January 2012.

A total of 40 groups were involved in a ceasefire process under the military government. Fifteen of them were disarmed or transformed into People Militia prior to 2009. By the time the constitution was enshrined, 25 groups remained as ceasefire armed groups. Among them, five groups agreed to transform into BGF. Fifteen groups were transformed into People Militia. The rest five refused to be transformed into any part of the Tatmadaw. Basically, the ceasefire collapsed between the government and these five groups. By the time the new government came to power in 2011, 11 groups continued fighting, in addition to the five groups that refused to be transformed. Although there are a few other smaller groups that claim to be fighting the regime, the new government recognized 16 groups in total to be a part of the new ceasefire process.

V.Conclusion

The successive governments have attempted for peace and made various concessions with EAOs. Since 1989, the military government (SLORC/ SPDC) had taken a series of ceasefire deals with the ethnic groups. As part of the ceasefires, the government began the Border Area Development Programme in 1989, which became a ministry-level body in 1992, as the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Races and has built road infrastructure, schools, and hospitals in rebel-occupied territories. The military government settled these ceasefire deals with individual armed groups and refused to talk to the coalitions of groups to negotiate collectively. The regime, for that reason, was accused of applying ‘divide and rule’ tactics with the various armed ethnic groups. During 1989 the military government had got ceasefire agreements with the United Wa State Army (UWSA), “Kokang” Myanmar National Defence Alliance Army (MNDAA), “Mongla” National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), SSA/SSPP (1989), Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP: 1991) and Pa-O National Organisation (PNO: 1991). In 1994 the military government signed ceasefire agreement with KIO, in 1995 with NMSP and many other minor groups. Throughout 1996, 1997, 1998 the government had made peace talks with the Karen National Union (KNU), Chin National Front (CNF) and Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP). Amidst simmering discontents of the ethnic minorities an uneasy calm prevailed in military-ruled Myanmar during 1990-2010. Despite the tension around 2009 and 2010, both the Tatmadaw and these ceasefire groups tried to avoid major clashes to maintain the status quo. During the period from 1989 to 2009, forty armed organizations entered into ceasefire agreements with the military government. Out of 40 armed groups that joined the ceasefire process, only five groups refused to be integrated into some form of Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR). Only two ceasefires with the KNPP and the MNDAA collapsed in over two decades. The rest were either disarmed or integrated into the Tatmadaw’s command structure. It was numerically significant. On the other hand, ethnic armed groups, including some of those who agreed to disarm, felt the previous ceasefire process did not engender a political solution to resolve ethnic problems in Myanmar. Some of them regret being disarmed. It can be found that the peace deals strategy was different from the MI led by Gen. Khin Nyunt and the SPDC’s peace strategy of the post- Gen. Khin Nyunt. The Military Intelligence (MI), led by General Khin Nyunt, negotiated ceasefire deals with armed ethnic groups by a new ethnic ceasefire policy, which focused on three points: the right to remain arms; the right to administer their own demarcated territory; and to conduct cross- border commercial activities. The government reached ceasefire deals with a total of 40 groups prior to 2010. After the fall of Gen. Khin Nyunt, the SPDC government shifted its peace deals with the EAOs, including ceasefire groups and non-ceasefire groups. In 2009, the SPDC regime proposed the foundation of a Border Guard Force program, which foresaw the transformation of EAGs into small battalions under control of the Union government. KIO, NMSP, UWSA, KPC, and the NDAA refused transformation to BGF. Despite representatives of some ceasefire groups attended the NC, they expressed disappointment that the NC did not involve substantive political dialogue, and did not address their political concerns. However, the military government made efforts for peace and got a success to some extent.

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