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**Political Authority in
Burma's Ethnic Minority
States:
Devolution, Occupation, and
Coexistence**

Policy Studies 31

**Political Authority in
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Coexistence**

Mary P. Callahan

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATS	amphetamine-type stimulants
BIHQ	Border Area Immigration Headquarters
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DDR	demilitarization, demobilization, and reintegration
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
KDRG	Karenni Development Research Group
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KSR1	Kokang Special Region 1
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
<i>Nasaka</i>	Burmese-language acronym for Border Area Immigration Headquarters
<i>Natala</i>	Burmese-language acronym for Ministry for Progress of the Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NDA-K	New Democratic Army-Kachin

NDD	Network for Democracy and Development
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLM	<i>New Light of Myanmar</i> (newspaper)
PDC	Peace and Development Council
PNA	Pao National Army
PNO	Pao National Organization
S.H.A.N.	Shan Herald Agency for News
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSNLO	Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization
TNI	Transnational Institute
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
UWSA	United Wa State Army
UWSP	United Wa State Party

A Note on Terminology

Four sets of terminology issues arise in this monograph. First, in studying state-society relations in the ethnic minority states of Burma, the term “state” can mean two different things. Within Burma, the territorial and administrative units where many ethnic minority peoples live are called “states” (*pyi-neh* in Burmese). 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.

Second, in most scholarly writing, the ethnic minority states have rarely been written about as a class or category, in large part because of the enormous diversity of historical experiences therein. Although this monograph underscores the necessity of taking into account this complexity and diversity, the political designation of these territories and populations under the category “state” (*pyi-neh*) does in fact have an impact on the nature of political authority in these regions. I have explicitly chosen not to use other terminology, such as the non-administrative category “border regions” or “border areas” to bound the politics and territory studied in this monograph. The latter terminology seems inaccurate because vast numbers of ethnic minority populations live within ethnic states (*pyi-neh*) but not near the borders with other countries. However, their lives are unmistakably

affected by the fact that the administrative unit they live in backs up to other countries. (When referring to territory that is in fact contiguous to the actual borders, I will use the term “borderlands.”) “Periphery” sounds derogatory, but somehow less so than “margins.”

Third, some leaders of populations identified as “ethnic minorities” in Burma today dislike the term “ethnic minority”; they recommend using the government’s terminology, “nationalities” or “national races,” because they view “minorities” a term of belittlement. Yet others consider “nationalities” and “national races” to carry oppressive or racist overtones as well. Some prefer to use the term “non-Burman.” See Harn Yawngwhe’s (n.d.) thoughtful commentary on the terminology issue. In the absence of consensus on terminology, I will use all of these terms, with no disrespect intended.

Finally, I use the term “Burma” in reference to the country and “Burmese” in reference to the citizens of this country. In 1989, the ruling military junta replaced the English name of the country, Burma, with “Myanmar.” Likewise, from that date, citizens were to be called “Myanmars.” Some countries (notably, most other Asian countries) have accepted the name changes, and some (the United States and several European countries) have not. Also in 1989, the junta assigned new English pronunciations, or what it considered more “authentic” names, for cities (e.g., “Rangoon” became “Yangon,” “Maymyo” became “Pyin-Oo-Lwin”) and ethnic groups (e.g., “Karen” became “Kayin”). For many outside the country, usage of pre-1989 or junta-designated names is thought to reflect a political position: usage of the old names implies rejection of the junta, given the illegitimate way it took power, while usage of the new names is said to imply acceptance or support of the junta. In point of fact, “Myanmar” has been the official written name of the country since independence in 1948 (see, for example, postage stamps from the parliamentary period (1948–62)), but as in other diglossic languages, few if any people ever used the term in ordinary discourse. Today inside Burma, many citizens—even those who are critical of the government—use “Myanmar” in everyday conversations. For some, it is safer and easier not to draw the ire of the state by using “Burma.” Also, for some ethnic minority leaders, the term “Myanmar” seems more inclusive and less tied to the ethnic majority group, the Burmans (renamed the “Bamars”). However, there remains some resistance among members of ethnic minority groups to what they see as the broader project of Burmanization of the names of their groups.

Given the audience of the East-West Center Washington publications in the *Policy Studies* series, I will use the pre-1989 terminology except when quoting from sources that use “Myanmar.” I am not using “Burma” to make any kind of political statement.

Executive Summary

Citizens in the ethnic minority states of Burma live under the authority of multiple “states” or “state-like authorities” that extract from citizens, both mediate and cause conflict, and provide some services for residents and commercial interests. The range of competing systems of authority sometimes creates ambiguity that leaves people, businesses, and the international community profoundly bewildered. This ambiguity also generates opportunities for personal advancement and wealth generation for some, but much of the population is left with limited strategies for survival or improvement. Although few ordinary citizens anywhere in the country have significant opportunities to influence the policy choices of various political authorities, those who live in ethnic minority states are among the most disenfranchised. However, in certain cases, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some ethnic minority political organizations, and other nonstate actors can serve as buffers or mediators between authority figures and local populations.

This monograph argues that despite the complexity of and variation across Burma’s ethnic-minority states, three patterns of relationships between the national state and locally-based, often nonstate actors have emerged since 1988: near devolution, military occupation, and coexistence. The first pattern of political authority relations can be seen in the Wa regions and to a lesser extent in the Kokang territory in Shan State. In those areas,

the authority of the State Peace and Development Council is limited, and there appears to be a *near devolution* of power to networks of former insurgent leaders, traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders. In northern Rakhine State and the Kayah and Karen States, the SPDC, the *tatmadaw* (Burmese for “armed forces”), and other state agencies constitute dominant and oppressive *occupying authorities*. Third, in parts of the border states where there have been ceasefire agreements, a range of strategic partners—including ceasefire group leaders, business operators, Union Solidarity and Development Association leaders, traders, religious leaders, NGO personnel, and government officials—have achieved to varying degrees a kind of *coexistence*. These areas include Pao territory in southern Shan State, much of Kachin and part of northern Shan States, the area controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in Karen State, and the parts of Mon State at least nominally in the hands of the New Mon State Party.

Except for small patches of territory along the Thai border where open conflict is ongoing, leaders of the Burmese government’s armed forces and of past and currently-active armed opposition forces operate in a context that is neither war nor peace, but instead a kind of post-civil-war, not-quite-peace environment. Decades of guerilla warfare and brutal counterinsurgency throughout Burma, but especially in the ethnically-demarcated states along the borders, have created highly-decentralized war economies, many of which evade regulation by the national state and are dependent on external resources, connections, know-how, and capital. As in the past, ruling and rebel groups alike continue to finance their activities by plunder, seizure, informal taxation and trade, and external assistance.

To understand these complex political arrangements, this monograph employs Mark Duffield’s concept of “emerging political complex”—a set of flexible and adaptive networks that link state and other political authorities to domestic and foreign business concerns (some legal, others illegal), traditional indigenous leaders, religious authorities, overseas refugee and diaspora communities, political party leaders, and NGOs. All of these players make rules, extract resources, provide protection, and try to order a moral universe, but none of them are able, or even inclined, to trump the others for monolithic national supremacy. They exist in a competitive, yet often complicit and complementary, milieu that varies across geographical space and time.

Conflict resolution strategies have to recognize that these emerging political complexes are not simply unfortunate bumps in the road to peace

but instead constitute intricate and evolving social systems that may continue to be adapted and sustained. Their sustainability is in part linked to the ability of major players to mobilize domestic and foreign resources, the latter being achievable given the deregulation of markets and resulting ease with which capital, commodities, and people can move across and within borders. But these emerging political complexes also provide alternative and at times reliable lifelines for hundreds of thousands of Burmese citizens living in areas poorly served by the formal economy and government agencies. These strategic networks have long held the capability to mobilize people and resources for war, but they may—as Duffield argues—be “the only force realistically capable of reinstating a peace” (Duffield 2001: 192).

For the international community to foster peacebuilding in Burma's ethnic states, it should start from the premise that all assistance must proceed in a participatory manner, one that does not assume any kind of one-size-fits-all solution. In particular, international actors must not dictate solutions imposed from outside Burma or by Burmans on ethnic minorities. Different configurations of political complexes will require situation-specific ways of engaging the masses and elites in discussions of conflict transformation, political reform, and human security.

For example, in the two extreme configurations of political authority, the overarching problem for conflict management and peacebuilding is to identify a means for mediation between those in power and the majority, whose needs are not being addressed either by warlord-like ceasefire group leaders (in the case of *devolution*) or army and government officials (in the case of *occupation*). In the areas where state and nonstate actors have achieved varying degrees of *coexistence*, citizens have access to a range of possible advocates and allies, such as religious groups, ceasefire groups (both current leaders and those coming up through the ranks for future leadership positions), NGOs, international organizations, business leaders, and even government officials in some circumstances. However, not all citizens have equal access and not all of these countervailing agencies or groups hold themselves accountable to local populations or internationally-accepted standards of behavior. As elsewhere in Burma, humanitarian assistance should be directed at alleviating suffering wherever possible. But in areas of political coexistence, the international community has far greater opportunity to support the work of responsible community organizations and NGOs in the service, development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding sectors.

More broadly, any kind of sustainable peace will necessarily involve the disarmament and demobilization of large numbers of soldiers, including those serving in the *tatmadaw*, the security forces of ethnic nationalist groups, and the paramilitaries and criminal gangs.

Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence

Ma-chiq-taw-leh aung-ka-nan.

[You don't love, but you still have to hold your breath and kiss.]

—Burmese proverb

Citizens in the ethnic-minority states of Burma live under the authority of multiple “states” or “state-like authorities” that extract from citizens, both mediate and cause conflict, and provide some services for residents and commercial interests. The range of competing systems of authority sometimes creates ambiguity that leaves people, businesses, and the international community profoundly bewildered. This ambiguity also generates opportunities for personal advancement and wealth generation for some, but much of the population is left with limited strategies for survival or progress. While few ordinary citizens anywhere in the country have significant opportunities to influence the policy choices of various political authorities, those who live in ethnic-minority states are among the most disenfranchised. However, in certain cases, nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs), some ethnic-minority political organizations, and other nonstate actors can serve as buffers or mediators between authority figures and local populations.

The mosaics of power in Burma today are fluid and complex. They vary from one region to another and sometimes from one month to another. This monograph examines the relationships between and among the national state, other “state-like authorities,” and social forces in the territory beyond central Burma. Citizens’ experiences of the national state as well as of locally-based, state-like authorities are varied and shifting,

depending on local resource endowments, investment opportunities, cultural variations, officials’ personalities, and the historical legacies of conflict. Throughout most of the ethnic-minority states, the populations experience the Rangoon-based government and other political authorities as military forces (whether Burman or ethnic), extractors of resources (via military conscription, forced

labor, and taxation), and rulers who resolutely proclaim to know what is best for them. As the state-controlled media reminds readers regularly, leaders travel through these regions to “provide all necessary instructions,” but neither the regime nor many of the other state-like authorities provide much in the way of services to or protection of non-elites.

Specifically, this monograph argues that despite the complexity of and variation in political authority across Burma’s ethnic-minority states, three patterns of relationships between the national state and locally-based, often nonstate actors have emerged since 1988: near devolution, military occupation, and coexistence. The first pattern of political authority relations can be seen in the Wa regions and to a somewhat lesser extent in the Kokang territory in Shan State. In those areas, the authority of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is limited, and there appears to be a *near devolution* of power to networks of traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders. Second, in northern Rakhine state, and in parts of the Shan, Kayah, and Karen States, the SPDC, the *tatmadaw*, and other state agencies constitute dominant and oppressive *occupying authorities*.¹ Third, in parts of the border states where there have been ceasefire agreements, a range of strategic partners—including ceasefire group leaders, business operators, leaders of state-sponsored mass organizations, traders,

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religious leaders, NGO personnel, and government officials—have achieved to varying degrees a kind of *coexistence*. These areas include Pao territory in southern Shan State, much of Kachin and part of northern Shan States, the area controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in Karen State, and the parts of Mon State at least nominally in the hands of the New Mon State Party.

This spectrum of variation in relations between the central government and local (sometimes ceasefire) authorities and officials should not conceal what is common across these regions: Political power is in the hands of specialists in violence—members of either the *tatmadaw* (Burmese for armed forces), antigovernment armed forces (past and present), criminal gangs, or paramilitaries. Except for small patches of territory along the Thai border where open conflict is ongoing, military and militarist leaders preside over a context that is neither war nor peace, but instead a kind of post-civil-war, not-quite-peace environment.² Decades of guerilla warfare and brutal counterinsurgency throughout Burma, but especially in the ethnically-demarcated states along the borders, have created highly decentralized war economies, many of which evade regulation by the national state and are dependent on external resources, connections, know-how, and capital. Both ruling and rebel groups have financed and continue to finance their activities by plunder, seizure, informal taxation and trade, and external assistance. Mary Kaldor (2001: 2), who writes about the relationship between globalization and security, argues that this kind of context blurs the “distinctions between war (usually defined as violence between states or organized political groups for political motives), organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain) and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by states or politically organized groups against individuals).”

ruling and rebel groups...finance their activities by plunder, seizure, informal taxation...trade, and external assistance

Governance in Burma today, then, takes place within what Mark Duffield (2001) calls an “emerging political complex.”³ This term describes a set of flexible and adaptive networks that link state and other political

authorities to domestic and foreign business concerns (some legal, others illegal), traditional indigenous leaders, religious authorities, overseas refugee and diaspora communities, political party leaders, and NGOs. All of these players make rules, extract resources, provide protection, and try to order a moral universe, but none of them are able, or even inclined, to trump the others for monolithic national supremacy. They exist in a competitive, yet often complicit and complementary, milieu that varies across geographical space and time (*ibid.*: 156; see also Kingston 2004: 7).

Employing Kaldor's work (2001: 3, 111), I argue that the recent history of state-society relations in Burma's ethnic states has been greatly influenced by a "revolution in the social relations" of both war and what I call "not-quite-peace." Conflict resolution strategies have to recognize that these emerging political complexes are not simply unfortunate bumps in the road to peace but instead constitute intricate and evolving social systems that may continue to be adapted and sustained. Their sustainability is in part linked to the ability of major players to mobilize domestic and foreign resources, the latter being achievable given the deregulation of markets and resulting ease with which capital, commodities, and people can now move across and within borders. This is all the more significant given Burma's location in a region that includes some of the fastest growing economies in the world. But these emerging political complexes also provide alternative and at times reliable lifelines for hundreds of thousands of Burmese citizens living in areas poorly served by the formal economy and government agencies. As Duffield (2001: 192) notes, "just as the emerging political complexes are able to wage war, in many places they are also the only force realistically capable of reinstating a peace" (see also *ibid.*: 142–53; Nordstrom 2001).

Like those in borderlands elsewhere in the developing world, Burma's emerging political complexes in the ethnic states are comparable in the ways major actors appear to be legitimizing their power. They tend to claim legitimacy by inscribing a meaningful ethnic label or identity among the ruled. Hence, as Duffield (2001: 14) notes, "politically, the new forms of protection and legitimacy involved tend to be socially exclusive rather than inclusive." National-government officials press for these labels to be broadly construed as part of "Myanmar" rather than more particularistic ethnic identities. However, much of the population that lives beyond the central region does not adhere to notions of a centralized, homogenous national

state but instead has local affiliations and loyalties based on historically-derived notions and practices of ethnic identity.

Finally, the shift in emphasis to a multilayered, complex view of political authority should not be taken as an argument that the Burmese state is definitively a “weak” or “failed” one. Indeed, the central state flexes its muscles throughout much of Burma, changing the behavior of elites and masses alike even in places where it has to negotiate with and accommodate nonstate authorities.⁴ Across many sectors, the state lacks the capacity, resources, will, and expertise to truly advance society toward its proclaimed goals, but it nonetheless retains the unmistakable ability to reshape the lives of many throughout the country. As a result, people living in the ethnically-demarcated states—like those living in central Burma—usually find ways to accommodate the explicit and implicit mandates of the Rangoon-based state and its local allies (be they ceasefire partners, traders, financiers, paramilitaries, and so forth). Where possible, most try to stay off the radar screen of the state. As in the Burmese proverb about kissing despite the absence of love, Burmese people may not love their government, but they still have to hold their breaths and get on with their lives.

The “State” in Burma

Contrary to the views expressed in most media and some scholarly literature, this monograph argues that the nature of political authority in contemporary Burma is dynamic and in some areas attenuated, with dramatic changes especially visible in the country’s ethnically-demarcated states over the last nineteen years. Although, as Robert Taylor has argued, the national state is “the dominant institution shaping economic, social and other opportunities for the population” (Taylor 1987: 1), it is also the case that relations of governance are now less-strictly hierarchical and unilaterally determined than this view suggests. Particularly in the ethnic-minority states, the last nineteen years have seen the emergence of political complexes or networks of state and nonstate actors that dominate the ever-expanding informal or shadow economy in border regions.⁵ Duffield (2001: 156) shows that throughout the “global South,” networks of this

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kind promote “new forms of privilege, authority, and rights to wealth.” As in other countries with thriving transborder economies, relations between the shadow economy and the state in Burma are complex and are characterized by “relations of dependence, complicity and control” (Duffield 2001: 156). The central state in Burma is dominant in some functional and territorial arenas, but its regulatory authority is neither uniform, coherent, unified, nor unchallenged. Moreover, given the transition in parts of the ethnic states from open, hostile, and dangerous conflicts to indefinite and sometimes tense truces, these networks undergo constant change and adaptation. The following section presents a brief overview of state-society relations throughout contemporary Burma. It also offers a set of conceptual tools to make sense of the multilayered, overlapping, and shifting kinds of state-society relations specifically in the ethnically-demarcated states.

Who Rules the Country?

Since the 1947 constitution paved the way for independence from Britain, the country has been divided into two kinds of territorial political units, called “divisions” and “states.” In principle, today’s seven divisions cover territory where the population is comprised mostly of the ethnic majority group, the Burmans (or Bamars). Divisions are located mostly in the central and southern portions of the country. The seven “states” encompass territory inhabited mainly by the non-Burman ethnic minorities, which the government and some ethnic-minority leaders call the non-Burman “nationalities” or “national races” (see project map).⁶ Currently, the seven states are Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kayah, Karen, and Mon, named after the largest ethnic groups represented in these territories. The mapping is far from isomorphic, however. For example, large numbers of Karens live in the Irrawaddy Division; large numbers of Shan, Chin, Rakhine, and other groups live scattered throughout the rest of the divisions; large numbers of Kachins and Burmans—as well as many other groups—live in the very diverse Shan State.

The only major contender for national political authority in Burma is the military junta, which has ruled since 1988. Currently called the State Peace and Development Council, it has been chaired since 1992 by Senior General Than Shwe.⁷ Throughout most of the country, the SPDC has articulated a rigid bureaucratic apparatus that functions via territorially-delimited state/division-, district-, township-, village tract-, and village-

level Peace and Development Councils (PDCs).⁸ At the levels of the states/divisions, districts, and townships, as well as in some larger villages, lower-ranking civilian bureaucrats from “line ministries” (such as Education, Health, Social Welfare, Forestry, and Agriculture) flesh out the functional apparatus of the state as they work with local PDCs to carry out orders from cabinet ministries and the junta in Rangoon (and now the new capital, Nay Pyi Taw). Order is enforced by locally-based military commanders as well as the police under the Home Ministry, which also fields the major domestic intelligence agency, Special Branch, throughout the country.

The junta, comprised of the *tatmadaw's* most senior officers, runs a highly-centralized administration and in fact cedes little power to line ministries or to local authorities other than regional commanders. Many of the PDC chairs at the state/division, district, and some township levels have been active-duty military officers, as are most cabinet ministers and many deputy ministers (Tin Maung Maung Than 2005: 70). As of September 2006, Lieutenant General Thein Sein, secretary-1 of the SPDC, announced administrative reforms that would civilianize administrative ranks below the district level. How precisely these changes will play out remains to be seen, but it is clear that where civilians occupy high posts, few dare to question the military leadership or suggest serious reforms.

*The junta...cedes little
power to line ministries or
to local authorities*

In the last nineteen years, Burma has seen a dramatic expansion of the *tatmadaw* from a proclaimed strength of 180,000 to probably about 300,000 soldiers.⁹ Hence in addition to military domination of elite political positions in the SPDC and cabinet in Rangoon, the armed forces as an institution constitutes a geographically sprawling, parallel apparatus of authority that sometimes supports other government officials at various local levels and sometimes is at odds with them. The number of garrisons in the country has grown considerably, with the most dramatic expansion in the ethnically-demarcated states.¹⁰

In the ethnic states as well as in the Burman-dominated divisions, regional commanders, who at one point were also members of the junta

(but are no more), oversee all military and administrative affairs in their areas of operation. SPDC policies are often carried out by formal or informal task forces directed by the regional commanders and comprised of local military commanders, PDC personnel, officials from line ministries and, increasingly, leaders and members of the regime's mass mobilization organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA).

The USDA was created by Senior General Than Shwe in September 1993 as a nationwide "social welfare organization" to "organize the people to have belief in the nation's policies and take part with might and main in implementing them" (*New Light of Myanmar [NLM]*, May 23, 2006; on the founding of the USDA, see *NLM*, September 16, 1993). The USDA has grown to more than twenty million members and has expanded its activities into explicitly political realms, including surveillance and harassment of government opposition as well as attempts to interfere with foreign assistance projects inside the country. Members include government servants (some of whom do not realize they have become members), teachers, students in government schools and universities, and business owners. In some areas of Burma, the local USDA branch appears to outrank PDC officials, but in most towns and villages, there is extensive overlap in personnel and families represented in USDA and PDC positions of leadership (Network for Democracy and Development [NDD] 2006; Steinberg 1997). Many Burma watchers expect the USDA to form the basis of a new government-backed political party in a future parliamentary political system.

Image vs. Practice

On the surface, the Burmese state appears to be one of the strongest in the world. It has largely eliminated organized opposition, has fought off

international reprobation and economic sanctions, has at times committed human rights violations with impunity, and has even moved the capital city to a remote site. However, if the SPDC were indeed so strong and omnipotent, it would be difficult to explain the emergence of the multilayered political complexes that organize life in Burma's ethnic states. Therefore, to more

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to be one of the strongest
in the world*

critically assess the nature of political authority throughout Burma, and

more specifically in the ethnically-demarcated states, this study follows Joel Migdal's conceptual approach. As he notes, no national state has ever achieved the Weberian ideal of an organization with a legitimate monopoly over violence throughout a given territory. Instead, Migdal suggests conceiving of the state as a "field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) *the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory*, and (2) *the actual practices of its multiple parts*" (Migdal 2001: 15–16).

Adapting the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1985), Migdal uses the concept of "field" to focus attention on the many dimensions in which power is disputed, negotiated, and exercised. For Migdal, the struggles over how rules are made and enforced must be understood in both *symbolic* and *material* terms (Migdal 2001: 22). Although the contours of a modern state's *symbols* and *image* have tended to converge over the last several centuries into a relatively limited menu of laws and institutions, the *material practices* of states "have tended to be diverse ... [and] have defied neat categorization" (ibid.: 16).

Image of Omnipotence

In its nineteen years in power, the SPDC has created an image of an omnipotent state that, in Migdal's words, citizens believe controls "all rule making, either directly through its own agencies or indirectly by sanctioning other authorized organizations—businesses, families, clubs and the like—to make certain circumscribed rules" in its territory (ibid.). As with other states, this image reinforces the lessons that the state defines all boundaries between public and private and that the state defines who makes and enforces rules.

The *image* of SPDC control is indeed powerful in Burma, where the field of activities that are subject to its regulations and oversight is immense. During periodic power struggles among regime elites (e.g., 1992, 1997, and 2004), the line between public and private, or permissible and prohibited, was less clear, leaving many Burmese to opt for extreme caution in social interactions. Still today, people regularly whisper in public when their conversations turn to senior officials or politics, although less obviously so than in the early 1990s. At that time, there was fear that Military Intelligence had spies everywhere; now some people may consciously fear being spied upon, but most are simply in the habit of being careful.

Many SPDC practices reinforce the image of a coherent and unified whole. The Press Scrutiny Board gags the domestic media, which is laced with government slogans such as “Emergence of the State Constitution is the duty of all citizens of Myanmar Naing-Ngan.”¹¹ School children, tourist guides, teachers, and government servants have to pass tests examining

their knowledge of the state’s “Three Main National Causes” and “Four-Point People’s Desire.”¹² Regime critics, including some from within the military, receive long jail sentences. Special Branch (which since late 2004 has replaced the now-defunct Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence as the home spy agency), the USDA, and shadowy military units all

*SPDC practices reinforce
the image of a coherent and
unified whole*

stifle the mobilization of any opposition, sometimes invoking a law (2/88) that prohibits meetings of more than five people.¹³ Whenever people move from one village or neighborhood to another—even if only for one night—they are required to inform the local PDC chair of their whereabouts or face the possibility of stiff punishment.¹⁴

Practices: A Different Story

Despite the image of coherent and absolute control, in its day-to-day practices the SPDC apparatus—like that of all states—is far from

omnipotent. Smugglers, labor recruiters, traders, drug dealers, and human traffickers routinely traverse Burma’s boundaries with China, Thailand, and India. They fear little retribution or oversight from state immigration authorities or *tatmadaw* units in the

*the SPDC apparatus...is far
from omnipotent*

borderlands, which are more likely to levy “taxes” than crack down on illegal operations. State agencies often act against each other and reverse their own policies. A typical example: in Kachin State, the Ministry of Mines recently granted a foreign company permission to dig an asbestos mine, despite the fact that the Ministry of Forestry had already granted the same land to a nearby village for the establishment of a community reforestation project.¹⁵ Elsewhere, repeated attempts by the junta to liberalize the rice trade have been consistently reversed in as little as a

few months after state officials announced liberalization measures (Okamoto 2005; Thawngmung 2001). State policies also suffer from lack of funding, expertise, and commitment. The Ministry of Health's campaign against AIDS has been compromised by its inability to fund reliable testing beyond the two major urban centers, Rangoon and Mandalay (Beyrer et al. 2006; Transnational Institute [TNI] 2006). In the military, where many infantry units are visibly understrength, desertion rates are high, logistical support weak, and morale low.¹⁶

Throughout the country, underpaid officials of PDCs, line ministries, army units, USDA branches, and the police can feed their own families only by participating in the informal and illegal economy, levying informal taxes, collecting unauthorized road tolls, and rerouting scarce state resources. The scale of corruption by government officials—unprecedented in postcolonial history—may indeed represent the most significant limit on state omnipotence. As one long-time foreign resident of Rangoon noted, corruption follows less the patterns of predictable rent-seeking seen in other developing nations and more the maxim that one can do anything as long as one pays the right amount to the right officials (Personal correspondence, January 2007).

Thus, the *image* of the state's line between public and private or legal and illegal, on the one hand, and its *practices* to regulate and enforce that line, on the other hand, are at great odds. Critics might call informal taxes or smuggling "corrupt" or "criminal" (in terms of legal codes), while others might consider them "moral" (as they allow officials to take care of their kin and their loyal followers, the latter known as *ta-bye* in Burmese). As in all countries, state legal codes maintain one set of rules while SPDC

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practices create antithetical others. The various sets of formal and informal rules diverge across regions as well as across time. For the people of Burma, discerning some set of "real" rules according to which they can safely organize their public life can be an enormously tricky endeavor. This ambiguity in the context of a regime noted for human rights abuses creates conditions in which ordinary people opt for as little engagement with the state and other political authorities as possible.

Image vs. Practice in Border States

The image of a clear national boundary within which the central state claims absolute sovereignty is also at odds with political practice. Historically, the Rangoon-based state¹⁷ rarely enforced its rules throughout much of the territory it claimed. This was particularly true in the regions that the British colonial regime euphemistically dubbed the “Excluded Areas” and now comprise the ethnically-demarcated states that flank most of the country’s international borders.¹⁸ Under colonial rule, the British deployed Indians, Karens, Anglo-Burmans, and small numbers of Britons and Burmans to administer and police the territory that currently constitutes the Burman-dominated divisions (which the British called “Burma Proper”), while allowing traditional local leaders to run the day-to-day affairs of the Excluded Areas. After independence in 1948, the new nationalist government, faced with serious antigovernment rebellions throughout the central region, haphazardly attempted to implement its

*these regions have never come
under anything approaching
central control*

parliamentary constitution and legal codes in the former Excluded Areas, but emerging opposition in some parts therein meant that the *tatmadaw* was the only significant state presence. Later, the Socialist Party state (1962–88) eliminated most traditional leaders and replaced them with Socialist Party

cadres, but the Rangoon government in fact governed very little in these areas, except where significant resources were at stake.

Throughout the postcolonial era, these regions have never come under anything approaching central control. Large stretches of territory—perhaps as much as one-fourth of Burma’s land—and large numbers of people have been governed, administered, and exploited by armed state challengers, such as the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union, and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). As the International Crisis Group (2003: 1) notes:

The history of these struggles is extremely complex as literally scores of groups have formed, split, reunited, and dissolved at various times. While most ethnic minority armies have been fighting the Myanmar army, some at times have cooperated with it against other groups, or they have fought each other over territory or other resources.

During periods of open armed conflict, these organizations have run state-like structures that have extracted revenues from trade and production to finance their ongoing wars against government forces. They have also assigned officials (sometimes called “ministers”) responsibility for functional portfolios to administer territory gained and maintained by their own military forces (Smith 1997; South 2003: 172–75; Thornton 2005).¹⁹ In these regions, state-building projects have tended to be restricted, however, as revenues were necessarily directed to maintenance of the opposition group’s military personnel and equipment.

Today, more than a dozen mostly small groups are still fighting against the government, while another twenty-eight groups have negotiated ceasefire arrangements or surrenders with Rangoon (Smith 2007, forthcoming). The so-called “ceasefire movement,” as the International Crisis Group (2003) notes, “began somewhat by accident” in 1989 in northeastern Burma, when the Burman leadership of the Communist Party of Burma faced serious rebellions from its rank-and-file troops, who were mostly from two ethnic minority groups. This mutiny was organized along ethnic lines, and out of it came two key parties to separate ceasefire agreements, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Kokang Democratic Party. Major General Khin Nyunt, then the powerful secretary-1 of the junta, seized the moment and offered these groups quite extensive local autonomy over economic, social, and local political affairs as well as the opportunity to hold on to their weapons. In return, the junta was able to pull back troops from former war zones and concentrate its units against remaining opponents. Subsequently, the regime continued to negotiate with individual armed opposition groups, although it refused any negotiations with joint fronts, such as the National Democratic Front. Another fifteen major ceasefire agreements followed.

As Ashley South (2004) notes, the precise terms of these agreements are not known, but in general it is clear that the terms are not uniform across all ceasefire groups. In all the ceasefires, “the ex-insurgents

have retained their arms, and still control sometimes extensive blocks of territory (in recognition of the military situation on the ground)” (ibid.). The ceasefires have reduced the most serious human rights abuses associated

populations displaced by decades of warfare have been resettled and have begun rebuilding

with counterinsurgency. Some populations displaced by decades of warfare have been resettled and have begun rebuilding their communities. However, none of the agreements appears to have addressed the fundamental political and economic grievances that fueled the insurgencies nor the enormous challenges faced by war victims trying to rebuild their lives. The agreements are, as Tom Kramer (2005: 38) notes, “merely military accords.” In some areas, the *tatmadaw* and the armed groups have relocated major contingents of civilians in the name of “resettlement” and “economic development.” In all but the Wa special regions, the national state—especially the *tatmadaw*—has built a presence with great haste as the spoils of the resource-rich regions were ripe for exploitation in border states. The seventeen “special regions” established in these ceasefire agreements are due to expire when the SPDC completes its constitution-writing process, one that has been ongoing and clearly troubled since its start in 1993. None of these agreements brokered anything approaching “peace.” In many of these areas, citizens may experience less physical violence than they did during the insurgency, but few have achieved any greater security in property or livelihood.

Across all of the territory claimed by the SPDC, rebel groups, and ceasefire groups, emerging political complexes rely on the networks of transborder trade, ad hoc alliances among state and nonstate actors, and external agencies to execute political power, extract resources, dictate conduct, and provide some degree of order. There are variations among complexes and networks in different parts of the country, but they diverge less according to the existence of “war” and “peace” and more according to resource and infrastructure endowments, proximity to borders, and historical legacies of conflict.²⁰ Although the complex historical legacies of particular conflicts are beyond the focus of this monograph,²¹ it is important to understand how today’s emerging political complexes were shaped considerably by the transformative events of 1988.

State-Society Relations after the 1988 Crisis

From the months leading up to Burma’s 1948 independence through today, the Rangoon-based state has faced a series of armed challengers who have tried to change the nature of state-society relations in the country. Some, like the Communist Party of Burma, sought to capture the reins of the state in Rangoon, while others—defined in terms of ethnic identity and territorial claims—have sought either greater political or cultural autonomy or outright independence from Burma.

For all of these challenges, 1988 was a watershed year. A series of demonetization measures in 1987 devastated the economy and wiped out the savings of most Burmese people, triggering the gradual collapse of former General Ne Win's Socialist Party state over the next year. Popular (often student-led) demonstrations presented a new set of challenges to the struggling state. They erupted in Rangoon in late 1987 and continued there and in other urban areas sporadically into the following year despite occasional violent crackdowns. In September 1988, army leaders seized direct power in a coup d'état. They established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) under the chairmanship of the army commander and Ne Win follower, General Saw Maung.²²

Quite surprisingly, in August and September 1988, the armed opposition groups did not take advantage of the disorder in central Burma by launching major armed offensives against the *tatmadaw* (Smith 1999: 11). Nonetheless, although the uprising was confined largely to major urban areas of central and lower Burma, the fallout of both the uprising itself and the *tatmadaw's* response to it had far-reaching implications in the ethnically-demarcated states where most of the armed challengers were located.

Almost immediately following the army crackdown, thousands of protestors from central Burma made their way to safe havens along the borders with Thailand, India, and China. Ethnic nationalist, armed opposition forces that had been fighting the government for decades controlled nearly all of the Thai borderlands and significant stretches along the Indian and Chinese borders. The newly-arrived, mostly Burman protestors received shelter, training, and medicine from the groups at the borders. Some even were given weapons by these groups. Aung Naing, a Burman student leader in 1988, told a journalist about his experience at the border:

It was tough, most of us were city kids with no experience of living in the jungle. We built and lived in basic bamboo huts. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) supplied us with food, but it was difficult to survive. The Kachin didn't completely trust us, as we were Burmans. They gave us a region to make money from jade mining and tax. It was 8,000 feet high, rocky, and difficult to grow rice or crops. We depended on supplies getting through to us.... We went without rice and salt for ten days. We became weak and those who got malaria died. I lost many friends, some only eighteen years old.... (quoted in Thornton 2005: 163).

Since the 1980s, the Thai border in particular has seen extensive traffic in Burmese people fleeing persecution and economic vulnerability. Refugee arrivals have been met by an influx of large numbers of external assistance workers and groups, as well as legal and illegal business concerns keen on making use of powerless, cheap labor. One study estimated in 2002 that with as many as two million Burmese migrants living in Thailand, the outflow of Burmese constituted “one of the largest migration flows in Southeast Asia” (Caouette and Pack 2002: 7). Only a small percentage of these migrants have anything approaching legal status, which leaves most Burmese subject to the deprivations of Thai police, the Thai military, factory and sweatshop operators, and various criminal gangs that operate along the border. As on the Burmese side of the border, these regions inside Thailand are subject to the regulation of constantly shifting and adapting networks of Thai state agencies, different branches of Thai police, UN agencies, international development NGOs, factory owners, criminal gangs, tour operators, mercenaries, and religious authorities. One journalist notes that there are “as many as fifty different NGOs working out of Mae Sot, but still the number of Burmese and Karen in and around the town who are jailed, beaten, robbed and killed increases each year” (Thornton 2005: 116).

In central Burma, the junta undertook a massive expansion of the armed forces to assert central control over national political and economic affairs. By 1996, the regime claimed that the *tatmadaw* doubled in size; it also undertook unprecedented purchases of higher technology equipment, arms, and materiel.²³ Local army commanders in towns and villages

throughout the country confiscated land for new army garrisons and outposts, while the numbers of naval and air force bases also increased (Selth 2002). The military expanded its economic and industrial base as well, and set up lucrative military corporate ventures, such as agricultural

*the regime claimed that the
tatmadaw doubled in size*

plantations, banks, and holding companies like the Myanmar Economic Corporation and the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, Ltd. The junta delegated day-to-day administration of the country to its regional commanders. Subsequently, regional commanders supervised the

construction of roads, housing, suburbs, and markets; rearranged and displaced urban and rural populations to accommodate tourism, military expansion, and other state priorities; and expanded surveillance and crowd control capabilities. Along the way, regional commanders have amassed enormous wealth and power, especially when posted to the commands flanking Burma's borders. There they oversee formal and informal trade, investment, transport, and border crossings—all of which provide ample opportunities for personal and institutional enrichment.

This state rebuilding process brought with it a new geography of military deployment and functions. In the aftermath of the bloody end to the 1988 uprising, military leaders correctly calculated that should an alliance develop between the opposition in central Burma and armed, ethnic-minority rebels beyond the center, the army lacked the capacity to fight battles in border regions and in central Burma alike. Accordingly, then-Major General Khin Nyunt initiated ceasefire negotiations with ethnic rebel groups in 1989.²⁴ Over the next several years, seventeen of the twenty-one major antigovernment forces concluded ceasefire agreements with the SLORC.

In parts of the territory where ceasefires ended decades of fighting, the SLORC deployed regional commanders, local battalions, the Ministry for the Development of the Border Areas and the National Races (later renamed the "Ministry for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs"), and other line ministries to build roads, power plants, telecommunications relay stations, Burmese-language schools, hospitals and clinics, and other institutions aimed at both modernizing and pacifying former rebel-held territory. Most of the laborers involved in these infrastructure projects have been local villagers whom the government requires to provide a certain number of days work or else pay fees to buy their own time back.²⁵ The government provides materials for some of these projects, but more commonly material purchases are financed either by levies on local citizens or in barter deals with foreign companies seeking to exploit natural resources. Although many of these developments were in part facilitated by changes in the nature of global capitalism and the easing of the Cold War in the 1980s, the 1988 uprising in central Burma nonetheless played a crucial role in transforming the political, social, and economic landscapes of the border states.

Emerging Political Complexes in Burma's Ethnic Minority States

Since 1988, the national state has been a major if not dominant partner in the strategic complexes that exercise authority throughout much of the territory in Burma's ethnically demarcated states. Bringing together bureaucrats, *tatmadaw* and ceasefire group soldiers, the USDA, traders, financiers, smugglers, traffickers, religious leaders, traditional authorities, NGOs, international aid organizations, foreign governments, and diaspora communities, these complexes vary across regions and time, across war and ceasefire zones, and within the ethnic states themselves.

Despite this variation, these emerging political complexes have in common six fundamental characteristics.

Predatory Image of the State

Throughout most of the ethnic states, there is a widely-held consensus about the image of the central, or national, state as predatory. While SPDC members as well as Burman pro-democracy opposition leaders based in central Burma make plans for governing the border states and its mostly non-Burman residents, minority elites and masses alike in the ethnic states respond nearly universally with suspicion and skepticism.²⁶

*minority groups...felt they
were victims of [Burman]
intra-elite struggles*

They cite historical grievances and blame the ethnic-majority Burmans for ongoing oppression, conflict, and poverty. At times, minority groups have felt they were victims of intra-elite struggles between Burmans, with the settlements of these struggles—in their perceptions—too often leaving them twisting in the

wind.²⁷ Among many minority citizens, the prevailing view is that efforts by Rangoon-based governments to pacify, govern, and develop the ethnic states have borne few benefits and produced great hardships for residents therein. For many, the image of the SLORC/SPDC era is also particularly associated with extraordinary and rapacious levels of natural resource extraction.

This image of the state as oppressor has a particularly strong hold among populations who have lived in war zones. In areas of ongoing or previous combat, "Burma" and the national government are synonymous with the *tatmadaw* and its brutal counterinsurgency tactics, some of which

included forced displacement and forced labor, confiscation of food and other resources, burning of villages, and many other human rights abuses.

Increasingly Intrusive Practices of the State

The SLORC/SPDC has moved unprecedented numbers of troops, teachers, the USDA, police, and bureaucrats into the ethnically-demarcated states. In some regions, the nationalities report a feeling of “occupation,” while in others the intrusion is viewed less critically. The expanded presence of the state is visible throughout, however. Evidence of state expansion includes (but is not limited to):

- Massive growth of sheer numbers of army garrisons, often set up on land confiscated from farmers or local businesses with little or no compensation (Selth 2002);
- The initiation of large, flashy infrastructure construction projects—such as gas pipelines, microwave stations, universities, and hydroelectric dams—that typically rely on conscripted local labor and taxation, and sometimes involve the forced relocation of villages or neighborhoods (see for example, Ministry of Information 2004; EarthRights International 2001; Karenni Development Research Group 2006);
- Red-and-white propaganda billboards exhorting locals to support the national state;
- Frequent ceremonies with SPDC or ministry officials parading through towns and villages, opening roads, schools, plantations, or bridges, or making donations at pagodas (often with cash appropriated “informally” from local businesses);
- The near omnipresent township and village offices of the USDA (NDD 2006);
- The construction of new Buddhist pagodas on visible hilltops in areas that are predominantly Christian or Muslim;
- Donation plaques with government leaders’ names all over major Buddhist shrines;
- Increased numbers of road “checkpoints” or toll gates with proceeds benefiting army or police units, local USDA groups, or line ministries;²⁸
- Increased kinds and amounts of business “license” fees and levies on all civilians, most of which are payable to military, USDA,

- police, and line ministry offices. According to the Karenni Development Research Group (2006: 41), since 1988, Kayah State has been subject to “porter fees, gate fees, military fund contributions, sports fees, road and bridges fees, fire sentry fees, labor contribution fees, and levies on farms, farm water, and crops”;
- Army, police, USDA, and line ministry ownership of plantations and agricultural land (usually marked by official signage), where nearby villagers are expected to “donate” their labor;
 - Increased pressures on farmers to expand areas of cultivation or plant crops defined by the SPDC as national or regional priorities. An example of a national priority in agriculture is *kyet-su*, or physic nut (*jatropha curcas*), which is said to produce a kind of castor oil that can be used to create biodiesel;²⁹
 - Expansion of the number of model villages. In some areas, like northern Rakhine and northern Karen States, these approximate strategic hamlets exercising social control over potentially hostile populations (usually ethnically-defined) or involving the resettlement of displaced populations.³⁰ In other areas, villagers apply for model village status to obtain some government services in exchange for adhering to strict planting and production schedules set by local and ministerial officials, mainly from the Ministry for Progress of Border Areas (Human Rights Documentation Unit 2003; Loo 2004: 168–69; Amnesty International 2004: 22–24);
 - Presence of more line ministry officers at township levels; and
 - Expansion of government schools and rural health clinics (some of which, however, remain empty or underutilized because of a lack of staff or materials).

Globalization

Another common characteristic of the emerging political complexes is the unprecedented degree to which the populations living in the ethnic-minority border states have been affected by the increased ease with which capital, legal and illegal commodities, and persons move in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Given the decades of antigovernment warfare that transpired in these regions prior to the ceasefire agreements of the 1990s, the people in the border states have long been linked to shadow economies and transborder networks of “producers, traders, fixers, carriers,

suppliers and so on” (quoted in Duffield 2001: 147).³¹ In the last decade, Burma's border regions have seen a deepening and thickening of these networks, particularly the ones associated with the transborder informal economy. What is different in the post-Cold War era is that deregulation of much of the world's financial system has broken down barriers to illegal and legal trade in the commodities produced in these states. Trade across

the people in the border states have long been linked to shadow economies and transborder networks

Burma's borders, which flank some of the world's fastest growing economies, is dominated by natural resources, drugs, and human resources (workers flowing out to Thailand, India, and beyond). The ethnic-minority states are home to the vast majority of natural resources—especially hardwoods, gemstones, asbestos, tin, tungsten, gold, and non-timber forest products (like rattan and bamboo). These exports are going initially to China, Thailand, and a few other markets.

Additionally, the cozying up to China by General Khin Nyunt, former junta secretary-1 and later prime minister, and his decision to grant National Registration Cards to Kokang Chinese within Burma, has hastened the pace of Chinese investment in and exploitation of the ethnic states with which China shares its border. In the states sharing a border with Thailand, local communities see incoming investment and exploitation from Thailand, as well as vastly greater traffic going out, as young people especially traverse the porous border to seek work in the many sweatshops and factories along the border or in Chiang Mai or Bangkok. Thus, globalization has brought about a transformation in social relations in the border states, although its effects vary across different parts of the country.

all are subject to the vast power and impunity of regional commanders

Human Insecurity in War and Not-Quite-Peace Zones

The ceasefire areas and the war zones share common dilemmas: for example, unemployment and underemployment are devastatingly high, food shortages

are rife at certain times of the year, especially in hilly areas, social services are almost non-existent, and both state and nonstate authorities usually act with no accountability to local populations. Throughout the border states, all are subject to the vast power and impunity of regional commanders. In the areas of active armed conflict, violence and forced displacement are common and populations have little security in property or person. But even in ceasefire areas, neither the government nor most of the leaders of armed ceasefire groups appear committed to expanding community or individual participation in development and state-building enterprises.

Consequently, most citizens both in war zones and not-quite-peace zones have inadequate security or protection and little hope for the future of their children.³² Most are forced into the shadow economy to find alternative sources of livelihood and protection; in a few areas along the

borders, some have become dependent on donor assistance for subsistence. External investors and trading partners who have become parts of the emerging political complexes show little commitment to local populations once natural resources are exhausted or their supply is otherwise threatened. Foreign assistance to development projects in the ceasefire regions and to humanitarian relief in war zones has seen little commitment as well, largely due

to lobbying efforts by anti-SPDC groups, who invoke the poor human rights record of the junta and the political deadlock between the SPDC and pro-democracy advocate, Aung San Suu Kyi.

*Most [citizens] are
forced into the
shadow economy*

Leadership Struggles

In all of the ethnically-demarcated states, there have been significant struggles over the leadership of armed groups and other political institutions such as political parties or “special regions.” In the ceasefire areas, leaders have experienced rough transitions from serving as antigovernment warfighters to political, commercial, and administrative elites. Given the continued (but in some ways attenuated) dominance of the national state in most of these regions, leaders of groups defined in ethnic terms are caught in an impossible situation. On the one hand, they can try to wage peace with the government and to pursue social and economic development in whatever territory they can claim in the ceasefire negotiations. On the other hand, given the stranglehold of the shadow economy and the predatory behavior

of central state and *tatmadaw* officials in these regions, ethnic leaders will face significant obstacles when they try to deliver on their promises of redistribution and development.³³ Many such leaders now face charges of “collaboration” with or “being too close to” the SPDC.³⁴ If they choose to continue their armed opposition against the government, they risk another generation’s future as the much-strengthened *tatmadaw* continues to ply its brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. Not surprisingly, rivals periodically come along either from within Burma or from diaspora communities abroad to challenge ethnic leaders and to offer alternative visions.

Moreover, within all of these states, large numbers of people define themselves as ethnically distinct from the group for which the state or post-ceasefire autonomy zone is named. This context provides the SPDC with a range of possible allies to court in a divide-and-rule strategy. The tendency of power struggles internal to some ceasefire groups to turn violent has also created pretexts for the *tatmadaw* to move troops into new territory.

Underdeveloped Human Capital

For more than a century, the people living in the ethnically-demarcated states of Burma have had fewer opportunities than ethnic Burmans to develop the skills, expertise, and networks to allow them to benefit from the opening of Burma’s economy in the colonial period, the parliamentary period (1950s), and the SLORC/SPDC period since 1988. In these regions today, the very low levels of education and limited work experiences of local populations open the way for outside investors (especially the Chinese) to bring in their own employees for both skilled positions and basic labor. For example, logging companies from China bring their own cutters, drivers, and laborers to work their Wa Special Region 1 concessions. Burmese-Chinese joint ventures setting up rubber plantations in Kachin State do not hire locals (some of whom are displaced when their land or forests are taken away for the plantation), but instead bring experienced rubber workers from southern Burma or China. In Karen State, gold mining companies have attracted hundreds of Burman laborers and employed very few local Karens in their mining projects.

When ceasefire area leaders sell concessions for natural resource extraction or take cuts of government-sold concessions, they have no real leverage to insist upon job training or local hires. Moreover, administrative and professional positions are beyond the reach of all but the few literate and skilled workers. Although some ethnic minority states have seen an

increase in the numbers of school buildings and universities, the quality of education is greatly diminished by the low skill levels of state-appointed teachers. The government pays teachers salaries that are less than a living wage. Where communities cannot afford to supplement those teacher salaries, teachers quit and move on.

*Human resources remain
severely underdeveloped*

Human resources remain severely underdeveloped throughout the country, but especially so in the ethnic minority states. There, unskilled populations living on the edge of subsistence will have little

chance or inclination to rethink or redirect the nature, necessity, and value of existing political arrangements.

Three Patterns of Emerging Political Authority

By focusing on these political complexes, and in particular on who dominates both day-to-day affairs and longer-term policy in these regions, we can identify three different kinds of relationships between the central, or national, state, on the one hand, and ethnic-minority actors, partners, and officials in Burma's border states, on the other hand. These categories are meant not to be definitive, but rather heuristic as we attempt to understand the basic conditions in which peacebuilding initiatives will have to take place. It is beyond the scope of this monograph to survey each and every component of each emerging political complex in Burma's border states. Instead, this monograph seeks to complement existing and emerging literature on conflict and not-quite-peace in these regions. My intention is less to offer a comprehensive catalog of different conditions than to apply a set of conceptual and analytical tools designed to help us locate opportunities for and obstacles to peacebuilding in the future.

The next section explores the two extremes of strategic relations: occupation by the SPDC, the *tatmadaw*, other state agencies, and local and foreign business owners, and *near devolution* of power to networks of traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders. The subsequent section looks into the more dynamic relations of *coexistence* and accommodation.

The Extremes: Devolution vs. Occupation and War

There is a kind of spectrum of emerging political complexes that ranges from what appears to be a near devolution of authority on the part of the

military junta (e.g., in the Kokang and Wa special regions) to the deeply militarized contexts in which populations live under the thumbs of rulers unchecked by any alternative sources of authority (in northern Rakhine State, as well as in areas with ongoing, active combat, such as Kayah, Karen, and parts of Shan States). Across this spectrum, nothing remotely resembling “peace” has been achieved, even in areas where in the name of “peace” the SPDC has established near monolithic rule.

Near Devolution in Parts of the Shan State

The first two groups to conclude ceasefires with the junta now administer their “special regions” as well as their formal and informal economies in Shan State with comparatively little oversight by the SPDC. At the time of their 1989 mutinies against the Communist Party leaders, these groups were comprised of war-weary, ethnic minority foot soldiers. Subsequently, they established new armies and carved out territorial control. The Kokang Democratic Party (later renamed the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army [MNDAA]) took charge in the Kokang area; the United Wa State Army took charge of the Wa hills (and later in part of southern Shan State). Both groups occupy territory that is very remote from the major population centers of Burma and that is far more deeply integrated into the transborder economy with southern China. Hence, the networks of political authority in these regions involve only minimal influence from the SPDC, with far greater power in the hands of cross-border traders, financiers, former insurgent leaders, and ethnic Chinese syndicates that control the international drug trade. There is also a small but growing presence of international assistance organizations trying to serve populations driven into destitution by recent opium bans in Wa and Kokang territory. And finally, Chinese political leaders, from both Beijing and neighboring Yunnan, have exerted influence there, largely in their attempts to facilitate trade and manage their own growing domestic problems with drug trafficking and abuse.

Kokang negotiators promised in the ceasefire talks to eliminate opium cultivation by 2003

Special Region 1: Kokang

In northern Shan State, Kokang negotiators promised in the ceasefire talks to eliminate opium cultivation by 2003 (later moved up to 2001) in return

for autonomy in the form of a special administrative region (Kokang Special Region 1, or KSR1) along the Yunnan border. Kokang leaders, the national government, and village leaders launched crop substitution programs and law-enforcement initiatives to eliminate poppy farming. In return, residents (including many newly-arrived and as-yet-to-arrive from China) received National Registration Cards, which opened doors to educational and investment opportunities and the possibility for greater movement throughout Burma.

Estimates of KSR1's population run from an official count of about 100,000 up to unofficial counts of 200,000, a figure that includes the many Yunnanese who crossed the border to live in KSR1 urban areas. The Kokang Chinese speak a Chinese dialect and use the Chinese currency. They are thought to comprise about 80 percent of the population of KSR1, joined by smaller groups of Shan, Palaung, Lahu, Lisu, Wa, and Miao (*Shan Herald Agency for News* [S.H.A.N.] 2005b: 20).

After the ceasefire, Laukkai, Kokang's major city, greatly expanded, attracting numerous Chinese workers and business owners from across the border. Laukkai now has more reliable water and electric supplies, modernized communication facilities, several new schools, a new hospital, and a growing system of paved roads. A flourishing industry of massage parlors, karaoke bars, and nightclubs dominates the city scene in Laukkai and other urban areas in Special Region 1. Wealthier Kokang have taken advantage of easier travel by pursuing educational opportunities in Mandalay and Rangoon, as well as in China and Taiwan. Economic opportunities are insufficient, however. As a recent assessment team noted, "the rapidly growing population is nonetheless straining the ability of the Kokang Authority to provide food and other necessities to the people" (Joint Kokang-Wa Humanitarian Needs Assessment Team 2003).

The day-to-day administration of Special Region 1 is managed by the Kokang Authority (also known in the SPDC-controlled press as the Kokang National Group), under the leadership of Pheung Kya Shin and with the backing of the 3,000-strong MNDAA. The SPDC, which moved twelve battalions (approximately 2,400 soldiers) into KSR1, nonetheless has some impact there, but it is limited by "the isolation, the poor communication links, language barriers and to its lack of financial resources" (*ibid.*; S.H.A.N. 2005: 20). Elites associated with the MNDAA and the Kokang Authority are profiting enormously from formal and informal trade with China. For

example, the Kokang Authority has licensed Chinese companies to construct and operate large gambling casinos and smaller dens that cater to Chinese who cross the nearby border checkpoints. However, these operations offer little in the way of economic opportunities to most locals. Instead, the Joint Kokang-Wa Humanitarian Needs Assessment Team (2003) noted that 80 percent of casino employees in Laukkai are actually from China, a fact the team chalks up to the poor education—and hence unemployment—of most Kokang.

In the wake of the opium ban, most of the agrarian population in the Kokang region has seen household incomes drop to 10 percent of pre-ban years. The opium ban deprives local farmers of their main source of extra income, while the Kokang Authority seems incapable of grasping how difficult it is for cash-crop opium farmers to shift into new kinds of agriculture. The situation is grim, as the Kokang Authority estimates that 80 percent of its population produces enough rice to feed their households for only six months of the year. According to the Japan International Cooperation Agency (2005), farmers can no longer afford to buy food, fertilizer and seeds from China, and they have been forced to cut back on education and health care expenditures as a result of the opium ban. “Weakened by an insufficient diet, an increasing number of villagers fell sick and died. Some, burdened by huge debts, took their own lives. To make things worse, malaria began to spread, infecting more than 4,000 villagers and killing some 270.” For non-elite Kokang, migration to other parts of the country for work is difficult, given the region’s isolation and the fact that most villagers have never completed the national registration process required for such movement.

In addition to a panoply of small and larger Chinese business operators, KSR1 also hosts twelve UN, Burmese, and international agencies “working side by side at the field level” to alleviate poverty in the region through the Kokang and Wa Initiative (UN Resident Coordinator 2005). Projects focus on agriculture, water, sanitation, and community development.³⁵

Special Region 2: Wa

Relative to the Kokang Authority, the United Wa State Army and its civilian wing, the United Wa State Party (UWSP), administer more expansive and noncontiguous territory in Shan State.³⁶ Along the northern border with China, the ailing UWSP leader Bao You Chang heads the Politburo

and Central Committee with headquarters in Panghsang, while its Southern Command—along the Thai border—is led by Wei Xue-kang, an ethnic Chinese UWSA commander who has been indicted for drug trafficking by the U.S. government. He was also owner of what was a major Burmese bank that had branches across the Thai border.

The 1989 ceasefire agreement is believed to have given Wa leaders a free hand in their territory and the right to maintain their army, as well as promises of development assistance from the national state. Some observers have noted that the SPDC has granted unequalled local autonomy to the UWSA, which “permits Yangon’s armed forces to enter Wa territory only after advance notification” (Gibson and Haseman 2003). UWSA territory, particularly in the north, is deeply integrated into China’s markets; indeed, local clocks are set to China’s time, not Burma’s. Wa leaders also issued an opium ban, effective in 2005.

In its highly centralized and hierarchical style, UWSP administers a total population of about 600,000. In its territory in northern Shan State, most inhabitants are Wa. There is far greater ethnic diversity in the territory

of the southern command. The UWSA administration includes offices that oversee agriculture, the treasury, health, education, and external relations. As the Joint Kokang-Wa Humanitarian Needs Assessment Team (2003) noted, “The Wa Authority administrative style adopted from the Burmese Communist party model allows for little local

*[The United Wa State Party]
administers a total population
of about 600,000*

initiative. Orders and directives flow out from Pangsang through the Districts and Townships to the local people. Negotiation is not always possible.”

Much as in Kokang society, Wa society has undergone economic transformations. There is striking evidence of modernization in the urban areas alongside the increasing impoverishment among farmers who relied heavily upon opium as a cash crop to supplement the paltry rice harvests typical in the hilly terrain along the China border. Decades of isolation and of guerilla and counterinsurgency warfare made this area a magnet for drug production and trafficking. Many of the informal and illegal trade networks were originally set up by nationalist (Kuomintang) Chinese in concert with U.S. intelligence agents in the 1950s (McCoy 1971). Some of the major

players in the drug trade today came out of those networks. Over the last decade, the ban on opium has not undercut drug syndicate profits, which have been bolstered by the introduction of *yaba* (or methamphetamine, often referred to as “amphetamine-type stimulants” [ATS]) production and trade. Media reports label the 20,000-strong UWSA “the world’s largest drug-trafficking armed militia” (e.g., Black and Fields 2006). UWSA no doubt has a role in trafficking, but ethnic Chinese networks that extend from Burma to China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and beyond are deeply entrenched in and happily profiting from this business.

In part to deal with the destitution of farmers as the opium ban approached, and in part to gain control over greater territory and trade routes to Thailand, the UWSP has relocated 125,000 people from its northern Shan State territory to parts of southern Shan State that formerly had been controlled by drug kingpin Khun Sa (Lahu National Development Organization 2002).³⁷ In 1996, after helping the *tatmadaw* push Khun Sa and his Mong Tai Army to surrender to the junta, the Wa took control of this territory. Non-Wa minorities who inhabited that area appear to have lost their land to the relocated Wa.

Throughout Wa-controlled territory, most people live on the edge of subsistence. More than 80 percent of the population has no access to health services (European Commission 2001). Those who were relocated to southern Shan State were provided inconsequential funds for resettlement, while those who stayed behind have lost their ability to supplement meager rice harvests with cash derived from opium cultivation. Many of the latter were surprised that the UWSP actually enforced the ban last year; to some degree, their isolation and long history of cultivating opium probably made the proposed ban seem unthinkable.³⁸ Officials did little or no preparation to retrain farmers to transition to post-ban, income-generating work.

Although the UWSP has enormous power in Wa Special Region 2, it is not omnipotent. For example, in recent years, the production of *yabal* ATS has been of increasing concern to the international community, which is providing community development and other kinds of assistance to the vulnerable populations of the region. As the UN Office on Drugs and

Throughout Wa-controlled territory, most people live on the edge of subsistence

Crime (2005) reports, “cross-border complicity is an important aspect of ATS production in Myanmar, as the pre-cursor chemicals required to produce ATS are not manufactured domestically.” The UWSP has responded to these concerns sporadically, including arresting the youngest brother of Bao You Chang, but ATS trade appears to continue unabated. It seems unlikely that the UWSP, UWSA, or SPDC has the ability, and perhaps the interest, to shut down these very powerful narcotics syndicates.

In another arena, Wa influence has faltered. Wa leaders have continuously pressed the SPDC to designate Wa territory as a “state” (or something greater than a “special region”) in the coming constitution. Wa leaders want no part of being ruled by any state-level government emanating from what now constitutes Shan State. However, Wa initiatives regarding constitutional reconfigurations—like the initiatives of other ceasefire groups—have to date achieved no visible success with the SPDC.

The Other Extreme: Occupation and Exclusion

At the other end of the spectrum of state-society relations sits northern Rakhine State, where a significant portion of the population lives in what can only be described as an occupation zone. One of the seven ethnically-demarcated states in the Union, Rakhine State is comprised of two major population groups, one called the Arakanese, or Rakhine, and

one that self-identifies as “Rohingya.” The former are Buddhists and speak a language that is a dialect of Burmese, while the latter are Muslims who speak a dialect similar to Bengali (which is unintelligible to Burmese speakers) and live principally in the northern part of Rakhine State. No Burmese government has provided

[In] northern Rakhine State...a significant portion of the population lives in what can only be described as an occupation zone

citizenship rights to the Rohingya group as an ethnic group or national race in Burma. Instead, since the British colonial regime began taking censuses in the early twentieth century, these Muslims have been identified as itinerant residents who are of Bengali origin and not “indigenous” to Burma. The Citizenship Law of 1982 bans them from citizenship in that it

holds that only members of the 135 “national races” or those who can prove their ancestors settled in the country before 1826 can be citizens. Historical evidence suggests that Muslims in this region (now referred to as northern Rakhine State) have long had a presence dating back to distinguished service to Arakanese kings, but proving residence before 1826 is all but impossible. Moreover, this region has seen enormous movement of populations, including Arab and Persian merchants who for centuries traded with seaboard ports on the Bay of Bengal. Over the last 200 years, people have moved back and forth across the border that now separates Burma from Bangladesh as seasonal work or food crises demanded.

Since the 1970s, Burmese governments have treated most of the Muslims in northern Rakhine as illegal immigrants and have periodically engaged in crackdowns that have sent tens of thousands fleeing across the border into Bangladesh. The most recent mass exodus saw more than 200,000 (or half of the Muslim population) flee from this region in 1991–92. Soon thereafter, the governments of Bangladesh and Burma brought the UN High Commissioner for Refugees into negotiations to establish a repatriation and reintegration process that began in 1996. By 2002, more than 90 percent of these refugees were thought to have been repatriated to northern Rakhine. According to the UN Resident Coordinator in Burma (2005), the returnees make up fully one-third of the population of northern Rakhine State, while the other two-thirds have experienced greater livelihood and personal vulnerability as a result of the enormous difficulty of reintegration.

The villages and townships of northern Rakhine, then, are home to a stateless population that lives a very tenuous existence. The Western Regional Commander and the Border Area Immigration Headquarters (BIHQ) reign supreme. BIHQ (known by its Burmese acronym, *Nasaka*) is a task force that combines the agencies of the army, immigration, customs and police, and intelligence. Muslims who never left Rakhine as well as repatriated refugees are subject to the most comprehensive forms of government oppression short of systematic physical violence. Rohingya are required to pay high taxes to register births and to request permission for marriage, the latter often subject to lengthy delays. They also must apply for permits to travel anywhere outside their villages. Since most will never obtain permission to travel to the Rakhine State capital, Sittwe, or to the national capital, Rangoon, they have no access to advanced education and medical care.

Each family is required to register a “family list” with the local PDC chair; the latter updates these lists during home visits every six months, and anyone not present will be stricken from the list and denied the right to live there in the future. Families must obtain permits to build any new homes or to add even a tiny space onto their existing homes. Every permit, every registration exacts more fees from local residents. Food prices are artificially high, in part because of movement restrictions, but more likely because of a monopoly system that encompasses all trade, production, and finance—in a word, the entire formal and informal economy of northern Rakhine. As Chris Lewa (2003) notes, “Anyone engaging in an economic activity must either sell his product to the license holder below market price or pay him a tax. As soon as a new income-generating endeavour appears, a new monopoly is installed” (see also Human Rights Watch 2000; Martin and Shukla 2003; Amnesty International 2004; Sajjad 2003).³⁹

A small number of wealthy business operators control the economy. They bid each year for *Nasaka*-designated monopolies over essential commodities, including rice, chicken, fish, and fishing nets. These traders and *Nasaka* collaborate on managing northern Rakhine State and thus form an oligarchy that disadvantages all but a few local residents. Lewa (2003) estimates that nearly two-thirds of the population of northern Rakhine State is landless and must rely upon wage or daily labor, which again is difficult to secure because of travel restrictions. At the same time, aid workers in the region have observed that the local Muslims are required to provide more “community work” (i.e., forced labor such as sentry duty, portering, brick making, road construction, etc.) than people in other parts of the country, while Buddhist residents are usually exempted from this requirement. There are also frequent reports of land and food confiscation by soldiers, many of whom receive little official salary but are expected—as they are in other parts of the country—to devise strategies to make their units “self-reliant” (interview, international aid worker recently returned from northern Rakhine, Rangoon, June 2006).

As in Kokang and Wa areas, most of the population of northern Rakhine are disenfranchised, although in this case, the powers that oppress and exploit are working directly for the SPDC. The network of government agencies that constitute *Nasaka* regulate all aspects of the formal economy, while deeply penetrating most of the informal economy as well. Over the last few decades, Muslim activists in this area have formed armed opposition

groups, though none have registered significant gains or concessions. Today, *Nasaka* and the SPDC allow very little external humanitarian assistance in this area; they restrict access to only a few international organizations. The extreme vulnerability of the “Rohingya” may not end should elite-level political reform come about in the national government. As Lewa (2003) argues, Muslims do not expect that “discriminatory policies would be removed with the emergence of a democratic government. The Rakhine Buddhist population, public opinion in Burma as a whole, as well as in the pro-democratic movement, are not disposed toward recognising the Muslim population of Arakan as a people of Burma.”

Occupation: Ongoing—But Deterritorialized—War

In Burma, a different kind of occupation occurs in the war zones and their immediate surroundings. As of January 2007, at least two fairly large groups and a number of smaller groups were still actively fighting against the regime. In the last decade, the ethnic, armed opposition fighting the government has become to some degree deterritorialized. The combination of ceasefire agreements and combat successes by the beefed-up *tatmadaw* has greatly impaired the ability of insurgent groups to hold territory for sustained periods. Instead, anti-state armed groups have been forced into hiding and into positions where the greatest success they can achieve is to harass and check the *tatmadaw*. Government counterinsurgency campaigns still use the army's infamous “Four Cuts” strategy—to cut rebels off from recruits, food, finances, and intelligence—in order to flush out enemies and their alleged supporters, particularly in areas where control over natural resources, trade routes, and strategic populations is at stake.⁴⁰ In the last decade, armed opposition groups have been attacked by former comrades from splinter groups that made ceasefire agreements and that subsequently teamed up with government forces in counterinsurgency campaigns. The shifting alliances and terrain leave noncombatant civilians with even less protection than they had in the decades leading up to the ceasefire arrangements of the 1990s. They are stuck in the middle of warring parties, the physical boundaries and personnel of which are not easily identifiable. Armed units of both the *tatmadaw* and the ethnic insurgencies move populations around routinely, with rationales that range from security to outright profiteering. But movement itself in these areas is dangerous, given that multiple groups have been laying landmines for decades. This

section will cover two such regions where populations live in conditions of ongoing, increasingly deterritorialized war.⁴¹

The Karen Areas

The five to seven million Karen in Burma live scattered throughout Burma's southern territory. Large populations of Karen live in Irrawaddy, Pegu, Rangoon, and Tenasserim Divisions, and in Karen, Mon, Kayah, and southern Shan States. The largest and most significant ethnic nationalist group still at war with the national state is the Karen National Union (KNU), based along the Thai border in the Karen, Kayah, and Mon States. Largely as a result of the ethnically-divisive recruiting practices of the

colonial period, at independence in 1948 the Karen were among the longest-serving and most skilled soldiers and officers in the military. In 1949, when the Burman-dominated government refused to deliver political concessions to Karen political and community leaders,

Karen units within the new nation-state's fledgling army went into rebellion. Since then, soldiers and revolutionaries associated with the KNU have been fighting for autonomy from the national government.

The 1990s dealt the KNU one damaging blow after another. Having suffered defeat against major *tatmadaw* dry-season offensives beginning in 1984, the KNU suffered a ruinous internal split in December 1994, when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) broke ranks with the predominantly Christian-led KNU. Manerplaw, the KNU's headquarters, fell in January 1995.⁴² A month later, the *tatmadaw* overran Kaw Moo Rah, the last KNU stronghold north of Mae Sot. In 1997, the government's armed forces launched massive offensives against all remaining KNU-held territory and captured many former KNU bases. Although the precise nature of cooperation is not always clear, joint operations between the DKBA and the *tatmadaw* since the late 1990s have continued to jam the KNU up against the Thai border.

Despite attempts by mediators from both sides to initiate ceasefire talks in the 1990s, talks between KNU leader Bo Mya and the SPDC did not

The largest and most significant ethnic nationalist group still at war...is the Karen National Union

occur until 2003–04. The outcome of those talks, a preliminary verbal “gentlemen’s agreement” to stop fighting and continue negotiations, has been rendered void by the late 2004 sacking of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, widely considered to have been the SPDC architect of the agreement. In 2006, a series of *tatmadaw* counterinsurgency campaigns in northern Karen State and eastern Pegu Division sent 27,000 noncombatants, most of them Karen, into hiding or to the Thai border for shelter. (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium 2006). The December 2006 death of Bo Mya has left the KNU in greater disarray, with yet another split in January 2007 leading to the formation of one more splinter group from the Seventh Brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)—the military arm of the KNU.

Throughout Karen State, the territory remaining under KNU control is at this point less clearly identifiable due to all of these losses. At the same time, some regions are more or less firmly under government or DKBA control, and others are experiencing dual administration. Since its breakaway, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army has been seen as an SPDC proxy force in formerly KNU-held territories. The DKBA’s headquarters is in Hlaing Bwe Township, which is also known as the Myaing Gyi Ngu region. The area is actually administered by the Myaing Gyi Ngu *Sayadaw*, U Thuzana, a revered Buddhist abbot and a founder of the DKBA. He is believed to have a direct relationship with the government (or at least he did until the SPDC arrested Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004). The *sayadaw*’s area of influence is thought to have 20,000 inhabitants, many of whom migrate in and out when in need of economic assistance or protection.

Few communities in Karen State live in anything remotely approaching conditions we might call “peace.” There is a vicious cycle at work there, as in the areas of Shan State where the Shan State Army (South) continues to fight and in Karenni regions where the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) still fights. After the ceasefires with the breakaway groups, the *tatmadaw* expanded the number of battalions in Karen State, bringing thousands of soldiers but

*Few communities in Karen State
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approaching... “peace”*

few resources to a region that has been a battleground for more than two generations. Along with the military came natural resource concessionaires, some from Burma, but mostly from Thailand, China, or Malaysia (Kramer 1994). The increased presence of the *tatmadaw*, its business partners, and other SPDC agencies created potential targets to be hit by KNU guerrilla fighters. Counterinsurgency campaigns, waged by both the *tatmadaw* and some ceasefire groups, have aimed at depopulating villages suspected of harboring or associating with the KNU, resettling villagers in relocation camps, and turning broad swaths of territory into “free-fire” zones. As Human Rights Watch (2005: 17) reported, “This approach aims to transform ‘black’ (rebel-held) areas into ‘brown’ (contested/free-fire) areas, and then into ‘white’ (government-held) areas.” Karen communities get caught in the middle of this violent storm of militarization. Cross-border aid workers from Thailand, seeking to bring medical and other much-needed assistance to these communities, sometimes travel under armed protection, which only reinforces the regime’s view that these areas are legitimate (by the government’s standards) targets of counterinsurgency campaigns.

The political complexes that exercise authority in Karen State are manifold. Despite its weakness and its losses over the last fifteen years, the KNU remains a symbol of Karen nationalism and, as such, retains some popular resonance as the predatory nation-state exploits Karen communities throughout southern and eastern Burma. But like the SPDC and the DKBA, the KNU and its military force, the KNLA, also prey on farmers, workers, and other locals. Villagers can be taken as porters or laborers by any of these groups as well as by the *tatmadaw*. All have at various points forced young men into military service and coerced individuals and

communities to provide cash, food, and other resources (ibid.: 22–23). At times, DKBA units have also come under threats from local *tatmadaw* commanders, and some DKBA soldiers have reportedly returned to the KNU (ibid.: 24).

To some degree, other players also have an impact on authority in this region.

Foreign companies, especially in the logging sector, have cut deals with whatever “officials” (SPDC, DKBA, KNU) can deliver access to valuable

*Recent U.S. moves...may
increase incentives for flight
from Burma*

commodities. The Thai government has at times made it very difficult for Karen refugees, workers, and insurgents to subsist in Thailand, thus limiting escape as an option. Recent U.S. moves—including the granting of immigration visas to refugees in predominantly Karen refugee camps along the border—may increase incentives for flight from Burma. Thai border-based assistance groups, with as much as \$30–40 million in foreign assistance each year, provide food, medical care, and shelter to refugees in Thailand as well as in some nearby areas of Karen State (via cross-border excursions). International aid agencies, few of which can operate legally deep inside Karen State (in the borderlands), struggle to maintain politically neutral assistance programs in the border refugee camps, most of which are in fact manipulated by Thai and KNU agencies and personnel.

Kayah State

In Burma's smallest state in the Union, Kayah State, the Karenni National Progressive Party reached a ceasefire with SLORC in 1995, but it unraveled within a few months over what most likely was a disagreement about a lucrative logging concession (Reh 2005; KDRG 2006; South 2003: 225). In Kayah State, several other groups concluded ceasefires in 1994, including the Karenni National People's Liberation Front, the Karenni New Land Party, the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization (SSNLO), and a small splinter or paramilitary group from the Karenni New Land Party called the Kayan Home Guard. At times, ceasefire groups have fought alongside the *tatmadaw* against the KNPP. Soon after its ceasefire negotiations, the Karenni National People's Liberation Front took control of border crossings long held by the KNPP, thus depriving the remaining Karenni armed opposition group of its major source of revenue—taxation of border trade.

Official estimates put the population of Kayah State at just under 260,000, although this figure does not include the large number of internally displaced persons who probably number in the tens of thousands. Karenni or Kayah constitute the majority of the population in the state, while there are 10–20 percent each of Shan and Burmans, as well as smaller numbers of other groups, such as Karen and Pao. While the majority of residents are Christian, Buddhism is practiced here as well. Soldiers in the former and current armed opposition groups in Kayah State include Karenni and Kayah as well as other minorities.

Two major rivers traverse the state, providing irrigation for widely practiced lowland and upland farming. Much of the best land in the state is owned by a small number of wealthy families. Upland, slash-and-burn (*taungya*, in Burmese) farming proceeds with either traditional land tenure or no permanent legal tenure. Most families have food shortages that range from two to eight months per year. Forests—traditionally a source of supplemental foods and income for farmers—have largely been stripped bare by logging authorized by successive Rangoon-based governments, local military commanders, and armed opposition groups. The military presence in this state dates back to the early 1960s, when the government constructed a hydroelectric power plant at Lawpita Falls outside of Loikaw. The hydroelectric plant supplies over twenty percent of the country's total electrical power today. With two new dams in the works in this state, the *tatmadaw* presence has been growing, as has been its resolve to wipe out the KNPP.⁴³ As a result, the *tatmadaw* launched large-scale assaults on KNPP positions in the late 1990s, forcing villagers caught in the middle to move into military-administered relocation sites, go into hiding, or flee to Thailand. In 1996 alone, 25,000 people were uprooted in these campaigns (Lawrence 2002).

The lucrative border crossings as well as the presence of two major rivers make this region a magnet for profiteering and violence. As a result,

one report notes, “displacement of civilians in Karenni State became, and still is, a common fact of life” (KDRG 2006: 14; see also Bamforth et al. 2000). More than 22,000 Karenni live in refugee camps in Thailand, and more than 90,000 internally displaced persons are thought to be in hiding,

government “relocation” sites, or otherwise on the run within Karenni State (TBBC 2005: 24). Because of the ongoing conflict and the forced relocations of the population, the government has allowed little external humanitarian assistance in the region.

Much as in Karen State, the emerging political complex in Kayah State is a highly militarized one. As a report by the Burma Ethnic Research Group observed in 2000, “The ceasefires have allowed armed groups to legitimize their role in the extra-legal State economy and, in fact, appear to

The lucrative border crossings... [are] a magnet for profiteering and violence

have led to further factionalism in the competition for increasingly scarce resources” (Bamforth et al. 2000: 8). These groups are tied increasingly to agencies and officials associated with the Thai and Chinese governments, international financial institutions (said to be supportive of dam projects), and transnational business enterprises seeking electric power and natural resources in the state.

Coexistence: Resignation, Accommodation, and Acceptance

The above discussion of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army points to another emergent phenomenon: that of the evolving networks of accommodation that appear to be developing among ceasefire groups, other ethnic minority groups, the SPDC, the military, commercial interests, and external actors. In some areas, the coexistence looks more like resignation, as local ethnic nationalist leaders recognize the limits of their ability to challenge the SPDC for much in the way of local autonomy. In other areas, the accommodation is more contested, though not necessarily less durable. But a third pattern emerges in which relations among political authorities appear to proceed in a much smoother, more consensual manner. In general, patterns of accommodation reflect the historical legacies of conflict (against either the Burmese state or other internal groups) and state-building, on the one hand, and resource endowments and economic opportunities, on the other hand. Where economic opportunities have been minimal and security considerations peripheral to the national state, local elites have had little leverage to negotiate autonomy as the regime and especially the army has expanded its reach. Hence, the result has been a kind of resignation. In areas flanking strategic trade routes or bearing significant natural resources, local (i.e., ceasefire and other) leaders have been more inclined to defend some locally-defined economic, cultural, and political interests in their various autonomy zones. Nonetheless, in return for these concessions, the latter groups have also accommodated and in some cases accepted the terms of the expanding national state.

In some areas, the coexistence looks more like resignation

Resignation: Chin State

Chin State, one of the more remote regions in Burma, has been under the steadily increasing day-to-day domination of the junta. It was never

considered of great economic or political significance to the Rangoon-based state prior to 1988. At that time, pro-democracy protests occurred in towns in Chin State. Subsequently, some Chin protestors fled to India, where they formed the Chin National Front, which has been engaged in occasional skirmishes with the *tatmadaw* over the last nineteen years. Although early on India supported the student leaders and condemned the military regime, in the mid-1990s the Indian government changed to a policy of engagement as well as military coordination along the border with Burma.

Hence, in the post-1988 period, Chin State has seen the junta develop a greater presence, although the junta has also given local representatives of the central government what appears to be fairly extensive autonomy. The population, the majority of whom are thought to be Christian (especially in northern Chin), is about 500,000 and is dispersed thinly. Chin is one of the poorer states, and although its forest products and mines attract investor interest, its lack of infrastructure has left Chin state mostly off the map of major resource exploitation. Over the last fifteen years, the number of *tatmadaw* battalions grew from one to ten; the arrival of more than 5,000 Burman soldiers placed new pressures on an already very weak state economy.⁴⁴ Human rights organizations also report the arrival of an increasing number of Buddhist monks encouraged by the SPDC to convert Chin Christians to Buddhism. Over the last fifteen years, local PDCs, the military, and other government officials have narrowed the space for the practice of Christian religions. Chins are not generally able to get permission to build new churches; large crosses have been taken down or destroyed by soldiers; and there are rampant reports of monks offering incentives (money, exemption from forced labor, etc.) to families that convert to Buddhism. Chin diaspora groups have tried to mobilize international pressure on this issue, but there has been little relief (Sakhong 2003; Za Uk Ling 2004)

The Chin population is organized around numerous clans and speaks a variety of local languages, many of which are mutually unintelligible. Chin communities are based on a system of village-level organizations responsible for economic and social activities such as land management, education, and religious affairs. In contrast to other ethnically-demarcated states in Burma, villagers in many parts of Chin State have been able to choose their village authorities according to their own rules, although township PDC officials nonetheless perform a final screening of the candidates.

In the Chin Hills, much of the population is unable to produce enough food for the entire year and relies on temporary outmigration, casual labor, or cash crops to try to supplement household incomes. Some families, however, are without much food for four to eight months. Social services are minimal and churches have had to tread carefully in providing assistance to the vulnerable. The SPDC claims to have opened ninety-one new schools since 1988 (*NLM*, February 4, 2006), but many Burman teachers assigned to Chin State do not stay long when they discover how little additional income villagers and townspeople are able to provide to supplement teachers' meager salaries. Since 2002, the SPDC and the Western regional commanders have declared Chin State to be the "tea state." Farmers have no choice but to plant tea, and the military has confiscated land near towns to create its own tea plantations or sell off concessions to wealthy families to do the same. Many small farmers are hesitant to plant tea because tea requires more water, fertilizer, and labor inputs than they can afford. The "tea state" policy has disrupted what had been for years a very effective, traditional land management and tenure system. By giving priority to farmers willing to plant tea, the SPDC has undermined the authority of village leaders. As a result, village collective life has been characterized by greater conflict resulting from the difference between traditional management institutions and SPDC-mandated tenure.

Financial capital is particularly scarce in Chin State. Sources of credit are insufficient. Poor families cannot readily access resources, and most depend on informal borrowing from and economic relations with the better-off families in the locality. Moneylenders operate mostly in towns but cannot satisfy the high demand for credit in this fragile economy.

Some international aid has made its way to Chin State; for some years now Group de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques has run village-level microcredit schemes; CARE and World Vision have carried out HIV/AIDS prevention programs; and others have implemented nutrition and healthcare support services. Nonetheless, throughout Chin State, there is a sense of resignation about the emergence of post-1988, post-isolation political authority. By deploying soldiers, monks, PDC officials, and the Union Solidarity and Development Association, the SLORC/SPDC state has gradually moved into the region, sold off what natural resources it

*In the Chin Hills...[s]ocial
services are minimal*

could (limited by the underdeveloped infrastructure), and reaped some revenues, although fairly small compared to the wealth generated in other ethnically-demarcated states.

Accommodation: Kachin State

An uneasy accommodation is perhaps most clearly identifiable in Kachin State, a largely agrarian state where many of the 1.4 million residents depend on either foraging in the forests or itinerant jobs to supplement what they earn or produce in farming. In Kachin State, two ceasefire groups—the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the New Democratic Army, Kachin (NDA-K)—have achieved a sustained truce with the junta, although not necessarily a significant understanding.⁴⁵ Like other ethnic nationalist groups that affiliated with the Communist Party of Burma prior to 1989, the NDA-K concluded its ceasefire in 1989 and was given territory (Special Region 1-Northeast Kachin State) to administer in both Kachin and northern Shan States along the Chinese border. Its headquarters is Pangwah. The KIO and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which had been fighting against Rangoon since 1961, had a troop strength of about 6,000 when it concluded its 1994 ceasefire. As a result of the ceasefire, the KIO set up headquarters in Laisin and the KIA in Laiza, both of which are east of Myitkyina and close to the Chinese border. Both the KIO and the NDA-K control border crossing points; both are thought to be forbidden by the ceasefire agreements to actively recruit new soldiers or to levy formal taxes (but do so anyway); both rely heavily on revenue raised from logging concessions; both have experienced coups internal to their organizations; and both have sent representatives to the National Convention.

The similarities stop there, though, as the NDA-K operates more like an armed syndicate, while the KIO has tried to establish a kind of state-within-a-state (Global Witness 2005: 54). As the oldest and most broadly supported nationalist group in Kachin State, the KIO faced pressure from followers to obtain major political concessions from the military junta when it agreed to stop fighting. Since the ceasefire agreement, however, no political solution has emerged. In its Kachin State-Special Region 2, the KIO has control over roughly twenty distinct geographic sectors, as well as influence over some villages in northern Shan State. The 80,000-plus Kachins who were displaced from their homes during the war were largely

resettled in KIO and joint KIO/SLORC-controlled areas.⁴⁶ The KIO administration runs functionally-defined ministries and sends officials to the field in the territory it controls; likewise, KIA units are based throughout Kachin State-Special Region 2. All territory not designated KIO or NDA-K is mainly administered by the SPDC, which in fact constitutes about three-fifths of Kachin State (ibid.: 61).

This arrangement delegates enormous power to the *tatmadaw's* northern regional commander, who oversees and regulates most economic activity in the state and to whom the ceasefire groups are required to report. Occasionally, one Kachin business owner reports, the regional commander uses this authority in beneficent

ways. One group of Kachin elders convinced the current regional commander, Major General Ohn Myint, to exempt Christians from *corvée* labor requirements on Sundays. (More than one-third of

Kachin State residents are Christian.) Major General Ohn Myint also eliminated all road checkpoints (i.e., toll collection sites) in Kachin State, which makes travel there much simpler than in other regions of the country. Nevertheless, the coziness of northern regional commanders with Chinese resource extraction companies as well as the large influx of Chinese into Kachin State's major city, Myitkyina, have left many Kachins feeling like they are being occupied from the north (by China) and from the south (by the Burmans).

The ceasefires have led to a notable decrease in the numbers of the most serious human rights abuses associated with the civil war, but have not led to the development of a dynamic and growing economy or much in the way of social services to help farmers, workers, and resettled Kachins adjust to the not-quite-peace-time context. In urban and rural areas, churches have attempted to provide aid to the poor and schooling for underserved communities. However, they have been hampered by continued intransigence of the government to allow Christian education and some social services in SPDC-controlled areas. Major "development" projects in the region have focused on transportation infrastructure, with 65 percent of the Border Area Development budget going to road construction (Global Witness 2005). Roads and bridges are a double-edged sword: on the one

*Major General Ohn Myint also
eliminated all road checkpoints*

hand, they are necessary for any kind of modernization of the economy, but on the other hand, they give the SPDC and the *tatmadaw* potentially greater control over the entire state. Troops just as easily traverse new roads and bridges as do migrant workers or investors. The military has become a much more visible presence in Kachin State, where new military garrisons, outposts, and farms have sprung up by the dozens, often on land confiscated from local farmers or, in at least one case, a retirement community.

Throughout Kachin State, the ceasefire arrangements have led to multiple sites of overlapping and indefinite authority. Foreign companies, local business owners, the KIO, and the NDA-K frequently pay SPDC and *tatmadaw* personnel to ignore illegal or informal economic activity. Exporters of natural resources sometimes have to travel along roads that pass through different authorities' territory, and thus end up paying taxes to all. In some

locales, this overlap has led to violence. For example, in November 2003, Burmese soldiers arrested six Chinese laborers and impounded four trucks carrying logs. The soldiers held the workers hostage until their Chinese bosses paid a ransom. Additionally, Global

ceasefire arrangements have led to multiple sites of overlapping and indefinite authority

Witness reports that "ceasefire groups have also entered [into] profit-sharing agreements with the *tatmadaw* and *tatmadaw* units have been known to grant logging concessions" (ibid.: 70). Foreign and Burmese NGOs that want to work in KIO areas have to apply for permission from the SPDC, the regional commander, and the KIO (Interview, Burmese NGO official, Myitkyina, May 28, 2006).

Additionally, in a handful of villages and towns, SPDC, NDA-K, and KIO all claim some degree of jurisdiction and all have officials on the ground. In some cases, this overlap leads to unstoppable predation on local community resources, but in other cases, it works to the advantage of villagers. For example, one Kachin official noted that farmers continue to produce small amounts of opium in a village near Sedon, where all three authorities claim power (interview, Myitkyina, May 25, 2006). In that area, villagers need the cash generated by opium to supplement their foodstocks. During the harvest, farmers are visited by representatives of each governing authority and told to stop growing opium. However, for a small fee, they

can be left alone. Since no single authority is responsible for eliminating opium, all three of them simply take their cuts, leaving the farmers with less, but still some, income.

International NGOs have been able to work in Kachin State since 1993, carrying out small-scale programs in the health, education, economic, environmental, and social sectors. They have to negotiate for access with combinations of the three major political authorities (SPDC, NDA-K, and KIO) in the state. Kachin State is thus home to an emerging political complex characterized by constantly shifting contestation and in some ways surprising degrees of accommodation among a variety of state, nonstate, NGO, commercial, and religious actors. An example of the shifting contestation: Global Witness (2005: 56) recently produced evidence that with the support of SPDC, the NDA-K is “aggressively expanding its logging activities into both the Southern Triangle ... and the N’Mai Hku area,” both areas assigned to the KIO in the ceasefire agreement. KIO leaders have felt their hands are tied in this kind of matter. They worry that if they stand up to the NDA-K, the confrontation will further splinter Kachin solidarity and open up Kachin State to increased intrusion by the SPDC. Hence, the KIO decided to overlook the incursion.

At times, even the SPDC has been unable to circumnavigate the layers of overlapping authority. For example, the junta has failed in its attempts to squeeze even greater revenues out of the logging concessions (Global Witness 2005). Moreover, commercial interests here—as elsewhere in Burma—are also hampered by the unreliability of contract security and the wide variety of formal and informal levies required to operate.

Pragmatic Acceptance: The Pao National Organization

In contrast to the states of resignation and uneasy accommodation in Chin and Kachin States, respectively, the Pao National Organization (PNO) leadership has achieved a kind of post-ceasefire acceptance of a diminished, unequal role in the emerging and very complicated set of networks that govern the economy and social relations in southern Shan State. Approximately 500,000 Pao inhabit southwestern Shan State, with another 100,000 in rural areas of Karen and Mon States. Mostly Buddhist, Pao

*Pao National Organization...
has achieved...acceptance of a
diminished, unequal role*

live interspersed among Shan, Danu, and other ethnic groups. After Burma's independence in 1948, Pao armed units have fought intermittently against Shan domination. Later they also fought against the Rangoon-based state. Like other insurgent groups, the armed Pao organization underwent an ideological split when one group—which renamed itself the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization, under the leadership of Tha Kalei—came under the influence of the CPB in the 1970s. Shortly thereafter, a former Buddhist monk, Aung Kham Hti, emerged as the head of the PNO. The latter finalized a ceasefire with the SLORC in 1991, and SSNLO followed suit in 1994.

PNO leaders, who established their headquarters in Kyauktalone, were granted some autonomy over six townships in what became Special Region 6. Under the PNO, these townships have largely welcomed the expanded presence of line ministries as well as other government officials and a small number of NGOs. The PNO has a presence in these townships, but does not have the capacity to assign shadow or replacement township officers to administer the territory directly. Pao leaders explain what appears to be an easier coexistence with the SPDC in highly pragmatic terms. One former officer of the PNO's armed wing, the Pao National Army (PNA), noted, "Our people are not so educated. If government officers leave the township, we cannot rule. We don't know how. We know how to fight" (interview, southern Shan State, May 31, 2006). The PNO has accordingly emphasized education as one of its priorities, sending students to Taunggyi, Mandalay, and Rangoon for higher education and professional training opportunities. Some of these courses are funded or made available by local USDA branches. "Our problem is how to make administrators out of revolutionaries" (*ibid.*). As fellow Buddhists with a longer history of conflict with neighboring Shan principalities than with Burman authorities, the Pao decided early on to throw in their lot with the government rather than with Shan armed opposition groups.

PNO leaders, lacking extensive training and skills in administration, have not hesitated to look beyond their territory for advice. They have invited foreign and Burman businesspeople, tourism operators, and other consultants to advise them on post-ceasefire reconstruction. The Ruby Dragon Company, owned by former PNA General Nay Win Tun, is a joint venture between the government and the Pao leadership. Its main interests are in gems and jade, but it also has interests in construction, hotels,

agriculture, and tourism throughout the country. In the ceasefire agreement, the junta granted Pao leaders gem mining concessions in Hpakant, Kachin State. They were lucky: On January 1, 2001, they discovered “the largest jade boulder in the world” in their concession (Thanegi 2002). Ruby Dragon is now one of Burma’s top gem producers. “Peace has been good,” said Nay Win Tun (quoted in Horn 2004).

While the SPDC taxes Pao businesses (for example, ten percent is levied against tourism profits), the PNO has been directing resources into rebuilding Pao society after decades of conflict. Working almost entirely alongside SPDC line ministries or the USDA, Pao leaders have established schools in nearly every village and claim to have employed at minimum a midwife in every village, no matter how remote. Most Pao villages are self-sufficient in rice production, given their agricultural expertise and the quality of land they hold. They also harvest a diversified range of plants, including the important cash crop, *thanapet* (the leaves used in rolling cigars).

However, Pao Special Region 6 remains a not-quite-peace zone, given that it flanks territory where conflict is ongoing. For example, in late 2005, the other Pao ceasefire group, the SSNLO, broke into two warring factions that have been unable to reach a solution to their differences. SSNLO leader Tha Kalei has been deposed by Khun Chit Maung (a rival from within the organization) and is under virtual house arrest in Taunggyi. At Nawnghtao, Hsihseng Township, Hkun Chit Maung has renamed the SSNLO the Pao Regional Nationalities Unity Organization. The latter reportedly has less than 100 soldiers, but they are reinforced by units from the PNA, the army associated with Aung Kham Hti’s PNO. Not atypically, units of the *tatmadaw* have also moved into nearby territory to patrol the area, ostensibly to protect Nawnghtao from attacks by forces loyal to deposed SSNLO leader Tha Kalei, which are thought to number 250 (S.H.A.N. June 15, 2006).

The emerging political complex of Pao Special Region 6, then, is one of coexistence of SPDC, PNO, PNA, USDA, line ministries, foreign advisors, gem traders, and NGOs. This is a region where there are spoils to go around—the land is fertile, the tourism opportunities are ample, and the marriage of convenience between Burmans and Pao (in a Shan neighborhood) is a potentially durable one. In some senses, the Pao can afford to accept this kind of partnership.

Conclusion

Dah thwa paw lan shauk ...

[(It's like) walking on top of the edge of a *dah* (knife or sword) ...]

—Metaphor used by Kachin NGO official, Interview, May 2006

In the ethnically-demarcated states of Burma, strategic networks of actors have emerged that exercise varying degrees of political control over people, resources, territory, and borders. In most of these states, at least one decade has passed since ceasefire agreements brought truces to significant territory and peoples, but to date no uniform or monolithic form of political control has monopolized state-society relations. Peace and security have yet to materialize, and political authority rests in the hands of what seems to outside observers to be a bewildering array of government agencies, warlords, military and paramilitary units, gangsters, foreign firms and syndicates, religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations.

In the two extreme configurations of political authority—what I term “near devolution” and “occupation”—violence or at least the threat of violence remains the currency of governance, and most citizens are powerless to effect change or even express concerns or alternatives. In the “near devolution” areas of the Wa and Kokang special regions, the post-ceasefire leadership is armed and resorts to coercion to manage social, economic, and political conflict. In the “occupation” areas of northern Rakhine State as well as the zones of ongoing, anti-state/counterinsurgency warfare, local

authorities representing the SPDC provide “all necessary instructions” and expect (and generally get) minimal resistance. Alternative centers of power may exist in contiguous territory, but they provide little relief to the inhabitants of these occupation areas, and in fact may only put them at greater risk of violence. Communities and individual citizens have little in the

*Villagers living in between
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way of security, opportunities, or services and are subject to the worst forms of human rights abuses. Villagers living in between territory regulated by

different authorities (especially in between state and armed anti-state challengers) lead perhaps the most tenuous existence as they can be exploited and harmed by all sides.

Beyond these two extremes of relations between the central state and local ethnic minority leaders, however, are found the emerging political complexes that involve various government and nongovernment actors in ongoing contestation, negotiation, discord, cooperation, and/or complicity over the nature and composition of political authority. Over the last two decades, these relationships have created fragile but surprisingly durable political coexistence, as well as new ways of attaining wealth, status, privilege, and authority. Many of these relationships lack formal institutionalization, and the resort to violence remains a valuable bargaining chip. Nonetheless, no attempts to bring meaningful peace to these regions will succeed without taking into account the capabilities, assets, external support, and in some instances legitimacy of the actors and organizations constituting these elite complexes.

The actual makeup of these networks of coexistence has varied across regions and time. Leadership challenges and changes have been common among military and ceasefire elites.⁴⁷ Legal and illegal business operations have been subject to flight or insolvency as a result of mounting rent-seeking or renewed violence. Individual elites, ruling groups, community organizations, and NGOs may feel like they are constantly “walking on top of the edge of a *dah*,” unable to plant their feet firmly with any security or without bloodshed. But during the last fifteen years, we have seen that when one set of political or business elites goes down in zones of coexistence, another fills in, arriving at the bargaining table with a different set of chips, but nonetheless open to negotiation.

In a sense then, what appear to be frequent splits, reshuffles, realignments, and reorientations in areas like Kachin State and southern Shan State may in fact represent an underlying strength of these emerging political complexes. It might make sense to read these kinds of developments not as indicative of instability in political authority in these regions but instead as representative of the deepening and thickening of processes of accommodation and compromise among elites. These processes neither constitute peace nor predetermine successful conflict mediation in the future. However, that they exist must be addressed in any peacebuilding initiatives.

Across the ethnic states as well as the rest of Burma, most citizens are neither invited to the bargaining table, nor are they likely to want to appear there. They walk the edge of the *dab* every day as they try to negotiate shifting networks of power in their regions. Some are finding hope or security in community-based organizations that service education, community forestry and agriculture, or religious affairs (Heidel 2006). But one misstep reminds them that they are still living in conflict zones—whether or not there is active insurgency/counterinsurgency nearby. Governance may be less-strictly centralized, hierarchical, and unilateral in the ethnic minority states, but sustainable peace remains only a distant hope.

Recommendations

Those seeking to bring about conflict resolution or peacebuilding in Burma's ethnic states have to recognize that these emerging political complexes cannot be dismissed entirely as temporary, ad hoc alliances of convenience. Because of the ongoing dissonance among and between key players in these networks, there is a tendency to discount these evolving structures of authority. However, as specific actors have left or been eliminated from these complexes and others have entered, these changes have created patterns of authority that will have to be addressed, accommodated, incorporated, or restructured in order to move from war and truce to sustainable peace. As Mark Duffield argues, these existing complexes may be the only ones capable of building peace.

For the international community to foster peacebuilding in Burma's ethnic nationalities' states, it should start from the premise that all assistance must proceed in a participatory manner, one that does not assume any kind of one-size-fits-all solution. In particular, international support must not dictate solutions imposed from outside Burma, or by Burmans on ethnic minorities. Different configurations of political

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complexes will require situation-specific ways of engaging the masses and elites in discussions of reform in these arenas. At all costs, the international community needs to avoid being yet another powerful actor providing “all necessary instructions,” whether the instructions come from Washington, D.C., New York, Brussels, or Bangkok—just as the national government in Nay Pyi Taw cannot impose solutions in a one-size-fits-all manner.

In the two extreme configurations of political authority, the overarching problem for conflict management and peacebuilding is to identify a means for mediation between those in power and the majority, whose needs are not being addressed either by warlord-like ceasefire group leaders (in the case of *devolution*) or army and government officials (in the case of *occupation*). In both these extreme contexts, citizenries experience dire human insecurity. In these circumstances, it is imperative that the international community respond thoughtfully and in a timely fashion to what is clearly a growing humanitarian crisis. Where possible, aid should be channeled through whatever nascent or fragile local organizations can be found. Where it is not possible for local community groups to develop “bottom-up” solutions to the problems associated with deepening impoverishment and the degradation of environmental and health conditions, international organizations must fill the gap, using processes that ensure accountability, cross-organizational coordination and cooperation, and (when possible) advocacy for the disenfranchised in these areas.

In the areas where state and nonstate actors have achieved varying degrees of *coexistence*, citizens have access to a range of possible advocates and allies, such as religious groups, ceasefire groups (current leaders and those coming up through the ranks for future leadership positions), NGOs, international organizations, and even government officials in some circumstances. However, not all citizens have equal access, and not all of these countervailing agencies or groups hold themselves accountable to local populations or internationally accepted standards of behavior. The problem for building a sustainable peace in these areas goes beyond simple mediation and direct international aid for those in dire circumstances.

The matrices of coexistent authority have provided lifelines of material, financial, health, and moral support for hundreds of thousands of people, but they do so with varying degrees of institutionalization and accountability, both crucial components of a peacebuilding strategy. As elsewhere in Burma, humanitarian assistance should be directed at alleviating suffering

wherever possible. But in areas of political coexistence, the international community has far greater opportunity to support and strengthen the work of local or national community organizations and NGOs in the service, development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding sectors. During the last

*there are remarkable examples
of local initiatives*

fifteen years, domestic community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations in the ethnically-demarcated border states—and especially in these areas I have designated zones of “coexistence”—have grown exponentially, at least by Burmese standards (Heidel 2006). These groups represent a civilianizing force with varying degrees of influence in these emerging political complexes. Throughout Kachin and Shan States, for example, there are remarkable examples of local initiatives that use miniscule resources to deliver critical services—such as HIV prevention education and community forestry initiatives—albeit on a heartbreakingly small scale.

To carry out meaningful programs, leaders of community-based groups and NGOs constantly walk the edge of a *dab*. They have to carve out enough of a zone of autonomy from predatory state and nonstate elites without endangering themselves, their staff, clients, or programs. To be sure, few if any of them can exercise any real control over political reform processes that would address the longstanding anti-state grievances of many in these regions. Indeed, as Mai Ni Ni Aung (2006) and Jasmine Lorch (2006) have noted, civil society groups throughout Burma have to work in a governance environment that is suspicious of their very existence. As Lorch (*ibid*: 127) notes, often they draw on the contributions of “retired officials [who] are frustrated with the regime’s policies and the weak bureaucratic capacity of the state to perform its functions,” especially in the domain of social service provision. Other groups pair up with or have evolved from existing faith-based networks. Retired civil servants, Buddhist monks, and Christian church-leaders (at least in some parts of the country) help flesh out a “grey zone” that provides civil society with some cover from government hostility.

This is the time for discrete external support of civil society groups in Burma, albeit in degrees that match the capabilities of these organizations. Although there are highly skilled and trained professionals who run many

organizations, they face great difficulty in recruiting additional personnel to help build capacity. The weakness of human resource capacity, which has resulted from decades of inadequate education, constitutes the greatest hindrance to the growth of the civil society sector. Another priority, then, for external assistance should be training for professionals in the NGO sector.

More broadly, given that all of Burma is ruled by one armed group or another, any kind of sustainable peace will necessarily involve the disarmament and demobilization of large numbers of soldiers, including those serving in the *tatmadaw*, the security forces of ethnic nationalist groups, and the paramilitaries and criminal gangs. However, the formal economy is in no shape to absorb what will certainly be between 100,000 and 200,000 unemployed, demobilized soldiers. Additionally, it remains unclear what the SPDC has in mind for the armed ceasefire groups under the new, but as yet unfinished, constitution. Indications are that the ceasefire armies are to be disarmed and integrated into the military in some way, a plan that surely will strain the resources and logistical capacity of the *tatmadaw*.

Demilitarization, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of Burma's hundreds of thousands of soldiers will inevitably involve walking the edge of a very sharp, perhaps deadly, *dah*. A program of demilitarization and demobilization will be sustainable only if it is accompanied by the increasing formalization and regularization of the shadow economy. This kind of economic reform will be difficult given the way the informal economy depends on at least the threat of armed force to protect its transactions. A crackdown on the informal economy is certainly beyond the capabilities of current political and regulatory authorities, who are lacking in management skills when it comes to fiscal, monetary, and macroeconomic policies (Turnell 2006).

Given the nationalist outlook of the Burmese government, as well as the ethnically-focused nationalism of the ceasefire groups, there is probably little entrée for international support for demobilization. However, this

sustainable peace will necessarily involve the disarmament and demobilization of large numbers of soldiers

issue will be central for years to come among nascent domestic peacebuilding organizations. The international community should be on the lookout for opportunities to discretely provide DDR and conflict transformation training opportunities for personnel of these organizations and for others in the NGO sectors, both in central Burma and in the ethnic nationalities' states.

Endnotes

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1. Parts of south-central Shan State, where conflict is ongoing between the regime and the Shan State Army-South, also look like military occupation zones. Political affairs in the southern Shan State will be explored in another publication in the East-West Center Washington Policy Studies series.
2. South (2004) labels these conditions “negative peace.”
3. Duffield credits Mick Dillon, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Lancaster, for helping develop this concept.
4. My understanding of state strength and weakness sidelines notions of legitimacy, which I take—per Hyden and Bratton (1992)—to be an outcome of state-society relations rather than a major determinant of them.
5. There remains little in the way of solid data or analysis about the shadow economies in Burma, which have existed and at times thrived since precolonial times. Perhaps the most systematic account is Kyaw Yin Hlaing’s analysis (2001) of the way black markets worked during the socialist period, 1962–88.
6. In post World War II English-language discourse, the majority ethnic group has been called the “Burmans.” This group resides mainly in the central agricultural valleys of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers and in the southern coastal and delta regions. No Rangoon-based government has attempted an accurate census throughout the minority regions since 1931. Most scholarly sources estimate the ethnic makeup of the Burmese population as follows: 65 percent Burman, 10 percent Shan, 7 percent Karen, 4 percent Rakhine, 3 percent Chinese, 2 percent Mon, 2 percent Indian, along with smaller percentages of Assamese and Chin minority peoples (Smith 1999, 29–32).

7. In 1997, the regime changed its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council to the State Peace and Development Council. The only other major group to make a claim on national authority is the National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD, the political party led by broadly popular Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide election victory in 1990, but has never been permitted to take power. Linked to the NLD is the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma. Founded in 1990 and comprised of members of parliament elected in the 1990 election, it operates as a kind of government-in-exile. The Committee Representing the People's Parliament—founded in 1998 of members-elect inside of Burma—also claims legitimacy.
8. A village tract is comprised of 5–25 villages with one larger village as the administrative focal point.
9. The regime claims to have a strength of 400,000 soldiers, and it may indeed have fielded something close to that number in the late 1990s. However, reports indicate that many if not most battalions are well under requisite strength, and desertions of soldiers outnumbered new recruits. For example, see “Co-ordination Meeting Between Military Commanders in Northern Command,” held at the command's operation meeting room, minutes, October 20–22, 2005. See also Selth 2002; and Aung Myoe 1999a, 1999b.
10. It is difficult to obtain reliable data on the territorial expansion of the *tatmadaw* presence throughout the country. In Kachin State, Global Witness (2005) reports that in 2001, “a day's drive west and south of Myitkyina many army camps could be seen that were not present before [1994] ... By 2003, the number of *Tatmadaw* battalions around Bhamo had trebled from four to twelve.” EarthRights International and Southeast Asian Information Network (1996: 14) reports that in the Mergui/Tavoy area, the number of *tatmadaw* battalions expanded from 5 to 14 from 1990 to 1996.
11. *Naing-ngan* means “country,” or in some cases “state.”
12. The Three Main National Causes are: (1) non-disintegration of the Union; (2) non-disintegration of national solidarity; and (3) perpetuation of sovereignty. The Four Point People's Desires consist of: (1) oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges or holding negative views; (2) oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the State and progress of the nation; (3) oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State; and (4) crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy. Some in Burma refer—in jest—to the latter “desires” as the “three opposes and one crush.”
13. Two other junta decrees explicitly undermine the potential for a viable opposition to emerge: 3/90, relating to the right to assemble and campaign; and 8/88, which forbids criticism of government officials or the defense forces and slurs against SLORC/SPDC, which are punishable by up to three years in prison and a fine. Also, the 1975 State Protection Act—amended in August 1991—allows the national government to detain without trial for up to five years any person “who will do, is doing or has done, an act that endangers the peace of most citizens or the security of the State, or the sovereignty of the State.”
14. There has clearly been some loosening of this requirement, or at least its application in non-sensitive areas or to people not associated with the political opposition (Khin Zaw Win 2006). Large numbers of Burmese citizens now travel relatively freely from one place to another.

15. Locals expect that the northern regional commander will have to step in to resolve the dispute. Interview, May 2006.
16. See Northern Command 2005 and Selth 2002: 79–81.
17. The SPDC is in the process of moving government offices to Nay Pyi Taw, a yet-to-be-completed new administrative center near Pyinmana, in central Burma. On July 13, 2006, a senior general announced that the new city, Nay Pyi Taw, will be enshrined as the new nation's capital with the adoption of a new constitution. (Agence France Presse, July 13, 2006). The constitution will not likely be adopted before 2008.
18. The British also called these regions “the Frontier Areas” and the “Scheduled Areas.”
19. For example, Thornton (2005: 34) reports that in the 1980s, the KNU taxed all goods traveling through the territory it held at a rate of five percent, which was widely thought to generate some \$7 million in revenue per year.
20. Duffield (2001: 188) argues that the presence or absence of war does not determine the nature of emerging political complexes.
21. For more details on the history of particular conflicts and ceasefires, see other publications in the East-West Center Washington Policy Studies series.
22. All told, the year-long crumbling of Burma's socialist authoritarian regime and the accompanying euphoric movement for democracy resulted in a death toll of at least 10,000, many of whom were unarmed citizens killed by Burma's soldiers.
23. In its first decade, the junta also spent over \$1 billion on 140 new combat aircraft, 30 naval vessels, 170 tanks, 250 armored personnel carriers, as well as rocket launch systems, anti-aircraft artillery, infantry weapons, telecommunications surveillance equipment, and other hardware. See Brooke 1998 and Davis and Hawke 1998. See also Tan 2004 and Aung Zaw 2006 for updates.
24. The conditions that led the SLORC to initiate Burma's ceasefire movement are surely more complex than this, given that it was the first time in 26 years a Rangoon regime attempted to forge sustainable truces. Other proximate causes of the shift in strategy include the winding down of the Cold War, which meant that anticommunist, ethnic insurgent groups along the Thai border were no longer of use to the anticommunist concerns of the Thai military; subsequent pressure by Thai officials on insurgent groups to repatriate refugees; weaknesses within major insurgent groups (such as the CPB); war weariness among insurgent leaders and followers; desires on the part of senior *tatmadaw* officers and regime partners to gain control over valuable natural resources in the border regions; etc.
25. Regarding forced labor and unpaid forced labor, until 1995 the SLORC invoked the Village Act (1907) and Towns Act (1907) laws, which allow local leaders to demand compulsory labor from residents. On June 2, 1995, the SLORC issued an order to State/Division Law and Order Restoration Councils on the subject of “Prohibiting unpaid labour contributions in national development projects.” However, most observers consider the practice of compulsory labor to have continued unabated.
26. While Aung San Suu Kyi has broad public support among many ethnic minority communities, many nonetheless harbor doubts about her or her party's ability to govern in the best interest of minority groups. Interviews: Sittwe 1998, Mawlamyaing and Hpaan 2004, Myitkyina and southern Shan State 2006.
27. An example: observing the then-ongoing talks between the NLD and the regime in

- 2002, a spokesman for an ethnic armed rebel group told a journalist that he was worried the NLD would make a deal with the SPDC that would sacrifice its ethnic minority allies (Lawrence 2002).
28. These seem to have peaked a few years ago. Kachin State has no checkpoints; a professional tour guide and driver reported fewer checkpoints in central Burma and southern Shan State than in previous years (Interview, May 2006).
 29. According to Brigadier General Hla Htay Win, Rangoon Regional Commander and Chair of the Rangoon Division PDC, "Physic nut oil can be used to meet the fuel needs of the nation to some extent ... and it is necessary to grow the plant widely throughout our country" (*NLM*, February 8, 2006).
 30. The Thai Burma Border Consortium (2006) estimates at least 500,000 internally displaced persons in the following states/divisions: southern Shan, eastern Pegu, Karenni, Karen, Mon, and Tenasserim.
 31. Since the British era, the formal financial system of Burma has never reached most Burmese, either in the central or border regions. Most instead rely on friends or families for credit or else on moneylenders charging extremely high interest rates.
 32. A recent report by Karen Human Rights Group (April 29, 2006) drove this point home: "Civilians in SPDC-controlled areas of Papun (Mutraw) district report that they are always suffering at the hands of SPDC soldiers and live with constant worry for their daily livelihoods." The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2004: 3) reported that populations in ceasefire areas recorded "the highest rates of hunting and gathering" for income generation, "indicative of the livelihood constraints of resettlement into these areas."
 33. In Kayah State, for example, the 1995 ceasefire agreement between the government and the Karenni National Progressive Party broke down within a few months. According to Abel Tweed, the KNPP foreign minister, "Some [Karenni] people blamed us for the fighting [that followed the breakdown of the ceasefire]" (quoted in Lawrence 2002). When the three factions of the KNPP returned to negotiations in 1999, a commander of the KNPP's army allegedly murdered two negotiators.
 34. The latter was a charge against the KIO leadership that I heard frequently during interviews with Kachin business and religious leaders in Myitkyina, May 2006.
 35. According to the UN Resident Coordinator (2005), the partners in KOWI are: Japan International Cooperation Agency, seven UN agencies, seven international NGOs, the SPDC's Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control, and *Nataka* (the Ministry for Progress of the Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs).
 36. For a more nuanced account of conditions in Wa Special Region 2, see Tom Kramer's forthcoming publication in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series.
 37. The Wa arrivals in southern Shan State displaced tens of thousands of Shan and Lahu living there.
 38. Interview, foreign consultant recently returned from WSR2, Rangoon, May 2006.
 39. In late 2004, when Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt was forced out of office and his Military Intelligence directorate disbanded, there were rumors that *Nasaka* would eliminate the monopoly system. However, there appears to have been no significant change.
 40. On the Four Cuts strategy, see Aung Myoe 1999a, 1999b; Selth 2002; Smith 1991, 1994, 2002; Karen Human Rights Group 1999; Kramer 1994; Project Maje 1994

- and 1996; Amnesty International 1988a, 1988b, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002; Global IDP Database 2003; Lang 2002; and Risser et al. 2004.
41. Other publications in the East-West Center Washington Policy Studies series will discuss ongoing insurgency and counterinsurgency in the Shan State.
 42. Most media attention is on the DKBA, but there have been other smaller breakaway groups as well. The Thandaung Special Region Peace Group broke away from the KNU and forged a ceasefire with the government in 1997. It receives a monthly salary from the government for its soldiers, largely according to the government pay scale, and sets aside one-third of these funds for community welfare.
 43. KDRG (2006: 11) reports that 24 army battalions are based in Karenni State; more are likely to move in because future dam construction will entail more extensive security arrangements.
 44. The government justifies its expanded military presence in Chin State by arguing that the Chin National Front represents a threat to state security. However, the government does not even list the CNF as an "armed group" (Sakhong 2003: 2). Perhaps access to natural resources, key border areas, or evolving trade routes are more likely explanations.
 45. A third group, the Kachin Defence Army, is based mostly in northern Shan State (Global Witness 2005: 50).
 46. Kachin Independence Organization 1995, cited in South 2003: 372. South writes that there was "no official repatriation programme per se, rather ... these [resettlement] areas are already existing towns and villages which are in the process of being upgraded."
 47. For example, the changes in the junta makeup and *tatmadaw* command structure in the capital and the frequent reshuffles (1993, 1997, 2003, 2006) of regional commanders appear designed to curb warlordism.

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Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia

Project Information

Project Rationale, Purpose, and Outline

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Rationale

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries.

Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were suppressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course. Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries, including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

Purpose

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such conflicts have affected

the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

Design

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.

Publications

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and

will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

Public Forums

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeast India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

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Background on Burma/Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts

One of the ethnically most diverse countries in the world, Burma (Myanmar) has suffered continuous armed ethnic conflict since independence in 1948. A series of ceasefires since the late 1980s has significantly reduced the levels of fighting across the country, but the legacies of hostility run deep, and the achievement of sustainable peace remains a major challenge in the twenty-first century.

The lands constituting the modern union-state of Burma have a turbulent history. From the foundation of Anawrahta's empire at Pagan in the eleventh century, political authority often fluctuated in wars between different Burman, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan rulers in Buddhist city-states on the plains. Meanwhile Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other ethnic groups in the hills were only nominally brought under control of the various dynasties and kingdoms. On a major crossroads in Asia, a diversity of cultures proliferated and survived.

Colonization by the British in the nineteenth century temporarily imposed external authority over this complex ethnic mosaic, but at the same time exacerbated existing ethnic cleavages. While Central Burma was subjected to British administrative and legal institutions, the non-Burman Frontier Areas were mostly left under the traditional rulers. This division compounded political and economic differences during a time of rapid social change. The British policy of recruiting hill peoples into the colonial army and the conversion of many to Christianity only fuelled interethnic suspicions.

During the Second World War, Burman nationalist forces in the Burma Independence Army initially fought on the side of Imperial Japan, but eventually turned against the Japanese and cooperated with the returning British Army. However, atrocities committed during the early months of the war by Burmans against Karen and other minority groups loyal to the British had dangerously increased ethnic tensions.

At the 1947 Panglong Conference, Chin, Kachin, and Shan representatives agreed to join a new Union of Burma in return for the promise of full autonomy. However the leaders of other ethnic groups were not included in these discussions, and the Karen national union boycotted the 1947 elections. Burma's first constitution deepened these emerging

fault lines by granting unequal rights to different ethnic groups and territories. During the hurried British departure, conditions were being created for conflicts that would endure for decades to come.

The first major group to take up arms against the government after independence was the Communist Party of Burma in March 1948. As violence escalated, armed struggle rapidly spread to the Karen, Mon, Karenni, Pao, Rakhine, and other nationality groups. The invasion by Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang remnants into the Shan State in late 1949 aggravated the breakdown of the embattled central government.

By the late 1950s, the mood of rebellion had spread to the Shan, Kachin, and other ethnic groups, frustrated by what they perceived as governmental neglect. In 1960, Shan and other nationality leaders organized a Federal Movement that sought, by constitutional reform, to replace the centralized system of government with a genuinely federal structure. Their efforts were aborted though, when the national armed forces under General Ne Win seized power in March 1962. Parliamentary democracy was brought to a complete end.

For a quarter of a century, Ne Win attempted to impose his isolationist “Burmese Way to Socialism” on the country. Confronting intensive counterinsurgency operations, armed opposition groups were gradually pushed out of the central plains into the surrounding borderlands. Here, however, insurgent forces were able to maintain control of their own “liberated zones,” financing their struggles out of taxes on Burma’s flourishing black markets that included illicit opium. Against this unending backdrop of war, Burma became one of the world’s poorest countries.

The post-Cold War period has brought major changes to Burma, but no definitive solutions. The new military government, which took power after quelling pro-democracy protests in 1988, refused to hand over power to the newly-formed National League for Democracy that won the 1990 general election by a landslide. Instead, following the collapse of the insurgent CPB, the regime forged ceasefires with a relatively large number of armed ethnic opposition groups, while massively expanding the national armed forces.

In these endeavors, the military government was helped by neighboring countries that change their policies of *de facto* support for opposition groups to close economic relations with the post-Ne Win regime. This decisively shifted the military balance in favor of the central government,

which continued to be largely boycotted by Western nations. New infrastructure and economic projects were started in many areas previously contested by insurgent groups, with central government authority extending further than ever before. In contrast, opposition groups became steadily weakened, divided over tactics between militant forces, ceasefire groups, pro-electoral organizations, and those that sought broader alliances.

In the twenty-first century, Burma's future remains delicately poised. A few insurgent groups have continued largely defensive guerilla warfare, but with little apparent hope of reasserting their authority by military means. However, the ceasefire groups similarly fear that the country's new constitution will provide few concessions to ethnic aspirations. Additionally, ethnic parties that stood in the 1990 election have been excluded—like the NLD—from constitutional discussions.

Against this backdrop, conflict and human rights abuses have continued in several border regions, sustaining ethnic anger and resentment. The desire is widespread for peace through dialogue. But the sentiment that future generations will take up arms again to continue the cycles of political violence cannot be discounted.

Pre- and Post-1989 Names

State/Division Names Pre-1989	State/Division Names Post-1989
Chin State	Same
Irrawady Division	Ayeyarwady Division
Kachin State	Same
Karen State	Kayin State
Karenni State (pre-1951)	Kayah State
Magwe Division	Magway Division
Mandalay Division	Same
Mon State	Same
Pegu Division	Bago Division
Arakan Division	Rakhine Division
Rangoon Division	Yangon Division
Sagaing Division	Same
Shan State	Same
Tenasserim Division	Tanintharyi Division

City/Town Names Pre-1989	City/Town Names Post-1989
Bassein	Patheingyi
Myitkyina	Same
Bhamo	Same
Paan	Hpa-an
Pagan	Bagan
Moulmein	Mawlamyine
Taungoo	Toungoo
Prome	Pyaw
Pegu	Bago
Akyab	Sittoung
Rangoon	Yangon
Lashio	Same
Taunggyi	Same
Pangsang	Panghsang
Tavoy	Dawei
Mergui	Myeik

Map of Burma/Myanmar



- Capital Cities
- Cities and Towns
- ~ Provincial Boundaries
- ~ Country Boundaries

Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.

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