Country Studies Series: Myanmar

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Sunil Kumar Pokhrel

Background

Myanmar (formerly Burma) occupies part of the Indochinese Peninsula, and is surrounded by India, China, Bangladesh, Laos, and Thailand. The Bay of Bengal touches the southwest coast. It has a land area of 678,500 sq. km. and a population of 47,758,181. The capital of Myanmar, Rangoon, is also the largest city.

Modern-day Myanmar suffers from a high inflation rate and an economy based almost solely upon the export business. It is rich in natural resources; however, mismanagement and acute corruption among the high-levels of the military have worsened the country’s economic condition. It has a per capita GDP of $1,900, placing it among the poorer countries in the world. The majority of the population lives in rural areas and has not experienced economic growth or prosperity. The private sector dominates in agriculture, light industry, and transport activities, while the military leadership controls energy, heavy industry, and the rice trade.

Modern Burmese are primarily an ethnic mixture of Indo-Aryans—who began pushing into the area around 700 B.C.—and the Mongolian invaders. In 1612, the British East India Company sent agents to Burma, but the Burmese doggedly resisted the efforts of British, Dutch, and Portuguese traders to establish posts along the Bay of Bengal. Eventually, through the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824–1826 and two
subsequent wars, the British East India Company expanded to the whole of Burma. By 1886, Burma was annexed to India, and then became a separate British colony in 1937. During World War II, Burma was a key battleground; the 800-mile Burma Road was the Allies’ vital supply line to China. The Japanese invaded the country in December 1941, and by May 1942 occupied most of it, cutting off the Burma Road. After one of the most difficult campaigns of the war, Allied forces liberated most of Burma prior to the Japanese surrender in August 1945. The country gained full independence from the British in 1948.

The official government record shows a total of 135 ethnic groups and over 100 languages that have been identified in Myanmar; many of these groups live in the hills bordering the neighboring countries of India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand. The Burmese ethnic group makes up 68% of the total population, followed by the Shan (9%), the Karen (7%), and the Rakhine (4%); the remaining 12% consists of Chinese, Indians, and other groups. The Burmese are predominantly Buddhist, whereas the Karen and the Shan are predominantly Christian, and the Rakhine are a mix of Buddhists and Muslims. Hinduism is practiced mainly by Burmese Indians and Nepalese. The Muslim and Christian populations face continuous religious persecution by the military leadership and others. The Jews, once thousands in number, have been reduced to less than one hundred. The correlation of minority ethnicity with minority religion in Myanmar has intensified the divisions between ethnic groups there.

Current State of Coexistence

Democratic rule ended in 1962, when General Ne Win led a military coup. The leaders of this coup immediately banned political opposition, suspended the constitution, and introduced Burmese socialism. Military rule has endured since then. The current head of state is Senior General Than Shwe, who is the chairman of State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the commander in chief of the Defense Service. In the 39-member cabinet, 33 posts are held by military officers. The current regime has ruled since September 1988 after it used the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) to violently suppress pro-democracy protests. The leader of the opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, which focused world attention on SLORC’s repressive policies. Suu Kyi remained under house arrest from 1989 until 1995, and again from 2000 to 2002. In 2003, the government cracked down once again on the democracy movement, detaining Suu Kyi and shuttering the headquarters of her National League for Democracy. She has remained in government custody since 2003.

There have been many peaceful movements (in 1974, 1988, 1991, 1994, 2003, 2004, and recently in 2007) against military power in Myanmar. The latest round of widespread pro-democracy protests, prompted by a sharp increase in fuel prices, erupted throughout the country in September 2007. Participation in the peaceful protests grew over several weeks. When Buddhist monks joined in the protests, it created a huge impact in the democracy movement. The monks emerged as the leaders of the protest movement and gained national and international sympathy and support. On September 26, the military cracked down on the protesters, firing into crowds, raiding pagodas, and arresting monks. After almost two weeks of protest, the monks disappeared. The monasteries had been emptied. A defected Myanmar intelligence official claimed that “thousands of protesters are dead and the bodies of hundreds of executed monks have been dumped in the jungle.”

In response to the recent military crackdown, the UN Secretary General sent Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to Myanmar on September 29, 2007. He conveyed serious concern over the undemocratic acts perpetrated by the military government in dealing with the peaceful protests. Following Gambari’s report, the UN Security Council condemned the use of violence in Myanmar. The EU, the US, Australia, and Japan have imposed economic sanctions.

In addition to the democracy movement, the country has been severely affected by ethnic insurgencies, mostly in rural areas, since its independence in 1948. In short, insurgency has remained endemic and, in many areas of Myanmar, the armed struggle is virtually a way of life.
Amnesty International asserts that the military junta has committed human rights violations in the name of counter-insurgency activities, “including forcible relocation, forced labor, torture, and extrajudicial killings.” In its efforts to assert control over ethnic border areas, the government has emptied over 3,000 villages in a decade, an average of almost one village each day.\(^9\) Mary Kaldor, a scholar of global governance, analyzes the military hold on power by saying, “The strategy is political control on the basis of exclusion – in particular, population displacement – and tactics for achieving this goal are terror and destabilization.”\(^10\) In recent years, the government has been able to manage most of the ethnic insurgency groups by granting their leaders lucrative business deals, such as timber concessions, in exchange for cease-fires, and by tolerating and often colluding in their drug trade. These cease-fire agreements have proved a useful means for the government to consolidate its power in previously contested border regions.\(^11\) However, some of the major insurgent groups, including the Shans and the Karens, still have not signed peace agreements with the government.

The Karen ethnic group has been fighting for independence since January 31, 1949. Since most of the Karens converted to Christianity during British colonial rule, they are often labeled as colonial sympathizers, and are treated by the Myanmar military as an internal enemy. During the 1980s, the Karen fighting force numbered 20,000, but now it is reduced to only 4,000. Due to this protracted war, 200,000 Karen have been displaced and have fled to neighboring countries.

The military also fueled conflict with the Shan ethnic group by abolishing their traditional “Saoph” power-sharing system in 1962. The Shan have been engaged in an intermittent civil war against the government since then. In May 2005 they announced their desire for an independent state, which has been rejected by the present regime as well as the main opposition party (NLD).\(^12\)

Along with the ethnic conflict, there is mutual fear and antipathy between the religious communities in Myanmar. The majority of people consider Buddhism to be their national identity and see the Christian and Muslim minorities, who are supported by rich countries through missionaries and others, as threatening to that identity. The military leaders fuel this psychology for their political longevity.

### Policies and Initiatives

#### International Corporations

Malnutrition, un/under-employment, and lack of access to education and health facilities are common in Myanmar. The military government has granted control of many natural resources to multinational corporations, which are the main backers, either directly or indirectly, of the Myanmar regime. This creates frustration among the population, sometimes manifested in peaceful ways, and other times in armed insurgencies.

At present, more than 127 international companies based in 20 different countries are working in Myanmar; some countries are involved directly through their state-run corporations and some are involved through private companies. The main stakeholders in Myanmar’s natural resources are India, China, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Canada, Singapore, and France. These countries gain profit from the military regime, and in turn, the regime gets foreign currency to buy arms and ammunition and to run the country as it wishes. Myanmar’s natural gas reserves are controlled by the regime in partnership with the U.S. multinational oil giant Chevron, the French oil company Total, a Thai oil firm, Indian state-owned oil companies GAIL and ONGC Videsh, and Chinese state-owned companies CNOOC and CNPC; these are the main profiteers from the ongoing conflict of Myanmar.

International NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Earthrights International, have developed campaigns to pressure multinational corporations to end their business relationships with the Myanmar government, with mixed success. As long as these corporations and others cooperate with the military regime, it will be nearly impossible for their home countries to pressure the government through economic sanctions. In particular, China has refused to back UN sanctions or resolutions condemning human rights violations and the imprisonment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi because of its economic stake in Myanmar’s natural resources.

#### Civil Society

All politically motivated trade unions, youth/student organizations, or professional associations are banned in Myanmar. Many civil society organizations exist, but most of them are supporters of the present regime. Underground student and youth organizations have often been at the forefront of the democracy movement. Due to this fact, whenever there are protests, the government’s first response is to shut down the universities in the capital. In addition, the government leaders continue to “maintain tight control over the media and are extremely reluctant to expand access to communication technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet, because of their potential use in anti-government activities.”\(^13\)

Buddhist monks—among the most prestigious people in Burmese society—have emerged as a strong force for
reform in Myanmar. According to the government, the population of professional monks is around 500,000. In the Buddhist tradition, each family has to select at least one member to become a monk. Besides their role as spiritual leaders Myanmar’s Buddhist monks are a force that has been politically active since the 1930s, when they led protests against the country’s British colonial rulers. They also played a strong role in the 1988 pro-democracy protest. Their major role in the pro-democracy protests of September 2007 indicates that the monks could play an important part in any future peace process.

Diaspora Community
There are two predominant types of Burmese living abroad: those who were politically harassed and exiled, and those who left the country for economic reasons. More than half a million Burmese refugees live in camps on the country’s borders. Those who left the country due to political or security reasons use special networks to support the internal movement against the Myanmar military regime. Much of the politically active diaspora has joined or developed human rights organizations in Europe and America, which have been at the forefront of international pro-democracy campaigns due to the inability to form civil society organizations within the country. There is, however, a difference in opinion within the politically active diaspora on the issues of the Karen and the Shan’s demands of independence. Economic migrants, on the other hand, often unknowingly support the regime by sending remittances to their families in Myanmar. As migrant remittances are often the largest source of foreign exchange in developing countries, there are some who argue that these money flows contribute to sustaining the country’s economy, and therefore those currently in power.

International Community
In 1961, U Thant, then Burma’s Permanent Representative to the UN and former Secretary to the Prime Minister, was elected Secretary General of the UN and served for ten years. At that time, Myanmar had excellent relations with the UN. Since the military junta captured power, relations with the UN and other international organizations have been continuously deteriorating. As the protests for democracy gain force, international organizations have been pressuring the regime in a variety of ways. In 2006, a divided United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution that strongly called upon the government of Myanmar to end its systematic violations of human rights. In January 2007, the UN Security Council, responding to widespread concern that the outflow from Myanmar of refugees, drugs, and HIV/AIDS and other diseases threatened international peace and security, put forward a draft resolution calling on the government of Myanmar to respect human rights and begin a democratic transition. Russia, China, and the U.S. vetoed the plan. Following the uprising in September 2007, the UN and many influential countries again voiced strong opinion against Myanmar’s regime. According to a September 2007 article on CNN.com, “The Bush administration announced that 14 senior officials in Myanmar would be subject to sanctions. Those targeted include the junta leader, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, and the No. 2 man, Deputy Senior Gen. Maung Aye. The action freezes any assets the 14 have in U.S. banks or other financial institutions under U.S. jurisdiction, and also prohibits any U.S. citizens from doing business with those individuals. European Union diplomats agreed to consider imposing more economic sanctions on Myanmar. Sanctions were first imposed in 1996 and include a ban on travel to Europe for top government officials, an assets freeze and a ban on arms sales to Myanmar. Australian Prime Minister John Howard said his government would also press Beijing to urge the junta to end its violent repression.”

At the annual Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in January 2007, held in the Philippines, foreign ministers had asked Myanmar to make greater progress on its roadmap toward democracy and national reconciliation. But, in apparent support of the Burmese regime, Singapore banned all outdoor protest at the next ASEAN summit. After the September 2007 crackdown, however, the ASEAN ministers called for the release of all political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition, during the summit, in November 2007, a group of international students at Singapore universities sought to defy the protest ban by posting a banner urging the regime to “Stop Arrests and Killings Monks,” and calling for democracy in Myanmar.

Complementary Approach
The conflict in Myanmar has many levels – it is rooted not only in the lack of democracy and a multi-party system, but also in issues of ethnic minority, religious identity, natural-resource distribution, and multi-national and trans-national economic interest. Therefore, the analysis of this conflict is difficult. A meta-conflict or complementary approach is the appropriate tool, as it takes into account the diverse but interwoven issues leading to conflict in the country.

The underlying problem in Myanmar is a political one. The exclusion by the military junta of all political parties, including pro-democracy and ethnic minority-based parties, from the process of nation-building and governance is fueling disaffection and conflict. “Cross-party communication” is essential, as is the development of
more inclusionary politics. Roger Fisher, a scholar of negotiation and conflict management at Harvard Law School, suggests that something along the lines of a Facilitated Joint Brainstorming (FJB) \(^{21}\) workshop would be a starting point for reducing the present conflict. “As in FJB, influential members of the parties come together to generate creative options on both substance and process that may improve the situation and relationship, with the help of third party facilitators. In addition, participants have no authority to commit anybody to anything at any time during these deliberations.” \(^{22}\) This might be a platform for future formal dialogue between conflicting parties.

China and India should use their influence as regional powers to resolve this protracted conflict. Without their involvement, a peaceful solution is almost impossible. However, these two countries are reluctant to push for an end to the conflict due to their economic interest in keeping the military leaders in power. Pressure must be kept up by international NGOs and the international community, in the form of the United Nations, to compel these countries to support sanctions against the military regime. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations can also help facilitate talks between the key stakeholders. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations can also help facilitate talks between the key stakeholders.

Democracy Work
A major priority for Myanmar should be to get the country back on the democratic track. But it should be noted that the existence of democracy in itself does not guarantee peace. The appropriate structures must be developed so power can be decentralized and handed down to the local level. The decentralization of power can be a way to engage groups in a central participatory and decision-making process while recognizing diversity. \(^{23}\) In addition, a proper power-sharing mechanism should be applied to include the voices of minorities. A compulsory proportional-representation system may be one way to include all minorities.

Human Rights
Since the military junta took power, human rights violations of the Burmese people and the ethnic minorities are a day-to-day phenomenon. As Amnesty International reported in 2001, “Over 300,000 Shan civilians have been forced off their farms since 1996 in order to cut off any alleged support for the Shan resistance. Between 20,000-30,000 Karenni villagers have also been pushed off their ancestral lands for the same reason. An unknown number of Karen people have lost their traditional lands as the army sweeps through villages on counter-insurgency campaigns.” \(^{24}\) To work towards solving these issues, local, regional, and international human rights organizations need to mobilize in a coordinated way. Organizations should try to push the military leadership to apply human rights norms; only then will further negotiation of the political deadlock be effective.

Equity
There are many structural inequalities between the so-called military elite groups and the rest of the population, as well as between major and minor ethnic communities. These inequalities should be fairly addressed so that every person has the equal opportunity to participate in society and to access resources. The military leaders have secured peace agreements with some ethnic groups by providing their leaders with access to natural resources, but this will not solve the equity issues of the rural people over the long term. For this, the government must constitutionally require inclusive policies, including allowing both minority groups and women to participate in the system of government. Economic and cultural programs, such as education in minority languages, are also currently lacking in Myanmar.

Reform in Government Institutions
The most difficult part of a transition from autocratic to democratic rule is changing the culture of government institutions. Slow change can lead to a frustrated populace. On the other hand, fast change sometimes creates anarchy. Any reform must include the principles of inclusion, participation, and respect for the diversity and dignity of all of Myanmar’s people. In order to resolve conflicts effectively and achieve lasting security, “coexistence efforts need to be fully integrated into democracy and governance programs, addressing the multiple facets of a conflict in an integrated and complementary manner.” \(^{25}\) This is especially important given that as people begin exercising their individual and ethnic rights, new conflicts can develop. A strong framework of coexistence can help positively address and manage these new tensions.

Cultural and Religious Relationship-building
The process of reconciliation between rival groups after conflict is always difficult. Establishing power-sharing arrangements between the major actors and giving proper representation to minority groups offers a clear path to political reconciliation. However, the cultural and religious relationship-building between those of different ideologies and backgrounds is often more complicated. A cultural approach—one that identifies both the concrete interests and threats to identity crucial to the disputants and that links interests and identities to psycho-cultural interpretations and the motives underlying them—can offer a bridge. In order for the settlement of ethnic conflict to be successful, the parties themselves must actively work towards proposals which address both their competing interests and their core identity needs. \(^ {26}\) For the development of new positive relationships with the
old enemy, different kinds of activities such as building monuments, holding cross-cultural public rituals, funding religious and cultural activities for diverse group, etc. can be useful. Such activities help groups acknowledge past suffering and mourn real losses, which in turn helps to build group relationships. In a country like Myanmar, which has a significant Buddhist population, familiar philosophical principles of peace and “inner dialogue” can be applied in creative ways in order to build relationships and reduce tensions between individuals and groups.

Conclusion

The present state of the Myanmar conflict is a stalemate. Direct dialogue has been at a standstill for a long time. The military dictatorship is taking a hard-line position and drawing out the situation as much as it can. At the beginning of each big protest or uprising, the junta’s leaders show the world that they are interested in dialogue, and often they go forward and meet with the main opposition parties and their leaders. But, as time passes and the heat of the protest cools down, the military dictators return to their earlier antagonistic position. Pro-democracy protests, fueled by the involvement of the Buddhist monks, will continue to grow in strength. The devastation of the resulting violence will not be contained in Myanmar, but will spill over to neighboring countries and to international communities in the form of refugees, disease, security threats, and cycles of violence.

For a long time, the people of Myanmar have been fighting for democracy, identity, and resources. Democracy is the foremost solution to the ongoing violent conflict there. However, when it is achieved, it will not be the end of the solution. Pre-planned and effective initiatives to address the post-democratic era are essential to manage the possibility of further violent conflict after a peace agreement. For example, in Nepal the post-democratic government has not been able to manage the demands of various newly emerged armed and unarmed groups, and because of this, the security of the Nepalese people is more at risk than ever before. Part of the solution in Myanmar should involve the forming of powerful commissions—a peace and reconciliation commission and a post-conflict negotiation commission—to ensure the future peace.

In the post-conflict period, every group will have its own story of the conflict and of hardships faced. Therefore, strategies for dealing with the past should include the documentation of victims’ stories in the form of books, archives, poetry, writing, theatre, and song, along with more structured truth-telling processes, ranging from counseling to commemoration through monuments and rituals. This will help the reconciliation and relationship-building process between and within groups, and ensure sustainable coexistence in the country.

Endnotes

1  From Infoplease; http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107808.html
3  Ibid.
4  Ibid.
12 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shan


Fisher, R. and Bolling, L. Facilitated Joint Brainstorming Conflict Management Group, Harvard University


About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

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With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

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Coexistence International

Mailstop 096
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

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