

# Opinion – The Politics of Inclusion in Myanmar’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

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EPHRAIM BASSEY EMAH, JUL 28 2020

Armed conflict in Myanmar (also known as Burma) has been protracted since the country’s independence from the British in 1948. Despite becoming an independent state, sub-national contests for political autonomy and legitimacy have sustained violent tensions. Also, the availability of natural resources in the country’s borderland regions has further contributed to the emergence of ethnonationalism and cycles of violence. Ethnonationalism enables competition for political power between so-called Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO), such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the central government, thereby contributing significantly to broader security challenges in Myanmar. The grievances that fuel these issues stem from access to political power by ethnic minorities and claims that the Bamar ethnic group allegedly dominates Myanmar’s polity.

Following international pressure and demands by ethnic minorities for democracy and broader inclusion in Myanmar’s politics and governance, the central government and some EAOs signed a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. The NCA seeks to facilitate pathways towards the resolution of sub-national conflicts and to pave the way for national dialogue, peacebuilding, and institution-building. However, while the NCA offers a creative step towards ending violence through the opportunities for local dialogue that it provides to different subnational areas, its impact on ensuring sustainable peace remains elusive. First, because the selection of some EAOs by Myanmar’s military (the Tatmadaw) and the outright refusal of many other EAOs to sign the NCA undermines its legitimacy. Second, because the poor level of consultations with rural ethnic communities and the imposition of the NCA’s provisions by the central government and the military on local populations demonstrate elitism and hegemony in decision-making. By ignoring the different actors in the conflict, the likelihood that the NCA will collapse is high. These concerns, therefore, have significant effects on public policies and the creation of political institutions that reflect the lived realities and ambitions of Myanmar’s citizens.

Conflicts in ethnic areas across Myanmar are perpetrated by several armed actors – the Tatmadaw and the EAOs. Hence, a sufficient resolution of the underlying drivers of ethnic grievances will determine any sustainable progress towards democracy. Consequently, agreements that seek to transition the country towards peace should incorporate the concerns of all the actors perpetrating violence. Myanmar’s sub-national conflicts affect more than one-third of the country’s 330 townships. While there are approximately 51 EAOs in Myanmar, the decision of the central government to select only eight EAOs to sign the NCA in 2015 is problematic. Although two new EAOs signed the NCA in early 2018, the selection of specific armed groups ignores the political legitimacy of others. This decision heightens grievance and perceptions of further marginalisation against some ethnic groups. Myanmar’s central government should acknowledge that the demand for political inclusion by ethnic minorities is legitimate and requires comprehensive action. Therefore, the engagement of all armed actors in the conflict increases the likelihood that agreements will gain acceptability and legitimacy among local populations.

Although some EAOs signed the NCA, some of the provisions of the agreement do not acknowledge the concerns of some dissenting voices in many ethnic areas, especially in rural communities. While the NCA provides mechanisms for consultation and dialogue within rural communities, the development of such provisions and the operationalisation of consultative mechanisms are top-down in nature. For instance, compared to Columbia’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which incorporated some of the concerns of ‘unarmed’ local/rural populations such as women,

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youth, and other identity groups, the provisions of Myanmar’s NCA were determined and imposed by the central government (particularly the Tatmadaw). Some of the NCA’s provisions reveal the tacit strategy of the Tatmadaw to remain in civilian affairs, to be protected from prosecution for different violations committed against ethnic minorities and other civilian populations, and to consolidate its presence as a viable actor in Myanmar’s political institutions. Also, the NCA depicts the interests of some ethnic elites and neglects the experiences of rural populations who are the recipients of direct violence perpetrated by EAOs and the Tatmadaw during the many years of conflict escalation.

As a country whose history is defined by civil wars, the experiences of communities where conflicts are waged is vital to understand and develop methodologies for conflict resolution and transformation. For instance, the patterns of conflicts in Myanmar’s sub-national areas vary between the use of heavy artillery and small arms and light weapons (SALWs). In many communities, some rural bandits with access to small arms engage in armed robberies and lethal combat with armed mobile Tatmadaw located in rural areas. Furthermore, some women and youths allegedly participate in ethnic armies (even though some have denounced their participation). Therefore, it is critical to include input from these stakeholders if the NCA seeks to accomplish the overarching goal of conflict resolution. These micro-level armed experiences in rural communities would constitute part of the concerns of the NCA agreement if adequate consultations were conducted with rural communities. Inadequate consultations with local populations make the NCA an elite arrangement, thereby limiting any chances for sustainable implementation or prevention of new forms of rebellion.

Myanmar’s subnational conflicts are kaleidoscopic. While the conflict drivers in the country appear to be clear and discernable, the issues in each subnational area are distinct, multifaceted, and complicated to understand or portray in a single conflict assessment. Therefore, policies that focus on addressing the drivers of violence need to understand the nature of contextual fragility (i.e. the challenges in each subnational area) and the dynamism of ethnic power-brokers (i.e. the legitimacy, position and interests of key conflict actors in each subnational area). Although the NCA is a strategic step towards addressing the grievances of ethnic minorities and fashioning of viable and participatory political processes, a tendency towards more harm is also plausible. The selection of specific EAOs as signatories in the NCA reinforces political rhetoric of dominance by the Barma-led government. It demonstrates a dictatorial behaviour and limits political opportunities for minority tribes in the country. Also, the poor level of consultation with rural populations and the top-down manner through which dialogues are implemented affects the quality of information and outcomes that the process can provide to shape public policy and peacebuilding. A potential collapse of the NCA will affect the legitimacy of Myanmar’s political institutions and give rise to factionalism and parallel governance in ethnic areas.

(1 )As Myanmar is transitioning towards democracy, the NCA is a significant determinant of political stability in the country. Therefore, to solve the gaps embedded in the NCA implementation process, it is vital to consider the following:

(2) The signatories to the agreement should be reviewed. This step will ensure that the agreement achieves a fair representation for EAOs and certifies that their political demands are taken into account during the implementation of the NCA as well as the subsequent institutionalization of democracy.

(3) It is necessary to revise the NCA to make its provisions more representative of the realities of conflict communities. Provisions in the NCA that stir resentment or increase political impunity for armed actors who violated human rights should be expunged. By deleting clauses that implicitly grant amnesty to wartime violations of civilians will ensure accountability and justice for different actions perpetrated by actors within the government and EAOs.

(4) The implementation of the NCA local-level dialogues should adopt a bottom-up approach to enable political actors to understand the experiences of local populations and the specific and general needs that require redress in each ethnic community.

The channels for implementing the NCA and reporting outcomes of local-level dialogues should be more transparent and accessible to different ethnic groups. All ethnic groups in Myanmar should make inputs to issues from different regions across the country as a way of promoting collaboration, compromise, and the identification of incentives to

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sustain peace. Transparency in the implementation of the NCA will favor more robust political dialogues, nation- and institution-building, and peacebuilding efforts. Furthermore, it will strengthen the political legitimacy of different ethnic groups and increase the acceptability of political institutions in the country.

Armed conflicts in Myanmar operate as a vicious cycle and are characterised by militarisation, radical ethnic ideology, and deep-seated resentment towards Myanmar’s central government and the Tatmadaw. Sub-national conflicts sustain ethnic rivalry and competition for economic and political resources, and contests for territorial control between EAOs and the Tatmadaw. While the resolution of some of these issues is anticipated through the NCA, the process could yield negative results for the politics of the country if it fails to achieve effective inclusion of different ethnic groups. However, with growing private, public, and international interests in Myanmar’s politics, the stakes are high. Therefore, the failure of the agreement to achieve constructive outcomes could affect political relationships between Myanmar and the rest of the world.

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## About the author:

**Ephraim Bassey Emah** is a graduate of the Master of Global Affairs – International Peace Studies Concentration from the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. He is a peacebuilding scholar-practitioner and possesses six years of professional experience designing and implementing community engagement and youth peacebuilding programmes in Nigeria and Myanmar. He also engages in peacebuilding policy debates and conducts extensive research on youth radicalisation and violent extremism.