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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Beyond Ceasefires: Myanmar's Precarious Peace Process**

By Kyaw San Wai

### **Synopsis**

*Ceasefires between the Myanmar government and national minorities will not in themselves solve their ethnic problems. Deep seated grievances and other encumbrances would have to be overcome for an inclusive Myanmar.*

### **Commentary**

12 FEBRUARY marked Myanmar's Union Day, which commemorates the signing of the Pinlon Agreement in 1947. The agreement created the 'Union of Burma' where the majority Barmars and a myriad of ethnic minorities opted to achieve independence from the British as a single state. How this arrangement fared is well known, as Myanmar still copes with ethnic rebellions and grievances.

President Thein Sein's government has embarked on an ambitious initiative to secure peace with ethnic rebels which hug Myanmar's borders. The chief government negotiator recently stated that Myanmar would achieve complete peace even by mid 2012: Nine out of sixteen rebel groups have signed provisional agreements with six set to follow soon. The current round of ceasefires, despite claims to the contrary, do contain certain differences with past rounds – notably that ceasefires are now treated as part of a process towards inclusive political dialogue, rather than solutions to a security problem.

### **Grievances galore**

Economics undeniably plays a role in the push for such agreements as Myanmar seeks to realise its potential. Resource-rich ethnic minority regions are crucial for Myanmar to link up with neighbouring countries via large infrastructure projects. The negotiations also help meet a key stipulation by the West on removing crippling sanctions. In addition, as Thailand and China move to expand links with Myanmar, the presence of rebel pockets within their territories will be less tolerated in order to appease the Myanmar government, sapping rebel support bases and abilities.

The sincerity of the government's push for dialogue remains doubted by sceptical dissidents. On one hand, the Myanmar government has made good use of the public relations value of the peace drives to reinforce its claims of reforms. On the other side of the arena, ethnic misgivings, ongoing conflicts with the Kachins, alleged past government insincerities and the fragility of agreements are highlighted to claim that the current process would not solve the ethnic issues.

A 'trust deficit' exists between the government and ethnic minority groups who remain sceptical, as they do not perceive a fundamental change in the power structure. Dissidents and rebels have long accused the Tatmadaw (the military) of neglecting the Pinlon Agreement, of its pathological dislike for federalism and for ignoring ethnic grievances. However, the fact is that most of the majority Bamar are unaware of, and often unable to fathom the sentiments behind ethnic grievances. For the minorities, vivid recollections of unequal and often violent treatment serve as stark reminders to be wary of both the military and the Bamar. These grievances can easily be exploited to turn into hatred.

Beyond the military there exist grievances about Burmanisation, the promotion of the Burmese language, the state's strong association with Buddhism (for non-Buddhists) and historical events, some dating back centuries. Even ethnic Buddhist monks have misgivings of 'being dictated' to by Bamar monks. On their part, the Bamar who form 70% of the population view themselves as either first amongst equals or elder brothers. The minorities however desire complete equality: they wish to be part of the 'Myanmar state' but not of the 'Burmese nation'. To the Bamar both notions are almost interchangeable. Enthusiasm surrounding Myanmar's recent political reforms remains mainly confined to the Bamar, as some minorities view it as beguilement by a 'fresh' set of Bamar faces.

### **Possible Impediments**

The negotiations are bound to stoke differences between hawks and doves in both the government and rebels. Tatmadaw hardliners will dislike the perceived erosion of central authority and see concessions as signs of weakness. While some ethnic groups may try to work towards better economic and political prospects through collaboration, stronger rebel factions may be recalcitrant. Thus, both sides have great internal impediments in pursuing peace.

Many ethnic minorities would welcome Aung San Suu Kyi as a better candidate to negotiate with for a more inclusive arrangement. However, fringe voices have claimed that she is also Bamar and in their opinion, would still spell Bamar dominance, albeit via a democratic tyranny of the majority. Grievances are louder in exiled ethnic circles, where secession still appears an option to some.

The previous junta frequently cited the numerous ceasefires it secured with ethnic groups as one of its achievements. The agreements usually allowed rebels to remain armed and create business niches in exchange for cessations of hostilities, temporarily placating rebel leaders into not raising issues on political dialogue. The junta's approach was that only when no armed groups challenged the military throughout Myanmar, would a political dialogue be embarked upon. However, it adopted a glacial approach to solving the political aspects, frustrating the minorities.

### **Beyond ceasefires**

The Myanmar government needs to make sure that the current agreements progress beyond ceasefires. The government has to note that seeking to drown ethnic grievances with either economic incentives or military action would at best only treat the symptoms and not the causes of Myanmar's ethnic issues. The rebels would have to learn to adapt to a possible new political agreement if the ceasefires hold, entailing the demobilisation of generations of troops who have never seen peace. Both sides would also have to demilitarise their territories and their mentalities to work together.

A federal structure may be the best inclusive and peaceful option for Myanmar's myriad ethnic groups to pursue. Certain aspects of the current constitution would have to be amended and more power devolved to the regional parliaments. Ethnic representatives, be it under the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, or opposition parties, could be given greater roles and duties in both regional and union level affairs. The Tatmadaw's ingrained phobia of federalism would also have to be dealt with, along with hardliners' dissatisfactions with the Tatmadaw playing a perceived smaller role in politics.

Democracy would be the best system under which mutually agreeable arrangements could be negotiated and ethnic rights respected. However, democracy alone would not automatically resolve the issues. Both sides would have to take leaps of faith and the government would have to create irreversible and institutionalised guarantees of ethnic rights.

Myanmar's nascent peace process faces many obstacles. And the ball is now in everybody's courts.

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