

Analysis

Ethnic Minorities Eye Autonomy in Post-Junta Myanmar

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Following the 2021 coup, there is no viable central government in Myanmar. The junta is illegal and illegitimate and unable to effectively deliver government services. Instead, a range of ethnic armed and other resistance organizations have emerged as viable and legitimate governance entities.

Recent debates have questioned whether Myanmar is a failed state and if this concept is relevant.

However, Burma has never achieved credibility as a state with which the majority of its citizens can identify.

As David Steinberg pointed out last year, political leaders have since independence failed to achieve a common sense of belonging among ethnic nations, especially between elites from the Burman majority and ethnic communities, which constitute at least a third of the population.

For many conflict-affected communities, the centralized state has been a disaster, seemingly determined to forcibly assimilate or eradicate autonomous ethnic nationality and other opposition groups.

It is unlikely that a coherent and credible Myanmar will emerge in the near or middle-term future – except perhaps in the form of a loose federal union, as proposed by the broad opposition movement forming the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and National Unity Government (NUG).

The impacts of climate change and growing geopolitical chaos across the world will likely exacerbate these tensions. If Myanmar does not recover as a coherent entity, what remains is a set of largely ethnically defined states claiming sovereignty.

Many of these existed before or during the colonial period but were never fully integrated into the post-independence union.

The peace process, an experiment which proved that Myanmar doesn't work

Following decades of armed conflict, the period from 2011 to 2015 was one of hope that the semi-civilian, military-backed U Thein Sein administration might be willing to do what its predecessors had not: engage in serious discussions with ethnic nationality leaders about the future nature of the union.

For the first time in decades, political negotiations were on the table, including the promise of a federal political settlement to decades of armed and state-society conflict.

For several of Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), now often referred to as ethnic resistance organizations (EROs), it was worth experimenting with peace after decades of conflict and suffering.

However, under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government from 2016, the promises of peace proved elusive. Neither the military nor NLD were willing to address ethnic communities' grievances or aspirations. Nevertheless, the peace process was a useful experiment, proving that Myanmar's central government – and particularly its military – are fundamentally unwilling to address ethnic grievances and aspirations or deliver genuine federalism. The situation has not improved since the coup.

Even if the current State Administrative Council could consolidate a brutal SLORC-like control, it seems unlikely the junta will succeed in bringing all territory currently defined as “Myanmar” under its control.

The brave resistance fighters across the country will doubtless continue their struggle, whatever the odds.

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P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 29 April 2022:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/ethnic-minorities-eye-autonomy-in-post-junta-myanmar.html>