

Opinion

# **Selling dog meat while showing a goat head in Myanmar - Aung San Suu Kyi's and the peace process**

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**State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's touted peace process has been an exercise in delusion and deceit.**

CHIANG MAI - Myanmar's recently concluded Fourth Union Peacemaking Conference (UPC) was a surreal performance of insincerity made even stranger with masks and social distancing measures and a sharply reduced attendance that aptly illustrated the still-deep divisions between all key players.

After nine years of peace talks and five years of a so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), any honest assessment of the situation would conclude that under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government once-high peace hopes have descended into a craven downward spiral.

After three days of meetings and speeches between August 19-21, participants agreed to a 20-point Third Union Peace Accord. These will be added to other broad points of discussion included in two previous accords nominally designed as a framework for future negotiations on a federal system for Myanmar, a key demand of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

The UPC's entire spectacle was an unabashed political stage show to grant the NLD legitimacy ahead of nationwide general elections set for November 8, with the ruling party using the ten NCA signatories as their props and extras.

As the foundations of a possible future system of government, the 20 points are repetitive, vague, insubstantial and unimpressive, with some seemingly lifted straight from the military-drafted 2008 Constitution. As one EAO peace process insider told this analyst back in 2018, "we have become engineers of a broken machine."

If one definition of madness is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different outcome, then the Fourth UPC was bedlam. Yet it was always going to be ludicrous.

The peace process, like many coronavirus victims, had serious underlying conditions that made it highly vulnerable from the start. These include the military's intransigence, the NLD's insincerity, EAO divisions, the raging war in Rakhine state and Western donor complicity in what amounts to a cover up.

Historians will likely scrutinize the speeches of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing at UPCs and associated events and wonder how so many Western peace industrialists didn't clearly see the

ingrained, almost joyful, obstinacy.

The military leader has been talking peace while waging war, both a war of slurs and accusations in his speeches and a literal war against multiple ethnic armed groups. His speech to the UPC was a greatest hits of two years of blustering and blaming the EAOs for decades of insurrection.

He promoted his own declarations of unilateral ceasefires, issued in May and extended in recent days until end of September, yet excluded Rakhine state where hostilities have reached record levels.

He pointedly blamed EAOs for reprising political demands of the 1950s, saying, "I would like to urge them not to sell dog meat by displaying a goat head (be deceptive). Based on its experience, the Tatmadaw is taking measures to prevent what should not happen from happening and to pave way for what should happen to happen."

Meanwhile, the Tatmadaw has continued abusive operations in ceasefire areas. In late June, a Shan farmer was killed in Kyaukme in northern Shan state, sparking an unprecedented demonstration against the Tatmadaw by 10,000 local civilians. Soon after, a Kayin woman was killed in Hpapun by two drunk soldiers, sparking protests by Kayin civilians against continued militarization.

The Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC), established in 2015 and lavishly funded, has been an abject failure at resolving breaches of the NCA and ensuring security on the ground.

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who earlier in her tenure touted the peace process as her government's signature initiative, has willingly looked the other way at the Tatmadaw's crimes and abuses.

Instead, her speeches have been characterized by imperious hectoring, evoking promises of unity but demanding loyalty and hard work, an approach more suited to election campaigning than empathy-driven conciliation.

Suu Kyi may enjoy massive popular support in Myanmar's heartland, but she certainly does not any longer in ethnic states. The arrogant ethnic Bamar nationalist hubris that cascades from her State Counsellor's office throughout Myanmar's political system has rendered the NRPC largely ineffectual.

The past two years have marked the lowest point of Suu Kyi's once touted peace process as the two key signatories - The Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) - suspended their involvement in formal talks at the end of 2018, jointly declaring the military was using the NCA as a "weapon."

This slowdown rent bare the internal divisions between the NCA signatories, with increasing exasperation between the role played by smaller EAOs, many of whom play an outsized role to their actual military strength or legitimacy.

The only two armed groups to sign the NCA during the NLD government was the New Mon State Party (NMSP), a venerable and symbolically important EAO with a 25-year ceasefire, and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), essentially a small collective with no weapons and territory and not permitted to sign the NCA in 2015 because, along with two small ethnic Wa and Rakhine EAOs, they didn't pose a military threat.

Half the NCA's signatories don't. For small groups such as the Chin National Army (CNA) to disarm, they would have to borrow weapons to do so. The question is: why haven't many of these practically

insignificant groups actually disbanded, disarmed, and made room for real armed groups?

The Federal Political Negotiations Consultative Committee (FPNCC), an umbrella organization led by one of Myanmar's largest EAOs the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and including six other armed groups that dwarf most of the signatories, refused to attend the UPC citing Covid-19 concerns and a lack of inclusiveness because one of their members, the Arakan Army, was not invited.

The failure of the peace process to engage with these groups, particularly the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in the country's north, is destructive and has doomed 100,000 internally displaced civilians to a future of uncertainty.

Another major rebuke to peace efforts is the escalating conflict in Rakhine state between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army, a conflict that has already displaced 150,000 Rakhine civilians and killed hundreds more including dozens of children in heavy artillery and air strikes. Thousands of combatants have likely been killed in the raging conflict.

The Arakan Army was declared a terrorist organization in March, which makes any inclusion in peace talks problematic and intimidates potential intermediaries. The AA demanded all Myanmar military and civilian structures to leave Rakhine state in May. Neither side seems invested in stopping a conflict where a routine exchange of bellicose statements are stand-ins for dialogue.

Illustrating her increasingly callous cadence on reconciliation, Suu Kyi spoke on Tuesday to the recent spike in Covid 19 cases in Rakhine by observing, "There are different faiths and ethnicities in Rakhine state. These differences have led to acts of terrorism, turned into instability and pushed our nation into a level of embarrassment to the world."

On the third anniversary of the beginning of the brutal campaign that drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh, the State Counsellor grudgingly conceded that crimes against humanity, but not genocide, may have been committed in the by now well-documented onslaught.

There is thus little rational optimism that Suu Kyi is willing or capable of achieving peace in Myanmar. The bloated Joint Peace Fund (JPF), established in 2016 by 11 donors to capitalize on Suu Kyi's government's investment in peace, has squandered most of its estimated US\$100 million budget (a fair bit on the JMC) with precious little to show for it.

The JPF comes out somewhere in the middle on a spectrum spanning well-meaning but ineffective programs to potentially a massive white collar criminal enterprise of fraud and embezzlement. Western donors keep pitchforking money into a process they know isn't working to hoodwink their capitals that the process is working to mitigate the still unfolding catastrophe in Rakhine state.

The woeful role of Western peacebuilders and their dubious background maneuverings with shady envoys has potentially doomed Myanmar to future decades of uneven armed conflict, environmental degradation due to corruptly regulated resource plunder, drug production and forced internal migration due to climate change and a flagging economy.

Those poor prospects are all sandwiched between the hammer of Chinese predatory capitalism and the anvil of World Bank financed anti-community, pro-government development projects.

Western supporters to this fractured and failing peace process need to start asking themselves when their own cynical short-term self-interests are more important than the future prospects for peace in Myanmar, and whether they're the ones selling dog meat while displaying a goat head?

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- “Selling dog meat while showing a goat head in Myanmar”. Asia Times. August 27, 2020 : <https://asiatimes.com/2020/08/selling-dog-meat-while-showing-a-goat-head-in-myanmar/>
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