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Alexander G. Hernandez
Florida International University

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A Land That Has Yet to Heal:
The Burmese Civil War (1948 – present)
Alexander G. Hernandez
Florida International University
February 2014

Abstract

Since its independence from Great Britain in 1948, the state of Burma has been at war with itself. Ethnic and religious tension fuel the conflict and has led to territorial disputes while no resolution to this strife is expected under a fragile and corrupt central government. Additionally, proxy wars have delayed any peaceful negotiations. The combinations of failing social welfare programs and prolonged peace talks have led many Burmese people join the military as soldiers in either the Burmese military or any one of the numerous ethnic paramilitary groups in the country. Human rights violations are common in Burma, including rape, pillaging, and ethnic cleansing. Essentially, Burma has had the longest ongoing civil war due to combination of grievances, many of which predate the 21st century.

General Introduction

We must understand war if our goal is to prevent it in today's society. The decision to go to war is a serious one for any state, and could lead to its survival or ruin (L. Giles, 1910). Our analysis here will focus on the 1948 onset of the Burmese Civil War, an interstate conflict. Without a solid comprehension of the leading factors that lead to violent conflict within states, what preventions can state leaders take for the preservation of peace within the state? And without any guarantee of peace, what will become of the state itself? If states cannot resolve struggles among its citizens, conflicts over land and resource distribution may escalate.

The increasing violence could spill over into neighboring states, including refugees who move en masse and occupy land, consume resources and afflict national interest of the state where they seek refuge. The inability to prevent war, specifically in intrastate affairs, out of the ignorance of misidentifying both direct and indirect causations, and applicable solutions for said causations will create more war or prolong current war or both.

For example, consider how the ECDC (European Centre for Disease Control) lists hand-washing as one of the best ways to prevent the spread of influenza outbreaks (European Centre for Disease Control [ECDC], 2013). By applying basic hygienic functions, another Spanish Flu pandemic could be reduced in intensity. Recall that the Spanish Flu claimed nearly 50 million lives—and something as elementary as hand-washing is listed under means of prevention over more influenza outbreaks. This would have not come about if virologists did not take the time to study the factors contributing to the spread of the disease. In effect, disease is to the body what intrastate conflict is to the state and an engaged analysis of the causes leading to intrastate conflict is essential if the state is to preserve its security and survival.

Understanding Burma

The Burmese Civil War is the world's longest running intrastate conflict (P. Winn, 2012). Over the course of the war, many human rights atrocities have been committed. Mass cases of rape, ethnic genocide, denial of food, clean water and shelter, kidnappings aligned with human trafficking rings and labor exploitation have been reported. The bloodshed over the years is due to irreconcilable differences, which will be expanded upon later. The story of the Burmese people helps understand not only what causes intrastate conflicts, but what keeps them alive. International awareness of the war has awakened citizens, right here in the United States, and they are rising up to influence their state leaders to act and bring justice to the people of Burma (Won, 2013). Because of the globalization of resources and data, states can no longer shelter the people they govern from the heinous acts being committed within the state of Burma. If the international community is to consider itself credible, it cannot continue to allow such human rights abuses to continue.

The United States, as the current hegemon, must set the tone and intervene either unilaterally or multilaterally in this multi-decade dispute. The failure to act in response to this situation that has spawned mass killing and genocide of purposefully targeted ethnic groups could lead to a spillover effect once other political groups within Southeast Asia find that Mao Tse-tung's

“*political power comes from the barrel of a gun*” realist philosophy could influence other states where equally weak state governments exist (Washington State University, 2014).

Who Are the Actors?

The Burmese Civil war is a multi-ethnic conflict in which multiple parties armed with conventional weaponry, engage in constant cycles of low-intensity warfare. The first of two principle actors is the Tatmadaw, otherwise known as the Burmese military government. The Tatmadaw is composed of roughly 492,000 active military personnel, including an army, navy, air force and police force, which accounts for nearly a quarter of its US \$2 billion GDP (Associated Press, 2011). The Tatmadaw demand a Burma unified under a strict military autocracy. It demands land reformation and for the various armed ethnic groups to surrender their guns and subject themselves to Tatmadaw law (Kah, 2013).

Following in significance is the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army). The KNLA represents the Karen people, the second largest ethnic group and most influential anti-government opponent of the Tatmadaw (The Economist, 2013). The KNLA consists of 5,000 troops, including a Special Forces branch (Rand, 2003). Under the Tatmadaw Union Army, the Karen have suffered torture, kidnapping, rape, the destruction of their villages, killing of unarmed combatants, and labor and resource exploitation. The KNLA demands to be recognized by Burma’s domestic politics; they also ask for land reformation. Additionally, the Karen asks for a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw without the need to surrender its own arms (“A Journey into Burma’s War Torn Karen State”, 2010).

Instrumental Causes of Ongoing Intrastate Conflict

Some of the most instrumentally specific reasons behind the continuous civil conflict are the ethnic and religious differences, territorial disputes and fragile government. Collectively, these reasons have led to the expansive 65 year history of the Burmese Civil War.

Ethnic and Religious Differences

The official state religion of Burma is Buddhism. Over 89% of Burmese are considered Buddhist, while another 4% are considered Christian, 4% Muslim and 3% of other religious affiliations (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2013). Ethnic issues have brought about violence and tension among the Burmese. In 2013, nearly 250,000 people, predominantly Muslims occupying the Myanmar side of the Myanmar/Bangladesh border, were displaced from their homes. The Buddhist/Muslim conflicts have claimed over 200 lives (S. Mahatani, M. Myo, 2013). Additionally, religious persecution has been aimed at the Karen people, who are mostly Christian. Over 2 million Karen people were displaced, forced to flee their shelters and villages from armed Tatmadaw troops in 2010.

Territorial Disputes

Territorial division is an ongoing issue. Great Britain dethroned the last king and queen of Burma, exiling them to India in 1824. The British then divided the land as they saw fit to

simplify efforts at resource extraction and labor exploitation (“A Journey into Burma’s War Torn Karen State,” 2013). By default, the British colonists displaced many ethnic peoples and after their withdrawal in 1948, the ethnic groups were left to fight among themselves over territory. The Burmese central government, on the other hand, decided to consolidate all of Burma into a single entity, namely Burma,¹ with the Tatmadaw as the central governing power. Since no compromise could be reached among the parties, they took up arms and have been fighting ever since (The Economist, 2013).

Fragile Infrastructure

Life is hard for the individual inhabitant of Burma. The governing institution is an autocratic regime which spends nearly a quarter of its annual budget on defense and roughly 2% of its total GDP on social welfare programs. Primary schools can cost up to 5,000 kyat, the equivalent of 5 USD. Given that the average Burmese family lives on less than 1 USD a day, education is a luxury for the rich and as a result, the majority of Burmese children drop out of school as early as the age of 9 to work in local markets, factories and crop fields to support their families. By age 15, they can be recruited into military service. Furthermore, healthcare is too expensive for most Burmese; however, there are local clinics run by amateur healthcare providers that the locals call “Quacks”. These clinics can perform small surgical procedures and provide general check-ups, although it should be well noted that the majority of these clinics often are unsanitary and recycle medical instruments (Lieberman, 2012).

How Does It Relate?

Ethnic conflict, poor infrastructure and bad government are not the primary causes of the Burmese Civil War. An assessment of the evidence would much rather suggest that these secondary causes (territorial disputes, ethnic/religious differences and fragile infrastructure) were rooted from the primary cause, namely post-colonialism.

A trickle-down effect then comes into play as the parties afflicted by the secondary causes, enabled by the primary causes, ignite third wave causes such as outside states funding the numerous factions within Burma, including the Tatmadaw, to serve their respective interests as the conflict continues, and further ongoing government corruption. The third wave leads the state to lose legitimacy and trust from the people. The process is cyclical, beginning from the secondary wave of causes, back to the third wave of causes and is multiplied by 65 years elapsed time to thus become a way of life for the Burmese people.

¹ The United States government uses the name “Burma” for most purposes although the military government began using “Myanmar” in 1989 (U.S. State Department, “U.S Government Relations with Burma” Fact Sheet <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm>, accessed 8/29/2014).

A Theory of Relativity

Interstate Behavior

Myanmar's foreign relations have been polarized, but recently the country is opening up. In 2014, Burmese president Thein Sein was the first Burmese president to meet with a U.S president in 47 years. At the meeting President Obama vowed support to Burma as part of a strategic foreign policy plan to gain support from Asian countries in the Far East to counterbalance China's growing influence in the area (Pennington, 2013). The Obama Administration is currently receiving backlash for supporting the Tatmadaw government, which has been accused of human rights abuses in the past. Additionally, Thailand is also in support of Burmese ethnic insurgency as it uses it as leverage to cripple the struggling Myanmar government. Justification for this may be the attacks Thailand has suffered in the past from the Burmese government (BBC, 1999)

Internal and External Threats

With much funding from outside states provoking proxy wars, and an unstable central government filled with multiple ethnic and religious clashes, Myanmar is very likely to receive threats from both within and outside of its state. In some cases, as previously described, it could be that the very external conflicts the Burmese have left unresolved are indirectly responsible for the internal threats occurring within.

Sociopolitical Motivations

Contrary to its messages of peace, the predominantly Buddhist central government is using violent force to oppress and attack other ethnic and religious groups for the sake of unifying the Myanmar state into one sovereign entity. In turn, ethnic groups have been fighting back; motivated by both distrust for the government and a need to get the land that was taken from them during Great Britain's colonization. The result is a free-for-all of failed ceasefire agreements and guerilla wars that have, in part, kept the intrastate conflict alive.

International Reciprocal

Although there has not yet been a spillover effect of wars spreading into Indochina and parts of the southern Asian border, ethnic conflicts within Burma have spread into the Thai and Bangladeshi borders as previously discussed. Further, there has been a power struggle effect among greater powers, such as the U.S and China, to manipulate the various warring groups within Burma and use them as leverage for political power.

The Long and the Short

In conclusion, the international community is still affected by the aftermath of the British hegemony and 19th century colonialism. What began with British conquest in 1824, and withdrawal in 1948, then evolved to disputes over lands, ethnic and religious intolerance and a corrupt government accused of human rights abuses. This in turn makes the state susceptible to

proxy wars fueled by states arming ethnic groups fighting back against a regime they could never trust their communities to and after six decades, the power struggle still rages. It is akin to The Door to Hell, a nickname given to a natural gas reserve scientists lit up in the Karakum Desert in Turkmenstein in 1971. Until this very day, the cave is still burning natural gas from that spark (Preece, 2012). Similarly, British colonialism has left its imprint upon the Burmese, a burning fire of anger and injustice from which they are yet to recover.

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