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**“Imagined Communities” Re-visited:
Contextualising and Challenging Myanmar’s ethnic history, trajectories and
marginality**

Abstract

Myanmar’s diverse ethnic composition has been a challenge in the central government’s effort to unify the country. While the state has experimented with some form of federalism in the early 1950s, it has not brought about much success. Moreover, Myanmar has often tried to curb its multifaceted ethnicities from pursuing self-determination and instead hoped for an amicable unification. In 2015, ultra-nationalist group and Buddhist extremists, Ma Ba Tha, gained notoriety when the Thein Sein government enforced a series of bills deemed to marginalise the country’s Muslim minorities. In 2016, Myanmar domestic politics came to the forefront amongst the international community with the Rohingya crisis. While ASEAN members have criticised the Myanmar government for doing too little to contain the problem, albeit stopping short of discrediting the Aung San Suu Kyi government, many have instead opted to provide humanitarian aid to the country. This paper will examine how the historical, social and cultural milieu has affected the extent to which ethnic and religious identities and sensitivities have been managed and negotiated within the state. The sense of survival and belonging for some of these indigenous groups has been marred by the country’s vague stance on the forms of self-determination for these groups. This paper will also analyse the trajectories and challenges that have plagued Myanmar’s attempt to instil a shared identity in order to assimilate the different ethnic and religious groups. The proclivity of Burmans’ dominance and its marginalisation over these groups has constantly been a factor in this aspect of an “imagined communities”.

Key words: Self-determination; Ethnic Resistance; Marginalisation; Shared Identity; Belonging

Introduction:

Myanmar's multi-ethnic history has posited a vast number of problems of the country's domestic political landscape. General Aung San's attempts to bring the country's dominant ethnic groups together through the first Panglong Agreement in March 1949 stalled after his assassination.¹ This agreement was, however, signed only between the Chin, Kachin and Shan ethnic groups while those from the Karen, Karenni, Arakanese, Mon and other ethnicities were excluded from this pact. Shortly thereafter, the U Nu's government tried to implement a nascent form of federalism in the country in order to fulfil the objectives of the Panglong agreement.² In the 1960s, General Ne Win's harsh execution of socialism in the country saw the rise of many ethnic armed groups.³ This marked increase in tension soon led to the continuation of such marginalisation of these ethnic groups. It was not until after the 1988 pro-democracy movement that ethnic groups were given some form of official recognition. By 2008, the nominally state sanctioned Constitution acknowledges 135 ethnic groups and sub-groups in the country.⁴ Since taking office in 2016 after a successful free and fair election, newly installed Myanmar's State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, revived her father's legacy of restarting the issue on federalism, or at the very least, the concept of a "national reconciliation". The 21st century Panglong Agreement endeavours to set in motion a series of discussion that would eventually lead to a more amicable solution that will benefit all the different ethnicities in the country.⁵ However, there continues other forms of marginalisation amongst some other ethnicities, such as the Rohingyas, that remains unresolved. The notion that Myanmar is a "union" and not a federated state is somewhat still prevalent in some circles, not least amongst the Myanmar military or *Tatmadaw*, who still holds substantial influence and power in Parliament, controlling 25% of the parliamentary seats.

¹ Smith, Martin, *Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change* (UK: Minority Rights Group International, 2002), p. 4

² Nakanishi, Yoshihiro, *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution: The State and Military in Burma, 1962 – 99* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), pp. 57 – 58

³ Taylor, Robert H., *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), p. 5

⁴ see appendix A

⁵ Union Peace Conference: 21st Century Panglong, *Myanmar Times*, [Online] Available: <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/panglong-2016.html> (accessed: April 2, 2017)

Since winning the elections, the National League for Democracy (NLD) had tried to instil some semblance of a multi-ethnic parliament. The speaker and deputy speaker of the Upper House is an ethnic Karen, Mahn Win Khaing Than from the NLD, and an ethnic Rakhine, Aye Tha Aung from the Arakan National Party (ANP), respectively. On the other hand, an ethnic Bamar from the NLD, Win Myint, is the speaker of the Lower House, whilst an ethnic Kachin from the former ruling party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is the Deputy Speaker. Another important note is that the post of the second Vice President of Myanmar hails from the Chin ethnic group – Henry Van Thio – from the NLD. It should also be noted that this shift is rather significant especially when the mainly Christian Chin ethnic minority group has faced years of oppression under the *Tatmadaw* since the country's independence in 1948.⁶ However, all these efforts may seem to be only superficial and there is a deeper crisis that dominates the undercurrent of Myanmar society. Aung San Suu Kyi's attempts to restart the national reconciliation process through the 21st Panglong Agreement has been met with several obstacles, not least the continued ethnic strife between rebels, namely the Kokang, Ta'ang, Arakan Army, United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). This move is significant especially after a National Ceasefire Accord (NCA) has been signed between some of the country's other ethnic armed groups and the *Tatmadaw* under the previous Thein Sein administration.⁷ Nevertheless, it should also be stated that,

[t]he armed conflict in Myanmar should not be understood through the relationship between [Aung San] Suu Kyi and non-ceasefire armed ethnic groups. Rather, the ongoing violence testifies to the stiff political differences and antagonism between the Myanmar Army [the *Tatmadaw*] and the non-ceasefire groups. Therefore, it is arguable that the NLD government does not have the necessary power to truly pursue national reconciliation.⁸

There lies the predicament for the Aung San Suu Kyi government. No matter how much the 21st century Panglong Agreement might aim to achieve its objectives of peace in Myanmar, the political landscape remains to be tense and unforgiving.⁹

⁶ “We are Like Forgotten People”: The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India, *Human Rights Watch* (USA: Human Rights Watch, 2009)

⁷ see Appendix B for the list of armed ethnic groups in Myanmar

⁸ Paode A, “Why Myanmar's New Peace Process is Failing”, *The Diplomat*, March 4, 2017 [Online] Available: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/why-myanmars-new-peace-process-is-failing/>

⁹ Lun Min Mang, “Treat everyone equally for reconciliation: State Counsellor”, *Myanmar Times*, March 31, 2017 [Online] Available: <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/25528-treat-everyone-equally-for-reconciliation-state-counsellor.html>

Moreover, there will continue to be historical mistrust and animosity between the *Tatmadaw* and the rest of Myanmar society that needs to be overcome.

“Imagined Communities” Re-visited

Benedict Anderson’s concept of an ‘imagined community’ examines how national identity has been socially constructed and nationalism, in itself, is, first and foremost, an “imagined political community”. Benedict Anderson, in his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, defined the concept of nation-hood as one that is an

imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... [firstly] because the members... will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... [and as such] communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined... [secondly] the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them... has infinite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations... [thirdly] it is imagined as *sovereign*... and [finally] it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship... [so much so that] it is this fraternity that makes it possible... for so many millions of people... willingly to die for such limited imaginings.¹⁰

For Anderson, ‘nations’ are socially constructed communities and this invention has led to some communities to identify themselves with a shared common characteristics and identities with others, usually a more influential group. This has led these ‘communities’ to see themselves as part of a larger social group/entity as a sense of belonging. The dominance of one particular community – here being the largely Bamar/Burman majority – has, unfortunately, created a conflict in its socio-historical, cultural and political landscape that has come to define this country. Most of the ethnic groups in Myanmar can be understood vis-à-vis to this historical conception. The effects of colonisation have also cultivated this idea that the country is a union of ethnic groups based on a few misalignment identification and misappropriation.

This paper will examine three main areas in which the ethnic communities in Myanmar have been marginalised. Firstly, the identity of an “ethnic” and considered as “others” and not fully accepted as part of the broader Myanmar society. Throughout history, the identification of a ‘Burmese’ (nor Myanmar) of being a

¹⁰ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), pp.6 – 7

Burman/Bamar has been essential to the formulation of this state identity. The fossilisation of such an identity has been ingrained into the mindset of most of the nation due to years and decades of historical and social integration. Secondly, the Buddhist narrative in which there is now resides a generally accepted view of Myanmar society made up of only Theravada Buddhists. This has led to the segregation of those ‘outside’ of this narrative as not being native to this state. As much as one would like to consider, Myanmar society continues to align itself as a Buddhist society more so than any other religion. There are generally three other types of beliefs, namely the animists, the Christians and finally the Muslims. Of these three, the Muslims have been the most subjugated and marginalised lot. So, while most would accept the other ethnic groups as part of the Myanmar identity, “many Buddhists raised issues of *naing-ngan-tha* (citizenship) and *taing-yin-tha* (indigenous or national identity) and questioned whether Muslims truly belong in Myanmar culture”.¹¹ This has led to continued alienation of, for example, not just the Rohingyas, but also the Muslim community at large. Thirdly, the identity of the various communities has also added to this continued marginalisation of some groups. The identification of what constitutes to “others” – or “stateless” people – in Myanmar certainly gives credence to such claims that they have no voice and representation except to become part of a larger community. This sense of belonging or attempts to ‘belong’ to a larger, usually a recognised ethnic group, can further subjugate and marginalise those who continue to resist this shift. Gyantri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) spoke about this idea of the *subaltern* in which she argued “that [the] subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers... that is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive”.¹² Although Spivak’s theory focuses on the colonialist discourse whereby the oppressed and the colonised does not have a voice in society, the Burman/Burmese identity has largely taken over the role of their colonial masters based on an “imagined community” that has been created over history. This paper, therefore, addresses this phenomenon – as what I

¹¹ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Alienation, Discrimination, and Securitization: Legal Personhood and Cultural Personhood of Muslims in Myanmar”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 50

¹² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 11

would term it – as the ‘marginalisation by the marginalised’. Ethnic groups in Myanmar are already subjugated by the majority Burmese-Burman population and in order for them to further integrate into a society crafted by Burmese identity, there is now a view that they would need to coalesce into this larger “imagined” Burmese culture and identity.

Myanmar’s ethnic history: Challenging Myanmar’s fragile ethnic peace process

Myanmar’s diverse ethnic composition has been a challenge in the central government’s effort to unify the country. Myanmar has often tried to curb its multifaceted ethnicities from pursuing self-determination and instead hoped for an amicable unification. There have been roughly four different phases in which this paper will examine with regards to Myanmar’s history that has contributed to this imagined political identity. The proclivity of Burmans’ dominance and its marginalisation over these groups has constantly been a factor in this aspect of an “imagined communities”. Firstly, Myanmar’s history between the mainly Burmese majority and other ethnic groups has led to establishment of this “imagined political community” in which concession has been given to the dominant group. There have been two significant periods in the history of Myanmar that led to the institutionalisation of the Burmese identity namely the Taungoo Dynasty (1510 – 1752) and the subsequent Konbaung Dynasty (1752 – 1885). The result of such historical manifestation is the crystallisation of the Burmese identity amongst the other groups, but it has also, at the same extent, created a tussle for space in the socio-political sphere between the various communities. To this effect, one should understand that, as some scholars would argue, “any attempt to reconstruct the history of the country [Myanmar] without the central role played by the Burmese speakers not only would be nearly impossible... but... intellectually dishonest as well”.¹³ This invariably left an imprint of Burmese identity that is not easily erased from the larger historical imaginations. In the meantime, other ethnic groups that have been subsumed within these dynasties continue to manifest itself in developing their own unique cultural identity and linguistically. Most of these groups have also been influenced by the Bamars, especially through its socio-economic and, at times, political, interactions. This, thereby, resulted in an amalgamation of a shared Burmese

¹³ Aung-Thwin, Michael, and Mairii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformation* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012), p.25

identity and community. So, much so that in Myanmar's tumultuous history, "the majority Burman group has [developed] a chauvinistic attitude over the ethnic minority groups... [and] one of the reasons for the rise of insurgency problems in the country was due to hatred and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity".¹⁴ This has translated to the modern era in which Myanmar society has continued with this dichotomy. Moreover, any studies on the country's history cannot eliminate the effects of Burmanization.

Secondly, the influence of British colonialism has an important effect on Myanmar society. The defeat of the Konbaung dynasty brought about the demise of a hierarchical social order that had very much governed the country up till the advent of colonialism. By overthrowing the Konbaung dynasty, the British has inevitably resulted in the perpetuation and the strengthening of the Barmar identity. Robert Taylor has argued that the "British... [had] denigrated indigenous institutions... [so much so that] the indigenous population was displaced from any significant role in the colony's military or administrative affairs during the colonial period".¹⁵ This is an important development as it created a 'divide and rule' policy within the society. Under the British, the Burmese society was further divided into smaller units, each independent on each other. John Furnivall has also observed that

in Burma under native rule the people were not organized territorially but on quasi-feudal lines by race and occupation, and that is the normal character of tropical society based on personal authority... [the] result is a social structure quite distinct in its political and economic properties from the homogenous unitary society of western lands.¹⁶

As such, the British began to transform the society into what Furnivall has attributed to a 'plural society'.¹⁷ Much of Myanmar's ethnic crisis also stemmed from the British census conducted in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The 1931 census conducted by the British, however flawed it was, has inadvertently divided the ethnic groups within the society and thus challenging a unified 'Burmese identity'. The data from the census further delineate the communities into different distinct

¹⁴ Kipgen, Nehginpao, *Democracy Movement in Myanmar: Problems and Challenges* (New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co., 2015), p. 8

¹⁵ Taylor, Robert H., "British Policy towards Myanmar and the Creation of the 'Burma Problem'", in N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, eds., *Myanmar: Society, Society and Ethnicity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 78 – 80

¹⁶ Furnivall, J.S., *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1948), p. 306

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp. 306 – 307

segments based solely on a linguistic pattern. This thus cultivated an “imagined community” around each of the ethnicities, which continues to monopolise the discourse in the socio-political sphere in Myanmar. The results of the latest census in 2016 and that in the earlier 2014 census also clearly reflected these results with little or no significant change to the rhetoric that the Myanmar government has reported over the years. Nevertheless, what many fear is that the data collected and used by the authorities

will [continuously] perpetuate many of the inaccuracies and inconsistencies that have reinforced ethnic grievance and gross inequalities within the country... [which] were derived from a flawed British census in 1931... [and] as a result, not only will the common experience of mixed ethnic identities not be recorded but leaders of some ethnic political groups also fear that their followers will not be counted by the identities or ethnicities that they self-report.¹⁸

The problem of early census data has been that the British conducted it under the guise of colonialism in order to differentiate and to divide the community. This has, invariably, led to the segregation and marginalisation of the groups within Myanmar society. Ultimately, what this does is that, on the surface,

this categorization seems to possess anthropological merits... [although it] has been questioned and critiqued by post-colonial scholars... [largely because] the census taken in colonial Burma, is based *not* (sic) upon noticeable racial characteristics among those groups but upon language...[so much so that] various authors have criticized the continued use of this outmoded method by the Myanmar government.¹⁹

This is troubling as it provides discrimination within the numerous groups and also the consolidation of the Myanmar identity based on the majoritarian group. This strengthens the use of Burmese as a national language, while alienating others who are unable to speak or use the language as a means of communication.

Thirdly, the rule of the military, or *Tatmadaw*, which have mostly consisted of the Burmese descent and thus leaving many to believe that the military has an ulterior Burmese trajectory. The early years of an independent Burma, the military was tasked to unify the state and its institutions by incorporating the different ethnic groups into

¹⁸ “Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context: The 2014 Census, Identity and Citizenship in Burma/Myanmar”, *Burma Policy Briefing*, Nr. 13, February 2014 [Online] Available: https://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/download/bpb_13.pdf

¹⁹ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Alienation, Discrimination, and Securitization: Legal Personhood and Cultural Personhood of Muslims in Myanmar”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 51 – 52

its mix. However, this eventually led to a wholly Burman military that began to take control over a diverse nation that it has inherited.²⁰ The position taken by the military could also be attributed to a rather ambiguous interpretation of General Aung San's Panglong Agreement with the main ethnic groups. There have been some who have argued that, "Aung San's nationalist ideology was based on an idea of a unitary state... although recognizing ethnic, language and religious differences... this ideology continued during military rule, and its ideas of 'Burmanization' have alienated the ethnic political organizations".²¹ This classification has been part of the *Tatmadaw's* attempt towards a "disciplined democracy", but ultimately, the "Burman-dominated military government has been using Burmanization policy and forced assimilation strategy to marginalize other ethnic groups".²² The military has also, since the coup in 1962 placed General Ne Win in power, entrenched a consciousness to limit the positions given to ethnic minorities.²³ These invariably resulted in the military becoming more "Burmese" – both in terms of an identity and also in the ethnic make-up within the institution.

Last, but not least, Myanmar's attempt to democratise has also posed numerous problems between the largely Bamar/Burmese-dominated NLD administration and the other ethnic communities, who continues to be doubtful over the sincerity of the Bamar/Burmans. Whilst many have hailed the surprised win by the NLD over the USDP in the 2015 election, there lies a caveat. Ultimately, the NLD party – in many ways similar to the USDP – is led by the mainly Bamar/Burman ethnic majority. Furthermore, there has been little ethnic representation in the NLD administration that would champion the rights of the minorities, not least defeating many of the existing ethnic political groups in the election. Some still view that the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, as a very Burman-affiliated group although it has made attempts to move away from that imagery. The loss of political support of many of these ethnic political parties has inevitably led to more challenges for the NLD administration in ensuring that ethnic representation in parliament remains utmost

²⁰ Holliday, Ian, *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), p. 45

²¹ Gravers, Mikael, "The Colonial Legacy", in Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen, eds., *Burma/Myanmar – Where now?* (Denmark: NIAS – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2014), p. 147

²² Kipgen, Nehginpao, *Democracy Movement in Myanmar: Problems and Challenges* (New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co., 2015), p. 17

²³ Steinberg, David I., *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p.72

importance. In many ways, therefore, this “electoral defeat means that already marginalised ethnic minorities are now underrepresented politically at a critical juncture in Myanmar’s democratic transition... [and for] the current peace process to succeed there must be channels through which ethnic minority organisations can express their grievances and work towards reforms”.²⁴ A case in point, in March 2017, the NLD in the Mon state had wanted to name a bridge after the country’s founding father, Bogyoke Aung San. This sparked off an outcry amongst the ethnic Mon who opposed this as and insisted that it be named “Ramonya” or “Thanlwin Chaungzone” bridge as a “matter of cultural and historical pride”.²⁵ While this might be a small incident, but such episodes in Myanmar can – and often do – lead to a public and, at times, more vocal criticism that the government is, once again, trying to “burmanize” and whitewashed the history of the ethnic minorities in the country. This has been what Benedict Anderson would constitute to the “Burman” state instituting and imposing its own cultural and historical dominance over the others through an “imagined political community”.

Contextualising Myanmar’s ethnic and religious trajectory

Most people would come to identify Myanmar as predominantly a Buddhist nation. One must also understand that “traditionally, the king was considered the defender of Buddhism, and the terms Burmese and Buddhist became synonymous”.²⁶ Any retaliation against the Burmese ‘identity’ would, in effect, be almost an act of treason against Buddhism. This is significant as it creates an “imagined community” that many, if not all, is able to agree and identify with. Buddhism had been a tool of political power even during the days of British colonialism. After all, “religion was central in the colonial encounter as part of the cultural modes of power and hegemony... [w]hat stands out in the Burmese case... is how the process of defining religion was itself a technique of power”.²⁷ The fall of the Konbaung dynasty under

²⁴ Nilsen, Marte, and Stein Tønnesson, “Myanmar’s ethnic minorities marginalised more”, *East Asia Forum*, April 13, 2016 [Online] Available: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/13/myanmars-ethnic-minorities-marginalised-more/>

²⁵ Lun Min Mang, “Mon State by-election: All about the “bridge””, *Myanmar Times*, March 31, 2017 [Online] Available: <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/by-election/25542-mon-state-by-election-all-about-the-bridge.html>

²⁶ Yegar, Moshe, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar* (USA: Lexington Books, 2002), p. 21

²⁷ Turner, Alicia, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), p. 10

the hands of the British also meant the decline of Buddhism. The religious vacuum that the British colonial powers generated was not immediately replaced, which led to a tussle for control and influence within the state by various nationalistic monks.²⁸ Hence, it comes as no surprise that this politicisation of religious power continue to the present-day Myanmar under the jurisdiction of the government of the day. In many ways, “the [Buddhist] sangha is seen as embodying the moral authority (*oza*) that empowers a field of merit that the present government seeks to control”.²⁹ This identity was what defined Myanmar society then and continues to be so up to today. As reiterated by renowned scholar, John S. Furnivall, who has observed that in the formation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Associations (YMBA) in 1906, it has led to a “revival of interest in the past of Burma... [so much so that] nationalism... drew much of its strength from Buddhist sentiment; but the new policy made a wider appeal, potentially embracing all peoples in the country instead of only Buddhists”.³⁰ This power was soon transferred to the elites within the community, which dominated the Buddhist discourse in formulating a national identity in the country. Shortly after independence, the control over Buddhism shifted from the elites to the military regime.

During the 1950s, under the jurisdiction of the U Nu government, Buddhism became officially recognised “as its state religion, as a means of national integration”.³¹ This further cemented the idea that the state is associated with only one religion – that of Buddhism. This, thereby, relegated all other religions to the periphery, which is rarely accepted as part of the national identity. In 1962, however, General Ne Win took over power through a military coup and overthrew the U Nu government. So, while U Nu “use of the faith [Buddhism] for political purpose, were known... Ne Win believed that the state... should not be involved in perpetuating religious practices”.³² Ne Win, on the other hand, implemented a national language policy and imposed ethnic assimilation into the country. Ne Win’s “Burmese Way to

²⁸ Mendelson, E. Michael, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (UK: Cornell University Press, 1975), John P. Ferguson, ed., Chapter 4, p. 173 – 235

²⁹ Schober, Juliane, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), p. 145

³⁰ Furnivall, J.S., *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1948), pp. 142 – 144

³¹ Sakhong, Lian H., *In Defence of Identity: The Ethnic Nationalities’ Struggle for Democracy, Human Rights, and Federalism in Burma* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Wanida Press, 2010), p. 26

³² Taylor, Robert H., *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), pp. 235 – 278

Socialism” not only created discontent within the Burmese society, but it also led to several civil wars and ethnic conflicts with numerous ethnic groups, not least the Chin, Mon and Karens, just to name a few. This is an important element in Myanmar socio-political landscape as the mostly successive military led governments continued with this currency of “one race, one language, one religion” or *Myanmar-lunyo, Myanmar-sa, Buddhism*³³ as part of its national identity. On the one hand, while Ne Win tried to do away with religious practices in the public realm, on the other hand, it also institutionalised Buddhism as part of the state. So much so that ‘while Buddhism receded from public sphere... successive military governments also relied in the legitimising potential of Buddhist acts... by creating opportunities for Buddhism to thrive’.³⁴ This has led to the identification and strengthening of Buddhism in Myanmar vis-à-vis communities who tended to affiliate with the other religions, such as Christianity; Hinduism; Animism and Islam. The resurgence and revival of Buddhism as well as its preservation in the face of an independent Burma heralded what some might view it as extremist elements amongst some Buddhists. The effort to maintain, sustain and perpetuate this normative ideologue that Burma/Myanmar is a ‘Buddhist nation’ has, unfortunately, led to the perception of an “imagined communities” that Benedict Anderson has described, albeit “in moral, soteriological, and supernatural terms”.³⁵ This has yet been another attempt of a manufactured identity that has been imposed upon the larger community.

Buddhist groups such as MaBaTha and the 969 Movement have also further exploited this religious identity in order to further instil a sense of a common identity. In 2015, ultra-nationalist group and Buddhist extremists, MaBaTha, gained notoriety when the Thein Sein government enforced a series of bills – generally titled ‘Protection of Race and Religion’ Bills³⁶ – that were deemed to marginalise the country’s Muslim minorities. This has raised numerous questions and concerns over its implementation and its desired outcomes. Some have even voiced that the bills that

³³ Sakhong, Lian H., *In Defence of Identity: The Ethnic Nationalities’ Struggle for Democracy, Human Rights, and Federalism in Burma* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Wanida Press, 2010), p. 27

³⁴ Walton, Matthew J., and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), p. 10

³⁵ Turner, Alicia, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), p. 144

³⁶ Horsey, Richard, “New Religious Legislation in Myanmar”, *Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum*, February 13, 2015 [Online] Available: http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Horsey-2015-02-New_Religious_Legislation_in_Myanmar-en.pdf

have been approved are deemed discriminatory to the other communities.³⁷ In recent years, MaBaTha, or *A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Sahuq Ye a-Pwe*, continues to demonstrate the importance of maintaining this Buddhist narrative in the hope of preserving the dominant religion in Myanmar from disintegrating. The importance of Buddhism in organising political space in Myanmar cannot be simply overlooked because “partly... Burmese nationalism became increasingly conflated with Buddhist religious identity... [and] this [has] exacerbated the dynamic of non-Burman, non-Buddhist “others” being considered a threat to the state, and the tools of regional or global power interests”.³⁸ In today’s context, Myanmar citizens continues to “worry about what they see as the preservation of Buddhist moral values and of other traditional practices in the face of rapid modernization, technological advancement, and increased openness to the outside world... they also express fears... that Buddhism might lose its position within society or might be debased in a secular, multireligious context”.³⁹ That are growing concerns that if other religions are given the same level of acceptance in Myanmar society, then there will be an eventual decline of Buddhism and thereby, the eventual demise of its national identity. Hence, there is a need to use Buddhist rhetoric to dominate the socio-political dimension of Myanmar society.

Revisiting an “Imagined Community”: The problems within and the “Marginalisation by the Marginalised”

The need to ‘belong’ has continued to cultivate and strengthen this identity politics in Myanmar. This creates a cultural identity of “Burmanization” that has often been debated and it is a

[c]omplex process of cultural contact between Burmans and Others, [and thereby] a socio-political strategy aiming to assimilate the country’s ethnic and religious minorities... Burmanization is sometimes used by the majority to exert its dominance over non-Burman and non-Buddhist groups.⁴⁰

³⁷ Caster, Michael, “The Truth about Myanmar’s New Discriminatory Laws”, *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2015 [Online] Available: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/the-truth-about-myanmars-new-discriminatory-laws/>

³⁸ Walton, Matthew J., and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), p. 6

³⁹ Walton, Matthew J., and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), p. 47

⁴⁰ Berlie, J.A., *The Burmanization of Myanmar’s Muslims* (Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2008), p. 19

Through “Burmanization”, many of the ethnic groups tended to assimilate and conform to the values and norms of the majority as a means of amending their current status. As Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” would presupposed, the new identity that most of these groups embrace would coalesce into a national consciousness that they tend to gravitate towards – that being a “Burmese”. Michael Gravers has also argued that, “religious conversion among the non-Burman ethnic groups [has] created a serious contradiction between a new, imagined homogenous pan ethnic... identity and the previous communitarian identities based on local moral and ritual communities... [to the extent that] Conversion thus was not seen as merely a conversion to modernity, but a retrieval of their old religious order”.⁴¹ This dominance of one particular religious identity onto another has resulted in the re-imagining of the group’s past histories, trajectories and marginality. This has also caused in-fighting amongst some of the ethnic groups, such as the Karens, where the mainly Buddhist Pwo-speaking Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) are at loggerheads with the mostly Christian Sgaw-speaking Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

The Spivakian’s *subaltern* is also reflected in this “marginalisation by the marginalised”. This Buddhist identity in itself can be a coalescing force amongst the different ethnic groups and especially so those who are not of the Buddhist faith. This is clearly represented in the situation between the largely Buddhists Arakanese and the Muslim Rohingyas in the state of Rakhine. The identity crisis that most Buddhist Arakanese would affiliate themselves with are the dominant Buddhist Burmans. The allegiance that the Arakanese builds around Buddhism thus affords them the legitimacy as a political force in the region and thereby providing legitimacy to them as being part of the larger Myanmar-Burmese society. Buddhism in Myanmar, therefore,

definitely unify the Burman... Yet, Buddhism in practice also divides the Burman... [and furthermore] the endangered Buddhism partly unifies Burman and Rakhine [Arakanese] against Myanmar’s Muslims – notably through religious movements like the “969” – only because it is linked to a perceived threat against their respective territories... [so much so that the] current conflict created the opportunity of a Rakhinization of Rakhine State in the

⁴¹ Gravers, Mikael, “Conversion and Identity: Religion and the Formation of Karen Ethnic Identity in Burma”, in Mikael Gravers, ed., *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Denmark: NIAS Press, 2010), pp. 250 – 251

same way that the Burman government tried to Burmanize Myanmar national territory. This Rakhinization process characterized by the equation “Rakhine identity = Rakhine language + Buddhism + Rakhine State” is explicit... [and] aimed at gathering all Rakhine State Muslims... in a temporary Muslim area awaiting for relocation to a third country.⁴²

This is what has been observed, not just in Rakhine, but also in many other parts of Myanmar. So much so that there are, for instance, “Karen identity = Karen language + Buddhism + Karen State”, leading to a fractured Karen society where the Buddhist Karens are pitted against Christian Karens. This form of marginalisation continues in Myanmar. Further examination of each of the ethnic groups and their identity vis-à-vis the larger Burmese conundrum will be needed. Unfortunately, for now, the international community’s obsession over the fate of the Rohingyas in Myanmar tends to overshadow the continued marginalisation of the other ethnic groups by the Burman majority. There are still many instances of an attempt to erase any memory of the ethnic identity that exists in the country. As a result of this, the majority Burman ethnic group, which continued to dominate the *Tatmadaw*, as well as other level of civil society, has used this differentiation to divide the various communities, creating animosity amongst the various groups so as to gain allegiance of one group over another. The voice of the ‘*subaltern*’, therefore no longer can be heard and represented over the larger schema of an “imagined community”. There is now the currency of a “marginalisation by the marginalised” that dominates the identity ethnic groups over other sub-ethnic groups. This will posit a problem if Aung San Suu Kyi’s 21st century Panglong agreement continues to falter.

Conclusion:

It has been slightly more than a year since the NLD has taken over the reins of the Myanmar government. Yet, there has been little progress with regards to the ethnic crisis that is dominating Myanmar society. With regards to Myanmar’s ethnic trajectories and marginalisation, that,

there are also concerns [and continue to be so] over the larger question of ethnic problems that has yet to be addressed... Ceasefires have been signed

⁴² Boutry, Maxime, “Burman Territories and Borders in the Making of a Myanmar Nation State” in Su-Ann Oh, ed., *Myanmar’s Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making an Figured Worlds* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), pp. 100 – 102

with most of the armed groups but a political solution has yet to be discussed.⁴³

The Burmanization and the continued marginalisation of the other ethnic communities in Myanmar have only posed more problems to the current administration. Few, if any at all, have the tenacity to plough through the delicate and complex issue of Myanmar's multi-ethnic society. It will take much more than a democratically elected government to unify this diverse nation. An active and more engaged civil society would also need to bear the burden of ensuring that the marginalised are properly represented. The dominance of the Buddhist identity has also posed huge problems to any integration efforts by the Myanmar government. Buddhism, while largely docile and peaceful, has found to be ineffective as a means to coalesce the diverse society. There remain a small number of Christians as well as Muslims who are marginalised and alienated by this "imagined community" that has been placed upon them. It should also be worthwhile to understand that "while the problem of other ethnic minorities in the country center around the question of autonomy or federalism, the Rohingyas are confronted with identity crisis"⁴⁴ and this marks the difficulties of such marginalisation within Myanmar society.

⁴³ Kipgen, Nehginpao, *Democracy Movement in Myanmar: Problems and Challenges* (New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co., 2015), pp. 189

⁴⁴ Kipgen, Nehginpao, *Democracy Movement in Myanmar: Problems and Challenges* (New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co., 2015), pp. 47 – 48

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Myanmar's ethnic groups

Bamar

1. *Bamar*
2. *Dawei*
3. *Beik*
4. *Yaw*
5. *Tabein*
6. *Kadu*
7. *Ganau*
8. *Salone*
9. *Hpon*

Chin

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Chin</i> | 21. <i>Zahnyet</i> |
| 2. <i>Meithei</i> | 22. <i>Tapong</i> |
| 3. <i>Saline</i> | 23. <i>Tiddim</i> |
| 4. <i>Ka-Liu-kaw</i> | 24. <i>Tay-Zan</i> |
| 5. <i>Awa Khami</i> | 25. <i>Taishon</i> |
| 6. <i>Khawno</i> | 26. <i>Thado</i> |
| 7. <i>Kaungso</i> | 27. <i>Torr</i> |
| 8. <i>Kaung Saing Chin</i> | 28. <i>Dim</i> |
| 9. <i>Kwelshin</i> | 29. <i>Dai</i> |
| 10. <i>Kwangli</i> | 30. <i>Naga</i> |
| 11. <i>Gunte</i> | 31. <i>Thanhkul</i> |
| 12. <i>Gwete</i> | 32. <i>Malin</i> |
| 13. <i>Ngorn</i> | 33. <i>Panun</i> |
| 14. <i>Siyin</i> | 34. <i>Magun</i> |
| 15. <i>Sentang</i> | 35. <i>Matu</i> |
| 16. <i>Saing Zan</i> | 36. <i>Miram</i> |
| 17. <i>Za-how</i> | 37. <i>Mi-er</i> |
| 18. <i>Zotung</i> | 38. <i>Magan</i> |
| 19. <i>Zo-pe</i> | 39. <i>Lushei</i> |
| 20. <i>Zo</i> | 40. <i>Laymyo</i> |
| 21. <i>Lyente</i> | 41. <i>Wakim</i> |
| 22. <i>Lawhtu</i> | 42. <i>Haulngo</i> |
| 23. <i>Lai</i> | 43. <i>Anu</i> |
| 24. <i>Laizao</i> | 44. <i>Anun</i> |
| 25. <i>Oo-pu</i> | 45. <i>Roungtu</i> |
| 26. <i>Asho</i> | 46. <i>Khami</i> |

Kachin

1. *Kachin*
2. *Tarone*
3. *Dalaung*
4. *Jinghpaw*
5. *Guari*
6. *Hkahku*
7. *Duleng*
8. *Maru*
9. *Rawang*
10. *Lashi*
11. *Atsi*
12. *Lisu*

Karen (Kayin)

1. *Kayin*
2. *Kayinpyu*
3. *Pa-le-chi*
4. *Mon Kayin*
5. *Sgaw*
6. *Ta-lay-pwa*
7. *Paku*
8. *Bwe*
9. *Monnepwa*
10. *Monpwa*
11. *Shu*

Kayah

1. *Kayah*
2. *Zayein*
3. *Ka-yun*
4. *Gheko*
5. *Kebar*
6. *Bre (ka-yaw)*
7. *Manu manaw*
8. *Yin Talai*
9. *Yin Baw*

Mon

Rakhine

1. *Rakhine*
2. *Kamen*
3. *Kwe Myi*
4. *Daingnet*
5. *Maramagyi*
6. *Mro*
7. *Thet*

Shan

1. *Shan*
2. *Yun*
3. *Kwi*
4. *Pyin*
5. *Yao*
6. *Panaw*
7. *Pale*
8. *Eng (En)*
9. *Son*
10. *Khamu*
11. *Kaw*
12. *Kokant*
13. *Khamti Shan*
14. *Hkun*
15. *Taungyo*
16. *Danu*
17. *Palaung*
18. *Mauzi*
19. *Yin Kya*
20. *Yiu Net*
21. *Shan Gyi*
22. *Shan Gale*
23. *Lahu*
24. *Intha*
25. *Eik-swair*
26. *Pa-o*
27. *Tai-loi*
28. *Tai-lem*
29. *Tai-lon*
30. *Tai Lay*
31. *Maingtha*
32. *Maw shan*
33. *Wa*

Armed Groups

Bamar

Chin

Kachin

Karen (Kayin)

Kayah

Mon

Rakhine

Shan

1. *Federal Union Army (FUA) – combination of 12 ethnic rebel groups of Myanmar.*
2. *All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF)(1988)*
3. *Myanmar National Democratic Alliance (MNDAA) (1989)*

1. *Kachin Independence organisation (KIO)*
2. *Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – armed wing of KIO*
3. *Arakan Army – Kachin (AA)(2008)*
4. *New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K)*
5. *Rebellion Resistance Force (RRF)*

1. *Kayan National Guard (KNG) (1970)*
2. *Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) (1957)*
3. *Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF)*
4. *Karenni National Development Party (KNDP) 1996*
5. *Karenni National Unity and Solidarity Organisation (KNUSO) (2002)*
6. *Kayan New Land Party (KNLP) 1964*
7. *Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)*

1. *Arakan Liberation Party with its armed wing, Arakan Liberation Army*
2. *Faith Movement Arakan (2016)*
3. *Rohingya Liberation Party (RLP) (1972-1974)*
4. *Rohingya National Army (RNA) (!998-2001)*
5. *Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF) (1974-1980s)*
6. *Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) (1982 – 1998)*

1. *The Chin National Front (CNF)*
2. *Chin National Army (CAN) – armed group of CNFs.*
3. *National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K) (1980)*
4. *Zomi Reunification Organisation (ZRO) (1996)*
5. *Zomi revolutionary Army (ZRA) – armed group of ZRO*

1. *Karen National Union (KNU)*
2. *Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)*
3. *Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)*
4. *Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) (1995)*
5. *Karen Peace Force (KPF) (1997)*

KNLA and DKBA are splinter factions of the KNU.

1. *The New Mon state party (NMSP)*
2. *Mon Peace and Defense Front (MPDF) (2008)*
3. *Mon Mergui Army*
4. *Mon National Defence Army*

1. *National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)*
2. *Shan State army / Restoration Council of Shan State (SSA/SSPP)*
3. *Shan State Army / Shan State Progress Party (SSA / SSPP)*
4. *United Wa State Army (UWSA)*
5. *Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO) (1949)*
6. *Pa-O National Liberation Army (PNLA) (armed wing of PNLO)*
7. *Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army*
8. *Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) (1992)*
9. *Kachin Defence Army (KDA)*
10. *Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP)(1976)*
11. *Wa National Organisation (WNO) (1974)*
12. *Pa-O National Organization (PNO) (1976)*

These groups became a focal point of the opposition movement following the 8-8-88 uprising as the military heightened its presence throughout the country

Red: New Ceasefire groups
 Blue: Transformed Border Guard forces/groups (Transformed BGF groups)
 Brown: Transformed people's militia force/group (Transformed PMF groups)
 Source: <http://mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/armed-ethnic-groups> (this link cannot be saved as a pdf.)

Purple: Combatant groups
 Green: Special arrangement groups
 Black: Defunct groups