

The Killings of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar (Burma) Change in Myanmar's Politics after Elections in April 2012

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Editor's Comment: The following is a very thoughtful review of much of the history of some of the current events of ethnic cleansing/genocide of minorities taking place in Myanmar. The article also gives the reader a meaningful historical narrative about Myanmar and especially the current transition hopefully to a more democratic government than was the case of the many years of the military junta.

This article was written by an intern for GPN who has a Masters degree in Human Rights and Genocide studies from Kingston University and who lives in Germany. In this case GPN senior staff do not have the skills to vouch for the accuracy of the report. Myanmar is one of the large number of areas that 'white men' western genocide scholars have ignored to a great extent over the years, and we welcome the input of an obviously caring and thoughtful observer. In addition we are pleased to provide an outlet for a young scholar at the beginning of her career.

This article is also followed by further up-to-date material that GPN Staff has collected from current news sources in order for the reader to have more than one lens with which to view this report.

Altogether these reports add up to a picture of a country that is getting better BUT is still struggling with major traditions of ethnic discrimination and prejudice. Further, as GPN has pointedly noted in the past, we in the West idealize Buddhist writings and thereby attribute to them idealistically that they do not do the horrible violence that we do. But they too do. Tragically, genocide is a serious human malady wherever our human race abounds.

Please click here to see [Sri Lanka: From Sinhalese Discrimination to Tamil Terror to Sinhalese Victory](#) in Issue 7 of GPN.

Political Development in Myanmar

The Union of Myanmar, formerly Burma, is geographically located on the continent of Asia and situated between India, China, Laos and Thailand. Burma gained its independence from the colonial rule of the British Empire in 1948.

On the 11th of October in 2011 the worldwide news reported the release of political prisoners in Myanmar by President Thein Sein. International politicians welcomed this decision of the government and especially the release of the famous political dissident and Nobel Prize winner Mrs. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was ordered under house arrest since July 1989. The most repressive state of the world changed its political discourse after elections in November 2010 when the new President Thein Sein, himself a former military man, started to create a civilian parliament and the military junta leader, Than Shwe, vanished from the public sight (CFR Kurlantzick, 2012). Myanmar, a country which experienced under the leadership of the National Unity Party (NUP) led by Dictator Ne Win nothing but misery, abuses and economic mismanagement since 1962 appeared now about to change after the elections in April 2012.

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) a favored military party took an insignificant handful of seats in the new parliament (Kurlantzick, 2012). The opposition leader, Suu Kyi and her National League of Democracy (NLD), celebrated an overwhelming triumph by taking 43 of 44 seats. Thousands of supporters of the NLD gathered together at the party headquarter of the party in Rangoon during the election time and waiting for the speech of the leaders (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). The celebration of the NLD demonstrates the support of the Burmese people after years of repression. Despite harassment of NLD candidates before the poll, international monitors were allowed and the Election Day was judged free and fair (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). The vote of the Burmese population does not mean an end of the military rule in Myanmar but it is a significant step on a path for democratic change (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR).

The foundation to successful elections conducted in April 2012 were the elections held by the military junta in November 2010. The process toward building a democratic state had begun. The elections by the military junta passed over power to the civilian parliament. The NLD boycotted the shifted vote to military parties. The result was the military dominating the new parliament by winning the political elections with 80 percent of the votes (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). Pro-democracy opposition groups asserted that the regime was engaged in rampant fraud to achieve this result (World without Genocide). The new President Thein Sein demonstrated a commitment to reform, former military leaders retired from politics, and Thein Sein launched a dialogue with Suu Kyi and opposition leaders (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). Sein demonstrated effort in reforming Myanmar by releasing political prisoners, opening the economy and banking system to internationals, agreeing to long-term peace deals with ethnic minorities fighting the Burmese military, and established a national human rights commission (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). The media censorship was slightly lifted as the Burmese newspapers published interviews with political opposites, criticism on the government and international news (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR).

However, even if the elections in April 2012 were free and fair, due to political harassment, soldiers, bureaucrats and people connected to the government were still

under pressure to vote for the USDP (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR). The by-elections were also taking place to fill a small percentages of seats in the parliament, which means control of one-tenth of the seats (Kurlantzick, 2012 TNR) The NLD will offer legitimacy to the parliament even if the NLD has little power to pass legislation or bills, but will make an impact on transparency of the state and criticize the government.

The government has a long way ahead to democracy. One of the first steps should be peace nationwide between the military and the largest powerful ethnic army, Kachin Independence Army by recognizing war crimes and more political support for ethnic minorities.

But can the NLD in the future government make a change? To what extend did the ethnic minorities have to suffer and why? The next part of this article will describe the human rights abuses taking place over the last decades.

Ethnic Cleansing/ Genocide of Minorities in Myanmar

The country of Myanmar is a home of different minority groups; these ethnic groups are separated by nation-state boundaries which have led to state control continuing to be the source of conflicts above the country. According to Cooper 40 percent of the Burmese population are non-Bamar. The largest ethnic minority is the Karen, half of them Christians while the rest are Buddhists. After decades of crimes against humanity, rape, forced labor an, use of child soldiers, destruction of villages, the Karen group took up arms against the government.

Since June 2011 the serious abuses committed by the government in the northern Kachin State (situated on the boarder to China) led to tens of thousands of displaced people in Myanmar (HRW 2012). The longstanding ceasefire with the ethnic armed groups escalated in 2011. The Burmese military continues to abuse civilians in conflict areas.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimated 75,000 ethnic Kachin displaced persons and refugees in need of food, shelter and medicine while the government of Myanmar blocks humanitarian aid. The Burmese army has attacked villages, pillaged properties and forced displacement; civilians were tortured and women raped by the soldiers. Children as young as 14 were conscripted to forced labor (HRW 2012). Displaced Kachin civilians described in the report from HRW to have been forced to work in front lines for the Burmese Army. The Burmese troops have deliberately attacked Kachin civilians. The Kachin Independence Army has been involved in abuses as well, recruiting of child soldiers and antipersonnel mines. 45,000 of 75,000 Kachin civilians have sought refuge in 30 camps for internal displaced persons.

The international campaign to stop rape in conflict (www.stoprapeinconflict.org) describes the situation in the Burmese state as serious. Ethnic minorities such as the Kachin, Shan and Karen states are facing significant persecution and systematic

violence by the security forces. Despite the ceasefire agreement has the military junta engaged in offensives in all three states over the last years.

Following the elections in November 2010 the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) took up arms in the Karen State (HRW Country Myanmar 2012). The Burmese army broke their ceasefire from 1989 and attacked the Shan State Army North. The Shan Army refused to demobilize and to become a government controlled militia, resulting in displacement of 30,000 civilians.

The Kachin Independence Army ended a signed ceasefire agreement from 1994, when the Burmese army broke out in a fight in the Karen State (HRW Country Myanmar 2012). 35 rape cases have been reported by women and girls, and thousands of civilians are seeking refuge in China.

These abuses from the Burmese Army are continuously violating international humanitarian law, using sexual violence, torture, beating, pillaging of property, recruiting of child soldiers (HRW Country Myanmar 2012). The perpetrators are rarely brought to justice by the Burmese government, which does not stop the army from continuing these acts of violence.

HRW estimated in January 2012 approximately 5000,000 internally displaced people with additionally 140,000 refugees in Thailand (HRW Country Myanmar 2012).

Another minority besides the Kachin and Shan people, who is participating in an armed force, the DKBA, are the Karen people.

Among the many ethnic groups that have taken arms against the government, the Karen is the largest group (Robinson p472). The Karen minority of Myanmar, are approximately five to seven million of the 47 million Burmese and they supported the colonial rule of Britain and became part of their Colonial Army. The Karen were situated in the hilly areas of Myanmar on the border to Thailand. Since 1948 the Karen fought under the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), for independence and autonomy (Robinson p472). According to Robinson (p472) have thousands of Karen people died due to military campaigns of the military government and millions were forcibly displaced.

Before the colonial rule of the British in 1886, the Karen has not been part of the political entity "Myanmar", but the political changes under the British authority made the Karen became loyal and parts of their Army. The close relationship to the colonial rulers made the Karen people an objective of hatred and suspicions of Burmese nationalists (Robinson 473). After the independence of Myanmar and the establishment of the new regime, autonomy was not granted for the Karen, a reason to take arms against the state. However, this can still not justify the violence the ethnicity of Karen people had to suffer over the past centuries.

Since 1962 the Burmese army was encouraged to intervene in political life to bring about a national unity and order and to handle various rebel groups (Robinson 473). After then has the military rule cut off Myanmar from the rest of the world leading to

an extreme isolation by nationalizing trade and business and rejecting investments from foreign countries (Diller 395). In 1968 the violence of Karen by the Burmese state was underlined with military doctrine, policies and practices (Robinson p474). The “four-cuts” included denying their access to “food, intelligence, recruits, and finances” resulting in systematic violence, terror and displacements of individuals and entire villages (Robinson 474). The impunity of the military and the encouragement of officers encouraged brutal behavior instead of treating individuals humanely.

The Karen Human Rights Group, an internationally recognized human rights organization, are working with villagers who are suffering from the violence and human rights abuses committed by soldiers and officials of the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC). The organization also supports the villagers to translate testimonies and gathering evidence such as photos and documentary for the worldwide distribution.

Additional Historic Events of Myanmar

In the 1970's ethnic minorities have been attacked in different areas of Myanmar, including resettling residents guarded by the military. The military junta sought for negotiation with ethnic state armed forces to maintain its political power, but the Karen did not cooperate with the junta (World without Genocide).

From 1962 to 1988 Ne Win presided over the Myanmar Socialist Programme Party, the “road to Socialism” included the nationalization of the country, everyday living essentials were only available on black markets (Skidmore & Wilson 207). The Military Dictator Ne Win controlled and oppressed the population by spreading fear and using methods such as disappearance, torture and arrest (Diller 396). The promulgation of a new constitution in 1974 was an instrument by Ne Win mainly to remain in power, where he refused to recognize ethnic minorities of Myanmar. After the resignation of Dictator Ne Win the military stayed in a dominant role in the politics of Myanmar in 1974.

In 1987 the United Nations declared Myanmar as the least developed country. Half of the population of Myanmar lived below the world poverty standards (Diller 396). In 1988, pro-democracy demonstrations spread throughout the country against political oppression by Burmese politicians (World without Genocide). Security forces were used to arrest of thousands of demonstrators and torture of detainees (World without Genocide). The uprising demonstrations marked the end of the “Road to Socialism,” the breakdown of law and order in Myanmar was abruptly halted by the Tatmadaw (Burmese military).

The order the Tatmadaw received to fire upon demonstrators resulted in 3,000 civilians killed in Yangon (former Rangoon) up to 10,000 nationwide (Skidmore & Wilson 204). On the 18th of September 1988 a military coup was staged and it was announced that the country was ruled by a State Law and Order Restoration Council

(SLORC) under General Saw Maung. Their first announcement was the intention of National Assembly elections in May 1989. The National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded by Tin Oo and Aung San Suu Kyi in the role of the general secretary. The party dedicated itself to human rights, democracy and well-being of the population of Myanmar. After the NLD launched a campaign against the SLORC, Tin Oo and Suu Kyi were set under house arrest and disqualified from the elections.

The first free election after 30 years in May 1990 ended with 392 out of 489 seats for the NLD (CFR Kurlantzick, 2010). The SLORC did not allow Suu Kyi's NLD to take office and claimed that Myanmar had to draft a new constitution before any parliament could be seated. The SLORC was under pressure due to the ongoing civil wars in the country which led to ceasefire agreements with the ethnic minorities, but not with the Karen National Union (Skidmore & Wilson 2005).

In 1995 Suu Kyi was released from his house arrest and launched a campaign for democracy and human rights in Myanmar. Thousands of civilians started to demonstrate all over the country. Students peacefully demonstrated through sit-ins at their universities. The SLORC forbid Suu Kyi to speak in public and set her under house arrest for a further five years to stop the demonstrations in the streets of Yangon, Mandalay and Bago.

In the interim, the armed forces doubled in size and used vicious tactics to fight minority groups in Myanmar. In 2007 the "Saffron Revolution," that took place in Yangon, gathered tens of thousands of monks together but was brutally repressed.

In 2008 Cyclon Nargis hit Myanmar and caused widespread destruction and death of countless Burmese civilians. The Burmese government blocked humanitarian aid to the worst affected areas for weeks (World without Genocide).

(2010) According to Human Rights Watch, discrimination continued during that time, as well as forced labor and further attempts to terrorize civilians (World without Genocide)

Conclusion

The first steps for the current Myanmar government should be to provide access to food security within the camps of the internally displaced people on the borders of Myanmar, humanitarian access to aid and financial support, as well as the development of human rights law to minimize harm to civilians.

This article gives an overview about the political development of Myanmar and the serious human rights violations on ethnic minorities over the past decades. The current government has a long way ahead to deal with the past, seek justice for the victims and to lead the country into becoming a democratic state.



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