

# RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND CONFLICT IN TRANSITIONING MYANMAR

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW



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This report presents case study findings from a two-year research and policy-dialogue initiative that explores how international peacemakers and development aid providers affect social cohesion in conflict-affected countries. Field research conducted by leading international scholars and global South researchers yields in-depth analyses of social cohesion and related peacebuilding efforts in Guatemala, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. The principal case study specialist for Myanmar is Nicholas Farrelly. The project was coordinated by the Sié Chéou Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver from 2012 - 2014, and supported by a generous grant from Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion and International Affairs.

# 1. INTRODUCTION: “NON-DISINTEGRATION OF THE UNION”

Relationships between identity groups in Myanmar are being tested in new ways by the unfolding political and economic transformation unleashed by the government of President Thein Sein. In a country where a fundamental principle for political management is the “non-disintegration of the union”, the overall picture is in flux. The government is intentionally working to bring long-standing ethnic conflicts to an end, a process that has been central to President Thein Sein’s agenda. Yet achieving this goal is not simple in a situation where new conflicts have emerged at the same time as others have diminished. The re-ignited war in Kachin areas that raged from 2011 to 2013 is one key example. The other is the ongoing tension between Muslim and Buddhist communities, most acutely in Rakhine State. The number of social challenges emanating from this transition away from entrenched authoritarian rule would be difficult for even the most capable government to manage.

The profound capacity constraints relevant to the Myanmar context exacerbate the political, managerial and ethical problems confronting national and international actors involved in work to deliver a more peaceful future for the country’s people. Overall, the study finds that:

- A key driver of deep social divisions is the fact that the Myanmar government has an uneven capacity to deliver services, especially in areas affected by ethnic and religious conflict. Some parts of the country, most notably in border areas, are off-limits to government personnel, even if they travel with a military escort. Then, there are other parts of the country where different ethnic interests seek to deliver services to local populations, sometimes in direct competition to the local and central governments.
- The unevenness of government capacity has made it very difficult for international organizations to determine where the greatest needs are, and the haphazard implementation of government policies complicates the story. To maintain social cohesion, and to minimize the prospects of exacerbating local inter-group resentment, it is clear that the overall picture of service delivery needs attention, as a key mechanism for building a more cohesive society.

## 2. SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS: RULES OF THE GAME

In Myanmar, social cohesion has three prominent, intersecting dimensions: religion, ethnicity and gender. The current state model did not emerge during a liberal period of Myanmar history and still excludes those who do not fit into the prevailing notions of indigeneity and belonging. Society remains dominated, at least in the public presentation of power, by men, many of whom are still in military uniforms. While Aung San Suu Kyi is a notable exception, Myanmar has an inconsistent track record of including women in all of its political, economic and cultural functions. In the Union Assembly, only seven percent of members are women. The fact that the armed forces still control 25 percent of seats, almost all of whom are men, is one part of the explanation.

Sexual violence in Myanmar’s war zones has been regularly documented (see SWAN, 2002; Fink, 2008). Violence perpetrated against women in the context of brutal inter-ethnic conflict is still reported (Phyu Phyu Sann and Radhakrishnan, 2012), and there are indications that sexual minorities, of which Myanmar has an intricate typology, are also vulnerable (see Gilbert, 2013). At the same time the alleged ill-treatment of Buddhist women by Muslim men is often used to justify anti-Muslim purges. In areas where Internally Displaced People or refugee populations are found there are also reports that women and children are disproportionately vulnerable (Yen Snaing and Lawi Weng, 2014). Efforts by local and international organizations to recognize the gender dimensions of Myanmar’s complicated cultural and political landscape are essential.

With the recent elections, state institutions in Myanmar are still controlled by the Bamar majority, and members of ethnic minorities who work closely with them. Members of the military, judiciary and bureaucracy tend to be from those groups considered more sympathetic to the central government's long-term agenda. There are ethnic and religious minorities in some areas of the state apparatus, with a number of notable Chin and Kachin Christians, for instance, working in senior bureaucratic roles in Naypyitaw, but Rakhine and Mon Buddhists heavily outnumber them in these roles.

- The extent to which state institutions accommodate ethnic minorities is a product of the distrust between different groups and their disparate access to educational advancement. In a context where political struggles remain emotive and the prospect of future violent conflict lingers, the arrangement of political power is highly contentious.
- Corruption exacerbates the level of resentment that disenfranchised groups in Myanmar feel. The relatively small number of ethnic and religious minorities who ever take on positions of authority with state institutions exemplifies their lack of inclusion in the overall political system.

The Myanmar state is strong enough, in any case, to draw the required support from the Bamar majority. While many people, even those who work in government positions, come to resent the authoritarianism and majoritarianism over the state institutions, it has proved a reliable vehicle for individual ambitions. For these reasons the state cannot be judged neutral, especially in the context of ethnic conflict where it has such a partisan track record. Those who do not belong to the Bamar majority often assert that the state promotes the majority's interests to the detriment of those from other national race groups.

When it comes to the Rohingya, the state has worked more actively to undermine their claims to inclusion. In this sense, it ensures that a strict separation is maintained between national races and the Rohingya. This is politically expedient, as most Myanmar citizens appear uncomfortable, for now, with the prospect of embracing the Rohingya as fellow citizens. This situation is even more complicated in the case of the Chinese, many of whom have self-assimilated and now prove indistinguishable from many other people in urban Myanmar. The extent to which the state and its proxies have any control over that process is doubtful.

- Instead, the state continues to define belonging on the narrow basis of national race classification and works to ensure that the key boundary is between those who are eligible for Myanmar citizenship and those who are not. In this sense the Bamar majority catalyzes what the government presents as a civilizational mission, harnessing the combined energies of all the national races.

## **THE UPPER HAND**

Myanmar is now a Presidential, constitutional republic, with a legislature elected to support the law-making of a strong executive. This system has evolved from what was a series of military dictatorships that ruled the country from 1962. Adequately characterizing the current system of government is difficult because the military continues to influence many of the key decisions in Naypyitaw even though its official role has been greatly reduced. The country therefore sits in an awkward position of semi-democracy that frustrates those who wished that faster progress had been made towards a genuinely participatory political system. The transition will be tested by the proposed elections in 2015, which will likely bring about more sustained changes to the overall political climate.

In a rapidly changing political context, while there is not a long history of broad-based social participation, there is a growing awareness that such participation will not pose an unreasonable threat to the transitional system. Media organizations that were previously allowed only to operate in exile, and often in secret, have been recently welcomed back to Myanmar. They continue to attack the government and its policies, but do so from the advantageous positions they now enjoy inside the country. There are still, however, those who struggle to find

support for their approach to confrontation with the government. In the past year some journalists and activists have been prosecuted for their work, although such cases are much less frequent than they were under military rule.

While even in 2014 Internet usage in Myanmar remains low, a rambunctious culture of online discussion has emerged. Myanmar's Internet has become an unruly forum for the distribution of provocative anti-Muslim material fanning hatred among those who are already inclined to chauvinist attitudes. The censorship that limited the utility of the Internet in earlier years has been replaced by free-wheeling discussions, including of sensitive political topics. During periods of inter-communal tension the government has allegedly sought to control Internet usage as a means of disrupting the flow of potentially explosive material.

## **POLICY AND LEGAL MATTERS**

Currently there are efforts to implement a law against inter-faith marriages that would, in a very clear way, criminalize certain interactions with the country's Muslim and Christian populations. The current draft of this law stipulates that Buddhist women will be precluded from marrying Muslim men, and that Muslims would need to convert to Buddhism before such marriages would be approved. There has been much consternation about the role of these proposed restrictions in contemporary Myanmar. They will serve to undermine some of the confidence of the population at a time when communal harmony is fragile. Among nationalist, Buddhist elements there is great anxiety about the perceived incursions that Muslims have made. Some of those anxieties are focused, simply, on the growing number of Muslims in the country. In other cases there are more personal reasons, including economic grievances and religious prejudices, which are leading to the entrenchment of cleavages. These blur the boundaries between ethnic and racial concerns, especially where Muslims are perceived to be foreigners, identified by their darker skin and alien cultural practices.

Perhaps the most significant division between the Bamar majority and some ethnic and religious minority populations is seen in the level of recruitment to the military. The preeminent role of the armed forces during Myanmar's recent history makes the lack of non-Bamar personnel an issue of significant concern for the long-term acceptance of state security organizations. Histories of abusive interactions with ethnic minorities are problematic in a context where the representativeness of the military has long been criticized. The police, a paramilitary force under the overall control of former military officers, struggles for respect, especially in those parts of the country where the local population is reluctant to trust any uniformed government personnel. Recruitment for the security sector that better reflects the ethnic and religious composition of the country will require attitude changes from both the government and the population-at-large. For now there are major challenges of perception that undermine the confidence that many of Myanmar's people have in those who are supposed to keep them safe.

## **3. THE DEVELOPMENT WONDERLAND IN MYANMAR: DEALING WITH UNPRECEDENTED INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

The extent of international engagement through development cooperation has increased significantly since the government of President Thein Sein came to power in 2011. It is now characterized by a major international effort to become enmeshed in Myanmar's transformation and to help nudge these efforts in positive directions. Until Cyclone Nargis struck the country in May 2008 there had been a long-term trend of limited international engagement, especially with respect to development cooperation. Major western donors were banned from having close ties to the government and it was therefore often impossible to maintain heavy involvement in the long-term. What development assistance western countries offered tended to filter through border areas, especially those that are directly adjacent to Thailand. The Japanese and Korean governments had other approaches but they were still partly constrained by the pariah status of the Myanmar regime. Since the government of Thein Sein took power international agencies and donors have sought to cooperate with the Myanmar side. They are now well entrenched in Naypyitaw, including in some of the key elements of the

bureaucracy where international staff have been seconded. Their role in this system has proved conducive to expanding the degree of autonomy that they have for directing development assistance.

In all areas, the international presence in Myanmar is expanding rapidly. ASEAN has become a key player, especially since Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The management of complex, multi-ethnic societies with legacies of authoritarianism is an experience shared across the major countries of the Southeast Asian region. ASEAN centrality, as it is often phrased in regional discussions, suits Myanmar's purposes as it seeks to create a more respectable international image. With that emerging image there is now a complex terrain of international engagements, with such partners as the current government, democratic parties, ethnic parties, armed groups, civil society, universities and the media. The Myanmar Peace Centre is especially relevant in this context. It has received significant funding from the United Nations, European Union and Japan to support historic peace negotiations between the government and ethnic armed groups. There have also been international efforts to generate inter-faith dialogue, especially along the violent cleavage between Muslims and Buddhists. This work is increasingly judged to be politically motivated by Myanmar's own people, many of whom are uncomfortable with the influence of Muslim or democratic countries perceived to be meddling in Myanmar's internal affairs. Protests against the Organization of Islamic Cooperation have, as one example, punctuated campaigns led by monks in support of their vision for a Buddhist-dominated Myanmar society.

- Notwithstanding the positive trajectory currently enjoyed by those seeking to manage Myanmar's conflicts, it has been difficult for international organizations to calibrate their involvement with conflict in Myanmar because, until very recently, the government was disinclined to seek any international assistance. A new level of openness, while widely welcomed, does not imply that there are simple operating environments for those who seek to influence the country's political development.
- Where international interventions have been able to work alongside local efforts to build more peaceful environments for inter-ethnic interaction there are clear advantages. Mediation and external diplomatic intervention have played a role in helping to re-shape Myanmar's conversations about ethnic and religious conflict.

Many countries and organizations have sought to play constructive roles. The relative tolerance of the Myanmar government for their efforts has varied over time, but the primary outcome of these efforts have been to legitimize the government's peace-building teams. The anxiety of other international actors about a rejuvenated foreign presence has occasionally been distracting. For example, Chinese officials have previously expressed discomfort about international efforts to resolve conflicts along the Sino-Myanmar border. International organizations have proved capable of managing any local or regional sensitivity in these difficult circumstances.

In Myanmar international donors still generally have a good reputation. They are welcomed for their resources and expertise, with the Myanmar side keen to embrace the possibilities of better technology, more professional administrative practices and cutting-edge conceptualizations of how a successful society can be organized. Certainly, there are those who are skeptical of the role that foreigners play and Myanmar's history of colonization sometimes proves an obstacle to easy interaction.

In conflict environments most non-governmental organizations are allied, in their rhetoric and in practice, with groups judged particularly vulnerable. Advocacy on behalf of the victims of human rights abuses has a long and admirable history in the Myanmar context. There are inevitably those, especially in the Myanmar government, that feel such advocacy has been unfair on the Bamar-dominated parts of Myanmar society who are blamed as aggressors. The complicated and entangled stories of attack and counter-attack ensure that it is rarely that simple and with better access to Myanmar government perspectives the best analysis now accounts for such a diversity of views.

Since the change of Myanmar's government in 2011 there have been increased opportunities for NGOs to play an active role in helping to manage ethnic conflicts. A number of donor-funded initiatives have followed. The Myanmar Peace Centre stewards negotiations between the central government and ethnic armies, but it is one of many adjacent efforts to work closely with all sides in the interests of building a more peaceful future. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a leading peace-broker in the Southeast Asian region, is, for instance, heavily involved. Other groups are active in monitoring work and there have been efforts to pioneer more rigorous methodologies for threat assessment in the complex Myanmar case. Assessing conflict vulnerability has been a major part of these developments. There is no evidence that external engagement has increased the likelihood of renewed conflict but an aid "bubble" has certainly developed. Unequal salaries and unsustainably high prices for certain services, particularly rental accommodation, have distorted the operating environment for those seeking to build a more peaceful Myanmar society.

External actors have supported the process of political change underway in Myanmar at every stage. They have sought to foster confidence among different ethnic communities while also helping fund the conditions that have made elections and a level of power-sharing possible. The 2014 census, while controversial at the time, was a major international effort to better understand Myanmar's social and economic conditions, including the status of different ethnic and religious groups. That it did not adequately count the Rohingya population is a clear failure, but in other parts of the country there are expectations that it will provide a much better baseline of data than currently exists. International actors have also worked to help foster the appropriate environment for negotiations between ethnic groups and the government. Most of this work has been undertaken quietly in the hope that the government and ethnic groups can claim a victory for Myanmar when final settlements are agreed. Members of the international community, and especially western democracies, have been prominent advocates for inclusive negotiation, based on the need to respect international norms. Inducements, particularly through foreign aid, have proved enticing to the Myanmar government as it works to bolster its economy while managing its domestic political challenges.

In particular, the international community has sought to entice the Myanmar government to support the peace effort. This has a number of different aspects. First, the link between resolving ethnic conflicts and receiving donor assistance has been made clear. One challenge is that during the period when these inducements have been offered new conflicts have emerged, like in the Kachin State and Rakhine State. Second, the government has been presented with the chance to rehabilitate the international image of its armed forces. There are new opportunities for military-to-military links, including with the armed forces from the western democracies that long opposed the Myanmar military dictatorship. This has other advantages for capability development, especially because Myanmar has enjoyed few chances to work together with the world's most sophisticated, technologically advanced military forces. Third, some members of the international community have used the prospect of further foreign investment as a way of helping to encourage the government to take the peace processes more seriously. This is complicated by the different international attitudes to the fault line between Muslims and Buddhists.

Increasingly, foreign development assistance is being targeted to those areas of the country where conflict has proved most persistent. Efforts to support economic development in Kayin State, as an example, require heavy investments in transport and communications infrastructure. There are emerging programs to offer the assistance that the central government, local governments and local communities are seeking as they work to harvest any resulting "peace dividend". The Myanmar government appears comfortable, at this stage, with such international involvement because it has yet to undermine the credibility of their specific commitments to the peace process. Managing the variety of interests that have emerged to resolve Myanmar's ethnic conflicts may have actually well-positioned the government to work collaboratively in contexts where conflict has been the historical standard.

It is likely that external actors will be preoccupied with Myanmar for many years to come. They will work to build a new social contract, one that should bolster the chances of inter-ethnic and inter-religious co-existence. Ethnic minorities remain fearful about the prospect of international support being withdrawn but that appears unlikely under current conditions. Instead the challenge for international actors is to generate goodwill and confidence among majority populations, especially politically moderate Buddhists, who will serve as the most important defense against rising anti-Muslim sentiments. This may prove harder than it looks at first glance because of the reluctance of Buddhists to oppose leading monks, which may indicate a need for re-interpreting some current local conceptions of Buddhist doctrine in favor of an inclusive, harmonious society in Myanmar.

## 4. PRINCIPLE FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

With ongoing violence against vulnerable minorities, inter-communal relationships remains fragile. With the resources that have been devoted to Myanmar in recent times there are important lessons that will be relevant in other contexts. From this perspective, three lessons of Myanmar's complex and incomplete transition will be especially relevant to policy-makers:

- A tentative democratization has led to new social strife, especially of a religious nature. Buddhist extremists have taken to targeting Muslims. As a result communal distrust is high, with anxieties among minorities, especially Muslims, continuing to rise. The freedoms that are so welcomed by Myanmar's people and the international community have been used to undermine some of the progress that could be made.
- In this context compromises between ethnic and religious groups are clearly required, yet they prove elusive. The deliberate efforts to exclude the Rohingya from institutionalized political discussions undermine their chances of ever playing a significant role in Myanmar's politics. With no adequate representation in the country's emerging legislative system, especially at the local level in Rakhine State, the Rohingya are being forced to look elsewhere for political support. Even if Myanmar becomes a full democracy, with adequately robust institutions for the peaceful transfer of power, it will likely still face a deficit of compromise. The sense that politics requires complete victory has infected all levels of society and could prove destructive in the context of unresolved ethnic and religious enmities.
- Contradictory trends introduce profound ambiguities and complexity. For Myanmar there is clearly no single or simple story of social cohesion. There is clearly more participation in politics for some, but not all, of Myanmar's peoples. There is also some peace, some war, and something in between. This complexity requires a more subtle calibration of policy, for the diversity of contexts that are in play. There is no single solution to the challenges facing Myanmar at this pivotal time in the country's history.



With wise leadership and the articulation of a culturally astute vision, Myanmar could become a beacon of religious and ethnic inclusion. It can draw on histories of co-existence and plurality: in its languages, cultures and religions. In theory, the goal of a peaceful multi-ethnic and multi-religious society can be achieved by making some relatively small changes to the national story of “union spirit”. By gradually including Rohingya and Chinese among the country’s “national races”, and by accepting the need for a more fluid style of multiculturalism, Myanmar would set an example far beyond its own borders. For now such an inclusive vision is a distant mirage. For interested international actors there is a clear need to identify Myanmar partners who are similarly concerned about the violent potential of future inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension. The changes required to safeguard against even more violent outbreaks will not come quickly or easily. The sustainability of Myanmar’s transformation to a more democratic system of government will only be possible where capacity is built at every level, and across the prevailing ethnic divides. To work cooperatively with different factions in Myanmar will be a profound test of the concepts of peace building and conflict resolution. Yet given Myanmar’s history of bloodshed and trauma, creating a society that is cohesive or even harmonious is a goal worth pursuing.