



Myanmar: A Bridge Too Far?

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Abstract

Ever since the attainment of independence in 1948 Burma, now Myanmar, has been engaged in a struggle to build a nation and a state capable of meeting the aspirations of her diverse population officially divided into 135 "recognised" ethnic groups. The task of achieving these two interrelated objects is hard and complex given the reality that at least 21 of these ethnic groups are "geopolitical minorities" defined as "minorities" in the total population of Myanmar but "majorities" in their own areas; and the fact that in the colonial period their ethnic-linguistic and cultural identities and differences from the majority Bamar or Burman Buddhists were recognised in the special arrangements for administration of these Areas provided the ground for violent identity assertion.

This was facilitated in no small measure by the post World War II geopolitics of South East Asia. In this backdrop, the demands put forward by the main ethnic groups for a Federal state make sense to put an end to seven decades of civil strife that nearly half a century of Military rule had only deepened it; and more damagingly, its stamp on the 2008 Constitution obstructs the beginning of a state based on democracy and the Rule of Law. Thus Myanmar's "transition" to a modern Federal Democratic State has to begin with peace and reconciliation to build trust among its diverse peoples to move towards a common destiny and a new Myanmar.

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Analysis

There is strength in the prescient comment of Pradip Phanjoubam, the distinguished Manipuri journalist and commentator of the North East affairs that "the overall Indian character is westward looking" and "the reluctance to look East should explain to a great extent why North East remained India's area of darkness for so long." This explains our lack of interest in developments in Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia though in the immediate Post World War II period, India under Pandit Nehru championed the cause of liberation of Asia and Africa from colonialism; and Calcutta hosted two conferences of Asian Communists under the auspices of the Communist Party of India in quick succession – in December 1947 and February 1948 that decided to intensify armed Communist movements in Burma, Malaya and Vietnam. We must note that the Communist Party of Burma was formed in 1939 in which several Indians like Ghoshal, Rajan, S. Mukherjee and Dr. Nath played key roles in mobilising the Burmese and the Indians under the Communist banner; and this gave the CPI some influence in the Communist movement in Burma.

The amazing spread of the Communist Party of Burma and formation of armed wings in the North, East and South Burma during the Second World War among the Kachin, Karen, Shan, Chin, Wa, Mon and other ethnic groups with the British help to fight the Japanese was the beginning of destabilization of Burma that we see today; because it equipped the "geopolitical ethnic groups" – minorities in the country but "majority ethnic groups" in their areas with military power. Martin Smith in his path breaking analysis "Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity" pointed out that what began as Communist Insurgency with Chinese support was transformed into ethnic insurgency and later degenerated into a drug Mafia sponsored organised crime that used political slogans to camouflage the crimes of violence, drug smuggling and extortion especially after 1988 when Tatmadaw – the Army high command took complete control over the country (this is a pattern of insurgency that North East India is all too familiar and equally self defeating).

However, the 'liberated Zones' formed during long spell of Communist Insurgency from 1948-1989 continue as areas of ethnic insurgencies; and so it appears that they have used their Communist and socialist badges quite fruitfully! Consequently the Central Government's effective control even on a liberal estimate is a little over 60 percent of the geographical area. And, this fact makes nation building a critical factor in transition of Myanmar to democracy and a modern State founded on rule of law and democratic institutions of governance. The other complicated issue is lack of any agreed population data on ethnic and linguistic basis right from 1931 Census partly because as a British official observed then – "some of the races and Tribes of Burma change their language almost as often they change their clothes".

Many ethnic groups feel that no true census has ever been undertaken and hence the figure of 68 percent being the proportion of the dominant ethnic Barmars in Myanmar's present population of 53.90 million as per 2015 UN estimate is often questioned. Even if it is accepted and the geographical distribution of ethnic groups is taken into account, Myanmar emerges as a multi ethnic-religious-lingual polity. This is seen in the present division of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar under the 2008 Constitution into one Union Territory, five self administered zones including a Naga Zone, seven states and seven regions. The Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon and the Rakhine Buddhists are major ethnic groups in the list of 135 "recognized" ethnic groups. Unfortunately for Myanmar, most of these groups have now become distinct "political societies" with ambitions to have states of their own and styled themselves as "nationalities" and now negotiate with NLD Government of Madam Aung San Suu Kyi.



Thus, five out of 21 Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) formed an umbrella organisation, the Unified Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) started ceasefire negotiation with the Centre for a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as a prelude to a serious effort to a "democratic and federal nation". At present there is a Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) Support Platform, a team backed by 13 countries and the United Nations but this body could achieve little more than emphasising the need for a peace process. There is in fact a deadlock because while the UNFC wants the international platform to look beyond ceasefire, that is, a lasting political solution – a constitutional reform, the Tatmadaw, i.e. the Army High Command and the NLD Government want a role limited to ceasefire monitoring as they fear dilution of the centralized and ethnic Bamar led Government built since 1958 when the first Army coup took place.

It is unfortunate that the very first effort of independent Burma to build a Federal Democratic state the Constitution of which was scripted by Sir B.N. Rau of the Indian Civil Service and a distinguished constitutional expert didn't work out. It may be noted that it was the same Sir BNRau who as the Constitutional Adviser to the Government of India rendered invaluable service to the Constituent Assembly of India to make the Constitution of the Republic of India in 1950 that made India the world's largest functioning democracy.

In this background the challenge before Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is manifold, stiff and fraught with risk of further drift to misgovernance as she is only the "State Counsellor" and not the executive head and functioning under a Constitutional arrangement made in 2008 that allocates 25 percent of seats in the Parliament to the military and placed crucial ministries of Home and Internal Security, Defence and Border Affairs under the military control. This arrangement is wholly opposed to what a "modern Democratic State" is; and despite this constraint, she has initiated steps to address the grievances of the ethnic minorities and the issue of citizenship in Rakhine faced by Muslims in its North Rakhine apart from measures to develop the regional economy. She is thus heading what observers call "an ostensibly civilian Government" put in place in 2011 with the task of building a nation first through a Peace and Reconciliation process and then a modern Democratic and Federal state with the consent of all Ethnic groups which will meet their aspirations for a better future and give them freedom, dignity and opportunities for advancement. No National leader of Asia today is confronted with such a complex task.

However, geopolitics seems to be on her side because despite the international outcry on the crackdown on the armed Rohingya Movement for a separate Muslim state in Rakhine in the last two months, she continues to enjoy the support of India and China as both have high stakes in peace in Rakhine Region. A 1060 km gas pipeline from Kyaukphyu on Myanmar's west coast to Kunming in Yunnan province of China has been functioning from July 2013 and an oil pipeline from January 2015 allowing China to obtain oil and gas directly from the Middle East and a huge strategic advantage as it reduces China's dependence on the Malacca straits and the South China Sea route. India's stake in stability of Rakhine is high for success of the Kaladan multi modal transport project to give North East an alternative and closer access to the Sittwee Port in Rakhine which might even incentivise Bangladesh to allow transit facility to Chittagong port. It seems that there is a sort of convergence of Indian and Chinese interests in Myanmar.

With a relatively low population as compared to the area and arable land of 10.6 million hectares and vast-largely untapped strategic minerals like tungsten, copper and zinc, on shore oil fields producing currently one million tonnes, proven gas reserves of 200 billion cubic metres and yet a GDP of USD 64.3 billions and Foreign Direct Investment of USD 5 billions only in 2014 and that too mainly from China, Thailand and Hong Kong, Myanmar is a potential Asian tiger economy. The present high growth of about 8 percent from 2012 is rather a product of low base effect' rather than an outcome based on attainment of "take off" stage. Myanmar is lucky



to have a neighbour like India which has returned resource rich Kabaw valley of Manipur to Myanmar in 1948 which the Manipuri people resent till date and didn't make an issue of expulsion of an estimated 400,000 of Indians – mostly merchants and professionals in 1968 by the junta.

To realize the growth potential stabilisation of the internal environment is the first step to put in place growth inducing institutions; and for that to happen Myanmar has to settle for something more than a federal and possibly a federation with some features of a confederation might provide a political framework capable of meeting the aspirations of the diverse ethnic groups in an era when nation states are giving way to subregional union of states for peace and progress. Only then, the "transition" may not look like "a bridge too far" but could make Myanmar again "a country like no other" – the way George Orwell saw its greatness.

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published in *The Statesman* on October 16, 2017.

About the Author of this Issue

Born in Bengal on March 11, 1942 Rangan Dutta was educated at the Universities of Calcutta and New England, NSW Australia and joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1966 and posted in the Assam Meghalaya joint state cadre by the Government of India. He held important positions in the district and State HQ and also in the Union Ministries of Defence, Home, Tribal Affairs, Rural Development. On superannuation in April 2002 from the post of Director General Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology in the rank of Secretary to the Government of India, he joined the Planning Commission till 2004 as a Senior Consultant and as a Scientific Consultant in the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India till the end of 2011. In 1979 he had served as an Agricultural Extension Specialist with the World Bank mission to Afghanistan to appraise Afghan wheat project and in 1980 agricultural research and extension projects in several states of India. He had served as a Senior Directing Staff at the National Defense College of India and a term as a member of its Academic Council.

Strategic issues of security and development of South and South East Asia with focus on North East region of India and India's neighborhood have been his areas of special interest which prompted him to start writing for the North East Page of *The Statesman*, the Indian English language daily, from February 2003 till date covering these issues. He also writes for the web portal www.impactnews.in on current affairs and penned down four short pieces on Myanmar and other journals.



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