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## Going To The Polls: Opportunity Or Setback For Myanmar's Ceasefire Groups?

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General Than Shwe, the leader of Myanmar's military junta, recently confirmed that parliamentary elections will be held this year (2010). While no date has been set it seems likely that voting will take place in late spring or early summer.<sup>1</sup> Although elections are generally a cause for optimism, voting in Myanmar poses many dangers. Two thirds of Myanmar's population consists of ethnic Burmese with the other third consisting of 6 major ethnic groups and 135 ethnic subgroups. As a result of this ethnic diversity the country has been embroiled in ethnic conflict since the 1960s. Myanmar has numerous ceasefire groups, ethnic groups which signed ceasefire agreements with the junta in the 1980s and 90s, the majority of which have not been engaged in armed combat for several decades. Their goals have ranged from greater autonomy to independence. With the possibility of regime change looming, there is a chance, that these groups will renege on ceasefire agreements and take up arms in the hope of gaining influence and power should the military junta be defeated. More real is the danger that the junta will engage the groups militarily in order to quell any potential opposition in the forthcoming elections. This paper argues that while the elections present many dangers for the ceasefire groups, the extent of the peril very much depends on their size and strength. The dangers posed by the elections are likely to be the greatest for the larger ceasefire groups but these groups also have the greatest bargaining power and thus the possibility to achieve the greatest gains.

Myanmar's ethnic groups have suffered decades of oppression and discrimination

under the current military regime. This has included forced relocation, land confiscation, extortion and forced labour. Banki argues that the junta has employed a system of divide and rule to manage the country's ethnic minorities. She states that the ceasefire agreements reveal the extent to which the junta has manipulated ethnicity and religion in order to create friction between the different groups. She claims that "although 14 of the approximately 25 ethnic opposition groups in existence in 1989 have signed official ceasefires with the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council), pockets of resistance are strong and reveal the extent to which divisions occur not only between the majority Burmans and ethnic minorities, but also among ethnic minority groups."<sup>2</sup> An example of such divisions is the recent split of the Shan Nationalities People's Liberation Group (SNPLO), a ceasefire group, into two factions. One of these factions, the Pa-O Liberation Army (PNLA) has resumed fighting.<sup>3</sup> These divisions prevent the ethnic groups from presenting a united front and making political gains through sheer weight of numbers. There is evidence to suggest that the junta will use the divide and rule policy with more vigour in the run up to the elections in order to ensure that ceasefire groups comply with its demands.

The ceasefire groups in Myanmar were established between 1989 and 1995. According to Guo "the ceasefire agreements reached with all but one of the ethnic armed forces in the country have put an end to the chronic insurgent activities waged against the central government of Myanmar

### About the Author

Anna Louise Strachan holds a Masters Degree in Asian Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and a Bachelors Degree in Middle Eastern Studies with Arabic from the University of Exeter. She has worked in a range of different environments including teaching, translating and research and recently completed a research internship, with a focus on Southeast Asia, at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi. She has travelled extensively in Asia, Africa and the Middle East and has also undertaken field research in Oman and Sri Lanka. Her research interests include intra-state conflicts, territorial disputes and the role of international organisations in Peace building and has published a number of papers on these subjects.

<sup>1</sup>McDonald, Mark. "Leader of Junta confirms Myanmar is planning 2010 elections." New York Times. 4 January 2010. Available at [www.nytimes.com/2010/01/05/world/asia/05myanmar.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/05/world/asia/05myanmar.html)

<sup>2</sup>Banki, Susan. 2009. "Contested Regimes, Aid Flows and Refugee Flows: The Case of Burma." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. Vol. 28(2), p.58.

<sup>3</sup>International Displacement Monitor. 2010. "Myanmar: Increasing displacement as fighting resumes in the east." p.5.

<sup>4</sup>Guo, Xiaolin. 2009. "Peace, Conflict and Development on the Sino-Burmese Border." *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, Policy Brief No. 13. p.1.

/Burma.”<sup>4</sup> The majority of the groups are made up of tribes from the northern districts of the country, bordering China. However, the Karen National Union (KNU) continues its armed struggle in the south of the country and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Shan State Army (SSA-South) also continue fighting. In western Myanmar, an armed wing of the Chin National Front also continues to fight against the military junta. The Chin are predominantly Christian and claim to be persecuted on the grounds of their religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> According to the Heidelberg Conflict Barometer 2009, these conflicts constitute a severe crisis.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, casualty figures and displacement as a result of these conflicts have been significant. Guo's argumentation is not therefore entirely accurate. Alongside efforts to bring the ceasefire groups under their control in the run up to the forthcoming elections, the junta has also stepped up efforts to defeat those ethnic groups, which have not signed ceasefire agreements. Fighting has been particularly severe in Karen areas over recent months.

The junta's approach to dealing with the ceasefire groups in the run up to the elections has been to order them to turn their armed units into “Border Guard Forces.” This would bring them under central government control in time for the forthcoming elections.<sup>7</sup> These “Border Guard Forces” will consist of 326 soldiers, 35 of whom, including those in command, will be government personnel.<sup>8</sup> The UWSA, the Mongla group, the KIA and the New Mon State Party were ordered to become part of this force by 31 December 2009. The UWSA has changed its stance on this issue, presenting demands to the Myanmar Army in January 2010 in return for their cooperation. They had previously rejected the junta's demands outright.<sup>9</sup> The junta provided the ceasefire groups with an alternative to the “Border Guard Forces” in the form of disbanding or disarming their military wings.<sup>10</sup> Thus far, few groups have complied with the juntas demands. The New Democratic Army Kachin (NDA-K) was among the first to accept the proposal to form a “Border Guard Force.” The Kayinni Nationalities People's Liberation Party (KNPLF), the Kokang Army in Shan State North and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) have also become “Border Guard Forces.” These transformations are recent and as yet there is little information as to how these groups are faring in their new role. This will undoubtedly become more evident as the elections approach. There have

however been reports that fighting between the DKBA and the KNU has intensified in some areas as a result of the DKBA's decision to align with the government forces. This suggests that if the junta is indeed pursuing a policy of divide and rule in the run up to the elections, it is meeting with some success. It is important to note that thus far the ceasefire groups complying with the junta's demands are relatively small. It is likely that prolonged negotiations will take place before there is any sign of a compromise being reached between the government and the larger ceasefire groups. These groups have bargaining power as they wield a significant amount of power in their home territories and will not easily be convinced to adhere to the junta's demands. It is however worth noting that recent news reports announced that the junta had arranged to meet representatives of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) on 29 January 2010 to discuss the “Border Guard Forces” proposal.<sup>11</sup> Whether this is a sign that the KIA is reconsidering the junta's demands remains unclear.

Following the outbreak of fighting in Myanmar's Kokang Special Administrative District, in the northern Shan State in August 2009 between the National Democratic Alliance Army (MDNAA) and government forces, fears that other ceasefire agreements may be broken in the not too distant future have been raised. The result of the junta's assault on the MDNAA was that the group split into two factions, with one agreeing to become a Border Guard Force and the other vowing to continue its armed struggle.<sup>12</sup> In August 2009, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) reported that some ethnic ceasefire groups had formed alliances in order to prevent acts of aggression by the military junta. The largest of these reportedly consisted of the MDNAA, Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Shan State Army North (SSA-North) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), with troop numbers numbering up to 50,000.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether this alliance is still in existence as the MDNAA has since split and the alliance did not prevent the conflict in Kokang District. There have also been reports that the Myanmar Army has been resupplying its camps in the border areas. The military build up on the part of both the army and the ceasefire groups suggests that the chance of an outbreak of fighting is high,<sup>14</sup> but in reality fighting is likely to remain a last resort for the parties concerned.

The recent killing of the Mongla based NDAA's leader

<sup>5</sup> Beech, Hannah. “A closer look at Burma's Ethnic Minorities.” *Time*. 1 February 2009. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1874981,00.html?xid=rss-world-cnn>

<sup>6</sup> Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research. 2009. *Conflict Barometer*. pp. 51-61.

<sup>7</sup> Lorch, Jasmin and Gerhard Will. 2009. “Burma's Forgotten Conflicts: A Risk for the Region's Security.” *SWP Comments 10. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> International Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2010. “Myanmar: Increasing displacement as fighting resumes in the east.” p.3.

<sup>9</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2009. Armed Conflict Database Myanmar. Available at [http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp\\_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209](http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209)

<sup>10</sup> Lorch, Jasmin and Gerhard Will. 2009. “Burma's Forgotten Conflicts: A Risk for the Region's Security.” *SWP Comments 10. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Moe, Wai. “Junta Restarts Border Guard Talks.” *The Irrawaddy*. 27 January 2010. Available at [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=17674](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17674)

<sup>12</sup> International Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2010. “Myanmar: Increasing displacement as fighting resumes in the east.” p.5.

<sup>13</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2009. Armed Conflict Database Myanmar. Available at [http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp\\_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209](http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209)

<sup>14</sup> Lorch, Jasmin and Gerhard Will. 2009. “Burma's Forgotten Conflicts: A Risk for the Region's Security.” *SWP Comments 10. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. pp. 5-6.

Min Ein may provide food for thought for Myanmar's ceasefire groups. Various theories as to who is responsible for the killing have been promulgated. Claims that the junta orchestrated the killing in response to the NDAA's refusal to become a part of the "Border Guard Forces"<sup>15</sup> are likely to cause some concern among other ceasefire group leaders who have refused the junta's demands. Whether it will have a serious effect on decision making within ceasefire groups is however questionable. This is not the first incident of this kind and previous incidents have not resulted in the larger ceasefire groups complying with the junta's demands. Moreover, many of the leaders of the ceasefire groups may also be targets because of their business deals and associations<sup>16</sup> so there is a significant chance that the military junta is not connected to the killing.

The forthcoming elections have had other effects on the ceasefire groups. The IISS has reported that ethnic armies are rapidly selling off their drug stocks in order to earn more money for weapons, so that they will be prepared for any military action by the state.<sup>17</sup> Opium production has reportedly increased by up to 50 per cent in some border areas. The fact that many ceasefire groups are involved in the drug business is unlikely to have furthered their cause with western governments and international organisations, from whom, to date, they have received little support. It is however worth noting the recent Palaung Women's Organisation (PWO) report on opium production in Myanmar. The report claims that contrary to the findings of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and other western organisations, opium production is in fact flourishing in the government controlled areas rather than in those areas controlled by ceasefire groups.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore unclear to what extent ceasefire groups are involved in the drug trade and to what extent any involvement may have been affected by Myanmar's forthcoming elections.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICJ) the constitution does provide some opportunities for Myanmar's ethnic minorities. They state "Myanmar will still have a new bicameral national legislature in which representatives from different parties will sit; regional legislatures that allow for more ethnic representation than in the past; and some scope for increased interaction between civilian and military leaders."<sup>19</sup> Whether this in itself is seen as a cause for optimism by ceasefire groups is however disputable. The reaction to the constitution among such groups appears to be predominantly negative. Horsey argues that despite this, most ceasefire groups see "possibilities for somewhat greater space to address ethnic concerns in the new structure." He states that these groups believe that the best way to

serve their interests is to participate in the electoral process and as such they will endorse independent candidates or ethnic parties, "openly or tacitly."<sup>20</sup> As yet there is limited evidence to support this viewpoint. It seems that many ceasefire groups have yet to decide on what action, if any, to take in the run up to the elections.

The ICJ also claims that many ethnic leaders believe that despite limited devolution, it will be possible to promote ethnic languages in schools and to open private ethnic schools as well as establishing ethnic language media outlets in the aftermath of the 2010 elections.<sup>21</sup> If this does in fact come to pass it will be the greatest improvement that ethnic minorities in Myanmar have witnessed in a long time. Such developments may lead to further autonomy for these groups in the long-term but are unlikely to have a significant impact in the short-run. It can however be argued that any improvement in conditions, however minor, is a step in the right direction. The ceasefire groups have waited for twenty years to witness an improvement in their situations. Whether they see the 2010 elections as a serious opportunity for furthering their causes remains to be seen.

It seems clear that the ceasefire groups are divided in the run up to Myanmar's first elections in twenty years, with some groups choosing to comply with the government's demand that they become "Border Guard Forces" and others refusing to act in accordance with the junta's wishes. The opportunities presented by the elections are few and only really present themselves to the larger of the ceasefire groups. The junta is desperate to gain control of the areas currently controlled by these groups and this affords them a certain degree of bargaining power if they negotiate intelligently. They may therefore be able to further their cause to achieve some of the improvements mentioned in the ICJ's report on the forthcoming elections, for example, promoting ethnic languages. It is also essential that the ceasefire groups keep negotiating in order to avoid the kind of military confrontation that occurred in the Kokang District in 2009. It is however important to note that should they agree to become "Border Guard Forces" like some of the smaller ceasefire groups already have it is likely that they will begin to lose their autonomy as the junta is almost certainly seeking to weaken them in the run up to the elections. It is also vital that the ceasefire groups continue to form alliances as presenting a united front will act as a deterrent to the junta and will frustrate their efforts to employ a policy of divide and rule. Those groups, which remain undecided as to how they will approach the elections must formulate their policies soon as indecision will only serve to weaken their position in the coming months.

<sup>15</sup>Moe, Wai. "Mongla Killing a Blow to Ethnic Cease-fire Groups." *The Irrawaddy*. 28 January 2010. Available at [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=17684](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17684)

<sup>16</sup>Moe, Wai. "Mongla Killing a Blow to Ethnic Cease-fire Groups." *The Irrawaddy*. 28 January 2010. Available at [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=17684](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17684)

<sup>17</sup>International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2009. Armed Conflict Database Myanmar. Available at [http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp\\_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209](http://acd.iiss.org/armedconflict/MainPages/dsp_ConflictSummary.asp?ConflictID=209)

<sup>18</sup>McCartan, Brian. "How Myanmar's opium grows." *Online Asia Times*. 30 January 2010. Available at [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/LA30Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LA30Ae01.html)

<sup>19</sup>International Crisis Group. 2009. "Myanmar: Towards the Elections." *Asia Report* No. 174. p.1.

<sup>20</sup>Horsey, Richard. 2009. "The ASEAN 10" in *Regional Outlook: Southeast Asia 2010-2011* edited by M.J. Montesano and L. Poh Onn. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore. p.44.

<sup>21</sup>International Crisis Group. 2009. "Myanmar: Towards the Elections." *Asia Report* No. 174. p.16.

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