

Festive stalemate in Burma's frontiers

Contributed by Nicholas Farrelly
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"Across the rugged terrain of Burma's frontiers, major ethnic armies have lowered their weapons and started working with the country's military leadership. At the center of this development is a political innovation known as Special Regions, where leaders of groups that were previously hostile toward each other are now making commercial profits within an uneasy ceasefire. Will their people support their business, and can profits develop into a permanent peace?" (Photo by John Hulme)

Burma's generals have been negotiating with their armed opponents since March 1989, signing over a dozen major ceasefire agreements. Today only the Karen National Liberation Army, the Shan State Army – South and about twenty small armed outfits continue to formally resist Burmese military rule. The remnants of the Communist Party of Burma and almost all of the major ethnic armies have now taken up opportunities to work with the country's military leadership. At the center of this development lies a special political innovation. What are these Special Regions?

Across the rugged terrain of eastern, north-eastern and northern Burma the various ceasefire agreements have created zones of semi-autonomous control, called "Special Regions" in local parlance, that give extra space to the "ceasefire groups."

In the Shan State seven Special Regions were declared. Others were promulgated in the Karenni and Kachin States. Fuelled by a mixture of pragmatic opportunism and lax law enforcement, some quickly gained infamy for their Wild West excesses. In others, longer-term planning has given hope for future autonomy, economic security and social cohesion.

All of the armies that control these Special Regions retain their tools of war and in many cases they also hold to the revolutionary spirit that propelled their anti-government struggles. But their years under ceasefire stalemates have not been easy. Infighting and the fracturing of once united fronts have undermined much of their former strength. Festivals and appearances

The Kachin Manau festival, held in January to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Kachin State, highlighted the challenges faced by ceasefire groups in the Kachin context. Three Kachin ceasefire groups participated in the festivities, each with its own commanders arriving in heavily guarded convoys.

The largest of these groups is the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Based at a small town called Laiza on the Sino-Burmese border it is the most venerable revolutionary organisation in northern Burma. Founded in response to perceived injustices and programs of Burmanisation, it waged a 32-year war against the Burmese government. That war was put on hold in 1994 when the KIA finalised a ceasefire.

This agreement followed a similar truce between the government and a group that emerged from the same tortured ground. It had once been part of the KIA, had later re-branded itself as the New Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA – K). While far smaller than the KIA, it also controls a Special Region.

The third Kachin army that attended the festival is smaller, with relatively few soldiers, and it does not have its own Special Region. At any rate, at the festival each of these three ceasefire groups was allowed a prominent role. They all brought their soldiers to the festival ground and danced in traditional formations. Popular appreciation for their attendance, and particularly for the thousands-strong KIA contingent, was palpable.

Their joint appearance does not mean that these different ceasefire groups now get along. Assassinations and coups—failed and successful—frequently rocks the Kachin groups. Tit-for-tat violence over broken alliances and murky business deals has meant that everybody sleeps uneasily. Each group designates round-the-clock bodyguards to protect their respective leaders.

Perhaps this is exactly what the Burmese military had in mind when it began to seek ceasefire agreements with its erstwhile enemies. A curiously profitable ceasefire…

As part of these agreements with the Burmese generals, there have been special opportunities for the elites aligned with ceasefire armies to make fortunes. The profits from mining jade or rubies, logging the forests of valuable timber, managing casinos or brothels, or even manufacturing and transporting narcotics like heroin and amphetamines, have made many leaders rich.

Some ceasefire armies—such as the NDA – K or the KIA—also conveniently control strategic territories abutting neighbouring countries. All along the border between Burma's Shan and Kachin States and the

People’s Republic of China there are checkpoints manned by soldiers that have never worn a Burmese army uniform.

Is this sustainable?...that needs permanent peace

The Burmese generals’ reluctance to convert ceasefire agreements into peace treaties has clearly been overwhelmed by the pressures they have faced since the popular uprising of September 2007. Right now they have other issues to worry about—as do pro-democracy campaigners and human rights advocates who hope to see lasting political change across the country.

For the Burmese generals, the alternative to negotiating final peace treaties, of course, is the status quo fragmentation of the national territory or a return to nationwide inter-ethnic war. Both scenarios are unpalatable to Burmese nationalists—whether of democratic or authoritarian inclinations.

But this does not mean that the ceasefire armies should be forgotten. While final settlements to these many conflicts do not appear to be on the immediate horizon, any future government that emerges from today’s constitutional and political quagmire will be forced to negotiate many competing claims. Some of the most ardent claims will come from those who have now managed their own Special Regions for so long. For the country’s future peace and prosperity, their voices will need to be heard especially if their guns continue to remain silent.

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