

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 14 May 2019

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## **Education; A Micro-theatre of Ethnic Politics and the Peace Process in Myanmar**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Schools have traditionally been sites of struggle over identity and ideas of nationhood.
- As physical access to schools in Kayin State increased, so has contestation over questions of legitimacy and sovereignty between the Myanmar Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Karen Education Department (KED), the education wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).
- For decades, schools in Kayin State have had relative autonomy from the central Myanmar state because of remote geography, poor infrastructure and armed conflict. The Myanmar state's ongoing expansion of education provision into these areas is perceived by local communities both as a benefit to students and as a way of undermining community education systems and local Kayin languages and identities.
- The KED is attempting with limited success to engage with the central Myanmar authorities to assert its legitimacy in representing the people of Kayin State; to retain certain ethno-nationalist components of schooling; and to obtain recognition for the learning therein.
- The positions of the various actors vis-à-vis federalism are reflected in the micro-level workings of schools and education authorities in this region, providing us with a better understanding of the viewpoints of local actors with regards to mode of governance and the nature of the national peace process.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The ceasefire agreement signed between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar government in 2012 brought about the cessation of armed conflict in Kayin State, Myanmar, albeit with intermittent skirmishes. Although armed struggle between the KNU, the largest non-state armed group of this region, and the Myanmar government has reduced considerably, the battle over sovereignty continues. The conflict has intensified in other arenas and in this article, we examine how this is being played out in the sphere of education.

Schools in this region (and in Myanmar as a whole) have traditionally been sites of struggle over identity and ideas about nationhood. This has increased now that physical access to education has expanded. This phenomenon has been described as “ceasefire state-making” in reference to the justice provision of ethnic armed groups.<sup>1</sup> We take this one step further, arguing that both non-state armed groups and the Myanmar government are expanding their social services during this ceasefire period. As we show below, this generates various forms of contestation: that between the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed groups over the legitimacy of the latter’s educational provision, and that between the Myanmar government and local non-state schools over language, curriculum and management of these schools.

In addition, from our examination of central and local-level education administration, we find that the positions of the various actors in the peace process and in Myanmar society in general are reflected in the micro-level workings of schools and education authorities. This supports the assertion that “different stakeholders’ positions in relation to language policy and use in education are proxies for positions regarding the relationship between the central government and ethnic communities, in the context of widespread state-society conflict”.<sup>2</sup>

To a degree, this reflects the significant interests and positions in the broader peace process, revealing a continuum of positions between separatist and federalist, which in turn informs our understanding of the complexities of the peace negotiations at the national level.<sup>3</sup>

## **EDUCATION IN KNU-CONTROLLED AND ASSOCIATED TERRITORIES**

The territorial boundaries of the Karen<sup>4</sup> education system do not coincide with that of the Thai or Myanmar states. Instead, it corresponds with the territorial reach of the KNU in Myanmar (where there are 1,573 schools, 173,631 students and 10,840 teachers), and in the seven predominantly Kayin refugee camps in Thailand (55 basic education schools, 18,977 students, 901 teachers in the 2018-9 academic year), and in some of the Kayin-related migrant schools on the Thai border.<sup>5</sup>

Karen education is a trans-border system of non-state education developed independently of the Myanmar state. It owes its existence to a combination of structural and ideological circumstances: the KNU’s former separatist agenda, the poor resourcing of the Myanmar government, harsh and inaccessible terrain in a context of armed conflict, and a border context.

On the part of the KNU, the aim was to develop an education system that would counter the ideological and political dominance of the Myanmar state while preserving and re-

constructing Karen culture, history and nationhood. Thus, for the most part, education in KNU-controlled areas was administered independently of the Myanmar state and formed part of the KNU's efforts to establish its own governance systems.

The KNU's efforts to provide education to populations that the Myanmar government has had little access to because of inaccessible terrain and/or a lack of trust may be viewed as an alternative model of ethnic nationality education in Myanmar. Viewed as a whole, Karen institutional networks in education, the circulation of textbooks and training, and the linkages between people in Karen schools have created a somewhat unified Karen educational landscape, independent of Myanmar or Thai state education systems. Although this fairly integrated education structure and the content of Karen ethno-nationalism in the curriculum resonate strongly in this borderland, they do not readily fit into the Myanmar education administrative system or into Myanmar state notions of identity and nationhood. However, in the context of post-conflict transition and national reconciliation, this separation is no longer possible. Consequently, the KNU and the villagers are having to re-negotiate their relationship with the Myanmar government and its local representatives.

## **LOCAL SCHOOLS AS BATTLEFIELDS OF SOVEREIGNTY**

The KNU administers large swathes of southeastern Myanmar. This administration comprises departments including military and justice, and social service systems including health, education and social welfare (Joliffe, 2014). Its education wing, the Karen Education Department (KED), administers Karen schools therein.

The multiplicity of governance systems in this region is reflected in the education system(s). Basically, there are three types of schools there: KED-administered schools, Myanmar government schools and 'mixed' schools. KED-administered schools are managed by the KED, with policy, curriculum and teacher training organized by the KED. They are not officially registered or recognized by the Myanmar government.

Government schools are administered and funded by the Myanmar Ministry of Education (MOE), teaching the MOE curriculum. The teachers are certified by Myanmar institutions and appointed by the MOE at the central level.

'Mixed' schools are mostly former KED-administered schools that have recently been registered by the Myanmar government. They comprise community and Myanmar government teachers, are funded through a variety of sources, and teach a mix of the KED and the MOE curricula. All three types of school make up the 1,500 schools that the KED supports, of which about 20% use only the KED curriculum, 36% use both the KED and the MOE curricula, and 44% use the MOE curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

While many parents have noted the benefit of Myanmar government educational support in the mixed schools, many local community members are wary that it forms part of what they perceive to be longstanding government efforts to dominate and homogenize communities other than those of the majority ethnic Bama. The Myanmar state's expansion of education provision into these disputed border areas is perceived by local communities as a means of undermining community education systems, local languages and identities. Local

stakeholders are most concerned about the lack of consultation, the introduction of competing school management systems, and the impact on mother tongue instruction.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, the legacy of ethnic conflict in this region, and in the country as a whole, has coloured local residents' perceptions of central government intentions in general and in education. As one informant put it, schools have become battlegrounds over governance and identity: "This is kind of the fighting operation, using development and using the education system in order to influence us and in order to dominate us."<sup>8</sup>

The KED is also trying to expand its reach in KNU ceasefire zones, but the difference is that the villagers do not view it with the suspicion that they do the Myanmar government. This is because many of the concerns surrounding ethnicity – mother tongue language, for example – are shared by the KED and the villagers. In addition, the KED's previous arm's length approach to the management of schooling and education, a result of low resources and few personnel, usually put them in a position of aid providers rather than full-fledged school administrators. Thus, they are often perceived to be a distant governance actor rather than an entity seeking to manage schools.

## **THE KED'S STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

In supporting the more than 1,500 schools in Kayin State, the KED claims legitimacy as their representative. Although the KED is largely recognized by local schools, this is not entirely the case with the central Myanmar education administration. With the KNU ceasefire and the ongoing national peace negotiations, the KED which once operated separately from the Myanmar MOE is now having to engage with the central authorities. It is doing so for both practical and political reasons: to ensure that its constituents are able to gain access to Myanmar government education and certificates (the latter being the pathway to the Myanmar labour market) and as a bid to assert its legitimacy in representing the people of Kayin State.

This is disputed by the central state government, which naturally considers the Myanmar MOE and its Myanmar-language curriculum the rightful administrator of education. The KED, as a department of the KNU, is viewed by many Myanmar government officials, civil servants and the army as a 'rebel' group whose administration over schools, health services and so on cannot be recognized. For example, the State Minister for Border and Security Affairs made official complaints about the fact that the KED exists and that schools in Karen State are displaying overt symbols of Karen nationhood and identity such as the Karen national flag (not the KNU flag), the use of Karen language and the requirement that students don Karen national dress once a week.<sup>9</sup>

It has not helped that in the political dialogues since the signing of the nationwide ceasefire agreements in 2015 between the government and non-state armed groups (which includes the KNU), social issues such as education have been de-prioritized, making it difficult for the KED to further its agenda on education at the central level. Moreover, as peace negotiations in the country go through cycles of peaks and troughs, the KED's negotiations with the MOE are alternately advanced and stymied.<sup>10</sup>

The official state narrative about the KED and the existence of KED-administered schools is about the lack of legitimacy, but this point of view is not necessarily held by all central level state representatives. These actors often feel the need to maintain this discourse in public but are acutely aware of the inefficient centralized national bureaucracy and of the lack of technical capacity slowing progress towards an education system accessible to students in non-state schools. Thus, government ministers have unofficially encouraged lower-level state and township bodies not to wait for official policy and instead to use their initiative to work with ethnic armed groups to ensure continuity of schooling for students from non-state schools through unofficial and informal means.<sup>11</sup>

The KED is also striving to gain recognition from another set of education actors operating in Myanmar—multilateral organizations (such as UNESCO), foreign government agencies (such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency, JICA) and international NGOs. It believes that the lack of recognition by the Myanmar government has had a negative impact on its legitimacy in the eyes of these agencies, precluding it from participation in the education policymaking that these agencies are involved in, even if this situation is slowly changing.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The positions taken by the various national and ethnic stakeholders may be discerned from their decisions and practices regarding language teaching, curriculum and administration in schools.<sup>13</sup> The KED/KNU had historically chosen a separatist model, but this changed in the 2000s and it is currently seeking to participate in national and lower-level dialogues on education.

The perspectives of individuals in the MOE vary widely, with some officials believing that the KED has no legitimacy at all while others encourage a more pragmatic and flexible approach to MOE interaction with KED schooling in these localities. These opinions reflect various notions of what federalism would mean in Myanmar, and some of the challenges that are involved.

Finally, the practices of KED schools help us to determine the position that their communities take vis-à-vis models of governance. The myriad versions of federalism and confederate status may be represented by various permutations of mother tongue teaching, the combined use of MOE and KED curricula, and different models of school ownership.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, we see that the contestation that is taking place in the education sector and in schools is representative of fundamental issues surrounding ideas about governance and sovereignty. The current peace-building process has not taken this into account, trying instead to enforce state-centric governance rather than recognizing the legitimacy of non-state actors in some ceasefire areas and their provision of social services, or promoting them as part of the solution. Doing so would at least acknowledge community interests, histories and identities, a longstanding point of contention between the state and non-Bama communities. In addition, the general public, government institutions and ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar find it difficult to articulate and define the term ‘federalism’.

Thus, concrete everyday practices provide a clue as to how people at various rungs of (parallel) education administrations imagine how governance and administration should look, and therefore how the mode of governance should be in Myanmar. Local and non-state viewpoints are important because they will determine politics and the nature of peace in their localities, particularly since there is yet a long way to go before the national peace negotiations are concluded.

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison, A. P., and Kyed, H. M. "Ceasefire State-Making and Justice Provision by Ethnic Armed Groups in Southeast Myanmar". *Sojourn* 34, no. 2 (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> South, A., and Lall, M. "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar". *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016): 128–53, p.129.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> We use the term Karen as part of the name of an entity, such as the Karen National Union, and as the term used by these entities to describe their culture, activities, constituents and territory. For example, the KNU claims territory that does not coincide with the boundaries of the administrative region of Kayin State, as designated by the Myanmar government.

<sup>5</sup> The statistics were collected from the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE) in April 2019 and from a presentation given by the KED in May 2017.

<sup>6</sup> World Education. *School Committees and Community Engagement in Education in Karen State*. Undisclosed location: World Education, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> World Education. *School Committees and Community Engagement*, 2016; Lenkova, P. *Conflict Sensitivity in Education Provision in Karen State*. Undisclosed location: Thabyay Education Foundation, 2015. South, A., and Lall, M. *Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-Based Teaching in Myanmar*. Undisclosed location: Asia Foundation, 2015; Jolliffe, K., and Speers Mears, E. *Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar's Ethnic Areas*. Undisclosed location: The Asia Foundation, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> World Education. *School Committees and Community Engagement*, p. 43, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with KED representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 12 October 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with KRC representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 22 October 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with KRC representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 22 October 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with KRC representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 22 October 2016.

<sup>13</sup> South, A., and Lall, M. "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar". *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016): 128–53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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