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Mergers May Not be Enough for Myanmar’s Single-ethnic Parties to Gain Seats in the 2020 Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Single-ethnic parties in Myanmar share the belief that non-Bamar ethnic groups’ interests are best represented by non-Bamar parties. The contest between greater autonomy and a stronger federal system also tends to concern them.
- However, single-ethnic parties are diverse in their political aims and ideologies, and they compete with one another due to the nature of formal political representation in Myanmar.
- The country’s ethnic geography and dispersal of ethnic groups add to the complex situation of ethnic political organisation.
- Single-ethnic parties have been merging to avoid the vote-splitting that hurt them in the 2015 elections, but their lack of capacity, institutionalization and policy programming are bound to work against them.

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INTRODUCTION

Single-ethnic parties are significant in the upcoming Myanmar elections because they have the potential to thwart the National League of Democracy's (NLD) dominance. Before the 2015 election, it was believed that these parties would gain enough representation to decide who would be president, to influence the government or to be included in a ruling coalition. However, this was not to be, and single-ethnic parties performed poorly. Instead, the NLD dominated at the polls.

After five years of NLD rule, however, signs have appeared that non-Bamar communities and single-ethnic parties are dissatisfied with the NLD in how it has handled language teaching, land laws, territorial disputes and economic development. This was reflected in 2017 and 2018 by-election results. The NLD won only nine out of 19 seats nationwide in 2017, and only six out of 13 seats in 2018. As a whole, the NLD won few of the contested seats in the ethnic states; and in Kayah State, it lost several seats to single-ethnic parties.

Given these circumstances, there is a possibility that single-ethnic parties will have greater appeal to non-Bamar voters in the upcoming elections. However, single-ethnic parties have performed poorly in past elections, a fact which has been attributed to their fragmented nature. As a result of this understanding, many single-ethnic parties are now merging to minimise votes being split. This article considers the reasons for their fragmentation and whether mergers will be enough to improve their performance in the upcoming elections.

THE NATURE OF SINGLE-ETHNIC PARTIES

In Myanmar, political parties may be grouped in the following ways: multi-ethnic parties that originate from and maintain close links to the military; multi-ethnic parties that stem from the pro-democracy movement; and small single-ethnic parties representing the interests of non-Bamar (non-Burman) groups.¹ The first two groups are usually referred to as political parties and the latter as 'ethnic' parties. I have refrained from using these terms as they promote the view that the Bamar ethnic group and its interests represent those of Myanmar in general, thereby framing the interests of non-Bamar ethnic groups as being unrelated to the rest of the Myanmar populace.

In general, single-ethnic parties in Myanmar have in common the belief that the interests of non-Bamar ethnic groups are best represented by non-Bamar parties. In addition, these parties are mostly concerned about the conflict between greater autonomy and a stronger federal system.² Whatever the case, single-ethnic parties are diverse in their political aims and ideologies, and engage competitively with one another.³ Using examples from Kachin, Shan, Rakhine and Kayin/Karen States, I show that the plurality of ethnicities⁴ bounded by ethnic geography, and the era in which single-ethnic parties were founded, have an impact on ethnic electoral politics. This goes some way towards explaining the great diversity of ethnic politics in the country.

ETHNIC GEOGRAPHY

The territorial organization of the country is based on eight official “major national ethnic races”: seven regions (Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi, Yangon) are dominated by the Bamar majority, and seven states (Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, Shan) are home to non-Bamar ethnic nationalities (see Figure 1).

As a result, single-ethnic parties have been formed to represent many of the officially recognized ethnic communities whose histories, geographies and concerns differ vastly. Take for example Kachin State where the second oldest ethnic rebellion by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) was re-ignited in 2011, ending a 17-year ceasefire. Four parties with differing political concerns – Kachin State Democracy Party (founded by the former vice president of the KIO), the Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (formed in 2010 to contest the elections and formed an alliance with the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, USDP), the Kachin Democratic Party (called for a federal union, an end to the Myitsone dam project and greater Kachin control over jade and timber resources, in 2015) and the Union Nationalities Federal Democracy Party – merged to form the Kachin State People’s Party.

Within each of these eight major ethnic nationalities are found multiple ethnic (135 officially recognised) subgroups. So, for the Kachin, there are six sub-groups: Jinghpaw, Lisu, Zaiwa, Lhaovo, Rawang and Lachid. Each of these may have their own political parties, like the Lhaovo National Unity and Development Party, the Lisu Development Party and United Nationalities Federal Democracy Party, for example.

Even when parties merge, like the Kachin ones mentioned above, there are still many single-ethnic parties representing the different sub-groups. Significantly, the four Kachin parties that merged were Jinghpaw parties; they did not merge with any of the other parties representing other sub-groups of Kachin.

Shan State is a good example of the complicated relationship between ethnicity, territory and formal democracy in Myanmar. Although the Shan, a Tai ethnic group living in the region, constitute the majority ethnic group in Shan State, there are significant numbers of non-Shan ethnic communities living there as well, such as the Danu, the Kokang, the Pa-O, the Palaung and the Wa. Unlike the other states and regions (with the exception of Sagaing Region), these five communities have self-administered areas (a subnational administration system) within Shan State.⁵ The self-administered areas were established by the 2008 Constitution to recognise these ethnic groups politically and territorially and to provide a state-sanctioned instrument by which they could govern themselves. They have a constitutional status similar to that of a region or state. Thus, the constituencies in each of these self-administered areas elect state members of parliament during the general election. Altogether, that accounts for 30 seats in the Shan State parliament.

The Danu had two single-ethnic parties – Danu National Democracy Party and Danu National Organization Party – but neither won seats in 2015. The Pa-O National Organization and the Ta’ang National Party – political parties that were transformed from armed political organisations that control these areas – won seats in the Pa-O and Ta-ang zones respectively.

The Wa townships under the control of the ethnic armed organization were prohibited from having elections by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in 2015 (although the UWSA has announced that elections will take place this year), but those under government control voted in ethnic parties: the Wa Democratic Party, the Wa National Unity Party and the Lahu National Development Party.

The demographics of Shan State are diametrically different from that of Rakhine State. The former has nine major ethnic nationalities with Shan as a majority and the rest of the population spread out among mostly eight different groups. Rakhine State, on the other hand, has the Rakhine (Buddhist) as the majority (more than 90 per cent), with 1-2 per cent Muslims (consisting of Rohingya, Kaman, Indians, Pakistanis and so on) and the Chin with about 4 per cent. This reflects how the nature of electoral politics differs markedly in Rakhine State.

The Rakhine dominate in electoral politics in Rakhine State. The success in the 2015 general election of the Arakan National Party (ANP) – a merger between the 1990-era Arakan League for Democracy and the 2010-era Rakhine Nationalities Development Party – of being the party with the third largest number of seats at the national level is often held up as the reason for single-ethnic parties to merge for the 2020 elections. The ANP was in fact the only ethnic party voted into the Rakhine State parliament in 2015.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider factors other than the limiting of vote-splitting to understand the ANP's success. First, the ANP monopolised the Rakhine vote as there were no other significant Rakhine parties contesting. Second, it carried out a solid campaign and had strong local networks.⁶ Third, it promoted anti-Muslim sentiment and encouraged Rakhine nationalism at a time of intense conflict between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine.

The ANP has since split over political and personal differences. The setting for the 2020 elections is also different: 18 parties are competing as opposed to eight in 2015, and the state is mired in armed conflict between the Arakan Army and the Burmese military. In fact, the Union Election Commission has announced that the elections will be postponed in parts of Rakhine State because of this.

Besides the diversity of ethnic groups within a state, as exemplified by Shan State, members of the same ethnic community reside in many different parts of the country and are represented by distinct single-ethnic parties. For example, in Karen/Kayin State, four small parties merged in 2018 to form the Karen National Democratic Party. At the same time, two other Kayin/Karen parties – Kayin People's Party and Kayin National Party – are based outside Kayin/Karen State and will represent Kayin/Karen constituencies outside Kayin/Karen State as separate parties.⁷



Source: http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=35249&lang=en

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The large number of political parties is also due to the transition to electoral democracy that began in 2010, which created a division between single-ethnic parties founded between 1988 and 1990 (the pro-democracy movement) and those formed for the express purpose of contesting the 2010 general election. The former abstained from contesting in the 2010 election as a protest against the 2008 Constitution or because they were not permitted to register for the elections. As a consequence, the Shan, Kachin, Kayah/Karenni, Chin, Mon, and Kayin/Karen were represented by at least two competing parties in 2015. For example, the Mon National Party (MNP) was formed during the pro-democracy movement and the All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMRDP) was founded in 2010. Both parties performed poorly in the 2015 election and, despite deep-seated political divisions, agreed to merge in

2018 to form the Mon Unity Party. Similar processes have also taken place in Chin, Kayin/Karen, and Kayah/Karenni States, where no parties representing the major ethnic groups won a significant number of seats in 2015.

But will mergers be enough for single-ethnic parties to gain seats?

As the Rakhine example shows, mergers are more likely to work if they consolidate the votes from the same ethnic community. In underpopulated, ethnically concentrated constituencies such as in Kayah/Karenni, Chin, Kachin and Shan States, small single-ethnic parties may be able to win seats because they only need a small margin to do so. However, in overpopulated constituencies such as Mon and Kayin/Karen States⁸ where most of the constituencies that merged parties are targeting are multi-ethnic, vote splitting occurs between rather than within ethnic electorates.⁹ In these circumstances, mergers may not be enough to get single-ethnic parties voted into parliament.

In addition, it has been found that while vote-splitting was a significant factor in some electoral districts, the actual number of seats affected by it was relatively small in the 2015 elections.¹⁰ Across all legislative levels – upper house, lower house and state/region assemblies – only 17 seats would have been won if other ethnic parties had merged. This represents but less than 4 per cent of all seats in the ethnic states.¹¹

This means that other factors beyond fragmentation have a bearing on single-ethnic parties' electoral performance. Besides the fact that the 2015 election was predominantly about the electorate's desire for democracy as represented by the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in the struggle against the military-backed USDP, the lack of institutionalization of single-ethnic parties played no small part in their lacklustre performance. For example, it was reported that Kayin/Karen voters in Yangon voted for the NLD in 2015 rather than Kayin/Karen parties because of the fragmentation of Kayin/Karen parties or the belief that they were too small to effect major change or form a government.¹² Indeed, many single-ethnic parties have paid little attention to developing their political programmes and policies, likely due to limited capacity and financial and organisational resources. Most are also weak in organisational structure and internal democracy.¹³

The exception to this is the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). In Shan State, where the SNLD was relatively successful in the 2015 election, the strategy has been to strengthen policies, communication and accountability rather than merging with the 2010-era SNDP.¹⁴ Interestingly, the SNLD stands in good stead among voters. In a survey conducted by the People's Alliance for Credible Elections in 2019, the proportion of people in Shan State who felt best represented by the NLD (16%) and USDP (4%) was similar to that in the states in general. However, the proportion of people in Shan State who felt best represented by the SNLD (8%) was higher than in the regions (0%).¹⁵

CONCLUSION

There is a common perception that ethnic voters are increasingly dissatisfied with the NLD government. The expectation is thus that single-ethnic parties may gain a more prominent position after the upcoming election and increase their bargaining power in parliament.

Single-ethnic parties have been responding by merging but their lack of capacity, institutionalization and policy programming will work against them. In a contest against the more developed and institutionalized multi-ethnic parties, the ruling NLD and the military-backed USDP, it is unlikely that single-ethnic parties will gain much representation in the national and state/region parliaments.

¹ Kempel, S., Chan Myawe Aung Sun and Aung Tun. (2015). *Myanmar Political Parties at a Time of Transition: Political party dynamics at the national and local level*. Yangon: Pyoe Pin Programme.

² Lall, M., Nwe Nwe San, Theint Theint Myat, and Yin Nyein Aye. (2015). *Myanmar's Ethnic Parties and the 2015 Elections*. European Union: International Management Group.

³ Thawngmung A. M. (2016). "The Myanmar elections 2015: why the national league for democracy won a landslide victory". *Critical Asian Studies* 48(1): 132–142.

⁴ Non-Bamar ethnic communities refer to themselves as ethnic races or ethnic nationalities.

⁵ A division is larger than a zone. There are six self-administered zones in the entire country, five of which are located in Shan State. The sixth, Naga Self-Administered Zone, is in Sagaing Region.

⁶ Burke, A. (2015). "Why didn't ethnic parties do better in Myanmar's elections". New Mandala. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/20151126-NMInquirer-November2015-MyanmarElections.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2020).

⁷ Aung Aung. (2018). "Understanding Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar: The Cases of Mon and Karen States". ISEAS Perspective No. 57. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

⁸ Tan, N. and Preece, C. (2020). "Electoral System, Ethnic Parties, and Party System Stability in Myanmar". *The European Journal of Development Research* 32:431–456.

⁹ Stokke, K. (2020). "Political Representation by Ethnic Parties? Electoral Performance and Party Building Processes among Ethnic Parties in Myanmar". *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38(3): 307–336.

¹⁰ Transnational Institute. (2015). "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?" *Myanmar Policy Briefing* 17. Available at https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb17_web_def.pdf (accessed on 28 September 2020).

¹¹ Transnational Institute. (2015). "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar..."

¹² Thawngmung A. M. (2016). "The Myanmar elections 2015: why the national league for democracy won a landslide victory". *Critical Asian Studies* 48(1): 132–142.

¹³ Stokke, K., Khine Win, and Soe Myint Aung. (2015). "Political Parties and Popular Representation in Myanmar's Democratisation Process". *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 34(3): 3–35; Transnational Institute. (2015). "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?" *Myanmar Policy Briefing* 17. Available at https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb17_web_def.pdf (accessed on 28 September 2020);

Burke, A. (2015). "Why didn't ethnic parties do better in Myanmar's elections". New Mandala. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/20151126-NMInquirer-November2015-MyanmarElections.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2020).

¹⁴ Stokke, K. (2020). "Political Representation by Ethnic Parties? Electoral Performance and Party Building Processes among Ethnic Parties in Myanmar". *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38(3): 307–336.

¹⁵ People's Alliance for Credible Elections. (2019). *Citizens' Political Preferences for 2020*. Yangon, Myanmar: People's Alliance for Credible Elections.

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