

PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 2 November 2020

Single-ethnic Parties and Ethnic Armed Organizations in the Myanmar 2020 Elections¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ethnic armed organizations' relationship to electoral politics is indirect, informal, and largely dependent on the state of the peace process and the local context.
- Ethnic armed organizations and political parties bearing the same ethnonym do not necessarily coordinate with each other, or represent the same constituency.
- All but two of the single-ethnic parties do not represent ethnic armed organizations, although some have informal links with them.
- Ethnic armed groups are more likely to control elections by not permitting them or by requiring parties to seek permission in their territories than by contesting as a political party.

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INTRODUCTION

Given the similarity in ethnonyms, it is reasonable to assume that there is a direct relationship between single-ethnic parties and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar. In fact, in some cases, similarities in labelling are due to the fact that some EAOs began as political parties but subsequently transformed into armed organizations. However, with the exception of two parties, single-ethnic parties² do not represent EAOs. In addition, all but two EAOs have not transformed into or formed political parties to contest in elections. The sheer plurality and diversity of players – 55 registered single-ethnic parties and more than 20 EAOs – means that this relationship is nuanced, dynamic and contingent on local context.

Ethnic politics in Myanmar encompasses the struggle for power between the various ethnic communities, including the dominant Bama/Burman group. It is played out in many spheres, such as institutional politics, armed conflict and at the everyday level of interaction. Although ethnic armed conflict garners the most media attention, most members of non-Bamar/Burman communities do not actually engage in armed conflict. They are, nonetheless, involved in ethnic politics through private, public and international organizations, civil society, as members of political parties, and as civilians under the control of EAOs.³ This paper will focus on ethnic politics in the spheres of institutionalized democracy and insurgent politics as it is played out in the upcoming elections.

INSTITUTIONALIZED DEMOCRACY AND ETHNIC POLITICS

Electoral politics is the most recent (although not the newest) arena of political contestation in Myanmar. In 1990, the first multi-party elections held since 1960 and dominated by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, was declared null by the military junta. It was only in 2010 that elections were re-instated under a new constitution drafted by the military junta and voted in by referendum in 2008.

Under the 2008 constitution, ethnic nationality⁴ groups are represented in national and state/region parliaments, in self-administered areas and by ethnic affairs ministers. Self-administered areas were established to recognise certain ethnic groups politically and territorially and to provide a state-sanctioned instrument by which they could govern themselves. There are six self-administered zones, five of which are located in Shan State (Danu, Pa-O, Ta'ang, Wa, Kokang). The sixth, Naga Self-Administered Zone, is in Sagaing Region. In addition, minority populations making up more than 0.1 per cent of the country's population in each region or state have the right to elect an ethnic affairs minister to their state or region legislature, provided that they are not the main nationality in that region or state and do not already have a self-administered area in that region or state.

In general, single-ethnic political parties aim to represent non-Bamar/Burman interests but are highly diverse in their political outlooks and objectives.⁵ Unfortunately, they failed to gain adequate representation in the past two general elections.

INSURGENT POLITICS

Insurgent politics is the struggle over power that takes place outside the boundaries of institutional politics. In this sense, it is diametrically opposed to electoral politics. It occurs when political groups subvert or displace the legitimacy of the government and/or institutions of power by completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory and its population through the use of military force and/or political organizations. It is common for insurgent groups to refuse to engage in formal political institutions such as electoral democracy.

In Myanmar, insurgent politics has included ethno-nationalist, pro-democracy and communist movements. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the ethno-nationalist ones with the caveat that some of these have communist origins. The ethnic insurgencies are the legacy of British colonial rule creating and exacerbating divisions between ethnic communities, the differential administration of ethnic communities in the border areas from the rest of Burma by the British, the divided loyalties of the Bamar/Burmans (to the Japanese) and certain ethnic communities (to the British) during the Second World War, unfulfilled expectations of ethnic autonomy established by the British, and disagreements over political and territorial agreements under the Panglong Agreement in 1947.

Since 2011, the Burmese government has engaged in a nationwide peace process to end decades of conflict. The EAOs have been asked to sign a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA), in addition to any previous bilateral ceasefire agreements; only ten EAOs have signed the NCA. In 2015, government negotiators drafted a framework for a political dialogue process (renamed the 21st Century Panglong Conference by the NLD) to discuss the material details of creating long-lasting peace. One of the goals of the peace process is for EAOs to disarm and transform into political parties. However, EAOs are against disarmament and the military's actions in armed clashes with EAOs is eroding the little trust that exists between the two sides. Also, the NLD government's insistence on bureaucratic procedures and formality, its ineffectiveness in administering the ceasefire monitoring mechanism, and its pursuit of constitutional change through parliamentary channels rather than through the peace dialogue has weakened EAO trust in the peace process. Consequently, the peace process has come to a standstill. The two largest EAOs – the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council for Shan State (RCSS) with influence over the other NCA signatories – have temporarily suspended their participation in the peace process.

The KNU, one of the most prominent EAOs and the first group to engage in armed conflict after Myanmar's independence, signed the nationwide ceasefire agreement in 2015 after six decades of armed struggle. It controls territory in Karen and Mon States and Bago Region. The RCSS, a splinter group from the Shan State Army and controlling territory in Shan State, is the second largest ethnic armed group to have signed the NCA (see Table 1).

The most powerful EAOs have not signed the NCA or have broken bilateral ceasefire agreements. The United Wa State Party (UWSP) and its armed wing, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), is the largest and most powerful EAO in the country. It possesses the best military equipment and weaponry of all the EAOs and has considerable assets from operating a drug empire in the Golden Triangle and other legitimate businesses. It administers four of the six townships in the Wa SAZ, was formed from original members of the Communist Party of

Burma, and its working language is Chinese. It signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government in 1989 and 2011.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) was also part of the China-backed Communist Party of Burma and is led by an ethnic Chinese. The Chinese in this region are recognized by the Burmese government as an official ethnic nationality, the Kokang. The MNDAA was formed in 1989 and signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement in 1999 with the Burmese government which broke down under the post-2011 government.

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is the second largest EAO in Myanmar and has control over natural resources in its territory which it extracts and exploits. It is an active combatant group that took up arms after a 17-year bilateral ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government after refusing to join the Border Guard Forces under the authority of the Myanmar Army (see Table 2).

Table 1. EAOs that have signed the NCA

	NCA	Bilateral ceasefire agreement	Political party	Remarks
ABSDF*	2015	2013	None	
Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan liberation Army (ALP/ALA)	2015	2012	None	
Chin National Front (CNF)	2015	2012	None	
Democratic Karen Buddhist Army – Brigade 5 (DKBA-5)	2015	2011	None	
Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA)	2015	2012	None	
KNU/KNLA Peace Council	2015	2007	None	
Lahu Democratic Union (LDU)	2018	unknown	None	
New Mon State Party (NMSP)	2018	1995	None	
Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO)	2015	2012	None	
Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)	2015	2011	None	

* ABSDF is the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, a student army formed after the 1988 uprisings to fight to restore democracy and human rights, and to establish a federal union. It is not an EAO.

Table 2. EAOs that have not signed the NCA and are recognized by the NLD government

	Bilateral ceasefire	Political party	Remarks
Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA)	1994-2011 Active combatant	None	
Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)	2012	None	
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	1999-2015 Active combatant	None	Controls Kokang SAZ
Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army-North (SSA/SSPP)	2012	None	
Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)	Active combatant	None	
United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA)	2011	None	Controls 4/6 townships of Wa SAZ
Mong La National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)	2011	None	

The links between single-ethnic parties and EAOs could be described as informal. EAOs are more likely to control elections by not permitting them or requiring political parties to seek permission in their territories than by contesting as a political party. In 2015, some EAOs disengaged from electoral politics, while others officially supported parties sharing their ethnonym. Many indirectly supported the NLD.⁶ This has changed for the upcoming elections due to EAOs' growing dissatisfaction with the NLD's handling of the nationwide peace process and of ethnic matters writ large.

NCA-SIGNATORIES WELCOME ELECTIONS

NCA-signatories welcome the elections as they hope that a strong performance on the part of single-ethnic parties will kickstart the peace process and work towards establishing a federal democratic union of Myanmar. All have not formed or transformed into political parties, but have been involved only indirectly through discussions of single-ethnic party mergers and decisions to form new parties.⁷

EAO CONTROL OVER TERRITORY AND ELECTIONS

In general, EAOs having control over their territory means that they can decide whether or not elections take place in the area and in what manner.

In the Wa self-administered division in Shan State, four of the six townships⁸ are ruled by the UWSP/UWSA. The UWSP has authority over the area through residual provisions of its 1989

ceasefire agreement and it also controls territory outside this area. It has little interest in the government establishing the Wa self-administered division in the area it controls. Instead it wants to expand the Wa division in order to create a new Wa State equivalent in status to the other ethnic states. It controlled electoral representation by not allowing elections to take place in 2010 and 2015. This year, though, the UWSP has announced that the elections will be held in the four townships it controls in the Wa SAA.

Similarly, the Shan State Army-North and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army in Shan State are allowing parties to organize their campaigns and voters to cast their ballots in the elections. The latter has reiterated that it does not support the election because it is being held under the 2008 Constitution, an opinion held by many EAO leaders with the conviction that the constitution exacerbates inequitable representation and political exclusion.⁹

The Kachin Independence Organization will not allow polling in its areas this year because it does not recognize the 2008 Constitution.¹⁰ This is in contrast to 2015 when it permitted elections but did not support Kachin parties. Instead, it discreetly supported the NLD in some constituencies in Kachin State.¹¹

The Restoration Council of Shan State has announced that political parties must give prior notice before campaigning in its territory, citing risks from armed conflict.¹² In areas controlled by the Chin National Front (CNF), parties have to ask the CNF for permission to campaign. This is ostensibly to prevent the spread of COVID-19.¹³

MEMBERS AND CANDIDATES LINKED TO ARMED GROUPS AND MILITIAS

In general, there are no direct links between single-ethnic parties and EAOs. There are however some representatives and candidates who have links to EAOs and militias backed by the Myanmar Army (those that have agreed to transform into Border Guard Forces under Myanmar Army authority).¹⁴ These individuals may be members or candidates of single-ethnic parties and the USDP.

The Karen National Union has not formed a political party, nor has it been involved in electoral politics. However, one of its senior leaders, Padoh Mahn Nyein Maung, resigned from its central executive committee to stand in the elections in Ayeyarwady Region (not Karen State) as a member of the Kayin/Karen People's Party and as the first person from the KNU to participate in parliamentary politics. If Padoh Mahn Nyein Maung wins, this may pave the way for other KNU leaders to engage in electoral politics. Already in 2015, the chairperson of the Kayin People's Party, Saw Htun Aung Myint, had invited the central members of the KNU to coordinate with the party, after the KNU signed the National Ceasefire Agreement.¹⁵

In the Kokang self-administered zone, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the United Democratic Party and Shan State Kokang Democratic Party are competing in the elections.¹⁶ The USDP won the elections in 2010 and 2015. In fact, in 2015, all the USDP candidates won seats. At least two of the MPs have connections to the Kokang armed group, the MNDAA.¹⁷

INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

The KIO has been careful about its involvement in election-related matters since the Union Election Commission rejected the application of one of its leaders to form a party in 2010.¹⁸ For the upcoming elections, the KIO was consulted, together with civil society organisations and church leaders, about single-ethnic party mergers in Kachin State.¹⁹

In Rakhine State, the Arakan Army, an EAO calling for nationwide armed revolution by the (Buddhist) Rakhine and the semi-independence of Rakhine State, has been intensifying its armed conflict with the Myanmar military since 2019. The NLD government has designated it a terrorist organization and therefore excluded from the nationwide peace process.

While the Arakan Army has no direct involvement in electoral politics, it has become more popular in central and northern Rakhine State due to the decline of Rakhine ethno-nationalist political parties and their marginalisation under the NLD. This is despite the Arakan National Party winning the most seats in the Rakhine State parliament in 2015.

Electoral democracy in Rakhine State has been further undermined by the cancellation of elections in certain parts of the state due to armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic this year. To top it off, the Arakan Army recently abducted three NLD candidates for being “traitors” and “Burmese puppets” “jeopardizing the Arakanese liberation movement”.²⁰

CONCLUSION

To a large extent, the EAOs’ relationship to electoral politics is indirect, informal, and largely dependent on the state of the peace process and the local context. While one of the aims of the peace process is to transform EAOs into political parties, it is unlikely that this will manifest in the short term.

Most EAOs are not involved in the elections beyond granting permission for elections to take place in their territories. However, leaders in some EAOs are participating in electoral politics as members either of single-ethnic parties, as is the case with the Karen National Union, or of opposition groups, such as the USDP in the case of the Kokang MNDAA. These varying forms of engagement in electoral politics reflect the immense diversity of interests and positions informing the relationship between political parties and EAOs.

¹ I am grateful to Mael Raynaud for pointing out the factual errors in the first version of this article and for providing the correct information. The errors have been rectified in this revised version.

² In Myanmar, political parties may be grouped as multi-ethnic parties that originate from and maintain close links to the military; multi-ethnic parties that stem from the pro-democracy movement; and smaller single-ethnic parties representing the interests of non-Bamar (non-Burman) groups. The first two groups are usually referred to as political parties and the last 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.

³ Thawngmung, A. M. (2011). *Beyond Armed Resistance: Ethnonational Politics in Burma (Myanmar)*. Honolulu: East-West Center.

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

⁵ Oh, S-A. (2020). “Parties and their Significance in the Myanmar 2020 General Election”. *ISEAS Perspective* 100. Singapore: ISEAS; Oh, S-A. (2020). “Mergers May Not be Enough for Myanmar’s Single-ethnic Parties to Gain Seats in the 2020 Elections”. *ISEAS Perspective* 121. Singapore: ISEAS.

⁶ Callahan, M. and Myo Zaw Oo. (2019). “Myanmar’s 2020 Elections and Conflict Dynamics”. *Peaceworks* 146. Washington: United States Institute of Peace.

⁷ Nyein Nyein. (2018). “New Mon Party to Register with Election Commission”. *The Irrawaddy* 15 May 2018. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/new-mon-party-register-election-commission.html> (accessed 20 October 2020).

⁸ There are two constituencies in each township, meaning that each township gets to vote for two candidates in the state elections.

⁹ Saw Thonya. (2020). “EAOs in northern Shan State give the green-light to election campaigns”. *BNI* 12 August 2020. <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/eaos-northern-shan-state-give-green-light-election-campaigns> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁰ Kachin News Group. (2020). “KIO/A Won’t Allow Polling In Its Area”. 13 August 2020. https://kachinnews.com/2020/08/13/kio-a-wont-allow-polling-in-its-area/?doing_wp_cron=1602301774.3310110569000244140625 (accessed 10 October 2020).

¹¹ Callahan, M. and Myo Zaw Oo. (2019). “Myanmar’s 2020 Elections and Conflict Dynamics”. *Peaceworks* 146. Washington: United States Institute of Peace.

¹² Sai Wanna. (2020). “RCSS vows to allow election campaigning in territory”. *Myanmar Times* 3 September 2020. <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/rcss-vows-allow-election-campaigning-territory.html> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹³ Salai Benezzer. (2020). The Chin National Front(CNF) and its armed wing declares all candidates must seek permission in order to prevent the spread of covid-19 inside rebel CNF-zones. *BNI* 15 September 2020. <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/chin-national-frontcnf-and-its-armed-wing-declares-all-candidates-must-seek-permission-order> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁴ TNI. (2015). “Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar”. *Myanmar Policy Briefing* 16. TNI. https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16_web_16092015.pdf (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁵ Naw Betty Han. (2020). “KNU heavyweight prepares for election battle”. *Frontier Myanmar* 12 August 2020. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/i-would-not-fight-in-a-war-unless-i-was-sure-of-victory-knu-heavyweight-prepares-for-election-battle/> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁶ Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint. (2020). “Kokang Party Vows to Make ‘Friends With All’ if It Wins Seats in Myanmar’s Election”. *The Irrawaddy* 19 August 2020. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/kokang-party-vows-make-friends-wins-seats-myanmars-election.html> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁷ Transnational Institute. (2015). “Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar”. *Myanmar Policy Briefing* 16. https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16_web_16092015.pdf (accessed on 20 October 2020).

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Zaw, J. (2018). “Strength in unity for Myanmar ethnic parties”. *UCAnews* 5 March 2018. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/strength-in-unity-for-myanmar-ethnic-parties/81676#> (accessed 20 October 2020).

²⁰ Nyein Nyein. (2020). “Myanmar’s NLD Calls for Release of Three Candidates Abducted by AA in Rakhine”. *The Irrawaddy* 22 October 2020. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/myanmars-nld-calls-release-three-candidates-abducted-aa-rakhine.html> (accessed 23 October 2020); Nyi Nyi Kyaw. (2020). “Elections or War? The Dilemma Facing Rakhine State”. *ISEAS Perspective* 116. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

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