CHAPTER V

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND PROBLEMS OF INSURGENCY
ETHNIC CONFLICT AND PROBLEMS OF INSURGENCY:

ETHNICITY (OR ETHNIC IDENTITY)

There are few countries in this world which are without ethnic minorities, and few could point to a history entirely free from inter-ethnic conflict. Ethnic minorities may be distinguished by their racial, ethnolinguistic, religious, caste and tribal characteristics. Ethnic identification or traits of ethnicity vary in scale and composition, and ethnic boundaries are adaptable cultural creations fashioned over time from the endlessly repeated process of integration and defeat, conversion and disaffection, absorption and migration, of which social history exists.¹

Ethnic groups are not perfectly homogeneous social units, whose solidarity could be assumed. They are often segmented and stratified. Inter and intra-group cleavages serve to divide, rather than unite them. In fact, ethnic minorities are complex social entities on which uniform protective policies will have neither uniform receptivity, nor response, nor even impact.

From the very beginning of the struggle for national independence and unity at the end of the Second World War,

the Burmese pursued a dual and contradictory policy for national unity. On the one hand, the minorities at the historic Panglong conference of February 12, 1947, were made to believe that they had the right to exercise authority in their own areas and preserve and protect their languages and culture, in exchange for voluntarily joining the Burmans in forming a political union and giving their loyalty to the new state. It was their faith in Aung San as the future leader of the nation that convinced many among them to participate in joining the union. On the other hand, U Nu and other successors to Aung San in the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) felt that the ethnic, cultural and territorial divisions among the peoples of Burma were largely the result of colonial policy and in fact, all the people were really one. This group believed that in time, a single identity would emerge which would draw heavily upon ethnic Burman culture, language and tradition. But many of the minority leaders interpreted this approach as negating the promises, they believed were given them by Aung San. While some sought guarantees to protect their identity, others rose in rebellion.

2. F.S.V. Donnison, Burma (New York, 1970), pp.81-82. See also Map No.1 showing distribution of Major Ethnic groups in Burma.

3. (Speeches of Thakin Nu) (Rangoon, Ministry of Information, 1968), pp.84-85.

The peculiar federal structure of the union caused discontentment in the first place. While the states appeared to enjoy administrative authority in their own areas, and power to protect their languages, culture and traditions, two of the states - Shan and Kayah - were guaranteed the right to secede, if, after ten years of the operation of the constitution, they were dissatisfied with the federal experiment. 5

However, the minority groups which intermingled with the Burmans did not get any such rights. The Burmese constitution promised the Karens a state of their own, but did not include the territories in the plains where a majority of them lived. Obviously, that would bring a large number of Burmans under Karen rule. The Karens were allotted under-developed, isolated territory. So a sizable number of Karens, both in and out of the new Burma army, and the police force, revolted after independence in 1948, and many have remained as insurgents ever since. 6

The Union Constitution was never regarded as fundamental or inviolable. It was not seen as setting up a

5. Burma: Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry 1947 Part I: Report (Rangoon, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947), pp.28-29. In the Rees-Williams Committee Report, the basis for the right of secession for the two states was cited as the traditional separation between the Shans and the Burmans, and the right of sovereignty of the Kayah state.

6. See Map No.3 on Topography.
permanent federal union that everyone must hold. It failed to exert moral authority and influence over the entire people of the union. This was so, as the Shan, Kachin, Karenni and Chin representatives were to have one seat each in the Union government, and the Arakanese and Karen members had been elected on the AFPFL ticket. The AFPFL, being the dominant political party, could dispense with the numerical support of the minority representatives. In terms of political power, the non-Burman members were numerically weak. In fact the AFPFL subsumed the Arakanese and Karen nominees to the Cabinet not as nominees of their respective ethnic groups but as those of its own party.

As the process of Burman domination, both political and cultural, went on, the autonomy of the minorities was rendered more nominal than real. During the Caretaker Government (1958-60), under the leadership of General Ne Win, the national government applied pressure on the hereditary leaders in the Shan and Kayah states to surrender their rights in exchange for a financial payment; in their place, the national government, in fact, sought to elevate a

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8. On January 3, 1948, a day before the formal transfer of power, U Nu, a Burman, became the head of a new Cabinet of 18 Ministers. Ibid., Vol.3, No.9, pp.391-99.
new leadership from among the common people. This led to revolt by elements from among the minorities. Some of the Shan leaders chose a second approach - the demand for constitutional reforms or the right to secede.

It was against this background that U Nu called a federal seminar at which the issues relating to federal structure and the problems of the minorities would be discussed with a view to finding a peaceful solution. In response to his invitations all the leaders of the minorities came to Rangoon to participate in the seminar. The meeting opened on February 24, 1962, and before it was concluded, and just before U Nu was scheduled to speak, the military struck on the dawn of March 2, seizing all the participants. This ended the debate on this crucial issue. It was left to the soldiers in power to find acceptable solutions to these long-fastering problems of ethnic insurgency.

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10. According to article 92(1),(2),(3), Article 94(1), of the 1947 Constitution, the national government, in a proclaimed emergency, could exercise the powers reserved for the states. See Union of Burma, Constitution of the Union of Burma (Rangoon), Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947), p.8.

11. n.9, p.33.
ETHNIC MINORITIES' DEMANDS AND INSURGENCY

Immediately after independence in 1948, the government forces found themselves besieged by various rebellions, including mutinying army units, demobilized veterans of the struggle for independence, and two communist party factions - the Red Flag and the White Flag.¹² Armed separatist movements organized by the Karens and other ethnic groups and by Burmese Muslims living in the eastern border areas also took up arms against the central government. Although the situation rapidly became so serious that the government control became limited to Rangoon and its environs, the rebels were not unified and were slowly worn out. By late 1949, the Burmese armed forces had assumed the initiative and by late 1957 had relatively firm control over the Central Irrawaddy Plain and most of the towns elsewhere - though often not the countryside.¹³

The government's efforts to consolidate and extend its control were made more difficult as the troops had to be diverted to the regions bordering China where remnants of the Nationalist (Kuo-Min-Tang) Army had fled following the victory of the communist forces. There the KMT irregulars

¹². Red Flag or Communist Party, Burma (CPB); White Flag (Stalinist) or Burma Communist Party (BCP). See also Map 2 showing areas dominated by insurgents.

started growing poppy in the Golden Triangle, where Burma, Laos and Thailand converged. During the early 1950s the Burmese army launched limited military operations against these remnants, many of which were evacuated in 1953-54 in a United nations - sponsored airlift to Taiwan. Several thousand, however, still remained in the area. A second evacuation of KMT remnants in 1961-62 again depleted but did not exhaust their numbers, and the insurgency situation in northern and north eastern Burma continued to worsen steadily.14

Following the coup by the military junta led by Ne Win in March 1962, the Revolutionary Council (RC) suspended the 1947 Constitution, insurgency by ethnic minorities and the Communist parties continued throughout the period of military rule. Since the BSPP was still in its formative stages, the RC addressed itself to the problems of dealing with the insurgency. The target of the RC was not only the minorities in revolt, but the communist parties as well. The RC, on April 13, 1963 proclaimed a general amnesty for all insurgents. Two months later, on June 11, the RC made a second gesture by inviting all groups in revolt, ethnic and political, to come to Rangoon and discuss their grievances settled in the eastern Shan state in the 1949-51 period and

and the ways these might be resolved.\textsuperscript{15} No preconditions were laid down, all were guaranteed safe passages to and from Rangoon, regardless of the outcome of the parleys, and all offers of reward for the capture of insurgents were suspended. Despite extended talks over several months, however, no real and permanent solutions emerged. Except for one small group of Karens, led by its leader Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe, all rejected government offers for solution and the talks ended on November 14, and insurgency and rebellion resumed.\textsuperscript{16} "Despite the generous concessions granted by the RC in the interests of peace", a communique explained, "the Communist Party of Burma and the Karen National Union were exploiting these very concessions to strengthen their organizations military politically and financially, and from such an improved position they were making insidious attempts to win the RC's recognition of the parallel governments set up in their jungle domains. Furthermore, they were constantly engaged in organizational activities both above-ground and under-ground, designed to show off


\textsuperscript{16} See Burma: Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma Internal Peace Parleys (Historical Documents, No. 1 Mimeographed (Rangoon, 1968). The major groups were the Red and White Flag Communist factions, the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progress Party, the New Mon State Party, The Kachin Independence Organization, the Chin Group, and the Stan State Army.
their strength with a view to blackmail the RC to accede to their demands". 17

For example, the Shan National United Front (SNUF) and the Shan State Independent Army (SSA) demanded federal status and the perpetual right of secession. These groups wanted recognition of the 'irrevocable rights' of national minorities and favoured a federal union in which all the constituent states would be equal with residual powers rested in the state governments. The peace emissaries revealed that these were the conditions in the fulfilment of which their organizations would fully support the RC's peace plan. They said, "We are fighting for sovereignty of the Shan State and not for federalism. We put forward the conditions for recognition of the Shan State as a federal state as a compromise gesture in response to the RC's call for peace parleys." 18

Thus General Ne Win's efforts to deal with the insurgents appeared to have failed. The rebel minorities sought more extensive autonomy than the RC was willing to

17. Nation (Rangoon), November 16, 1963, Guardian (Rangoon), November 16-17, 19, and 23, 1963; Hanthawaddy (Rangoon), November 17, 1963. The Press shared the view of the RC saying the people would not favour the mockery of domestic peace proposed by the rebels.

18. Guardian (Rangoon), September 2, 1963, "SNUF, SSIA demand federal status: Firm 'No' by RC to proposals to split Union," p.1, The demand was made by Sao So Htein, "Commander" of the SSIA, "2nd Brigade".
grant and the communists asked political arrangements and guarantees that would have compromised the RC's firm control of Burma's affairs.

As the RC sought a different approach to the minorities problems, insurrections by various ethnic and ideological groups continued. 19

While the peace parleys with the insurgents were on, the RC had, by a political action, taken another step towards one-party state under military rule. On August 9, 1963, the RC had arrested 11 prominent political leaders, saying they had been obstructing parleys with the communists and other insurgent groups, and detaining them for three months. It had thought that the insurgents would be persuaded to fall in line. It seemed more than possible, and the appeal of U Ba Swe of the AFPFL was perhaps read as a challenge that he and his supporters remained opposed to the one-party state. 20

On February 12, 1964, the government issued the "Declaration of the Conviction of the Revolutionary Council


on the Question of Union Nationalities." It declared that economic development and the social welfare of the people were tasks for the nation, whereas minority autonomy was limited to the areas of language, literature, culture, religion and customs. The policy elevated the nation above its member states and placed the common good above the rights of the ethnic minorities. It emphasized the primacy of the nation over its parts, and the sum of nationhood as the shared experiences of all the peoples and not their individual identity.

To implement this new policy, an academy for the Development of National Groups was established in Sagaing. Its purpose was to recruit and train representatives of the Burmans and the minorities to preach the new ideals of the Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS) and national unity, to be teachers of basic health, social and educational subjects for the people living in remote areas of the states, to assume leadership of the people with whom they lived, and to help them improve their standards of living. Despite publicity and funding, the new academy did not prove to be a success because of poor selection of candidates, who were unwilling to live in the remote and backward areas after


22. n.9, p.55.
training. As political analyst Joseph Silverstein put it, the policy represented the RC's commitment to the "nationalization of the society and the Burmanization of its culture". 23

Another approach to the problems of insurgency and disunity was the continuation of the cultural efforts (of the previous government) in making the Burmans aware of the minorities and their contribution to the country. Through Union and National Day Celebrations, the publication of historical and anthropological studies of the minorities and the repetition of the theme that the minorities and their cultures were part and parcel of the nation and national culture, the RC sought to bring the Burmans and the minorities together in a permanent union. But words and celebrations did not offset the trends of nationalization manifested in education and other policies which ran counter to the demands of the minorities for separate, autonomous identities of their own. 24

This was in striking contrast to General Ne Win's interpretation of national unity. While criticising the 1947 constitution, he observed:


"Our Union is just one homogeneous whole. A Chin, for instance, can go wherever he likes. So, too a Burman". "Then we will not need to have separate governments within the Union." 25

If anything, in this statement of his, Ne Win clearly emphasized assimilation and nationalization at the expense of unity in diversity.

While the process for the drafting of a new constitution was going on, insurgency became a phenomenon which was not restricted to ethnic minorities but encompassed the problems of politics, opium and rebellion. At times the minorities had united from time to time, with the Burma Communist Party (BCP) in the northern part of the Shan State, where Burma and China shared a common border. After 1968, when the BCP saw the murder of its leader, Thakin Than Thun, and later, when the Army successfully drove the remnants of the party from the Pegu Yoma, the party regrouped on the China frontier. 26. Established under Chinese guidance, the new BCP was composed overwhelmingly of those belonging to Shan, Kachin, Wa and other ethnic minorities, recruited from both sides of the Burma-China


26. In an internecine strife, other BCP leaders were also executed by Than Tun. See Myanma-alin (Rangoon), November 30, 1968, p.1.
The BCP could also forge shifting alliances with the Kachin and Shan separatist groups, and with other small, armed rebel groups. This was a sequel to the spilling over of the "cultural revolution" purge similar to the one going on in China in the late 1960's by the BCP chairman Thakin Than Tun, (who was himself assassinated in September 1968). In November, 1970, as the government forces captured Thakin Soe, a prominent leader of the Red Flag communists, the communist insurgency got critically weakened.

Armed opposition in Burma still increased in the early 1970s after the exiled Prime minister U Nu, formed a group called Parliamentary Democracy Party (PDC) in 1969, to restore parliamentary democracy in the country. His group, based in Thailand, worked in a loose alliance with insurgent groups on the Thai-Burmese border. Speaking at a press conference in London on August 29, 1969, U Nu announced the formation (PDP) with himself as leader. He hoped that the response within Burma would enable him to displace General Ne Win peacefully. Falling that, insurrection of some kind


29. Bangkok Post, August 30, 1968, p.5. U Nu's avowed aim was stated to be to oust Ne Win from power.
would be "the only answer". He thought that the insurrections were growing in strength and the Burmese government was weaker. In Kokang State, to the west of the Salween river, he said the Burmese communists had virtually under "their control" a liberated area, as the Burmese Army had withdrawn its troops to the east of the river. He said he had not taken the step of open opposition to the military government without deep thought.

In 1970, while living in exile in Bangkok, U Nu formed a National Liberation Front of Burmese rebels committed to overthrow the government of General Ne Win. This front was reported to have the support of Mon rebels under Nai Shwe Kyin and was reported to have under its control the Tenasserim state of southern Burma and the 20,000 strong army of Mahn Ba Zan, president of the Karen National Union in the east. A number of Shan rebels as well as hill tribe units adjoining Thailand were also reported to have joined the front. U Nu operated from his rebel headquarters in mountainous terrain in Thailand's central western province of Tak, which bordered on Burma.


31. "Anti-Burma government posters", Times of India (Delhi), December 22, 1969. It called upon the masses and monks to destroy and crush the military dictatorial regime of self-seeking and exploiting General Ne Win and RC members.

Interestingly, U Nu who had been given asylum in Thailand on condition that he would not take part in any political activities, had gone beyond his assurances causing embarrassment to the host government in Bangkok. Finding that the Burmese leader was heading a new political movement for the overthrow of the Ne Win regime which he considered "illegitimate" [sic], the Thai Government requested U Nu to leave the country. The Thai government was also unhappy over U Nu's interview in local English-language newspapers calling for "free and fair" elections in Burma, and requesting for a meeting with General Ne Win. On July 24, 1973, U Nu left the emigre movement, ended his exile in Thailand, and thereby ended the long-standing friction between Thailand and Burma. Burma had repeatedly complained to Thailand about harbouring an active enemy of the government.

While the Burmese emigre movement went on, the BCP, a pre-dominantly ethnic Burman organization prior to 1969, had become an essentially ethnic minority organization by the early 1970s. The new base area, on the north east, included very few Burmans, virtually the entire population was Kachin, Wa, and Shan. Of necessity, from these groups were

35. Charles B. Smith, Jr., The Burmese Communist Party in the 1980s. (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), pp.3-5.
drawn both cadre and fighting forces of the BCP. In general ethnic relations in Burma were such that a revolutionary organization was at a severe disadvantage if forced to operate among one ethnic group with cadre drawn from another ethnic group. This was particularly true with the ethnic Burman, majority population, primarily farmers. The BCP had registered a constant failure in attracting followers among this key group. The Party still faced severe difficulties in making headway among the great mass of the Burmese population. Terrorist excesses and the Chinese connection rather restrained the BCP influence, both among Burmans and among ethnic minorities. In April 1971, a BCP clandestine radio station, Voice of the People of Burma (VOPB), was established at Yunnan Province, China. As late as July 21, 1971, the Peking Review carried a BCP message avowing to overthrow the Ne Win government. 36 This could be interpreted as China's double-pronged tactic: The parallel yet separate approach to party-to-party and government-to-government relations adopted towards Burma. But ideology and goals kept the minorities and the BCP from forming permanent alliances. And in their division lay the reason that explained the government's ability to keep the revolt

36. Ibid., pp.6-7.
confined to the border areas. 37

Complicating the above was the ever-growing opium trade which found its centre in the Golden Triangle - an area which included portions of the Shan and Kachin States. For some of the Shans, the opium trade provided them with a major means of earning money to buy weapons and keep alive their struggle against the central government in Rangoon.

The growing illegal narcotics trade provided the Shan rebels and other insurgents in the border areas with lucrative revenue. According to their organizational goals, national insurgent groups sought to overthrow the existing central government, and create a new structure in its place, or fight for independence, or control illicit trade and trade routes. 38

Be that as it may, some insurgent groups had been successful in attracting support from the Burmese government itself in return for fighting other insurgents and drug


38. Ibid., p.248. The BCP sought to overthrow the government, while the KMT remnants and Shan rebels engaged in drug trafficking. Radio Peking on March 13, 1968 called on the BCP to "defeat US imperialism and its agents in Burma-The reactionary clique of Ne Win".

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traffickers. About 50 small private armies were allowed by the Burmese government to continue their smuggling activities in 1966-67, in return for carrying out anti-communist operations in Shan State. Designated Kakweye (KKY) or militias, these groups used their status to extend their own interests leading to increased disorder in the area. 39

The goals of these multifarious anti-government groups ranged from the BCP's to form a new "people's democratic republic", the pro-west anti-communist KNU's declaration to establish a democratic Karen republic guaranteeing individual rights, freedom from corruption, and freedom of religion, the Rohingya Patriotic Front's Muslim links with Bangladesh, and the ethnic Nagas seeking autonomy. 40

THE NATIONALITIES ISSUE

The Ne Win regime had described insurgency as "a twin brother of independence." 41 It perceived that the demands of restive minorities threatened national unity. The RC, therefore, radically transformed the administrative

structure of the country. The state councils, the office of head of states, and the separate state administrations were abolished and replaced by a system of state councils under the direct control of the central government. The RC extended the military controlled Security and Administrative Committee (SAC) hierarchy to the states and Burma proper. The RC founded the Academy for the Development of National Groups in October, 1964, at Sagaing, and later moved it to Ywathitgyi. The authorities reminded the trainee-cadres that they would have to work among their own people for their own development, economically and culturally." Only when all the national races were developed on the same level would the socialist state of social justice and affluence be attained", Col. Hla Han, a member of the RC, observed in his inaugural speech at Sagaing 42. General Ne Win believed that "all the races of the Union must work together and that there must be no cause of discrimination on grounds of race or religion." 43

According to the BWS, the success of the BSPP depended on the relentless effort being made to forge that unity. For years the RC had been relying on military force to forge "the unity of all working people" in Burma, and this policy


had failed. Large portions of the country had been in the hands of the insurgents, depriving the government of needed revenues, and of access to valuable national resources, as well as putting a constant strain on the national budget, and the loss of lives and property. There had been no return to the spirit of the Panglong Agreement, and, as J. Dundin wrote in the New York Times, "There is deep disenchantment among the people of Burma with the Ne Win regime. The suppression of civil rights and the economic depression caused by its nationalization have caused resentment and general poverty. General Ne Win's ruthless efforts to suppress the Kachins is reported to have made them implaccable opponents of any sort of rule by the Burmans who control the Rangoon government". 44

History has demonstrated since 1962 that the dogma of the supremacy of class ties over those of ethnic nationalism does not correspond with political reality in Burma. When about a third of the country is controlled by the rebels, when the minority is dependent upon the majority for its protection, when it is limited in its actions to seek redress, when the self-interests of the majority elites are

44. "Prospects of U Nu's drive in Burma held uncertain", New York Times, September 1, 1969, p.1. The article mentioned the bombing of towns and villages, and brutal punitive action against the civil population. See also New York Times of January 24, 1972, p.52 on Burma's economy. The World Bank officially called it "stagnant".
dominant, the minority may experience varying degrees of social ostracism and waves of persecution. As the demands may include political secession, confrontation usually results. This has been the case with the majority Burman ruling elites and the ethnic minorities, the latter invariably asking for "independence". Temporary and changing intra and inter-group rebel alliances have also sought independent statehood outside the Union of Burma citing the government(s) 'opposition to federalism.'
