APPENDIX

India and Political Turmoil in Myanmar

Kharajam Herojit Singh

[Currently India exercises no leverage over Myanmar and the present pattern of relationship between India and Myanmar relationship is more favourable to Myanmar than to India. Undoubtedly, a democratic Myanmar will serve India’s interests better. Instead of turning Myanmar as a nerve centre of Sino-Indian rivalry, India and China need to have a paradigm shift in their respective priority policies towards Myanmar for the sake of liberating people of Myanmar from their endemic political, economic and social plight.]

Myanmar, rich in natural resources and located in a strategic region of a dynamic continent, has a long experience of military dictatorship. The military government of Myanmar, presently styled as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), continues its misrule and the sheer indifference to the daily sufferings of 50 million people.

The ruling military regime is being condemned and criticized by its opponents, both inside and outside the country, to the deepening isolation, poverty, diseases, malnutrition, conflict and despair of the people of what was once popularly known as the “Golden Land”. It is urged that democratic political reforms alone would unleash the country’s enormous potentials and would reverse the deepening political and economic stagnation and deteriorating social infrastructures.

The military government is currently engaged in “restoring democracy” or more precisely paper democracy through what can only be seen as utterly undemocratic means. India, in the name of pursuing security and economic interest, has recognized and legitimized a repressive military government by increasingly engagement with the military regime, but not without a loss of credibility as a great and responsible power.

Junta’s Tight Grip

The Burmese military, officially known as Tatmadaw, occupies a dominant position in every aspect of Burmese life. In their view, the present regime is the protector and unifier of the country, the “mother and father” of the people. Organizationally, the Tatmadaw is reported to be well-structured unit with over four lakh active-duty personnel tied down in a disciplined superior-subordinate chain and supported by organizations and institutions such as Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Siam Ari Shim, Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF) etc. that are run by or under the influence of the military itself.

General Than Shwe, who heads the SPDC, is considered to be a very hardliner and a good tactician, having background in psychological warfare. Xenophobic and superstitious, he desires absolute control. On 19 October 2003, General Khin Nyunt and others who were considered to be the most pragmatic and open-minded element in the army, were sacked. By implication, Than Shwe and like-minded hardliners assumed full control of the SPDC and followed a skillfully calculated opportunistic ideology called “isolationism” that enable it to consolidate its power while protecting itself from both internal and external potential threats.

Myanmar relinquishing its right to ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 and capital shift to Naypyidaw, a strategic location, can be seen in this context. Thus, internally, the Burmese military government is well entrenched today. Pro-democracy group, National League for Democracy (NLD) with its prominent leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi’s prolong detention and continued campaign of harassment over NLD members by the military, has slipped to decline.
The “88 Generations Student Groups”, a new political activist, established on August 2006, with its top leaders arrested and detained, poses little threat to the regime. The government has also greatly marginalized most of the ethnic insurgency groups since mid 1990s, through a process of cease fire negotiations. During the ceasefire period, the military has built roads and other infrastructures in the hitherto less accessed ethnic areas and this has provided room for military offensive when needed.

The international community is divided on Myanmar issue and hence, not able to exert any credible and concerted leverage over the junta. It is alleged by China and Russia that the US, in the name of resolving the Myanmar issue, sought big power consensus on the western style democracy as the norm of international governance of the UN member states. The ruling military leaders also know well Myanmar’s geo-strategic significance and play card accordingly.

Roadmap to Democracy

After the “Depayin accident” (30 May 2003), SPDC, with an effort to counter Western as well as regional pressure rather than to appease the internal opposition or with the genuine desire to politically transform the country, advanced its Seven-Point Roadmap towards a “flourishing-disciplined democracy” as officially depicted, that basically involved completing of a new constitution, a referendum on that constitution, a new general election on the framework of the new constitution and installation of a new government thereafter. It was the only political card the SPDC leaders could safely play without being brutally toppled and prosecuted at that time.

The road-map and the constitution are supposed to pave the way for democracy. But, the provisions of the new constitution which took 15 years to complete makes sure that full civilian rule is not restored and military is assured of an important place in the new dispensation as well. Twenty-five percent of the seats in both Houses of Parliament and State Assemblies are reserved for the representatives of the army. Most importantly, it debars Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party NLD won a thumping victory in 1990 elections, from participating in politics on the ground that she married a foreigner.

Elections

The referendum on the new constitution took place on 10 May 2010, while in some areas devastated by the Cyclone Nargis, voting was postponed until 24 May. NLD called a vote against the draft constitution. The process was highly flawed which was apparently confirmed by the highly implausible result in the aftermath of the devastating cyclone tragedy i.e. 92 percent in favour with a turnout of 98.12 percent, thus, adding no legitimacy to the whole process. The military Junta announced that elections for the new parliament and regional assemblies will be held on 7 November 2010.

Accordingly, elections were been held on the appointed day, but in parts of Mon State, Shan State, Kachin State, and Kayin State the elections had been cancelled. The election laws issued ahead of voting are “unfair and undemocratic”. It effectively bars Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, estimated more that 2,000 and members of religious orders from taking part in the elections.

The political parties’ regulation laws enacted by the Junta forbid anyone convicted or serving a prison term from being a member of a party. It asked political parties to register on or before 6 May 2010 or face automatic de-recognition. Critics urged that there can’t be a greater fraud on the electoral process, the sole aim of which is to keep the military Junta in power.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her entourages had refused to register their party NLD condemning the governing election laws as “unfair and unjust” and thus, lost its status as a legally registered political party. However, some members of NLD who favoured contesting the election have formed a new group, National Democratic Force (NDF). Except diplomats and representatives from UN organizations, Myanmar also barred foreign observers and the international media to observe the election.
For the forty political parties contesting the election, it was certainly not a level playing field. Only a few of the registered parties had the financial and the organizational resources to contest in a significant portion of the constituencies across the state. The final results had been announced by the Myanmar Union Election Commission on 17 November 2010. As expected, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party was declared victorious capturing 129 of the 244 seats (76.79%) in the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities) and 259 of the 440 seats (78.48%) in the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives). The international community severely criticized the election process and the result as flawed. However, India was conspicuously silent with segments of the Indian media questioning if principle gave way to expediency.

Than Shwe visited India

Recently, General Than Shwe, who does not travel very often outside his country, paid a five-day visit to India. India, a nation with a proud democratic tradition and credentials, extended a red-carpet reception to a dogged dictator on his second visit in 6 years. Than Shwe’s previous visit to India was in October 2004. The recent visit is significant for both the countries. A forty-five para joint statement was issued in New Delhi on 27 July 2010 that reflects basically security and trade promotion concerns. For the ruling Junta, the red-carpet rolled out to Than Shwe matters much.

In the broad-based joint statement, there is only one small paragraph which reflected India’s concern in political reforms inside Myanmar. This frustrated the ideologue and supporters of democracy in Myanmar. India’s attitude, mild speak out for a peaceful democratic transition in Myanmar not to the extent of threatening bilateral ties, is certainly not a morale booster for democratic forces inside and outside Myanmar. Though it was not appeared in the official agenda, informal Than Shwe expected India’s support in the upcoming polls and the Indian leaders to recognize, if not endorse, the election result which was all set to ensure military’s continuity to cling to power. It was important for Than Shwe to have the support or silence of India which has a credible position in the region as well as in global politics today.

Opportunistic Engagement

In the late eighties and early nineties, India was very critical of Myanmar’s military regime. It was in the forefront in voicing for democracy and human rights in Myanmar. But, India soon found its bilateral relationship with Myanmar freezing and New Delhi itself lost out to China. India’s policy-makers were also worried about the activities of the insurgent groups in the north-eastern region (NER) and their use of Burmese territory as a safe haven, problem of small arms proliferation, drug trafficking and HIV/AIDS problem, all having a cross-border dimension.

All these considerations brought about a noticeable change in India’s approach towards the military government. Consequently, starting from mid-1990s, India’s policy underwent a dramatic shift from pro-democracy to pro-military. The then Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao affected the course correction, followed by an official “Look East Policy”, but greatly augmented by Atal Bihari Vajpayee led-NDA government and the present UPA government led by Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Though Naypyidaw never wants it to be entirely under the influence of China, yet Myanmar is becoming increasingly dependent on Beijing. There is apprehension that China is slowly turning Myanmar into another Tibet. India expresses concern over the Chinese up-grading of port especially building a major naval base on Hyangjeik Island and communication facilities at Coco Islands in the Bay of Bengal which is a mere 45 km from India territory.

According to some analysts, it also has signal intelligence (SIGINT) modes capable of monitoring Indian naval and missile launch facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, movement of Indian navy and other navies throughout the eastern Indian Ocean. India seeks to counter the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar. Myanmar also desires India to be a counter-balance to growing Chinese influence. In spite of this, China continues to be, in
the eye of Burmese military regime, a higher priority than India as it enjoys veto power at the UN Security Council which provides the only guarantee against possible UN offensive. Besides, geographical constraints also hinder India-Myanmar economic and trade relation.

The India and Myanmar have achieved a target of USD 1 billion in bilateral trade, albeit after a delay of 3 years. India is Myanmar’s 4th largest trading partner and the second largest export market after Thailand absorbing 25% of its total export. India is also 7th most important source of Myanmar’s import. Since April 1995, a border-trade agreement is in operation between India and Myanmar presently covering 44 items.

The Indo-Myanmar balance of trade is, however, unfavourable to India in a 5:1 ratio, posing a challenge to bilateral trade. In terms of infrastructure co-operation, on 21 February 2001 India and Myanmar had inaugurated a major 160-km Tamu-Kalaymo-Kalewa Road (Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road) that aims to provide a major strategic and commercial transport route connecting NER with Mandalay. Kaladan River Multi-Model Project intended to link India’s state of Mizoram to Sittwe though Bay of Bengal is also set for implementation.

During Than Shwe’s recent visit, India and Myanmar signed a treaty on mutual assistance in criminal matters. This agreement is significant keeping in view the security issues in NER. There had been assurance on many occasions from the top Burmese officials that it would not allow its territory to be used by the extremists for anti-Indian activities. But the sincerity of the Burmese officials is always doubted. It is said that the Myanmar government uses the Manipuri rebels and ULFA as bargaining instruments vis-à-vis India whereas the crackdown on the Nagas is for their demand for “Greater Nagaland”.

The endemic nature of the problem is evident by the report that there are, at present, about 30 camps belonging to ULFA, NSCN (K), CNF, UNLF and PLA inside Myanmar’s territory. The porous Indo-Myanmar border of 1643 km. is also a boon for small and light weapons smugglers. There are reports that many of the arm seizures in India used by northeastern insurgents are of Chinese origin which reach the insurgent groups through Myanmar’s northern and north-western territory. There is also problem of uninterrupted flow of huge volume of drugs in NER from Myanmar. This poses a serious health menace in the form of large scale HIV infestations. Oil and natural gas constitutes a major share of the total export of Myanmar and India’s desperate quest for energy sources has presented an important leverage point for the ruling junta. At present, ONGC Videsh Ltd and GAIL, two major Indian oil companies, are engaging in oil and natural gas extraction business in Myanmar.

Conclusion

The Myanmar’s SPDC, with internal rivalries managed and civil and ethnic opposition marginalized, maintains a tight grip on power. The military government gradually isolated itself from external meddling in its internal affairs. At the same time, it opened option for engaging with countries wanting to do business with Myanmar without seriously concerning themselves with the political situation inside Myanmar.

However, political changes inside Myanmar are taking place. Despite the flaws in the election process, the recent development represents the most significant political development in the last two decades. Street protests and revolution all have tried in Myanmar, but failed to pull down the military government. Sanction policy for that matter has also proved largely ineffective.

No doubt, the recent election result does not bring forth a legitimate civilian government, but the political civilianization of government would mean, at least, some hope in this direction. Furthermore, the notion that Western democracy offers an effective remedy for all political problems in all societies is fundamentally a folly, for it ignores the indigenous conditions in which the state interacts with society.

For one and half decade now, India, in an attempt to boost its security concern and extract economic benefits, has been trying to befriend Naypyidaw sheltering behind a diplomatic principle of “non-
interference” in the internal affairs of Myanmar, though it has a long history of political and military interference in the internal affairs of its immediate neighbours.

India needs to realize that it has so far not achieved most of its expectation from SPDC. China is more seductive to Myanmar; several insurgent groups from NER still have their basecamps inside Burmese side of the border and India’s economic integration with Myanmar benefits Myanmar more. While the Burmese military government, by engaging with India, has been getting much more – a viable counter-balance force to Chinese overwhelming presence, investments in key sectors, valuable military equipment supplies, a tacit silence on its internal affairs and a country’s support that pushes for integration of Myanmar into regional groupings such as BIMSTEC, MGC and SAARC, in fact, a great boon for the legitimacy-hungry military regime.

Thus, India has no leverage over Myanmar and the present Indo-Myanmar relationship is more profitable to Myanmar than to India. Given the priorities of India, it can be urged that a democratic Myanmar will serve India’s interests better. We can cite that a democratic Bangladesh and Bhutan have served India’s security interest in NER more effectively. India needs to look beyond opportunism to the right and liberties of 50 million Burmese people. For that to happen, India and China need to have a frank dialogue with each other about Myanmar keeping in view political changes and a democratic Myanmar. India and China need a desperate priority changes in their policies towards Myanmar. Only then the Burmese people will be liberated from their endemic political, economic and social plights.

References

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The Role of Ethnicity in the Process of Democratization in Myanmar
Kharajiam Herojit Singh

Introduction:

The demographic diversities in Myanmar may be a beauty to the anthropologists, but to the country’s leadership, civil and military, and other elites, it poses a critical problem of integration and reconciliation of the diverse ethnic groups into a compact and unified nation-state. With Myanmar’s new parliament, Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, having elected state leaders and forming government organizations, the military government’s more than seven years old self-declared seven point road-map towards a flourishing disciplined democracy is about to end formally. Although many, both inside and outside the country, criticize the entire process of “restoring democracy” as being flawed, there is no denying that it represents the most significant political development of the last two decades; a step forward towards political civilization to government, greater pluralism and an end to the dominance of a single leader over all decision-making process. This makes the question of sustaining and nurturing the ongoing political reform process central in Myanmar and it, in turn, necessitates proper revisit to the ethnic discord which is endemic in the country and its reconciliation in a sensible manner. Unless the ethnic conflict in Myanmar is addressed in a rational and amicable way, the perplexing post-independent situation may be reiterated again and that may invite a military coup like that of 1962 in the pretext of preserving unity and stability of the country and thus, the sprouting transition to democracy would again be affected adversely.

Ethnicity to Ethno-Nationality

Approximately 678, 500 sq. km in land area, Myanmar is the largest country in the mainland Southeast Asia. With a population of around 55 million people, it is one of the least densely populated, but most ethnically diverse countries in the region. The official figure of government of Myanmar (Census of 1983) talks of 135 indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting in Myanmar, which are bundled into eight major ethnic groupings: the Burmans, the most numerically dominant ethnic group, the Shan, the Mons, the Karens or Kayins, the Arakaneses or Rakhines, the Kayahs or Karenns, the Kachins and the Chins. Amongst the foreign ethnic residents, the most important are the Chinese and the Indians. The US Central Intelligence Agency (2010) gives the breakdown of population as the Burman 68%, the Shan 9%, the Mon 2%, the Karen 7%, the Arakanese 4%, the Chinese 3%, the Indian 2% and other 5%.

The ethnic Burmans constitute about two-thirds of the population and historically, they mostly inhabit around the central geographic core of contemporary Myanmar. The non-Burman indigenous ethnic minorities, except few, are mostly concentrated in the remote, mountainous and strategically important border areas with India, Bangladesh, China, Laos and Thailand. These ethnic minorities constitute only one-third of the population, but they inhabit about 40 percent of the country.

An important aspect of the ethnic composition of Myanmar is that each ethnic group is not necessarily a homogenous entity, but has many tribal groups under them based on religion, dialect, political or family ties. The Karens, for instance, have four major tribal groups under them, namely, the Sgaw, the Pwo, the PaO and the Karenni or Kayah. (Seekins 2006: 247) while the Chins have six major tribal groups: Asho, Cho or Sho, Khuami, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi. (ibid 146) The same is true with the Kachin and other groups. These ethnic minorities have their own languages and culture. In terms of religion, approximately 89% of the total population of Myanmar is adherents of Buddhism, 4% Christian (3% Baptists and 1% Roman Catholic), 4% Muslim, 1% animists and 2% other religions. Ethnically speaking, the overwhelming majority Burmans, the Mons, the Shan as well as many Karens are adherent of Buddhism. Next to Buddhism, Christianity is largely followed, primarily amongst the hills populated ethnic minority people such as the Karens, the Chins and the Kachins due to extensive missionary activities during the colonial period. There is also a sizable Muslim population in Myanmar. The Muslims predominantly populate in Rakhine state bordering Bangladesh to the west.

In the pre-British period, the various ethnic minority groups in the frontier areas were ruled by separate kingdoms and local tribal leaders; but they maintained tributary relations with the Burman kingdom in the lowland without falling under their direct control. There existed a loose type of political alignment and social relations based
on patron-client relationship rather than ethnic or linguistic cleavage. The key to the fulfillment of the patron-client obligations was power and the various interpenetrating centres of power were arranged by concept of Mandalay, “where various centres of power are arranged in shifting, hierarchical relationship.” (South 2008: 15) Such interpenetrating, but often loose power relationship created substantial autonomy to the ethnic minorities at the periphery and at the same time, a feeling of distrust and hatred over the dominant power, in most case the Burman kings.

However, the breakdown of population by politicisation of ethnicity is basically a modern experience. The British had colonized Myanmar and the ethnic, political, social and religious identities which was not so fixed and unipolar, (ibid 4) were further ossified and subsequently undergirded by the colonial policy of divide and rule. The British colonial system prioritized economic-commercial viability and administrative conveniences over unity and integration, applied different administrative systems to different regions that set the people on different path of political and economic development. Following their usual martial race policies, the British identified specific groups within Myanmar for military recruitment and such groups enjoyed higher status. Christian missionaries converted many tribal people, particularly the Chins, Karens and Kachins and by promoting education and their language, galvanized a sense of modern ethnic or national identity among people that had previously been scattered or politically disparate. (Gosh 2008: 43) Thousands of Indian and Chinese were immigrated further exacerbating ethnic complexities. While the colonial system naturally disfavoured the Burmans because they held the roots of anti-colonial sentiments, some of the ethnic minorities actively co-operated with the government. They believed that the colonial state was, “a benevolent but impartial umpire…thus freeing the individuals from the extremities of an exploitative ruling class.” (Taylor 1987:66)

Thus, the colonial system reinforced ethnic split and animosity to become Myanmar, a country of extremely politicized multi-ethnicity. No doubt, when the Burmese nationalist movement started in the early decade of the twentieth century due to their lack of political and cultural bonds with the Burmans, many ethnic minorities did not sided with the Burmans instead collaborated with the British. For instance, the Karens were instrumental in hunting down rebels led by Saya San and his followers. (Thant Myint-U 2007:211) The concept of inclusive nationalism was, thus, absent and overshadowed by ethno-nationalism that occurred horizontally and simultaneously. During the Second World War, the situation was further exacerbated. While the Burman nationalists sided with the Japanese, many hill people, notably the Karen and the Kachin, besides the Chin and the Shan, formed guerrilla units, which fought alongside the British and the Americans against the Burman-Japanese force. (Lintner 2003: 184) It was against this backdrop of centuries of mistrust and extremely politicized ethnic environment that Myanmar became an independent country on 4 January 1948.

Ethnic Politics and Insurgency

Britain ruled Myanmar for more than sixty years following the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885. However, the impact of the basic western societal values and political concepts on Myanmar was less than on institutional and economic structure. (Taylor 1987: 71) After gaining independence, a parliamentary democratic government crafted along the Indian model was installed, but the system ended up in crisis and conflicts. Among other issues, the unsettled problem of ethnicity and ethno-nationalism erupted and it disrupted functioning of the parliamentary democratic government. In a society of ethnic pluralism, Myanmar, in reality, emerged as an “ethnocratic” state where the state set as agency of the dominant ethnic group in terms of its ideologies, its policies and resource distribution. (Brown 1994: 36) As a result, the post-independent Myanmar failed to accommodate and integrate ethnic minorities politically. The Burmans dominated political as well as institutional set up, which is continuing until date.

By the end of the year of independence, the Karen, the Karenni, the Mon and the Arakanese ethnic nationalists articulated claims to social and political autonomy based on ethnicity; and they, like the powerful Communist Party of Burma under the leadership of Than Tun, took up arms against the Burman-dominated government. (South 2008: 26-29) Ethnic identity and loyalty, thus, became the basis of political right. Gravers called this process; “ethnicity” which is the “separation or seclusion of ethnic groups from the nation states in the name of ethnic freedom…where cultural differences are classified as primordial and antagonistic.” (Gravers 1999: 152-153) The ethically motivated political divisiveness and armed struggles led to form many ethnic armed organizations such as the Karen National Union, the Kachin Independence Organization, the New Mon State Party, the Shan State Army etc. These organizations sought to monopolize the loyalty of their respective ethnic community by ethnocentrism of Gravers thus rendered their communities un-integrated with the mainstream polity. Brown (1994) also points out an important aspect while explaining the emergence of ethno-nationalism and ethnic
separatism in Myanmar. He systematically distinguishes ethnic elites and the masses. In his analysis, state’s penetration disrupted the local authority structure affecting the ethnic elites and communal unity and identity in the periphery, consequently affecting both the ethnic elites and the mass public respectively. This consciousness was translated into ethno-nationalism and separatism because of the ethnic elites’ mobilization activities.

It may be mentioned here that like today, the ethnic cum politically inspired armed struggle in Myanmar was not a clear-cut conflict between the Burman dominated government and the various ethnic minorities. In fact, there existed differences in terms of language, religion, social and economic development between the various minorities. As a result, ethnic conflicts or insurrections were directed not only against the majority Burman government, there were several inter-ethnic insurrections and factionalism and this continues till date. In an effort to unify the various ethnic opposition groups under one joint front, National Democratic Front (NDF), an umbrella body was formed in 1976, which later aligned itself with the Aung San Suu Kyi led National League for Democracy (NLD), which was formed at the aftermath the of 1988 uprising as a common platform for democratization movement in Myanmar. However, subsequent splits and factionalism marred the spirit of unified opposition.

Another important issue related with the ethnic opposition movements in Myanmar is that they have often been supported and used by neighbouring countries such as China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh (Steinberg 2010:44) given the fact that regional borders are very porous to local ethnic communities including the insurgents and traders, drug smugglers. (Seth 2001:5) This has exacerbated sense of isolation, suspicion and concern among the Burmans who dominates the national politics and policies over both their minorities and foreign powers. While Bangladesh is said to back the Muslim Rohingya, India to be involved with the Kachin and the Karens, the Chinese with Burmese Communist Party, the Nagas and the Kachin rebels, Thailand is alleged to support a variety of rebel groups, essentially creating buffer zone along its Burmese frontier. (Steinberg 2010:44)

The implications of these decades of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations launched by the government are political instability and threat to the existence of Myanmar as a nation-state. Even more concern is the severe rights abuses of innocent civilians with continuing reports of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, displacements, exodus and other tragedies in the conflicting zones. According to Human Right Watch (HRW) Report, there are an estimated half-million internally displaced persons in eastern Myanmar, 140,000 refugees remain in nine camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border, more than 50,000 refugees from Chin State in eastern India and 28,000 ethnic Rohingya Muslims live in squalid camps in Bangladesh. (HRW 2010: 274) Eventually, this causes great humanitarian pressure on the neighbours.

**Nation-building Flawed**

The more than sixty years old ethnic conflicts in Myanmar is related to problem of ethnic identity and loyalty, political legitimacy and participation, government’s lack of capacity, egalitarianism and fair distribution, which is basically economical, all adversely affecting development of a new national identity where the various ethnic groups come to shift their loyalties, expectation and political activities toward a the new mutually acceptable centre. While it is vital to develop such an inclusive national identity by reconciliation of differences, state’s approach toward that had long been a mixture of assimilative unionism and military offensive, to back the former.

Aung San, the Burmese national hero who dreamt independent Myanmar to be a single entity, once said that if the Burman receives one Kyat (the Burmese currency), the minorities will also get one Kyat. (Smith 1991: 78) What was implied in the statement was his “unity in diversity” policies. With this vision, he organized a historic agreement known as Panglong Agreement signed on 12 February 1947, a year before independence with the leaders of the Shan, the Kachin and the Chin. The agreement provided foundation for post war co-operation between the Burman people and some of the major ethnic groups (Litner 2003: 181). Despite the goodwill, the agreement could not bring about political stability and ethnic harmony largely due to inherent inadequacies in the agreement. Besides, it was not represented by all the ethnic minorities (the Mons and the Arakanese were not invited) and the political turmoil following the assassination of Aung San on 19 July 1947, along with six other state leaders gave a big blow to the initiative.

The constitution of 1947, which was a product of the Panglong agreement, conceived a quasi-federal government for the independent Myanmar. Nevertheless, as Taylor observes, it “delineated the federal state, but in reality provided a centralized governmental system.” (Taylor 1987: 227) The various provisions of the new constitution called for autonomy of the ethnic minorities and protection of their culture, but this was not upheld by effective support of the government at the centre. In practice, the Burmans sought to establish their hegemony and tried to promote their language and religion (Buddhism) by using state apparatus and these attitude
of the dominant group, coupled with government's inability to meet high expectations of development in minority regions due to lack of fiscal and administrative resources evaporated the goodwill created by the Panglong agreement and the constitution of 1947. As a result, many ethnic rebel movements continued seeking goals that range from autonomy to independence. The political situation that time was such that it created the most serious threat to the integrity and security of the state. (Sarodea 1983: 343) Amidst such situation, a military coup led by General Ne Win overthrew the dysfunctional democratic regime in March 1962. Since then, until today, the military had developed into an influential political factor which until very recently had directly ruled the country and consistently sought to achieve a centralized, unitary structured state, allegiance and assimilation of the members of the minority group through a policy of “Burmanization of minorities.” However, with respect to the Rohingya the military government had been pursuing a policy of ‘marginalization.’ This has been the military’s notion of nationhood and national identity; and the subsequent state’s nation-building projects have been built upon this flawed understanding which continued with varying degrees in each subsequent military government periods. The military and the successive ruling military leaders saw themselves as saviour of the nation and they, maintaining that diversity as divisiveness, denounced federation in practice to be anti-integration.

In 2005, the ruling military government, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), relocated capital of the country from Rangoon to Naypyidaw, which according to Donald D. Seekins is both for state security and to construct a new “Myanmar Identity” based on the ethno-racial unity rather than political pluralism. (Seekins 2009: 63) The new constitution adopted in 2008 has followed the model of the 1974 constitution in dividing the country into administrative divisions with slight difference; while maintaining the seven-fold division of states as well as divisions, it has renamed the divisions as ‘regions.’ Five self-administered zones have been created: Danu, Kokang, Naga, Palaung and Pao-o. In other words, the new constitution has introduced many significant changes, which seeks to placate ethnic aspirations and discontentments. How far the provisions of new constitution diverge from the assimilative and centralist nation-building process and how far it is successful in undergirding democratic values among the ethnic groups is to be seen. The military government has also used military offensive in dealing with ethnic conflicts particularly since 1962, which demonstrates state’s weakness vis-à-vis society. As of 2006, it is said that there are at least forty-one armed ethnic groups in Myanmar and of these; roughly two-thirds have reached some form of ceasefire with the government. (Cline 2009: 579) However most of these agreements are semi-official ceasefire agreements and still there are some ten groups formally in armed opposition to the government. (ibid 279) Recent tensions between the military government and an estimated two dozen armed militias with longstanding ceasefire during the 2009, following government have proposed them to disarm themselves and transform into smaller “Border Security Guard” ahead of 2010 elections testify how insecure the ceasefire agreements are.

Conclusion

The problem of ethnic discord by politicization of ethnicity has been a long issue in Myanmar, which throughout the country’s past had been manifested in term of ethnic politics and many violent armed movements. The British colonial rule nurtured a plural society but it never endeavoured to develop a cohesive national identity for the future independent state, instead, it generated multiple sources of politicized ethnic identities and loyalties. The Second World War further polarized the multi-ethnic society, Myanmar; as a result, when the country got independence it inherited a complex problem of bringing the divided people into one nation-state. While the need was developing trust and goodwill, the subsequent governments of the post independent Myanmar have failed to develop the vision of a cohesive national identity and the state’s nation-building projects got confused between Burman-centred centralized and assimilative model and integrative pluralism, which was need of the period. The historically flawed process of assimilation and marginalization continues today as well. Various ethnic minorities have been claiming that they are economically marginalized, while their social, cultural and religious rights are suppressed. They consider themselves discriminated against and have openly accused the government of a deliberate policy of Burmanisation. The causes for the breakdown of the population by politicization of ethnicity may be many such as political economic or social marginalization or say assimilation, but the resultant conflict among the ethnic groups will continue to persist if the government ignores the doctrine of equality, liberty and fraternity at the national level. Although democracy is a far cry in Myanmar in terms of when and how, today, Myanmar is embarking on political reforms that could prove to be the first stage of a gradual transition to democracy. However, the ethnic divisiveness that led to collapse of the Burmese experiment to democracy between 1948 to 1962 and a major factor for stepping in and prolonging military rule has not been resolved yet. Ethnic harmony must be accorded a full place alongside democratization, as it is equally important as democracy deficit. It is hoped that the new civilized
but military dominated government will attempt to reconcile ethnic tensions and consolidate integration in an amicable and sensible manner, so that it does not hesitate to hand over power later to a genuine democratically accountable government, as the military leaders frequently urged, by fear of disintegration. The ethnic leaders are also expected to come out of the insurgency politics and undertook democratic method of discussion and political solution under the paradigm of the new constitution. Here, important role of the democratic ideologues inside and outside Myanmar and international state and non-state actors are crucial. Most importantly, role of India in shaping Myanmar’s ethnic future may be mentioned. Unlike China, India acknowledges the right of its minorities and value cultural diversity and it could be the best lesson that India could teach to Myanmar at present. However, India’s stand at present, keeping security and economic considerations seems to be very opportunistic. India should realize that a democratic Myanmar will serve its interests better and its positive role in settling ethnic discords in Myanmar is vital.

Notes:

1 In 1989, State Law and Order Restoration Council, the then ruling junta, changed the name of the country from Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar. In this article both, “Burma” and “Myanmar” are used to mean the country, according to convenience and necessity.

2 During the British colonial rule, while the Burmese homeland, lowland Myanmar, was ruled directly and thus, the region enjoyed some degree of development and modernization, the mountainous or frontier areas were left more or less alone with the local chief or princess in charge under the British supervision. These two zones were never integrated administratively and thus, such colonial method fragmented the ethnic groups in Myanmar.

3 Modern scholars on Myanmar make a distinction between these two terms- “Burman” and the “Burmese.” In modern sense, “Burman” is a term denoting a particular ethnic group, while “Burmese” is used to identify all the inhabitants of Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity. In this article, the modern sense of using those terms is followed.

4 After the British colonial force occupied Myanmar in three military campaigns (1824-26, 1852 and 1885), the country became a province of India under a chief Commissioner responsible to the Governor General. In 1923, it was placed under a Governorship and remained so until 1937 when Myanmar was separated from India and kept directly the Government of United Kingdom.

5 The term “Burmanisation” essentially indicates the Burman-dominated government’s one-nation policy designed to be achieved by obliterating all differences through forced assimilation or “Burmanisation” to the extent that the ethnic minorities become indistinguishable from members of the majority Burman.

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