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[Home](#) > Myanmar: Civilizing the Military Nation- When?

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## Myanmar: Civilizing the Military Nation- When?

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Kyaw Zwa Moe, the English Editor of Irrawaddy has written a piece starting with this title “Civilinising this Militarised Nation” and comes to the conclusion that it may take another three decades. He has reasons to be very pessimistic as the developments in Myanmar do not give us any hope of the Army- the Tatmadaw giving up its iron grip over the country.

No one has better credentials than Kyaw Zwa Moe to write this poignant piece on the movement that started some thirty years ago with the specific objective of bringing in democracy in place of the military regime and yet it has made little or no progress at all in this direction.

Kyaw Zwa Moe joined the 1988 movement just as he was to enter the University. He had spent many years in prison and it is said that he was not even allowed to attend his mother’s funeral by the cruel military regime! Now he is the editor of the English news section of Irrawaddy- a successful analyst who is widely read by one and all.

But there were others who joined the 88 movement who were not so lucky. I still recall the days of the 88 movement when the students were mercilessly suppressed and particularly the Sule Pagoda incident when hundreds were gunned down. Many of the 88 students have been rehabilitated and yet they have not organized themselves as a political force. They offered to join Suu Kyi in the last Elections, but their offer was spurned by her. It still intrigues me as to why Suu Kyi ignored the entire 88 group- young students who sacrificed their entire future for bringing in democracy in the country. Probably Suu Kyi was running high even otherwise in terms of popularity but to me it looks that she was apprehensive that her closeness to the 88 students would perhaps not be conducive to her overall objective of convincing the army to give up their powers progressively and voluntarily. In this she is going to be disappointed as we shall see.

The points made by Kyaw Zwa Moe in coming to the conclusion that it will take another three decades were

1. The country has seen a civil war since 1948.
2. The current peace process initiated in 2011 has not achieved any breakthrough so far.
3. Almost all the 20 ethnic armed groups seek autonomy- Of these ten have signed the National Cease fire agreement. Five have been fighting and five more are waiting.
4. The NLD was formed in 1988. It had recently proposed constitutional reforms for reduction of military representation from 25 percent to 15 percent for the upcoming 2020 elections and progressively to be reduced further. The military has just refused so far. (though outwardly their rejection has been couched on procedural terms.)
5. Thus, the NLD has failed to convince the military to fully collaborate and convince them to go back to the barracks.
6. It is 30 years since the process of getting the military out was started and it may take another 30 years to succeed.

It is unrealistic to expect the military to give up its decisive hold even progressively in the coming years.

I have seen statements being made by the Myanmar Tatmadaw that peace and stability will be restored by 2020 a possibility I do not share.

But what is certain is that the NLD may not get the same overwhelming majority that they got in 2015 elections. Suu Kyi may even draw a blank in some States like Rakhine. On the other hand, the USDP, the civilian proxy of the Army may get more representation in which case the military influence will only get entrenched more and more. Thus, there appears to be no possibility of Constitutional Reforms in the near future.

While the possibility of Constitutional reforms remain bleak, the other main objective of Suu Kyi towards ethnic reconciliation appears to be equally bleak. Even the ten ethnic groups who have signed the National Cease fire agreement, after the five day meeting at Chiangmai recently have come away with the feeling that building a federal state appears to be far- far away and that the 2008 Constitution is the main stumbling block.

Yawd Serk of RCSS was clear that peace has to be pursued beyond 2020 that is beyond the next elections. The leaders of the ten groups who had signed the National Ceasefire agreement which incidentally has a provision of federalism said that all that they want is “equality, democracy and federalism” while the Tatmadaw continues to harp on the principle of ‘non secession’ which it is insisting.

In the west, a regular civil war is going on between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State. In a major incident, the Army suffered heavy casualties when two of its boats carrying officers and soldiers were fired upon in the Kaladan river near Palettwa in Chin State on 26<sup>th</sup> May.

Two days later, an Army Spokesman declared that it cannot accept the presence of Arakan Army in Rakhine State but is acceptable if it goes back to Laiza- the KIA hqrs. Here again one is puzzled as to why the Government should have directed the Tatmadaw to go all out to finish off the Arakan Army which is well entrenched, well armed and well motivated in Rakhine Province.

Added to this is a completely different narrative being posited by the FPNCC- a group of seven of the most powerful ethnic armed groups and supported by China. The Wa Group which leads the FPNCC is enjoying more powers than what is to be had even under a confederal status.

The present situation suits both the Tatmadaw and China. Unlike the CPEC where the Chinese projects are facing security problems from the Balochistan Liberation army, here the CMEC ( China Myanmar Economic Corridor from Kunming to Kyaukphyu is safe with all the ethnic armed organisations under Chinese control.

The Tatmadaw under the present 2008 Constitution is all powerful holding 25 percent of the seats in the parliament with no amendment is possible without its consent. As one NLD leader said even the President of Myanmar does not have the power to appoint even one member to the Parliament whereas the Army Chief can appoint any one from the army for one fourth of all the seats. He gives his own extension. Soon after the second Panglong conference the Army began an intensive campaign against the KIA while the intention of the Conference itself was ethnic reconciliation. One recent incident of the release of seven soldiers who were sentenced to 10 years within one year when the Army Spokesman did not even confirm the release showed the overwhelming power of the Army. While the Army was responsible for the excesses on the Rohingya it was Suu Kyi the civilian face of Myanmar who had to bear the international criticism.

All this goes to show that the “status quo’ suits both the Army and China and so why one should bother about the people or the civilian Government?

**Tags:**

Myanmar Army [1]

EAOs [2]

**Category:**

Papers [3]

**Countries:**

Myanmar [4]

**Topics:**

Political [5]

Insurgency [6]

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[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1961>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/myanmar>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/insurgency>