

THE ROLE OF MILITARY IN MYANMAR'S PEACE PROCESS SINCE 2011

Myint Zu Win*

Abstract

Since the new government came to power on March 30, 2011, U Thein Sein led-government's peace process has become a pivotal element of political reform in the country's new political era. Like USDP-led government, NLD-led government has also prioritized national reconciliation and peace process as a part of the road map for democratic federal union. Although the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government have been pushing for the peaceful resolution of the internal armed conflicts, domestic armed conflict remains difficult issues in Myanmar's peace process. The persistent domestic armed conflict between the EAOs and Tatmadaw is also posing a prominent challenge to the government's credibility. The Tatmadaw has remained the most politically influential actor in Myanmar politics with a significant share of seats in parliament. As a result of the continuation of fighting in internal armed conflict, the Tatmadaw plays a decisive role in the peace process. Therefore, in order to achieve lasting and sustainable peace, there are important not only government's peacemaking efforts but also the Tatmadaw's cooperation necessary require. Upon both the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government situation, the research question focuses on how the governments attempt to succeed peace process and how the Tatmadaw influence Myanmar politics and its effects on peace process.

Keywords: Peace Process, the Tatmadaw (military), EAOs, NCA, Panglong Conference

Introduction

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar was unable to establish a united Union, trusted and valued by all and began internal conflict. Later, internal armed conflicts gradually emerged and broke out across Myanmar. From that time, Myanmar has suffered from one of the world's longest domestic armed conflicts. More than two dozen Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), militias and insurgents have been involved in the conflict.

Because of domestic armed conflicts, the Tatmadaw were the only force capable of protecting the country from disintegration and the Tatmadaw

* Dr, Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Yangon

became one of the most important institutions and increased its political influential domestic player in Myanmar politics. Therefore, Myanmar has been dominated by its national armed forces Tatmadaw who have ruled over the country through junta-style governments which meant that the Tatmadaw's role expanded.

Since the new government came to power on March 30, 2011, the new president, U Thein Sein who was former prime minister of the Tatmadaw government began series of reform process that could show to be the first stage of a gradual transition to democracy since the Tatmadaw government seized power in 1962. Under U Thein Sein government, led by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Myanmar's peace process has become a pivotal element of political reform in the country's new political era. The civilian government initiated an effort to end fighting on a nationwide scale and invited a large number of EAOs for peace talks.

In 2015, the USDP-led government signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with eight of the EAOs including the Karen National Union (KNU). However, some EAOs including significant groups such as Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and Wa are not yet part of the NCA. Like the USDP-led government, the NLD-led government has also prioritized national reconciliation and peace process as a part of the road map for democratic federal union. Therefore, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stated that the government will continue to be able to build up a genuine, democratic federal union through peace conferences. As the top political dialogue, the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong began with the country's incomplete NCA that was initiated by the USDP-led government.

However, there are many complicated and difficult issues about peace process for both governments. The persistent domestic armed conflict between the EAOs and Tatmadaw is also posing a prominent challenge to the government's credibility. In order to achieve lasting and sustainable peace, there are important not only government's peacemaking efforts but also the Tatmadaw's cooperation necessary require. Upon both the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government situation, the research question focuses on how the governments attempt to succeed peace process and how the Tatmadaw influence Myanmar politics and its effects on peace process.

I. Myanmar's Peace Process under USDP-led government

Successive governments of Myanmar did their best to end internal armed conflicts caused by divide-and-rule policy and different political, racial and religious ideologies, and achieve internal peace. However, there were both progress and failures of peace process.

Since the new government came to power on March 30, 2011, Myanmar's peace process has become a pivotal element of political reform in the country's new political era. On August 18, 2011, the USDP-led government invited a large number of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) for nationwide peace talks because of recognizing that national reconciliation is a vital component of Myanmar's democratic reforms. With democratic reforms and USDP-led government's renewed peace process, Myanmar's peace process, which aims to end the more than 60 years of internal armed conflict, has been in progress in 2015.

On October 15, 2015, one important political development is the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with eight of the country's sixteen ethnic armed groups after four years of trust building based on patience and mutual understanding under the USDP-led government. In fact, the NCA was one of the USDP government's tools for achieving nationwide peace in Myanmar. The NCA seeks to achieve a negotiated settlement between the government of Myanmar and non-state ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that paves the way for peace-building and national dialogue. However, the USDP government's attempt at an 'all inclusive' peace process was not successful because it failed to reach the "all inclusive" objective between the government, the Tatmadaw and EAOs. Until 2018, seven EAOs including significant groups such as Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and Wa are not part of the NCA.

A. Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)

In 2013, in order to achieve lasting and sustainable peace, the government agreed to multilateral negotiations over a single-document Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that encompasses the majority of EAOs. The NCA recognizes, reinforces, and reaffirms all previous agreements between the government and EAOs. The agreement also aims to secure an

enduring peace based on the principles of dignity and justice through an inclusive political dialogue process involving all relevant stakeholders.

Significantly, the NCA was one of the most important political steps taken since 2011 by the U Thein Sein-led government. For the first time in Myanmar's history, the Union Government, Hluttaw, Tatmadaw, and EAOs achieved a milestone in the Myanmar peace process by finalizing the text of the NCA. The NCA intends to end armed conflict and resolve political issues through peaceful political means. The NCA is the outcome of the discussion by the government, Hluttaw and Tatmadaw, based on proposals made by EAOs.

After signing the NCA in 2015, the peace process and political framework is moving full speed ahead. Because of NCA, it can be said that fighting in conflict areas decreased to some extent and eventually cease. However, the government does not successfully complete signing ceasefire agreements with all ethnic groups. As a result of the continuation of fighting in conflict, the Tatmadaw is remaining critical to the government's cause and thus influential.

II. Myanmar's Peace Process under NLD-led government

Since the NLD-led government was taken office on 30 March 2016, national reconciliation and the peace process, constitutional reform, and better living standards were the top priorities highlighted in the inaugural address of President U Htin Kyaw. Therefore, the NLD-led government has been emphasizing the importance of the peace process towards national reconciliation as one of three main priorities.

The NLD-led government has made changes to the government's structures related to the peace process. As the first effort, the NLD-led government replaced the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC: the operating agency for the peace process under the USDP-led government) with a government-controlled National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC) as the secretariat for the peace process.

In the context of political dialogue, the NLD government has constituted a new government peace monitoring body called the Union Peace

Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), replacing the previous Myanmar Peace Center. The UPDJC committee is constituted by the government, the ethnic armed ceasefire groups and political parties. The UPDJC's role is to oversee the "Framework Political Dialogue."

The NLD-led government's major peace initiative is in continuing the Union Peace Conference under the title "21st Century Panglong". The NLD-led government's Union Peace Conference has been welcomed as the most encouraging initiative to achieve countrywide peace and political reform in Myanmar. Dr. Tin Myo Win, who was Vice Chairman of the UPDJC, called on all representatives at the conference to strive to reach an agreement on basic principles for establishing a federal democratic system through negotiations.

A. Union Peace Conference - 21st Century Panglong

The NLD-led government, under the leadership of State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is attempting to continue to be able to build up a genuine, democratic federal union through peace conferences. The Union Peace Conference 21st Century Panglong began with the country's incomplete NCA as the top political dialogue. The main sources of armed conflicts were the inability to resolve the political problems. The 21st Century Panglong Conference can attempt to solve the source of the armed conflicts through dialogue. Therefore, the 21st Century Panglong process can bring positive changes through political dialogues in the ceasefire areas.

The first 21st Century Union Peace Panglong Conference was successfully held in August 2016 and a second session took place in May 2017. The Third Session of the Union Peace Conference 21st Century Panglong was held in July 2018.

The 21st Century Panglong Conferences (first, second, third) were part of the NLD-led government's new way of pursuing peace. The 21st Century Panglong Conferences are the only channel to a political solution, as well as the importance of reaching an agreed understanding of the goal of a democratic federal union. Like the USDP's NCA, the NLD's Panglong-21st Century intends to be inclusive of all EAOs for political dialogue. The NLD-led government expects to sign non-signatories EAOs in the NCA agreement

as the step of the political road map for peace. “All-inclusiveness” continues to be an issue for peace process. Lasting and sustainable peace cannot succeed without the participation and support of all the armed groups, both signatory and non-signatory ones.

Both the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government have been forcing for deadlines to guarantee rapid completion of the peace process. Although the democratically elected government pushes for the peaceful resolution, persistent domestic armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and EAOs is posing a big challenge to the government’s credibility.

One major difference between the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government peace process is the diversification of power among key government institutions. During the USDP-led government peace efforts, the Tatmadaw and ethnic leaders had established some level of personal trust and the retired Tatmadaw personnel engaged in the peace negotiations were recognized by the ethnic leaders. In contrast, during the NLD-led government peace process, the Tatmadaw has been handling the peace process and Tatmadaw intelligence is the major player which made critical decisions on the peace process. For instance, Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing remarked on 27 March 2017 that the Tatmadaw will continue as important role in the peace process because successive Tatmadaw governments, particularly the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) initiated several agreements with EAOs since the 1990s.

III. Role of Military in Peace Process

Since independence in January 1948, EAOs in Myanmar have been waging domestic armed conflict with the government. Therefore, the Tatmadaw were the only force capable of protecting the country from disintegration and became one of the most key stakeholders in Myanmar politics. Historically, the Tatamadaw were the most political influential domestic player in Myanmar.

Since 2011, the Tatmadaw has also remained the most politically influential actor in Myanmar with 25 percent of the seats in both the upper house (Amyotha Hluttaw) and lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw) of the parliament

(Pyidaungsu Hluttaw). According to the 2008 Constitution, only serving Tatmadaw officers can lead the three most powerful ministries — Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs. Moreover, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing said that the Tatmadaw intends to continue to play a leading role in Myanmar politics. Therefore, these situations give the Tatmadaw a significant leveraging capacity in the peace process and also control over the security affairs in Myanmar.

In line with the Three Main National Causes and multi-party democracy, the Tatmadaw has its own “Six Peace Principles”: (1) to have a genuine wish for peace; (2) to keep promises they agree to during the peace process; (3) to refrain from reaping benefits from peace agreements; (4) not to become a burden on the people; (5) to follow the country’s existing rules of law; and (6) to respect and march towards a democratic country in accordance with the 2008 Constitution.

Because of these “Six Peace Principles”, the Tatmadaw’s cooperation remains the most key players in Myanmar’s peace process. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Tatmadaw plays a decisive role in the peace process and retains partial control of national politics while the threat of internal conflict remains.

Despite the fact that the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government had been making the peace process, the continued military combat between the Tatmadaw and the non-ceasefire armed ethnic groups like Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA, “Kokang group”, Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA), United Wa State Army, and the Kachin Independence Army have not stopped. Suspicion and the lack of trust between the government and EAOs, the Tatmadaw, have resulted in what is known as a “security dilemma” environment.

In Myanmar, the security dilemma situation has a direct effect on the peace process because the Tatmadaw and EAOs have different options for dealing armed groups in the war to peace transition. There are territorial disputes between the Tatmadaw and EAOs. That is increasing number of armed forces Tatmadaw in EAO areas. Therefore, security dilemma and the lack of trust and confidence between the Tatmadaw and EAOs have impeded the Myanmar’s peace process.

From the EAOs perspective, the Tatmadaw is treating EAOs as insurgents rather than nationality resistance groups that are fighting for a political reason. Considering the security dilemma situation on the part of EAOs, disarmament before political settlement can be unlikely because once disarmed, armed groups can lose their bargain capacity in the peace process, as was the case in Myanmar in 1950s and between 2008 and 2010. From the Tatmadaw perspective, NCA signatory EAOs continue to build up military strength and territory as a safeguard.

From the EAOs perspective, the EAOs prefer security sector reform (SSR) with an aim to form comprehensive Union Army by integrating EAOs troops into Tatmadaw while the Tatmadaw has forced for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). Moreover, EAOs are unwilling to disarm because of the example that the plans for armed groups to exchange “weapons with democracy” failed in the 1950s. On the other hand, from the Tatmadaw perspective, the Tatmadaw has maintained that DDR can be its favored option to deal with EAOs.

Moreover, national army, secession and federalism are the most controversial issues for Myanmar’s ethnic armed groups and the continuing challenges of Myanmar’s peace process. Concerning with national army, the Tatmadaw, which plays a dominant role in politics and in the entire peace process, insisted that there should be one national army or a single army under the new federal arrangement. Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that in any country, regardless of practicing democracy or any other system, they have only one Armed Force. Therefore, the ethnic groups should work in accordance with the international peace principles. Nevertheless, the EAOs want to see a federal army, which would allow them to preserve their respective armed forces.

Concerning with secession, it has arguably been the most complicated and challenging single issue the country has faced since its independence from Britain in 1948. Concerning with federalism, there are disagreements over type of federalism between the Tatmadaw and EAOs. Federalism in the Tatmadaw’s earlier vocabulary used to be similar with disintegration. With the path of the NCA negotiations, the Tatmadaw has come to be more accepting of several demands from the EAOs side, especially the notion of

federalism. The Tatmadaw has changed its perception and federalism seems no longer to carry a negative meaning. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said that federal is not a system for cessation but a system that strengthens unity. In implementing federal, the main principles of non-cessation from the Union and self-determination need to be negotiated because these are delicate problems.

Discussions on federalism, federal army, and non-secession have met a stalemate at the negotiating table between the Tatmadaw and the EAOs. These issues are vital to the success of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference but the more important issue is to build trust between the government, the Tatmadaw and EAOs. To cease armed conflicts, it is very important to achieve political agreements that are acceptable to different forces. However, main issues of military offensives not yet stopped. The peace process also continues to go through its ups and downs because Tatmadaw operations and civilian displacement have significantly eroded trust, even while peaceful solutions are being sought.

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that the Tatmadaw is doing its utmost for the success of the government's peace process based on its experience at the Third Session of the Union Peace Conference-21st Century Panglong that was held in July 2018. The Tatmadaw wants to achieve real peace as quickly as possible in such a way that cannot harm the Union, national unity, independence and sovereignty. The Tatmadaw agreed to support the peace process by finding a political settlement.

Conclusion

Myanmar's peace process was succeeded to some extent under USDP-led government. Because of NCA that was initiated by the USDP led-government, it can be said that fighting in conflict areas decreased to some extent and eventually cease. However, the government does not successfully complete signing ceasefire agreements with all ethnic groups. As a result of the continuation of fighting in internal armed conflict, the Tatmadaw plays a decisive role in the peace process and holds partial influence of national politics.

The NLD-led government has also been emphasizing the importance of the peace process towards national reconciliation. The NLD-led government's 21st Century Panglong Conferences, USDP-led government's incomplete NCA, were part of the government's new way of pursuing peace. However, the persistent internal armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and EAOs is posing a big challenge to the government's credibility. The NLD-led government wants to give a better deal to the EAOs, but it is the Tatmadaw that can make the final analysis decision.

Although the USDP-led government and the NLD-led government have been pushing for the peaceful resolution of the internal armed conflicts between the Tatmadaw and ethnic based groups, domestic armed conflict remains a serious issue in Myanmar. The democratically elected government's effort at an 'all inclusive' peace process failed to reach the "all inclusive" objective between the government, the Tatmadaw and EAOs. Because of the continuation of fighting in conflict, the Tatmadaw is remaining critical to the government's cause and thus influential. The Tatmadaw were the only force capable of protecting the country from disintegration and the Tatmadaw became one of the most important institutions and increased its politically influential domestic player in Myanmar politics with 25 percent of the seats in both houses of the parliament. According to the 2008 Constitution, only serving Tatmadaw officers can take the three most powerful ministries — Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs. Moreover, the Tatmadaw has its own "Six Peace Principles" in line with the Three Main National Causes. Thus, these situations give the Tatmadaw a significant leveraging capacity in the security affairs and also control over the peace process like security dilemma situation. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Tatmadaw's cooperation remains the most key players in Myanmar's peace process.

Similarly, EAOs's perceptions are also important to succeed Myanmar's peace process because there are arguments about defining federal army, non-secession and federalism between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups. Some EAOs (KIO, Wa) do not believe about Myanmar's peace process. Therefore, it is important to build trust and respect between the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed groups because mutual trust is playing a pivotal role in Myanmar peace process so as to achieve lasting and sustainable peace.

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