

# REFLECTIONS ON THE 1995 NEW MON STATE PARTY CEASEFIRE

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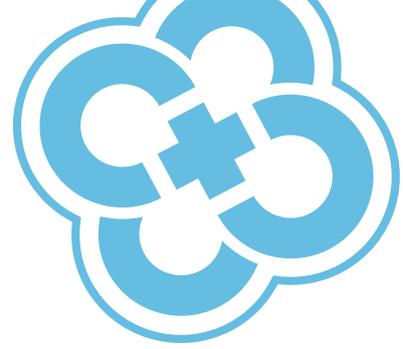
*With a preface by Nai Hongsa*



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## Acronyms & Abbreviations

|               |                                     |              |  |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|--|
| <b>ABSDF</b>  | All Burma Students Democratic Front | <b>NCA</b>   | Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement               |
| <b>BGF</b>    | Border Guard Force                  | <b>NCCT</b>  | Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team       |
| <b>BSPP</b>   | Burma Socialist Programme Party     | <b>NCUB</b>  | National Council Union of Burma              |
| <b>CPB</b>    | Communist Party of Burma            | <b>NDF</b>   | National Democratic Front                    |
| <b>CSO</b>    | civil society organisation          | <b>NDUF</b>  | National Democratic United Front             |
| <b>DAB</b>    | Democratic Alliance of Burma        | <b>NLD</b>   | National League for Democracy                |
| <b>DKBA</b>   | Democratic Karen Buddhist Army      | <b>NMSP</b>  | New Mon State Party                          |
| <b>EAO</b>    | ethnic armed organisation           | <b>NULF</b>  | National United Liberation Front             |
| <b>HRP</b>    | Hongsawatoi Restoration Party       | <b>PNO</b>   | Pa-O National Organisation                   |
| <b>HURFOM</b> | Human Rights Foundation of Monland  | <b>PSLP</b>  | Palaung State Liberation Party               |
| <b>IDP</b>    | internally displaced person         | <b>RPF</b>   | Rehmonya Peace Foundation                    |
| <b>KIO</b>    | Kachin Independence Organisation    | <b>SLORC</b> | State Law and Order Restoration Council      |
| <b>KNPP</b>   | Karen National Progressive Party    | <b>SPDC</b>  | State Peace and Development Council          |
| <b>KNU</b>    | Karen National Union                | <b>SSPP</b>  | Shan State Progress Party                    |
| <b>KNUP</b>   | Karen National United Party         | <b>UNFC</b>  | United Nationalities Federal Council         |
| <b>MNDF</b>   | Mon National Democratic Front       | <b>UNLD</b>  | United Nationalities League for Democracy    |
| <b>MNEC</b>   | Mon National Education Committee    | <b>USDA</b>  | Union Solidarity and Development Association |
| <b>MNHC</b>   | Mon National Health Committee       | <b>USDP</b>  | Union Solidarity and Development Party       |
| <b>MNLA</b>   | Mon National Liberation Army        | <b>UWSA</b>  | United Wa State Army                         |
| <b>MoE</b>    | Ministry of Education               |              |  |
| <b>MPF</b>    | Mon People's Front                  |              |  |
| <b>MRA</b>    | Monland Restoration Army            |              |  |



## Preface

by Nai Hongsa, Chairman of the New Mon State Party

In a country like Myanmar/Burma, with great ethnic diversity, there will inevitably be political problems between different groups and communities. Leaders of larger and more powerful ethnic groups tried to dominate minorities by means of force, but it is not possible to crush ethnic nationalities who have significant numbers and a strong sense of identity. If both are determined, there will be endless civil war and the country will collapse into ruin. Therefore, responsible political leaders need to find alternatives, moving away from fighting, laying the ground for peaceful political dialogue and negotiation. In order to negotiate, there must be a ceasefire in order to build trust. During the ceasefire period, all parties must maintain the agreement. If fighting breaks out, trust-building among the dialogue partners can collapse.

In our country, armed conflict has been almost continuous since independence from British rule in 1948. During this period, armed groups have had two revolutionary ideologies: socialism/communism, and the struggle of ethnic peoples for the right to self-determination. Communism failed in Burma, despite the Communist Party of Burma receiving assistance from foreign countries. Ethnic armed resistance groups like the New Mon State Party received no assistance from any foreign country, but could sometimes receive humanitarian and development support for civilian communities. Despite limited resources, ethnic armed political organizations have fought against successive Burmese regimes for over 70 years. This proves that the most durable problem in Burma is the rights of ethnic indigenous peoples rather than the varieties of political ideology. This is why we need and claim the rights for ethnic peoples. To understand our cause, the majority Burman (Bamar) people can refer back to how they felt when their people and country were under British colonial rule.

In the past, ethnic nations like the Mon practised self-determination for many years, even establishing kingdoms, while upland communities flourished under the rule of their community chiefs. Over the course of centuries the Burman kings, who had the advantage of military force and greater resources, expanded their kingdoms and fought to occupy ethnic people's lands, establishing the first, second and third Burmese empires. However, if we look back in history, the

Burman kings never controlled the lands of ethnic peoples permanently and, whenever the centre of the kingdom weakened, ethnic people revolted and took back their lands.

When the British army was powerful, it occupied the entire country of Burma, and all Burmese and ethnic peoples were placed under British rule. During the period of colonial rule, Karenni territory became a buffer zone to Thailand (and was recognised as an independent state), while the Kachin, Chin and Shan frontier areas were ruled under special laws by British rulers. Karen, Pa-O, Burman, Mon and Arakanese people were consolidated as part of "Burma Proper" (Ministerial Burma) and ruled directly by the British colonial power.

During World War II, when British military strength was weak, Burman nationalist leaders cooperated with leaders of different ethnic groups to fight against the British, for a time taking sides with the Japanese forces. When the Japanese imperialists oppressed the people of Burma, the Burman and ethnic leaders fought the Japanese military. In these violent years prior to independence, Burman political leaders promised that "after we fought all outsiders and regained independence, we will share it equally to all ethnic groups, including to Mon, Pa-O and Arakanese".

Shan, Chin and Kachin ethnic groups were living in separate territories from Burma Proper but, at the same time, they were also given promises by Burman leaders to retain their rights to self-autonomy, as in the British time. The Burman leader, Gen. Aung San, then led the mission and signed the historical Panglong Agreement in February 1947, allowing all Burma's nationalities to regain independence together. After Gen. Aung San was assassinated, his successors failed to respect or implement the dream of a Federal Union. Although Shan, Kachin and Chin were guaranteed their own territories, the Mon, Pa-O, Arakanese and Karen peoples in Burma Proper were denied these rights.

After independence, the peaceful political demands of ethnic nationality peoples were ignored and oppressed by successive Burman-majority governments that were dominated by the armed forces. They refused to fulfill the promises given by

Gen. Aung San at Panglong. The ethnic people had no choice but to take up arms and fight for freedom against the regimes in Rangoon.

The armed movement by the ethnic nationality peoples is not aimed at splitting up Burma/Myanmar. Our political objectives are to achieve equal rights for all ethnic peoples, including self-autonomous states and the establishment of a Federal Union of Burma/Myanmar. These political objectives are in stark contrast to the authoritarian efforts by Burman military leaders to establish a fourth Burman empire. Some Burman political and military leaders have been concerned that the country could be at risk, lying between two powerful neighbours, China and India. They have therefore sought to promote a national identity based on Burman language, history and culture, and impose this on ethnic nationality (minority) communities. Although the central government recognizes some ethnic groups with relatively large population numbers by naming their territories as "states", under the 2008 constitution the government effectively centralizes all significant political and economic powers.

The protracted civil wars in Burma/Myanmar have not so far resulted in significant political negotiations. During U Nu's democratic government rule, Pa-O, Mon and Arakanese leaders were called upon to participate in the democratic processes, so they agreed ceasefires with the Burmese Army. Later, those leaders - even though they participated peacefully in the political process - were arrested and put in prison. In 1963, after the Burmese Army took control of the country through a military coup, Gen. Ne Win called for peace talks with ethnic leaders. But in the meetings Burmese Army commanders just requested that ethnic leaders lay down their arms and effectively surrender. After the ethnic leaders refused to do so, the Burmese Army launched a series of brutal and violent "four cuts" counter-insurgency campaigns against ethnic civilians, aimed at undermining the rebels. Although the Burmese Army could take control of some territories, they could not defeat the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs).

The country faced another crisis in 1988, when students led pro-democracy protests that toppled Gen. Ne Win's state-socialist regime. Following another coup, a new generation of Burmese Army leaders ruled the country through the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) junta. The SLORC had some early success in persuading ethnic Kokang, Wa, Akha, Kachin and others to split from the Communist Party of Burma,

which finally collapsed. Following the first ex-communist ceasefires in 1989, the SLORC agreed ceasefires with a number of non-communist groups in northern Burma, including the NMSP's allies in the National Democratic Front and Democratic Alliance of Burma. After completing ceasefire agreements with most northern armed groups, the Burmese Army increased pressures to agree ceasefires on Mon, Karen, Karenni, Kayan and Pa-O armed groups in the southeast of the country.

In June 1995 the New Mon State Party agreed a ceasefire agreement with the SLORC government. As well as a military truce, our leaders demanded a political dialogue to solve the underlying problems underpinning decades of conflict. However, the Burmese military leaders refused this request, saying that we should wait to discuss politics with a future government that is elected by the people.

During this period, the military regime drafted a new constitution through hand-picked representatives at a National Constitutional Convention. The regime, then known as the State Peace and Development Council, approved the military-drafted constitution in 2008 and began planning for elections. In 2009, the regime explained their strategy to hold a general election and requested ethnic elders and leaders of ethnic armed groups to form political parties and participate in the elections. The young members of ethnic armed organisations were told that they could serve in the Burmese Army (effectively meaning to surrender) or transform their ceasefire groups into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under the control of the Burmese Army. A few small armed groups had little choice but to comply, and some transformed into BGF units. However, many large EAOs strongly disagreed with this approach, refused to transform into BGFs, moved back to their bases, and they prepared to fight back. These non-BGFs groups form a new military-political alliance, the 11-party United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC).

During the time of the successor government of President Thein Sein, the regime negotiated directly with the UNFC and other EAOs to establish a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and dialogue for peace. In 2013, the UNFC organized a conference at Laiza in territory controlled by the Kachin Independence Organisation on the Chinese border, and established a National Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT) representing up to 16 ethnic armed groups. The NCCT engaged with the government's peace secretariat, the Myanmar Peace Center, to draft a text for the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

In mid-2015, while all 16 EAOs agreed to sign the NCA as an alliance, the Burmese Army refused, opposing the right of six groups to sign the NCA. Thus the UNFC discovered the insincerity of the Burmese Army, and many groups refused to sign the NCA. On 15 October 2015, only eight EAOs signed the NCA with the government of President U Thein Sein.

To be successful, ceasefire agreements and political dialogue need to proceed on the basis of mutual trust between the government, Burmese Army, ethnic armed organisations and other ethnic stakeholders. Unfortunately, since signing the NCA the Burmese Army has frequently launched attacks against NCA signatory groups and other EAOs.

A real nationwide ceasefire agreement should demonstrate the real intention to seek political solutions to end decades of conflict. Insincerity cannot build trust at all. Burman military and political elites have long used “divide and rule” tactics toward ethnic communities and EAOs. We must find “win-win” solutions through political dialogue, with good intention to all our peoples across the entire country, in order to free them from the long-standing conditions of national crisis and live in peace and harmony among all peoples.



# 1 Introduction

June 29th 2020 marks 25 years since the New Mon State Party (NMSP) agreed a ceasefire with the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military government in Burma (as the country was officially called until 1989). The essays collected here reflect on the experiences of Mon communities and the NMSP, before and after the ceasefire.

The NMSP and the (ex-Communist Party of Burma) United Wa State Army are among the few “ceasefire groups” of the 1990s which still have ceasefires. Other ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) were either forced in 2010 to become Myanmar Army-controlled Border Guard Forces (BGFs: e.g. most units of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) or Peoples Militias (pyithusit: e.g. the Pa-O National Organisation), or ceasefires broke down amid recrimination and return to large-scale state violence against ethnic nationality communities (e.g. the Kachin Independence Organisation, whose 1994 ceasefire broke down after 17 years, in 2011). In contrast, other groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) continued the armed struggle for self-determination through the 1990s and 2000s, before agreeing a ceasefire with the U Thein Sein government in 2012.

The NMSP ceasefire effectively broke down in 2010 under military government pressure to become a BGF. However, despite considerable tensions at the time, fighting did not break out again. The NMSP resisted pressure to transform into a BGF, and eventually confirmed a new bilateral ceasefire with the government in February 2012. Both the KNU (in 2015) and NMSP (in 2018) signed the multilateral Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

Unfortunately, the NCA has largely failed. The hoped-for “Political Dialogue” has stalled, with the Myanmar government and armed forces (Tatmadaw) unwilling to allow necessary sub-national (ethnic community) consultations, or to accept EAO demands for meaningful federalism. Security elements of the NCA (the Joint Monitoring Committee) have been largely dysfunctional and/or dominated by the Tatmadaw. While key EAOs (including the NMSP) continue to deliver governance administration and services (e.g. health and education) in their areas of control and authority, the peace process

has yet to provide a credible vehicle for delivering “Interim Arrangements”, despite these being mandated by the NCA (Chapter 6, Article 25).

The four essays collected here discuss different aspects of the NMSP’s long struggle for Mon self-determination in the context of the 1995 ceasefire. Martin Smith and Ashley South are writers and analysts, who have studied Mon history and society since before the ceasefire. Martin offers a historical-cultural and political account of the Mon armed struggle, which frames the essays to follow. Ashley presents an assessment of the NMSP’s achievements and challenges since the ceasefire.

Nai Kasauh Mon and Nai Banya Hongsar are civil society activists and authors. Nai Kasauh Mon provides a critical analysis of the ceasefire years, highlighting both successes and failures. And Nai Banya Hongsar discusses the challenges that the NMSP and Mon movement continue to face in a country still entrapped within a cycle of conflict and ceasefire.



ဆရာတော်ရှင်ဦးစိန်စေတီတော်

## ② The 1995 New Mon State Party Ceasefire: Uncertain Steps on an Uncharted Road

by Martin Smith<sup>1</sup>

Mon language and culture are regarded one of the foundational elements of civilisation in southeast Asia. Dating back to the first millennium, Mon language inscriptions are among the oldest discovered in the lands today known as Myanmar and Thailand, while Mon kingdoms were key vectors introducing Theravada Buddhism to the region. It is a heritage about which many Mons feel proud. But like the ancient kingdoms of Arakan, Mon society came under great pressure during the era of colonial rule. First, the independence of the Hongsawatoi kingdom at Bago was brought to an end under the Konbaung Dynasty of the 18th century. Then expressions of Mon identity were subsumed during a century under British rule. Since the fall of Hongsawatoi in 1757, dreams of an independent “Monland” have continued. But, until the present day, manifestations of Mon nationalism have been politically constrained.

Many landmarks of Mon history and culture remain in both Myanmar and Thailand. But Mon-speaking communities are largely confined to Thaton and Mawlamyine (Moulmein) Districts and lowland areas to the south in the Tanintharyi Region, as well as a few areas of west-central Thailand. Two factors underpinned this historical decline. First, under the diarchic system of British government, Mon-inhabited lands were incorporated into Ministerial Burma. And second, Burmese – not Mon – was preferred as the medium for colonial administration. The impact was dramatic. In Henzada District, an 1856 census calculated nearly half the population as Mon (Talaing); but in a 1911 census only 1,224 people still described themselves as Mons out of 532,357 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

During the first decades of the 20th century, this pattern of marginalisation created a dilemma for Mon nationality leaders. Caught between British rule and an emergent Burmese nationalism, a fundamental question arose: would they do

better to stand independently or work with political movements among the Bamar-majority population?<sup>3</sup> It is a challenge that still exists today.

During the British era, at least, Mon leaders chose to engage in the politics of Ministerial Burma where the lawyers U Chit Hlaing and Sir J.A. Maung Gyi became leading figures. But in 1937, with the separation of British Burma from India looming, a change in direction was signalled. That year a group of Buddhist monks and Mon intellectuals came together to form the All Ramonnya Mon Association.<sup>4</sup> This conjunction between political and religious leaders very much reflected the emerging patterns in nationalist politics of the time through such organisations as the General Council of Burmese Associations, Arakan National Congress and Karen National Association. As the Second World War approached, the political temperature was rising.



NMSP TROOPS ON THE ROAD TO THANBYUZAYAT 1989 (MS)

1 Martin Smith is an author and independent analyst who has researched and reported about Burma/Myanmar and ethnic nationality affairs since the early 1980s for a variety of media, non-governmental and academic organisations.  
2 Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, Zed Books, 1991&1999), p.43.

3 In general, Burmese has been used as a broad term to describe language, culture and citizenship, while Burman (today Bamar) refers to the majority ethnic group: i.e. a person can have Burmese (today Myanmar) citizenship but a Mon or Karen nationality. In 1989, the official name for the country was changed from Burma to Myanmar by the then military government.

4 See e.g., Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics*, pp.52-3, and passim. Much of the analysis in this account is based upon research and travels that began in 1982. For a detailed account of Mon politics, see, Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, second edition, 2005).

## THE OUTBREAK OF CONFLICT IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ERA (1948-62)

Claims for a Mon State first came to the fore during the upheavals around Myanmar's transition to independence in 1948. Mon nationalists were among many different movements competing for rights and representation in the aftermath of the Second World War. A pattern of exclusion was developing. Due to their designation in Ministerial Burma, Mon representatives were not included in the historic Panglong Conference of February 1947 where the principles for equality, unity and union were agreed between Aung San and Chin, Kachin and Shan leaders under the Frontier Areas Administration. Various discussions and commissions subsequently took place. But it was not until 1974 that a Mon State was designated on the country's political map. By then, much troubled water had passed under the bridge.

In the countdown to independence, a sense of marginalisation and grievance was developing that has continued in Mon communities until the present day. As political jockeying continued, the modern nationalist movement originated from a Mon United Front (established 1947) and a militia force known as the Mon Defence National Organisation (established 1948). Their leaders included Nai Hla Maung, Nai Ngwe Thein, Nai Shwe Kyin, Nai Tun Thein, Nai Aung Tun and other young nationalists who would steer the direction of the Mon movement over the following decades. Their voices, however, were little heard in the civil wars that erupted across the country at the British departure.

Within two years of independence, the country fell into a "conflict trap" from which it has never truly emerged. Until the present day, opinion is widespread among different nationality groups that the post-colonial structures of government run counter to the principles of ethnic autonomy and equality that were enshrined in the Panglong Agreement. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) began insurrection in March 1948, the national armed forces (Tatmadaw) split, and armed struggle swiftly spread to Karen, Karenni, Pa-O, Rakhine and other

nationality groups. Amidst the chaos, the Mon people were swiftly caught up in the front-line of war.

In a bid to end the crisis, Mon and other nationality representatives put forward a number of visions for ethno-political reform that, they believed, would have been far more appropriate than the unitary system imposed by the central government. In particular, Mon leaders worked closely with the Karen National Union (KNU: founded 1947), a sometime symbiotic relationship that has continued until the present day (although not without its difficulties). In a multi-ethnic region, where communities of different ethnicity often live in close proximity, it is difficult to designate exact nationality territories (or "homelands") and political rights.<sup>5</sup> At the time, Mon, Karen and other nationalist movements were making different claims for states and rights in often over-lapping territories.

Their solution was a proposal for a joint Karen-Mon State, a goal that they put forward to the 1948 Regional Autonomy Commission. The prime minister U Nu responded that he was "cent per cent in disagreement" with states for Mons and Karens (and also Arakan).<sup>6</sup> But, still today, many Mon and Karen veterans believe that the principles for such a federal state, which would have included the present-day Karen and Mon States and Tanintharyi Region, would have helped support the foundation of a prosperous union. With a capital at the seaport of Mawlamyine, it could indeed have become a model of prosperity and diversity in one of the most-conflict divided countries in Asia. Like so many political dreams in the post-colonial union, this was not to be.<sup>7</sup>

The civil war carried on throughout the parliamentary era (1948-62). Eventually, a truncated Karen State was declared by the U Nu government in 1952 in the uplands along the Thai border. But it was far from meeting KNU or Mon demands. The same year, the Mon struggle stepped up a gear with the formation of the Mon People's Front (MPF) by such nationalist leaders as Nai Ngwe Thein, Nai Tun Shein and Nai Shwe Kyin.<sup>8</sup> Bringing different groups together, the MPF became the first movement to explicitly promote a sovereign Monland.

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5 Karen and Mon populations are the most numerous in the modern-day Karen and Mon States and Tanintharyi Region, with Karen communities generally in upland areas to the east and Mon in lowlands and coastal plains to the west. But in some (especially urban) areas there is considerable intermingling. There are also Tavoyan and Bamar populations living adjacent to Mon communities, the former especially in the Tanintharyi Region.

6 U Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1949), p.151.

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7 Over the years, this author frequently heard advocacy for such solutions from such veteran leaders in the south and southeast regions as Nai Shwe Kyin and Nai Nor Lar in the NMSP, and Saw Tha Din and Skaw Ler Taw who were among the founders of the KNU. After independence, they claimed, meaningful dialogue with the government never took place to discuss political ideas.

8 The MPF was initially known as the Mon People's Solidarity Group.

Only in 1958 was a change in government policy signalled when an amnesty was announced under U Nu's "arms for democracy" initiative. This was followed by a series of ceasefire agreements with different armed movements, including Pa-O and Rakhine, around the country. A historic moment then came on 19 July when the MPF signed a peace agreement. Four days later, 1,111 MPF members, led by Nai Aung Tun, came in from the forests to lay down their weapons at a public ceremony in Mawlamyine. For the first time, a Mon State appeared in prospect.

Today this date is marked as the first ceasefire failure in Mon history. Not for the last time, peace hopes were to be disappointed. The day after the amnesty agreement, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) was founded by Nai Shwe Kyin and a small group of loyalists who argued that the government could not be trusted. By the end of the year, their caution looked to be correct when Gen. Ne Win assumed power in a short-lived "military caretaker" administration (1958-60). As the Tatmadaw stepped up operations, fighting swiftly resumed in the country.

Events now moved quickly in one of the most critical moments in post-colonial history. In 1961, the creation of both Mon and Arakan states was finally announced after U Nu returned to political office following the 1960 general election. The two new states were designated to come into being by September 1962. Buoyed by hopes of reform, Nai Hla Maung, Nai Ngwe Thein and other Mon leaders became prominent in the Federal Seminar movement, initiated by Shan politicians, that was growing in national momentum. But political reform was stopped in its tracks when Gen. Ne Win seized power in a military coup in March 1962. "Federalism is impossible," he said. "It will destroy the Union."<sup>9</sup>

In the following days prime minister U Nu, ex-president Sao Shwe Thaike and the former MPF leader Nai Aung Tun, who had become a government minister, were among dozens of political and ethnic leaders arrested in a military crackdown. The first Mon ceasefire cycle had come to an end.

## THE "BURMESE WAY TO SOCIALISM": A NEW GENERATION OF CONFLICT (1962-88)

For the next half century, military rule defined the political and conflict landscape of the country. Only once did Gen. Ne Win appear to consider changing course. This happened during a brief "Peace Parley" in 1963 that brought in delegates to Yangon (Rangoon) from 13 armed opposition groups around the country. Nai Shwe Kyin and the NMSP attended in a joint National Democratic United Front (NDUF) delegation with the CPB and ethnic Karen, Karenni and Chin allies.<sup>10</sup> As public hopes rose, People's Peace Committees sprang up in Yangon and other local districts, with Mon nationalists notably active in Mawlamyine.

It was a brief respite from fighting. Following the breakdown in talks, the Tatmadaw quickly restarted operations. Nai Ngwe Thein, Nai Non Lar and other ex-MPF leaders were detained, and several would spend many years in jail.<sup>11</sup> The consequences were profound, deepening distrust that still lingered from the failure of the 1958 agreement. Neither the post-independence governments of U Nu nor Ne Win, it seemed, had initiated peace processes that ended the civil war. It was to be another quarter century before another peace initiative was tried.

Opposition to the central government was far from defeated. Rather than suppressing resistance, Ne Win's idiosyncratic "Burmese Way to Socialism" fuelled opposition as armed movements proliferated around the country. Under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), all schools and key sectors of the economy were nationalised, while the Tatmadaw launched constant military offensives in different nationality regions. In 1974, Mon and Rakhine States were announced under a new one-party constitution. But the heavy-handed tactics of the Burmese Way to Socialism always appeared doomed to failure. Rather, as the economy declined, it was such opposition forces as the NMSP, KNU and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) that became the de facto authorities in "liberated zones" which they built up along the Thailand border. On the China frontier, the CPB and Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) gained similar ground.

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9 The Times, 3 March 1962.

10 Founded in 1959, the NDUF was a left-aligned pact then popular in activist circles. The founding members were the NMSP, CPB, Karen National United Party (KNUP), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and Chin National Vanguard Party. The KNUP was a (leftist) political wing within the KNU.

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11 Among prominent leaders, Nai Ngwe Thein spent two years in jail, Nai Aung Tun six, Nai Tun Thein six, and Nai Non Lar nine.

Looking back today, NMSP veterans remember the BSPP years as a key formative experience in the development of the Mon movement. Emanating from bases in the hills, the NMSP was able to expand its influence down to Mawlamyine, Ye and other towns and villages along the Gulf of Andaman shoreline. The joint NMSP-KNU stronghold at Three Pagodas Pass boomed as thousands of traders passed through every day carrying goods on the thriving blackmarket. Under the BSPP government, teaching in minority languages was banned above fourth grade in schools. But here, in NMSP-controlled territories, Mon-speaking schools and expressions of Mon history and culture revived.

The Mon cause also became popular in influential circles in Thailand where Mon culture was widely respected. On one occasion this author met a class of naval cadets with their instructor who had brought them to Three Pagodas Pass to practise Mon as a graduation treat for passing their exams. The nearest Tatmadaw units and government-controlled towns were many miles away. During the 1980s, the NMSP also sponsored a Mon National University in Thailand, which came to function as a symbolic campus in exile. This initiative found support among leading Thai-Mons, an education project that was inconceivable for the Mon population living in BSPP-controlled areas across the frontier.<sup>12</sup>

It was also during this period that the NMSP's political standpoint evolved into the pro-federal form that it still retains today. In a 1972 statement, the party declared that it would continue the struggle for an "independent sovereign state" unless the "Burmese government" allowed a "confederation of free nationalities exercising full right of self-determination inclusive of right of secession".<sup>13</sup> But, as the statement implied, this was an opening position from which Mon leaders wanted to negotiate with other parties to find compatible solutions. In line with this policy, the NMSP became a key actor in "united front" politics, a practice that it has since continued.

12 There are no reliable figures. Not all people who identify as Mons are Mon-speakers. There has also been substantial migration and refugee flight into Thailand during the past 35 years. The "indigenous" Mon population is generally estimated at up to 1.5 million in Myanmar today and around 100,000 in Thailand. Despite occasional predictions of Mon speakers in Thailand dying out, the last two decades seem to have instilled new vigour in the community.

13 "Answers to Questionnaire on Mon Freedom Movement", New Mon State Party, 15 October 1972.



MON TRADERS ON THE WAY TO THE THAILAND BORDER, BSPP ERA (MS)

As fighting continued, the steps towards federalism took place during a process of negotiations with different opposition groups during the 1970s. By 1969, the NDUF alliance with the CPB was essentially defunct. With its failure, the NMSP joined with two new united fronts that led to the party's adoption of an explicitly federal line. The first was a short-lived National United Liberation Front (NULF: 1970-74) that included the KNU, Chin Democracy Party and Parliamentary Democracy Party of the deposed prime minister U Nu.<sup>14</sup> In a remarkable shift in alignments, U Nu took up arms alongside his erstwhile opponents in the Thailand borders in the late 1960s following his release from detention. With U Nu always ambivalent on the question of ethnic rights, the NULF did not prove a success.

The second alliance was the ethnic National Democratic Front (NDF: founded 1976), which the NMSP joined in 1982. In its early years, there was some ambiguity about the political aims of the different NDF members.<sup>15</sup> But following a 1983 agreement at the Manerplaw headquarters of the KNU, "federalism" became the NMSP's guiding philosophy, a policy that it has maintained ever since. The party's NDF representative at these historic meetings was Nai Hongsa, today NMSP chairman.

14 The NMSP referred to the NULF as the United Nationalities Liberation Front.

15 Membership fluctuated, but there were generally nine parties. In the 1980s, the main parties were: the NMSP, KNU, KNPP, KIO, Arakan Liberation Party, Lahu National United Party (today Lahu Democratic Union), Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP), Pa-O National Organisation (PNO), Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), and Wa National Organisation. The Chin National Front joined in 1989.

The BSPP era, however, was by no means a trouble-free time for the Mon movement. The main problems that the NMSP faced were on the military and unity fronts. Unlike the KNU, KNPP and its NDF allies, the NMSP did not have extensive borderland territories into which it could retreat. With around 1,000 troops under arms, the NMSP's main strength was never military. Rather, the party enjoyed solidarity and support among intellectuals, Buddhist monks and villagers throughout the Mon region. But, from the mid-1980s, the stability of NMSP and KNU bastions in the hills came under increasing pressure in response to the NDF build-up. In 1984 the joint KNU-NMSP stronghold at Three Pagodas Pass was itself briefly raided, leading to a first exodus of Mon refugees into Thailand.

The party also suffered a damaging split in 1981 that divided the NMSP into two wings, headed by Nai Shwe Kyin and Nai Nor Lar respectively. Various ideological explanations were advanced. Not all Mon leaders supported Nai Shwe Kyin's perceived pro-communist leanings, and a number of lives were lost in internecine clashes.<sup>16</sup> But the impression in the front-line was that the split was between rival commanders and officials over local territories, administration and control. Only in 1987 was this division finally healed.

The NMSP's reunification also had less foreseen consequences, bringing to the surface tensions over the party's sometimes uneasy relationship with the KNU over trade, taxation gates and areas of operation. The sudden increase in NMSP military strength following the party reunification was superseded by outbreaks of fighting with the KNU in the Thanbyuzayat to Three Pagodas Pass corridor. The timing could not have been more acute. Coinciding with the 1988 "democracy summer", relations between the NMSP and KNU – and hence NDF – were paralysed at the very moment pro-democracy protestors took to the streets across the country.

As Gen. Ne Win stepped down, it was a reminder that nationality politics in Myanmar are not simply a question of Bamar-majority versus ethnic-minority relations. After a quarter century of BSPP misrule, a host of new challenges now lay ahead.

## **CONFLICT CONTINUES: A NEW ERA OF MILITARY GOVERNMENT (1988-2011)**

During the next few years, differences with the KNU were largely put behind the two parties in one of the most turbulent periods in post-independence history. In the post-1988 fallout, national politics underwent a dramatic shift. As the new military regime of the State Law and Order Restoration (SLORC) clamped down, around 1,300 young Mon men and women fled from Mawlamyine and other local towns and villages under government control to join the NMSP. This flight was part of a major exodus of up to 10,000 students and democracy activists into NDF-controlled territories to escape arrest by the security services.<sup>17</sup> While many of the new arrivals stayed with the NMSP, others quickly became part of a new generation in civil society activism. Still others went as refugees or illegal migrants into Thailand, where the number of displaced people was steadily rising. Amongst organisations that had their roots in these days were the Mon Young Monks Union, Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Mon Relief and Development Committee, Mon Women's Organisation and Mon Unity League.

Political anger then deepened when the SLORC banned and arrested members of a newly-formed Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF), which won five seats in the 1990 general election.<sup>18</sup> Hopes of a new era of multi-party democracy were receding. Headed by the veteran nationalists Nai Ngwe Thein and Nai Tun Thein, the MNDF was a member of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), which was allied with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) that had won the 1990 polls by a landslide. In the following years, the NLD, UNLD and MNDF were all similarly repressed. Neither the 1988 protests nor 1990 election appeared to make any difference in trying to advance political reform.

In this maelstrom, the NMSP initially appeared to gain ground following the SLORC takeover. The NMSP, KNU and KNPP territories of the NDF allies became hives of activity in which the NMSP became a leading member in two new formations: the 1990 Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB); and the 1992 National Council Union of Burma (NCUB). On paper, the NCUB was the most significant armed opposition alliance

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16 Many statements were circulated: see e.g., Nai Shwe Kyin, "Clarification of Current Situation in the New Mon State Party", Statements No.1 & No.2, 17 April 1981 & 3 July 1981. Nai Shwe Kyin wanted to take an explicit anti-Soviet position in the Cold War. But this quickly developed into broader arguments over administration, finances and party meetings.

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17 Two battalions of the Bamar-majority All Burma Students Democratic Front, 101 and 102, were also formed in NMSP-KNU territory at Three Pagodas Pass.

18 The MNDF chairman Nai Tun Thein, MP-elect for Thanbyuzayat, spent two years in detention.

since independence, and included the National Coalition Government Union of Burma of exile MPs-elect headed by Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin, Dr Sein Win. Both the DAB and NCUB embraced the NLD's pro-federal goals. With the BSPP and CPB both collapsing, the political landscape appeared to be transforming into a new tripartite struggle between the Tatmadaw, NLD and ethnic nationality parties.

Storm clouds, however, were gathering. The build-up of these new anti-government alliances in the southeast borderlands meant that the once impregnable KNU and NMSP strongholds came under Tatmadaw attack. During 1988-92, civil war dramatically intensified as the SLORC government stepped up counter-insurgency operations, known as the "Four Cuts", to try and sever links between armed opposition forces and different ethnic nationality communities.<sup>19</sup> Territories that

were declared "black areas" (i.e. insurgent-controlled) by the government were essentially treated as free-fire zones.

NMSP base areas now became a prime target for Tatmadaw operations. During the following years, tens of thousands of Mon civilians were displaced from their homes amidst widespread reports of forced labour, forced relocations and extrajudicial executions.<sup>20</sup> In March 1990, 300 NMSP troops took part in a diversionary attack on Ye town, but failed to relieve the mounting pressures. By 1991, there were 12,000 Mon refugees living in camps along Thailand border with many more who became internally-displaced persons (IDPs) inside.<sup>21</sup> During the same period, the number of Karen and Karenni refugees grew to over 50,000 who were supported by the Burmese Border Consortium based in Bangkok.<sup>22</sup> The humanitarian emergency was deepening.

19 For a human rights overview of the events of these years, see e.g., "Myanmar: No Law At All: Human Rights Violations under Military Rule", Amnesty International, November 1992.

20 See e.g., "Mon Refugees: Hunger for Protection in 1994", Mon National Relief Committee, February 1995.

21 Ibid., p.32. In 1991, the number of Mon IDPs was generally estimated at around 30,000.

22 For an analysis that especially focused on the impact on Karen communities of these Tatmadaw operations in the early 1990s, see, "Forgotten victims of a hidden war: Internally displaced Karen in Burma", Burma Ethnic Research Group, April 1998.



NMSP WOMEN SOLDIERS AT THREE PAGODAS PASS, PRE-CEASEFIRE (MS)

At this critical moment, the NMSP came under pressure from a new source: the Thai government. For the first time in a quarter of a century, the geo-political world was shifting – both inside Myanmar and around its borders. With the collapse of the Burmese Way to Socialism, the SLORC government announced a new “open door” economic policy that quickly found favour in business and military circles across the Thailand border. During the 1988-94 period, new trade deals were agreed in everything from timber and fisheries to minerals and natural gas. Some of these projects, such as the Unocal-Total gas pipelines, were still a few years ahead.<sup>23</sup> But from 1990 the Tatmadaw began to expand the scope of counter-insurgency “regional clearance” operations in anticipation of major projects to come. Many different proposals were rumoured. But as international investors started to arrive, it was quickly clear that the verdant coastline along the Andaman Sea was regarded by companies around the world as a virgin area for business expansion.<sup>24</sup> The lands and security of the Mon people appeared to be under increasing threat.

During 1993-94 this led to one of the most ignominious episodes in Thailand-Myanmar relations when, in a complete disregard for universal human rights protection, the Thai authorities began placing pressure on Mon refugees to return. In April 1993 two refugee camps were burned down near Nat-Eindaung, which the NMSP president Nai Shwe Kyin warned were in preparation for a gas pipeline.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Tatmadaw units began probing along the borderline, including a notorious raid in July 1994 on Halockhani refugee camp.<sup>26</sup> The Bangkok Post described the refugees as “pawns” in a complex game.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, further across the frontier, dozens of villages were relocated and thousands of civilians press-ganged as porters as the Ye-Dawei railway and other infrastructure projects went ahead.<sup>28</sup> “Endless Nightmares in the Black Area,” reported a Mon news group.<sup>29</sup> On all sides, the pressures on the NMSP were intensifying.

## ETHNIC CEASEFIRES: A CHANGE IN TACTICAL DIRECTIONS

Caught between the interests of two neighbouring powers, NMSP leaders began to reassess their strategies. During these years, the KNU, KNPP and other opposition groups were generally allowed to continue their activities under Thailand’s laissez-faire policies on its western border. But with the change in Bangkok attitudes towards the Mon movement, a new tactical line appeared essential if the NMSP was to survive in effective shape and form. At first, there seemed little way out. But as the military and economic pressures increased, an alternative line of action suddenly appeared in view. Change now came at dramatic pace. Triggered by events elsewhere in the country, armed hostilities were about to wind down for the first time in three decades. Within a year of the Halockhani attack, the NMSP and SLORC government had agreed to a ceasefire.

The starting point for this policy change was an ethnic ceasefire initiative unveiled by the SLORC government in April 1989 following the breakaway of Kokang, Wa and other nationality forces from the CPB along the China border. Headed by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), they quickly agreed to truces. For the embattled regime, it was a significant breakthrough, allowing the Tatmadaw a vital breathing space as it sought to stifle the emergent democracy movement within the country. In line with this policy, from late 1989 the SLORC began to roll out peace offers to ethnic nationality members of the NDF. This also had success, seeing Shan, Pa-O and Ta’ang members of the NDF agree to ceasefires during the next two years.<sup>30</sup> “Peace through development” became the new mantra, and this was backed up by invitations to join the SLORC-initiated National Convention to draw up a new constitution.<sup>31</sup> Initially including the NLD and other pro-democracy parties, this new body began its first meetings in 1993.

23 See e.g., “Total Denial Continues: Earth Rights Abuses along the Yadana and Yetagun Pipelines in Burma”, EarthRights International, May 2000. See also note 42.

24 See e.g., “Position on the Gas Pipeline and Ecology”, New Mon State Party Central Executive Committee, 11 May 1994.

25 Letter by Nai Shwe Kyin to author, 6 September 1993.

26 “Emergency Report of Mon National Relief Committee”, statement, 22 July 1994. For a detailed account, see, South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War*, pp.178-215.

27 Robert Birsell, “Mon refugees seen as pawns in complex political game”, Bangkok Post, 24 August 1994; see also, “Statement of NDF on Mon refugees on the Thai-Burma border”, Executive Committee, National Democratic Front, Burma, 28 June 1994.

28 See e.g., “Mon Refugees: Hunger for Protection in 1994”, Mon National Relief Committee, February 1995; “Forced Labour in Ye-Tavoy Railway Construction”, Human Rights Foundation of Monland, 1/96, 15 April 1996; “Endless Nightmares in the Black Area: Human Rights Violations in Burma’s South and Southeastern Region during 1995”, Mon Information Service (Bangkok), March 1996.

29 Ibid.

30 SSPP, PNO and PSLP. In 1991, the fourth brigade of the KIO also broke away to agree a ceasefire, becoming the Kachin Defence Army headquartered in Kaunghka.

31 For analyses of the Kachin ceasefire experience, see, Mandy Sadan (ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire 1994–2011* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute for Asian Studies, 2016).

The change in the conflict environment in the northeast of the country was not immediately obvious in opposition strongholds along the Thai frontier. But, under pressure from governments in both Yangon and Bangkok, Mon leaders were watching developments closely. During 1993 this confluence of events caused NMSP leaders to embark on a series of party meetings that led to a new peace and negotiation line, confirmed by the party Central Committee in November that year: “The present world political trend encourages solving political problems by negotiation rather than violent means.”<sup>32</sup>

In coming to this decision, two further factors weighed upon the NMSP leadership. At the time, NMSP leaders were in frequent discussion with another NDF member, the KIO, which agreed a ceasefire with the SLORC government in February 1994. The KIO and NMSP were historically close. At this uncertain moment, leaders of both parties shared the view that if, after decades of civil war, they were going to have peace talks about the country's future with one Bamar-majority organisation, this should be with those who actually had power: i.e. the Tatmadaw. With the end of BSPP rule, this seemed a good moment to try.

The second issue also had resonance. As the Tatmadaw stepped up operations along the Thai border, it was not only NMSP-controlled areas that were coming under pressure. In late 1994, this saw a newly-formed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) break away from the KNU in the Hpa'an area. War-weary communities in the south of the country also wanted change. With the DKBA agreeing to a government ceasefire, this quickly led to the fall of the KNU-NCUB headquarters at Manerplaw in January 1995. For the NMSP, it was a salutary warning. The party had also suffered defections from its own ranks the previous year in the Ye area. Shortly afterwards, the KNPP – a fellow NDF member – also agreed to a short-lived ceasefire.<sup>33</sup>

Adding to the uncertainties, rumours began to circulate during 1994 that the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi might be released from house arrest (this eventually happened a month after the NMSP ceasefire). At the time, the prospect of an NLD government seemed very remote. But, as all these pressures came to bear, the agreement of a ceasefire suddenly appeared a viable policy change for the NMSP leadership. With a new constitution as yet unwritten, it seemed a better strategy for the

party to be on the inside of any process for political dialogue than on the outside. The party had now known nearly four decades of bitter warfare without reaching any tangible conclusion.

In making this decision, Mon leaders privately conceded that a ceasefire with the military government was a great leap into the unknown. A key question remained: with Ne Win gone, could reform be achieved by negotiation with a regime headed by another military strongman, Snr-Gen. Than Shwe? A new chapter in national politics was just beginning.

## COUNTDOWN TO CEASEFIRE: PEACE TALKS BEGIN

It was in these fragile circumstances that, starting from December 1993, peace talks intermittently continued between NMSP and Tatmadaw leaders for 18 months. In the four rounds of meetings, there were three peace go-betweens: Nai Khin Maung, an MNDF MP-elect; Nai Pe Tin, a trader from Mawlamyine; and Khun Myat, a Kachin businessman who was also involved in the KIO negotiations. On the government side, the main interlocutors were military intelligence officers under the command of Gen. Khin Nyunt, the then powerful no.3 in the SLORC hierarchy.

In an apparent bid to build confidence, the veteran Mon politicians Nai Tun Thein and Nai Ngwe Thein were both released from prison during 1994. But, with the Tatmadaw keeping up military pressures in the front-line, many observers believed that the peace talks would eventually break down. It was only during the fourth round of negotiations in June 1995 when an NMSP team, led by the party's vice-president Nai Htin, made a compromise breakthrough. Three weeks later, the ceasefire was greeted with much fanfare in the Mon State capital Mawlamyine. In a show of strength, the NMSP claimed at the peace ceremony to have 7,000 soldiers and 8,000 arms.<sup>34</sup>

There were also international actors watching closely. To indicate that the NMSP was keeping its options open, the party president Nai Shwe Kyin wrote on the eve of the ceasefire to Mitch McConnell, chairman of the U.S. Senate Ethics Committee, urging him to do everything “possible to eliminate U.S. foreign investment until a legitimate democratic government is in

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32 “Statement by the Emergency Meeting of the Central Committee”, New Mon State Party, 19 November 1993.

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33 A verbal ceasefire in March 1995 broke down within three months.

34 “Mon rebels sign ceasefire with Burmese junta”, Reuters, Moulmein, 30 June 1995.



power”.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Nai Shwe Kyin was also engaged in efforts with the Carter Center of former president Jimmy Carter to mediate peace and secure the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. But it was officials in neighbouring Thailand who were following the situation most carefully. Here the National Security Council continued to be involved in events behind the scenes. Few imagined that the same ceasefire conditions of “neither war nor peace” would exist 25 years later.<sup>36</sup>

For the NCUB and other anti-government movements, the NMSP ceasefire was a significant blow, compounding the loss of the KIO a year earlier. The NCUB, especially, never really recovered from the departure of such important members. But, in their defence, NMSP negotiators claimed to be laying out a new path to political solutions. The 1995 agreement now served as a template for the party’s future actions.

It was later said that only the KIO had a written agreement with the SLORC government. But in documents the NMSP circulated, a number of key decisions were revealed.<sup>37</sup> The NMSP ceasefire, in essence, was similar to those of Kachin,

Kokang, Shan, Wa and other ethnic forces in the country’s northeast. In the Mon case, there were five main elements. The NMSP would retain an initial 20 “deployment areas” in Thaton, Mawlamyine, Dawei (Tavoy) and Myeik (Mergui) Districts; establish liaison offices in the major towns; support development programmes; initiate humanitarian relief for the resettlement of IDPs and refugees; and take part in political negotiations about the country’s future.

On the surface, this lightly-shaped agreement suggested little detail about timetables and implementation. But, in the first months, NMSP leaders perceived two immediate advances. First, the party’s position appeared enhanced as the voice of the Mon people and de facto authority in a network of territories extending through the south of the country. And second, they believed that the achievement of a Mon ceasefire would contribute to a more extensive peace process in the country. In the context of the times, these ideas did not seem far-fetched. Aung San Suu Kyi was about to be released and both the KNU and KNPP were considering ceasefires. The key objective among NMSP leaders now was to move on to political dialogue while conducting peace-building activities in the meantime.

35 Letter from Nai Shwe Kyin, NMSP President and NDF Chairman, to The Honorable Mitch McConnell, 6 June 1995.

36 This view was stated to this author by a National Security Official involved in May 2019.

37 See e.g., Letter from Nai Shwe Kyin, NMSP President, to General Charan Kullavanijaya, Secretary General, National Security Council, Thailand, 1 August 1995.

If the NMSP was expecting imminent change, such optimism was not securely grounded. There was not going to be any sudden transformation within the country nor by the Tatmadaw leadership. Myanmar remained one of the most militarised countries in the world. The military government of the Than Shwe era still had another 15 years to run.

## A NEW CYCLE OF CHALLENGES IN AN ERA OF CEASEFIRE

Any hopes that the 1995 ceasefire would usher in a new era of nationwide peace and political reform were soon disappointed. There were three key areas of contestation: military, socio-economic and political. In military terms, much of the instability can be attributed to the failure of the SLORC government – and its 1997 successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – to reach peace agreements with the NMSP's long-standing allies, the KNU and KNPP.<sup>38</sup> For the next 15 years, much of south and southeast Myanmar remained a war-zone.

The result was a disorienting conflict-split between the northeast and southeast of the country. Fighting continued for the rest of the SLORC-SPDC era in the Thailand frontiers, where the KNU, KNPP and their NCUB allies urged economic boycotts and political support for the NLD. In contrast, the borderlands with China witnessed an era of relative peace as the KIO, UWSA and other ceasefire groups pursued business and development plans while attending meetings of the National Convention to draw up a new constitution.

For the Mon people, there was initially little respite in this conflict paradigm. The ceasefire did not mark an immediate end to coercive behaviour by the government. As operations continued, the Tatmadaw was accused of conscripting

38 For the KNPP, see note 33.

39 "The Massive Arrest of Porters in Southern Part of Burma", "Forced Relocation in Gas-Pipeline Area", Reports One & Two, Human Rights Foundation of Monland, 2/97, June 1997.

40 "SLORC Troops intruded into a Mon Refugee Camp", "The Dry Season Offensives and Population Displacement", Reports One & Two, Human Rights Foundation of Monland, 3/97, June 1997.

41 See e.g., "Forced Labour on the Ye-Tavoy railway construction", Mon Information Service (Bangkok), December 1996; "Forced Labour on Infrastructure Development Projects in Burma's Tenasserim Division", Mon Information Service (Bangkok), March 1997; "Ye-Tavoy Railway Construction", "Ye-Magyi Road", "Kya-Inn-Seikyi-Taungbawk Truck Road", Human Rights Foundation of Monland, Reports One, Two & Three, 4/97, September 1997. See also note 39.

30,000 civilians, including both Mons and Karens, as porters for offensives against the KNU during the first months of 1997.<sup>39</sup> In May that year, Tatmadaw troops again intruded into Halockhani refugee camp, resurrecting fears among displaced populations.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile in Dawei-Myeik Districts there were NMSP units who rejected government pressures to withdraw their positions, leading to the 1996 formation of a breakaway Mon Army Mergui District. The following year, this new force also agreed to a ceasefire. But it was clear that distrust of the government continued to run deep in many Mon communities. (In 2001, another breakaway group, the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party, also briefly emerged.)

There was also disappointment on the social and economic fronts. For the next 15 years, much of the country remained in a highly militarised state. While the NMSP sought to expand education and welfare programmes, development for SLORC-SPDC officers meant roads, railways and infrastructural projects. This was evidenced by the construction of major bridges over the Attaran, Gyaing and Thanlwin Rivers, opened in 1998, 1999 and 2005 respectively. During a time of humanitarian need, ceasefire critics argued that these were of more strategic benefit to the government than economic delivery to the people.



CONSTRUCTION OF POST-CEASEFIRE BRIDGE OVER THE GYAIN RIVER (MS)

Adding to community concerns, forced labour, portering and other human rights abuses all continued on government infrastructure projects.<sup>41</sup> The ceasefire appeared to make no

social and humanitarian difference to the military authorities. As construction started, the gas pipelines to Thailand also became a new source of controversy – as well as revenue to the government. Village clearances, forced labour and a further military build-up were all reported in the Tanintharyi Region.<sup>42</sup> In the meantime, local Mon, Karen and Tavoyan populations remained among the poorest in the country. In the aftermath of the 1995 ceasefire, around 11,000 Mon refugees resettled back across the border under pressure from the Thai authorities. But the numbers of migrants – both legal and illegal – crossing into Thailand only continued to grow.<sup>43</sup>

Passions then deepened when the authorities prevented celebrations of the Golden Jubilee Mon National Day in government-controlled areas in February 1997. This was followed the next year by the arrest of the veteran politician Nai Ngwe Thein and two MNDF MPs-elect, Dr. Minn Soe Lin and Dr. Kyi Win.<sup>44</sup> This time the rebuke towards the Mon movement appeared even clearer. At their trial, where they received seven-year jail terms, the two doctors were accused of seeking to disrupt the NMSP ceasefire. But many Mon leaders believed that the government had another motive: “divide and rule”. At the time, the MNDF was working closely with the NLD.<sup>45</sup> The clampdown on the MNDF thus appeared a blunt-edge strategy to keep opposition movements – whether NMSP, MNDF or NLD – weak and disunited.

The consequence of these regressions could not have been more serious. Within three years of the ceasefire, a general mood of negativity had set in. There was little will to go back to war, but there also appeared little room for manoeuvre, whether in electoral or ceasefire politics. In this vacuum, the NMSP’s main endeavours were in the social and educational fields, and a new enterprise, Rehmonnya International, was established to develop business. But it was quickly clear that military rule remained the dominant fact of life in the country. In March 1999, this author visited Nai Shwe Kyin at his home in Mawlamyine. After half a century in armed struggle, the veteran nationalist was in reflective mood. Gesturing to a Tatmadaw officer, he said: “Martin, it seems we can’t live with them and we can’t live without them.”

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42 See e.g., “Total Impact: The Human Rights, Environmental, and Financial Impacts of Total and Chevron’s Yadana Gas Project in Military-Ruled Burma (Myanmar)”, EarthRights International, September 2009; see also note 23.

43 There are no reliable figures. At the time of the NMSP ceasefire, there were general estimates of around 200,000 Mon migrants. This figure was communicated to the Thai National Security Council by the NMSP (see note 37). Today Mon migrant communities can be found around Bangkok and many southern parts of the country.

For the next decade, the NMSP ceasefire continued in desultory fashion. In keeping to the ceasefire path, NMSP leaders placed all their hopes on the final element in the peace process: political dialogue. But in this, too, they were disappointed. At the National Convention, NMSP delegates worked with the KIO in a 13-party grouping led by a nucleus of former NDF allies in presenting their vision for a “federal union”. The process, however, did not finish until 2008. And when the results were released, any prospect of a federal union was rejected under a unitary model that reserved the “leading role” for the Tatmadaw in national political life. Under the 2008 constitution, the country has a new multi-party system, but under centrally-controlled conditions.

The NMSP’s concerns did not end here. The following year, the party was ordered to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) under Tatmadaw control. Like the KIO and more powerful ceasefire forces in the northeast of the country, the NMSP refused. As uncertainties deepened, the NMSP joined a new ethnic alliance in February 2011, the United Nationalities Federal Council, that included its long-time KIO (then ceasefire) and KNU (then non-ceasefire) allies. All parties were busy making preparations as the SPDC continued its groundwork before stepping down.

There was thus little expectation of change when President Thein Sein assumed government office in March 2011. But, within a year, the Thein Sein administration had built bridges with the NLD and unveiled a new peace initiative, setting the scene for a new NMSP ceasefire in February 2012. This time such non-ceasefire forces as the KNU and KNPP followed suit. Finally, a significant liberalisation in the political atmosphere appeared possible. At the time, the breakdown of the KIO and other ceasefires in the north of the country were generally overlooked. But in most other areas the peace momentum appeared to be building.

Optimism then reached a crescendo at the 21st Century Panglong Conference in August 2016 after Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD gained election to government office. Delegates on all sides publicly supported pro-federal reform. Eighteen months later, the NMSP signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in

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44 Another MP-elect Nai Thuang Shein escaped into Thailand and exile.

45 In September that year, the MNDF joined with the NLD and three other ethnic nationality parties in the formation of an electoral Committee Representing the People’s Parliament that demanded recognition of the 1990 election results.

February 2018, joining nine other ethnic armed organisations, including the KNU. But in reality, as with the 1995 ceasefire, a new era in ethnic politics is only just beginning. As of mid-2020, there has been no breakthrough in nationwide peace, and conflict is still continuing in several borderlands. Myanmar today is a land that is still far from peace, reconciliation and reform that truly represent all peoples.

On the 73rd anniversary of Mon National Day in February 2020, the NMSP chairman Nai Hongsa went back to the origins of civil war, reiterating the party's long-standing belief that conflict in Myanmar is due to a very basic cause that affects all peoples: the "lack of "self-determination". "Our country is very poor. To solve this, we need to create a federal union and elect our leaders," he said. "Then there will be peace and development."<sup>46</sup>



THE VETERAN NMSP CHAIRMAN NAI SHWE KYIN (MS)

The importance of these experiences should not be underestimated. It was during the ceasefire years that a revitalisation of Mon culture and society took place, as educators and civil society leaders sought to promote freedoms, welfare progress and create a new social space. It is also upon these foundations that Mon communities are seeking to build today. They are not alone in these endeavours. Such goals are supported among peoples from all ethnic backgrounds across the country. The Mon experience in post-colonial Myanmar is not unique. The conflict challenges have always been political, and it is long since time that inclusive solutions were achieved.

There are many warnings from history. The Mon nationalist movement has now known ceasefire agreements in 1958, 1963, 1995, 2012 and 2018. The subsequent failure to follow through on peace and reform underpins the caution still expressed in many Mon communities today. In the coming years, it is to be hoped that the memory and lessons from the 1995 ceasefire will form the basis for a genuinely transformative peace.

The challenges facing the Mon people were summarised by Nai Shwe Kyin shortly after the 1995 ceasefire:

"We want to establish peace in our country. It is not a time to confront each other because we need national reconciliation. We have reached ceasefire agreements and the next step is political dialogue. We must establish trust. After bloodbaths lasting nearly half a century, we must establish trust with the view that one day reconciliation will come about."<sup>47</sup>

Such sentiments remain highly valid today.

## CONCLUSION

Twenty-five years have passed since the first NMSP ceasefire. The events of these years have continued to shape and inform the struggle for Mon rights and identity into the first decades of the 21st century. For the moment, though, their legacy remains uncertain. During the SLORC-SPDC era, human rights abuses, civilian displacement and the marginalisation of Mon rights and identity all continued. At the same time, after the first difficult years of ceasefire, young people grew up as the first generation to know peace in half a century.

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46 "Civil War Was Due to Lack of Self-Determination: NMSP Leader Says", Network Media Group, 11 February 2020.

47 "Burmese ethnic groups urge reconciliation", Reuters, 2 October 1996.

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## ③ Unfinished Business: Achievements and Challenges of the NMSP Ceasefire

by Ashley South<sup>48</sup>

The New Mon State Party's main achievement since 1995 is probably the Mon civilian community's trust in and support for the party as a legitimate governance and political authority, and appreciation of the Mon National Education Committee's successful mother-tongue based education system. Among the challenges facing the party are limited human resources, and significant shortfalls in funding.

The NMSP enters the second quarter-century of its ceasefire with the government in a relatively strong position politically. However, new strategies and energies will be required to meet new challenges ahead, including in the context of destabilising impacts of climate change in Myanmar/Burma.

### POLITICAL LEGITIMACY AND CREDIBILITY

The NMSP has been politically consistent, despite its relative weakness militarily. The armed wing of the NMSP, the Mon National Liberation Army, is massively outnumbered by the Tatmadaw. Since 1995, the party has followed the leadership example of founder-chairman Nai Shwe Kyin, maintaining the ceasefire despite difficulties and provocations, while continuing the struggle for ethnic self-determination (specifically, federalism) in the country, and in representing Mon political interests and identities, including the field of community development.

Following the death of Nai Shwe Kyin in 2003, successor chairmen (Nai Tin, Nai Taw Mon and Nai Hongsa; and others including the late Nai Rotsa) have continued to challenge the government's appalling human rights and political record, demanding freedom and justice for Mon and other ethnic nationality communities. Over the years, despite many challenges, the NMSP leadership has been determined to

maintain the ceasefire, while holding the government to account and continuing the struggle for self-determination.

Although the National Constitutional Convention (1993-2008) failed to produce a federal constitution, the NMSP continued to advocate for this outcome throughout the process. This policy line was pursued together with the Kachin Independence Organisation and other ethnic nationality allies. Part of the NMSP's strategy has been to cultivate alliances with other ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). As Martin Smith notes, the NMSP was a leading member of the National Democratic Front, and played a leading role in subsequent political alliances, including the United Nationalities Federal Council. In these capacities, NMSP members and affiliates played important roles in the drafting of federal constitutions for Myanmar and its ethnic States.

NMSP leaders (particularly Nai Hongsa) were at the heart of negotiating the October 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).<sup>49</sup> However, due to numerous concerns including the NCA's lack of inclusiveness, the NMSP only signed this multilateral agreement in 2018.<sup>50</sup> Although the Political Dialogue element of the NCA has since stalled, the peace process did allow the NMSP and Mon civil society organisations (CSOs) and communities to conduct a series of Mon national dialogues, culminating in a series of events between 5-7 May 2018.

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<sup>49</sup> The NCA mandates three main outcomes, implementation of which remains incomplete and deeply contested: a largely dysfunctional process of Union-level and sub-national political dialogue leading to a Union Peace Accord; a ceasefire monitoring mechanism (the Joint Monitoring Committee), dominated by the Myanmar Army; and arrangements regarding implementation and coordination of services and administration during the interim period of continuing negotiations towards a hoped-for Union Peace Accord ("Interim Arrangements").

<sup>50</sup> Initial NCA signatory EAOs in 2015 were: the Karen National Union (KNU), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, KNU-KNLA Peace Council, Restoration Council of Shan State, Chin National Front, Pa-O National Liberation Organization, Arakan Liberation Party and the All Burma Students Democratic Front. On 13 February 2018 the NMSP and the Lahu Democratic Union signed the NCA.

One of the main advantages of the ceasefire (and particularly the NCA) for the NMSP has been the space this has opened up for the party to engage with Mon civilian communities (and CSOs), having previously been punished for such engagement. By joining the NCA, the NMSP was able to lead a process of discussion and dialogue within the Mon national community, leading to the development of positions on a range of issues (including the political structure of Myanmar and Monland, within a federal framework; natural resource and environmental issues; social issues; and economic issues). Furthermore, despite the frustrations and failures of the 2008 constitution and the NCA, the agreement does in principle recognise “Interim Arrangements”, the NMSP and other EAOs’ governance and administration roles, and services delivery (often in partnership with CSOs).

### GOVERNANCE AND SERVICES: EDUCATION, HEALTH AND JUSTICE

The NMSP exercises administrative and political authority, and provides services to civilian communities, in exclusively controlled ceasefire areas defined by the 1995 and 2012 ceasefire agreements. In adjacent areas of “mixed administration”,

51 The NMSP is governed by a 38-member Central Committee, and a nine-member Central Executive Committee, elected at Congress every 4 years (most recently, in January 2020). Services to communities are delivered by NMSP line-departments (e.g. MNEC and MNHC), often in partnership with CSOs.

NMSP authority overlaps and is contested with that of the government and Tatmadaw.

The NMSP has a functioning governance system in 3 districts and 12 townships, including the administration of justice and provision of education, health and other services - both in NMSP ceasefire zones, and areas of “mixed administration”.<sup>51</sup> My own and other research confirms that local civilian communities regard the NMSP as having high levels of political legitimacy, as the leading representative of Mon identities and interests.<sup>52</sup>

Despite funding difficulties, the NMSP has been able to implement a relatively effective and credible administration in its areas of control, and deliver services in the ceasefire zones and beyond.<sup>53</sup> This provides the NMSP with a high degree of “performance legitimacy”, despite significant challenges in terms of human resources.

The success of the Mon National School system, administered by the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), is arguably the NMSP’s most important achievement since the ceasefire.

52 See Ashley South, “‘Hybrid Governance’ and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process” (Journal of Contemporary Asia, 2017).

53 Myanmar Interim Arrangements Research Project, *Between Ceasefires and Federalism: Exploring Interim Arrangements in the Myanmar peace process* (Covenant Consult, November 2018: Ashley South, Tim Schroeder, Kim Jolliffe, Mi Kun Chan Non, Saw Sa Shine, Susanne Kempel, Axel Schroeder and Naw Wah Shee Mu).



MON NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, LOE LOE, 1990s (IBC)

This mother tongue-based system provides excellent learning outcomes for marginalised ethnic nationality and conflict-affected children, while preserving and reproducing the Mon language and culture. This is one of the main aspirations of Mon communities and the NMSP. At the same time, it is integrated with the government (Ministry of Education: MoE) school system, allowing Mon National School graduates to successfully sit government regulation exams, and enter union-level tertiary and higher education institutions. As such, the Mon National Schools can be seen as elements of building “federalism from below” in Myanmar in the field of education. This is achieved through locally owned and delivered institutions that nevertheless articulate with the union level. Unfortunately however, the MNEC has not been able to secure consistent funding, and furthermore has had to cope with inconsistent and sometimes unhelpful government policies. Nevertheless, there are some examples of collaboration between the MNEC and MoE, particularly at the Township and State levels.

From just a few schools in NMSP-controlled areas and refugee camps at the time of the 1995 ceasefire, the MNEC system has expanded into a substantial system. Today, about 70% of Mon National Schools are located in government-controlled and “mixed administration” areas, representing a huge expansion of education to communities who would not previously have had access to schooling in their mother tongue. In 2020, the MNEC administers 133 Mon National Schools (including 3 high schools), with 686 teachers and 10,324 students, in the Mon and Karen States and Tanintharyi Region - plus several dozen “mixed schools” where authority is shared with the government (MoE).

The MNEC and CSOs - and also aboveground Mon political parties - have also engaged with the government education system, working with the MoE State Education Office to develop Mon language teaching materials to be used in government schools (so far, only through to Grade 3). As in other sectors, however, such achievements are undermined by the limited availability of funding. Although much-appreciated, international donor support to the MNEC has been sporadic, while the NMSP has extremely limited funds to support education through its own resources. Lack of secure

funding has, in turn, led to a high turnover of teachers, who understandably need to find secure livelihoods.

Another serious challenge is the expansion of MoE schools into areas of “mixed administration” between the NMSP and government. In pursuit of this policy, the government has built new schools and roads, pushing state authority into previously autonomous areas. But given that the peace process is still in an interim stage, such incursions have seriously undermined local trust and lessened the impact of the ceasefire.<sup>54</sup>

In the field of health, the Mon National Health Committee (MNHC) has likewise faced serious challenges. Although Mon medics continue to provide an important and appreciated service to the community, capacities are stretched, and medicines and equipment are in short supply due to very limited funding in recent years. This is a significant problem, given the prevalence of drug-resistant malaria and other diseases in the area.

Nevertheless the MNHC and NMSP have responded successfully to the coronavirus pandemic together with NMSP-affiliated bodies such as the Rehmonya Peace Foundation (RPF). Mon CSOs in partnership with the NMSP have also been very active in coronavirus response, including awareness-raising activities (prevention of Covid-19), and providing PPE, soap, hand sanitizer and gloves.

Another key element of NMSP governance is the delivery of access to justice. Research has demonstrated the credibility of NMSP justice administration. Trust in the NMSP justice administration of local communities is for three main reasons. It is regarded as fairer and more accessible than the government system; there is less corruption involved; and legal cases are heard in the local (Mon) language.<sup>55</sup> However, “justice shopping” remains problematic, with those who lose court cases sometimes seeking to reverse the outcome by appealing to Myanmar government authorities. Despite progress so far, there is still a need for administrative reform of the NMSP justice system and further review of the legal code.

54 Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Power Dynamics of Language and Education Policy in Myanmar's Contested Transition" (Comparative Education Review, vol.62, no.4, 2018); South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar" (Contemporary Southeast Asia, vol.38, no.1, 2016).

55 Helene Maria Kyed and Ardeth Thawngnhmung, "The Significance of Everyday Access to Justice in Myanmar's Transition to Democracy" (ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia, November 2019).



MON REFUGEE TEACHERS MEETING, 1990s (TBC)

## DRUGS ISSUES

For Mon communities, like many others in the country, the most pressing issue is a perceived crisis in drugs-taking. This is a challenge that also overlaps with justice reform. Community concerns focus on highly-addictive methamphetamines, or amphetamine-type stimulants (ya ma or ya ba), the abuse of which has widespread and often devastating impacts on individuals, families and local communities.

The NMSP plays a very important role in suppressing drug supply in its areas of control and “mixed administration” areas, including through arresting drug dealers. However, this is hampered by a lack of cooperation on the part of Myanmar government local authorities (including the Myanmar Police Force), who are widely regarded as inefficient and corrupt. The NMSP and CSO partners are developing programmes to address the “demand-side”, including building a rehabilitation centre. Such initiatives should be supported, with an emphasis on ensuring that the right techniques and methods for rehabilitation of drug users are adopted. This means accessibility to necessary technical and financial support that promotes a rights-based approach. Unfortunately, the NMSP and Mon CSOs have only limited expertise in human resources in this field, and need greater financial and technical support.

## PARTNERSHIPS

Before the 1995 ceasefire, the NMSP had a strong underground movement in both rural and urban areas. One of the main

benefits of the ceasefire has been the opportunities created for the NMSP to engage with communities in government-controlled and “mixed administration areas”, allowing the party to better communicate with and mobilise the Mon community.

Since the ceasefire, Mon civil society actors have developed close relationships and much overlap between those working “inside” Myanmar, those operating out of the NMSP-controlled ceasefire zones, and in neighbouring Thailand. Mon women have been prominent in the peace process, particularly in relation to community development and education activities.

The NMSP leadership has generally been open to developing relationships with other stakeholders in the social-political realm - although the party is keen to stress its leading role. The NMSP organised a first Mon National Seminar in February 1995 (before the ceasefire, during the period of negotiations), which was attended by a wide range of Mon stakeholders from the EAO, political party and CSO sectors. The following year this dialogue process saw the formation of a new Mon umbrella organisation, the Mon Unity League.<sup>56</sup> In 2006 the Mon Affairs Union was created to continue the work for political unity and advocacy; both groups remain active despite financial and political constraints. Despite occasional tensions, the NMSP supported the formation of these groups and often played leading roles in discussion and strategy-making.

In the decades following the ceasefire, there were sometimes tense relationships between some Mon CSOs and the NMSP. Some senior NMSP leaders demanded that civil society groups follow the party’s political lead. This is a position that was not appreciated by some CSO activists, who were rightfully keen to maintain their autonomy and independence. Since 2018 however, and particularly under a new NMSP chairman since early 2020, there has been a thawing of relations, and increased collaboration between Mon CSOs and the NMSP. This has occurred in the context of unification between the two main Mon political parties (the All Mon Regions Democracy Party and the Mon National Party), and a renewed appreciation of and support for the roles of civil society actors among NMSP leaders.

The NMSP enjoys a strong strategic partnership with the Mon Unity Party (formed in 2019 by the merger of the two parties

<sup>56</sup> Mon Unity League, *The Mon: A People Without a Country* (Bangkok, 1997/1999).

mentioned above). As with some other parts of this essay, reasons of confidentiality prevent analysis of this relationship at this time. Also noteworthy is the role of the RPF and NMSP's Technical Assistance Team.<sup>57</sup> These organisations provide bridges between the NMSP and Mon civil society. These (particularly the RPF) are the NMSP's preferred vehicles for partnership with international donor agencies (together with the Mon Relief and Development Committee, which has historically provided much-needed assistance to refugees and IDPs). The NMSP and associated Mon civilian communities have also received significant support from a number of international donors. Key donor relationships include those with Japan and Norway, which have provided support to infrastructure, education and other initiatives through bilateral grants and support to international and local non-governmental organisations.

These positives notwithstanding, there is a widespread perception of relatively limited donor support to NMSP-controlled or -influenced areas in comparison with funds and technical and other expertise provided to the Myanmar government. The government and its international partners often do little to signal their recognition of the legitimacy of conflict-affected community's grievances or the credibility of ethnic armed organisations as political actors. This risks failing to address the inherently political drivers of peace and conflict in Myanmar and has exacerbated concerns that the Myanmar government and Tatmadaw are using peace and development initiatives (or "peace dividends") to secure their control over Mon territories. Mon and other ethnic stakeholders perceive the government and its development priority as trying to impose an "economic development first" approach to the peace process. This, they believe, undermines the capacity and self-sufficiency of local communities, while downplaying the socio-political concerns of ethnic nationality parties and their

57 The author is an adviser to both these bodies.

58 James Ferguson argues that development aid can de-politicise contentious issues, by framing these as amenable to technical solutions implemented by the government in partnership with aid professionals, rather than at sites of political struggle. This liberal peace-building approach is apparent in Myanmar, where donors are keen to strengthen a state lacking capacity and reach, rolling out market-friendly "good governance" policies and in effect delivering the "anti-politics machine". However, after experiencing over six decades of conflict, and related abuses on the part of the Myanmar armed forces, the NMSP and many local communities have little trust in the central government. Only by trying to better understand and engage with local realities and actors can peace-builders hope to support a just and sustainable peace process: James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge University Press, 1990.)

demands in the fields of human rights and politics ("the anti-politics machine"<sup>58</sup>).



MAWLAMYINE TO MARTABAN FERRY BEFORE CONSTRUCTION OF THANLWIN BRIDGE (MS)

## POLITICAL CULTURES

The NMSP is widely regarded as having entered a reforming phase under the new chairman Nai Hongsa during the past year, moving towards more inclusive governance practices. Young people and women are being promoted more quickly to leadership positions, and the organisation is making serious efforts to ensure it remains fit for purpose in the 21st-century.

The NMSP has a relatively strong democratic political culture, including regular elections to the party Congress which is held every four years. The party demonstrates a strong command and control system, meaning that decisions at the leadership or local levels are normally carried out effectively. This is not always the case with the country's other EAOs. However, this effectiveness is not without its downside. The NMSP is still organised as, and exhibits the culture of, a revolutionary (armed) vanguard political party. This reflects "traditional", sometimes authoritarian (top-down), and patriarchal political cultures.

## SECURITY SECTOR

There have been tensions around Three Pagodas Pass, between government, Mon, Karen and other armed forces for centuries. Territorial conflict re-emerged in May 2019, in the context of logging (revenue) disputes between the NMSP and KNU. Despite a quickly reached agreement to stop fighting, the clashes occurred again in October. With the pretext of

instability, the following month the Tatmadaw-controlled (or at least aligned) Karen Border Guard Force attacked the important and relatively lucrative 5th Battalion checkpoint of the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) at Palaung Japan (“Japanese well”) village, on the border just south of Three Pagodas Pass. This was clearly a violation of the ceasefire (and the NCA), as the area was on the edge of agreed NMSP-controlled zones. The incursion forced over 500 local people to flee and take refuge at a Mon monastery on the Thai side of the border. Later that month, the Myanmar Army arrived and briefly occupied the location. However, following tense discussions the Tatmadaw force withdrew slightly.<sup>59</sup>

These clashes disrupted local security and development. However, the subsequent resolution of tensions at Palaung Japan demonstrated the flexibility of MNLA and NMSP leaders and their ability to negotiate with the Myanmar Army Southeast Command, the government’s National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, and the Mon State government (with which the party enjoys relatively cordial relations). Nevertheless, serious concerns remain that the Tatmadaw is intent on taking control of areas on the edge of the agreed NMSP ceasefire zone. The efforts by the Tatmadaw to expand militarised state control into “mixed administration” areas exacerbates a long-standing climate of fear and distrust, and threatens to undermine the peace process.

## CONCLUSION

For 62 years, the NMSP has been in the vanguard of the struggle for Mon self-determination. In 1995 the armed conflict phase ended (mostly, and hopefully permanently). The struggle continues in the fields of politics and development, including in recent years as framed by a so far incomplete and deeply-contested peace process.

For the foreseeable future, the NMSP will persist as a leading body in the struggle for (and guarantor of) Mon political rights. The NMSP is in a reforming phase. International donors and diplomats, and other well-wishers, should do what they can to support equitable and rights-based governance in its areas of control and influence.

<sup>59</sup> “Myanmar Army’s entering NMSP base, a violation of the NCA agreement, says NMSP”, Mon News, 28 November 2019; “Tatmadaw army decamps from NMSP military base, relocates 900 feet away”, Mon News, 6 December 2019.

Little international support was available in earlier decades. Since the 1990s however, some international donors have generously assisted displaced and vulnerable civilian communities, and supported a range of Mon CSOs. Some aid has been provided to NMSP “line departments” (the MNEC and MNHC). In general however, despite its political legitimacy and intention to govern effectively and inclusively in its areas of control and authority, the NMSP has received little direct support from the international community, especially in comparison with significant efforts to build the capacity and reach of the Myanmar state. In a future (presumably federal) Myanmar, sub-national States and Regions could have real autonomy and authority, in which case ethnic nationality political parties like the Mon Unity Party will be important power-holders.

Longer-term, the impacts of climate change are the most pressing issue facing Mon and other communities in Myanmar (and the world). Massive disruption is on the way, with the window of opportunity closing to prevent massive destabilisation.<sup>60</sup> The “new ab-normal” includes global pandemics such as Covid-19. Like many other countries, Myanmar/Burma may become increasingly unstable. The country is already experiencing shorter and wetter rainy seasons, increased flooding and salination, soaring temperatures and fires. These phenomena will increase in intensity and frequency, possibly leading to a collapse in food security, and societal unrest. Historically resilient communities are already reaching a “tipping point”, beyond which recovery will be very difficult.<sup>61</sup>

Credible EAOs, like the NMSP, should focus on Interim Arrangements, reinforcing locally owned and delivered governance and services (e.g. health and education), and strengthening their military wings. The NMSP can be a viable post-nation state entity, which deserves support to promote and protect the rights of all people in its areas of authority and influence.

<sup>60</sup> “Collapse of Civilisation is the Most Likely Outcome - Top Climate Scientists” (June 2020: <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-06-08/collapse-of-civilisation-is-the-most-likely-outcome-top-climate-scientists/>); “Climate tipping points - too risky to bet against” (Nature, November 2019): <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03595-0>.

<sup>61</sup> Ashley South and Liliana Demartini, “Towards a Tipping Point? Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in Southeast Myanmar” (ActionAid Myanmar, 2020).



## 4 25 Years On, But Little Progress

by Nai Kasauh Mon<sup>62</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The Mon self-determination movement is a long road to the journey's end. Mon armed resistance is the fundamental revolutionary spirit of the Mon people after the loss of the last Mon capital, Pegu (Hongsawatoi Dynasty), in 1757. The New Mon State Party (NMSP) and its armed wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), are reaching the 25th anniversary of the 1995 ceasefire agreement, a search for peace and unity among the national races in modern Myanmar. After a long campaign and movement for liberty, freedom and democratic rights (social, cultural and political) in the modern era, this essay is a reflection of personal and professional accounts provided to a Mon person who lives, works and remains today in the heartland of the Mon people.

Gen. Khin Nyunt, the Military Intelligence chief of the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw), developed a strategy to divide the strength of ethnic armed organisations and democratic alliances in the early 1990s. Many mainstream ethnic armed groups, including the NMSP, accepted bilateral ceasefire agreements, known as "gentleman agreements". But these truces never guaranteed political dialogue or improved human rights standards against violations such as forced labour, land confiscation and sexual assaults in the regime's mega-development projects, including oil and gas, in the Mon region. The Burmese military offensives - and emergence of militia splinter groups - in the border region of Mon State and Tanintharyi (Tenasserim) Division increased in scale during the early 1990s where local civilians were targeted for forced labour.

The NMSP signed a ceasefire agreement with the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in June 1995 but, up until 2010, the process had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were the extension of the Mon national education system, improvement in agricultural and trading livelihoods, and local area development such as road

construction, transportation and telecommunication networks. But the disadvantages still remained as thousands of refugees and internally-displaced persons (IDPs) were not properly resettled. Human rights violations continued as before. In 2010, before the general election, there was then a ceasefire dilemma and the NMSP retreated back to its military base camps after refusing to agree to operate under the government's Border Guard Force (BGF).

In 2012, the government of President U Thein Sein called for strengthening the ceasefire agreement with a new policy proposal and process for the Mon. The NMSP therefore signed a second bilateral ceasefire agreement with the government in early 2012. NMSP leaders were then actively involved in writing a single text for a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with the government, Tatmadaw and other ethnic armed organisations. But the NMSP only formally signed the NCA in early 2018 with the popularly-elected government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Subsequently, the Mon national political organisations were permitted to hold a Mon National Political Dialogue in Mon State. After this, they joined the third 21st Century Panglong Conference in July 2018.

In summary, 25 years after the 1995 ceasefire agreement and initiating the peace process, the NMSP and the Mon people started to hope that an autonomous Mon State in a Federal Union of Burma will be achieved following the signing of the NCA. But it took nearly 60 years to get started, and many of the young generation now need to continue their support and activities in the movement for freedom and democracy until their political goals are achieved.

### CEASEFIRE DEALS WITH THE NEW MON STATE PARTY

The Military Intelligence chief, Gen. Khin Nyunt (also General Secretary-1 of the later State Peace and Development Council), travelled to Ye and invited the NMSP to start talks about a ceasefire agreement in late 1993. The NMSP then sent delegates to talk to military and intelligence leaders in the Southeast Command in Mawlamyine, capital of Mon State, for three

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<sup>62</sup> Nai Kasauh Mon is founder and Executive Director of the Human Rights Foundation of Monland, and a founder and director of the Independent Mon News Agency.



HALOCKHANI REFUGEE CAMP, RAINY SEASON 1994 (TBC)

rounds of informal meetings during 1994. But the negotiations were deadlocked after agreement could not be reached on the location of MNLA base camps and the NMSP's territorial control.

NMSP leaders then agreed to send a ceasefire delegation again in March 1995, and finally agreement was achieved on the issues of troop settlement, territorial demarcation and resettlement areas for IDPs.<sup>63</sup> NMSP leaders, however, did not sign a formal agreement with the SLORC and Southeast Command like the Kachin Independence Organisation did in 1994. There were 14 main points in the ceasefire document that the two sides described as a “gentlemen’s agreement”. These recognised MNLA troop locations as well as clarified agreements on civilian resettlement and local development, including permits for NMSP members to travel in the Mon heartland.

However on the day of the ceasefire ceremony, 29 June 1995, NMSP leaders were unhappy with a banner designed and displayed on the wall by Military Intelligence officers. Rather than announcing the ceasefire agreement, it claimed that “the NMSP is coming into the legal fold”.<sup>64</sup> Everything was too late

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63 The SLORC government and Southeast Military Command finally agreed to recognise 14 pinpoints for MNLA troop locations, in which each location was five miles diameter in width. Then, both sides agreed to set up the relocation sites of IDPs and refugees. But there was no guarantee of the political dialogue that was demanded by the NMSP. Gen. Khin Nyunt said that the government was a military regime; the NMSP, he said, needed to talk to the next civilian government.

64 NMSP Vice President, Nai Htin, led the NMSP delegation, and the SLORC-NMSP ceasefire ceremony was held in a meeting hall of the Southeast Command. Gen. Khin Nyunt and the commander of the Southeast Command hosted the ceremony.

for renegotiation over the banner display. In fact, this agenda was hidden by the government during the peace negotiations. The following day, Gen. Khin Nyunt and his team discussed with NMSP leaders the many promises that had been made to the Mon people for the peace process. These talks included the allowance of Mon language teaching in government schools; local development including schools, clinics, hospitals and road-building; and food ration support to the MNLA on a monthly basis. These promises, however, were empty, lasting only a few months because the SLORC did not implement any kind of activity with adequate resources that should have been allocated to the Mon people.

## ADVANTAGES IN THE 1995 CEASEFIRE

### PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND MEETINGS

The 1995 ceasefire marked the first time that NMSP leaders could freely meet the Mon people in their heartlands since the party began armed struggle against the Tatmadaw in remote areas along the Thailand-Myanmar border in 1958. The NMSP general headquarters – both administrative departments and military offices – were based in the border regions. The founder of the NMSP, Nai Shwe Kyin, toured the people’s heartlands along with senior party members to exchange information and hear the voice of the Mon people. The tour provided a lift to Mon political momentum in another era in national politics after the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1948.

After the ceasefire, unlike other ethnic armed groups, the NMSP did not request economic opportunities. Rather, they requested religious rights, literature and cultural preservation, and the right to education in the Mon language. In reply, government and Military Intelligence officers offered economic opportunities to the NMSP, including logging, real-estate and border trading.<sup>65</sup> The NMSP, however, was determined to prioritise formal approval for education about Mon culture and learning in the Mon language, with Buddhist institutions allowed the right to conduct courses and examinations in the Mon language. This now appeared to be accepted.<sup>66</sup> Previously, the SLORC government had declined to approve this during the preparation of the ceasefire agreement.

### EXTENSION OF MON NATIONAL EDUCATION

During the 1970s, NMSP leaders opened an Education Department under its Administrative Sector in order to provide basic education by using the Mon mother-tongue in rural villages in the conflict-zones and NMSP-controlled areas.<sup>67</sup> In 1990, after many educational professionals joined the NMSP, the NMSP strengthened its education sector, forming a Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). The MNEC was delegated to not only teach children but to also develop a Mon Education System, policies and institutions.

The MNEC then promoted many of its middle schools into Mon National High Schools, upgraded teaching methods, created its own curriculum, and prioritized Mon language and Mon history in teaching.<sup>68</sup> The MNEC operated three Mon National High Schools, and many of the students who passed from the middle schools joined these high schools afterwards.<sup>69</sup> The MNEC also developed a bridging programme with the government education department to enable high school students to enter the “University Entrance Exam”, which is also

known as the “Final Exam”. Subsequently, the Mon national education model of “non-state based education delivery programmes” has been applauded by UNESCO and other international education specialists for its mother-tongue based learning and teaching curriculum.

At the time, the then SLORC government promised to support Mon national schools in terms of infrastructure and human resources, especially school buildings and teachers, but it never followed through. The NMSP Education Department requested the building of a high school under the name of a Mon National High School at Nyi Sar, but the military government replied that a high school could be built but only under the name of a “government high school”.<sup>70</sup> The NMSP rejected this, and the project was not implemented. Instead, the high school project was shifted into a government-controlled area.

### FORCED LABOUR OR VOLUNTARILY LABOUR

After coming to power in 1988, the SLORC government – and its successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – attempted to launch a new route into rural areas controlled by ethnic armed organisations in line with a new border development plan. With the regime facing economic boycotts by Western nations, the ruling generals sought alternative sources of income. In the lower coastal regions of the country, there was a focus on a number of different sectors, including gas and other mineral resources.

In 1995, even before the NMSP accepted a ceasefire agreement, the regime built a 110-mile long railway from Ye to Tavoy (Dawei), the capital of the Tenasserim (Tanintharyi) Division. This railroad was strategically important to the SLORC government, as it needed to extend its military force to protect onshore and

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65 The Htoo Company, for example, became involved in logging in NMSP-controlled areas to cut 40,000 tons of timber with the SLORC government's permission and sold the timber to Thailand officials. The NMSP did obtain some income from this logging business.

66 In 1996, the NMSP President Nai Shwe Kyin wrote an official letter to the military government, requesting that the Buddhist Scriptures Examination should be allowed in Mon language – a right that had been prohibited for decades. This was approved, and teaching in Mon language in Buddhism was officially recognised.

67 The NMSP is an ad hoc government in its control areas and mixed-administration areas. In its formation, the party has three main sectors: political, administrative and military. In the Administrative Sector, there are many departments, including judicial, education, health, forestry and taxation.

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68 Teaching in Mon national schools in mother tongue is possible in Mon villages and communities, as the Mon people have a single speaking and written language. This is different from ethnic nationalities who may have a variety of languages or dialects. Mon schools prioritize teaching Mon history, which is not allowed in government schools.

69 There are three Mon National High Schools that have operated for over twenty years: Nyi Sar, Ann Din and Weng Kapor that are located Ye and Kya-inn-seiky townships.

70 The military government has also built government schools in other ceasefire areas, such as in Shan State, under the name of the Ministry of Education, sending in government teachers to teach the government curriculum. But in the Mon region, Mon National Schools have continued to compete with the government system, opposing government influence on education in NMSP-controlled areas.

offshore gas pipelines that were being planned for projects in the Andaman Sea (Yetagun and Yadana). In 1990-1991, the Tatmadaw deployed ten military battalions in Yebyu and Tavoy townships in order to take responsibility for railway and road construction. To do this, they recruited civilians to contribute their labour and provide security for the Yadana pipeline that was laid for 40 miles across land from the coast at Kanbauk to Ratchburi Province on the Thailand border.<sup>71</sup> These military deployments took large areas of lands in Yebyu township and areas surrounding the Kanbauk onshore port.

In response, the NMSP rejected further gas pipeline construction in the Mon region until a proper agreement is made with local people and land owners, and heritage sites are properly protected based upon environment factors. These proposals were rejected by the military government. In the face of continuing pressures by the ruling generals, the NMSP asked the Mon media and information services to further report these issues in the outside world, especially to the International Labour Organisation and other UN agencies based in Bangkok.

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71 New military battalions deployed during 1990-1991 included ten Light Infantry Battalions No.401-410. The other local battalions (282, 273, 284 and 356) were responsible for security during the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline.

72 The Tatmadaw used a strategy known as the “Four Cuts” campaign against the NMSP and civilians who were suspected as NMSP sympathisers from the 1970s until 1995.

## MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS AND LAND CONFISCATION

Land ownership is the fundamental right of every farmer in Mon State. Mon people have largely worked on farmlands for their livelihoods for many centuries. The NMSP leadership, however, could not protect the rights of landowners and farmers during the government’s massive expansion of military deployments in Mon regions after 1988. The 1995 ceasefire agreement was then used by the SLORC government and Tatmadaw to extend their military outreach even further into Mon State.

According to the ceasefire agreement, the MNLA had to withdraw their troops from the conflict-zones where they had engaged in guerrilla fighting against government troops since the 1960s and 1970s. MNLA troops extended their territories into many parts of Mon State, near to the capital Mawlamyine in 1990, and reached to Chaungzon township on Balu Island, Paung township and Kawkareik township. MNLA troops also launched military activities throughout Ye township except Ye town, and about 35% of Kya-inn-seiky township and over 50% of Yebyu township. As a result, the villagers and communities in these townships constantly suffered constant human rights violations by Tatmadaw soldiers, as they were suspected of being NMSP sympathisers.<sup>72</sup>

This pattern changed with the 1995 ceasefire. The agreement re-grouped all MNLA troops into 14 designated locations that are



YOUNG MON PEOPLE FLEEING FORCED LABOUR AT THAI BORDER (TBC)

NMSP TROOPS ON FRONTLINE PATROL, 1985 (MS)



mostly in Mon State, with the remaining six locations – designated as temporary – in the Tenasserim Division far to the south of the NMSP general headquarters in Ye township. The Tatmadaw then planned to take over areas in Ye township and other territories where the NMSP was formerly active. Ye township is very large, and it has rich resources, including rice fields, rubber plantations, betel-nut plantations and many other kinds of fruit farming.

During 2000-2003, the Tatmadaw then deployed a further ten military battalions in Ye township.<sup>73</sup> They were based in various strategic locations: the northern part in Lamine and Arutaung village tracts: the eastern part of Kyaung-ywa village tract: and the southern part of Khaw Zar village tract. During the deployment, the Tatmadaw also confiscated thousands of acres of rubber, betel-nut and other fruit plantations.<sup>74</sup>

### SPLINTER GROUPS AND ARMED CLASHES

Mon unity in political leadership and armed struggle has not been without its challenges. Over the years, NMSP leaders have faced internal clashes over corruption, allegations of illegal cash-collection from civilians, and other disciplinary matters among its members. After a party division between 1981 and 1987, the NMSP fostered internal unity with a policy of “forgive

and forget” to members who breached the party’s rules.

Following the ceasefire, the NMSP administration and MNLA troops withdrew from Ye township. As a result, the people felt that they had no protection. There were many retired MNLA commanders and soldiers in Ye township, and they rose up to fight against the Tatmadaw in 1996. In late 2001, Col. Pan Nyunt also split from the NMSP and MNLA command to found a Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP) and revolutionary army, the Monland Restoration Army (MRA). Because Mon people in various walks of life were still suffering from the massive conscription of forced labour, tax extortion and land confiscation, they therefore hoped that the HRP/MRA could protect them.

Col. Pan Nyunt and the HRP were able to reorganise some small splinter groups into the MRA, and his force grew rapidly to 500 troops within one year. They fought against the MNLA base at its Baleh Donephai stronghold in the summer of 2002 where the NMSP had resettled many thousands of refugees and IDPs in the border area. However the MRA troops withdrew after one of their men was killed. As this experience shows, Mon armed resistance always faces political tests when challenges continue in the way of reaching the goal of self-determination for the people.

73 The Burmese Army battalions deployed in Ye township in 2000-2003 were: Light Infantry Battalion Nos.583-591 and No.19 under the Military Operational Management Command.

74 Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), 2003, “No Land To Farm Report” documented that about 7,780 acres of lands were confiscated by Tatmadaw battalions in Ye township alone. HURFOM documented land confiscation not only in Ye township, but other townships such as Thanbyuzayat in Mon State and also Yebyu in the Tenasserim Division.

## THE 2010 CRISIS AND THE NEW POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Following the ceasefire, the NMSP and other Mon civilian leaders maintained the ceasefire agreement and peace process for an alternative political settlement in line with the wishes of the people of Myanmar under democratic principles and standards of government. The NMSP leadership therefore did not reject Mon politicians contesting the general election in November 2010. It is not a legitimate role to direct political matters under electoral laws towards any particular candidates.

The military government, now known as the SPDC, confirmed its military-drafted constitution in 2008, and then planned to hold a nationwide election in 2010. Before the polls took place, the SPDC transformed their social organisation into a political party: i.e. from the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) to Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).<sup>75</sup> The regime itself planned transforming into a quasi-civilian role, and many of its senior commanders took off their uniforms to join the USDP leadership.

As this happened, the NMSP - along with most other ethnic ceasefire groups - refused to become a Border Guard Force under Tatmadaw control, although several of the smaller groups did agree. They were mostly positioned along the borders with Thailand. Here the BGF battalions were based close to other ethnic armed organisations that had not agreed to become BGFs. This meant that, in the future, the Tatmadaw could handle opposition forces more easily and effectively if fighting broke out. In the meantime, the NMSP joined with the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), founded in February 2011, with other ethnic armed organisations in preparation for the government changeover.

## THE 2012 BILATERAL AGREEMENT

In 2011, President U Thein Sein first formed a new Union Government with key leaders from the USDP and military-appointed Ministers and with the formation of State and Region governments according to the terms of the 2008 Constitution. He then started considering political reforms. In the following

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<sup>75</sup> The USDA was formed in 1993 as a social organisation under the patronage of the SLORC and its SPDC successor.

months, the government released political prisoners, lifted restrictions on the media, and allowed more freedom of expression. In addition, President Thein Sein considered initiating a meaningful ceasefire agreement, including political dialogue which has always been a key demand of ethnic armed organisations and political parties.

While continuing to work with the UNFC, the NMSP signed a second bilateral ceasefire agreement with the Mon State government and Southeast Command in February 2012. Since the NMSP had already signed the 1995 ceasefire agreement, the 2012 agreement essentially followed all the points in the 1995 agreement on territorial demarcation, civilian and IDP-refugee resettlement, and the operation of liaison offices.<sup>76</sup> Nai Rotsa, Vice President of the NMSP, led the party delegation to sign the agreement, and U Aung Min led the government delegation. Many political observers agreed that the NMSP's second bilateral agreement was much better than the 1995 agreement. In the new treaty, there were political guarantees for a further Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and political dialogue to build peace and a federal union of Burma/Myanmar.

## SHEDDING A NEW LIGHT FOR PEACE

The Thein Sein government adopted three steps for a peace-building process under its administration. The first step was to have bilateral ceasefire agreements with all armed organisations, including the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) that is not technically an ethnic-based force. U Aung Min attempted to meet all armed opposition groups as a result of which the USDP-Thein Sein government was able to sign 34 bilateral state- and union-level ceasefire agreements with 14 armed organisations between 2011 and 2013.<sup>77</sup>

The second step was to achieve the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Thus, soon after signing the bilateral agreements, the government called for the drafting of the NCA. NMSP leaders engaged in the NCA drafting process

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<sup>76</sup> The NMSP had retreated back to its general headquarters district and abandoned its offices in Mawlamyine in March 2010. After the February 2012 agreement, they were able to re-open their liaison, business and development offices.

<sup>77</sup> UN Women Report, 2016, "The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: A Gender Equality and Women's Rights Analysis", p.7: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20easia/docs/publications/2017/02/mn-nca.pdf?la=en&vs=3331>

along with UNFC members and non-members, taking part in various rounds of discussions with Tatmadaw and government representatives. The EAOs formed a negotiation collaboration group in the name of a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team, which drafted a single text for the NCA treaty.<sup>78</sup> The final text of the NCA was finalized on 7 August 2015.<sup>79</sup>

Following its completion, President Thein Sein called on all EAOs to sign the NCA and move on to the third step of “Political Dialogue” or “Peace Dialogue”, based upon Chapter Five of the NCA. There was a disagreement among the EAOs whether to sign the NCA as individual organisations or as the alliance of the UNFC. The Tatmadaw, however, rejected six EAOs from signing the NCA. The government then signed the NCA with eight armed opposition groups, including the ABSDF, on 15 October 2015 as an initial step towards a ceasefire for the entire country.<sup>80</sup> The NMSP did not sign at this time since it wanted all EAOs to be included. But it later signed on 13 February 2018.



Based upon Chapter Five of the NCA, “Guarantees for Political Dialogue”, the NMSP has opportunities to talk about the text of the NCA agreements with the public. The NMSP therefore held two public consultation meetings in its administered areas in Nyi Sar village and Wae Zin village respectively during March and April 2018. Then, with the collaboration of the NMSP, Mon political parties and Mon civil society organisations, the Mon “national level” political dialogue was held from 5-7 May in Ye town. In the opening ceremony of the Mon National Dialogue, many government authorities and leaders of the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre attended the ceremony and

gave opening speeches. During the three days of discussion, about 800 representatives from all walks of life among the Mon people discussed recommendations for the establishment of a federal union based upon policy positions adopted during the political dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

In comparison to ethnic nationality communities who live in highland areas, the Mon people live in lowland territories, and their military position is not strong enough to defend themselves against offensives by the Burmese Army. Since the 1970s, the NMSP has gradually lost its areas of control in the plains, and it has moved back its main bases to border areas with Thailand.

The 1995 ceasefire agreement thus marked an opportunity for the NMSP to expand its political space and explain its policies and objectives to the Mon public. As a result, the people have a better understanding of the position of the NMSP today. The party has struggled for cultural, literary and educational rights for the Mon people. At the same time, the Mon people have been engaging and fostering relations with NMSP leaders in the formation of such organisations as the Mon Union Affairs, Mon CSO Forum, Mon Women’s Organisation, Mon Youth Progressive Organisation and Mon Writers Association.

On this basis, although it has brought many challenges, the ceasefire agreement has not only benefitted the NMSP in its ability to take part in the peace process and provide public administration in its control areas, but it has also received wider support from the Mon public because of its mandate to liberate the Mon people from oppression. In Myanmar today, a newly-formed Mon Unity Party and its members are enjoying the fruits of long years of armed resistance. Until the present, this is being led by the NMSP and a political movement of Mon leaders who have continued the struggle for political and ethnic rights since the 1940s regardless of personalities and political ideology.

78 For a chronology, see the website of the Myanmar Peace Monitor. The NMSP Vice President Nai Hongsa was the team leader, and the NCCT had 16 member organisations: <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/1661>

79 Ministry of Information, “A milestone in the Myanmar peace process: the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement”, August 2015: <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng?q=news/8/11/2018/id-4940>

80 “Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups”, Reuters, 15 October 2015.

## ⑤ Mon National Self-Determination in Transition: The Case of the NMSP's Leadership in the Myanmar Ceasefire and Peace Agreement Process by Nai Banya Hongsar<sup>81</sup>

Self-determination for the Mon people was a legitimate political proposal by Mon leaders prior to the independence of Burma in 1948. Mon leaders and youth activists put proposals for cultural autonomy and basic civil rights for the Mon people to the Burmese political elites during 1946-1947, but these were utterly rejected in principle. A call for self-autonomy (self-determination) under the Union of Burma, which was formed as a new country by the 1947 constitution, was denied to the Mon people. Mon leaders, mostly young men at the time, united to form a political movement with the mass support of the Mon people in 1948. Subsequently, the Mon People's Front (MPF) was formed with the engagement of all sectors of Mon society, including men and women, in lower Burma.

Mon leaders continued to propose constitutional change, the right of local self-governance and political power-sharing to the newly-formed governments after the country gained independence in 1948. Non-violent movements proved ineffective, and Mon leaders formed the MPF in 1952 as an armed force to promote the Mon struggle. The first Mon ceasefire agreement was reached in 1958 between the MPF and U Nu government.

This analysis will therefore look at the strength and weaknesses of the Mon leadership from the perspective of a Mon writer. The views expressed here are solely personal views as a citizenship

journalist. A balanced view on cultural and constitutional rights are explored in line with the objectives of political legitimacy.

### **BIRTH OF THE NEW MON STATE PARTY IN 1958**

The establishment of a new Mon State through armed struggle, and with the desire of the Mon people, was the goal of the late New Mon State Party (NMSP) leader, Nai Shwe Kyin. Following its 1958 foundation, the new party regrouped old comrades and patriotic young men and women during the late 1950s and 1960s. Nai Shwe Kyin and his colleagues proposed the establishment of a Mon State to the central government during the 1963 "Peace Parley". Subsequently, a Mon State was designated under the 1974 constitution. But the Mon state was entirely controlled by a military-backed government, then in the name of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, until 1988.

After thirty years of insurgency and underground political movement, the NMSP faced financial and political dilemmas for the survival of the Mon movement. The NMSP's deputy chairman, Nai Non Lar, died in August 1989 at the first anniversary of the "8888 Day" in Three Pagoda Pass. The NMSP's general headquarters (the Central Army Camp) at Three Pagodas Pass was also attacked by the Karen National Union in early 1988 and by the Burmese Army in 1990. Subsequently, the NMSP's armed wing - the Mon National Liberation Army - relocated to the south of the Ye river to the Jao Ha Pru Camp (in Mon) in the late 1990s.

The NMSP's top leaders - Nai Shwe Kyin, Nai Htin, Nai Rotsa, Nai Hongsar (the current chairman), Nai Htaw Mon, Nai Aung Naing and Nai Cham Toik - proposed a new ceasefire agreement to the central committee of the party with the military government of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC: subsequently, State Peace and Development Council) in late 1993. A "gentlemen's agreement" was then

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81 Banya Hongsar left Mon State for Thailand in 1995. He migrated to Australia in 1997. Hongsar worked with the Overseas Mon Student Newspaper (Bop Htaw) and Mon Unity League's Information Centre in Bangkok between 1995-96. After he studied for a Diploma of Media and Journalism in the Canberra Institute of Technology (1998-2001), Hongsar returned to Bangkok in 2001 and volunteered to work for Kaowao News and the Mon News Agency as a trainer and senior reporter. Hongsar returned to Australia with his family in 2004 for further study, work and raising children. Hongsar completed a B.A. in Community Education at the University of Canberra (2017). Hongsar has worked with local non-governmental organisations in Canberra since 2006 as a senior project leader. Hongsar participated in the democracy uprising in Yangon in 1988. Hongsar has been writing in Mon, Burmese and English languages for Mon media and publications since 1995.

signed in June 1995. A new path to peace, federalism and democracy thus began because NMSP leaders were allowed to visit all Mon towns, cities and villages for public meetings and gatherings for social, cultural and political exchange.



THE LATE NMSP LEADERS, NAI SHWE KYIN AND NAI NON LAR (MS)

### THE PATH TO CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND THE NMSP'S ROLE

On 19 December 2003, five members of the NMSP were enlisted to participate in the upcoming National Convention to draw up a new constitution to be held in Rangoon (Yangon), sponsored by the State Peace and Development Council. After a two-day emergency meeting at the NMSP headquarters, the party issued no public statement to the media. There is, however, a clear message in Mon language publications which says that the party works closely with local communities.

After the ceasefire process began in 1995, the NMSP renovated its internal and external business operations in the country, especially in Mon State. As it assumed that party reformation was the first step for survival in the new peace environment, the NMSP formed a "Committee for Youth Assembly" in Mon State, led by Nai Tala Mon, head of the Department of Public Affairs. According to an internal source, in 1998 the party developed a Department of Political Affairs at its headquarters, and members of this new department increased during the following years. Since this time, the party has continued to look for alternative ways to develop its political strategies. The organisation is unable to resist the pressures of the external political environment.

The NMSP also released a public statement inviting all people in the Mon community to openly inform and report to the party

headquarters if there is a lack of accountability by members of the party. The public statement in the Mon language said that, in order to safeguard the organisation, the party has established a Department of the Auditor General for both central and district levels. The department urges members of the party, local affiliated members, civilians and Buddhist monks to put their criticisms into writing if they find any "wrongdoing" by members of the organisation.

### THE SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTION

The NMSP regards itself as a "revolutionary party" struggling for the self-determination of the Mon people for the last sixty years. The Mon National Liberation Army was formed as the party's military force in 1972. Only the last 25 years can be considered as "golden times" for party members to engage with urban populations in Rangoon and Moulmein (Mawlamyine), the capital of Mon State. To support this endeavour, the Department of Public Affairs has adopted new tasks for its staff who not only work in the party headquarters but also in urban areas along with local social and cultural organisations.

Since the 1995 ceasefire, the party has looked for new ways rather than continuing with its "old system" for public relations works. Both the Department of Public Affairs and the Department of Political Affairs worked hand in hand during the ceasefire years. The party was still under attack, both internally and externally, after the ceasefire agreement was reached. Senior party members attempted policies of toleration but they were unable to adopt interactive strategies to prevent organisational conflict. Subsequently, members broke away from the party in 1996 to set up a Mon Army Mergui District, while Col. Nai Pan Nyunt led another breakaway group in 2002 which established a Hongsawatoi Restoration Party.

Following these splits, NMSP leaders faced the dilemma whether to attack the breakaway soldiers or tolerate different opinions. In both cases, Mon leaders reached a consensus that troops on the different sides should maintain a distance from each other in operations and use a policy of "watch and act" in dealing with internal conflict. The reality is that, since the 1995 ceasefire, large battalions of the Burmese Army have been established in Mon towns and villages in Ye township where the NMSP has been unable to reduce the government's military build-up on the ground.



NMSP CELEBRATES GOLDEN JUBILEE MON NATIONAL DAY, 1997 (NA)

### SEARCHING FOR MIDDLE GROUND FOR THE NEW MON POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Unity is the first and foremost aim of the New Mon State Party. Following the ceasefire, the party called public meetings during 1995-96 in different places and at different levels of participation by Mon people. A Mon National Affairs Seminar was convened in 1995 with almost one hundred young men, women and laymen from different villages participating in the three-day convention. A new Mon alliance was formed by the name of the Mon Unity League (MUL). The new movement was comprised of the NMSP's key leaders as well as members of organisations representing women, youth, media, human rights and the rule of law.

The formation of a Committee for Youth Assembly was a first step to reform the NMSP's political wing while there were also policy changes to further the business operations of the party. The Department of Administration holds a degree of power within the party while the Mon National Liberation Army also exercises higher power to shape the party's image. The Committee for Youth Assembly and the Department of Public Affairs now hold a mandate to reunite Mon social and political forces within the country. If the NMSP is to be serious about reformation, freedom of expression within the party circle should first be exercised without blacklisting members. A young people's forum by the name of the Mon Youth Progressive

Organisation was also formed in late 2001 to promote civic-based movement in Mon State.

### CONCLUSION

Mon leaders under the NMSP leadership have endured over six decades of conflict, political dilemma and facing their own weaknesses, both for better and for worse. It can be summarised that the party holds balanced views about its own internal affairs as well as dealing with controversial issues such as disputes over border demarcation with the Karen National Union and local militia groups in its control areas. In the future, NMSP leaders will continue to engage with both local and national movements for the right of self-determination and guarantees of cultural and civil rights under the ceasefire process.

Today the NMSP leadership is in its third generation after the death of its five veteran leaders: Nai Shwe Kyin, Nai Non Lar, Nai Htin, Nai Rotsa and Nai Pan Thar. The new leadership are mobilizing their military and political strength by close engagement with the Mon people. The party has been underestimated by other parties as a weak organisation. But the truth of the matter is that the party is in safe hands for the next chapter. A call for the self-determination of the Mon people in political transition will be a high stake development following the 2020 general election in the country.



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