

【현장보고】

Update on Myanmar's Ethnic Peace Process*

Surge in Violence in Rakhine State
and Impasse over Charter Amendments

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There were a number of new developments in Myanmar's ethnic peace process since the last Panglong Peace Conference in July 2018. The first of these was a unilateral ceasefire declaration by the military for its north, northeast and southern commands for a period of 4 months from January to April 2019. According to the military this announcement was meant to facilitate the peace process in order to try and end armed conflict in the country by 2020 and in time for the next election. However, this announcement had little impact on Rakhine state in the west where attempts by the Arakan Army (AA) to establish a foothold in the state has led to a serious surge in fighting as well as new groups of internally displaced persons. This new front has now become the most volatile region in the country and adds on to a list of grievances between Rakhine nationalists in the state on the one hand and the central government and the military on

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the other. Another major development has been attempts by the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led parliament to amend the constitution, much to the chagrin of the military that has stoutly opposed it thus far.

This article examines the most important developments that have occurred in Myanmar's ethnic peace process since the Third 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference that was held in August 2018. Specifically it examines the military's unilateral ceasefire that was declared in January 2019, and the upsurge of violence in Rakhine state since then. Then it goes on to look at the Karen National Union's withdrawal from formal meetings of the peace process since last October and the chances of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) possibly signing on to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in the footsteps of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU). The fourth section outlines the continued fighting in the Shan states between the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) on the one hand and the Restoration Council of the Shan States (RCSS) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) on the other that has continued unabated with a seeming dynamic of its own. The fifth section looks at continued Chinese attempts to broker peace between the Northern Alliance and the government while the final section examines the dynamics associated with the NLD-led parliament's attempts to amend the 2008 Constitution that has put it on a seeming collision course with the military. The concluding section then describes the likely future issues and trajectories in the peace process.

I . The military's unilateral ceasefire and related issues

In a surprising and unexpected development the Myanmar military announced a unilateral ceasefire on December 21 2018 that it said would last for 4 months till end April 2019. While this was a welcome development to many of the ethnic armed groups it did not completely put a halt to fighting. First, this ceasefire only applied to active conflict areas under the Northern and Northeastern Commands (Nyein Nyein, 2018a). This is a geographical reference to the Shan and Kachin states where there had been much fighting recently as the military sought to extend its control and consolidate previous gains especially against the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). And in the Shan states quite a lot of the fighting is between different ethnic groups themselves and in particular between the Restoration Council of the Shan States (RCSS), the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). And most of this fighting is for control over territory in areas with mixed ethnic populations. The declaration is also viewed as an attempt to lure the three ethnic armed groups that appeared keen to enter the peace negotiations and sign on to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) earlier after informal talks arranged by China. The three groups are the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Arakan Army (AA). These were the three groups that the military had in the past insisted on a surrender before any negotiations on account of

their brazen attacks on border towns in the past.

Unilateral ceasefires are not a new development and in fact the previous government led by Thein Sein announced a similar ceasefire with the KIO in January 2013 in order to try and engage it in peace talks after the collapse of the bilateral ceasefire in June 2011 (Aung Naing Oo, 2018). Other than trying to persuade the non-signatories the ceasefire is also viewed as an attempt to reengage the Karen National Union (KNU) the anchor ethnic armed group in the NCA to return to the negotiation table (to be discussed later). There are many other reasons that could have motivated the military. Like the three non-signatories mentioned earlier, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) is another group that is believed to be close to signing the NCA (Joe Kumbun, 2018). And the military would like all ethnic armed groups to sign on to the NCA by April 2019 in order to move the stalled process forward. In fact the National League for Democracy-led (NLD) government is also hoping to bring the peace process to an end in 2020 prior to the end of its term in office although this is not to suggest that the military and the government necessarily share the same strategic perspective. The government's strategy also includes changes to the 2008 Constitution that the military is staunchly opposed to. And while there has been a lull in fighting in the north and northeast of the country, the situation in the western state of Rakhine has deteriorated significantly and fighting there involves the Arakan Army, one of the three groups that the military had initially sought to bring into the NCA.

II. Arakan Army's new forays into Chin and Rakhine states

The Arakan Army (AA) had been involved in clashes with the military from October 2018 and this is one of the reasons why the unilateral ceasefire was not extended to the Western Command covering the area. The AA had traditionally been headquartered in Laiza in Kachin state together with the KIO. In fact it was the KIO that nourished and supported the AA and the TNLA in order to broaden its engagement of the military. Then in late 2018 the AA announced that it was going to seek a foothold in Rakhine state in order to represent Rakhine ethnics and secure its position as an ethnic armed group with territorial control in areas where its ethnic nationals were dominant. Consequently, it sought bases in Paletwa in Chin state and in the Mayu mountain range in Rakhine state. The military was determined not to allow this relocation and has engaged the AA fiercely to deny it such a foothold.

The flare in violence between the two groups became especially pronounced after the AA attacked 4 border police posts and killed 13 border policemen. In the early stages of the fighting it was reported that hundreds of Chin and Arakanese had fled across the border into Bangladesh as well (Moe Myint, 2019a). The military was enraged and vowed a strong response to the terrorist-style attacks against security forces likening it to the attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in August 2017 that led to the clearance operation that resulted in more than 700,000 Rohingya

Muslims fleeing across the border to Bangladesh. In fact the military has on a number of occasions accused the AA of collaborating with ARSA and using common staging areas near Myanmar's border with Bangladesh in order to undermine the AA's credibility (*Mizzima*, 2019). The military also claimed that it had received instructions from the government to attack and defeat the AA. Since January this year the fighting between the AA and the military has escalated considerably and the AA attacked more border police posts in March and also staged brazen attacks on military camps leading to a large number of casualties (Nyann Lynn Aung, 2019a; Moe Myint, 2019b).

The AA accused the military of disguising its soldiers as policemen and held it responsible for indiscriminate artillery attacks on civilian areas as it seeks to find common cause with the ethnic Rakhine who have a long history of animosity towards the Bamar majority ethnic group. By March the military reported nearly 100 clashes with the AA in 2019 alone (Nyein Nyein, 2019b). And in mid-April at the time of writing the military has significantly beefed up its troop presence in the area and has fought pitched battles around the historic city of Mrauk U using fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships akin to the situation when it previously engaged the KIO in order to take control of strategic high ground around Laiza. The death toll has mounted steadily on both sides and there are now more than 26,000 internally displaced persons in this new theatre of conflict. The AA and locals have accused the military of summary arrests and killing of civilians as well as indiscriminate aerial bombing of the area. The heightened fighting has led the military to declare a curfew order in five townships in northern Rakhine and there are fears that the situation will deteriorate further (Moe Myint, 2019c). The order includes curfew from dusk

to dawn that makes it difficult for civilians to go about their daily lives including procuring food and medicine. Moreover the AA has detained 8 construction workers and destroyed vehicles and equipment in Paletwa in Chin state accusing the workers of being soldiers in disguise. The stalled construction work for the Paletwa-Mizoram Road is part of the larger Kaladan Project that is meant to link Myanmar and India through land and sea routes and the military was quick to villainize the AA for its actions (Chan Thar, 2019a).

The Rakhine situation has its own dynamics and is somewhat different from that of many of the other armed groups. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Rakhine state that was in the past home to its own kingdom has a long history of past socio-cultural achievements and the local population is understandably proud of it. Additionally they distrust the Bamar majority as well as the military that they regard as oppressors. In fact it may be remembered that Rakhine, together with the Shan state, are the only two states where the NLD did not secure a majority in the local legislature but since the constitution privileges the President in the appointment of Chief Ministers, the current Chief Minister, Nyi Pu, there is an NLD appointee and there have already been several apparent attempts on his life. This structural arrangement is viewed as continuing oppression from the central government regardless of local electoral outcomes. And to make matters worse, two leading Rakhine personalities (a political leader and a writer) have recently been sentenced to lengthy 20-year prison terms for high treason and incitement deriving from a public speech made during a ceremony marking the fall of the Rakhine Kingdom to the Konbaung Dynasty where they allegedly called for secession and offered armed

insurgency as an option (Than Hlaing, 2019; Lun Min Mang, 2019). Both men are held in high regard among the locals and this development has further alienated the government from the locals. There are also reports that many Arakanese are supportive of the AA and view them as potential liberators from Bamar oppression (Lawi Weng, 2019a). Additionally, the AA and its charismatic leader has also called for a new and independent vision for the state called the Way of the Rakhita or Rakhine Dream (Kyaw Lin, 2019). There is a history of such attempts in the past with the Arakan Independence Army (AIA) and Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) for Arakan freedom though both rebel groups collapsed in 1967.

This new theatre of conflict in the west has also strained the government and military's relationship with the other ethnic armed groups. At a meeting between the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) and 8 ethnic armed groups, many of them from the Northern Alliance, it was reported that the government's chief negotiator, U Tin Myo Win indicated that the government will take steps to prevent the AA from setting up a base in Rakhine state (Htoo Thant, 2019). The TNLA has even warned the military that if it does not stop "war crimes" in Rakhine state it will fight alongside the AA and against the military (Lawi Weng, 2019b). And together with the MNDAA, the three groups accused the military of attacking civilians and destroying historic pagodas. It may be remembered that these are the three groups that the military managed to persuade earlier on in a meeting in Kunming, China to sign on to the NCA. Hence, it now seems like the ongoing situation in Rakhine state has forced a rethink from these groups. Additionally, all three groups are part of the Northern Alliance that is led by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) that has been planning for a large

celebration of the 30th Anniversary of its bilateral ceasefire agreement with the military in mid-April. In fact the UWSA had called for the government to consider crafting the country into a loose confederation of states rather than a federal structure. While this idea has been dismissed the AA has made a similar call and the military has similarly told the AA to give up the idea (Nyein Nyein, 2019b) Meanwhile the Rakhine parliament in February defeated a motion submitted by the military for the state government to win public support for it (Chan Thar, 2019b). Taking all these negative developments into consideration President U Win Myint has just established a new committee to try and encourage peace and reconciliation in the state albeit the scale and intensity of the violence between the AA and the military seems to be only getting worse (Nyan Lynn Aung, 2019b). The 14 member committee is led by Upper House Deputy Speaker U Aye Thar Aung and his mandate is to lead field visits to the state and after consultations with locals make short and long term suggestions to alleviate the situation.

III. Karen suspension of peace talks, Karenni grievances and KNPP's possible accession to NCA

In October 2018 the Karen National Union (KNU) announced that it was suspending participation in formal peace talks. This was widely viewed as a major negative development since the KNU that initially signed the

bilateral ceasefire agreement in 2012 and then went on to sign the NCA in October 2015 was the largest ethnic armed group among all the signatories. In fact the relationship between it on the one hand and the military and the government on the other became so cordial to the point that the KNU regularly used to encourage the non-signatories to adopt a positive mindset and sign on to the NCA. Even the government sought the KNU's help in trying to persuade the KIO, the largest of the non-signatories after the UWSA to sign on to the NCA. Among the reasons offered for the withdrawal was the military's continued insistence on the armed groups formal commitment not to secede territorially from the Union and the agreement to a single joint army under Tatmadaw command. In the past both of these conditions had halted progress on the peace process (Nyein Nyein, 2018c). Another major issue involved the outbreak of fighting between the military and the KNU since March 2018 over the construction of a road in Phapun township in Karen state. This violence was over the issue of territorial control since the area, believed to have lucrative gold deposits, was under the control of Brigade 5 from the KNU. The fighting also led to the displacement of a large number of civilians. And finally, the KNU has indicated that political negotiations and dialogue regarding the terms of the future federal political structure should also involve the non-signatories to the NCA in order for the process to be inclusive of all parties. Internally there has also been leadership struggles within the KNU with hardliners insisting that the KNU is not enjoying any peace dividend.

Another major development in the peace process involves the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). It may be remembered how it was the only major group remaining in the United Nationalities Federal Council

(UNFC) that in the past used to collectively house the non-signatories. This situation arose after the other two major parties in the UNFC, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) signed on to the NCA just before the Third 21st Century Panglong Conference in February 2018. And one of the major reasons cited for the abstention by the KNPP then was the accusation that the military had killed four of its members in cold blood. But sufficient time has lapsed since then and the military has also held informal talks to persuade the KNPP to sign on. However, another new incident has posed an obstacle to that development. In January 2019 the government brought in and erected a statue of General Aung San at a state park in the capital Loikaw. This was viewed as an affront to the Karenni ethnic group and protests broke out shortly afterwards. In the ensuing clashes the police arrested 20 protestors in early February and another 21 were injured when police used rubber bullets and water canons against them later in the month (Lawi Weng, 2019c; Radio Free Asia, 2019). A KNPP spokesperson pointedly linked the installation of the statue to a possible delay in the KNPP's accession to the NCA (Chan Thar Htoo, 2019). The erection of similar statues in Mon, Chin and Kachin states have also led to backlash against the NLD government. In fact in 2017 when a bridge was named after General Aung San there were also widespread protests but these appear to have fallen on deaf ears. Such symbols associated with the majority ethnic Bamar are viewed as an affront in the ethnic minority states and areas that often have their own political elite and heroes (Lawi Weng, 2019d). In fact the military has on a number of occasions prevented the KNU from erecting a statue of its founder Saw Ba Oo Gyi in Karen state.

In order to reinvigorate the stalled peace talks with the KNU and the

RCSS and persuade the non-signatories to sign on the government has rekindled its previously successful informal talks to break the ice (Chan Thar, 2019c). These are typically held in Thailand and often referred to as the “Bangkok process” although the talks are usually held in the northern city of Chiangmai. Similarly, since the end of 2018 the government has attempted to similarly engage the Northern Alliance through such informal talks brokered by China and typically held in Kunming. All groups and in particular the Northern Alliance have welcomed this approach although the surging violence in Rakhine state has the potential to scuttle this initiative. In fact the KNU has confirmed that it will meet with the government’s NRPC to try and resume dialogue in April 2019 (Chan Thar, 2019d). And there is also an attempt to engage the KIO as part of talks between all three parties to broaden the process as well (Htoo Thant, 2019b)

IV. Continued inter-ethnic fighting in Shan states

Fighting has also continued unabated between some of the ethnic armed groups among themselves for control of territory in mixed ethnic areas. Such fighting is usually between the Restoration Council of the Shan States (RCSS) which is a signatory to the NCA and the TNLA which is a member of the Northern Alliance led by the UWSA. Sometimes the fighting is joined by the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) which typically fights alongside the TNLA and against the RCSS. Such fighting which began almost 3 years ago has only intensified and there appears to be little by way of attempts to

resolve the differences between these groups through dialogue. And such fighting makes the general situation much more complicated and difficult to resolve since some of the armed groups view each other as enemies as well. From time to time these three groups accuse the military of taking sides during such fighting over territory in order to take advantage of their differences. And the RCSS is typically accused of receiving such support since it is a signatory to the NCA compared to the TNLA for example which does not even have a bilateral ceasefire agreement which is the *conditio sine qua non* before accession to the NCA. In November 2018, for example, even before the military's unilateral ceasefire announcement, the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security (MIPS) reported 21 clashes between the military and the armed groups while those between the armed groups themselves numbered 23 in all (Chit Min Tun, 2018). And since the military's ceasefire took effect this discrepancy has gotten even worse.

V. Continuing Chinese attempts to broker peace

China's involvement in the ethnic peace process in Myanmar has also continued. In fact, since the appointment of Sun Guoxiang, Special Envoy for Asian Affairs in 2015 to help broker peace between the 7 ethnic armed groups in the Northern Alliance that are mostly located in the northern Shan states and Kachin state bordering China and the Myanmar government, China's involvement has become much more pronounced. It may be remembered that it was Sun who arranged for members of the Northern

Alliance to attend the Second and Third 21st Century Panglong Conference in Naypyitaw from Kunming in Yunnan province. If not for his intervention and persuasion, members of this group appeared disinterested in the peace process. In fact, the UWSA that claims leadership of the Northern Alliance has repeatedly said that since its 30-years old bilateral ceasefire that was negotiated in 1989 following the collapse of the Burma Communist Party (BCP) is working so well there is no need for it to accede to the NCA. And as mentioned earlier, it is now making grand plans to commemorate the event in April 2019.

While there is a sense in which the alliance is a marriage of convenience between parties that are either in a state of active conflict or left to their own devices like the UWSA, the purpose of the arrangement is to seek solidarity and strength in numbers. And since the UNFC no longer performs that function for the non-signatories to the NCA, the Northern Alliance conveniently performs that role. Whereas the government had in the past been dismissive of this collective idea, especially in dealing with the MNDAA, TNLA and the AA – three groups that do not even have a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the government, it has since the start of informal talks late last year come around to the idea (Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, 2019). And this agreement is truly a clear departure from the military's previous position since the Alliance's Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) has already indicated that it has its own plans and is unenthusiastic with the NCA as currently constituted. This position is also a great achievement for China since the military was never certain about China's motives given the fact that many of the Northern Alliance's ethnic groups are Chinese in origin and conveniently straddle the border between

both countries (Lawi Weng, 2018). That suspicion appears to have worn thin recently and Sun has consistently maintained that China's position is that the Northern Alliance should accede to the NCA and that such a development would be mutually beneficial for both countries in bringing about greater stability and security to the lengthy border areas.

To be fair, it is Yunnan province that is normally forced to play host to large numbers of refugees when fighting occurs in these areas and therefore the situation does impinge on China's core security interests. The Myanmar military's clearance operation against ARSA in 2017 in Rakhine state has also brought extremely negative international publicity to the country and its government and military for not undertaking a truthful and open investigation into the incident that led to more than 700,000 Muslims crossing into Bangladesh and still living in squalid conditions there. This development and China's willingness to blunt criticisms against Myanmar and its military in international fora has won kudos for the country. Arising from this situation the bilateral relationship between the two countries has strengthened considerably and elites of both countries have regularly exchanged cordial visits to further nurture the relationship. In April 2019 Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited China at the invitation of General Li Zuocheng, a member of China's Military Commission and chief of the Joint Staff Department of China (Nanda, 2019). And during the visit the Myanmar military leader endorsed China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and how it could benefit Myanmar and Chinese President Xi Jinping in turn reassured him of the country's support and desire to "increase strategic communication and support" regardless of the international situation (*China Daily*, 2019). And Aung San Suu Kyi is herself preparing to attend the Belt

and Road Forum in China later in April. China has in fact been drawing up plans for a number of economic corridors to link the country not only with Myanmar's cross-border northern cities but also to the northern city of Mandalay, the southern port city of Yangon and the western port city of Khaukphyu where it already has oil and gas pipelines to draw feedstock for its energy needs directly to Kunming. The country formalized an agreement to build a direct railway line from Muse to Mandalay to facilitate the first stage of this larger project in October 2018 (Nan Lwin, 2018). In fact there are now fears, especially in Kachin state that the Myanmar government may try to hasten the completion of large projects including the Myitsone Dam that was suspended by President Thein Sein in 2011 to the detriment of locals and their environment.

VI. Government attempts to amend the Constitution

The NLD-led government entered the political arena and campaigned in 2015 with a firm public commitment to amend the 2008 Constitution to deal with clauses that are not democratic in spirit, particularly those privileging the military and its entrenchment in politics. However this process has been hampered albeit there is widespread public support for it. In fact it may be remembered how a few years ago up to 5 million signatures were collected as part of a public campaign to force the issue although it was unsuccessful. And lately, the government has returned to this agenda through legislative attempts in the parliament and made it a priority item to be achieved by

2020 when its current term expires. Interestingly, the process has now become intertwined with the ethnic peace process. The argument is that the Constitution as it is currently drafted does not allow for the kind of political federation envisaged by the ethnic armed groups. Accordingly, in order to move the peace process forward the Constitution has to be amended.

In line with such thinking the parliament has appointed a committee to examine amending the Constitution with NLD lawmakers filing a motion for it in the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (bicameral legislature). It was passed by 369 of the 601 members who were present at the session with 17 voting against it and 3 abstentions while military MPs boycotted the vote (Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 2019). Hence, at least at the formal level a committee has been formed to do a review of the document and make its recommendations. And in March at the 7th meeting of the Joint Constitutional Amendment Committee approximately 70 sections from Chapter 4 of the Constitution were discussed and the most controversial suggestion of the NLD is to reduce the military representation in parliament down to 15 percent from the current 25 percent in the third term of parliament in 2020 and then 5 percentage point reductions during the next two terms of parliament to 10 and 5 percent respectively (Htoo Thant, 2019). Ethnic parties took the suggestion even further by proposing the exclusion of military MPs from parliament altogether. The military MPS and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) have made no suggestions thus far albeit USDP MP Soe Thein has suggested removing the power of the central government in appointing state and regional Chief Ministers. This suggestion will be a welcome development for the ethnic parties that have complained of being unable to exercise power in the states where they have an overwhelming majority in

parliament like in Rakhine and Shan states. However, they are also interested in denying the military representation in parliament and the Arakan National Party (ANP) had called for the total rather than phased removal of military MPs from 2020 (Moe Moe, 2019).

The motion was stiffly resisted by the 25 percent military members of parliament who stood up in unison to express their disapproval when the proposal was first mooted in the bicameral legislature. In fact these appointed military MPs had collectively behaved in a similar fashion when parliament proposed a bill to create the position of State Counsellor that is now being held by Aung San Suu Kyi in order to lead the government and have a confidant function as President and head of state in order to see the NLD's agenda through parliament. The warnings from the military actually preceded the formation of the Committee. In December 2018 during the passing out parade of the 20th Intake of the Defence Services Technological Academy (DSTA) in PyinOoLwin, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing warned against attempts to reduce the role of the military in the country and attempting to sow discord within it (*Eleven Newsmedia*, 2019).

A month after the Committee was formed, the military called for a press conference and stated that the military would step back from politics when “there is no ethnic armed organization and the country is in peace,” signaling that the military does not think this a right time for it to be disengaged from politics (Nyein Nyein, 2019e). Additionally, the military's senior parliamentary representative, Brigadier General Maung Maung has significantly stepped up his rhetoric against the NLD-led government's attempts to amend the Constitution by threatening a “battleground” if the issue is mishandled (Htet Naing Zaw, 2019). In late February the military

convened a press conference in Yangon attended by senior commanders from the military and pointedly indicated that it will not allow amendments to the essence of the Constitution, a reference to the military's structured presence in parliament especially if it was done in breach of Constitutional rules – a reference to the 75 percent majority vote that is required for such amendments (San Yamin, 2019). Finally, at the end of March during the 74th Armed Forces Day Vice General Soe Win warned against undertaking “illegal” changes to the charter, again harkening to the military's unhappiness with the situation (*Irrawaddy News*, 2019). In fact the USDP which has traditionally allied itself with the military and against the NLD in parliament has even tabled a motion to abolish the Charter Amendment Committee (San Yamin Aung, 2019). Hence, all in all the position of both the military MPs and its top brass have been clear and consistent in opposing amendments to the 2008 Constitution that they view as an existential threat to their political representation and influence. As to how far this challenge posed by the NLD will actually lead to political violence of any kind is difficult to predict but the military is not known to take challenges to its pride of place in domestic politics lightly. However the situation is still fluid and has not progressed to the point of actual confrontation beyond blunt warnings thus far.

VII. Likely future issues and trajectories

The ethnic peace process has suffered some serious setbacks since the

last 21st Century Panglong Conference. Such setbacks include the suspension of the KNU and the RCSS from ceasefire discussions. The KNU's withdrawal is especially significant since it is the largest of the NCA signatories and anchored the arrangement. Hence how this situation unfolds will be telling on the future of the entire peace process. The military's unilateral ceasefire for 4 months until the end of April is a welcome gesture although it is widely viewed as an attempt to restart a stalled process. Another positive development appears to be the seeming willingness of the KNPP to accede to the NCA. If the military deals with the KNU and the KNPP well then it will boost the NCA and peace process in general and if it does not, the entire agreement will be under threat. The NRPC's restart of the Bangkok process of informal negotiations has also led to some positive headway although no formalized outcomes other than the endorsement of the process are still visible.

The attempt by the Arakan Army to secure a foothold in Chin and Rakhine states has led to a massive upsurge of violence in Rakhine state with a large number of casualties on both sides as well almost 27,000 new internally displaced persons. The AA has also assassinated "traitors" among the public and threatened administrative and security personnel with a bullet in the mail. The AA's main targets are soft ones like police and army convoys using improvised explosive devices. The threat by other members of the Northern Alliance like TNLA to fight alongside the AA against the military may lead to an even greater escalation of violence. In this regard this conflict has the potential to spiral out of control and involve other ethnic armed groups. The UWSA's 30th anniversary celebrations and political statements and maneuvers associated with it are also worth watching for

clues on how the military may engage the Wa and Northern Alliance going forward. The involvement of Chinese officials at the celebrations and their statements may also yield some clues on China's position and preferences on the ethnic peace process.

And finally, the unknown at the back of all these developments is how the NLD's attempts to amend the Constitution will pan out in the days ahead. As mentioned earlier, the military has clearly indicated its displeasure thus far and how parliament deals with the issue and the military's response in turn has the potential to alter the entire political landscape and should not be taken lightly. In this regard both parties need to exercise good judgement to avoid untoward outcomes that may set back the political progress that the country has slowly achieved thus far.

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