

The Instrumental Roles of United Nationalities Federal Council as an All-Inclusive Platform for the Ethnic Groups in Burma

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to Burma/Myanmar:

The first chapter is an introduction into (1) the political background of the decades-long civil war and ethnic strife of Burma as well as the key political players in the political setting of Burma, (2) the theoretical literature which covers the keywords such as: conflict, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, (negative & positive) peace, peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and (3) the research questions that will explore the instrumental roles of United Nationalities Federal Council in the process of uniting the ethnic groups and peace-building.

Since its independence in 1948 Burma has been struggling to establish a modern democratic political system, and to unite the people under its rule, and so far, it has failed on both accounts. However, following the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (a pro-democracy leader and the Nobel Prize Winner) from a 15-year house arrest on November 13, 2010, unprecedented political reform has taken place, albeit gradually. Thein Sein, the current president of Burma, and Aung San Suu Kyi, the heroic opposition leader, are the two key political figures actively engaged in constructing a platform for future reconciliation and a path for political reforms. However, anyone familiar with the politics of Burma is well aware of the triangular relationships in politics. There exists three major political forces (Hlaing, 2010): 1) the erstwhile Military government (currently substituted by Thein Sein's government); 2) prodemocracy groups symbolized by National League for Democracy (NLD) and 3) ethnic minority groups currently represented by the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC).

The chapter provides an overview of the current political setting in Burma and the key political players and a brief introduction of roles of United Nationalities Federal Council as an all-inclusive platform for the ethnic groups in Burma.

Chapter 2: Historical Timeline of Burma

In order to understand how the situation of Burma can be spear-headed towards peace, harmony and gradual development of the country, it is integral to understand the historical timeline of the key events. This chapter highlights the major events, describes them and elucidates their impact on Burma as a whole. The author wishes to point out that the following the historical timeline of Burma is not written from a historian perspective. The intention of the author is to offer a concise description of various events which took place from the pre-colonial era until the present of Burma; or to put it simple, to offer a guideline as where Burma came from and to where the country is heading.

The historical timeline of Burma can be broken down into four significant periods:

1. Pre-colonial period
2. Colonial period
3. Independence and Civilian Government period
4. Military Coup and Socialist period
5. The Embarkation on Political Reform period

Chapter 3: Stakeholder Analysis

This chapter provides a comprehensive description of the major stakeholders (key political players in the current political setting of Burma) as well as a descriptive introduction of the major non-Burma ethnic groups (that represent both political and armed wing). In addition to the analysis of the key stakeholders in relations to this significant developmental stage of Burma (the stage of radical transformation), the chapter also offers an analysis of the current domestic affairs against the backdrop of the outside (international) interests. Since the announcement of the unprecedented reforms by President Thein Sein the international community, the United States, European Union, United Kingdom and etc. have all expressed their approval and as a token of their sincere commitment to facilitating and assisting Burma in the process of nation building and genuine political transformation, economic sanctions imposed by the aforementioned countries have been lifted and developmental assistance has been continuously flowing into Burma.

Chapter 4: Research Methodologies

Two types of research methodologies were adopted:

1. Participatory Observation
2. One-on-one interview

The prime objective of this series of in-depth one-on-one interview with the leaders of the ethnic groups is to understand and analyze the instrumental roles of United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) for the ethnic groups.

Field Research Locations:

1. First Field Trip (2012) **Mae Sot** and **Chiang Mai**, Thailand
2. Second Field Trip (2014) **Chiang Mai**, Thailand

The questionnaire comprises of twelve open-ended questions pertaining to the formation and instrumental role of UNFC as an all-inclusive platform for the ethnic minority groups. The followings are the twelve open-ended questions employed in a series interviews:

1. When was the UNFC established and what were the motives behind its establishment?
 2. Is a UNFC a political entity or a mere non-governmental organization whose only motive is to provide humanitarian aid/emergency relief aid to the rebel-controlled areas? Or both?
 3. If UNFC is a political entity, what are its political philosophy, objectives and visions and ARE they compatible with those upheld by the ethnic groups (ethnic rights, political equality, federalism, self-determination)?
 4. What are the instrumental roles of UNFC in the community rebuilding and peace process? Do the roles of UNFC undermine or foster the relationships between Thein Sein's government and the ethnic groups?
 5. Is it not possible for both the Burmese government and the ethnic groups (who are still in combatant with the military junta) to lay down their guns and talk? How much do you agree with the following statement; "*Without GUN the government refuse to sit with us (the ethnic groups) at the peace table.*"
- Etc.

Chapter 5: Findings and Data Analysis

This section of the study at hand involves in-depth analysis of the data in the purview of the objectives of the study. The research aims to understand the current affairs of Burma, the relationships of different ethnic groups as well as their positions in the failed attempt at nationwide ceasefires, the process of peace building and nation building. For this, UNFC has been taken the chief stakeholder to be analyzed. The primary data was gathered through personal interviews of 8 key position holders in UNFC and other ethnic groups. This section commences with details about the respondents and then an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary data is attempted.

And equally important, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the functional roles of Nippon Foundation against its multi-level relationships with Thein Sein's government, ethnic groups and Japanese government.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

Despite the overall positive directions, many more challenges remain regarding the current process of nation building and future reconciliation. Necessary measures have been undertaken by Thein Sein's government with full cooperation from opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and key ethnic leaders in order to pave the way for nationwide ceasefire agreements and unarmed negotiations. These are seen as the cornerstones to ending mutual distrust and ethnic conflicts that have created a substantial obstruction to the political transition process in Burma.

However, politics in Burma revolve around three main players or *political forces*: the former military government now replaced by Thein Sein's government, prodemocracy groups represented by the famous National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic groups now represented by United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). A realistic future reconciliation and a smooth political transition will inevitably prove challenging if one of the political forces is left out of the decision making process in political dialogue, policy formulation or the nation building process. Thein Sein's regime cannot dismiss the political significance of different political forces and the potential contribution that they will bring to the table.

The following bullet points are some of the possibilities that the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) and the key leaders of the ethnic groups can take into consideration to further improve and design a more inclusive and sustainable programs for rebuilding their respective community and nation as a whole for the betterment of the people of Burma:

- **Formulating and constructing a more integrated peacebuilding efforts (directing not only at the ordinary ethnic people but also the ordinary Burman) for greater inclusion**

The promotion and implementation of various community building programs, which have been elaborately discussed earlier in this paper, can be viewed as constructive approaches and mechanisms for supporting transformation process and development required to address the political and economic injustice, and bring about a continuous improvement to the livelihood and welfare of the grass-roots people. This will in turns ensure a sustainable-level of positive peace that has been for so long depriving.

- **Fostering reconciliation at a grass-roots level (Buman and non-Burman)**

Polarization does not allow a country as diverse as Burma to transcend its differences and truly enjoy the potentialities brought about by the celebration of diversity. To transcend differences, they all – both the *Burman* and non-*Burman* (ethnic minorities) alike – should learn to overcome their polarization and look beyond their walls of comfort and familiarity. What is required of them is the ability to imagine living in a society with those, whom they have for many decades, labeled as the enemy or perceived as the privileged ones (*heavenly sent*), and the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexities without dependence on the dualistic polarity (Lederach, 2010). The realization of such process will enable *Burman* and non-*Burman* alike to come to terms with the perceived differences that are dividing them and to together discover what they have or have not so to compensate for one another and bridge the gap. And a *common platform* for the ordinary people of the Union

of Burma should be establish so to offer them a safe atmosphere to reconcile the opposites and re-forging new relationships with one another.

- **Creating a tri-lingual society**

In the context of Burma, where there is a clear divide between the majority *Burman* and the ethnic minorities (non-*Burman*), language has a remarkable impact that can either be beneficial or detrimental to national unity which is crucial to Burma's political reforms. When asked what language they usually use when communicating with their comrades of different ethnic backgrounds as well as when with Thein Sein's government, all the ethnic leaders responded that they use *Burmese* language. Given the racial superiority, the language – *Burmese*, can be employed as a tool to enforce racial superiority over those of ethnic backgrounds. One of the most significant and invaluable heritage left behind by the British colonial is the *English language*. Burma can take advantage of this invaluable heritage for creating a sense of commonality that will benefit the unification of different nationalities. Establishing a *tri-lingual* society can be one of visions towards which all the Burmese people can work together, making English language as the *lingua franca* while respecting the languages of different ethnic minorities by allowing each state freely use their respective local language as the medium of communication and instruction in school.