

BURMA'S PATH TO PEACE

LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND PATHS FORWARD

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report aims to provide policymakers and the general public with a better understanding of Burma's ethnic conflicts. It examines the country's past experiences of peace efforts and why they have failed to end its decades-long series of wars. I believe that such a study is essential in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, and that it is applicable to any future, democratic government as well as local actors, armed and otherwise, which want to engage in peace talks. It is also my belief that foreign peacemakers need to have a better understanding of Burma's long history of unsuccessful peace efforts than was the case during 2011-2021 when a number of international organizations invested vast amounts of money on what they believed was a genuine peace process. This report chronicles past and current peace talks, describes the context in which they took place, and explains why all have failed to bring about a peaceful resolution to Burma's civil wars. Financial support for this project was provided by the United States Institute of Peace. Findings and conclusions are entirely my own.

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I have covered Burma's civil wars and the related issues, such as domestic Burmese politics, organized crime, and the Golden Triangle drug trade for more than forty years. I was a correspondent for the now defunct Hong Kong weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review* from 1982-2004 and now write for *The Irrawaddy* and other websites. I am also the author of 23 books of which nine, including *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgencies Since 1948*, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, and *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma* have been translated into Burmese. My most recent book on Burma is *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*.

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ABOUT VISUAL REBELLION MYANMAR

Visual Rebellion is a collective for journalists, photographers, filmmakers, and artists to publish their productions in the aftermath of the February 1st, 2021 coup d'État in Nay Pyi Daw. As wars on information and ideology are raging in the country, our aim is to provide young creators with the necessary resources to keep producing high-value verified content on what is happening in Myanmar. We partner with international organizations and media outlets to fund and spread their work.

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They were published on Researchers' Republic, a network of academics from Myanmar specializing on environmental issues, land rights, labor rights, business and human rights, drugs, health, education, conflict, displacement, and gender.

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Visual Rebellion provided the layout and publication for this report.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	01
Overview	02
<i>Peace Efforts and Talks in the 1950s</i>	05
<i>The Rise of the Military into Becoming a State Within a State</i>	09
<i>Peace Efforts and Talks in the 1960</i>	12
<i>Peace Efforts and Talks in the 1970s</i>	20
<i>The 1980 General Amnesty and Peace Talks</i>	24
<i>Ceasefire Agreements After the 1988 Pro-Democracy Uprising</i>	29
<i>Peace Meetings After the 2010 and 2015 Elections</i>	34
<i>The 2021 Coup and its Aftermath: A Wider Civil War and Lessons Learned</i>	37
Appendix I // <i>Burma's Civil Wars: A Timeline</i>	42
Appendix II // <i>Major Past and Present Rebel Armies</i>	50
Abbreviations	56
References	58

SUMMARY

The wars between successive central governments in Burma and an abundance of ethnic, leftist and rightist rebel movements together comprise the longest, internal armed conflict in the world. They began shortly after Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 and, despite numerous talks and mediation efforts, the country is still at war with itself. The internal security situation deteriorated even further after the Burmese military stepped in to regain absolute power on February 1, 2021. Until then, the wars had for decades been confined to the country's frontier areas, where the ethnic minorities live. But what began as peaceful demonstrations against the military's power grab turned into armed resistance when the protests were met with bullets, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths. Activists from urban areas teamed up with ethnic rebels, which resulted in armed confrontations not only in the frontier areas but also, for the first time since the 1970s, in the Burmese heartland.

During a decade of relative openness, which lasted from the 2010 election and the formation of a quasi-civilian government in March 2011 until the 2021 coup, a series of peace talks were held. Several foreign organizations became involved in what they believed was a "peace process", but it was clear from the very beginning that the Burmese military only wanted the ethnic armed organizations to surrender without agreeing to any of their demand for their political demands, which included fundamental changes to the 2008 military-drafted constitution and a return to the federal system that Burma enjoyed before the first military takeover in 1962. That should have come as no surprise, because it is exactly what military's position has been since the first peace talks were held in the 1950s. Nothing changed when more talks were held in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and the early 2000s. What the outside world hailed as an important step forward after the 2010 election was actually nothing more than a repeat of earlier, equally inconclusive talks and efforts—and broken promises.

The situation today is more serious than it has been at any time since the turbulent years immediately after independence. But even if there is little the outside world can do, we have to explore ways to get out of the immense human suffering that has befallen Burma. The first step would be to examine Burma's long history of failed attempts to establish peace, and why those did not end the country's civil wars. This paper was written with that in mind and present the lessons that could be learned from past mistakes.

OVERVIEW

On January 4, 1948, Burma became an independent republic, the Union of Burma. Its constitution was federal and, in accordance with an agreement that the country's independence hero Aung San signed with representatives of the Shan, Kachin and Chin communities at Panglong in the Shan States on February 12, 1947, the country's frontier areas were to be granted regional autonomy. But not all ethnic minorities attended the Panglong conferences, and some, instead, demanded independence from Burma. Among them was the powerful Karen National Union (KNU), which had its own militia, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), and they began their struggle for complete independence in January 1949. Smaller groups of Mon and Karenni rebels also took up arms and, in the west near the border with East Pakistan, Muslim mujahids began fighting for accession to Pakistan. Even before that, in April 1948, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) had gone underground and begun fighting for a socialist republic. At the same time, several army units mutinied. Some joined the CPB while others, dominated by ethnic minorities, went to the KNDO and the smaller armies.

The government's control of the country was so limited that diplomats widely referred to it as "the Rangoon Government." But within a few years, and with massive help from India, the government gained ground and managed to re-establish control over most of the country. That was also when the first peace talks were held, but the government and the military could offer the rebels who surrendered nothing more than rehabilitation and, for some, business opportunities. The government, and especially the military, were also suspicious of machinations behind the scenes by the Soviet and Chinese embassies in Rangoon.

At the same time, it was not only indigenous rebel movements that were active in the frontier areas and elsewhere. Thousands of nationalist Chinese, Kuomintang (KMT), soldiers who had been defeated by the communists in the Chinese civil war, had retreated into the northeastern Shan States. Supported by US government agencies and the Republic of China on Taiwan, they established bases in those areas from where they tried to re-enter China. The Burmese army was sent to the Shan States to rid the country of the intruders, but were only partly successful. Then, in 1958, some Shans resorted to armed struggle and were followed by Kachin nationalists who in 1961 set up the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The country was once again in turmoil, and the central government summoned ethnic leaders to a seminar in Rangoon to address the crisis. However, before anything could happen, the military commanded by General Ne Win staged a coup on March 2, 1962, detained all the participants in the seminar along with Prime Minister U Nu and his cabinet ministers. The federal constitution was abolished and Burma came under strict, centralized military rule. A junta headed by Ne Win assumed absolute power over all organs of the state.

OVERVIEW

What had happened during the 1950s and early 1960s was that the military had grown in strength in order to fight the insurgencies and the KMT—and it became a state within a state that also ran its own business enterprises outside of governmental control. Rather than solving the problem of national unity, the coup had the opposite effect. The ethnic and communist insurgencies flared anew. In 1963, and ostensibly to address the issue, the military convened what it called a “peace parley” in Rangoon, which was attended by leaders of nearly all the rebel movements. But, again, the military did not offer anything more than rehabilitation and business opportunities. Not surprisingly, the talks ended inconclusively.

The civil war took a new turn in 1968, when heavily armed CPB troops, supported by China, came across the Chinese border. Within a couple of years, they had wrested control over a 20,000 square-kilometer area along the Chinese border—and forged alliances with a number of ethnic rebel armies. That war was even bloodier than the post-independence turmoil, and the government, unable to defeat the “new” CPB in the northeast turned on the much weaker base areas in central Burma, among them the Pegu Yoma mountains north of Rangoon where the party had been ensconced since the beginning of the civil war in 1948. By the late 1970s, all those areas in the Burmese heartland had been recaptured by the military and a non-communist insurgency in the Thai border, initiated by the ousted prime minister U Nu after the 1962 coup, had crumbled because of internal divisions and conflicts with the ethnic rebels in whose areas they had their camps. The CPB became isolated in the northeast while the Shan, Kachin and Karen rebel armies continued fighting in their respective areas.

In 1980, the government announced a general amnesty and talks were held with the CPB and the KIA. Some rebels, though not as many as the government claimed, surrendered—and were offered rehabilitation and business opportunities. The talks produced nothing, and by 1981, the wars with the CPB and the KIA flared up again. The CPB meanwhile, began to suffer from reduced Chinese aid after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. With Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power and the implementation of free-market reforms, China was no longer interested in exporting revolution; now economic growth and exports became Beijing’s top domestic and foreign policy priorities.

By then, the general public had also had enough of years of military misrule that had devastated the economy and turned what once was the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia into a social and economic wreck. In 1988, millions of people across Burma demonstrated against the dictatorial rule of General Ne Win, coup maker and later the country’s president. The uprising was drenched in blood as the military fired their automatic rifles and machine-guns into crowds of demonstrators. Perhaps as many as 3,000 protesters were killed and more than 10,000 mostly young activists fled to the border areas where they formed their own armed units and joined forces with the ethnic rebels. The military government in Rangoon was isolated, but was saved by a mutiny within the hilltribe rank and file of the CPB. Tired of fighting for an ideology that meant nothing to them, they drove the ageing, mostly Burman, leadership into exile in China in April 1989 and formed their own, ethnic armies.



The generals in Rangoon realized that an alliance between the CPB mutineers, the ethnic rebels and the urban dissidents would pose a major threat to their grip on power and, therefore, made a unique offer to the former communist forces: they could retain their guns and control over their respective areas—and engage in any kind of business—if they did not share their weapons with the anti-junta forces. Ceasefire deals were struck with the former CPB forces, though contrary to how many writers have it, no agreements were signed at that time.¹ But the strategy proved successful and soon ethnic armies that had been dependent on the CPB for military, medical and other assistance faced severe difficulties arming and maintaining their troops—and entered into similar ceasefire agreements with the military. More than twenty groups, most of them small but also major armies like the Shan State Army (SSA), accepted the offer. In 1994, the powerful KIA also made peace with the military, and the Kachins were the only ones who actually insisted on, and got, a written ceasefire agreement.²

Peace seemed to be at hand in Burma, and in 2010-2011 came a general election and the formation of a quasi-civilian government led by Thein Sein, a retired general. To the surprise of many, political prisoners were released, previously strict press censorship regulations were abolished, and political parties could operate freely. The Thein Sein government also launched what they called a “peace process”, and began talks with representatives of the country’s many ethnic armed organizations. Foreign donors flocked to Burma to support the efforts, turning peace-making into a lucrative business for those involved. Some cynics even began talking about a “peace-industrial complex.” With most foreign consultants lacking knowledge of the roots of Burma’s civil wars, it was, not surprisingly, a total waste of money. Nothing substantial was achieved and when the Thein Sein government signed a “Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement” with eight groups in October 2015—only weeks before the next election which was going to be held in November—critics dismissed it as a face-sav-

ing gesture. Only two of those signatories actually had armies that had been engaged in fighting the military. The rest were small and insignificant, and one, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was in effect a military-allied militia. Nevertheless, the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, which won the November 2015 election came into office in April 2016, did not deviate from Thein Sein’s failed peace policies.

This charade of a peace process, and the freedoms that people had enjoyed since Thein Sein formed his government in 2011, finally came to an end on February 1, 2021. The mass killings that followed the coup, and yet another flight of urban dissidents to ethnic minority areas, strongly resemble what happened after the 1988 uprising. But there are also differences. This time, the resistance is able to use digital media to get their messages across, there is more foreign sympathy for their cause, and the army, despite their huge arsenal of weapons, is showing signs of weakness. There have been defections from the military and the police, and discipline and morale within the armed forces are reported to be at an all-time low.

The nature of the resistance has changed dramatically after what has been termed “the Spring Revolution” of 2021. From being confined to the border areas, Burma’s armed conflicts have become a nationwide uprising against military rule. Between the campaigns against the CPB in the mid- and late-1970s and 2011, there was no fighting in central Burma. Now, resistance forces are battling the Burmese military even in regions such as Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay and Irrawaddy, where there had been no war since the 1970s. Moreover, the old capital Rangoon has seen urban guerrilla warfare of a kind never experienced before in Burma’s long history of armed conflicts.

PEACE EFFORTS AND TALKS IN THE 1950s

Burma's first years of independence were the most difficult in the post-World War II era. Only the 4th Burma Rifles commanded by General Ne Win remained intact after the mutinies and defections in 1948-1950, and that unit, not any World War II-era resistance forces, became the nucleus of the new Burmese Army that emerged after independence. The soldiers, who had served under independence hero Aung San, formed a paramilitary called the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), and there was little love lost between them and the ambitious General Ne Win. Aung San had been assassinated on July 19, 1947, half a year before independence and a faction of his PVO was among the many military units and paramilitary forces that went underground following the departure of the British.

In order to understand what has happened in Burma since independence and the outbreak of hostilities it is of vital importance to study the rise of the 4th Burma Rifles. The modern Burmese Army traces its origin to the World War II resistance, but that is one of the many myths that has been kept alive by the Burmese military. Even Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, used to talk about "my father's army". But, somewhat ironically, there have actually been more veterans from his erstwhile Burma Independence Army (BIA) in various insurgent organizations than in the Burmese Army.

Of the legendary Thirty Comrades, who went for military training in Japan before the invasion in 1942, two—Bo La Yaung and Bo Taya—joined the PVO rebellion. Three—Bo Zeya, Bo Ye Htut and Bo Yan Aung—joined the CPB after independence. Only General Ne Win, Brigadier Kyaw Zaw and Major Bo Bala remained in the new army that emerged in the 1950s. Four of the others—Bo Let Ya, Bo Yan Naing, Bohmu Aung and Bo Setkya—rallied behind the right-wing resistance, which former Prime Minister U Nu organized on the Thai border after Ne Win's seizure of power in 1962. And, in late 1976, Kyaw Zaw, once the most popular commander in the army but who had been pushed out by Ne Win in 1957, went underground and joined the CPB.³ On September 6, 1988, as the pro-democracy movement swept across Burma, nine out of the then eleven survivors of the Thirty Comrades denounced Ne Win and called on the army to join the uprising. Only Kyaw Zaw, who was then still with the CPB, was unable to join the appeal. Later, he also expressed his support for the movement against Ne Win.



The power base of the army that emerged during the 1950s, and especially of the military regime that staged a coup d'état in 1962, was actually a very narrow one. It consisted mainly of officers from the 4th Burma Rifles and nearly all officers who became prominent in the 1960s came from this particular unit. When Ne Win formed a so-called "Revolutionary Council" after the coup, it was popularly referred to as "the Fourth Burifs Government." Number two in that Government, Brigadier Aung Gyi, came from this regiment, as did two of the most prominent members of the post-1962 junta: Brigadiers Tin Pe and Kyaw Soe.

More ex-4th Burma riflemen rose to power in the 1970s and 1980s as other officers were gradually weeded out of the top military leadership: General Sein Lwin, who served as president for seventeen days during the stormy events of August 1988; stalwart General Kyaw Htin, who served as Chief of Staff of the army from 1976 to 1985, and defense minister from 1976 to 1988; and U Tun Tin, Deputy Prime Minister from 1981 to 1988. When the socialist system that Ne Win's junta had introduced in 1962 was abolished in 1988, the then ruling Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was renamed the National Unity Party (NUP), with U Tha Gyaw, also a former 4th Burma rifleman, as its first chairman. Even Ne Win's personal cook, an ethnic Indian called Raju, had served in the same capacity in the 4th Burma Rifles.

Dr. Maung Maung, Burma's official historian during the pre-1988 regime, estimated that there were maybe only 2,000 soldiers at Ne Win's disposal when he took over as commander-in-chief in 1949, and they were "all scattered in decimated, weak battalions and companies."⁴ It should also be remembered that Aung San and his Thirty-Comrades based BIA were first allied with the Japanese and turned against them as late as March 27, 1945, three years after Karen and Kachin resistance forces had taken up arms against the occupiers—and that, after independence, exacerbated the already existing divide between the majority Burmans and the ethnic minorities.

Miraculously, however, “the Rangoon Government” survived. Military assistance from India was crucial for the initial victories against the insurgents, or, as U Nu remarked in his autobiography: “True to his words, Pandit Nehru [Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru] sent several shipments of arms, without which Burma might never have recovered. Now the unserviceable guns of the combat troops were replaced, and new units raised and equipped. By November 1949, the army, civilian police, and the UMP [Union Military Police] felt strong enough to retake towns and villages under rebel occupation.”⁵ Further on in his autobiography, U Nu went on to say that he “found in Premier Nehru a friend and a savior. Without the prompt support in arms and ammunition from India, Burma might have suffered the worst fate imaginable. As it turned out, from the middle of 1949, when Mr. Nehru’s rifles began arriving, the enemy’s threat was first contained, then eliminated.”⁶

The Communist and ethnic rebels had perhaps not been “eliminated”, but by the mid-1950s they had retreated to remote areas of Arakan, the Irrawaddy Delta region, the Dawna Range near the Thai border, and parts of Sagaing Division in the northwest. The CPB, which had been outlawed in 1953 and established a stronghold in the Pegu Yoma, began to talk about giving up the armed struggle and joining Burmese mainstream politics as a legal political party.

Was peace at hand? The first efforts to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table were actually made the same year as the civil war broke out. The main spokesman for the early peace movement was Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the “grand old man” of Burmese nationalism and the one who guided the independence movement of the 1930s. On October 19, 1948, he held a meeting with veterans of the anti-colonial struggle at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon and they agreed on a 6-point proposal to end the war: fresh elections should be held; both sides (the government and the CPB) should begin preparing for those elections; the population should not be intimidated by either the government’s army or the CPB’s militants; a new Union government should be formed within ten days of the election; the rebels should hand over their weapons to the government; and everyone should pledge to solve the country’s problems with democratic, peaceful means.⁷ A committee consisting of six executive and eleven or-

dinary members was formed to lead the efforts. Apart from independence struggle veterans there were also people from the legal profession, intellectuals and other well-respected members of society. But among them was only one Karen, Saw Mya Thein, and one woman, Daw Khin Chit.⁸ A People’s Peace Front was also formed and meetings were held in the Jubilee Hall in Rangoon, and Thakin Kodaw Hmaing attended the 1952 Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference in Beijing, which took place in Beijing in October 1952 against the backdrop of the Korean War. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing also traveled to China, Mongolia, Hungary, and the Soviet Union in 1953 and, the following year, he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize by the Supreme Soviet Presidium in Moscow. All this led to the military being convinced that the Soviets and the Chinese had a hand in his peace initiative. There was no evidence of that, but it meant that the military refused to enter into any talks with the CPB. Thanks to the arms that had been supplied by India, the military was now better equipped and convinced that they would be able to defeat the rebels on the battlefield. Therefore no talks were necessary.

Thakin Kodaw Hmaing’s first peace initiative ended in failure, but he did not give up. In 1956, as some leading members of the CPB had begun talking about negotiations and the possibility of giving up the armed struggle in favor of becoming a legal, political party, Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, sent an appeal to 143 leading monks urging them to support his peace movement. Peace marches were held all over the country, but the government—and the military—saw no reason to enter into talks with the rebels, and neither did U Nu. On September 23, 1956, U Nu addressed a big gathering in Rangoon and although he had resigned in favor of socialist leader U Ba Swe (who served as prime minister from June 1956 to July 1957, when U Nu once again became prime minister), it was attended by all the cabinet ministers. U Nu’s speech, which ran into 29 typed pages in Burmese, was a vitriolic attack on “the traitorous acts committed by the insurgents, and the acts of perfidy which accompanied every attempt of the Government to end the insurrection through negotiation...in order to bring their rebellion to a successful conclusion, the Communists are setting up a gigantic trap. Let those who loathe the evil method of force to gain power beware!”⁹

The U Ba Swe government went beyond rhetoric and pledged to pay 500,000 Kyats to anyone who could bring in CPB chairman Thakin Than Tun dead or alive, and a 50,000 Kyat reward for the capture or killing of any of the other six members of the party's politburo. The offer was valid until September 1957, but none of the CPB's top leaders was ever hunted down.¹⁰

More political disputes where the military were to play an important role occurred in 1958. The ruling AFPFL had split into two rival factions and the parliament had given General Ne Win "the mandate to restore law and order in the country and also create the conditions that would be conducive to the holding of free and fair elections as soon as possible."¹¹ Despite a pledge to rule the country for only six months, Ne Win's Caretaker Government did not hand back power to a civilian government until December 1960, after the promised elections had finally been held.

During the 1958-1960 Caretaker Government, the military went ahead with its own way of trying to bring the internal wars to an end. First, the military claimed that it has to take over power, not only because the split in the AFPFL had caused a political crisis but, according to a speech Ne Win delivered on October 31, 1958, also because "the rebels were increasing their activities and the political pillar was collapsing. It was imperative that the Union should not be drawn in shallow waters as it nearly did in 1948-49. So it fell on the armed forces to perform the bounden duty to take all security measures to forestall and prevent a recurrence."¹²

That astounding statement was contradicted by other statements made at the very same time by the military, where it was claimed that the rebels had been defeated: "The remnants of the Red Flag Communist Party (a break-away faction of the CPB) are so small as to be hardly worth speaking about. Only a few leaders and a pocket here and a pocket there of the White Flag Communists [the main CPB] remain. With the exception of a very few, all the PCPs [People's Comrade Party, the successor to the PVO] have surrendered. Of the KNDOs there are some left in the Papun area of the East Yomas and a little in the delta. The remnants of the MNDO [the Mon National Defense Organization] are scarcely worth mentioning."¹³

Despite being reduced to next to nothing, a surprisingly large number of rebels were killed, wounded or captured, or surrendered during the reign of Ne Win's Caretaker Government:

1,872 killed

1,959 wounded

1,238 captured

3,618 surrendered ¹⁴

Those figures may have been grossly inaccurate and inflated, but the context in which they were presented reflected the attitude of the armed forces, which became clear during the peace efforts in the 1950s, and which have remained unchanged since then: rebels should either be killed or forced to surrender. There is no room for political dialogs. In line with that thinking, in 1959 the Caretaker Government issued an order dissolving Thakin Koidaw Hmaing's peace committee.

THE RISE OF THE MILITARY INTO BECOMING A STATE WITHIN A STATE

The insurgencies and failed peace efforts had made it necessary for the government to increase the strength of the armed forces, but, once strong, the military developed into an entity over which the elected civilians had no influence. The civilian-military divide when it came to privileges began within a couple of years of fighting between the army and the insurgents. According to U Thaung, a prominent journalist who later went into exile in the US: “The civilians faced their hardships boldly—but for the fighting forces it was different. Soldiers were giving their lives for the safety of civilians and they felt they should not suffer the same adversities together with the civilians...there was a special shop, like a PX, run by a contracted firm for the army officers.”¹⁵

But this was insufficient to ensure the loyalty of the armed forces, and in 1951 the Ministry of Defense established the Defense Services Institute (DSI), a non-profit organization that could conduct business. The enterprise was controlled by twelve members, all military officers and most of them with a background in Ne Win’s 4th Burma Rifles. A general store to distribute consumer goods to the members of the armed forces was opened on Sule Pagoda Road in downtown Rangoon. There, imported and locally produced goods were sold to soldiers and their families at low prices. Imported goods were exempt from import duties and other taxes. It became a success, and within a couple of years there were eighteen DSI shops across the country.

It was started with a loan from the government, but that was soon repaid and the DSI became totally independent with its own budget. According to U Thaung: “The military leaders, happy and proud of their achievements, learned something wonderful from their business experience. They discovered that a business enterprise without government taxes could yield a great fortune. And then the DSI expanded rapidly.”¹⁶

The DSI’s next venture was a publishing house with a stationery store called Ava House. The original aim of that enterprise was to supply suitable textbooks and writing materials for the soldiers and their families, but the store was also open to civilians and thus became the DSI’s first venture into public trade. Encouraged by the success of those still rather modest forays into business, the DSI and the military went on to exert control over other sectors of the economy. Companies owned and controlled by the military soon included Rowe & Co, a department store that sold high-quality foreign goods to the public, and the Ava Bank which was set up after buying out the previously privately-owned A. Scott Bank. The military also formed the Burma Asiatic Company after buying up the former East Asiatic Company and, perhaps most important of all, the Burma Five Star Shipping Line, a freighter service company with a fleet of seven ships.¹⁷

With profits from its own businesses, the military even financed the publication of a daily newspaper to convey its ideas to the public, the English-language *Guardian*, which was founded in 1955 by Aung Gyi, an army officer, and Dr. Maung Maung, a former army officer who had become a lawyer and a historian. The paper's editor, however, was Sein Win, one of Burma's leading and best-respected journalists.

The strength of the armed forces had also been steadily increasing since the beginning of the insurgency in 1948. According to an agreement signed in September 1945 in Kandy, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) between Aung San's wartime anti-Japanese resistance forces and the British, independent Burma would be entitled to maintain a standing army of 12,000 men, plus an unspecified number of paramilitary forces.¹⁸ That was basically what the country needed for maintaining security along its frontiers. When several battalions defected to the insurgents after independence, though, an entirely new army had to be raised more or less from scratch to fight the rebels. Consequently, the strength of the armed forces had risen to 40,000 in 1955. By the time of the 1962 coup, there were about 100,000 soldiers in the country.¹⁹ Arms had been procured from a wide range of countries including India, Britain, Israel, Yugoslavia and Sweden.

In the 1950s, Burma also established its own defense industry. Fritz Werner, a small West German company that had done good business during World War II by supplying the German army with weapons, had gone bankrupt after the war and been taken over by the West German government. Now, it became Burma's main partner in defense production. A factory was set up on the outskirts of Rangoon to produce a new infantry rifle for the Burmese army, the G-3, as well as other armaments.²⁰

The Burmese military even formulated its own ideology which strongly resembled the *dwifungsi* ("dual function" in Bahasa Indonesia) doctrine of the Indonesian army which stated that the military had both a defense and social-political role. But there were also differences. While the Indonesian military entered into marriages of convenience with the country's mostly Sino-Indonesian plutocracy (which was similar to developments in Thailand, where the military at an early stage forged an alliance with the Sino-Thai business community), the Burmese military through its DSI came to play a direct role even when it came to running the economy.

A document entitled "The National Ideology and the Role of the Defense Services", which was presented at a military seminar that was held in Meiktila on October 21, 1958, spoke of psychological re-generation which was the result of the "decisive leadership of the government and the clarity and conviction of the Defense Services."²¹ Having successfully entered into business, the military now also began to show a more direct interest in politics and the running of the country. The military got its first taste of political power when, in October 1958, the U Nu government handed over power to a so-called Caretaker Government led by Ne Win. It believed it had public support because Rangoon was cleaned up, new satellite towns were built on the outskirts of the capital. The political situation also appeared to have become stable after a couple of years of turmoil. Economically, the country was doing quite well, but that was mainly because the insurgencies had been contained in the mid-1950s, and, therefore, well before the formation of the military-run Caretaker Government.

Nevertheless, Ne Win and his military leadership became convinced that they were the only ones capable of governing the country and running a successful economy. By the time the Caretaker Government had finished its term in office, it had expanded its initial business enterprises in retail and publishing to include a single coal import license, a hotel company, fisheries and poultry distribution businesses, a construction firm, a bus line that carried thousands of passengers daily between Rangoon and Mandalay, and the country's biggest department store chain.²²

The rapid expansion of the armed forces in terms of troop strength, the wealth that the officers had accumulated since independence, and, behind the scenes, the leadership's growing interest in politics meant that the military had become a state within a state. But, at the time, not many Burmese paid much attention to it. After all, the vast majority of the population had faith in the democratic system, the constitution, and the rule of law. The international community by and large shared this view—but a rare exception was a Central Intelligence Agency analyst who predicted with remarkable foresight as early as in 1951: “[There is a] current struggle for control of the armed forces between the government and the army commander-in-chief, General Ne Win. For some time, the government has been attempting to undermine Ne Win's dominant personal position within the army. Ne Win may retire completely from the struggle and leave the government in undisputed control. On the other hand, there is a continuing possibility that Ne Win might attempt a military coup, which would lead to protracted violence.”²³



PEACE EFFORTS AND TALKS IN THE 1960s

The Kuomintang incursion into the northern and northeastern Shan States combined with the Burmese army's inability to rebel the invaders led to the Shans becoming squeezed between two forces, both of which were perceived as foreign. In October 1952, the Union government had declared a major portion of the southern Shan States to be under military administration. The aim ostensibly was to suppress the Kuomintang in those areas, but it was perceived by many Shans as a move to undermine the power of their hereditary princes, called Sawbwas in Burmese and Saohpas ("Lords of the Sky") in Shan. It was becoming clear that Burma's military leaders felt uneasy with the federal structure that was enshrined in the 1947 Constitution (which came into effect at independence on January 4, 1948) and held that only a strong unitary state could solve the country's problems.

The 1950s saw a great influx of Burmese troops into the Shan States and before long frictions arose between them and the local population. Ordinary Shans, for the first time since pre-colonial days, came into close contact with the Burmese, and the ethnic differences grew more apparent. If the Burmese nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s had been a reaction against British colonial policy, the Shan national movement was born out of Burmese encroachments in the Shan States and Kuomintang terror.

Young Shans began advocating for secession from the Union, which the Shan and Karenni States had the right to do under Chapter X of the 1947 Constitution (the Kachin and Karen States, which were created in the early 1950s, did not have that right.) On May 21, 1958, a group of Shans—students from Rangoon and

local peasants—set up an army called Noom Suk Harn ("Young Brave Warriors") to fight for independence. They launched a surprise attack on the garrison town of Tang-yan in 1959 and managed to capture it for a couple of days. A train to Lashio was also attacked, but the Noom Suk Harn insurgency was never widespread and its fighters were poorly equipped.

There was also unrest among the Kachins in the north. In 1960, Burma and China signed an agreement delineating the border. China was given two sparsely populated areas, 59 square miles (153 square kilometers) around Hpimaw Pass in Kachin State and 73 square miles (189 square kilometers) at Panhung-Panglao in the northern Wa Hills of Shan State in exchange for recognizing Burmese sovereignty over an area northwest of Namkham known as the Namwan Assigned Tract (85 square miles or 220 square kilometers) which the British had leased from the Chinese in 1897. China also recognized the de facto northern borders of Kachin State; until then maps in the People's Republic of China had shown the border at the confluence of the Mali Hla and Nmai Hka rivers, and indeed that border is still evident even on modern maps of the Republic of China (ROC), as that government did not sign the 1960 border agreement (these days, however, official maps of ROC-Taiwan are blurred when it comes to the interior of the Chinese mainland.) The deal was not unfair by international standards, but rumors soon spread across Kachin State to the effect that vast tracts of Kachin territory had been handed over to China. Even today, it is not unusual for many Kachins to point across the border at a piece of land and claim that it was given to China by Rangoon.²⁴



© U Nu

To add fuel to the fire, one of U Nu's promises before the April 1960 elections was to make Buddhism the state religion of Burma, and that was seen by the predominantly Christian Kachins as an open provocation against them and their beliefs. On February 5, 1961, three Kachin brothers—Zau Seng, Zau Tu and Zau Dan—formed a group called the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) with the stated aim of establishing a “free republic of Kachinland.” But, like Noom Suk Harn, it was fairly small and had strongholds only in the Lashio-Kutkai area of northern Shan State.

It was becoming clear that the 1947 Constitution had to be revised, not in order to dissolve the Union but to satisfy the aspirations of the country's ethnic minorities. In June 1961, Shan and Kachin leaders met in Taunggyi for what was called an “All-States Conference”. The delegates issued a statement saying that “the conference expressed the desire that a National Convention, composed of all nationalities in the whole Union, be immediately called at an appropriate place to ensure the development and prosperity of the

Union of Burma; for better and closer relationship of the peoples of the states within the Union; for consultation with one another on the question of equality of all citizens of the Union.”²⁵

The Taunggyi Conference set in motion what became known as the Federal Movement. Its main leader was Sao Shwe Thaik, the saohpa of Yawnghwe who had also served as Burma's first Union President (1948-1952) and it included a broad spectrum of mainly Shan leaders and politicians. It presented a proposal for the revision of the Constitution, which by no means could be considered separatist in nature.²⁶

Prime Minister U Nu was now also, for the first time, willing to enter into serious discussions with the ethnic minorities, and, on February 24, 1962, their delegates and representatives of the government met in Rangoon to discuss constitutional reform. But before any consensus or agreement could be reached, General Ne Win staged his coup. All the participants at the seminar were detained along with U Nu and his entire cabinet. Sao Shwe Thaik's home in Rangoon was raided and his 16-year-old son Sai Myee was killed when he came rushing down the stairs to see what was going on. Sao Shwe Thaik was led away and died—presumably by extrajudicial execution—in prison in November of that year. Another popular saohpa, Sao Kya Seng of Hsipaw, was arrested upcountry, led to an army camp and never seen again.²⁷ A junta called the Revolutionary Council (RC) and headed by general Ne Win had seized absolute power.

More bloodshed was to come when university students demonstrated at their campus in July. The army opened fire on the protesters, killing and wounding hundreds.²⁸ That was the first massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators perpetrated by Ne Win's military. On July 8, the day after the massacre, the military dynamited the historic Students Union Building, where Aung San and his comrades had met in the 1930s to begin their fight for independence. Ne Win and his officers had made it clear that this time they were back in power for good. It was not going to be a repeat of the 1958-1960 Caretaker Government. Opposition of any kind would not be tolerated.

The RC banned all political parties and announced that, henceforth, the newly formed Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) would be the country's only legal political organization. The junta and its own political party introduced a new economic system called the Burmese Way to Socialism which, in effect, meant that the military has seized not only political but also economic power. It was not socialism as practiced at the time in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, but a system whereby all private enterprises were nationalized and handed over to about 20 state corporations controlled by the military.

Brigadier Aung Gyi, speaking for Ne Win's junta a few days after the coup, said in its defense that it was necessary because "we had economic, religious and political crises with the issue of federalism as the most important reason [for the takeover of power]."²⁹ But there was no evidence to support the allegation that the Federal Movement and the Rangoon seminar would lead to the break-up of the Union. On the contrary, as U Nu wrote in his autobiography, it was his resolve in the event that he won the 1960 election "to consult and to bring about constitutional reform that would strengthen and solidify the Union."³⁰

The coup led to hundreds of students taking to the hills and the jungles to fight the military regime and the until then limited Shan and Kachin insurgencies grew into formidable resistance movements. The KIA moved from the Kachin-inhabited areas of northern Shan State into Kachin State proper and there took over most of the countryside. The Shan rebel movement also saw an expansion of its forces after the coup. Hsipaw, the former domain of the popular saohpa Sao Kya Seng probably supplied more youths to the Shan rebel armies than any other Shan state. The Karen rebel army solidified its strongholds in the Irrawaddy Delta region and in the highlands near the Thai border. Burmese who sympathized with the CPB flocked to its Pegu Yoma stronghold.

The RC decided to counter the renewed insurgencies with a seemingly conciliatory approach to the rebellions. On April 3, 1963, a general amnesty was declared, and on June 11 insurgent leaders were invited to come

to Rangoon to participate in peace talks.³¹ They were guaranteed safe passage to the talks and back to their respective areas if no agreement could be reached and representatives of a broad spectrum of rebel groups came to Rangoon: the CPB, the smaller and more radical Communist Party (Red Flag), the Karen National Union (KNU), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Chin Presidium Council (CPC) took part in the talks, and so did the KIA and two Shan groups, the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA) and the Shan National United Front (SNUF). The CPB, the KNU, the NMSP, the KNPP and the CPC joined together as the National Democratic United Front (NDUF) and negotiated at times on a collective basis, at other times individually.³²

Negotiations continued for months, and Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was active this time as well. After the 1960 election and the return to constitutional rule, he had set up a new 8-member Internal Peace Organizing Committee of which he was the chairman with Brigadier Kyaw Zaw, the popular officer who Ne Win had ousted from the military in 1956, as his main adviser.³³ The committee included some of the peace activists of the 1950s and Taw Phaya Galay, the grandson of Burma's last royal couple, King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat. Taw Phaya Galay, who also used the name U Thant Zin, had established himself as a prominent businessman in the 1950s but had seen his enterprises taken over by the military after the 1962 coup and the introduction of the Burmese Way to Socialism.³⁴ The Peace Committee held a rally in front of the City Hall in Rangoon, which was attended by as many as 200,000 people.³⁵

Despite the generous offers the government had made before the talks, the military's negotiators turned out to be much less flexible than the participants had expected. The KIA delegates claimed that the government had "put forward unacceptable conditions such as: all armed troops must be concentrated in designated areas, troops must not leave these areas without permission, all organizational work must stop, all fund-raising must stop, and the location of armed camps must be disclosed to the RC."³⁶ The Kachins on

their part asked for self-determination and the right to secede from the Union, demands that were rejected by the RC.³⁷ The Shan representatives spent only a week in Rangoon and instead of listening to their demands for a return to the pre-1962 federal system with modifications, the new military authorities took them to the Shwe Dagon and Kaba Aye pagodas and to visit a newly-established garment factory in Rangoon.³⁸

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Ne Win's RC, various schemes had been hatched in China, whose communist leaders had long been wary of the ambitious and sometimes unpredictable general.



Bertil with CPB Chairman Thakin Ba Thein Tin, Panghsang, 1987.
© Hseng Nong Lintner

1950s

Six important steps were taken immediately after the coup in Rangoon

- 1 *CPB exiles in China, who had been in Sichuan since the early 1950s and not allowed to engage in political activities as long as U Nu was in power in Rangoon, could for the first time print propaganda leaflets. They also began traveling to Beijing for meetings with Chinese state and party leaders.*
- 2 *Following the split in the international communist movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the CPB had sided with China. CPB exiles in Moscow were forced to leave for Beijing where a “leading group of five” was set up to coordinate what was to become all-out Chinese support for the communist insurrection in Burma. It was led by Thakin Ba Thein Tin, the party’s vice chairman, who had left for China in 1953.*
- 3 *Nearly all the CPB cadres in China were well-read Marxist intellectuals with little or no military experience. But Naw Seng, a Kachin rebel leader who had staged an uprising in the late 1940s, been defeated and retreated to China in 1950, had been living with his followers in a people’s commune in Guizhou since their escape. In early 1963, China’s security authorities brought Naw Seng and his battle-hardened Kachins to see the CPB exiles and told that the time had come to go back to Burma and fight. They were given military training in Yunnan.*
- 4 *In late 1963, San Thu, one of the Moscow returnees, was put in charge of a team that began surveying possible infiltration routes from Yunnan into northeastern Burma. Naw Seng and his Kachins would lead the first attack accompanied by political commissars from the CPB.*
- 5 *Since the 1920s, small ethnic Chinese communist cells had been working underground in Rangoon and other towns. The Chinese embassy in the capital now arranged for them to go to a base area which the CPB at that time had along the Shweli River in northern Shan State and wait for help that was going to come from China.*
- 6 *Most important of all, the 1963 peace parley in Rangoon provided the CPB and its Chinese backers with an opportunity to establish a link between the exiles in China and those holding out inside Burma, primarily in the Pegu Yoma. That link-up paved the way for a new era in the history of Burma’s civil war. China was becoming a factor to be reckoned with.³⁹*

1960s

In July 1963, two groups of altogether twenty-nine CPB members arrived by air from China, ostensibly to participate in the peace talks.⁴⁰ Among the “Beijing returnees”, as they came to be known, were prominent members such as yebaw Aung Gyi, Thakin Pu, Bo Zeya (one of the legendary “Thirty Comrades” who had gone with Aung San to Japan during World War II), a famous woman cadre called Ma Sein Win or Ma Myo Thant—and Thakin Ba Thein Tin who did not actually participate in the talks but seized the opportunity to sneak out of Rangoon and visit the CPB’s headquarters in the Pegu Yoma. He had brought with him radio transmitters from China, and the communist fighters in the Pegu Yoma were shown how to use them so they could communicate with the exiles in Sichuan. They were also told to be patient. Big plans were being hatched in China, and help would soon be forthcoming.⁴¹

According to CPB documents, the government demanded that the communists should concentrate all their troops and party members in an area stipulated by the authorities, inform the government if there were any remaining guerrillas or cadres elsewhere, stop all organizational activities of the party, and cease fund raising.⁴² The CPB, on the other hand, wanted to retain control of its areas, which the RC found unacceptable.

The talks broke down on November 14, and the various insurgents returned to their respective jungle camps. The official explanation for ending the peace talks was outlined in a document issued afterward: “The Revolutionary Council had come to realize the danger of the country being split into two by allowing the NDUF to try to set up a parallel government.”⁴³ Thakin Kodaw Hmaing’s peace movement was also seen as a threat because the RC thought it was biased in favor of the CPB and its allies. After the huge, successful rally in Rangoon, another was scheduled for Mandalay—and a wave of arrests and detentions followed.⁴⁴ NMSP leader Nai Shwe Kyin stated that “the negotiations failed because the military only wanted us to surrender.”⁴⁵

The intransigence of the military regime was a blessing in disguise for the CPB. Thakin Ba Thein Tin and Thakin Chit Maung, another CPB cadre, flew back to China, while the remaining twenty-seven “Beijing returnees” went to the Pegu Yoma where they assumed de facto leadership of the party at home.⁴⁶ Talks with the ethnic rebels also

ended without any agreement being reached. The only progress that the RC could register was with Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe, the KNU chairman, who went to Rangoon and eventually reached an agreement with Burma’s new military leaders. According to Saw Ralph, a veteran of the Karen struggle: “I didn’t go with him. I didn’t trust the Burmese and I didn’t think the war was over yet. When they [the Karen delegation] first arrived in Rangoon, the Burmese media reported falsely that Hunter and the others had surrendered. Later, when the peace talks failed, Hunter did surrender and never returned to the revolution.”⁴⁷ His agreement with the RC was not done in the name of the KNU, but his own faction called the Karen Revolutionary Council.

For those who remained in “the revolution”, the economic policies of the new socialist government turned out to be a boon. While the Defense Services Institute (DSI) had been quite a successful undertaking, the Burmese Way to Socialism whereby the entire economy was taken over by the military turned out to be a disaster. Everything in sight was “nationalized”, which in a Burmese context meant that the military replaced the entire legitimate business community, and that wrecked the economy. But enterprising black marketeers and smugglers soon made up for the shortcomings. Nearly all the consumer goods that became available in Burmese markets were brought in from Thailand. The KNU units along that border set up a series of “toll gates” through which the contraband was funneled—and taxed by the rebels. Links were established with Thai merchants and military authorities, whose interests often were intertwined. The Karens, and also smaller groups among the Mon and Karenni, used the income from their “toll gates” to buy modern weapons in Thailand. The total value of these unofficial transactions has never been thoroughly researched, but it is fair to assume that Thailand owes much of its rapid economic growth and development to the thriving cross-border trade with Burma. The Thais also gained an unofficial “border police” that served as a buffer between them and their historical enemy, the Burmese. Every Thai schoolchild learnt how the Burmese invaded their kingdom and ransacked the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767. The Burmese government had to turn a blind eye to these smuggling activities along the border, given the choice of contraband or no goods at all, which could result in political and economic unrest.



KNU 3 Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army.
© Hseng Nong Lintner

Consumer goods, textiles, machinery, spare parts for vehicles and medicines went from Thailand to Burma and teak, minerals, jade, precious stones and opium in the other direction. But contrary to popular belief, the ethnic rebels were never involved in the actual opium trade, which had been built up by the Kuomintang forces in the 1950s. The poppies were grown mainly in the Shan States and the Kuomintang involvement in the opium trade was explained explicitly by one of its most famous generals, Duan Xiwen: *"We have to continue to fight the evil of communism and to fight you must have an army, and an army must have guns, and to buy guns you must have money. In these mountains, the only money is opium."*⁴⁸

The Kuomintang and the merchants in Burma and Thailand with whom they were connected were in charge of the opium business. Relations were also maintained with military officers, bankers and politicians in Thailand while Burmese military officers were bribed to look the other way. The rebels, on their part, controlled the countryside inside Shan State where the poppies were grown,

the opium harvested and through which the produce was convoyed down to the Thai border. The physical control of the fields and caravan routes, which the rebels exercised, enabled them to collect tax on the trade and with that income they could buy weapons in Thailand.

Rather than unifying the country and serving as steps that would end the internal wars, the 1962 coup and the 1963 peace parley—and the military's intransigence combined with its disastrous economic policies—opened the floodgates for a renewed insurgency. The military government soon proved incapable of overcoming the rebels, who had not only gained access to modern weapons but also grown considerably in number since the coup. There were also acute shortages of money in government coffers. The rather unorthodox solution to both problems came after the breakdown of the peace talks: new home guard units called Ka Kwe Ye (KKY, or "defense" in Burmese) were established and given the right to use all government-controlled towns and roads in Shan State for opium smuggling in exchange

for combating the rebels. By trading in opium, Ne Win hoped that the KKY home guards would be self-supporting.⁴⁹ Among the local leaders who became rich on the deal was Lo Hsing-han (Luo Xing-han), the commander of the KKY in Kokang, an area in northeasternmost Shan State inhabited by ethnic Chinese. Another was Zhang Qifu, better known as Khun Sa, who headed the KKY unit in Loi Maw, an opium mountain on the western bank of the Salween River in northern Shan State. Both Lo and Khun Sa were later arrested at different times, but not for their involvement in the opium trade, which they had in any case carried out with the tacit approval of the Burmese authorities. Instead, they were charged with high treason, or, in other words, for making contacts with the rebels, who continued to control the Shan countryside. Even the KKY commanders had to negotiate tax agreements with the rebels.

There was total anarchy, especially in Shan State, with an abundance of armies ambushing each other, but the event that was going to change the situation in Burma's frontier areas for many years to come occurred on January 1, 1968. The CPB finally made its move, and a heavily-armed unit crossed the Sino-Burmese border at Möng Ko. The main fighting force consisted of Naw Seng's Kachins and CPB veterans served as political commissars. Chinese Red Guard volunteers also joined in and for several years after the battle of Möng Ko they actually made up the bulk of the CPB's fighting force. An entirely new chapter in the history of Burma's insurgency had been arrived.



Shan State Army (before there was north and south) crossing the Salween River.
© Bertil Lintner

PEACE EFFORTS AND TALKS IN THE 1970s

The 1970s was a decade of intense fighting between the Burmese army and, mainly, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and its allies, but also with Karen, Kachin and Shan insurgents. After its first, successful push across the border from China at Mōng Ko, the communist juggernaut went on to conquer area after area in northern and north-eastern Burma. On January 5, 1968, another CPB unit led by two Chinese-supported local warlords, Peng Jiasheng and Peng Jiafu, took over their home district of Kokang. In late January, two Kachin warlords, Sakhon Ting Ying and Layawk Zalum, who had left the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to join the CPB, set up a “liberated area” in the Kambaiti-Pangwa area on the Chinese border. Shortly afterwards, Khun Hai and Man Hio, two enclaves of Burmese territory north of the Shweli River in northern Shan State, were captured by the CPB. In 1969–1970, the area around Mōng Ko was expanded and, in 1971, the CPB entered the hills north of Kengtung in eastern Shan State. In all those areas, the CPB armed local, ethnic-minority warlords who were more than willing to join the party’s People’s Army if they got the modern Chinese guns that they were promised. Ideology was of secondary importance, or in most cases, not at all.

But the CPB had no desire to stay in those remote areas of the country. The plan was to push down to the old headquarters area in the Pegu Yoma north of Rangoon and then take over central Burma where its political future, if any, would lie.

The first attempt to break out of the newly-established northeastern base areas be-

gan at the end of November 1971. Heavily armed CPB forces—among whom were many Red Guard-volunteers from China who had joined the fight—attacked and captured positions around the vital Kunlong Bridge on the Salween River, which connected Kokang with the rest of Shan State. The battle for Kunlong Bridge saw forty-one days of continuous, heavy fighting. When the battle ended on January 7, 1972, the CPB had failed to capture the bridgehead and was forced to retreat back into Kokang. If government forces had been defeated, the CPB could have marched on to capture Hsenwi, Lashio and other towns in northern Shan State and, perhaps even Mandalay.

When that push failed, the CPB’s forces marched south, into the Wa Hills. By the end of 1972, the entire area had been taken over by the CPB and a new headquarters was established at Panghsang, then a small market town right on the Chinese border. Arms, ammunition, medical supplies and other necessities kept flowing across the border, and Panghsang was also from where the CPB’s broadcasting station, the People’s Voice of Burma, operated. A printing press was imported from China and Chinese engineers helped the CPB build a small hydroelectric power station on a river near Panghsang.

Although it had won the battle of Kunlong Bridge, the Burmese military leadership realized that they would not be able to defeat the Chinese-supported, heavily armed CPB in the northeast. Instead, it was decided to contain them in those remote mountains—and wipe out what remained of the CPB-controlled territory in central Burma.

The communist forces in those areas were poorly equipped and would be no match for a concerted government offensive. If that strategy proved successful, the CPB would not be able to connect the new base areas with the old and, ultimately, the party's struggle for a communist Burma would fail. The CPB veterans and those who joined in the early 1960s and 1970s would become isolated in parts of the country where they did not belong.

That plan must have been drawn up at an early stage of the renewed communist insurgency. The CPB's official chairman, Thakin Than Tun, was assassinated by a government infiltrator on September 24, 1968. Then, in the years after the battle of Kunlong Bridge, his successor Thakin Zin and party secretary Thakin Chit were killed in fighting in the Pegu Yoma, which was reconquered by government forces. One by one, other former strongholds in northern Sagaing Division, in the Arakan Yoma and the Irrawaddy Delta were cleared of communist insurgents.

The renewed, post-1962 insurgency led to a total reorganization of Burma's armed forces. From 100,000 at the time of the coup it grew to 150,000 in 1974 and, by 1980, possibly as many as 180,000. New elite units were formed and designed for mobile operations. They were called Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs) and the first, the 77th, was set up in 1966. Headquartered at Pegu, its main duty was to fight the CPB in the Pegu Yoma, which it also managed to capture in March 1975. The 77th LID was supplemented with the 88th in 1967 (Magway), the 99th in 1968 (Meiktila) and, in the mid- and late-1970s, the 66th was set up in Pyay (Prome), the 55th in Aungban, and the 44th in Thaton. Four of the six LIDs came to have their forward bases in Shan State while the 55th was already there with a combined headquarters and forward base at Aungban not far from Taunggyi. Those five LIDs were tasked with containing the CPB. The exception was the 44th LID, which was designed to fight the Karen rebels.⁵⁰

As for the notorious KKY home guards, they had outlived their usefulness and were asked in 1973 to disband and surrender their firearms to the authorities. Most of them did, but some chose to join forces with the rebels. Khun Sa even set up his own army, the Shan United Army (SUA)—and continued to trade in opium from his base at Ban Hin Taek near the Burmese border in northern Thailand.

But all was not easy going for the government's forces. In the 1970s, the CPB lost all their old strongholds in central Burma, but unlikely alliances were forged between the communists and various ethnic rebel armies in the frontier areas which were not ideologically motivated. They needed guns, and only the Burmese communists, thanks to Chinese support, had vast stocks of weaponry.

In 1964, three Shan groups, the SSIA, the SNUF and the Kokang Revolutionary Force, a local army in Kokang, had merged to become the Shan State Army (SSA). A war council was founded, headed by Sao Shwe Thaik's widow, Sao Nang Hearn Kham, who had managed to escape to Thailand after the coup and the disappearance of her husband. Her son Chao Tzang Yawngnwe became the movement's main theoretician and a political wing, the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), was set up in 1971. It soon took over most of the Shan countryside west of the Salween River, but internal problems in 1974 led to the majority forging an alliance with the CPB and the previous leadership, among them Chao Tzang Yawngnwe, sought refuge in Thailand. Armed with Chinese weapons, the "new" SSA carried out a number of attacks in Shan State, supported by the CPB.⁵¹

Before that happened, one of the founders of the SSA, Moh Heng alias Kwon Zerng, had broken away and formed his own group, the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA). Moh Heng allied himself with the remnants of the Kuomintang and his SURA set up a base at Pieng Luang on the Thai border. SURA became the Kuomintang's proxy army inside Shan State and was responsible for much of the cross-border trade in opium. The SSA, however, entered into an alliance with the CPB and another group in Shan State, the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization also made an agreement with the Burmese communists. It consequently inserted "people's" in its name and became the SSPNLO. Originally set up in 1968 in southern Shan State, it was active among the Pa-O minority in the area and a rival of the main, non-communist Pa-O army which was first called the United Pa-O National Organization/Army and later simply the Pa-O National Organization/Army. Then, in 1978, the CPB managed to win over a faction of the Karenni Army (the armed wing of the Karenni National Progressive Party, KNPP), which formed a new, pro-communist group called the Karenni State Nationalities People's Liberation Force (KNPLF).

But the CPB's main achievement in the 1970s was to forge an alliance with the KIA, Burma's strongest and best-organized ethnic armed group. In the beginning, the KIA has been staunchly anti-communist and allied with the Kuomintang. Kachin rebels convoyed jade from the mines in Kachin State to the Kuomintang settlements on the Thai border and returned with weapons bought in Thailand. The Kuomintang connection also resulted in the formation of a Kachin chapter of the World-Anti Communist League (WACL) and the Asian People's Anti-Communist League (APACL), right-wing organizations with contacts in South Korea and Taiwan. The KIA's commander, Zau Seng, carrying his Kachin flag with red and green fields and two superimposed swords, attended several WACL and APACL meetings in Saigon, Taipei and Manila. The KIA's anti-communist stance was further enhanced when Naw Seng died under mysterious circumstances in the Wa Hills in March 1972. The official CPB version was that he had died in an accident while hunting but many Kachins suspected that the communists had had him killed because he did not want to fight his countrymen in the KIA. After taking over Mông Ko, the CPB fought several battles with the KIA, which was active in the same, mainly Kachin-inhabited area of Shan State.

Further north, at home in Kachin State, the KIA was facing serious challenges as well. It had to fight the Burmese army — and also Ting Ying's and Zalum's pro-CPB faction, which has established a base area around Kambaiti, Pangwa and Hpimaw on the Chinese border. The KIA, unable to fight two enemies at the same time, approached the Burmese army and, in June 1972, the two sides agreed on a ceasefire. Talks were held in Lashio where the KIA was represented by Lieutenant-Colonel Zau Dan, a brother of the commander, General Zau Seng, and the chief negotiator for the Burmese army was then northeastern regional commander Colonel Aye Ko and Colonel Sein Mya, commander of the 99th LID, which had its forward headquarters at Lashio. The KIA asked the Burmese army for weapons and other supplies so they could fight jointly against the CPB. The ceasefire lasted for three and a half months but broke down when Brigadier San Yu, Ne Win's right-hand man who served as Vice Chief-of-Staff of the Burmese army and Deputy Minister for Defense, stated that the KIA must surrender and then become a militia controlled by the central government.⁵²



Bertil interviewing KIO Chairman Brang Seng,
Pa Jau, 1986.
© Hseng Nong Lintner

Unable to fight a two-front war, some KIA commanders then entered into secret talks with the CPB. By coincidence or not, Zau Seng, his other brother Zau Tu (Zau Dan had died in battle with the CPB on March 1, 1975) and the movement's main theoretician, the staunchly anti-communist Pungshwi Zau Seng, were assassinated at a KIA camp on the Thai border on August 6, 1975. A new leadership took over with Brang Seng, a former headmaster of the Baptist High School in Myitkyina, as chairman of the political wing, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and Malizup Zau Mai as commander of the KIA. The camp on the Thai border, which was located near the Kuomintang's base at Tam Ngob, was cut off from the forces in Kachin State and, on July 6, 1976, the KIO and the CPB signed an agreement, ending the war between the two groups. The text was in pure Maoist language: "Today, throughout the world the two superpowers—the Soviet social-imperialists and the American imperialists—are trying to divide and rule the world between them...it is necessary to stand on the side of the world's peoples headed by the so-

cialist People's Republic of China...both parties agree that the common enemy of the people of all nationalities—the Ne Win-San Yu military government—is the chief representative of the three main enemies: imperialism, feudalism-landlordism and bureaucrat capitalism."⁵³ It was signed by Brang Seng and Thakin Ba Thein Tin, the CPB's new chairman after the deaths of Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Zin.

Had the ardent Christian KIA become communist? Despite the Maoist rhetoric, and invitations to all Kachin rebel leaders to visit China, little actually changed in an ideological sense inside the KIA-controlled areas of Kachin State. But Chinese-made assault rifles, machineguns, mortars and ammunition began flowing in through the CPB and the KIA was able to take over more areas where the rebels established their own administrative offices, schools, hospitals, churches and infrastructure. The Bhamo-Myitkyina road was cut and new headquarters were set up near the Chinese border: Pa Jau for the KIO and Na Hpaw for the KIA.

THE 1980s GENERAL AMNESTY AND PEACE TALKS

The rebels, communist as well as ethnic, had made considerable gains in the 1960s and 1970s, but global events and developments inside China in the tumultuous months immediately before and after the death of Mao Zedong on September 9, 1976 would have far-reaching consequences for Burma's civil wars. When China's radical Left reasserted itself before his death and ousted Deng Xiaoping, the CPB—unlike other communist parties in the region—spoke out loudly in favour of the hardliners. In a congratulatory message on the 55th anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in June 1976, the CPB stated: "The revisionist clique with which Deng was linked headed by Liu Shaoqi has been defeated...The movement to repulse the Right deviationist attempt at reversing correct verdicts, and the decision of the Central Committee of the CPC on measures taken against rightist chieftain Deng Xiaoping, are in full accord with Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong thought."⁵⁴

In a second message mourning the death of Mao, the CPB sent another, similar message to Beijing: "Guided by Chairman Mao Zedong's proletarian revolutionary line, the Chinese people seized great victories in the socialist revolution and socialist construction in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in criticizing Liu Shaoqi's counter-revolutionary revisionist line, in criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius and in criticising Deng Xiaoping and repulsing the Right deviationist attempt at reversing correct verdicts and consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat, thus, consolidating the People's Republic of China—the reliable bulwark of the world proletarian revolution."⁵⁵

The CPB had reason to re-evaluate the reliability of that bulwark the following year when Deng reassumed power in Beijing. The CPB, which once had branded

its own "revisionists" Yebaw Htay and Hamendranath Ghoshal as "Burma's Deng Xiaoping" and "Burma's Liu Shaoqi" respectively, became silent. Htay and Ghoshal were two of the founders of the CPB and they had been executed during a series of bloody purges within the party which were spearheaded by the Beijing Returnees in the late sixties. The Beijing Review and other official Chinese publications, which had previously published battle reports and CPB statements, stopped printing anything about the "revolutionary struggle in Burma." The CPB was mentioned for the last time in November 1976 when Thakin Ba Thein Tin and his Vice Chairman Thakin Pe Tint, called on the new Chinese Chairman Hua Guofeng in Beijing, who was soon to fall into disgrace.⁵⁶

The Burmese military quickly and shrewdly exploited the rift by lending its good offices in Cambodia, by then the focus of Beijing's interest as concern increased over Vietnam's designs on its China-allied Indo-Chinese neighbor. In November 1977, Ne Win travelled via Beijing to Phnom Penh and became the first foreign head of state to visit Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975. The Chinese were no doubt behind the unusual visit in an attempt to draw the Khmer Rouge out of its diplomatic isolation. Ne Win played along, for his part hoping that Beijing would further reduce its support for the CPB. He was not disappointed. In 1978, the CPB's central office, which had operated partly in Yunnan, was forced to return to Panghsang, the party's official headquarters since the Burmese army had captured Pegu Yoma in 1975. Supplies did not dry up completely but dwindled down to absolute necessities and the Chinese "volunteers," who had fought alongside the CPB since 1968, were recalled.

In September 1979, Burma even left the Non-Aligned Movement—which it had helped form in the 1950s—at its Havana summit to protest against Cuba's assuming the chairmanship and its decision not to let the Khmer Rouge, which had been driven from power in January 1979, represent Cambodia. Then President San Yu said in a report to the Burmese parliament after the Havana meeting: "Every nation has the inalienable right to freely choose its political, economic, social and cultural system without interference in any form by another state...Burma strictly stands for the solution of problems by peaceful means rather than resorting to threats or use of force."⁵⁷ San Yu's remarks were made with a vague reference to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, but they were also interpreted as a signal to Beijing that Rangoon disapproved of its continued support for the CPB however limited it had become.

Following Ne Win's trip to China and Cambodia in 1977, Deng Xiaoping paid a politically important visit to Rangoon from January 26-31, 1978. China had broken diplomatic relations with Burma after anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon in June 1967 and, although relations were partly restored in 1970, it was not until Deng's visit that the hitherto strained relationship between the two countries could again be described as reasonably normal. The official Chinese policy during the decade 1979-1988 was also characterized by the rather contradictory Chinese concept of differentiating between "party-to-party" relations and "government-to-government" ties—a meaningless distinction in the Chinese context since the party in any case formed the government in Beijing.

Relations between Rangoon and Beijing were nevertheless improving noticeably. Between July 9-13, 1979, Burmese Prime Minister Maung Maung Kha visited China and an agreement on economic and technical cooperation was signed on July 12. Ne Win returned to China in October 1980 and again in May 1985. Ne Win's successor as president of Burma, San Yu, visited China in October 1984 and China's President Li Xian-nian visited Rangoon in March 1985. It was clear that the CPB, even from the Chinese point of view, had become irrelevant and anachronistic.

The reduced aid from China led to fundamental changes in the way the CPB operated. In their base

area—still encompassing 20,000 square kilometers on the Chinese border in eastern and northeastern Shan State—a lucrative trade in contraband became significant, and when the Chinese in 1978-1979 decided that the CPB had to become "self-sufficient," smuggling was the main source of income the party could muster. The orthodox Burmese Maoists suddenly became free-wheeling capitalists, and cross-border trade flourished as a result. Chinese consumer goods—textiles, plastic products, cigarettes, beer, bicycles, petrol and household utensils—were exchanged for Burmese timber, minerals, precious stones and jade. The CPB survived by taxing this increasingly lucrative, but still illegal, cross-border trade. But the foundations for an entirely new kind of relationship between China and Burma had been laid, "party-to-party" with the CPB and its allies as well as "government-to-government" with Rangoon.

Feeling that it had the upper hand, the government in Rangoon decided that the time was ripe for a new approach to the civil wars. On May 24, 1980, it announced a ninety-day amnesty for all insurgents and invited them for peace talks. The first group to accept the amnesty offer was U Nu's fractured Thailand-based resistance, which had been quite strong in the 1970s but after infighting and disagreements with the ethnic rebels, primarily the KNU, now consisted of only a handful of fighters called the Patriotic Liberation Army (PLA). U Nu himself, who had gone into exile in India staying in a stately mansion in Bhopal, returned to Burma on July 29. Lo Hsing-han, who had been arrested on the Thai side of the border in 1973 and extradited to Burma, was among those who were released from prison.⁵⁸ His men at the Thai border were covered by the amnesty and returned home. Lo and his men were then allowed to form a new pro-government militia group with its headquarters at Salween Village south of Lashio.⁵⁹

Officially, 2,257 rebels surrendered, but that is clearly a gross exaggeration.⁶⁰ A more realistic estimate would be around 150 from Lo's Kokang group, 450 Burmese expatriates who returned home (including former PLA fighters) and possibly a few hundred from various ethnic groups. But two groups decided to accept the offer of peace talks: the KIO and the CPB. Talks with the CPB began in Lashio in May after the

end of the amnesty period, deliberately timed to show that the party did not recognize the government's offer to surrender.

The CPB delegation consisted of vice chairman Thakin Pe Tint, party oldtimer Ye Tun and Hpalang Gam Di, a Kachin from Naw Seng's group of war veterans. Kyaw Zwa, a medical doctor who had joined the CPB in the early days and then made it to Panghsang, was also present. The government's side were represented by Major General Aye Ko from the military, and Than Hlaing and Myint Lwin from the ruling BSPP, still the only legally permitted political party. Although the CPB delegation spent a week in Lashio, actual talks lasted for only one day. **The CPB's position was presented in three demands:**

1 // The CPB must be recognized as a political party.

2 // The CPB must be allowed to maintain control over its area.

3 // The CPB's army must be recognized and remain under the control of the party.⁶¹

The government's response came in a statement that was read by Aye Ko: "*The negotiations have ended once and for all because we cannot accept the CPB's demands.*"⁶² The CPB delegates were sent by military helicopter to Namkham, where they crossed the Shweli River into Khun Hai, an enclave north of the river which was controlled by the communists. From there, they travelled through China back to Panghsang.

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Wa girls in Panghsang market, CPB area, 1987.



In contrast, talks with the KIO/KIA began in August 1980 and lasted until May 1981. The first meeting took place in the old school house in Dabak Yang, a village south of Myitkyina. The KIO was represented by vice chairman and KIA commander Brigadier Zau Mai and three other officers while five ethnic Kachins came down from Myitkyina: ex-Burmese army captain Hkun Seng, ex-Burmese army major Ubyit Tu, Duwa Lawang Li, a politician, the Reverend Lahtaw Saboi Jum from the Kachin Baptist Convention, and Father Kawhkum Lawt Naw from the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³ Later, KIO chairman Brang Seng and a few of his colleagues joined the talks and were flown to Rangoon, where meetings were held with Ne Win and other state and party leaders.

The KIO delegates asked for autonomy in administrative, judicial and economic matters. They even agreed to change the name of the KIA, but the Kachin forces should remain under the control of a future, autonomous Kachin State government. The government's side responded with a 16-point list of conditions which included a demand that the KIO would merge with the BSPP and that the KIA's troops would become a local militia commanded by the Burmese army. Those who wanted to return home would get help to be "rehabilitated" into society.⁶⁴



According to Brang Seng, the Chinese had been the guarantors of the talks and they were active behind the scenes throughout the process—and they supported the KIO's proposals. Burmese president San Yu reportedly told the Chinese: "In our country, we recognize only one party."⁶⁵ The talks broke down when it became clear that the government was not interested in considering any of the KIO's demands. But the Kachins had scored a significant political victory, winning the respect and admiration of the Chinese and many ordinary Kachins were appalled at Rangoon's intransigence.

Brang Seng concluded that he and his men had negotiated from a position of weakness: “Only if we united with the other ethnic groups would we succeed.”⁶⁶ In late 1982, a KIA delegation was dispatched to the Thai border, where they joined the National Democratic Front (NDF), a coalition of ethnic armies which had been set up in 1976. The NDF was also invited to Kachin State, and a delegation of Mons, Arakanese, Karennis, Karens, Pa-Os, a small non-communist Wa group based on the Thai border, Palaungs and Shans made it to the KIO’s Pa Jau headquarters. The NDF was reorganized under a more centralized command and the delegation marched south to Panghsang, where, on March 24, 1986, the NDF and the CPB agreed to coordinate military operations against the Burmese army. The purpose of the exercise was to step up the military pressure on Rangoon, so that the next time peace talks were held, the government would have to face a unified, militarily powerful adversary.⁶⁷ However, the staunchly anti-communist KNU chairman Bo Mya denounced the tactical alliance with the CPB, causing a split within the NDF from which the front never recovered. One of the two KNU delegates who had taken part in the meetings in Pa Jau and Panghsang was even imprisoned for a while by Bo Mya’s men.

In the years after the failed 1980-1981 peace talks and as a consequence of the inability of the resistance to form a united front, the Burmese army was further strengthened with the addition of two more LIDs: the 33rd with its headquarters at Sagaing and the 22nd at Pa-an in Karen State. The 33rd was raised to counter the rise of the KIA in the north, and the 22nd was tasked with fighting the KNU rebels on the Thai border. The total strength of the armed forces was now close to 190,000, but despite its size it continued to serve very narrow interests. The 4th Burma Rifles tradition had not yet passed into history, but it had become the army of the ruling BSPP, still the country’s only legally permitted political party. This had actually become clear as early as in the 1970s. According to Japanese researcher Yoshihiro Nakanishi: “The BSPP’s control over the Tatmadaw (the Burmese army) was set down in the ‘Organization Rules for the Burma Socialist Program Party,’ adopted at the first Party Congress in 1971. Following this, party committees were established within the Tatmadaw in accordance with the ‘Organization and Duties of Party Organizations Within the Tatmadaw’.”⁶⁸ An army-party committee composed of military officers was established within the Ministry of Defense and, as Nakanishi states, “BSPP organizing committees headed by military officers were set up in the General Staff Office as well as in regional commands, divisions, military areas, garrisons, base commands, battalions, and companies.”⁶⁹ The role of the Burmese army not as a force designed not to defend the state but to act as the Praetorian Guard of the BSPP regime became evident when a nation-wide uprising for democracy swept Burma in 1988.

CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS AFTER THE 1988 PRO-DEMOCRACY UPRISING

In 1988, discontent with decades of military misrule erupted in a nationwide uprising for democracy. Millions of people marched in every city, town and major village across the country—and the military, as usual, responded with brute force. Thousands of people were gunned down when soldiers sprayed automatic rifle fire into crowds of demonstrators. In the wake of the massacres, more than 10,000 urban dissidents fled to the Thai and Chinese border areas and formed a group called the All-Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) which received some arms from the KIA and the KNU's armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), respectively. The problem was that none of these ethnic groups had any significant stockpiles of weapons which they could share with the urban dissidents; the CPB, on the other hand, had more than ten warehouses full of Chinese arms and ammunition, which had been supplied mainly during the decade 1968-78. But very few urban dissidents had made it to the CPB-controlled area, which was hardly surprising given the anti-authoritarian nature of their movement.

That changed when, in March and April 1989, the mainly hill-tribe rank and file rose up in mutiny against the CPB's ageing, staunchly Maoist leadership. The old leaders were forced into exile in China, where the Chinese authorities gave them places to stay and pensions, leading to speculations that the new business-oriented leadership in Beijing had had a hand in the mutiny. The CPB's former army broke up into four different ethnic forces:

- 1 //** **The United Wa State Army (UWSA), which took over most of the CPB's former base area along the Chinese border. The vast majority of the CPB's troops had consisted of ethnic Was, and they now formed their own organization.**
- 2 //** **The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), which consisted of the former CPB-forces in Kokang.**
- 3 //** **The National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) took over the area between the UWSA's territory and the Mekong River and established its headquarters at the border town of Mōng La.**
- 4 //** **The New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K) became the new name for the former CPB forces in Kachin State, which were encamped at Kambaiti, Pangwa and Hpimaw on the Chinese border.**

© Bertil Lintner
CPB soldiers with Chinese-supplied truck, 1986.
(Battle of Hsi-Hsinwan)



After the 1989 CPB mutiny there remained only ethnic rebels in the country and the possibility of a link-up between the urban dissidents, the ethnic groups along the Thai and Chinese borders—and the well-armed mutineers—worried the military. Sensing what could happen, the new junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which had assumed power after crushing the demonstrations on September 18, 1988, acted quickly and with much more to offer than the ethnic rebels. The generals were determined to prevent such a link-up which could have potentially disastrous consequences for the new regime—and the strategy they employed was to neutralize the ex-CPB forces with ceasefire deals and promises of lucrative business opportunities.

The SLORC sent three emissaries to talk to the CPB mutineers—erstwhile opium warlord Lo Hsing-han, ex-Brigadier Aung Gyi, a Sino-Burmese officer who has been a member of the initial, 1962 junta, and Yang Kyin-hsui or Olive Yang, a former ruler of Kokang—and several ceasefire arrangements were agreed upon. In exchange for not fighting the SLORC's army, and not sharing their weaponry with the ethnic and urban dissidents, the mutineers were allowed to retain control over their respective areas, to keep their armies, and to engage in any kind of business. In the remote mountains where they were based, the main source of income used to be the cultivation of opium poppies. For more than two decades, the UWSA and its allies were Asia's main producers of opium and its derivative heroin, though they later turned to manufacturing methamphetamines and other synthetic drugs. In Möng La, casinos, brothels and transvestite shows as well as the production and sale of drugs contributed to the wealth of the NDAA-ESS and its leaders while in Kokang and the NDA-K area border trade with China became a lucrative business.

Once the former CPB forces had made peace with the SLORC, ethnic armies which had been dependent on arms supplies from the communists, entered into similar ceasefire-agreements. By the mid 1990s, more than twenty ethnic armed organizations had struck such deals. Several were small, insignificant **local militias** but 14 were of significance:

TIMELINE // Ceasefire agreements between ethnic armies and SLORC



At a time when almost the entire population of Burma had turned against the regime, thousands of former insurgents who had been fighting against the central government made deals with the ruling military. In addition to those ceasefire agreements, opium warlord Zhang Qifu, or Khun Sa, surrendered to the Burmese army in the first week of January 1996. He agreed to dissolve his more than 10,000-strong army, now called the Mōng Tai Army (MTA), and moved to Rangoon where he retired from politics and business. Most of the leaders of the MTA moved to various towns, including Mandalay and Taunggyi, where they established themselves in supposedly legitimate businesses such as transport companies, liquor making, real estate, mining for gold and precious stones, and trade with Thailand, where they had lots of contacts.

However, it is important to remember that the KIO was the only group that actually insisted on, and got, a written ceasefire agreement during this time. All the other above agreements were verbal understandings, and none of them involved any political talks. The agreement with the KIO had been preceded by a series of meetings, but then only to discuss a cessation of hostilities and where the different forces, the Burmese army and the KIA, should have their bases. The process had been facilitated by Lahtaw Saboi Jum from the Kachin Baptist Convention, his brother Hkun Myat, and Duwa Hpauyam La Wawm, an ethnic Kachin, former Burmese ambassador to Israel. For the first time in the history of peace making in Burma, some foreigners became involved in the efforts. Michael Baumann, a German peace activist and his associates—all Europeans—working with Lahtaw Saboi Jum, figured prominently in documents issued by Kachin organizations.⁷¹

Members of Baumann's team have since denied that they were involved in the peace process, but a document titled "Report on Burma Visit: December 1993-January 1994" suggests otherwise. It is marked "Confidential", so, presumably, it was meant for some governmental institution, and stated: "An important element...was the work of church members, especially from the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), who have been intermediaries in the peace process and were responsible for organising many aspects of the trip."⁷² The report also reveals the naïveté of the European peacemakers and their inability to understand how the Burmese military and its intelligence services operate: "We were at times discreetly accompanied by officers of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), who were very cooperative and, it appeared, more concerned with our well-being and travel organisation than what we were actually doing."⁷³ Unfortunately, the same kind of naïveté also became the hallmark of nearly every foreign peace mission that was allowed into the country when a new round of meetings and talks were held after 2012.

The talks between Burma's central authorities and the KIO, which began in 1990, continued in secret until a formal agreement was signed on February 24, 1994. Brang Seng had led the Kachin delegation during the actual talks, but the agreement was signed by vice chairman and KIA commander Malizup Zau Mai and KIO central committee members Lamung Tu Jai and Gauri Zau Seng for the Kachins. The junta signatories were also three, Major-General Aye Kyaw, Major-General Saw Lwin and Lieutenant-Colonel Kyaw Thein, a leading military intelligence officer. The two sides agreed to observe a ceasefire and that communication should be done through eleven designated liaison posts. The KIO also pledged to "assist as best it can" to get other ethnic armies "into peace negotiations with the SLORC."⁷⁴ The signed agreement did not contain any references to federalism or other constitutional issues, but stated that the KIO shall "help the state in its efforts for restoration of peace and the rule of law in the region."⁷⁵ The military insisted that it was in power only temporarily, and any political agreements would have to wait until Burma had a new constitution (SLORC had abolished the old 1974 constitution when it assumed power on September 18, 1988) and an elected government.⁷⁶ In that way, the KIO's peace talks in the early 1990s were fundamentally different from those in 1980-1981, when the KIO raised political demands such as autonomy for Kachin State and the reorganization of the KIA into a local police force controlled by the state government. In 1980-1981, talks were held in Rangoon and involved Ne Win, then president of Burma, and other state leaders. In the early 1990s, though, talks were held locally, first in the Chinese border town of Wanding (indicating that the Chinese acted as facilitators) and then in Lashio and Myitkyina. At all those meetings, the SLORC was represented by local military commanders such as two of the three signatories of the final ceasefire agreement, the northeastern commander Major-General Aye Kyaw and the northern commander Major-General San Lwin.⁷⁷

CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS AFTER THE 1988 PRO-DEMOCRACY UPRISING

That non-political peace agreement lasted for seventeen years and was broken when the Burmese army, in June 2011, launched a major offensive against the KIA. The reason for the breakdown was obvious. The political talks that the KIO had been promised when it signed its ceasefire agreement with the military never materialized. Instead, the leaders of the KIO/KIA had been asked to convert their army into a Border Guard Force(BGF) controlled and commanded by the Burmese military. When the KIO/KIA refused to comply with that request, the Burmese army went on an all-out offensive against its bases along the Chinese border and elsewhere in Kachin State and northern Shan State.

© Myanmar and China Borderline across Kachin and Shan



PEACE MEETINGS AFTER THE 2010 AND 2015 ELECTIONS

The old ruling party, the BSPP, was dissolved after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and replaced by a new military-run entity, the National Unity Party (NUP). The one-party system was also abolished which enabled other political parties, among them the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, to operate openly—at least until she was placed under house arrest in July 1989. Elections, which the SLORC had promised when it assumed power in September 1988, were held on May 27, 1990. Despite the repression, the NLD scored a landslide victory capturing 392 of 492 contested seats. The NUP won in a mere ten constituencies. The rest of the seats went to ethnic parties which were loosely allied with the NLD but wanted to safeguard the rights of their respective communities.

But that elected assembly was never convened. Instead, a 600-plus assembly consisting of 100 MPs elect with the rest hand-picked by the SLORC had to sit down and draft a new constitution, a duty that should have befallen the elected assembly, not any other body. A referendum on that constitution was held in May 2008, in which 99 percent of the electorate was said to have participated and 93.82 per cent voted in favor of the basically military-drafted charter. But it is obvious that it was fraudulent. Some constituencies reported that there had been more than 100 per cent yes votes before the central authorities could step in and “correct” the figures.

Elections under that constitution were held on November 7, 2010, and after the failure to attract support for the NUP the military had formed a new party called the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The NLD boycotted the elections and the result was widely believed by foreign observers as well as the Burmese public to have been far from free and fair. The USDP won a clear majority and former junta member and military-appointed prime minister, General Thein Sein, became president and formed a government in March 2011. Despite his past and the fraudulent 2008 referendum and the rigged 2010 election, Thein Sein introduced a number of unexpected initiatives such as the release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and allowing all political parties to operate openly. Press censorship was also abolished and an abundance of new publications appeared in Rangoon and elsewhere. It is beyond the scope of this report to analyze the background to and reasons for taking those measures, but it would suffice to say that decades of Western boycotts and sanctions had forced Burma into a dependence on China, which the staunchly nationalist Burmese military perceived as a threat to national sovereignty. And in order to normalize relations with the West, the Burmese military had to ease the repression of the public and allow more freedoms.⁷⁸

Equally surprising as the general liberalization of society that took place under Thein Sein's presidency (2011-2016) were his so-called peace initiatives. He appointed a body called the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) to initiate and oversee talks with the ethnic armed organizations, and tens of millions of dollars were poured into the peace process by foreign governments and institutions.⁷⁹ This foreign interest was much bigger and certainly involved much more money than had been the case in the fairly modest participation of foreign peacemakers in the 1990s. But the efforts were equally misguided and tens of millions of dollars were spent on various training programs and study-tours to countries such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, Colombia and Guatemala, which had little relevance to the situation in Burma.



Shan State Army (North), Wan Hai, 2014.
© Hseng Nong Lintner

In the end, the MPC had little to show for its efforts as most ethnic armed organizations in the country did not take part in the process, or did so reluctantly. As a face-saving gesture before the next election, which was to be held in November 2015, and which USDP was not sure to win, the Thein Sein government announced on October 15 that year that a “Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement” (NCA) had eventually been signed by eight armed groups. But a closer look at the list reveals that only two of those groups actually had any armed forces to be reckoned with: the KNU and its KNLA, and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), whose army is called the Shan State Army (which should not be confused with the original Shan State Army, which was set up in 1964 and its political wing, the Shan State Progress Party, SSPP). The RCSS grew out of Khun Sa’s Mong Tai Army, and to differentiate the two SSAs, the RCSS’s army is often referred to as SSA-South and the SSA/SSPP as SSA-North. But those are not official names.

The other signatories were:

- **The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)**, a militia which fought together with **the Burmese army** against **the KNU/KNLA** and later split into several different factions, one called **the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army** while another accepted the government’s offer to become a **Border Guard Force**.
- **The All-Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)**, which gave up its armed struggle in the early 2000s in order to focus on political work.
- **The KNU/KNLA Peace Council**, a tiny group with only a few armed men.
- **The Chin National Front (CNF)**, another small group which was of little relevance until the peace process began (the MPC chief, Aung Min, even gave it a few villages in Chin State so it would have a “base area” and some degree of credibility when the talks began.)

The Arakan Liberation Party and Army (ALP/ALA), a handful of soldiers who were based on KNU/KNLA areas on the Thai border. It never had any presence in Rakhine (Arakan) State and should not be confused with the Arakan Army (AA), which is active in Rakhine State and has a formidable fighting force.

The Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), which was formed by a handful of Thai-border based Pa-Os who broke away from the main Pa-O National Organization/Army (PNO/PNA) when it entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1991. Like the CNF, it was of no relevance until it signed the NCA and subsequently recruited some troops and, sources in Taunggyi claim, borrowed some from the PNA.

On February 18, 2018 two more groups signed the NCA: the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), which could best be described as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, and the New Mon State Party/the Mon National Liberation Army (NMSP/MNLA), which was quite strong in the 1980s and 1990s, but then fell apart and dwindled, becoming a small armed band with no military clout or influence.

It is evident that Thein Sein's peace process was a sham. The old ceasefire agreements from the late 1980s and early 1990s were forgotten as soon as the "new" peace process began, and the KIA was not the only group that came under attack, and that as early as June 2011. The Burmese army launched an offensive against the SSA/SSPP's base at Wan Hai—which was designated Special Region-3 in 1989—in October 2015. In 2009, fighting broke out between the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Burmese army in Kokang. In February 2015, MNDAA forces went on the offensive, provoking a fierce response from the Burmese army. Aircraft and heavy artillery were used in what Jane's Defense Weekly called "the largest war since Myanmar's [Burma's] independence."⁸⁰

In the Palaung area in northern Shan State, the April 1991 ceasefire agreement between the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA) and the military led to discontent as government forces began suppressing the local population. The outcome was the formation of the Ta-ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which, with support first from the KIA and later from the MNDAA and the UWSA, has grown into one of Burma's strongest ethnic armies. In Rakhine State, another formidable ethnic army has emerged in recent years—the Arakan Army (AA), which is allied with the "non-signatory" TNLA, SSA-N, KIA, MNDAA, UWSA and NDAA-ESS in an umbrella organization called the Federal Political Negotiating and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) and was set up on April 19, 2017.

Those seven groups account for more than 80 per cent of the personnel in Burma's ethnic armed organizations—and they remained outside the peace process. And so does another ethnic armed force, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which launched some spectacular attacks in the Muslim-majority areas of northern Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017, prompting the Burmese army to launch a massive "clearing operation", which drove more than 700,000 Rohingyas into refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh.

By then, the NLD had won the elections in November 2015 and formed a government led by state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi. She dissolved the MPC and replaced it with an entity called the National Reconciliation and Peace Center which, in reference to the talks that her father held with minority representatives in Panglong in Shan State in 1946 and 1947, held a number of meetings called the 21st Century Panglong. But the policy remained the same: the ethnic groups would have to sign the NCA first, then political talks about the country's constitutional future were supposed to be held, or, to use a tired phrase, it continued '*putting the cart before the horse*'. The failure of Thein Sein's and Aung San Suu Kyi's peace processes should also be seen against the backdrop of intensified fighting in Kokang, Kachin State and other frontier areas.

THE FEBRUARY 2021 COUP AND ITS AFTERMATH: A WIDER CIVIL WAR AND LESSONS LEARNED

The February 1, 2021 coup has changed the political landscape in Burma dramatically and it is far from certain that it can ever again be the same as in the period 2011-2021 in any shape or form. The military accepted the outcome of the 2015 election, but a second win for the NLD, as what happened in 2020, was not going to be tolerated. The military may have feared that the NLD, after two landslide victories, would try to amend the constitution and perhaps even write a new one. Many outsiders were stunned by the violence that the military unleashed on the population after the coup, but it was not the first time the Burmese army has gunned down pro-democracy demonstrators. That happened at Rangoon University in 1962, when people protested against the dictatorship in the mid-1970s, during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, during the anti-junta demonstrations in the 1990s, and when the Buddhist monks marched against the regime in 2007.



In the past, groups of hardened militants had fled to the borders to take up arms against the military when their peaceful protests were met with bullets. But this time, the fighting is not confined to the frontier areas. Local People's Defense Forces (PDF) have sprung up in many parts of the Burmese heartland, areas which have not seen any insurgency since the 1970s when the CPB had strongholds there. This is happening as a new generation of Burmese, regardless of nationality, do not want to see a return to the bad old days of absolute military rule. Many individual fighters as well as entire PDFs have

been trained by Kachin and Karen rebels in border areas. The so-called “peace process” is dead and the NLD and other political parties have been forced underground.

During the Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi eras, foreign analysts were talking about “Myanmar’s transition to democracy” and wrote papers about that supposed “transition” from military rule to a more civilian-based system of government. After the February 1 coup and the brutal suppression of all opposition to the military’s supreme role in Burmese politics and society, it should be evident that all that was based on gross misinterpretations of what really happened during the decade following the 2010 election and the introduction of a more open political environment.



It should be enough to read the 2008 constitution, which was drafted under military auspices and laid the foundation for continued military rule regardless of who formed the government in the new capital Naypyitaw, to realize that what we saw after the 2010, 2015 and 2020 elections was not a transition to any fundamentally new political system. That constitution states that the “Defense Services” shall “be able to participate in the National political leadership role of the State”—and they have done so, by holding 25 per cent of all seats in the bicameral National Assembly and securing for themselves control over the three crucial ministries: defense, home affairs (which includes the internal security apparatus) and border affairs.⁸¹

The charter’s Chapter 12 lays out the complicated rules for constitutional amendments, which effectively give the military veto power over changes to the present power structure. Minor constitutional changes may be considered by the parliament if 20 per cent of the members submit a bill. However, a tangle of 104 clauses states that major charter changes cannot be made without the prior approval of more than 75 per cent of all MPs, after which a nationwide referendum must be held where more than half of all eligible voters cast ballots.

And the generals stated time and again that it was their duty to uphold and defend that basically undemocratic constitution. On January 28, 2021, only days before the coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that the Myanmar military “needs to abide by the Constitution” which he described as the “mother of the law.”⁸² He has even—most recently on October 12, 2021—claimed that the military take-over was carried out constitutionally.⁸³



But, if it was not a transition, what did actually happen after the 2010 election? The answer is obvious: the unprecedented openness that people enjoyed led to a transformation of Myanmar society. An entire generation learned how to use the internet, communicate on social media, and to hold workshops and seminars on subjects related to democracy and civil rights. That, in turn, gave birth to Generation Z and the massive opposition to the coup, first by peaceful means and then armed struggle against the coup-installed junta, the State Administration Council (SAC). The so-called “peace process” is dead and the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other political parties have been forced underground.

It is possible that the generals had not expected that kind of development when changes were introduced after the election in November 2010, which was blatantly rigged in favor of their own party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Nor had the generals anticipated that millions all over the country would come out to protest against the coup—and continue to do so more than two years after the tanks rolled into Rangoon and Naypyitaw. There seems to be no way out of the situation that the military has created for themselves and the country after the coup—many would argue since the first coup in 1962—and nothing is likely to change unless and until there is a split in the military. But that could also lead to an even bloodier civil war, a potentially devastating scenario for which the outside world and all those involved in Burmese issues must be prepared.



So is there anything the outside world can do to help find a reasonably peaceful resolution to Burma's civil wars? It is important to understand that there is actually very little outsiders can do to directly influence any peace process or the overall political situation in Burma. But efforts could be made in four areas. The first task for any outside organization or individual interested in peace should be to conduct a thorough study of the Burmese military, its command structure, how the officer corps function and operate, and what is being taught at military academies. Without such a study, it would be impossible to understand why the Burmese military is behaving the way it does. Outsiders as well as internal actors would benefit from such a study and, it is important to emphasize, it has to be the result of active and respectful collaboration between Burmese, ethnic, and non-Burmese researchers.

The next task would be a critical study of Burma's past experiences of failed peace efforts. This report is only the first step towards a better understanding of why those failed, and it shows that the military's position has not changed since the 1950s: the rebels must surrender or form local militias under the ultimate command of the Burmese army, and they can as such engage in any kind of business. That is not a viable way forward, and the onus is on the military to change its attitudes towards the internal wars. In April 2022, the coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, called for peace talks with some leaders of the ethnic armed organizations. But there were few takers, those who participated in the talks represented only very small and insignificant groups. Of those who came, only the RCSS and a faction of the KNU could be described as proper ethnic armed organizations. It was a propaganda exercise and should be exposed as such. Min Aung Hlaing's junta is not seriously interested in seeking a comprehensive, political solution to Burma's ethnic wars. The goal of the military has always been to defeat the rebels on the battlefield and force them to surrender, but more than 70 years of experience have shown that that is impossible. History has also shown that turning ethnic rebel groups into business-oriented outfits is not going to address the reasons why there has been a civil war in Burma for more than seven decades.

It is obvious that an entirely new approach is needed and the various resistance forces also have to present viable and realistic alternatives to what the military has demanded of them over the last decades. "Democracy" and "federalism" are noble goals, but how would they work in practice? Foreigners interested in peacemaking must also change their attitudes. They should listen to local activists, not treat them in a patronizing manner, as was often the case when international organizations were allowed into the country during the pre-coup era. Burma's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) need help, financially as well as by outsiders sharing their experiences, rather than being self-appointed "masters" of the work that has to be done.

Third, the various games that China especially has been playing since the 1950s should be studied and analyzed. Burma's CSOs and NGOs must be made aware of those manipulations and map out a strategy to counter Chinese influence over Burma's ethnic armed groups and other actors on the domestic, political scene. Chinese interference in Burma's internal conflicts has had a stronger impact on the situation in the country than actions and policies of any other country. The change in China's role from being an exporter of revolution to Burma and beyond to becoming a major trading nation must be fully understood. Even if the priorities have changed, Burma is still the springboard through which China wants to expand its influence in the region. Only Burma provides China with direct and convenient access to the Indian Ocean, and efforts to secure that economic corridor explain why Beijing is playing all sides of the conflict. China is not necessarily interested in peace but wants primarily to maintain its influence in Burma and that explains why the Chinese have close contacts with Burma's military authorities, the NLD, and several of the ethnic armed organizations. Chinese-supplied weaponry can be found in the hands of the Burmese military as well as major ethnic armed organizations. The Chinese have geostrategic interests in Burma which the West do not and, therefore, China's involvement

in Burma's "peace processes" is entirely different in nature from that of Western powers and players.

Fourth, it would be a serious mistake to "outsource" the issue of democracy and peace in Burma to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which appears to be what several Western countries have done since the coup. ASEAN is a grouping of mostly un-democratic countries guided by two cardinal principles: consensus and non-interference. ASEAN has never solved any bilateral problem among its members, nor has the bloc taken any affirmative action against untoward developments inside a member state. Support for resistance to and punitive measures against the new junta must be undertaken by the world's democracies themselves.

There is no easy way forward and there is no way the military would agree to "go back to the barracks", as some people argue should be the ideal solution to Burma's problems. But certain steps such as those listed above could be taken to assist the pro-democracy forces in their struggle. Even so, any collaboration with them has to be based on mutual respect and an equal partnership. Only then can it be a meaningful step forward.



On February 18th, 2021 in Pyay, Bago Region, protesters gathered in front of the Myanmar Economic Bank to convince employees to join the Civil Disobedience Movement as they work behind closed doors under army surveillance.

© The Visual Rebellion Myanmar Collective // PBR106

BURMA'S CIVIL WARS: A TIMELINE

1940s

January 4, 1948 // Burma becomes an independent republic.

April 1948 // The first battles between the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and government forces take place near Pegu (Bago) in central Burma.

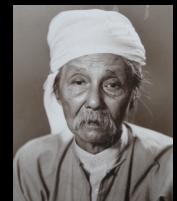
July 1948 // The People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), a militia set up by Aung San, goes underground. Army mutineers form the Revolutionary Burma Army (RBA) which later merges with the CPB.



© Aung San

July-August 1948 // A smaller band of Karenni rebels begin gathering arms and recruits. The first Pa-O rebel army is formed to fight not against the government but against the power of the Shan saohpas.

October 19, 1948 // Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, the "grand old man" of Burmese nationalism, holds a meeting at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon and tries to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. His campaign continues into the early 1950s.



© Thakin Kodaw Hmaing

January 1949 // The Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO) occupies Twante and Insein near Rangoon, marking the beginning of the Karen insurrection. Ethnic Kachins led by Naw Seng, a World War II hero, join the rebellion. A Mon rebel army is formed in the southeast. Most of Burma under rebel control.

January 1950 // Muslim mujahids in Arakan resort to armed struggle.

February 1951 // Renegade Chinese nationalist Kuomintang forces retreat into the northern and northeastern Shan States following their defeat in the Chinese civil war.

1950s

1950s

1955-1956 // The rebels have retreated into remote areas followed by renewed efforts by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing to bring about a negotiated peace. He wins support from the Buddhist clergy. The efforts fail as the army is not prepared to offer the rebels anything more than rehabilitation—if they surrender.

October 28, 1958 // Prime Minister U Nu hands over power to a caretaker government led by General Ne Win.

January 4, 1958 // Ten years of independence have elapsed and the constitutional right of the Shan and Karenni states to secede from the Union comes into effect.

May 21, 1958 // A Shan rebel army called Nook Suk Harn ("Young Brave Warriors") is formed near the Thai-Burma border.

April 29, 1959 // 25 Shan and Karenni sawbwas surrender their powers to the elected government of their respective states. The Shan States become Shan State and the Karenni States become Kayah State.

January 28, 1960 // China and Burma sign an agreement delineating the border between the two countries.

February 6, 1960 // Elections are held and U Nu forms a new civilian government on April 4.

February 5, 1961 // A rebellion breaks out in the Kachin-inhabited areas of northern Shan State. The Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA) is formed.

June 8-16, 1961 // Ethnic leaders meet in the Shan State capital of Taunggyi to discuss how to reform the federal structure of the Union.

August 25, 1961 // U Nu's government decides to make Buddhism the state religion of Burma.

February 24, 1962 // U Nu convenes a Federal Seminar in Rangoon to find ways to amend the constitution to allow more rights for the ethnic minorities.

March 2, 1962 // The military led by General Ne Win seizes power in a coup, detains participants in the seminar and other political leaders, and abolishes Burma's federal constitution.



© U Nu



© General Ne Win

1960s

1960s

July 1962 // The military carries out its first massacre of civilians. Hundreds of students are killed when soldiers open fire on students at Rangoon University. Some students go underground and join the CPB while ethnic insurgencies flare anew in Shan and Kachin areas. The KIA moves into Kachin State, and Shan and other ethnic rebels (Palaung, Kayan and Pa-O) take over much of Shan State. A new group of Muslim Rohingyas resort to armed struggle in Arakan. In China, CPB exiles and followers of Naw Seng (who retreated into China in 1950) begin to prepare for a push into northeastern Burma.

April 3, 1963 // The military government announces a general amnesty and peace talks with a number of rebel groups begin in Rangoon in July.

November 14, 1963 // The peace talks break down. Once again, the military had demanded that the rebels surrender and, in return, offered them rehabilitation. Only a few rebels accept the offer.

March 24, 1964 // Three Shan rebel groups merge and form the Shan State Army (SSA), headed by Sao Nang Hearn Kham, the widow of Burma's first president, Sao Shwe Thaik, who was arrested and killed after the coup.

January 1, 1968 // Thousands of CPB troops, including Naw Seng and his men as well as Red Guard volunteers from China, cross the border into Mōng Ko in northern Shan State, soon to be followed by another push into Kokang. A new CPB supported by China emerges on the northeastern border. The advance is stopped in a battle at the Kunlong bridge on the Salween River that lasted from November 28, 1971 to January 7, 1972.



© Naw Seng

August 29, 1969 // Ousted Prime Minister U Nu, while in London, forms the Parliamentary Democracy Party. The PDP, later renamed the People's Patriotic Party (PPP), attracts army veterans and other volunteers who want to fight against Ne Win's regime. In the early 1970s, the PDP/PPP entered into a pact with Karen and Mon rebels on the Thai border, but later fell out with them. The group disintegrated in the late 1970s.

1970s

June 1972 // The KIA and the military agree on a ceasefire and talks are held in Lashio. The military wants the KIA to join the fight against the CPB. The KIA expresses willingness to do that, if the military provides them with arms and ammunition. The request is turned down and the ceasefire collapses in September.

1970s

1972-1973 // The CPB takes over the Wa Hills and the area north of Kengtung, or more than 20,000 square kilometers of territory. Arms and other supplies keep flowing in from China.

1975-76 // The “new” CPB forges alliances with ethnic rebel armies, among them the SSA and the KIA, which benefit from the supply of Chinese weapons. At the same time, the Burmese army wipes out the CPB’s old strongholds in central Burma, including the Pegu Yoma mountains north of Rangoon. Meanwhile, the Karen National Union (KNU), forced out of the Irrawaddy Delta and other strongholds in southern Burma, establish a base area along the Thai border. Tax on the black-market trade between Thailand and Burma provides the KNU with a substantial income which is used to procure weapons from Thailand. Mon and Karenni rebels establish similar “buffer zones” along the Thai-Burma border. Alliances are formed consisting of various ethnic armies.

May 24, 1980 // The government announces a 90-day general amnesty for rebels. The government later announced that 1,431 rebels had surrendered.

November 1980-April 1981 // Talks are held between the government and the KIA, first in Myitkyina and then in Rangoon. The talks break down when the government does not change its demand that the KIA has to become a local militia force under the command of the Burmese army.

May 5-9 1981 // The government and the CPB meet in Lashio and hold inconclusive talks.

August-September 1988 // Massive protests against the military government occur in every major city and town across Burma. The military opens fire on demonstrators, killing thousands.

November 5, 1988 // Students who have fled to the Thai border to resort to armed struggle against the military government form the All-Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF).

March 12, 1989 // A mutiny breaks out among CPB forces in Kokang.

1980s

1980s

April 16-17, 1989 // The mutiny spreads to ethnic Wa in the CPB's army. They capture party headquarters at Panghsang and drive the mostly Burman leadership into exile in China. The Wa form their own organization called the Burma National United Party (BNUP) and make peace with the government. Other former CPB forces in Kachin State, Kokang and those in the hills north of Kengtung, enter into similar ceasefire agreements with the government.

February-October 1989 // Smaller, CPB-allied forces among the Karenni and the Kayan enter into ceasefire agreements with the government.

September 2, 1989 // The SSA enters into a ceasefire agreement with the government.

November 3, 1989 // The BNUP merges with a smaller Wa faction on the Thai border and establishes the United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA).

January 1993 // Peace talks between the KIA and the government begin.

February 24, 1994 // The KIA signs a ceasefire agreement with the government. This is the only signed ceasefire agreement between the government and any rebel group; all other ceasefire agreement concluded at this time are verbal understandings.

October 4, 1994 // A former, CPB-allied Pa-O rebel army called the Shan States Nationalities People's Liberation Organization, makes peace with the government.

January 1995 // The KNU splits and the breakaway faction forms the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which makes peace with the government. During 1989-1995, more than twenty major and small rebel armies make peace with the government. But no agreements are signed (other than that with the KIA) and no political talks are held.

1990s

1900s

January 1996 // Opium warlord Khun Sa surrenders to the government, disbands his Mong Tai Army (MTA) and moves to Rangoon. A smaller group led by Yawt Seik, a former MTA officer, refuses to surrender and forms the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS). Its army later assumes the name the Shan State Army. To differentiate between the old SSA in northern Shan State and Yawt Seik's SSA on the Thai border in the south, the media calls the former the SSA-North and the latter SSA-South. The SSA-North is sometimes referred to as the SSPP/SSA after its political wing, the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), which was set up in 1971.



© Khun Sa

May 10 and May 24, 2008 // A referendum is held on a military-drafted constitution. According to official figures, 99 per cent participate and the constitution is approved by 93.82 per cent of voters.

November 7, 2010 // Elections are held to the bicameral national parliament. The pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) wins 259 of 330 contested seats in the 440-member lower house (110 seats are appointed by the military), and 129 out of 168 contested seats in the 224-member upper house (56 seats are appointed by the military). The National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotts the elections.

March 30, 2011 // General Thein Sein, prime minister in the previous military government and first secretary in the ruling junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), retires from the military and is appointed president. He announces that he wants to seek peace with the country's many ethnic armed organizations.



© General U Thein Sein

June 9, 2011 // The military breaks the ceasefire agreement with the KIA and a renewed civil war breaks out in Kachin State.

2012-2015 // A series of talks are held between Thein Sein's governments and various ethnic armed organizations. Foreign interlocutors become involved in what is termed a "peace process."

October 2015 // The Burmese army launches attacks against the SSPP/SSA's headquarters at Wan Hai. The SSPP/SSA's verbal ceasefire agreement with central authorities is effectively broken.

2010s

2010s

October 15, 2015 // A Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) is signed in the new capital Naypyitaw with eight signatories. However, only two (the KNU and the RCSS) have any substantial armies.

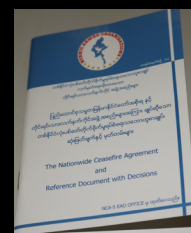
November 7, 2015 // Elections are held to the bicameral parliament. The NLD wins 255 of 330 contested seats in the 440-member lower house (110 seats are appointed by the military), and 135 out of 168 contested seats in the 224-member upper house (56 seats are appointed by the military). The pro-military USDP wins 30 seats in the lower house and 11 seats in the upper house.

March 30, 2015 // A new NLD-led government assumes office in Naypyitaw. Aung San Suu Kyi, who cannot become the country's president because her sons are not Burmese citizens, is appointed State Counselor or the equivalent of a prime minister.

August 31-September 4, 2016 // The first of a series of peace talks called 21st Century Panglong (after the first Panglong conferences which were held in 1947 and headed by Aung San Suu Kyi's father Aung San) is held in Naypyitaw. This is followed by more such talks in May 2017, July 2018 and August 2020. The ethnic armed organizations called for a federal system while the leaders of the military on other occasions stated that their duty is to defend the 2008 Constitution.

February 13, 2018 // The New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) sign the NCA. While the remnants of the once-strong NMSP have a small armed force, the LDU is a Thailand-based NGO.

November 7, 2020 // Elections are held to the bicameral parliament. The NLD wins 258 of 330 contested seats in the 440-member lower house (110 seats are appointed by the military), and 138 out of 168 contested seats in the 224-member upper house (56 seats are appointed by the military). The pro-military USDP wins 26 seats in the lower house and 7 seats in the upper house.



© Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement



© Aung San Su Kyi

2020s

2020s

February 1, 2021 // The military seizes absolute power. President Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders are detained. The coup is met by widespread demonstrations all over the country. When the army responds by firing into groups of demonstrators, the initially peaceful protests turn into armed resistance against the new military regime. Fighting breaks out in ethnic areas and the ceasefire with the KNU collapses. For the first time since the 1970s there is also fighting in several parts of central Burma.



© President U Win Myint

April 16, 2021 // Members of the pre-coup parliament and other pro-democracy forces set up the National Unity Government (NUG) to unite the resistance.

May 5, 2021 // NUG announces the formation of People's Defense Forces (PDF) which launch a "defensive war" against the junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), and its military.

2021- // Heavy fighting rages in Karen State, Kachin State, Kayah (Karenni) State, Shan State, Magwe Region and Sagaing Region. Bomb blasts and assassinations occur in major cities, among them Rangoon and Mandalay. Local PDFs appear to operate independently without a supreme leadership or a coordinated strategy.

2022- // Some foreign peacemakers try to restart the "peace process", but the approach appears to be the same as before the coup. Meetings are held with groups which are of little or no relevance to the overall situation in the country.

APPENDIX II

MAJOR PAST AND PRESENT REBEL ARMIES

1 // NON-ETHNIC

ABSDF (All-Burma Students Democratic Front)

Set up on the Thai border after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Gave up its armed struggle in the early 2000s but nevertheless signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015.

CPB (The Communist Party of Burma)

Set up in 1939, went underground in 1948 and later received massive support from China. Had strongholds in the Pegu Yoma and other areas in central Burma until the mid-1970s, and along the Chinese border from 1968 until a mutiny among the hilltribe rank-and-file in 1989. Now defunct. In some literature, it is often referred to as “the White Flag” Communist Party, but that is a derogatory term (“white” for surrender) coined by CP(RF). Needless to say, that name was never used by the CPB in its literature and statements. Army mutineers were called the Burma Revolutionary Army before they merged with the CPB in the early 1950s. At the same time, some members of the People’s Volunteer Organization (PVO), a post-World War II militia, went underground and became the People’s Comrade Party (PCP). Some of them later joined the CPB as well.

CP(RF) The Communist Party (Red Flag)

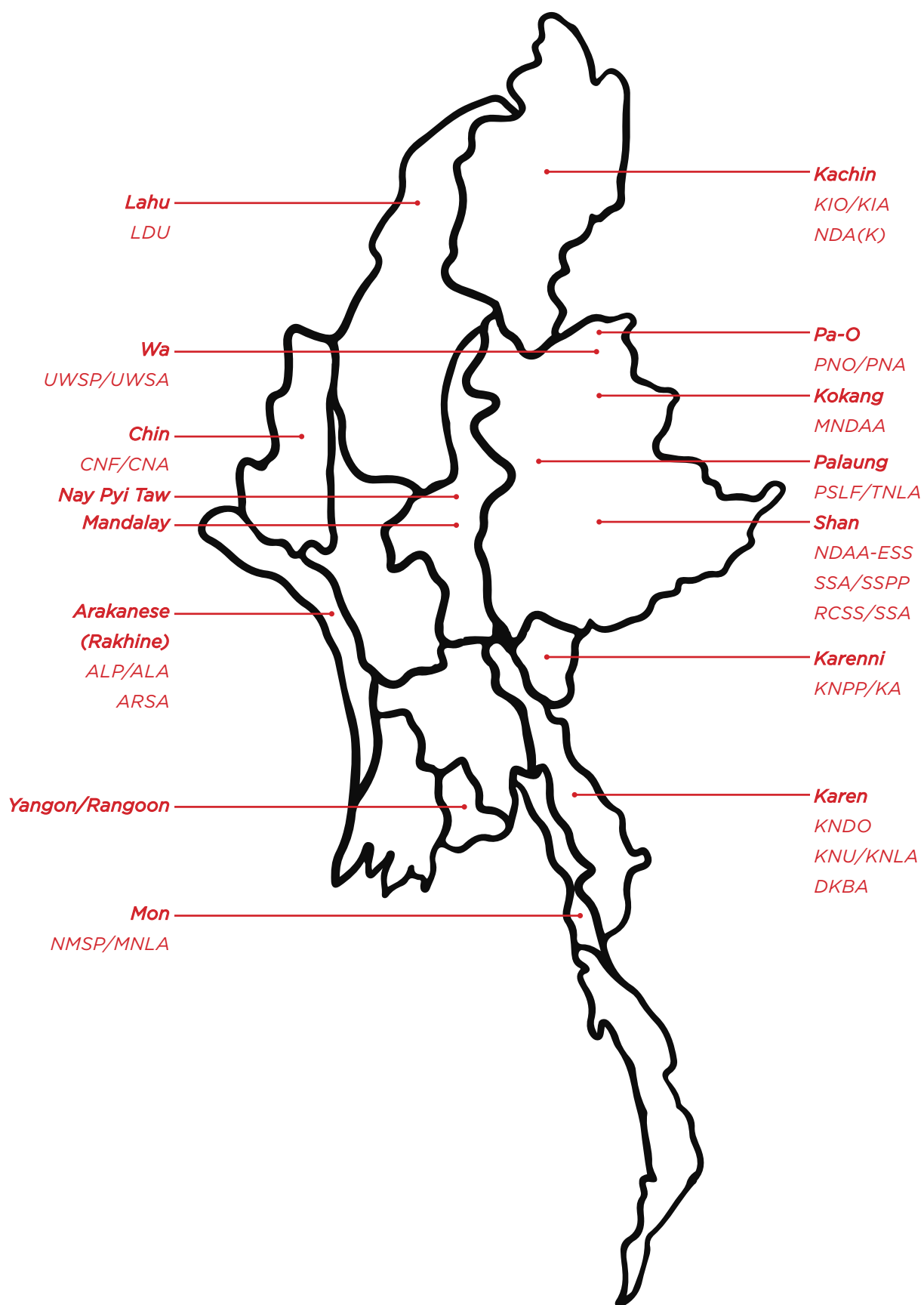
A radical communist party and rebel army, usually referred to as “the Red Flags.” Went underground in 1946 and collapsed when its leader Thakin Soe was captured in 1970. Was never as strong as the CPB.

PDF (People’s Defense Forces)

The common name for local resistance forces that were set up after the February 1, 2021 coup.

PLA (Patriotic Liberation Army)

The armed wing of the Burman, non-communist resistance in the 1970s (Parliamentary Democracy Party, later People’s Patriotic Party). Disintegrated after the 1980 amnesty.



2 // ETHNIC

Arakanese (Rakhine)

AA (Arakan Army)

Set up in 2009, now one of Burma's strongest ethnic rebel armies. Operates all over Rakhine State and is allied with the KIA, TNLA and MNDAA.

ALP/ALA (Arakan Liberation Party/Army)

Set up in 1972 on the Thai border, where it was based in areas controlled by the KNU. A small group that never had any presence in Rakhine State. Signed the Nationwide Cease-fire Agreement in 2015.

ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army)

Set up in 2012 by Rohingya Muslims from northern Rakhine State. Formerly known as Harakah al-Yakin or "the Faith Movement." Was preceded by moderate groups such as the Rohingya Patriotic Front, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and the Arakan Rohingya National Organization, and the somewhat less radical Rohingya Solidarity Organization.

Chin

CNF/CNA (Chin National Front/Army)

CNF was in 1985 and the CNA in 1988. Broke up into a number of factions, one of which signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015. Was never a formidable rebel force but grew in importance after the February 1, 2021 coup.

Kachin

KIO/KIA (Kachin Independence Organization/Army)

Set up in 1961 and soon took over most of the countryside in Kachin State. Signed ceasefire agreement with the then junta in Rangoon, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, in 1994 which was broken when it came under attack in 2011. A smaller Kachin faction, the Kachin National Organization, is active mostly among Kachin exiles in Europe and the US.

NDA(K) (National Democratic Army-Kachin)

A smaller Kachin rebel army and one of the four ethnic forces which emerged from the collapse of the CPB in 1989. Entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in that year after which some of them became an official, military-allied Border Guard Force.

Karen

KNDO (Karen National Defense Organization)

Set up in 1947, went underground in 1949. In the beginning, made up the core of the Karen resistance but later became KNU's village defense forces. It is unclear if it recognizes the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.

KNU/KNLA (Karen National Union/Liberation Army)

KNU was set up in 1947 and went underground with its militia, the KNDO, in 1949. Various armed Karen groups united in 1968 and 1975 and began to use the name KNLA. KNU signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015.

DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army)

Some Karen broke away from the KNU/KNLA in 1994 and formed the DKBA. In effect a Burmese army-allied militia, it signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement while some units became Border Guard Forces. One faction broke away and formed the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, also abbreviated DKBA.

Karenni

KNPP/KA (Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army)

KNPP was set up in 1957 and KA in 1974. However, the first Karenni rebels went underground in 1948. Active in Kayah (Karenni) State.

Kokang

MNDAA (Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army)

Set up in Kokang, an area dominated by ethnic Chinese, in 1989. One of four ethnic armies that emerged from the collapse of the CPB in that year. Had a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army until hostilities broke out in Kokang in 2009.

Lahu

LDU (Lahu Democratic Union)

More an NGO than an armed group. Nevertheless, it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in February 2018.

Mon

NMSP/MNLA (New Mon State Party/Mon National Liberation Army)

The first Mon rebels went underground in 1949. NMSP and the MNLA were formed in 1958. Made peace with the Burmese army in 1995 and signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in February 2018.

Palaung

PSLF/TNLA (Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army)

Formed after the Palaung State Liberation Organization/Army and entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in 1991. Active in northern Shan State and allied with AA, MNDAA, KIO/KIA and SSPP/SSA. Note: Ta'ang is another name for the Palaung.

Pa-O

PNO/PNA (Pa-O National Organization/Army)

Set up when some smaller Pa-O factions merged into one organization in 1976. Entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in 1991 and became an official, military-allied local militia in areas south of the Shan State capital of Taunggyi.

PNLO/PNLA (Pa-O National Liberation Organization/Army)

Set up on the Thai border in 1991 by a small group of Pa-Os who refused to honor PNO's pact with the Burmese army. Originally called the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization, it was a small and insignificant group until it signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement which enabled it to draft new recruits and set up bases away from the Thai border.

Shan

NDAA-ESS (National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State)

Set up in eastern Shan State after the 1989 CPB mutiny. One of four ethnic forces that emerged from the collapse of the old communist rebel army. Entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in 1989.

SSA/SSPP (Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party)

SSA was set up in 1964, combining three former Shan rebel armies (the rebellion broke out in 1958.) Its political wing SSPP was set up in 1971. Split when the majority entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in 1989. That ceasefire was broken when the Burmese army began attacking its strongholds in central Shan State in 2014-2015. In recent years it has also been fighting against the RCSS, which sent forces to northern Shan State after signing the 2015 ceasefire agreement.

RCSS/SSA (Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army)

RCSS was set up in the early 1990s by opium warlord Khun Sa. His first army, set up in 1973, was called the Shan United Army (SUA) and then became the Mong Tai Army ("Mong Tai" = Shan State in Shan). A group who disagreed with Khun Sa's surrender to the Burmese army in 1996 broke away, retained the name RCSS and, in the beginning, used the name of an older Shan army, the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA). Later, it assumed the same name as the old SSA and the media usually distinguishes the two armies by referring to them as SSA-S (South) and SSA-N (North), but neither of those names are used by the groups themselves. RCSS signed the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement which enabled it to move troops to the north.

Wa**UWSP/UWSA (United Wa State Party/Army)**

Set up by ethnic Wa after the 1989 CPB mutiny. The strongest of the four ethnic forces that emerged from the collapse of the old communist rebel army, it entered into a verbal ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army in 1989. Today Burma's best-equipped ethnic armed organization. Its armed strength is estimated at 20,000-30,000.



ABBREVIATIONS

AA // Arakan Army

ABSDF // All-Burma Students Democratic Front

AFPFL // Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League

ALA // Arakan Liberation Army

ALP // Arakan Liberation Party

ARSA // Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

BIA // Burma Independence Army

BSPP // Burma Socialist Program Party

BWPP // Burma Workers' and Peasants' Party

CNA // Chin National Army

CNF // Chin National Front

CPB // Communist Party of Burma

CP(RF) // Communist Party (Red Flag)

DKBA // Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (or Democratic Karen Benevolent Army)

DSI // Defense Services Institute

FPNCC // Federal Political Negotiating and Consultative Committee

KA // Karenni Army

KIA // Kachin Independence Army

KIO // Karen Independence Organization

KKY // Ka Kwe Ye (government-recognized home guards)

KMT // Kuomintang

KNDO // Karen National Defense Organization

KNLA // Karen National Liberation Army

KNO // Kachin National Organization

KNPP // Karenni National Progressive Party

KNU // Karen National Union

LID // Light Infantry Division

MNDAA // Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army

MNLA // Mon National Liberation Army

MPC // Myanmar Peace Center

MTA // Möng Tai Army

NCA // Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

NDAA-ESS // National Democratic Alliance Army (Eastern Shan State)

NDF // National Democratic Front

NDUF // National Democratic United Front

NLD // National League for Democracy

NMSP // New Mon State Party

PDF // People's Defense Forces

PNA // Pa-O National Army

PNLA // Pa-O National Liberation Army

PVO // People's Volunteer Organization

RBA // Revolutionary Burma Army

RC // Revolutionary Council

RCSS // Restoration Council of Shan State

SAC // State Administration Council

SLORC // State Law and Order Restoration Council

SPDC // State Peace and Development Party

SSA // Shan State Army

SSPP // Shan State Progress Party

TNLA // Ta'ang National Liberation Army

UWSA // United Wa State Army

UWSP // United Wa State Party



On June 30th, 2022, a TNLA soldier pressures local shops to empty out cans of Myanmar Beer in the streets. A nationwide boycott campaign was initiated to hurt the vast network of military-owned and crony businesses controlling Myanmar's economy.

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On February 28th, 2021, in Pyay, Bago Region, police prepared a charge for the first day where violence was recorded in this town. A dozen of civilians, protesters and journalists were injured by rubber bullets this day.

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