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Asian Journal of Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t741771145>

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Online publication date: 20 August 2010

To cite this Article Holliday, Ian(2010) 'Ethnicity and Democratization in Myanmar', Asian Journal of Political Science, 18: 2, 111 – 128

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02185377.2010.492975

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2010.492975>

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Ethnicity and Democratization in Myanmar

Ian Holliday

Myanmar is embarking on political reforms that could prove to be the first stage of a gradual transition to democracy. However, critical problems of ethnic discord remain to be resolved. This article draws on the literature on multiculturalism to examine ways forward. First it considers how other democratic states have sought to manage ethnic relations, and constructs a matrix of four ideal types: multiculturalism; ethnic enclaves; assimilation; and marginalization. Next it demonstrates just how difficult matters of ethnicity and identity were in the development of modern Burma. Then it surveys possibilities for ethnic relations in contemporary Myanmar. Finally it sketches future pathways. A brief conclusion reinforces the core argument. Ethnic enclaves and assimilation are the major contenders for ethnic policy in Myanmar. Their relative merits will need to be debated as openly as possible during any future democratization process.

Keywords: Burma; Democracy; Democratization; Ethnicity; Multiculturalism; Myanmar

Introduction

Myanmar is embarking on political reforms that could prove to be the first stage of a gradual transition to democracy.¹ Currently directed by Senior General Than Shwe and the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), political reform is promoted with far greater ambition and vision by democratic groups focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), as well as by leaders of ethnic forces based mainly in peripheral parts of the country. At the heart of the roadmap to discipline-flourishing democracy pursued by the military junta is a tightly managed general election scheduled for the closing months of 2010, which is already certain to result in victory for military-backed candidates and parties. At the same time, however, the 2010 election will recast the political landscape by instituting

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an elected president, a bicameral national parliament, and a series of provincial legislatures. In years thereafter, politics in Myanmar could thus chart a fresh course as elected assemblies haltingly find their feet, and power slowly flows from the hands of military leaders who have long imposed tight control on the country into the hands of civilians.

As Myanmar approaches its 2010 general election, the controlling military stamp placed on existing democratization proposals makes them a source of deep division across the country. Indeed, with elements unwelcome to many, the democracy on offer in 2010 casts considerable doubt on the extent of the political reforms soon to be enacted. In particular, parallel sets of guarantees of military power and constraints on popular control raise many questions. The guarantees are most evident in constitutional clauses requiring the president to have a military background, allowing military forces to appoint 25 per cent of legislative members, and enabling military forces to declare a state of emergency and impose unfettered control should all else fail. They are also visible in electoral laws mandating total acceptance of the junta's contentious roadmap to discipline-flourishing democracy. On offer in Myanmar in the closing months of 2010 is, then, democracy for a garrison state, designed to generate enough democracy to keep the generals' critics at bay, but not enough to loosen their tight grip on power. For this reason, it is forcefully challenged by leading members of the opposition and key ethnic groups. Even as the calendar counts down to the 2010 general election, the fate of the SPDC's political reform process therefore remains unclear.

There is, though, a matter of still greater uncertainty on Myanmar's political horizon, well understood by analysts but paid only limited attention in much democracy talk. This is the course ethnic politics will take if and when the country really does begin to democratize. Historically, the project of nation building in modernizing Burma was fraught and unsuccessful. Indeed, failure to build a modern nation to underpin the modern state was a key trigger for the collapse of democracy nearly 50 years ago, and has been a major factor prolonging military rule down to this day. Faced with such a difficult past, there is little reason to believe ethnic politics will miraculously fall into place if Myanmar starts again to move down the path of democracy after the 2010 general election. At a time when a degree of political change may be on the horizon, it is thus necessary to revisit the country's ethnic question. How might ethnic issues be managed to undergird a democratization process?

This question has faced many other countries as they too have built democratic systems. To address it, this article therefore looks to comparative experience for guidance before focusing on the Myanmar case. The article has four main sections. The first considers how other democratic states have sought to manage ethnic relations, and constructs a matrix of four ideal types: multiculturalism; ethnic enclaves; assimilation; and marginalization. The second demonstrates just how difficult matters of ethnicity and identity were in the development of modern Burma down to the late 1980s, when a formal military junta seized power from a disintegrating military-backed regime. The third surveys possibilities for ethnic relations in contemporary Myanmar by showing

where key political forces are arrayed on the matrix of available options. The fourth sketches future pathways by thinking through potential areas of policy shift by leading political forces, and evaluating the contribution external actors and experiences might make to a process of dialogue and reform.

The exploration undertaken here is necessarily schematic and suggestive, designed to provoke further analysis and debate rather than to provide definitive answers to immensely complex questions. Moreover, in the current climate of vice-like military control, an element of unreality hangs over any attempt to open up Myanmar's ethnic question for rational examination. Nevertheless, the article's core argument is in no sense diminished by this. It is that ethnic enclaves and assimilation are the major contenders for ethnic policy in Myanmar. Their relative merits will need to be debated as openly as possible during any future democratization process.

Modeling Multi-ethnic States

It is now widely accepted that nations are a product of the modern age. Anderson notes that the two most important pre-modern cultural systems were the religious community and the dynastic realm. As capitalism developed, however, and print technology revolutionized human communication in a world fractured into multiple language groups, the stage was set for the modern nation to emerge as an 'imagined political community' (Anderson, 1991: 6). Furthermore, following the American and French Revolutions the nation became a template for and marker of modernity. 'In effect, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, if not earlier, a "model" of "the" independent national state was available for pirating' (Anderson, 1991: 81). So widespread was the subsequent spread of nationalism that 'nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (Anderson, 1991: 3). Against Hobsbawm and others, Anderson contends that its dominance is far from drawing to a close, and global events in the two decades since he wrote bear him out on that.

One key problem that the near-universal spread of modern nationalism has generated is well known. In much of the world, the frontiers of nation and state are not coterminous, and many political leaders face difficult issues of building a nation to underpin the state they govern. Nation-building projects have thus been taken seriously by just about every major modern state. Nearly 20 years ago, Walzer (1992: 100–101) sketched the outlines of a neutral liberal state that stands above ethnic groups, 'refusing to endorse or support their ways of life or to take an active interest in their social reproduction', and thereby making itself 'neutral with reference to [their] language, history, literature, calendar'. He held the clearest example to be the United States, which mandates no official language or religion in its constitution. However, as Kymlicka (2002: 346) notes, actual policies in the US have done an enormous amount to promote English, which today must be learned by children in schools and by immigrants under the age of 50, and is a de facto requirement

for government jobs or contracts. Similarly, the Christian religion is immensely privileged.

Nation building is, then, a project undertaken by states throughout the world. In Asia, it was pursued with particular intensity in the early post-colonial years as governments sought to project an image of unity and control. The result was that a region characterized by extreme cultural and linguistic diversity witnessed often heavy-handed attempts to straightjacket multiple ethnic groups into single national frameworks, most of which were in fact inherited from imperial masters (Brown, 1994). Only after long periods of violent struggle and widespread recourse to ‘the art of not being governed’ (Scott, 2009), much of which continues to this day, did alternative approaches start to emerge. Complicating the contemporary situation is the gradual spread of democracy which, though formally committed to numerical majorities through the principle of one person one vote, in practice creates space for minority groups to advance their cause (Kymlicka, 2005: 33). Today, in consequence, several Asian states are starting to pay more attention to ethnic issues.

In a typical situation where a majority ethnic group is confronted by one or more minority ethnic groups, minority attempts are often made to open up the public sphere. There are, though, various ways for minority groups to gain political traction. Kymlicka (2002: 348) sketches four options: mass emigration; integration into the majority culture; self-government to defend the minority culture; and permanent marginalization. However, it is possible to address the issue more systematically. In essence, multi-ethnic states face two overwhelmingly important matters relating to the map and the law of the land.

With regard to the *map of the land*, the key issue is whether ethnic groups are to be given demarcated spaces where their identity is accorded special value and recognition. Will the territory of the state be mapped on to one national identity using the established formula of one language, one nation, one state? Or within the country’s borders will there be a series of ethnic markers and divisions?

With regard to the *law of the land*, the central issue is whether ethnic groups are to be accorded legal protection in part or all of the country’s territory. Is this to be a single nation, blind to ethnicity in the public sphere? Or is it to be a conglomeration of two or more identities and cultures, each afforded due recognition and protection by the body of law that defines a state?

Taking these two issues—map of the land and law of the land—as the axes of a two-by-two matrix generates the four options for structuring a multi-ethnic state shown in Figure 1.

In the top left-hand quadrant, a map of the land treated as a single national space partnered by a law of the land providing full legal protection for ethnic groups generates *multiculturalism*. This is one variant of the liberal democratic ideal, in which a state guarantees equal rights for ethnic groups throughout the length and breadth of its territory. While this ideal has not yet been fully realized in any real-world state, it is an increasingly visible strand of political debate and is starting to inform policy choices in some democracies.

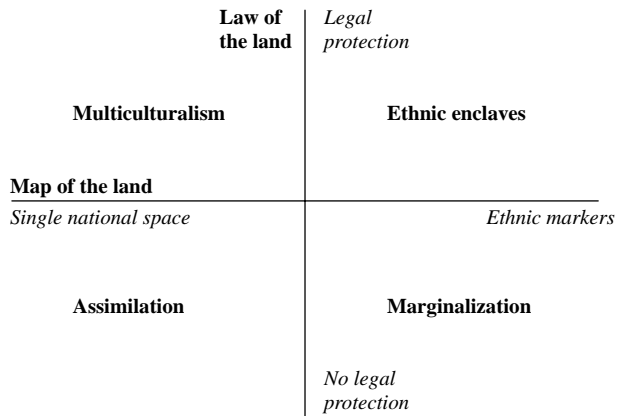


Figure 1 Structuring a Multi-ethnic State.

In the top right-hand quadrant, a map of the land with ethnic markers partnered by a law of the land that provides full legal protection for ethnic groups within clearly demarcated spaces generates *ethnic enclaves*. Taking ethnicity to be a key dividing line within society, this policy adheres to a notion of separate but equal. More negative ways of describing it are ghettoization and ethnic cleansing. However, it is more fair to employ a neutral terminology, for a policy of ethnic enclaves can derive from positive expressions of ethnic identity and need not embrace the many negatives associated with, say, ghettoization of the Jews in World War II or ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Indeed, a policy of ethnic enclaves is another variant of the liberal democratic ideal, providing special protections for ethnic groups in designated parts of the land.

In the bottom left-hand quadrant, a map of the land treated as a single national space partnered by a law of the land that provides no legal protection for ethnic groups generates *assimilation*. This is the polar opposite of ethnic enclaves, for it takes no account whatsoever of ethnicity in framing law and policy and thus has no concept of separate spheres. All are held to be equal before the law, and minority ethnic groups are expected over time to adopt the majority culture. For many years, this was the dominant policy in new world states such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US, with English language and culture in the ascendancy and minorities required to fall in line with it. More recently, however, all of these states have made important, though still incomplete, moves away from assimilation to either multiculturalism or ethnic enclaves by introducing legal protections for minority cultures (Kymlicka, 2005).

In the bottom right-hand quadrant, a map of the land with ethnic markers partnered by a law of the land giving no legal protection to ethnic groups generates *marginalization*. This is the polar opposite of multiculturalism, for it not only denies equal rights to all ethnic groups, but also restricts the movement of designated groups to particular parts of the national territory. In many ways, this is the policy

historically adopted by new world states in their dealings with indigenous peoples. Again, however, moves have been made out of this quadrant in recent decades (Kymlicka, 2005).

The model presented in Figure 1 identifies four ideal types. None will necessarily be found in pure form anywhere in the world, and hybrid forms are conceivable especially in the top and bottom halves of the matrix. It is quite possible for a state to adopt a dual policy of multiculturalism and ethnic enclaves by introducing legal protections for ethnic groups throughout its territory, and enhanced protections for specified groups in designated zones. Similarly, it is possible for a state to adopt a dual policy of assimilation and marginalization by promoting one-nation policies throughout the country, and persecuting selected minorities in particular parts. The chief value of the matrix comes not in describing the contemporary world of multi-ethnic states, but rather in serving as an analytical tool for examining the challenges that face them. Furthermore, determining a state's orientation with regard to this matrix is logically antecedent to debating detailed constitutional questions to do with federalism, consociationalism, voting systems, and so on.

Ethnic Politics in Burma

The people of the country now known as Myanmar have inherited a legacy of mainly failed nation building from their ancestors who inhabited a country known as Burma. Indeed, in analyzing ethnic relations in this land, a useful dividing line is the late 1980s, when a military junta took power from a collapsing military-backed quasi-socialist regime and soon issued a decree mandating the set of name changes linked to the major switch from Burma to Myanmar. The failure of nation building in Burma weighs heavily on leaders and citizens in Myanmar (Smith, 2006).

Tracing back into history, a convenient starting point is British engagement with Burma during the central decades of the nineteenth century. Prior to the first British intervention in the mid-1820s, the territory had neither modern frontiers nor a modern state. Indeed, in terms of both the map and the law of the land, everything was archaic. Moreover, while the British gradually brought modern maps and laws to Burma, they did so in ways that were mainly imposed, and thereby entirely divorced from a project of organic nation building (Thant Myint-U, 2001; 2006). The reason is clear and simple: the British were involved in a colonial project of imperial control, not an indigenous project of national development. Their concerns were first to secure their Indian Raj, the jewel in the crown of their Empire, second to exploit the natural and human resources of their colonial possession, and only third to promote the development of a functioning social and political system.

The British were thus cavalier about governance and the ethnic relations that underpinned them. They incorporated Burma into the Raj for most of the colonial period, paid little heed to traditional ruling structures in some parts and worked closely with and through them in others, and consequently established divergent modes of direct rule in central Burma and indirect rule in the surrounding hill

country. By and large, the impact of this patchwork of governance arrangements on ethnic relations was catastrophic. Clearly, distinct groups had not subsisted in total peace and harmony prior to the colonial period. Nevertheless, by destroying social structures and fundamentally reshaping the pattern of rule in the heartland, where most of the Burmans lived, and leaving social relations and traditional modes of control only minimally changed in the periphery, where most other ethnic groups were to be found, the British substantially recast ethnicity and identity in Burma (Thant Myint-U, 2001).

Registering this shift most keenly were Burmans in the heartland, who saw senior levels of government occupied by Europeans, middle levels occupied by Indians, and much of the army staffed by minority peoples from the margins of the historic Burman dominion (Smith, 2005: 264–266). Moreover, differential governance practices were reinforced by the events of World War II, when distinct ethnic groups fought on both sides of the overarching conflict between Britain and Japan (Allen, 1984). The result was the plural society identified by Furnivall (1948: 304), in which a ‘medley of peoples . . . mix but do not combine’. For him, the four main racial groups in British Burma—European, Chinese, Indian and native—were held together solely by an economic nexus, and had no social or cultural ties.

Burma by the time of the assassination of independence hero General Aung San in July 1947 and of formal independence from Britain in January 1948 was, then, deeply divided (Thant Myint-U, 2001; Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, its constituent ethnic groups were much more varied and nuanced than the four categories listed by Furnivall, and political systems across the territory were divergent (Leach, 1965). Additionally, a rushed decolonization, conducted in the shadow of Indian independence, ensured that little attention was paid to ethnic relations. Indeed, the iconic document from the period, the Panglong Agreement of February 1947, is both brief and enigmatic, and spawned diverse interpretations that did little to promote ethnic accord (Smith, 2005; Walton, 2008). Similarly, the subsequent 1947 constitution enshrined complex quasi-federal arrangements that satisfied neither the Burman majority nor any of the country’s minority ethnic groups. The result was that soon after a Communist revolt was launched in April 1948, ethnic tensions exploded in Karen country and other uprisings occurred.

Ethnic violence was then intensified and prolonged by the historical accident that saw part of the Chinese Revolution migrate to eastern Burma in shape of a contingent of Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist) troops and US technical advisers employed by the Central Intelligence Agency. In response, as Callahan (2003: 5) puts it, ‘military and civilian leaders had few choices but to reinvigorate and redeploy the colonial security apparatus to hold together a disintegrating country during the formative period of postcolonial state transformation’. Thus came about the rise of a nationalist Burman army, founded in wartime struggles against first the British and then the Japanese, as the critical institution within the state (Selth, 2002; Callahan, 2003). At the same time, ethnic claims made above all by Karens in the late 1940s also surfaced

in Arakan State, Shan State and elsewhere in the 1950s. Hostility to the government's Burmanization policies contributed to this (Tinker, 1956; Fairbairn, 1957).

By the late 1950s, Burmese ethnic divisions were deep and vibrant. In 1958, constitutional clauses enabling some ethnic states to trigger autonomy provisions provoked an upswing in revolt. At much the same time, the army—by now an overwhelmingly Burman force—had its first taste of power through an 18-month caretaker government headed by Chief of Staff General Ne Win. In the early 1960s, when a return to civilian rule generated not only renewed elite bickering and incompetence, but also federation talks, Ne Win's army seized power in a March 1962 coup. While Burma's experience of functioning democracy ceased, ethnic divisions intensified further as army leaders sought a military solution to the ethnic conflict that now plagued the country (Smith, 1999). A new constitution promulgated in 1974 established a structure of seven Burman divisions and seven ethnic states that persists to this day, and a 1982 nationality law identified 135 ethnic groups located within eight major national races (the Burman majority plus seven minorities). Nevertheless, ethnic tension remained a key motif of the entire 26 years that elapsed from the 1962 coup to the political convulsion of the 8-8-88 uprising, which in September 1988 prompted a formal military directorate to seize power from Ne Win's failed military-backed regime (Lintner, 1989).

Ethnic Politics in Myanmar

Ethnic politics in the two decades since Burma ceded place to Myanmar in June 1989 have been handled fitfully and crudely. A constitution-making process launched in the wake of the country's abortive 1990 general election, won in a landslide by the NLD but ignored by Myanmar's 'perpetual junta' (Callahan, 2009), quite properly became the key forum for articulation of ethnic claims. However, constitutional debate was just as flawed in this domain as in all others, and although many hitherto insurgent ethnic groups concluded ceasefire deals with the SPDC in the 1990s and 'returned to the legal fold', their cooptation into the junta's constitutional process generated several proposals but scant progress. Indeed, discord over ethnic provisions was in many respects a greater impediment to constitution-making than well-publicized tension between the SPDC and the NLD.

Moreover, deadlock in the ethnic sphere meant that the constitution eventually put to the people in a stage-managed May 2008 referendum made no clear advance on the existing situation. Chapter I on basic principles and Chapter II on state structure identify seven Bamar regions (in place of divisions) plus seven ethnic states, all of which are formally given equal status. Chapter II spells out standard procedures for redrawing territorial boundaries. Indeed, far more significant than any territorial provisions is Chapter VII on the defence services, which holds in its second clause that 'All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services' (Government of Myanmar, 2008: 338). This opens up a major rift between the SPDC, determined to exercise to the full Weber's monopoly on violence

throughout the country, and leading ethnic groups, both legal and illegal, that have long maintained militias in defiance of the national army.

Looking beyond the charade of constitution-making to the real world of Myanmar politics over the past 20 years, one significant development is the junta's attempt to entrench a form of harmonious nationalism built on a foundation of Bamar Buddhism (Skidmore, 2005). Echoing one-nation strategies found in China and other parts of Asia, the military elite has sought to rally the people around a single Myanmar language, religion and identity held in harmony by all major ethnic groups (Holliday, 2007). As this initiative has met with limited success, however, the junta has also concluded the series of ceasefire agreements that has returned many ethnic groups to the sphere of legality and effectively seen the dominant military machine cede control of some peripheral parts of the national territory to ethnic armies and militias (Silverstein, 1997; Callahan, 2007; Zaw Oo and Win Min, 2007; South, 2008).

In consequence, contemporary Myanmar is a patchwork of contending ethnic groups, and even mapping its composition is contentious. The SPDC holds firm to the formula established by Ne Win in 1974 and 1982, which asserts that the country has eight major national ethnic races, and 135 ethnic groups within them.² It lists the national races, with numbers of subsidiary ethnic groups in brackets, as: Bamar (9); Chin (53); Kachin (12); Kayah (9); Kayin (11); Mon (1); Rakhine (7); and Shan (33) (Government of Myanmar, 2010). While from one perspective there is much to applaud in this nuanced presentation of Myanmar's ethnic make-up, from another there is here a conspicuous junta attempt to divide and rule, or at least to indicate that the extent of ethnic division across the land justifies its disciplining control (South, 2008). The 8/135 formula was a major bone of contention, never satisfactorily addressed, in Myanmar's drawn-out constitutional process.

Determining the populations of distinct ethnic groups with any degree of accuracy is also problematic. The US Central Intelligence Agency (2010) gives this breakdown: Bamar 68 per cent, Shan 9 per cent, Kayin 7 per cent, Rakhine 4 per cent, Chinese 3 per cent, Indian 2 per cent, Mon 2 per cent, other 5 per cent. For the seven states in which the leading ethnic groups are concentrated, the Myanmar government gives these populations (in millions): Shan State 4.75; Rakhine State 2.71; Mon State 2.43; Kayin State 1.45; Kachin State 1.25; Chin State 0.47; Kayah State 0.26. However, no state has an ethnically homogenous population, and representation of the group for which states are named ranges from 94 per cent in Chin State to 38 per cent in Kachin and Mon States. By the same token, many individuals from non-Bamar ethnicities live in the seven divisions dominated by the Bamar majority with, at the extreme, Ayeyarwaddy Division being 20 per cent Kayin (Government of Myanmar, 2010). More generally, marriage across ethnic lines has generated a series of hyphenated identities. Exactly how any individual chooses to express his or her identity is little analyzed in a country marked by a dearth of scientific social research. The map of ethnic composition therefore remains one of the great unknowns about Myanmar. In the foreseeable future, there is little prospect of change in this regard.

Equally difficult to capture are the political commitments of leading forces. Always many and varied, those forces have been thrown into considerable flux by recent constitutional and electoral provisions. Among ethnic groups, the major challenge has come from the constitutional requirement to fold ethnic militias into the national army, which generated armed skirmishes notably in the Kokang region of eastern Myanmar in August 2009 and may provoke further flare-ups in the near future (Haacke, 2010). Among the democratic opposition, the major provocation was found in electoral laws released in March 2010, which require political parties wishing to contest the 2010 election to accept all of the junta's major political moves over the past 20 years, including writing the 1990 general election out of the country's political history and entrenching a discipline-flourishing democracy through the 2008 constitution. Within weeks, the NLD voted formally to boycott the 2010 election, provoking an open split within the democratic camp over electoral strategy.

Today, key political forces throughout the country are thus fragmented and divided. Neither among ethnic groups nor within the democratic opposition is it possible to detect an entirely unified identity or stance. Placement of major political forces on the matrix of multi-ethnic state forms is therefore hazardous, and cannot be undertaken with any degree of precision. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of where key political groups have staked out a position over the past 20 years are reasonably clear. Drawing on the flow of debate over those years, Figure 2 grafts on to the matrix presented in Figure 1 the location of major political forces that have sustained themselves over the two decades that Myanmar itself has been in existence. It is at once apparent that all four quadrants contain significant proponents.

Multiculturalism has long been the stated policy of Myanmar's leading opposition force, the NLD (National League for Democracy, 1996). More accurately, in Walton's

	Law of the land	<i>Legal protection</i>
Multiculturalism	NLD	Ethnic enclaves ENC
Map of the land		
<i>Single national space</i>		<i>Ethnic markers</i>
Assimilation	SPDC	Marginalization SPDC (Rohingya)
		<i>No legal protection</i>

Figure 2 Perspectives on Myanmar's Multi-ethnic State.

terminology this is the myth of Panglong to which the party subscribes in its insistence that Myanmar already is multicultural, or rather would be if only the extreme Bamar nationalist control imposed by the SPDC were replaced by a democratic order. Both Aung San Suu Kyi in her writings and the NLD in its rare policy documents promote this largely unsubstantiated belief, and with it the desire to build a polity in which ethnic groups have full legal protection throughout the land (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995: 223; Walton, 2008: 904–905). Another way of putting this is that the NLD focuses on democracy as the critical issue in Myanmar, and places ethnic relations on a secondary footing (Smith, 2005: 274–275).

A policy of *ethnic enclaves* has generally been the aspiration of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities inside the country, as well as of exile forces grouped in the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) (South, 2008). It corresponds to another of Walton's myths of Panglong, and one of the clearest statements of this position was appropriately issued by the ENC on the 60th anniversary of the Panglong Agreement (Ethnic Nationalities Council (Union of Burma), 2007). The sheer extent and diversity of ethnic nationality groups makes it is hard to define their position on any given issue. Nevertheless, it is clear that whether operating legally or illegally inside the country, or maintaining an oppositional stance from outside, the ethnic nationalities are overwhelmingly concentrated inside this quadrant, articulating a defiant ethnic nationalism and seeking to secure special rights for specified ethnic groups within demarcated areas of the country's territory (Smith, 2005: 278–279; Smith, 2006; Walton, 2008: 905–907).

Assimilation has always been SPDC policy, and was also the policy of the military-backed governments that preceded it. It has thus been state policy for some 50 years. It corresponds to still another of the myths of Panglong identified by Walton (2008: 904). It gains expression not only in routine official pronouncements such as the three main national causes and set-piece speeches by military leaders, but also in consistent government attempts to consolidate national identity around the dominant Bamar identity (South, 2003). The many approaches adopted range from military conquest in Myanmar's ongoing low-grade civil wars, through suppression of key ethnic markers such as non-Buddhist religions, to education campaigns mandating Bamar language as the medium of instruction in schools across the land. Although assimilation has evidently been a policy failure in many peripheral parts, defeated by overt resistance, covert non-compliance, resource constraints and state incapacity, it remains a central plank of government policy (Holliday, 2007). No challenge to it is made by the SPDC's 2008 constitution (Government of Myanmar, 2008).

With respect to one of Myanmar's small ethnic groups, however, the SPDC has consistently departed from its overarching assimilation policy and pursued instead a policy of *marginalization*. The Rohingya, concentrated in Rakhine State and accounting for 68 per cent of that state's population according to government statistics, are in key respects the most distinctive of Myanmar's many ethnic groups, with religious beliefs, social customs and physical features that set them apart from other groups and attract hostility not only from the government, but also from many ordinary citizens. For

decades, government policy has been to marginalize them. The Rohingya are not included in the list of 135 ethnic groups enshrined in the 1982 nationality law, and their rights to property, marriage, travel, education, employment and so on are largely non-existent. This is one of the clearest cases of ethnic persecution in the world today (Refugees International, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Feeding the matrix of options facing multi-ethnic states into the real world of contemporary Myanmar reveals the magnitude of the task facing political leaders committed to sponsoring some measure of political reform. Moreover, that task is just as great whether thin (SPDC) or thick (NLD) versions of democracy are implemented, for while a government prepared to follow the SPDC in seeking a military solution to ethnic challenges may taste short-run success, in the long run a political settlement will be needed. Either way, then, attention must turn to political solutions that can provide a foundation for lasting stability as part of a future democratization process (Steinberg, 2001; South, 2008).

Ethnic Futures in Myanmar

When key political forces are distributed all over a two-by-two matrix, the critical task is to find ways to bring them together across the axes that structure the matrix. To do this, it is necessary to examine two aspects of group placement that have not yet been considered: strength and depth. By strength is meant the intensity with which a political force is committed to its ethnic relations policy. Is it high or low? By depth is meant the location of a political force on the matrix. Is it near to or far from the central point? Once issues of strength and depth are examined, the nature of Myanmar's ethnic challenge becomes somewhat clearer.

In the *multiculturalism* quadrant, NLD policy on ethnic relations is difficult to gauge. Statements issued by party leaders are infrequent and enigmatic, typically mandating little more than big-tent dialogue with military forces and leading ethnic groups during a transition to democracy. Does this indicate that the strength of the party's commitment to a multicultural future for Myanmar is low? Does it reveal that the NLD is not deeply embedded in this quadrant, but rather can easily be brought near to the core of the matrix? In the absence of detailed position papers, both questions are difficult to answer. The conclusion many draw is that the NLD believes ethnic stains will simply come out in the democratic wash. For ethnic nationality leaders, this generates broad frustration (South, 2008). As Smith (2005: 275) notes, they 'would prefer to have clear minority guarantees included as part and parcel of the democracy process—alongside human rights and rule of law—rather than something to be left to the vagaries and uncertainties of political decision-making once democracy is established'.

In the *ethnic enclaves* quadrant, multiple diverse actors drive policy formulation and no umbrella organization inside or outside Myanmar is fully representative of ethnic nationality positions. Despite this, there is comparative clarity here. In terms of strength, the ethnic nationalities are forcefully committed to a policy of ethnic

enclaves. In terms of depth, they are located quite far from the central point of the matrix. There is, then, a solid commitment to ethnic enclaves among key political forces in Myanmar.

In the *assimilation* quadrant, the strength and depth of the SPDC's commitment to one nation look considerable. Smith notes that the SPDC has accepted the reality of seven main non-Bamar ethnic groups, each with its own state, as promulgated in the 1974 constitution (Smith, 2005: 275–277). Its 2008 constitution makes no change in this regard. Nevertheless, the blatant Bamar nationalism of most of the junta's words and deeds suggest that the military machine is solidly bound to an assimilation policy.

In the *marginalization* quadrant, systematic SPDC persecution of the Rohingya concentrated in Rakhine State is something much external opinion feels cannot be allowed to continue, and it may be that this is not the most substantial of the SPDC's policy commitments. However, there is another difficulty. When the junta recently responded to global outrage by stating through its mouthpiece English-language newspaper that 'The Rohinja is not included in over 100 national races of the Union of Myanmar', it may well have expressed an opinion shared by many citizens (*New Light of Myanmar*, 2009). Indeed, while some local voices were raised in protest, to many observers there appears to be a social consensus behind the stigmatization of what Kymlicka (2005: 53) calls a 'metic group'. If so, then the situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar is parallel to that faced, at different times, by Koreans in Japan, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia, and so on.

When issues of strength and depth are examined, the extent of Myanmar's ethnic challenge is confirmed. Very few of the divisions that structure this multi-ethnic society look readily amenable to negotiation and compromise. Furthermore, comparative experience suggests that unless the people of Myanmar can engineer a political settlement in the realm of ethnic relations, the danger of voting leading to violence will be considerable (Holliday, 2008). Building a secure foundation here is, then, the central issue facing the country when one day it embarks on a genuine process of democratization, and not something that can be left for later. While conflict resolution strategies are an essential starting point (Smith, 2007), there is a need in the longer run to focus on principles that can underpin a durable political settlement. In Myanmar's difficult circumstances, how might a future path be sketched out?

One helpful development would be for the NLD to abandon the rather bland multiculturalism that in any case it promotes with little vigour, and move to another quadrant. Historical factors relating to Aung San's ambivalence on ethnic questions combined with contemporary issues regarding Aung San Suu Kyi's unswerving focus on democracy suggest that this will be difficult. For those who are in a position to offer advice to the NLD, however, an important task is to advocate for this switch. Within another quadrant, marginalization of the Rohingya cannot be expected to resolve itself even if the SPDC passes power to a civilian regime and democracy establishes a footing. Rather, it is necessary for those who advise groups across the country to speak for the Rohingya and the rights they can properly claim in

Myanmar. To some extent that has happened in recent months, but there is clearly much more to be done.

If, then, the NLD can be talked into moving on from the lip service it currently pays to multiculturalism, and the country can be persuaded to review its marginalization of the Rohingya, the task of fashioning a multi-ethnic polity in Myanmar will home in on two quadrants: ethnic enclaves and assimilation. It is immediately clear that between these two a choice needs to be made. Ethnic enclaves and assimilation are utterly distinct ways of confronting a single issue. It is also clear that the broad trend of global experience, and therefore of external influence on Myanmar, is divided between these two perspectives. In much of the wider world, ethnic enclaves are increasingly seen as the way forward, and policies that would have been unthinkable no more than two or three decades ago have been introduced in many states (Kymlicka, 2005). In key parts of Asia, by contrast, assimilation remains dominant. In this regard, no state is more important than China (He, 2005).

In charting ethnic futures for Myanmar, as in charting ways forward in many other domains, one key issue will therefore be how the balance of global experience and opinion is registered inside the country. Under SPDC control, whether direct as now or indirect as may be the case after the 2010 general election, China's complex and by no means decisive influence will nevertheless remain more substantial than any other (Holliday, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2009). Despite cross-border problems recently witnessed in Kokang and elsewhere, and not yet fully resolved (Haacke, 2010), this influence can be expected strongly to reinforce existing SPDC assimilation policy. Indeed, so firm is Beijing's commitment to one China that splittist moves and tendencies on any of its borders are certain to be regarded with deep hostility. However, should the political sphere start to open up to more diverse internal forces under a process of real and sustainable democratization, other global experiences will become more relevant to the Myanmar case.

At that point it will be important to demonstrate that a policy of ethnic enclaves is by no means the unique preserve of Western states. Indeed, in many respects the global pioneer emerged in Asia. 'At a time when Western liberalism advocated neutrality and [a] difference-blind approach, India acknowledged the rights of minorities and valued cultural diversity', writes Mahajan (2005: 288). During its difficult and violent independence in 1947, which generated an immediate split with Pakistan and many subsequent fractures on both sides of the absolute divide established then, India was endowed with a system of differentiated rights within a federal system. In years thereafter, additional minority claims were accommodated within this framework through constitutional revisions. Today, many minority groups, defined by religion, language and tribe, have guaranteed rights within the overarching framework of Indian democracy. While the resultant governance arrangements are far from flawless, and have by no means consigned ethnic and religious intolerance to history, many scholars maintain that they have helped to stabilize, not undermine, Indian democracy (Dasgupta, 1998). As Mahajan (2005: 310) puts it, 'the ability to accommodate and recognize collective community

aspirations play a critical role in holding the nation-state together and minimizing moments of internal dissent'. India's rich experience is not always viewed positively in Myanmar, and relations across this border remain fraught (Egreteau, 2008). Nevertheless, there is much in Indian ethnic politics that is relevant to Myanmar as it grapples with parallel issues.

Conclusion

At a time when politics in Myanmar is consumed by prospects for democracy, artificial or real, it is critical that serious attention be paid to the multi-ethnic context in which any genuine transition will inevitably take place. Indeed, this has long been the most important issue facing the country. The analysis of ethnicity and democratization presented here is clearly sketchy and partial. In the case of a country where political debate has been heavily constrained for decades, and where major political forces are often unable to undertake even basic functions, this is unavoidable. Nevertheless, that is no reason not to engage in thinking through the deep challenges that exist in this domain, and that will undoubtedly have to be faced sooner or later. The strategy adopted here is simple: to systematize the options by focusing on issues generated by the map and the law of the land, and then to examine how they might play out in a democratizing Myanmar.

The first requirement that emerges from this analysis can be readily stated: ethnic relations must be accorded a full place alongside democratization. Here, an important responsibility lies with the NLD and the massed ranks of external observers who focus above all on the fate of Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar's ethnic question is just as important as its disfiguring democratic deficit, and must be addressed with equal energy and vigour.

The second requirement is that some key players be encouraged to think again about where they stand on the matrix of options facing multi-ethnic states. Here too the NLD has a significant responsibility. The commitment to multiculturalism that emerges from the writings of Aung San Suu Kyi and some NLD policy documents, always suggestive rather than definitive, cannot be squared with the demands of the ethnic nationalities. In all probability it will have to be abandoned. By the same token, the SPDC must stop marginalizing the Rohingya, and all sides need to acknowledge an urgent need for public education about their historic home inside the country. On each count, in dealing with both the NLD and the SPDC, outsiders with links into the relevant hierarchies have an important discursive role to play.

The third requirement once genuine democratization finds a place on Myanmar's political agenda is that open public debate of the two main contenders for ethnic relations—ethnic enclaves and assimilation—take place and be informed by real-world practice in its neighbourhood.

In this latter regard, proponents of assimilation can certainly advance arguments that would play well across much of Asia, and particularly within China, the key external power in this case. In fact, Myanmar's geopolitical location makes

neo-Chinese perspectives strategically essential, and may mean that assimilation is the most viable future for its ethnic relations. Nevertheless, it is also possible for proponents of ethnic enclaves to point to India for evidence that Asians can successfully balance ethnic aspirations and democracy. Indeed, while both historical and contemporary factors clearly inhibit sympathetic understanding across the India–Myanmar border, there is a compelling need to bridge the divide so that debate in a democratizing Myanmar can profit fully from regional experience.

Key insiders in the democratic movement long focused on the NLD and in the major ethnic nationalities are well placed to make this happen. Equally, key outsiders can play an important role by supplementing their focus on the fate of democracy in Myanmar with informed analysis of options for ethnic relations. Although nothing will ever undermine the role of China in shaping Myanmar's future, lessons from India are also critically important in addressing challenges now at the top of the country's political agenda.

Acknowledgements

A draft of this article was presented at the symposium on 'Political Development and New Challenges for International Relations in Southeast Asia', hosted by Yunnan University, China, on 20–21 July 2009. The author is grateful for constructive comments received at the symposium, and from two anonymous referees appointed by the journal. Work on the article was supported by an award from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. HKU 744407H).

Notes

- [1] Myanmar is the country formerly known as Burma. The name change was introduced by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in June 1989, when many states, divisions, towns, streets, mountains and rivers were also given new English names. Rangoon, for instance, became Yangon. Burman, denoting the dominant ethnic group, became Bamar. This article falls in line with the SLORC changes. Up to 1989 it uses Burma and associated names. Thereafter it uses Myanmar and associated names.
- [2] While the SPDC talks of eight major national ethnic races containing 135 different ethnic groups, the major non-Bamar peoples speak of ethnic nationalities.

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