

CHAPTER 4

Myanmar Security Outlook: Peace-making, Ceasefires, Communal Tensions and Politics

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Introduction

In accordance with the 2008 Constitution, President Thein Sein's Union Government comprises two elected vice presidents and an appointed cabinet of Union ministers as well as the Attorney General. The bicameral legislature constitutes the Amyotha Hluttaw (national assembly or upper house) and Pyithu Hluttaw (people's assembly or lower house) each of which includes 25 per cent military representatives nominated by the Commander-in-Chief (who has the status of Vice President but ranked 7th in national protocol). Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (union assembly) functions as the combined forum of both houses of Parliament. The executive and legislative branches together with the judiciary underpin the political regime instituted through the 2008 Constitution. Formulated under the auspices of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) it was described as "discipline flourishing democracy" by its designers.

Administratively, Myanmar has 14 provinces comprising seven states (named after the major non-Bamar ethnic group that inhabits the region) and seven regions (areas with Bamar ethnic group as majority) each with its own government (headed by a chief minister, a Presidential appointee) and legislative assembly (Parliament). Some provinces include quasi-autonomous territories each designated as a self-administered division or zone (depending upon population) for ethnic minority communities. Below the provincial level, in a descending order of administrative authority, are districts, townships, and wards (in town) as well as village tracts (grouping of villages in the countryside). The national capital called Nay Pyi Taw (meaning abode of kings) was established in November 2005, replacing Yangon and administered separately as Union territory.

With a land area of some 677,000 square kilometres (km), Myanmar shares over 6,000 km of land border with five states (Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and

Thailand) and possesses a coastline stretching over 2,200 km. Myanmar is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-religious society. Officially, there are 135 sub-national (ethnic) groups under eight major ethnic communities. Population estimates (last census was in 1983 and a new census scheduled for early 2014) indicated that the majority Bamar (formerly called Burman) ethnic group constitutes over 60 per cent, while non-native (mainly of Chinese and Indian origin) communities numbered around five per cent of the total population.

Towards the end of 2013, as Myanmar passed the half-way mark of the five-year election cycle, representative democracy was formally in place. Meanwhile, democratic institutions such as the legislature, political parties, and judiciary are trying to climb a steep learning curve with the Myanmar Defence Services (MDS) or Tatmadaw (Royal Force) playing a less direct but quite significant role in governance and politics apart from its traditional mission of defending the territorial integrity and safeguarding the sovereignty of the country formally known as the Republic of Union of Myanmar.

Myanmar's National Security: Adjusting to Democracy

The aforementioned political, geographic, and demographic factors have, all along, influenced Myanmar security establishment's perspectives on national security and the role of the military in politics. In this context Myanmar's security outlook is largely influenced by domestic variables; be they the fragile ceasefires and violent resistance by ethnic armed groups¹, or communal strife between Buddhists and Muslims or authority-defying public protests by local communities and activists who are trying to extend the scope of their rights invoking the new-found freedoms prescribed in the 2008 Constitution. There is even a mounting demand from the public and politicians to change the Constitution in such a way as to excise or minimize the role of the military in politics that could be seen as destabilizing by those with Praetorian inclination.

¹ See, e.g., Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Dreams and Nightmares: State Building and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar (Burma)', in Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (eds.), *Ethnic Conflict in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), pp. 65-108. In fact, the country's capital Yangon was under siege and almost fell to Kayin ethnic insurgent army in early 1949 and that bitter experience left an indelible mark in the psyche of the military leaders and state managers of the day.

As far as external threats are concerned, Myanmar's security planners probably view them as contingent upon reactions by neighbouring states to spill overs from internal conflicts and cross-border security issues. The remarkably rapid improvement in relations with the United States and the West, who had removed virtually all sanctions (except arms embargoes), has probably removed much of the military's fear over foreign intervention that warrants a military response. Defence diplomacy is another instrument used by the MDS leadership to build confidence and establish good military-to-military relations. It has been stepped up in recent years through hosting port calls by naval vessels², exchange of visits by top military leaders, and participation in regional security forums and exercises. Myanmar was represented twice by its Defence Minister in 2011 and 2012 at the Shangri-La Dialogues in Singapore and the Deputy Defence Minister in 2013, Myanmar's top brass had attended both the last ADMM (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) Plus (includes dialogue partners) and ADMM as well as meeting of ASEAM army chiefs. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had visited almost all regional states in the last two years and had received honours and titles from Malaysia and Thailand.

Since the turn of the century, Myanmar has also become more aware of the threats posed by non-state actors spreading terrorism and posing challenges in the area of non-traditional security (NTS) such as piracy, human, arms, and drug trafficking, natural disasters, and vector-borne health hazards.

However unlike the (1988-2010) era under direct military rule, the military leaders' role and functions in the security arena have been somewhat circumscribed by the Constitution and the MDS has been re-orienting towards the traditional (professional) objective of defending the nation-state from armed insurrections and external aggression, whereby the NTS issues are being handled by relevant law-enforcing agencies under different ministries.

However, this does not mean that the MDS leadership has lost their say on security matters nor shed the military mind set in the new democratic setting. It is noteworthy that the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), the highest decision-making body for national security, is packed with serving commanders and retired

² See, e.g., "Japanese training warships make port calls in Thilawa," *New Light of Myanmar* (NLM), 1 October, 2013.

commanders of the MDS. The 11-member NDSC is chaired by the President (retired general) and also includes: the two vice-presidents (one is a retired admiral and former navy chief), the speakers of the Pythu Hluttaw (retired general) and Amyotha Hluttaw (retired major general), C-in-C of the MDS and Deputy C-in-C (who is concurrently army C-in-C), as well as ministers of defence (lieutenant general and also quarter-master general), foreign affairs (retired colonel), home affairs (lieutenant general), and border affairs (lieutenant general). Influences of the past, when state-centric security outlook (conflating regime with state) had been dominant in an authoritarian setting, are likely to remain strong.³

Tatmadaw or Myanmar Defence Services (MDS): No Major Change⁴

Successive leaders of Tatmadaw or MDS have always claimed it was a child of the revolution to gain independence from Great Britain. It was also touted as the people's military and has a proud heritage of "saving" the "Union" not only from foreign occupation, but also from the follies of self-serving politicians and separatists. As such, the military leadership of the past two generations had adamantly proclaimed that the MDS should have not only the duty to safeguard the Union, but also the right to manage it as well.

The current leadership of the MDS has inherited the mantle of a virtually autonomous military from the SPDC which used the Constitution to confer a set of prerogatives to the MDS that enable it to play a significant role in governance and politics.⁵

³ For a historical perspective, see Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Myanmar: Preoccupation with Regime Survival, National Unity, and Stability,' in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 390-416. See, also, Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* for the historical roots of Myanmar's state security concerns.

⁴ For a comprehensive account of the MDS, development, see Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009). The actual strength of the MDS remains a mystery even to knowledgeable observers. In recent years there were many unsubstantiated reports of substantially undermanned units (only one-third of the nominal strength) and high rates of desertions. Estimates ranged from 300,000 to over 500,000 with a conservative estimate of around 350,000 for all three services (army, navy and air force) combined (see, e.g., Andrew Selth, "Burma's armed forces: Does size matter?" *East Asia Forum*, online, 17 September 2010, available at www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/09/17/burmas-armed-forces-does-size-matter/print/).

⁵ For these Constitutional provisions see Tin Maung Maung Than, "Myanmar Security Outlook," in *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, NIDS Joint Research Series No.8 (Tokyo: NIDS, 2013).

The current top leaders of MDS (see Table 1 below) may be classified as belonging to the third generation since the establishment of the core of MDS in 1945 are regarded by many observers as a cohort anointed by the SPDC leadership.⁶ In fact, the changes introducing third generation leaders to command the MDS under constitutional rule were carried out in several stages during the months leading to the 2010 elections and are some two decades behind those who had commanded the MDS in the era of direct military rule following the September 1988 coup.

Table 1: Generational Change in Army Leadership

| Position | September 1988 | November 1997 | December 2013 |
|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| C-in-C | Gen. Saw Maung (OTS 6) | Snr.Gen. Than Shwe (OTS 6) | Snr.Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (DSA 19) |
| Dy. C-in-C | Lt.G. Than Shwe (OTS 9) | Gen. Maung Aye (DSA 1) | V.Snr.Gen. Soe Win (DSA 22) |
| JCS | n.a. | n.a. | Gen. Hla Htay Win (DSA 20) |
| AG | B.G. Aung Ye Kyaw (OTS 6) | Lt.G. Win Myint (OTS 28) | Lt.G. Khin Zaw Oo (OTS 56) |
| QMG | M.G. Phone Myint (OTS 9) | Lt.G. Tin Hla (DSA 3) | Lt.Gen. Wai Lwin (DSA 18) Defence Minister |
| BSO 1 | M.G. Sein Aung (OTS 10) | Lt.G. Tin Oo* (OTS 22) | Lt.G. Myint Soe (OTS 61) |
| BSO 2 | M.G. Chit Swe (OTS 8) | -- | Lt.G. Aung Than Htut (DSA 20) |
| BSO 3 | n.a. | n.a. | Lt.G. Hla Min (DSA 22) |
| BSO 4 | n.a. | n.a. | Lt.G. Thet Naing Win (OTS 56) Border Affairs Minister |
| BSO 5 | n.a. | n.a. | M.G. Mya Tun Oo (DSA 25) Army Chief of Staff |
| BSO 6 | n.a. | n.a. | -- |
| CMAS | B.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25) | Lt.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)** | Lt.G. Kyaw Swe (DSA 22) |

Notes: n.a. = not applicable; -- = vacant; Snr.= Senior; V.Snr. = Vice Senior; Gen. = General; Lt.G. = Lieutenant General; M.G. = Major General; B.G. = Brigadier General; C-in-C = Commander-in-Chief; Dy. = Deputy; JCS = Joint Chief of Staff; AG = Adjutant General; QMG = Quartermaster General; BSO = Bureau of Special Operations (Chief); CMAS = Chief of Military Affairs Security (intelligence); OTS = Officer Training School (for graduates); DSA = Defence Services Academy (for high school leavers); *Lt. G. Tin Oo was killed in a helicopter crash in 2001. *(Then) Gen. Khin Nyunt was removed and arrested in October 2004.

Sources: Maung Aung Myo. *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009); media reports; and personal communications

The current C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who took over from Senior General Than Shwe (SPDC Chair) after the changeover from military junta to constitutional government with the rank of (four stars) general, was promoted to

⁶ The new C-in-C and Deputy C-in-C were appointed by the President after the new government was formed in March 2011.

senior general in March 2013 while the Deputy C-in-C was promoted to vice senior general. In more than two years. It is believed that the C-in-C has consolidated his command authority over the rank and file of the MDS which, after decades of weapon acquisitions and expansion, has undergone a transformation from a counter-insurgency (COIN) force structure to a hybrid formation featuring elements geared towards fighting a conventional war. In fact, the MDS rolled out, for the first time, its heavy artillery, main battle tanks, armoured vehicles, air-defence weapons, and rockets), and rockets as well as helicopter gunships, attack aircraft, air superiority fighters, and interceptors at Naypyitaw on 27 March 2013, during the military parade to commemorate the Armed Forces Day.⁷

However, because of the West's arms embargo the MDS had to turn to China, North Korea, India, and some East European states for force modernization.⁸ When the United Nations (UN) imposed sanctions on North Korea, Myanmar was caught in a bind. Though Myanmar's political leaders, including the President, had repeatedly stated that Myanmar stopped buying military equipment and embargoed materials from North Korea, doubts remain.⁹

The North Korea issue became an obstacle to the U.S. engagement with the MDS despite a meeting between the U.S. Ambassador and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in August 2013. In fact, in July 2013, in a surprise move, the U.S. blacklisted Lt. General Thein Htay, chief of military industries and procurement, for alleged purchasing of military material from North Korea.¹⁰ Again, on 17 September the U.S. announced the blacklisting of one Lt. Colonel from the defence industries directorate as well as three Myanmar companies, accusing them of breaching U.N. sanctions.¹¹ Meanwhile, the U.S. had extended to Myanmar its "*Building Partner Capacity*

⁷ See, e.g., Aung Zaw, "Putting a New Face in Myanmar's Military," *Irrawaddy*, 12 July 2013, available at www.irrawaddy.org/burma/magazine-analysis/putting-a-new-face-on-myanmar-military.html.

⁸ See, e.g., Jacob Sommer, "Myanmar's military: Money and guns," *New Mandala*, 6 December 2013, available at <http://asiapacific.anu.edu/newmandala/2013/12/06/myanmars-military-money-and-guns/>.

⁹ However, U.S. concerns over Myanmar's nuclear ambitions, despite repeated forswearing by Myanmar leaders, were allayed by Myanmar's accession to IAEA Additional Protocol in September 2013 (see, e.g., Matthew Pennington, "US Welcomes Myanmar Signing Nuclear Agreement," Associated Press, 20 September 2013, at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/us-welcomes-myanmar-signing-nuclear-agreement-20311088>).

¹⁰ See Hannah Hindstrom, "US to boost military ties with Burma, but warns of N Korea connection," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 30 August 2013 available at www.dvb.no/news/us-to-boost-military-ties-with-burma-but-warns-of-n-korea-connection/32040.

¹¹ See "US blacklists Myanmar firms for NKorea arms trade," Associated Press, 17 December 2013.

(BPC)” initiative.¹² Australia and United Kingdom had also stepped up engagement by offering training courses, workshops, and seminars for MDS personnel.¹³

During military rule the MDS had enjoyed considerable latitude in spending and accounting of its budget. Defence ministry’s percentage share in the government budget traditionally had been in the double digit range and exceeded the combined expenditure for health and education. However under the new government its share was reduced to 14.4 per cent in the 2012/13 budget estimate which was much lower than the 23.6 per cent allotted for the previous fiscal year. It was reported that the allocation for fiscal year 2013/14 was just over 12 per cent. These figures were skewed because imports were converted to local currency using the official rate of around 6 kyats per US dollar while (illegal) open market rates varied from 1,200 kyats to 900 kyats in those years.¹⁴ On the other hand, the practice of operating on the basis of a block grant not subject to auditing detailed scrutiny by the legislature and civilian authorities remained.¹⁵ However, in accordance with the government’s drive to plug tax loopholes and prevent evasions, the military’s business conglomerate Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (UMEHL) lost its tax exemption privilege. Prohibiting local military units from engaging in business (including renting military owned spaces) that was rampant under military rule had been strictly enforced though the Ministry itself was allowed to privatize (sell, lease, jointly operate/own) its assets.¹⁶

Despite losing some entitlements and control over government resources the MDS appeared to have adjusted rather well to the new political environment which saw the emergence of one of the freest private media in Southeast Asia, which did not shy away from criticizing the military over a range of issues from land acquisitions to its

¹² See, Christine M. Leah, “Military Assistance to Myanmar: Need for Balance,” *RSIS Commentaries*, No. 164/2013, 6 September 2013.

¹³ See, e.g., “Western military engagement with Burma ‘deeply’ concerning,” Democratic Voice of Burma, 17 October 2013, available at www.dvb.no/news/western-military-engagement-with-burma-deeply-concerning/33563; and “Myanmar officers attending course at Cranfield University” (in Myanmar), BBC (Burmese language), 8 October 2013, transcribed in www.thithtoolwin.info/2013/10/cranfield.html.

¹⁴ It was only in April 2013 that the kyat was devalued to conform to the open market rate in a float managed by the central bank.

¹⁵ See Brian McCarran, “Myanmar military in the money,” *Asia Times* online at <http://atimes.com/>, 28 February 2012.

¹⁶ See Aung Zaw, “Putting a New Face,” *op. cit.*

conduct in fighting with ethnic armed groups.¹⁷

C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's speech to the assembled troops and invited guests (which included opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for the first time)¹⁸ on 27 March 2013, on the occasion of the 68th anniversary of the Armed Forces Day, indicated that the MDS, though playing by the rules of electoral democracy, would not remove itself completely from the political stage. He stated:

Just as the Tatmadaw safeguards the nation from all kinds of threats, it also performs its role in the national politics in accordance with the people's desire when [the] nation faces with [sic] ethnic conflict and political struggles.¹⁹

Currently, the Tatmadaw in this new era of top-down reforms and political transition towards an inclusive democratic system is facing two security challenges, both of which are internal problems with a long history of intractable tensions and conflict. The first is the imperative of making peace with ethnic armed groups and the other is the resurgence of communal violence which had morphed into a sectarian conflict drawing sustenance on religious nationalism.

Peacemaking and Ceasefires²⁰

The peace process initiated by President Thein Sein on 18 August 2011 with an offer to all armed ethnic groups to enter into peace talks remained at the ceasefire stage during the year. The 13 groups that had signed ceasefire agreements had not yet progressed towards political dialogue and the KIA (Kachin Independent Army) which is the military arm of the KIO (Kachin Independent Organization) continued

¹⁷ Observation based on news, op-eds and features in mostly Myanmar language weekly journals, recently established private dailies and Internet blogs, websites, e-zines and social media postings over the last six months. See, e.g., Tin Zar Aung, "How significant is the role of C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in the political realm?" (in Myanmar language), *The Myanmar Herald*, 7-13 December 2013.

¹⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi was apparently invited as the chair of a parliamentary committee in line with the decision to invite leaders of parliamentary committees to the event. Nevertheless, given the military's discomfort with her in the past and the fact that she was photographed sitting next to a senior military officer led to some speculation on her relation with the military (see, e.g., "Suu Kyi joins Armed Forces Day celebrations in Naypyidaw," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 27 March 2013, available at www.dvb.no/news/suu-kyi-joins-armed-forces-day-celebrations-in-naypyidaw/27236).

¹⁹ NLM, 28 March 2013, p. 1; also, Ei Ei Toe Win, "The army does not need to change," Interview with Lt. General Myint Soe in *The Myanmar Times*, 11-17 November 2013, p. 8.

²⁰ For a concise analysis of the peace process, see, Transnational Institute-Burma Centrum Nederland, "Burma's Ethnic Challenge: From Aspirations to Solutions," *Burma Policy Briefing* Nr. 12, October 2013.

to engage in violent skirmishes with government forces. The most intense fighting occurred in December 2012 and continued into January 2013 in which government forces employed heavy weapons and air support. This was despite the President's standing instruction in December 2011 to take only defensive action towards KIA.²¹ This apparently led to the Lower House Speaker announcing a parliamentary statement calling for an immediate ceasefire.²² The subsequent message by the Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC chaired by Vice-President Sai Mauk Kham) inviting the KIO to enter into peace negotiations resulted in a meeting in Shweli (Ruili a border town in Yunnan) on 4 February, witnessed by Chinese officials as well as the Karen National Union (KNU; a ceasefire group) Chairman and a high-ranking officer from the Shan State Army (SSA-South; a ceasefire group). No ceasefire agreement was reached but both sides agreed to continue holding talks.²³ The second round of talks on 11 March also at Shweli agreed to stage further talks inside Myanmar.

The three-day meeting between the UPWC delegation and the KIO in Myitkyina (Kachin State capital), observed by UN Special Adviser Mr. Vijay Nambiar, concluded with a seven-point agreement on 30 May allowing for establishment of a KIO technical liaison team in Myitkyina and joint monitoring bodies and to de-escalate conflict. However, even the latest round of talks in Myitkyina on 8 October, held after another bout of heavy fighting in September and witnessed by a large contingent of interested parties and stakeholders, did not yield any ceasefire agreement though a new seven-point agreement was announced.²⁴

As for other armed groups some progress could be seen during the year. In early August, the UPWC delegation reached a 12-point agreement in its official first engagement with the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF; popularly

²¹ See the "Statement by the National Human Rights Commission," 13 December 2011, in *NLM*, 14 December 2011. The government claimed that the action was for self-defence and to secure the lines of communications (EBO *Political Monitor* No. 4 [19-25 January 2013], Appendix A). It was also reported that artillery shells struck Chinese territory during the fighting in December 2012 and early January 2013 resulting in Chinese complaints with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei expressing strong "concerns and dissatisfaction" and "calling for an immediate ceasefire" (*Burma Bulletin*, January 2013, p. 2). Subsequently the President ordered the military to maintain ceasefire with effect from 19 January (*ibid.*).

²² See EBO *Political Monitor* No. 3 (12-18 January 2013), appendix B.

²³ The choice of China as a venue reflected KIO's mistrust of the government and also indicated the significance of China's deep concern for border security and stability.

²⁴ Those present included Mr. Nambiar, China's Special Envoy on Asia Mr. Wang Ying Fan, representatives of 10 ceasefire groups and political parties within Kachin State, Kachin parliamentarians, community elders, and civil society representatives.

known as student army).

The violent episode in January and further fighting throughout 2013 not only with the KIA²⁵ but also with Shan armed groups that had already concluded ceasefire agreements had led to perceptions that the government was pursuing a dual track policy of talking while fighting and some even questioned the President's ability to control the military and enforce his instructions. In the international media front, the Myanmar military was vilified by ethnic activists and human rights organizations some of whom were lobbying for a unilateral ceasefire by the government. Thus far, the main disagreement between the KIO and the government regarding the sequencing of ceasefire agreement and political dialogue in which the KIO preferred to have political dialogue first remained unresolved and was holding back further substantive progress.

On the other hand, the intransigence of the KIO and a small ethnic armed group who had yet to sign ceasefire agreements together with ambivalence among some ceasefire groups had repeatedly delayed the signing of the nationwide ceasefire accord envisaged by the government's leading negotiator U Aung Min (Vice Chair of UPWC) and the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC; a think tank-style support team for the government's peace initiative). The insistence by the UNFC to bargain collectively with emphasis on achieving political concessions before a ceasefire had been at odds with the UPWC's bilateral ceasefire negotiation approach and further complicated the peace process. Two round of meetings in February and September 2013 went nowhere.

Meanwhile, most of the ethnic armed groups managed to get their act together for negotiations with the government at an unprecedented meeting hosted by the KIO at its headquarters in Laiza (Liza) from 30 October to 2 November 2013. It adopted a six-point road map and formed a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT) mandate to enter into dialogue with the government negotiating team on behalf of the 17 signatories (representatives of armed ethnic organizations) to the so-called "Laiza Agreement."²⁶

²⁵ See, e.g., "Fresh fighting reported in Kachin State, ahead of ceasefire talks," *The Irrawaddy*, 2 October 2013.

²⁶ See, e.g., "Ethnic Armed Organizations Conference," EBO Briefing Paper, October 2013.

Communal Violence and Religious Nationalism

The communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims that erupted twice in the Rakhine State in 2012 resurfaced in central Myanmar in March. The riots involved local Muslims who had been much more integrated than the Rakhine Muslim community (known as Rohingya and virtually stateless) who were generally regarded by the Myanmar polity as “alien” (mainly illegal) migrants from Bangladesh. The riots originating in Meiktila (where dozens of Muslims were killed and martial law had to be declared) spread to two other townships in the Mandalay Region and eight townships in the Bago Region (lower Myanmar), and one in Yangon Region. Though the scale of death and destruction was not as severe and extensive as the 2012 Rakhine violence it was a disturbing escalation because it occurred in the heartland and affected Muslims who were fellow citizens.

On 30 March the President appointed a committee comprising five Union ministers and five deputy ministers to tackle the unrest. Nevertheless, mob violence manifested in Hpakant (jade mining town) in Kachin State on 2 May. In the last week of May, Muslim inhabitants Lashio (Northern Shan State) were the target of riots for two days and another riot occurred the next day in Bago Region. This spread to ethnic minority areas was a worrisome development. In June and early July violence against Muslims were reported in Thandwe (Rakhine State). In August the violence occurred in Kantbalu Township (Sagaing Region). In September the violence returned to Thandwe again on the 29th. Violence in Thandwe flared up again in the first 2 days of October coincided with President Thein Sein’s first visit to the troubled Rakhine State. Later in the week in Kyaungon Township in the Ayeyarwady Region. This year’s series of anti-Muslim riots which occurred virtually every month since March were reportedly provoked by real or perceived (or even rumours of) misbehaviour or criminal acts of individual Muslims, but the disproportionately violent responses of the Buddhist polity apparently remained undeterred by the government’s threat to use force if necessary. Attempts by the authorities to enhance interfaith dialogues and cooperation as well as addressing local grievances had yet to yield substantive results in preventing outbreaks of violence in both the Myanmar heartland and the ethnic minority regions as well as the Rakhine State.

2013 also saw the rise of the so-called “969” movement that advocated a form of ethno-religious nationalism encouraging Buddhists to patronize only Buddhist-

owned business and campaigned for restricting and punishing mixed marriages between Buddhists and those from other faiths. The vanguard of this movement is a monk with the *nom-de-plume* of U Wirathu who rapidly gained fame and following since his public appearance in favour of “protecting” Buddhism and Buddhist polity from “aliens” (read Muslims in general and the Rohingya/Bengali in particular). His portrayal as “the face of Buddhist terror” on the *Time* magazine cover (1 July 2013) further raised his profile, both nationally and internationally, and led to the ban of the magazine in Myanmar.

In a significant development toward curbing extremism among the Buddhist polity, the State Sangha Mahanayaka Committee (state-sponsored ruling council for monks) reportedly decreed on 2 September that banned the formation of “969” networks and the use of the movement’s emblem as a Buddhist symbol.

Action-reaction dynamics of the conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim communities further aggravated by long-standing misunderstanding between them requires a measured but rapid response by the security forces which often arrived after violent clashes. The military, as the most powerful instrument of state power, has become “enforcer of the last resort”; a most unenviable task fraught with dangers threatening its integrity, efficacy, and credibility.

Concluding Remarks: a Dilemma for MDSs

Myanmar’s unprecedented two-pronged reform process of changing the political and economic structures. While both problems have deep-rooted socio-culture underpinnings that involve issues related to identity, rights, justice, and equity and political governance, possible solutions are beyond the purview of the military. Yet, as they remain unresolved, the MDS has to bear the brunt of condemnations, accusations and all kinds of attacks for carrying out security operations in the Kachin and Shan States. Commanders and soldiers are frustrated by the fact that they and their comrades have suffered heavy losses in fighting with an enemy who has the upper hand in the shooting war (due to territorial and logistical conditions) as well as in the propaganda war. The MDS has been vilified as an obstacle to peace by the

media as well.²⁷

In the case of the communal conflict, the military, scarred by past encounters with the public, is loath to intervene, but when other security agencies are overwhelmed by the numbers and intensity of violence it falls upon the MDS to step into the political minefield.

However, these do not mean that the MDS cannot overcome this dilemma of internal security operations. It has to develop appropriate doctrines and establish clear rules of engagement and formulate a more flexible command and control structure to meet these challenges. The way forward would be to be more professional and less political. Confidence building between the MDS and political stakeholders as well as ethnic groups is essential for progress towards some form of security sector reforms. Ultimately it must accept the political solution arrived at through negotiations among multiple stakeholders. On the other hand, even though the MDS is also a stakeholder in peacemaking and maintaining communal harmony, it seems that it has been allowed to play a lesser role than it deserves.²⁸

²⁷ See, e.g., Burma Partnership, "Whose Guns Are Silent? An Analysis of Burma's Fractured Peace Process," 20 September 2013 available at <http://www.burmapartnership.org/2013/09/whose-guns-are-silent-analysis/>

²⁸ See, e.g., Andrew Selth, "Burma's Security Forces: Performing, Reforming or Transforming?" Regional Outlook Paper No. 45, 2013. Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, Australia.