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Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement: Second Chance at Peace?

By Kyaw San Wai

Synopsis

Myanmar is edging closer towards its first-ever nationwide ceasefire agreement. Numerous challenges remain but the prospects appear encouraging.

Commentary

MYANMAR'S EFFORTS to secure its first-ever nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) appears to be nearing fruition, as the fifth round of negotiations between the government's Union Peace Working Committee and the National Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) representing 16 ethnic armed groups drew to a close in Yangon in mid-August.

Another round of talks is set to follow in mid-September, with both sides expecting the jointly drafted agreement to be signed by the end of October. The NCA aims to end internal conflicts, some older than the modern state of Myanmar itself, and pave the way for political dialogue on long-standing ethnic issues. While a herculean task lies ahead, the developments are encouraging.

Light at the end of the first tunnel

The administration of President Thein Sein has made securing of the NCA a key deliverable of its tenure. His government has already secured various bilateral ceasefire agreements with most of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups (EAGs). Although government forces continue to clash with some rebel groups and ceasefire violations have been reported, stakeholders from both sides are optimistic that the NCA is within reach.

Both sides regard the general election next year as a crucial deadline and thus seek to secure an agreement before the political landscape becomes more complicated. The government hopes to gain significant legitimacy by achieving nation-wide peace during its tenure. For the EAGs, they seek to hammer out a deal with a government they are already familiar with, given uncertainties concerning the upcoming election, and also capitalise on the government's predicament. The EAGs also desire for Aung San Suu Kyi to play a prominent role in the political dialogues which will follow the signing of the NCA.

While a host of issues will need to be addressed after the NCA is inked, the current process represents the closest Myanmar has ever been towards ending nearly 60 years of civil war. In the latest round of negotiations, the government made an unprecedented move by accepting the ethnic groups' long-repeated demand of establishing a federal union, albeit in principle.

In addition, mutual trust and rapport have been built up between the involved parties who now communicate and negotiate directly rather than relying on intermediaries as in previous years. Conditions in certain ceasefire areas have improved, such as reduced militarisation and human rights abuses, although deep-rooted scepticism of the military (the *Tatmadaw*) remains.

The challenge of federalism

There are also concerns that the task might not be accomplished before the 2015 elections. There have been a number of instances where government officials and ethnic leaders have declared that the NCA was within reach, only to see complications and postponements. The *Tatmadaw's* demands that ethnic groups disarm, demobilise and reintegrate, along with its manoeuvres in ceasefire areas are sources of continued mistrust and disagreement. Continued fighting, ceasefire violations and actions by parties benefiting from conflict risk reversing the gains.

The NCA will be the first major step of many more to come, and might well be the easiest. The agreement will stipulate commencing political dialogue within 90 days of signing, and this dialogue promises to be more tedious and prolonged than the NCA negotiations. Fundamental issues such as the structure of the state, the *Tatmadaw* and the EAGs' roles, socio-economic integration, revenue sharing and constitutional amendment will have to be discussed.

The ongoing NCA negotiations only involve the government/military and EAGs, while the political dialogue will see a diversification of stakeholders as political parties, civil society and women's groups become involved. That will enable the negotiations to be more comprehensive, but also likely to be drawn-out.

One of the major hurdles will definitely be on federalism. The government's agreement to a federal system is a major breakthrough. Successive governments and the *Tatmadaw* have regarded federalism as anathema and a precursor to Balkanisation, while ethnic groups and pro-democracy activists consider federalism as the only suitable structure of government for Myanmar. That said, different groups have different interpretations and expectations of federalism, meaning it will have to be negotiated at length.

In addition, the current notion of federalism espoused by its proponents is based on ethnicity, where power will be devolved based on ethnic groups and their geographic distribution. While Myanmar has administrative units based on major ethnic groups, they are not homogenous and have various other self-identifying ethnic groups residing within.

The EAGs have also linked federalism with the need for a federal army, but there is confusion on what it actually should be – whether a unified military that accepts all citizens regardless of ethnicity (the *Tatmadaw* is heavily dominated by the majority Bamar and has glass ceilings for minorities) or each administrative unit entitled to a military formed along ethnic lines.

Other major challenges - second chance at peace?

The other major challenge is that the entire negotiation process remains heavily personalised, spearheaded by individuals such as President Thein Sein and ethnic leaders. The personalisation means that all parties are dealing with uncertainty on how their counterparts' successors and subordinates will approach issues, and a bad apple can quickly derail the entire process. Institutional mechanisms are being cultivated but remain unable to supplant the heavily personalised form of political participation endemic to Myanmar.

Other issues that will require attention include refugees and internally displaced persons, landmines, the Border Guard and People's Militia Forces (former EAGs and factions aligned to and supported by the *Tatmadaw*), transnational crime, illegal immigration, drug production and environmental

destruction. These will have to be dealt with in conjunction with national-level political and economic liberalisation, growing religious sectarianism and constitutional reform. There is also uncertainty surrounding the Wa, the largest and best-equipped EAG with its own de facto state, and a number of EAGs whom the government does not consider eligible to participate in the NCA.

Despite the laundry list of challenges, there is a shared sense of guarded optimism that Myanmar is getting a second chance at peace. Only by peacefully resolving the ethnic issue would Myanmar be able to progress and democratise. While the NCA represents the beginning of a protracted long-term project to resolve issues older than the country itself, the trust and momentum built up in securing it will be crucial to confront the challenges ahead.

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