

Sectarian Violence in Burma: A Country Opening Up, or Collapsing?

Written by Kenton Clymer

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KENTON CLYMER, JUN 15 2012

Will the recent outburst of sectarian violence in Burma bring about the collapse of the government or affect the recent reforms that have led to positive international responses?

That there has been an upsurge in ethnic violence is certain. Most recently the clashes between Muslims (about 4 percent of the population) and Buddhists (about 90 percent) in Rakhine State have dominated the news. At least twenty-one people have died, and tensions are running high elsewhere, with Muslim and Buddhist groups marching in the capital. The Muslims, known as Rohingyas, are in an unenviable position. They are not recognized as Burmese citizens, are discriminated against, and live as refugees.

The Rakhine violence has overshadowed the vicious war going on in Kachin State, where the Burmese military stands accused of numerous war crimes. A ceasefire had been in existence for seventeen years, but last June it broke down. There has been speculation that the army wishes to have more control over Kachin, where Chinese development projects exist and where there are many natural resources. Meanwhile, other insurgencies continue. One study concluded that about eighteen insurgencies existed in 2012.

As a result the brutal responses of the Burmese military to the insurgencies, advocacy groups urge that existing sanctions remain in place. The U. S. Campaign for Burma, for example, pointing to the "heinous human rights abuses against Burma's ethnic civilians," urged re-enactment of significant sanctions legislation.

The abuses are real, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the European Union have both appealed for an end to the violence. But it is not likely that the existence of the insurgencies, or the human rights abuses connected with them, indicate that a government collapse is near. Nor will they derail the current reforms in other areas.

Here it is useful to take a look at Burma's modern history—and historical inquiry sometimes unfortunately does not receive the attention it deserves in the study of International Relations. For one thing, the ethnic tensions and violent responses from the government are hardly new. Within two months of Burma's independence, Prime Minister U Nu was beset by two armed communist insurgencies. Soon thereafter he also faced a raft of ethnic insurgencies, most notably the Karen rebellion. Burma blamed the British who, they charged, had pursued a divide and conquer policy, setting Burmans against the minorities. But whatever the cause, Burma was near collapse. As U Nu wrote in his memoirs, the government "had taken on the appearance of an old house with rotten supports."

Since then, Burma has faced large number of insurgencies. The numbers increased more or less steadily until, in the early 1990s, there were over forty. But after the first few years the government was never in real danger of collapsing. Today there are fewer than half the number of insurgencies as there were two decades ago. So it is hard to argue that the existence of the insurgencies today signals an impending collapse.

Since independence, there have been numerous efforts to end the ethnic conflicts. U Nu entered into serious negotiations with the Karens, but could not find a solution. One of the reasons that Ne Win overthrew him in 1958 in what the American ambassador called "a polite coup" was that he was trying to settle with the Shans on terms that

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Ne Win thought inadvisable. To look just at the year 1967, a time when tensions were high between China and Burma, the American ambassador urged Prime Minister Ne Win to make the “earliest possible effort to get together with the ethnic groups” because they, like Ne Win, did not like China. But Ne Win, pointing to the impact of Britain’s divide and conquer policy, responded that it would take at least two generations before there could be ethnic peace. The same year, it might be noted, a mob attacked government installations in Akyab (now Sittwe), the capital of Rakhine Province. The military killed twenty-two.

In sum, the new wave of violence, with its human rights atrocities, is not a new phenomenon. It would be wonderful if a way could be found to stop the violence and end the abuses. But if that does not happen, the government will not collapse.

Nor is the continuing ethnic violence likely to end international support for the current reforms. Here again history is instructive. During World War II many ethnic minorities fought valiantly with the Allies. Many Burmans fought with the Japanese. When the war ended, the British and the Americans sympathized with the minorities but did not support their cause. Indeed, they both supplied military aid that was used against the ethnic armies.

The direction of American policy was evident in the trial of high treason of Dr. Gordon Seagrave, the famous “Burma Surgeon,” in 1950-51. Seagrave was born in Rangoon in 1897 to American Baptist missionary parents. In 1922 he and his wife built a hospital in Namkham, Shan State. Seagrave had a reputation much like that of Albert Schweitzer. But in 1950 the Burmese government arrested him and charged him with aiding the Karen rebels.

Seagrave denied the charges, but there is no question that he sympathized with the Karens and thought much more highly of the minorities than he did of the Burman-dominated government. This put the American government in a difficult situation, for it was supporting Burma’s government, not the minorities. Because Seagrave was widely admired in the United States, the State Department was very solicitous of him personally. But despite Seagrave’s strongly anti-communist views, it could not use him effectively in its “hearts and minds” campaign against the communists because his views about the minorities clashed with the official American policy.

In sum, realpolitik ruled policy. The United States found much to criticize about the government of Burma, but at least it was fighting the communists at home. And when it had to devote its limited military resources against the ethnic minority resistance forces, it had fewer resources to fight the communists—the existential enemy, as the Western powers saw it.

The lesson for today is that it is unlikely that the United States (or Europe) will allow the plight of the ethnic minorities to stand in the way of larger policy objectives. As long as the current Burmese government opens up the political process, allows Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy some breathing room, frees important political prisoners, and allows free and fair elections, the Western powers will continue to lift sanctions and liberalize trade with Burma. They will genuinely try to help bring about reconciliation between the government and the ethnic minorities. But it is very doubtful that they will insist on peaceful resolutions of these conflicts as a hard and fast condition for improving relations.

In sum, the existence of ethnic minority insurgencies will not bring about the collapse of the government. Nor will they have a decisive impact on other aspects of Burma’s reforms or on the decisions of outsiders to work with a reformed Burmese government.

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