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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The Myanmar Government and Ethnic Minorities: An Unhappy Marriage**

By Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit

### **Synopsis**

*The recent communal rioting in Meiktila has led critics to doubt the Myanmar government's ability to cope with its ethnic issue. Although outside efforts have failed to pressure Myanmar to institute improvements, the government will be able to curb its ethnic tensions and prevent them from spiraling out of control, making regional instability unlikely while continuing the relationship of an unhappy marriage.*

### **Commentary**

The recent ethnic conflict in Meiktila, central Myanmar, is different from previous conflicts. It occurred in the inner Myanmar, not in the country's border towns as before. This might have led some critics to doubt the government's ability to deal with the ethnic problem since the conflicts have spread to the heartland. As international efforts have failed to pressure Myanmar to institute improvements, will the Myanmar government be able to cope with its ethnic issue on its own? Will the problem spiral out of control and thereby destabilise Myanmar and South east Asia? The answers to the questions are: yes and no, respectively.

### **Unsuccessful International Efforts**

The international community has not been mute on finding ways to deal with the ethnic issue, but previous efforts have succeeded little in convincing Myanmar to alleviate its ethnic problem. For example, the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) have issued resolutions which strongly condemned the human rights violations in Myanmar and urged the government to tackle the ethnic problem. Last year, ASEAN proposed to work with the Myanmar government and the United Nations over the ethnic matter. Despite these efforts, the Myanmar government has turned a deaf ear to their calls and offers, citing the ethnic issue as its internal affair.

The same goes for efforts by individual states, especially those having business ties with Myanmar or bordering the country. Even though countries such as the United States, China and Japan have commercial interests in Myanmar as seen in several energy and infrastructure projects, they have done little to link their business issues to humanitarian concerns, resulting in their inability to effectively press Myanmar to improve its ethnic minority situation. Myanmar's neighbours such as Bangladesh, Thailand and China which have been affected by the influx of Myanmar's minority refugees, have chosen to send the exiles back home and thus missed a good opportunity to persuade the country to improve its ethnic situation.

## **Changes from within?**

As international efforts have brought little success to the improvements of the ethnic issue, can changes come from within? Among the potential domestic players, Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), comes to mind. After having disappointed the international community by remaining neutral on the Rakhine ethnic issue, Suu Kyi has recently expressed her willingness to mediate talks between the government and ethnic minorities. While this is a good sign, one should not raise one's hope too high.

Suu Kyi may not be able to help much on lessening the ethnic problem. As the NLD is looking forward to the crucial 2015 general elections, it has to take into account its main constituents who are against the minority groups; some of the party's members view these minorities negatively, and Suu Kyi's influence over the ethnic issue will likely to be constrained. As the party's stake in the 2015 elections is high, expressing too much concern about minority groups will not be a smart move as it will risk not only jeopardizing the NLD's internal solidarity but also alienating the party's constituencies.

## **Spiraling Out of Control: The Unlikely Scenario**

The government has been swift in managing the situation in Meiktila. Curfews were imposed in the affected areas. President Thein Sein also made his first public speech on the violence, emphasizing that the government will use force if necessary to stop any attacks orchestrated by political opportunists and religious extremists.

Should ethnic violence or uprisings occur elsewhere in the future, the government will likely monitor the situation closely. The military has spread throughout the country by setting up its networks within the country's bureaucracies and local authorities. This has facilitated the government's oversight of the ethnic groups' movements.

## **The More likely Scenario: An Unhappy Marriage**

Since the Myanmar government will be able to keep the ethnic issue under control, its future relationship with ethnic minorities will not end in a divorce. It is highly unlikely that the Myanmar government will let the minorities go, mainly for geopolitical and economic reasons. The ethnic groups live in resource-rich areas, which have attracted investments from abroad such as several mega-projects of hydropower dams, gas and oil pipes running from Myanmar to China and India, and highways linking South Asia with Southeast Asia. Thus, the Myanmar government will neither let the regions go nor grant ethnic groups independence or autonomy. The minorities will, as they have been, remain under the current regime.

The relationship between the government and ethnic groups will not be a happy one either. Rather, it will be more like an unhappy marriage – though highly uncomfortable with each other, they will stay together. Like an unhappy marriage, both sides may yell, curse, fight, and cause damage to each other. Although their fighting sometimes generates uneasiness among certain “outsiders,” the latter's intervention will be unlikely as they seem unable to penetrate the government's “It's a domestic affair” shield. However, outsiders' efforts are not entirely impossible. Outsiders will come along with this ethnic matter if they see their own interests at stake. But so far, there have been little signs showing that their interests are at risk. The future prospect is likely to be that, like it or not, the Myanmar government will “drag” its ethnic minorities along, and the ethnic issue will continue.

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