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Forget About the Sham Burmese Elections

It's the growing risk of ethnic violence the world should worry about.

BY STEPHANIE T. KLEINE-AHLBRANDT | NOVEMBER 5, 2010



BEIJING—As the world prepares to label this weekend's elections in Myanmar an undemocratic farce -- which of course they are -- a brewing potential crisis in the country's border regions is being ignored. While cease-fire agreements have tempered the civil wars that have raged for much of Myanmar's 62-year post-independence history, these conflicts have never been fully resolved. Fighting in the northeastern Kokang region in August 2009 forced more than 30,000 refugees to flee across the border to China. Now, the government's aggressive tactics are increasing tensions in a high-stakes game of ethnic politics, one that carries significant potential for violent conflict.

The military government that rules this Southeast Asian country has never taken the political demands of its ethnic groups seriously, and several have taken up arms and built sizeable militias that control large swathes of territory. In April 2009, the authorities told armed ethnic groups that they had to transform their militias into "Border Guard Forces" under central military control. The groups, which see their weapons as their last bit of leverage against a government that gives them nothing in return, refused.

But in recent weeks, the government has signaled it may be planning another offensive to forcibly integrate ethnic minorities under state control, raising tensions to their highest level since the Kokang offensive. After a land-mine explosion in mid-October, it labeled the large and well-organized Kachin Independence Army (KIA) as "insurgents." The government's use of this term for the first time since it signed a cease-fire with the group in 1994 has been widely interpreted as a prelude to force. Tensions escalated further when government troops forcibly surrounded three KIA offices in mid-October. Ethnic militias are reinforcing their troops in Kachin and Shan states, and six of them have formed an agreement to join forces should the government launch another attack.

Although the impending elections could have been an opportunity to restore calm through increased political participation by ethnic groups -- which represent roughly a third of the population -- such hopes have been dashed by recent events: Sizable sections of the minority Wa, Shan, and Karen communities have opted out of the polls, believing that they will change nothing for them. And the electoral commission has disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of ethnic

persons by canceling voting altogether in several townships of the Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, and Shan states, including four townships in Wa-controlled territory. In September, the commission barred three of four Kachin-affiliated political parties and blocked a dozen senior Kachin leaders from running as independent candidates.

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Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt is Northeast Asia project director at the International Crisis Group.

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AUNG AUNG

7:22 PM ET

November 10, 2010

focal points

This is an empirically based article as opposed to a spin-driven one. It is insightful. However, its exclusive focus on China- and northern-Burma needs to be expanded. Thailand's role in this, as the largest investor in Burma as well as as the country that had benefitted from Burma's wars against ethnic minorities such as the Karens and the Shan need to be examined.

As the post-election fighting in Eastern Burma along Thai-Burmese borders at Myawaddy-Mae Sot amply indicate the more immediate war may be looming on the Thai-Burmese border region than in Sino-Burmese border regions.

JASONBROOKS

3:21 PM ET

November 17, 2010

BEIJING

The military government that rules this Southeast Asian country has never taken the political demands of its ethnic groups seriously, and several have taken up arms and built sizeable militias that control large swathes of territory.
@Jason mange in dogs

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