

Forget About the Sham Burmese Elections: It's the growing risk of ethnic violence the world should worry about

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Foreign Policy | 5 Nov 2010

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 government's Kokang offensive. After a land-mine explosion in mid-October, the government 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.

China is one of the few countries in a position to help address the long-term standoff between the border ethnic groups and the ruling junta. The stakes for Beijing are high -- unrest along its shared 2,192 km border with Myanmar could disrupt China's own border stability and regional economic development, as well as its energy infrastructure projects in ethnic group-controlled areas, including several large-scale hydropower plants and the major oil and gas pipelines it is building to decrease dependence on shipping through the Malacca Strait.

Driven by these concerns, China has already taken action. In the wake of the Kokang conflict and refugee crisis, Beijing stepped up direct engagement with the border ethnic groups and has been mediating privately -- urging the government not to use force while compelling groups like the Wa to negotiate despite their reluctance. One policy camp in China has gone so far as to suggest limited autonomy for the ethnic groups in a "genuine union," similar to China's special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau. A political solution is a long way off, but China has helped to prevent conflict in the border regions in the past, and can do so again.

China is less alert, however, toward the situation in Kachin, Myanmar's northernmost state, where tensions have spiked ahead of the elections. Some analysts suggest Beijing is more willing to take action when the fate of groups with strong ethnic and cultural ties to China is at stake. The Kokang people, for example, are ethnically Chinese, as is the majority of the Wa's leadership. The conflict in Kokang last year ignited Chinese nationalist sentiment, with some voices even calling for Beijing to take invasive action to protect ethnic Chinese in Myanmar. No such affinity exists with the Kachin, who are predominantly Christian, U.S.-friendly, and do not share China's ethnic or communist credentials. The Kachin complain bitterly about Chinese companies' resource extraction activities due to their lack of transparency, unequal distribution of benefits from the resource wealth, environmental damage, and forced displacement of communities -- resentment laid bare by the April bombing of a Chinese hydropower project in Kachin state, which the junta blamed on Kachin activists.

While China is focusing on the post-election political and economic landscape of its southwestern neighbor, it needs to press the Myanmar regime to stop its brinkmanship and ensure it does not take aggressive action against the ethnic groups. Nor should India and many Southeast Asian nations -- which have failed to hold the regime to account -- get a pass. And the West, instead of focusing only on the elections, should redirect its energy to the alienation of ethnic minorities, which is by far the most serious long-term challenge to Myanmar's peaceful political development.

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