

Shared Legitimacy for Building A New Burma/Myanmar

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The Crisis of Political Legitimacy in Burma/Myanmar

Burma (Myanmar) has always been a multi-ethnic state. While the Burman (Bamar) majority makes up roughly 65% of the population, ethnic minorities occupy the majority of the territory—especially the surrounding highlands. This ethnic diversity has always posed a challenge to a centralized state dominated by the Burman/Bamar political elite, whether elected or military. Since independence in 1948, successive governments have behaved as though Bamar majoritarianism confers the automatic right to rule. This assumption of legitimacy—backed by centralist constitutions and military force—has been consistently rejected by ethnic nationalities, leading to resistance and protracted conflict.

Early Betrayals and the Erosion of Ethnic Trust (1948–1962)

Under British colonial rule, Burma was administered as two separate entities: direct rule over Bamar-majority areas and indirect rule in ethnic minority regions. On the eve of independence, the Panglong Agreement—signed by General Aung San and ethnic leaders—promised ethnic groups no less autonomy than they had under the British. However, the 1948 Constitution broke that promise. Though labeled “quasi-federal,” it created a highly centralized union. A clause allowing ethnic states to secede after ten years implied confidence in unity—but when the time came, demands for autonomy were met with military suppression.

Ethnic-language high schools, such as those serving the Karen community, were shut down and nationalized. Efforts to preserve ethnic culture and heritage were severely restricted. Ethnic identity was pushed to the margins, effectively rendering minority groups second-class citizens.

Ethnic armed resistance did not continue out of ambition, but out of betrayal—driven by broken promises, illegitimate central control, and repeated military crackdowns.

Military Dominance and Suppressed Sovereignties (1962–1988)

When the military seized power in 1962 to prevent a federalism dialogue, Burma entered decades of authoritarian rule. The 1974 constitution gave ethnic states names but no power. Elections were rigged, ethnic regions militarized, and any federal aspirations violently suppressed. While intra-Bama political movements (like the NLD) emerged, ethnic people remained marginalized—viewed not as political equals but as subjects to be pacified or assimilated.

The Appearance of Reform and the Continuation of Centralism (1988–2020)

After the 1988 uprising, the military promised multi-party elections, which in 1990 the NLD won in a landslide. Yet power was never transferred. Over two decades, the military engineered a façade of democracy through the 2008 constitution, which entrenched military power even as it permitted electoral politics. Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) like the KNU entered ceasefires and political dialogues under the Natiowide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) implementation process, but these processes operated parallel to, not within, the real power structures.

From 2015–2020, despite another NLD landslide, ethnic people saw little change. The NLD's government continued to favor centralized governance, with ethnic state governments still controlled from the center. Dialogue with EROs stagnated. Worse, the NLD defended the military's actions against the Rohingya, further alienating ethnic communities. For many, it was clear: in Bama-majority politics, ethnic legitimacy remained unrecognized.

2021 Coup and the Collapse of Central Control

The 2020 elections again delivered a sweeping NLD victory. But the military, claiming fraud, staged a coup in February 2021. The response was mass protest, violent crackdowns, and a rapid descent into civil war. Ethnic groups, long resisting the state, now found common cause with new People's Defense Forces (PDFs) across central Burma. The National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by deposed MPs—but the same legitimacy questions resurfaced: Who has the right to shape the future state?

The military junta (SAC) claims de facto control but governs less than half the country, relying increasingly on indiscriminate airstrikes to assert presence. The international community continues to treat the SAC or NUG as central actors, but on the ground, legitimacy lies elsewhere: in the ethnic organizations and territories that have resisted central domination for decades and continue to provide governance and protection.

Ethnic Resistance and Alternative Legitimacy

Organizations like the Karen National Union (KNU) have maintained parallel governance structures in their territories, developed education and health services, and drafted their own constitutions. We have long rejected centralized constitutions imposed without consent. Since the coup, ethnic resistance has gained both moral and practical credibility. In our areas, we do not wait for permission from the center. Legitimacy comes from our people and history, not from military decrees or majority elections alone.

Efforts to establish a shared framework—like the **Federal Democracy Charter** and the **National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)**—aim to reconcile diverse claims to legitimacy. But tensions remain. The NLD and its allies, pointing to past electoral victories, claim a central role in post-military governance. Yet those elections occurred under a military-controlled constitution, and did not include much of the ethnic population meaningfully. Ethnic political actors reject the idea that electoral success under military rules equals a mandate to dictate the country's future.

The Path Forward: Shared and Plural Legitimacy

Burma/Myanmar's failure to become a cohesive nation-state stems from its refusal to acknowledge ethnic legitimacy—both **performative** (based on service to and recognition by the people) and **legal-rational** (based on historical agreements like Panglong and governance structures within ethnic territories). Central governments have attempted assimilation, not integration. They have denied power-sharing, dismissed self-determination, and imposed central control through constitutions written without consent.

To emerge from this failure, the state must be rebuilt from the ground up as a **federal, democratic union** based on genuine autonomy for ethnic states. Legitimacy must be **shared**, not claimed exclusively by military or majoritarian forces. It must reflect the country's ethnic and political mosaic.

The military has no place in the political future. Only a federal democracy shaped by all, especially ethnic groups as co-founders—not auxiliaries—can bring sustainable peace.

Conclusion

Legitimacy in post-revolution Burma/Myanmar must be plural, rooted in mutual recognition, and built from the ground up. State constitutions and a new federal constitution must emerge through broad-based, multi-ethnic consensus—not imposed by those who once held power.

A new federal framework must enable democratic decision-making, define armed group conduct, and establish clear chains of command. Crucially, it must guarantee autonomous federal units and uphold the principle of subsidiarity—where power is shared fairly between state and federal levels. This is the foundation of real, shared legitimacy.

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