



The War in the Minds: Some Reflections on the Thorny Peace Process in Myanmar

Hans-Bernd Zöllner

POLICY BRIEFING | 1 | FEBRUARY 2020

On February 12 of last year – Union Day – some 20 demonstrators were hurt by the police in Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State. More than 3,000 mainly young people had demonstrated to protest against the installation of a bronze statue of Aung San. The protest had some significance because the holiday memorialises the Panglong Agreement signed on this day in 1947 by Aung San and leaders of some ethnic groups. Obviously, the protesters did not cherish the day as well as the document without which the Union of Myanmar would not have achieved independence on January 4 1948.

One participant in the protest was quoted thus: “Local ethnicities have no right to determine their own destiny, and reveal their ‘true’ history. What’s worse is youths who reveal the true history are arrested and shot with rubber bullets.” And a statement issued by the Karen Women Organization (KWO) stated: “We as fellow indigenous women understand that Burmese ethnic people hold the General as a hero of their people and the father of their independence. This is not how the indigenous people of Burma view him. He was a General in the Burmese Army. The same Army that attacks civilians, uses rape as a weapon of war and burns villages.” In other words: The Bogyoke is not seen as a symbol of unity among the ethnic groups of Myanmar, but as one of strife.

The Karen Women’s Organisation further said it was “time for the Burmanization of our country to end. We have many indigenous groups who have a right to a voice and have heroes worth honoring.” One of these heroes is the Karen Saw Ba U Gyi, the founder of Karen National Union (KNU) who was killed by Burmese forces in August 1950, one and a half year after fighting between Karen troops and the Tatmadaw had started at the end of January 1949. The day of his death is still celebrated in many Karen communities as “Karen Martyrs’ Day”, despite the government’s ban of the word “martyr” reserved for Aung San and the other eight people assassinated on July 19 1947, one of them being a Karen.

The Ongoing Quest for Independence

There still exists an ongoing war in the minds of many ethnic people of Myanmar, as it seems particularly among the younger generation. It is a war about defining the “true history” of

Myanmar and how to remember and to honour it. One can argue that it is a hidden war about independence, as the dispute about another statue depicting the Karen hero shows. The nine feet high sculpture was constructed in Yangon to be first placed at Three Pagoda Pass on the border to Thailand, a rather prominent place, on Karen New Year in December 2017. According to a member of the festival organising committee, the Tatmadaw Regional Commander did not allow the installation because “Saw Ba U Gyi is a national leader as well as revolutionary leader. This will cause revolutionary motivation to the youths”.

A second attempt to publicly display the statue, on February 11 2018, Karen National Day (which marks the formation of the KNU), was thwarted as well at another place in Southern Karen State. The dispute between a Tatmadaw general and the representatives of the KNU was about whether the statue could be publicly displayed since the KNU had signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) of 2015. The representative of the Myanmar army allegedly asked for the statue to be stored in the jungle out of sight for the time being. The statue nevertheless was given a big reception by villagers in a rather remote place, without however being allowed to be placed on the before prepared plinth. On this occasion, a big poster was shown depicting Saw Ba U Gyi besides Aung San. A KNU member commented the episode thus: “This is the history and heritage of the ethnic Karen people, but they do not let us express it. How can they build unity with the country’s ethnic people by acting this way?”

The Myanmar media reported these events, but did not convey crucial information to their readers that would help understanding the explosive nature of the issue. In July 1950 Saw Ba U Gyi coined the four principles of the KNU that are still very well remembered until today by many Karen nationalists: “1. For us surrender is out of the question, 2. The recognition of Karen state must be completed, 3. We shall retain our arms, 4. We shall decide our own political destiny.” This uncompromising demand for independence is still closely attached to the Karen hero both by many Karen and their Burmese counterparts, particularly in the military. More than 70 years after the Union of Burma came into being, the memories of Aung San, the hero

of Burmese independence, and of Saw Ba U Gyi have not been reconciled. Today's Union of Myanmar is still a split entity – and not just with regard to the Kayah and Karen.

In Search of the Lost Spirit of Panglong

They did not object to Aung San, one protester in Loikaw said. The problem was how his successors – including his daughter – were handling his legacy. To erect his statue without the consent of the local community was like killing him a second time. Such a statement corresponds with a general assessment of non-Bamar ethnicities. The independence leader who signed the agreement, as the representative of “Burma proper” administered directly by the British, had good and sincere intentions to treat the “hill people” living at the fringes of the province as equals. It was his successors who betrayed the spirit of Panglong embodied by Aung San.

Some closer looks at what happened before and at the Panglong meeting show that the realities were more complex. From the seven ethnic nationalities that according to the country's first constitution of 1947 – together with the Bamar – are recognised as the “indigenous races”, only three – Shan, Kachin and Chin - had sent representatives to the conference who signed the agreement. The Mon and Rakhine belonged to Burma Proper, the Karen just sent some observers and the Kayah were absent. Their leaders had stated that the Kayah State was an independent state as a result of a treaty between the British and the Burmese king Mindon concluded in 1875. Furthermore, Aung San was under pressure because, according to the treaty he had concluded with the British in January 1947, agreement with ethnic nationalities was the precondition for the independence of the whole territory of British within one year. He had to negotiate hard to convince the Shan and Kachin representatives that achieving independence together would be beneficial for all, and the final Panglong agreement was worded rather vaguely by promising the “Frontier Areas” “full autonomy in internal administration in principle” and the “rights and privileges which are regarded as fundamental in democratic countries.” The latter sentence could be interpreted as a call for ending the feudal rights of the Shan princes, the Sawbwas.

As a result, after the assassination of Aung San “Panglong” became the symbol of a union without any solid fundament. What remained was the “Spirit of Panglong” - that was celebrated every year on Union Day, and invoked at other occasions as well. Before the National League of Democracy had taken over the presidency of Myanmar in 2016, under the leadership of Aung San's daughter, efforts to materialise this spirit intensified in a plan to organise a “Second Panglong

Conference”. At the end of August 2016, some 700 persons assembled in Naypyidaw to start realising this aim of reviving the spirit. The “Union Peace Conference” was given the – highly ambitious and ambivalent - subtitle “21st Century Panglong Conference”. Three rounds of meetings have taken place until now, in which stakeholders, including some Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO) that have refused to sign the NCA, were present, even if they did not participate in the official discussion rounds.

In terms of quantity, the series of conferences is impressive, not just with regard to the number of participants. 51 “basic principles” have been adopted in four sections. They are however, as vaguely worded as the agreement of 1947. The last meeting added the following principle to the political sector: “In establishing a Union based on democracy and federal system, no citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar must be treated differently based on gender difference and policy must be established for equality.” This leaves much room for interpretation. Furthermore, no single principle could be agreed upon until now in the crucial Security Sector. Nothing was said about this issue in the 1947 agreement of being responsible for the defence of the country.

It seems that the “Spirit of Panglong” is still fugitive. A number of observers state that the aim of building trust between the fighting parties has not yet been achieved. The war in the minds is going on as are the armed clashes between EAOs and the Tatmadaw in the north-eastern and western parts of Myanmar.

The Continuation of a Vicious Circle: The Lack of Trust Reinforcing the Reliance on Arms and Vice Versa

Looking back from the 21th Century Panglong meetings to the conference of 1947, one can get the impression that Myanmar is caught in a time-warp. Not much has changed since then. The ethnic representatives might have trusted Aung San's promises then – they cannot be asked any more – but they wanted to cast off the yoke of British colonial rule as soon as possible together with the Bamar as the preamble to the agreement states. The trust invested in the leader of the envisaged independent state however, died with him and civil war broke out. The Bamar dominated Tatmadaw saved U Nu's government, but it paid a heavy price for it. From now on, the army took over the role formerly ascribed to the British oppressors. The “tricky” Burmese were accused of making use of the policy of the divide-and-rule policy of the colonialists in founding the Burmese State by force of arms, instead of a federal union in which all ethnicities could live peacefully together. This lack of trust strengthened the need to rely on arms on the side of the ethnic groups, too. Thus, the attitude

of the Tatmadaw leadership to regard themselves as the saviours of Myanmar in the footsteps of Bogyoke Aung San was reinforced – as well as the self-conception of commanding a political army created by the father of the nation that he never was able to assist growing up.

What Is To Be Done?

Post-colonial vicious circles exist not just in Myanmar, but in other ex-colonies, and they cannot be easily broken. They have to be faced and taken into consideration. The protesters in Loikaw and their sympathisers from other ethnic groups point to a sector not included in the Union Peace Conference – the field of history. Here something could be done to fight the war in the minds of the people as a supplement to the large meetings in Naypyidaw.



Panglong Independence Monument

Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

“Panglong” could be a beginning. At the Memorial Monument built there, an inscription informs about the “Brief History” of the monument. The beginning, dealing with the antecedents of the conference is worth to be quoted at length.

In the middle of the 11th century, the Bagan Dynasty in Myanmar emerged as a union state in which nationalities like Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Sham lived in peace and tranquillity. With the beginning of colonialism in the 15th century the British invaded Myanmar three times in 1824, 1852 and 1887 respectively. Myanmar became a colony of the British during the 19th century. Under the divide-and-rule-policy of the British Myanmar exclusive of the hilly regions was granted the administrative power. During the Second World War, Myanmar nationalities reunited against the Fascist Japanese. The British re-entered after the Second World War.

Different nationalities in Myanmar united in an effort to gain independence. The British wanted to exclude hilly regions if independence had to be granted to Myanmar. Knowing the intentions of the British, General Aung San and national leaders started negotiations and discussions from 26th to 28th March, 1946 in order to obtain independence together, followed by the Second Panglong Conference at the southwest corner of Panglong from 3rd to 13th February 1947. The historic Treaty of Panglong was signed by twenty three representatives from different parts of the country at 10:00 am, on Wednesday the 12th of February, 1947. Myanmar declared independence on 4th January 1948.

This is a very simplified version of what the protestors of February 12 2019 might rightfully call a severely “Burmanised” version of history. It even contradicts the findings published by the Historical Research Centre of Yangon University. Thus, the inscription is clearly a hindrance to achieve reconciliation because it excludes other views. This fact could be the starting point to organise a complementary “21st Century Panglong Conference”, aiming at collecting and discussing the various perceptions on the Panglong agreement. This should be done not in a top-down manner, but bottom-up by trying to document the diversity of views and assessments that are representative for the political problems of Myanmar and thus try to fight the “war in the minds”. In a second step, these diverse views could be discussed in various regions and states of Myanmar. The main goal would be to build trust, not just to draft a “true” history of the country. In the course of such a project, people might find that many histories exist in Myanmar and one should look for ways how they can co-exist peacefully.

Such a process would take time, but it could achieve some results before the end of the 21st century. It could lead on to a much needed but not yet suggested change of the 2008 Constitution. Its Preamble is as unacceptable for Myanmar’s most non-Bamar groups as the inscription in Panglong quoted above. And since the series of Great Peace Conferences that commenced in 2016 seems to be adjourned, civil society could step in to start a process about ways out on the wars about Myanmar’s history.