Towards an Inclusive Multinational Society in Myanmar : Ethnic Perceptions and State Building

Author:
Medail, Cecile

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Towards an Inclusive Multinational Society in Myanmar: Ethnic Perceptions and State Building

Cécile Medail

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Surname/Family Name	:	**Medail**
Given Name/s	:	**Cécile**
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Democratic transitions in multinational countries can be problematic when ethnic minorities are excluded from a dominant majority group's vision of the nation. This is the case in Myanmar where, since independence was granted in 1948, ethnic people's aspirations have clashed with the military's vision of a centralised state and a national identity based on the Bamar majority group. Consequently, civil war has been raging for more than 70 years, and discrimination of ethnic groups has been gradually institutionalised. Thus, in order to support peace, one of the main challenges of state building in Myanmar will be to develop institutions that reflect the multinational character of the country. In this thesis, I argue that more attention should be paid to the perceptions of the broader ethnic population. Employing a political ethnographic design, I seek to reveal people's lived experiences of ethnicity in the current democratic transition to suggest state building strategies promoting national belonging.

Focusing on the perceptions of two groups, the Mon and the Pa-O, my findings suggest: First, that they experience the institutional dominance of the Bamar group as a number of cultural, economic, social and political insecurities; second, while Mon and Pa-O attitudes indicate a tendency towards rigid ethnic identification, Bamar chauvinism appears to be the main obstacle to inclusiveness; third, Mon and Pa-O aspirations show that redressing Bamar privilege through institutional reforms bringing about equality of status and greater autonomy would positively support a sense of belonging to the national identity; and finally, I found that among the existing institutional models advanced by the ethnic conflict management literature, the state-nation model reflects most closely Mon and Pa-O aspirations because its policies aim to protect ethnic identities while also promoting national membership. The state-nation model is not a perfect fit, however because its proposed policy sequence prioritises constitutional amendments that do not appear politically feasible in present day Myanmar. I therefore recommend the prioritisation of policies that support a sense of belonging such as symbolic recognition, access to opportunities or cultural autonomy. I argue that since these policies do not directly challenge the political order and the existence of Bamar privilege, they would positively support trust building and thus peace.

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Abstract

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Focusing on the perceptions of two groups, the Mon and the Pa-O, my findings suggest: First, that they experience the institutional dominance of the Bamar group as a number of cultural, economic, social and political insecurities; second, while Mon and Pa-O attitudes indicate a tendency towards rigid ethnic identification, Bamar chauvinism appears to be the main obstacle to inclusiveness; third, Mon and Pa-O aspirations show that redressing Bamar privilege through institutional reforms bringing about equality of status and greater autonomy would positively support a sense of belonging to the national identity; and finally, I found that among the existing institutional models advanced by the ethnic conflict management literature, the state-nation model reflects most closely Mon and Pa-O aspirations because its policies aim to protect ethnic identities while also promoting national membership. The state-nation model is not a perfect fit, however because its proposed policy sequence prioritises constitutional amendments that do not appear politically feasible in present day Myanmar. I therefore recommend the prioritisation of policies that support a sense of belonging such as symbolic recognition, access to opportunities or cultural autonomy. I argue that since these policies do not directly challenge the political order and the existence of Bamar privilege, they would positively support trust building and thus peace.

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Although it should be said first, I would finally also like to acknowledge Australia, the land on which this PhD was written: Canberra, and its surrounding regions, which as I discovered presents troubling similarities with the issues that are the focus of this study: Always Was, Always Will Be.

List of Maps and Figures

List of acronyms[1]

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
BGF	Border Guard Forces
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
LCO	Literature and Culture Organisation
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
MFL	Mon Freedom League
MNEC	Mon National Education Committee
MNLA	Mon National Liberation Army
MNP	Mon National Party
MP	Member of Parliament
MPF	Mon People's Front
MUF	Mon United Front
MWO	Mon Women Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMPS	New Mon State Party
PMF	People's Militia Forces
PNLO	Pa-O National Liberation Organisation

[1] In this thesis, I used the Australian English spelling, expect in official names or quotes.

PNO	Pa-O National Organisation
PWU	Pa-O Women Union
PYO	Pa-O Youth Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USDP	Union Solidarity Development Party
RCSS	Restoration Council Shan State
SAA	Self-Administered Area
SSNLF	Shan State Nationalities Liberation Front
SSNLO	Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organisation
SSNPLO	Shan State Nationalities People’s Liberation Organisation
UPDJC	Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee
UPNO	Union Pa-O National Organisation

Glossary of Burmese, Mon and Pa-O language terms

Term in text	Burmese	**English**
Amyotha Hluttaw	အမျိုးသား	Upper house of parliament
Hinthar/Hongsar	ဟင်္သာ (ဟောင်ဆာ)	Brahmany duck
Hluttaw	လွှတ်တော်	Parliament
Kopaing-ouq-chouq-kwe-ya-data	ဝိုးကိုယျပိုဝျအုပျခုပြုခ့ျရဒသေ	Self-Administered Area
Longyi	လုံခြည်	Sarong
Lumyo	လူမျိုး	Literally "person-type". Often translated as ethnicity or race but also includes religious identities.
Naing-ngan	နိုင်ငံ	Country
Papraye	ဖါဖြားယေ	Grandfather in Pa-O
Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	ပြည်ထောင်စုလွှတ်တော်	Union Parliament
Pyi-nae	ပြည်နယ်	State
Pyi-nae Hluthaw	ပြည်နယ်လွှတ်တော့်	State or region parliament
Pyithu Hluttaw	ပြည်သူ့ လွှတ်တော်	Lower house of parliament
Raman	ရာမန်	Ethnonym used by the Mon to refer to themselves
Ramanya	ရာမည	Mon name for Mon territory instead of Mon State

Ramanyadesa	ရာမညတိုင်	Early Mon kingdoms
Sawbwa	စော်ဘွား	Shan princes
Saya/Sayama	ဆရာ/ဆရာမ	Teacher (male/female)
Sayadaw	ဆရာတော်	Buddhist Abbot
Tai-data-gyi	တိုင်းဒေသကြီး	Region
Taingyintha	တိုင်းရင်းသား	National races
Talaing	တလိုင်း	Derogatory Mon ethnonym used by the Bamar
Tatmadaw	တပ်မတော်	Myanmar armed forces
Thaungthu	တောင်သူ	Derogatory Pa-O ethnonym used by the Bamar
Thingyan	သင်္ကြန်	Burmese new year and water festival
Zaga	စကား	Language

INTRODUCTION

While Myanmar is a very diverse country, counting various ethnic communities and religions, the ethnic conflict that has plagued the country since independence has undeniably contributed to shape these identities in ways that seem irreconcilable.[1] The literatures of comparative politics, international relations, development studies and conflict management have long debated how to build stable and democratic states in divided societies.[2] The traditional notion of "nation states" conveys the idea that states struggle to gain legitimacy when they are comprised of multiple ethnic groups or nations. This potential challenge of multinational societies[3] is not automatically resolved by democracy, as majority decision-making can sometimes contribute to prioritise the views and interests of the majority.[4] Indeed, although institutions of a liberal majoritarian democracy guarantee that participation is meaningful and that power can only be in the hand of elected representatives who are accountable to the people and each other, they can, in fact, result in the complete exclusion of minority groups.[5]

The process of democratic transition can be particularly fragile in multinational societies. As a sudden shift away from authoritarian rule to more open politics,

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[1] For a discussion of the construction of ethnic identities in Myanmar, see for instance Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1970); Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2013); Matthew J. Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1–27; Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (May 27, 2017): 461–83.

[2] Prominent scholars include for instance Robert A. Dahl, Arend Lijphart, Donald Horowitz, Alfred Stepan.

[3] "Multinational societies" refers to countries characterised by the presence of at least two territorially concentrated distinct communities. In this thesis, the term "multinational" is used interchangeably with the term "multiethnic".

[4] Wilfried Swenden, "Territorial Strategies for Managing Plurinational States," in *Routledge Handbook of Regionalism and Federalism*, ed. John Loughlin, John Kincaid, and Wilfried Swenden (Milton Park: Routledge, 2013), 61.

[5] Larry J. Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore (Md.); London: J. Hopkins University Press, 1999), 10–11; Donald L. Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 4 (1993): 31.

democratic transitions are processes of social and political transformation.[6] David Brown describes the process of democratisation in multinational countries as "a transition in the character of national identity."[7] This is because it raises questions about what identities constitute the political community, as different political actors who influence the transition may articulate potentially incompatible conceptualisations of national identity. This is especially true when a majority group dominates the political landscape and attempts to impose its vision of the nation on other minority groups.[8] However, as presented in the literature on ethnic conflict management, democratic systems also offer various ways in which ethnic minorities can be accommodated within new democracies. The establishment or strengthening of inclusive institutions in particular can positively contribute to sustainable peace.[9]

This general *problematique* – the relationship between inclusiveness and peace - is highly relevant to Myanmar,[10] which has experienced the longest running civil war for over seven decades. Since independence was granted in 1948, ethnic nationalities[11]

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[6] Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," in *Democratization and Ethnic Minorities : Conflict or Compromise?*, ed. Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.

[7] David Brown, "The Democratization of National Identity," in *Democratization and Identity : Regimes and Ethnicity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Susan J. Henders (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2004), 43.

[8] Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation : Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 16.

[9] Stefan Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building: The Debate on Institutional Choice," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 10 (2011): 1780.

[10] The use of "Myanmar" as the name of the country is contested. In 1989, the military government unilaterally changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in order to erase the colonial influence. Similarly, the names of a number of cities and other territorial divisions were changed. For example, Rangoon became Yangon and Karen state became Kayin State. Many people who rejected the legitimacy of the junta to dictate such changes chose to keep calling the country Burma. Today, however, *Myanma naing-ngan* is almost universally used by people living in the country. For this reason, I use Myanmar as the country name, as well as the names of other town and territorial divisions decided in 1989. However, I recognise that this re-naming is still strongly contested. For instance, since most Karen prefer not to use Kayin, I employ Karen instead of Kayin. See Ashley South, "Karen Nationalist Communities: The 'Problem' of Diversity," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 1 (2007): 1. In some cases, I follow the historical logic and use both ethnonyms to designate the same group depending on whether I refer to events happening before or after 1989. See for instance, the use of Arakanese/Rakhine or Karenni/Kayah.

[11] In this thesis, I follow the principle of self-identification and therefore refer to ethnic minority groups in Myanmar as "ethnic nationalities", out of respect for ethnic politicians' preference for this designation. This preference rests on the belief that the term "nationality" reflects the idea that they constitute a nation and therefore denotes greater political status. In the same way, ethnic leaders have resisted describing themselves as indigenous and, therefore, have generally not invoked their indigenous rights. See Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Introduction," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 3.

have aspired for the recognition of their cultural identities and the implementation of self-rule. The post-independence democratic government (1948-62) failed to fulfil the needs and aspirations of the country's ethnic nationalities, which have also clashed with the vision of the army, the *Tatmadaw*. Indeed, the *Tatmadaw*, which is dominated by members of the dominant Bamar ethnicity, imagined the country as a centralised state with a unified Bamar national identity, as opposed to recognising the Bamar as one ethnic group among many.[12] Within a decade and a half, dozens of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) had taken up arms against the central government, which was also weakened by the communist armed struggle. In 1962, Myanmar's first democratic experience collapsed and a repressive military regime was established, which continued in various iterations until 2010. With a transition to semi-democratic rule and a peace process underway since 2011, a unique opportunity exists to reassess and reform institutional arrangements to better take account of the country's ethnic diversity.

In this thesis, I trace the source of ethnic conflict in Myanmar to the Bamar dominance of the national identity. As Gustaaf Houtman described, the military government's resolve to strengthen the Burmanisation or "Myanmafication" of culture and history is a main cause of the gradual suppression of Myanmar's distinct cultural identities.[13] Similarly, ethnic nationalities have also experienced oppressive state policies as contributing to create inequalities at the economic, social, and political levels. These have, in turn, inspired ethnic nationalism since the early days of independence and up until today. While the historical fluidity of ethnic identities in Myanmar is commonly acknowledged, ethnicity has gradually solidified into a strong marker of identity, which has become the basis for political mobilisation.[14] Building on Matthew Walton's

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[12] In this thesis, "Bamar" and sometimes its English equivalent 'Burman' are used interchangeably to refer to members of the Bamar ethnic group or "*Bamar lumyo*", which represents the majority in the country. "Burmese" refers to the language of this group, "*Bamar zaga"*, which is used as a lingua franca throughout the country. While commonly used, especially, amongst English-speakers "Burmese" will not be used to refer to all citizens of the country because for most non-Bamar, 'Burman', 'Burmese' and 'Bamar' mean the same thing. To complicate the picture, "Myanmar", which replaced "Burma" as a country name in 1988, is often used interchangeably to refer to the Bamar group as in "*Myanmar luumyo"* as well as to the Burmese language as in "*Myanmar zaga"*, which is why, as will be discussed later, Myanmar as a country name is often controversial among non-Bamar.

[13] Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics : Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999), 142–48.

[14] Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*; Sadan and Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*; Robert H. Taylor, "Do States Make Nations? The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited," *South East Asia*

theorisation of Bamar supremacy, I show how the institutionalised dominance of the Bamar has generated a sense of exclusion from the national identity and contributed to this rigidification of ethnic identities.[15] As the incompatibility of ethnic aspirations with the particular notion of Bamar identity promoted by the militarised elite is one of the reasons why civil war has been raging for more than half a century, I argue that institutional reforms should focus on encouraging a sense of belonging to the national identity in order to positively support peace building efforts.

Purpose, research questions and significance

Following this, the immediate purpose of the present political ethnographic study is to reveal people's lived experiences of ethnicity in the current political context from the perspective of two groups, the Mon and the Pa-O, in order to understand the ways in which ethnic identities have been marginalised from the national imagination and investigate what state building strategies could promote a sense of belonging to the national identity. For the present purposes, state building is defined as the design of state institutions.[16] I specifically consider six main institutional "solutions" for ethnic conflict and examine whether they reflect ground-level perspectives in Myanmar and how they could potentially be adapted to the local context. My investigation is thus determined by this central research question:

> *How can ethnic voices help inform state building strategies that foster the development of an inclusive multinational society in Myanmar?*

This question drives the thesis as I consider empirical findings through a political ethnographic lens, taking the form of participant observation, interviews, and focus groups involving the nationalist elite and community members from the Mon and Pa-O ethnic groups. More specifically, this central inquiry led me to examine the following key issues:

> *What do current ethnic attitudes towards ethnicity reveal on the question of*

Research 13, no. 3 (2005): 261–86; Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness'"; South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*.

[15] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness.'"

[16] Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building," 1778.

national belonging? What are the perceived needs and aspirations of Myanmar's diverse ethnic communities? In light of the above, what possible political and cultural arrangements can support the development of an inclusive multinational state in Myanmar?

Since political mobilisation around ethnicity plays a central role in ethnic conflict, I believe that ethnicity as an identity marker represents a key variable for determining what kind of institutional arrangement is appropriate in a particular society. In terms of state building, the constructivist assumption that the formation of identities and institutions are co-constitutive implies that when ethnic identities are politically salient, the state's response to cultural diversity should foster "accommodation" of multiple identities rather than "integration" into a single public identity.[17] This is because many see integration as a first step towards assimilation, especially when the state is based on a dominant identity.[18] Such an integrationist state building strategy can thus significantly strengthen ethnic identification rather than mitigate conflict. Conversely, since accommodation involves institutions that respect the interests of the state's distinct ethnic communities and guarantee protection against the majority, the necessity for political mobilisation around ethnicity might decrease.

Using the six institutional models mentioned above as a conceptual framework, this thesis discusses what kind of institutional design would best match the intensity of Mon and Pa-O ethnic identification, and how they might be modified to best reflect the aspirations of these two groups. I hope that revealing these insiders' perspectives on ethnicity in the current political context can help understand the ways in which marginalisation from the national membership has influenced the construction of ethnic identity and what state building strategies could support a more inclusive vision of nationhood. Since the prescription of specific institutional solutions is based on my own judgment of participant responses, this study only represents an effort to ground state building in local perspectives.

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[17] John McGarry, Brendan O'Leary, and Richard Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation? The Enduring Debate in Conflict Regulation," in *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?*, ed. Sujit Choudhry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42.
[18] Michael G. Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Finding the Middle Ground*, Politics in Asia Series (New York: Routledge, 2018), 183.

This thesis thus seeks to address two gaps in the discussions on state building in Myanmar: First, while the Myanmar literature has extensively discussed the causes of ethnic conflict in Myanmar, little attention has been paid to comprehensive institutional arrangements proposed by the conflict management literature. Second, discussions on state building in Myanmar have neglected the perceptions of the broader ethnic population, and grassroots perspectives in particular. My view is that such perspectives should be considered for several reasons. Since the dominance of a Bamar vision of the national identity has fuelled ethnic conflict, I argue that the question of belonging to the national community requires some consideration prior to the discussion on institutional arrangements.[19] As such, understanding the way people experience various state-generated insecurities is critical to assess the political salience of ethnicity and the question of national belonging. Furthermore, the consideration of ethnic voices can provide valuable input on how institutions could be more inclusive, particularly if the perspectives of nationalist elites as well as the perceptions of community members are included and thus reflect variations in socio-political background.

However, in keeping with the qualitative methods adopted in this thesis, I do not suggest that the views of Mon and Pa-O people are representative of all ethnic groups in Myanmar. To be representative and support generalisation of the claims, further research should include, in particular, the views of groups that are still actively fighting against the government, such as the Kachin; views of groups that do not benefit from any form of representation, such as the Lahu in Shan State; views of several groups that live in the same state; and the views of minorities in Myanmar who are not considered indigenous.

It is hoped that the research findings will provide insight for those concerned with how institutions in Myanmar might be shaped to support the development of a more legitimate multinational state, whether they be scholars, local politicians, international donors, international or local NGOs, or activists. The findings should also be relevant for those interested in learning more about the lived experiences of Mon and Pa-O people and more broadly, to those looking at the practical application of theories in democracy, nationalism, state building and conflict management.

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[19] Larry J. Diamond, "The Need for a Political Pact," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 138–49.

Structure and argument of thesis

Chapter 1 is concerned with providing context on Myanmar's nation building crisis in the current political period and outlines some methodological considerations. Describing the construction of ethnic identities in Myanmar in light of major historical events, I discuss how the institutional dominance of the Bamar cultural identity has affected ethnic nationalities' sense of belonging to the national community. I highlight that the state's failure to respond to the demands of ethnic nationalities for autonomy and the centrality of the question of national membership indicate a need to explore broader institutional solutions and consider the perspectives of ethnic communities. The second half of the chapter discusses the methodology employed. I present this thesis as a political ethnographic study involving two groups, the Mon and the Pa-O, and outline methods of data collection and analysis. I also reflect on my position as researcher and discuss ethical issues.

Chapter 2 considers various theoretical debates underpinning the challenges of nation building in democratising multiethnic societies and the question of institutional design for managing deeply divided societies. Firstly, exploring definitions of democracy and democratic transition, I clarify my characterisation of Myanmar as a "democratising state." Secondly, I outline the competing approaches on the nature of ethnicity and argue that the constructivist and ethno-symbolist approaches are helpful in explaining the construction of ethnic identity in Myanmar described in chapter 1. Looking at a number of factors that can explain conflict in multinational countries, I contend that since exclusion from the national community plays a central role in fuelling violence, institutional solutions should be developed only after the question of national belonging has been addressed. Furthermore, drawing on the constructivist assumption that practices and ideas are co-constitutive, I argue that institutional design should carefully consider the political salience of ethnicity in order to successfully manage ethnic conflict. Thirdly, I turn to the role institutions can play in promoting effective conflict management, particularly in three main areas: territorial structure; power sharing; and the protection of identities. Drawing from these, I finally introduce six institutional models designed for managing ethnic conflict in divided societies: the consociational and centripetal approaches, integrative consensualism, hybrid federalism, power-dividing, and the state-nation model. In addition, I examine their assumptions about the

role of institutions in managing ethnic mobilisation so as to determine which model would be likely to resonate with the political salience of ethnicity in Myanmar.

Moving on to the "ethnic sites" of this study, chapter 3 introduces the Mon and Pa-O nationalist struggles since Myanmar was granted independence in 1948. A preliminary overview of the challenges that affect the legitimacy of the current nationwide peace negotiations helps situate the present political context. Then, I aim to discuss each group separately while emphasising commonalities and differences that will guide the analysis. Continuing the discussion on the construction of ethnic identities in Myanmar started in chapter 1, I show that despite important differences, Mon and Pa-O strongly identify themselves as separate ethnic communities, which exhibit the tangible and intangible characteristics of Smith's definition of an ethnic community outlined in chapter 2. Leaving the broader discussion of Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and a national identity for later (chapter 5), I then provide a historical overview of the Mon and Pa-O nationalist struggles, emphasising major differences in their strategies. More precisely, I describe the governance mechanisms of New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Pa-O National Organisation (PNO) and highlight how Mon and Pa-O people perceive their EAOs very differently. This background will help contextualise the ethnographic data, which is presented in the following three chapters.

Chapter 4 seeks to build a ground-up understanding of how Mon and Pa-O people experience discrimination based on their ethnicity when interacting with state institutions. Looking at Mon and Pa-O people's views to understand what Bamar privilege means to them and how it is reflected in practice, I identify a number of state policies revealing different levels of inequality with the Bamar. According to Mon and Pa-O perspectives, these discriminatory policies have contributed to create a number of cultural, economic, social and political insecurities. Indeed, many Mon and Pa-O fear that their identities may be assimilated into the Bamar culture. They also feel excluded from the country's economic and social opportunities. Finally, many Mon and Pa-O are concerned that without proper participation in the political process their basic needs will not be fulfilled. Adding a comparative element, this chapter highlights similarities and differences between Mon and Pa-O perspectives based on the contextual variations discussed in chapter 3.

Concluding the discussion on the construction of ethnic identity in Myanmar, chapter 5 considers how Bamar privilege has contributed to shape Mon and Pa-O people's attitudes towards ethnicity and evaluates the prospects for policies promoting inclusion in the national identity. This chapter extends the discussion in chapter 4 by looking more closely at the impact of various insecurities experienced by the Mon and Pa-O on their sense of belonging to the national identity. As argued in chapter 2, while the inclusion of distinct ethnic identities in the national community is central to Myanmar's nation-building process and subsequent democratic consolidation, the intensity of ethnic identification is also a significant variable that can affect the choice of institutions to accommodate diversity. After discussing how Mon and Pa-O perceive the predominance of the Bamar cultural identity, I investigate whether Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and a common identity reveal rigid or moderate ethnic identification. I also present a number of conditions that have been highlighted as necessary to reduce Bamar privilege and promote a sense of inclusion.

Chapter 6 elaborates on these conditions and why many Mon and Pa-O people perceive them as key steps towards the development of a sense of belonging. In order to address the insecurities described in chapter 4 and reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege, Mon and Pa-O people expressed different aspirations, which I examine through a framework that reflects the Panglong Agreement's promises of equality and autonomy. Demands for equality of status include cultural recognition, symbolic claims, access to economic opportunities and political participation. Demands for greater autonomy include cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance. For each category, this chapter reports suggestions for policy and institutional reforms as expressed by Mon and Pa-O nationalist elites and community members. Echoing chapter 4's comparative component, it also discusses parallels and disparities between Mon and Pa-O perspectives.

Having completed the presentation of ethnographic findings, chapter 7 explores how state building may work in Myanmar based on ground level realities and insider perspectives. I evaluate which of the institutional models for successful democratisation in divided societies offered in the existing literature best reflect Mon and Pa-O people's attitudes towards ethnicity and the aspirations expressed in the empirical chapters 4-6. I argue that the state-nation model, which seeks to protect ethnic identities while

promoting identification to multiple but complimentary identities, would fit well with Mon and Pa-O rigid attitudes towards ethnicity but openness to national belonging. The state-nation model is not a perfect fit however. Although the theoretical notion that a sense of belonging to the national identity would result from the institutional legitimisation of cultural diversity appears to resonate with the aspirations expressed by many Mon and Pa-O people, this does not seem to be politically feasible in present day Myanmar. I therefore propose an alternative sequence of reform that would support a sense of inclusion in the national identity and protect ethnic identity without threatening the current political order. The proposed sequence also takes into consideration the fundamental need to acknowledge and address the deep-seated problem of "Bamar privilege." This revised model would facilitate the development of a state-nation in the long term by building trust between ethnic, government and military stakeholders.

The conclusion summarises the key points of the findings highlighted in each chapter. In addition, I show that this thesis contributes to knowledge in three main areas. First, the production of a rich ethnographic dataset highlighting Mon and Pa-O experiences of ethnicity and their aspirations contributes to the Myanmar literature. Second, the critical examination of the relevance of six main institutional models to a contemporary empirical context and the suggestion to adapt the state-nation model to the local context adds to the literature on ethnic conflict management. Third, it is hoped that the policy recommendation prioritising the promotion of national membership over measures that more directly challenge the political order and the existence of Bamar privilege, will be beneficial for actors engaged in promoting peace in Myanmar. Finally, acknowledging that this thesis is only a preliminary exploration of grounded ethnic responses to state building in Myanmar, I suggest that more ethnographic research should be conducted with other groups in order to produce empirically grounded but general knowledge and thus support broader, generalised claims.

CHAPTER 1 – Myanmar Context and Methodology

This chapter first seeks to shed light on the nation building crisis that is intertwined with the state building process in Myanmar. Providing some background to Myanmar's ethnic conflict, I examine the construction of ethnic identities particularly in reaction to the institutionalised dominance of the Bamar majority and discuss the state failure to accommodate ethnic nationality demands. Highlighting the centrality of the question of national membership, I argue that state building solutions to Myanmar's identity crisis should engage more broadly with institutional models for ethnic conflict management as well as consider ethnic people's lived experiences. The second part of the chapter discusses the methodology driving the thesis. I present my approach to the study of state building in Myanmar as a political ethnographic endeavour that was made possible through my longstanding connection with the country. In particular, I discuss the choice of a "multi-sited" ethnography and introduce the two ethnic sites, the Mon and the Pa-O groups. I also examine in detail the data collection methods I used, taking the form of participant observation, interviews and focus groups. Finally, I also share some reflections on my position as researcher and ethical considerations.

1.1 Myanmar's identity crisis

The purpose of this section is to introduce key elements of Myanmar's identity crisis in order to lay the foundation of the discussion that this thesis is primarily concerned with. I first provide a brief overview of critical events underlying Myanmar's ethnic conflict as far as they are necessary to understand the issues subsequently examined in this section. Second, I look at the contested definition of ethnicity in Myanmar, which is encapsulated in the concept of *taingyintha* and the controversial recognition of 135 national races. Third, I present scholarly discussions on the construction of ethnic identities in Myanmar and highlight diverging views regarding its persistence or evolution. Fourth, I discuss the problematic question of membership to a political community dominated by the Bamar national identity. Fifth, I show that successive centralised constitutions have failed to fulfil ethnic demands for recognition and autonomy and highlight the need for institutional reforms to address the problem of

national belonging. Finally, I detect two gaps in the discussions on state building in Myanmar: a limited engagement with the conflict management literature and an insufficient consideration of grassroots perspectives.

Map 1.1: Myanmar's seven states and regions
Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

1.1.1 Genealogy of Myanmar's ethnic conflict: the failure of the transition to independence

The Rohingya crisis has recently brought Myanmar under the spotlight for its mismanagement of ethnic conflict. However, many other groups including the Mon and the Pa-O, which are the focus of this study, have been affected by Myanmar's seven decade long armed conflict. Others have discussed at length the history of conflict between Myanmar's armed forces, the *Tatmadaw*, and dozens of EAOs.[1] This section thus provides a brief overview of historical factors underlying Myanmar's identity crisis.

Independence and the legacy of the Panglong Agreement

The British colonial rule in Myanmar is often criticised for its role in exacerbating pre-existing conflicts and solidifying divisions around ethnic identity.[2] For instance, the administration of the colony through a mix of direct and indirect rule resulted in a territorial division between Ministerial Burma (the central area, predominantly populated by ethnic Bamar, but also by Mon and Arakanese) and the Frontier Areas (the Shan states and areas mainly inhabited by the Chin and Kachin). While the former was controlled from Yangon, the latter was administered through traditional leaders. Similarly, military recruitment policies privileging soldiers of Kachin, Chin and particularly Karen ethnicity led many ethnic Bamar to associate ethnic soldiers with the colonial power. [3]

While Myanmar's various ethnic groups sought to escape the shackles of British colonial power, they never succeeded in uniting after independence was granted in 1948.[4] Some ethnic groups such as the Karen, who supported the colonial army in the anglo-Burmese wars and in the suppression of the 1930s strikes, also wanted independence from the British. However, they were afraid to be pushed into a state that

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[1] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991).
[2] The solidification of ethnic identity in Myanmar is specifically discussed in the following sections.
[3] Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 893–94.
[4] Igor Blazevic, "Burma Votes for Change: The Challenges Ahead," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (2016): 108.

would be dominated by ethnic Bamar.[5] At the same time, some Bamar nationalists suspected the intentions of British authorities and soldiers supporting other ethnic groups.[6] Such mistrust was reflected in a strong disagreement on the nature of the new state and on the relationship between the Bamar nationalists leading the independence movement and the other ethnic groups involved.[7] Two opposing visions of the future were at play: while many Bamar leaders expressed desire for a strong unitary state, ethnic elites focused on maintaining autonomy and the right to self-determination. What Josef Silverstein has described as "the dilemma of national unity" has been the main challenge underpinning state instability in Myanmar since independence.[8]

To resolve this, the British insisted that prior to granting independence, some form of consultation should take place between the Bamar, represented by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and other ethnic groups. This finally took place in a conference convened by the Shan in Panglong in February 1947 and attended by members of other ethnic nationalities.[9] The main outcome of the conference was the adoption of the Panglong Agreement, which paved the way for the drafting of a new constitution and the declaration of independence in 1948. This agreement, which was signed by General Aung San as well as representatives of the Chin, Kachin and Shan, promised autonomy to major ethnic groups as well as the same rights and status as the Bamar majority in exchange for forming the Union of Burma. While the agreement itself stated that ''full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle'',[10] it is at the conference that Aung San made his famous promise of equality to ethnic nationalities: "If Burma gets one kyat [of currency] then you will get one kyat."[11] In addition, the agreement granted the Shan states a right to secede after 10 years if they did not agree with future developments.

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[5] Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 105.
[6] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 896.
[7] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 24.
[8] Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (Rutgers University Press, 1980).
[9] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 24–25.
[10] Tin Maung Maung Than, "Dreams and Nightmares: State Building and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar (Burma)," in *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 73.
[11] Cited in Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 897.

Even though after 70 years its promises are yet to be fulfilled and ethnic conflict continues to rage, the Panglong Agreement is still celebrated for its symbolic achievement of national unity. A number of scholars thus describe the Panglong Agreement as a foundational myth of the creation of a post-independence multiethnic state. Indeed, the institution of military rule and the failure of the country's successive constitutions to commit to federalism soon contradicted the primacy that the Panglong Agreement had gained as the initial document envisioning a multinational state in Myanmar. In the early 1950s, the agreement transformed into the notion of "Panglong Spirit", which Mandy Sadan describes as "a mythical rendering of harmonious ethnic relations that were deemed (almost entirely erroneously) to have characterized the secretive proceedings in 1947."[12]

Stressing how collective memory and myths can be manipulated to legitimise the dominant power, Walton identifies three conflicting interpretations of the Panglong promises by Myanmar's main political actors.[13] First, the military government's version of the myth – the dominant one - stresses in particular the harmonious spirit in which ethnic group representatives came together at Panglong to sign the agreement. It also highlights the government's role in protecting the integrity of the Union against foreign and internal threats in order to maintain the spirit of Panglong. Second, the democracy movement's version condemns the military backed government for betraying the spirit of Panglong by ignoring ethnic minority demands for sovereignty and thus plunging the country into civil war. According to Walton, this version of the myth suggests that implementing the promises of the Panglong Agreement is the only way to recapture the "Panglong Spirit". The fact that the current peace dialogue was named "21st Century Panglong Conferences" (see chapter 3) is emblematic of this. Finally, the third account from the ethnic nationalist movement is more critical of Panglong. It emphasises how promises were betrayed as well as the inherent limitations of those promises.

According to Walton, these different interpretations of the Panglong Agreement overlook important elements that are helpful in understanding the nature of ethnic

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[12] Mandy Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," *Current History* 115, no. 782 (2016): 217.
[13] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 904–6.

conflict in Myanmar. The first and second myths ignore significant limitations to the fulfilment of the promise of autonomy and equality: the fact that only three groups signed the agreement and that the status of ethnic groups living in Ministerial Burma was overlooked. In addition, they pay little attention to the limited pre-existing unity among the groups, both between Bamar politicians and ethnic nationalists who had never discussed any political and constitutional issues until then and within ethnic nationalist groups themselves. The third myth ignores the existence of dissensions between and among ethnic groups in order to maintain a united position to resist the supremacy of the military government.

In any case, if a spirit of unity had existed at Panglong, it was already destroyed at independence and had entirely disappeared after the second military takeover in 1962. [14] Instead, as Sadan put it, "The Panglong Spirit became a hollow piece of rhetoric used most often to put a gloss on an aggressive expansion of Burmese neo-colonialism into non-Burman areas of the union." [15] Not only did the dominant myth of harmony replace any efforts to address issues of economic and political discrimination, but multiculturalism has never been an essential part of the independent state. Rather than promoting social inclusion, the state sought to secure a Bamar Buddhist ideology against internal and external threats. [16] As a result, Walton argues that the spirit of Panglong cannot resonate with national unity unless the Panglong history acknowledges ethnic diversity and ethnic conflict. [17]

The 1947 constitution did not live up to Aung San's promises and carried the seeds of the violent disputes of the years to come. According to Robert Taylor, even though the constitution demarcated a federal state with the creation of three ethnic Union States for the Shan, the Kachin and the Karenni as well as the Chin Special Division, it "provided for a centralized government system."[18] In addition, Silverstein noted that although federalism appeared to be the main intention of the 1947 constitution, the term was

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[14] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 897.
[15] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 217.
[16] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 218.
[17] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 910.
[18] Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 227.

actually not even mentioned.[19] Moreover, the assassination of Aung San, champion of an independence celebrating "unity in diversity", before independence was even granted was a major setback: subsequently elected governments have never honoured the alleged Panglong promises.[20] The failure of negotiations between the Bamar majority and other nationalities to develop an inclusive agreement generated widespread ethnic armed resistance soon after independence was proclaimed in 1948. Before the end of that year, Arakanese, Karen, Karenni and Mon ethnic nationalists started an insurrection against the state and were joined over the following decade and a half by the Panglong Agreement signatories and several other smaller groups – such as the Pa-O in 1962 - also advancing an ethnic nationalist agenda.[21]

The parliamentary democracy period: 1948-1962

Myanmar's first era of parliamentary democracy was characterised by great instability. Indeed, civil war started in the wake of independence, involving three sides: the Bamar nationalist movement represented by the AFPFL, the communist struggle, later led by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the ethnic nationalist movement.[22] The AFPFL, a broad parliamentary coalition which led the country during its first democratic decade, was backed by the *Tatmadaw*, where perceptions that the country was under siege started to develop.[23] During this period, the *Tatmadaw,* drawing on fears of national disunity, became increasingly more powerful.[24] The armed forces gradually got involved in politics while non-Bamar people were marginalised from government positions.[25]

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[19] Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 185–205.
[20] Martin Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 33; Sarah L. Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, "Re-Examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar" (UNFPA, 2019), 20, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Ethnic-Identity-in-Myanmar.pdf.
[21] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 26–27.
[22] Smith, *Burma*, 138; For more details on the communist struggle, see Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)*, Southeast Asia Program Series 6 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, 1990).
[23] David I. Steinberg, "Burma, the State of Myanmar" (Georgetown University Press, 2001), 185.
[24] Callahan, *Making Enemies*.
[25] Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 35.

In 1958, Prime Minister U Nu's call of "arms for democracy" resulted in mass surrenders of armed insurgents, including the Pa-O and Mon armed groups, who were hoping to continue their struggle through the democratic avenue (see chapter 3).[26] However, these did not begin a new era of peace in the war-torn country as the *Tatmadaw* led by General Ne Win seized power before the end of the year. A main argument advanced to explain this unexpected coup is that Ne Win feared insurgents had only entered the legal fold to win power through elections. However, most scholars posit that the 1958 takeover was possible because of a split in the AFPFL. As Smith explain, the AFPFL split broke "the narrow consensus that had bound U Nu and the Socialist Party and *Tatmadaw* together" because it was perceived as opening the way for the communist ascension to power.[27] At the same time, tensions between the military and ethnic groups continued to grow: the right to secede was seriously discussed and ethnic rebellion spread to Shan State in 1959 and to Kachin State in 1961.[28]

Ne Win's "caretaker government" handed over power after a general election was organised in 1960. However, this return to parliamentary democracy was very brief. In 1962, U Nu initiated discussions on federalism with ethnic nationalities. Since the *Tatmadaw* perceived these discussions as a destabilising factor, Ne Win staged another coup. While the external influence of communist China on the instability in the eastern borders and on the rise of the CPB played a role in the takeover, the main factor was the determination of the army to protect its privileged status against perceived internal enemies.[29]

The "Burmese way to socialism" period: 1962-1988

The 1962 coup began a new era where a form of military backed socialism was implemented. This period is notorious for its authoritarian socialist economic development, with the implementation of the "Burmese way to socialism" under the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). While the nationalisation of the economy

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[26] Smith, *Burma*, 168.
[27] Smith, *Burma*, 176–77.
[28] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma," 900.
[29] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 217.

dramatically increased poverty and isolation, the country was on a constant war footing. As the military takeover reignited conflict with groups that had agreed to U Nu's proposal to surrender arms in exchange for democratic participation, the following years triggered the military government's counter insurgency strategy. The infamous "four cuts" policy, which sought to prevent civilian support for EAOs and the establishment of local militias in ethnic areas, had disastrous humanitarian impacts on ethnic populations.[30] In addition, Ne Win aimed at building a strong, unified country, centred on an army dominated by Bamar officers and around a homogenising Bamar identity and culture.[31]

The 1947 constitution was cancelled and replaced by a new constitution in 1974, which recognized three new ethnic Union States: Arakan, Chin and Mon. In order to balance the seven ethnic states, seven mostly Bamar populated "divisions" were created.[32] Disastrous economic policies and a strong dislike of the BSPP eventually triggered the 1988 nationwide protests, which were violently suppressed.

Direct military rule period: 1988-2011

The 1988 protests led General Ne Win to step down and another military coup suspended the 1974 constitution. This military takeover announced the start of a third political era characterised by the direct control of the *Tatmadaw*, through the State Law and Order Restoration Council and later the State Peace and Development Council. The army presented itself as the saviour of the country using a strong propaganda campaign that alternated between accusing the CPB, rightists, and the influence of foreign media's support of ethnic insurgents, for instigating the democratic uprising. As Smith put it: "Suddenly, after years of playing down the insurrections, it was as if Burma were a land in flames."[33] General elections were organized in 1990, where ethnic political parties were permitted to form after a ban of almost three decades. The National League for Democracy (NLD), the largest opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San, won by a landslide. However, the military refused to hand over

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[30] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 34–35.
[31] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 28.
[32] While Kachin, Shan and Karenni states were created by the 1947 constitution, Karen State was established in 1952, see South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 26.
[33] Smith, *Burma*, 18.

power before a new constitution was adopted. This marked the beginning of a lengthy, military controlled constitution drafting process, through the National Convention. This process was suspended in 1996 with the exclusion of NLD and ethnic representatives and resumed in 2003, when a roadmap was articulated in order to guarantee a military managed transition to "disciplined democracy". The National Convention ended in 2007 and resulted in the adoption of a new constitution in 2008 after a rigged constitutional referendum was organised, shortly after Cyclone Nargis had hit the country. As Crouch notes, "This process of constitution-making deeply undermines the legitimacy of the 2008 constitution."[34] In addition, this constitution was perceived as undemocratic as it establishes a legislature that is only partially elected, with 25% of the seats reserved for *Tatmadaw* officers.[35]

This period was also marked by a number of bilateral ceasefire agreements negotiated between the military government and several EAOs in the 1990s. A number of reasons prompted these ceasefires. Some EAOs connected with the CPB lost Chinese support after the collapse of the party in 1989. In addition, some EAOs may also have hoped to expand mining and other black-market interests, including drug trade. Finally, both civilians and ethnic forces, tired from decades of conflict and displacement, hoped that these ceasefires could bring well-needed development assistance.[36] While these ceasefires generally allowed EAOs to maintain their arms and territories, the details of the ceasefires agreed by the PNO in 1991 and the NMSP in 1995 will be discussed in chapter 3. Importantly, the ceasefire groups were included in the National Convention, which initiated the discussion regarding the establishment of Self-Administered Areas (SAAs) for groups representing a minority within their state or region but a majority within a number of townships. Noticeably, four of these ceasefire groups were among the six ethnic groups to which the 2008 constitution eventually granted an SAA status, including the PNO.[37]

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[34] Melissa Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar: A Contextual Analysis*, Constitutional Systems of the World (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 26.
[35] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 60.
[36] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 119–20.
[37] Government of Myanmar, "Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar" (2008), Section 56. There are five Self-Administered Zones (Danu, Kokang, Pa-O, Ta-ang and Naga), which have two to

Furthermore, this period was characterised by the dominance of the military power in all aspects of governance, which led some scholars to describe Myanmar as a "praetorian state."[38] While many religious and social welfare organisations were already in existence, civil society organisations started to emerge, such as the Metta Development Foundation in 1998, the Shalom Foundation in 2000 or Myanmar Egress in 2006. However, broader society remained under tight control, as the military continued its influence over the everyday lives of citizens.[39] Finally, the *Tatmadaw* sought to expand its control over the national economy, bringing important natural resources under central administration. This resulted in a rush of powerful business interests in ethnic territories, without consultation or benefit for local people.[40]

Transition to semi-democracy (2011-present)

In 2010, the military backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) won the first general election organised in twenty years, which was described as unfree and unfair.[41] The coming into office of the Thein Sein government in 2011 marked the transition to a quasi-civilian democracy. The liberalisation programme undertaken by the Thein Sein administration, with sweeping political and economic reforms, was unexpected as opposition parties, EAOs or exiled political elites seemed to hold most prospects for change.[42] In addition to the introduction of parliamentary politics and some level of constitutional reform, one of Thein Sein's most substantial achievements was to begin a peace process which resulted in the adoption of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 (see chapter 3). However, while offering the best opportunity in decades to address issues at the core of armed conflict in Myanmar, many EAOs refused to sign the agreement because some groups were excluded from the negotiations and large

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three townships, and one Self-Administered Division (Wa), which has six townships. This thesis uses the generic term "Self-Administered Area" and does not distinguish between zones and divisions.

[38] Renaud Egreteau, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State* (NUS Press ; IRASEC, 2013).

[39] Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 42; Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving under Military Rule*, 2nd ed. (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm, 2009).

[40] Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 43.

[41] BBC News, "UN Condemns Burma's Human Rights and 'unfair' Elections," November 19, 2010, sec. Asia-Pacific, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11793615. Accessed on 17 February 2020.

[42] Maitrii Aung-Thwin, "The State," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Nicholas Farrelly, Ian Holliday, and Adam Simpson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21; Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 45.

scale fighting continued in northern Myanmar, particularly in Kachin State.[43] In addition, despite widespread support for the reform process initiated by the Thein Sein government, many ethnic stakeholders still consider the current structure of the state, which is based on the pro-military 2008 constitution, as illegitimate.[44]

Yet, the liberalisation initiated by Thein has gone further than what was intended. Indeed, the second general election organised under the 2008 constitution in 2015 was deemed as free and fair.[45] The NLD won by a landslide and finally took office in April 2016 with Aung Sang Suu Kyi as the de facto head of government. Many observers considered this transfer of power to the NLD government "a sign that genuine democracy had arrived."[46] While its constitutionally entrenched military dominance indicates that Myanmar is not a genuine democracy, Simpson et al. note that, "with the gradual loosening of constraints on political debate and the NLD government coming to power in 2016, Myanmar is becoming more democratic than at any point in the past half century."[47] Yet, it remains unclear whether the transition will stay on the democratic path. The following three years saw a number of setbacks with a stalled peace process, the diminution of freedoms, the intensification of conflict in the north and the brutal persecution of Rohingya Muslims.[48] In 2018, Myanmar drew once again negative international attention: one UN fact-finding mission accused the Myanmar army of having committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in the north of the country and another one recommended genocide charges against military leaders.[49] Meanwhile,

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[43] South and Lall, "Introduction," 5.
[44] Ashley South, "Governance and Political Legitimacy in the Peace Process," in *Myanmar, the Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, ed. David I. Steinberg (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2015), 171.
[45] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?," Myanmar Policy Briefing # 17, December 21, 2015, 6, https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-2015-general-election-in-myanmar-what-now-for-ethnic-politics.
[46] Aung-Thwin, "The State," 15.
[47] Adam Simpson, Ian Holliday, and Nicholas Farrelly, "Myanmar Futures," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London: Routledge, 2018), 433, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743677.
[48] Justine Chambers and Gerard McCarthy, "Myanmar Transformed?," in *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*, ed. Justine Chambers et al., Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 3–8; Matthew J. Walton, "Reflections on Myanmar Under the NLD so Far," in *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*, ed. Justine Chambers et al., Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 312–218.
[49] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Myanmar," 2019, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/burma; UN News, "Myanmar Military Leaders Must Face Genocide Charges – UN Report," August 27, 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/08/1017802.

land grabbing without hope for compensation and competition for the control of natural resources continued.[50]

While this generally affected the popularity of the NLD, ethnic people's hopes seemed to have vanished by the end of its five-year term. Many feel that it failed to fulfil its promises of amending the constitution and made limited progress in terms of moving the peace process forward. Although Aung San Suu Kyi has followed President Thein Sein in advocating for national reconciliation and federal reforms, she and the *Tatmadaw* leadership often demonstrate similar dismissive attitudes toward ethnic demands. Indeed, naming the peace conferences in a way that seeks to revive the symbolism of the Panglong Spirit was her idea. However, this represents a very fragile initiative as it fails to fully engage with the aspirations of non-Bamar people (see chapter 3). As Sadan puts it, "To many, the NLD seems just as incapable or disinclined to add more flesh to the bones of the NCA as the military-civilian regime before it." According to her, this is partly because Bamar politicians of all affiliations are unwilling to propose a clear vision for the development of a multiethnic and multifaith country.[51] This is well reflected for instance by Aung San Suu Kyi's silence on the Rohingya crisis in 2018 and her defence of the country against allegations of genocide at an International Justice Court hearing, which denote a disturbing convergence with the *Tatmadaw*'s position.[52] As a result, the NLD's capacity to represent the whole country rather than just the Bamar majority has been questioned.

Myanmar's recent political developments clearly illustrate that a transition to democracy does not necessarily follow political liberalisation. Today, scholars disagree, however, about the origins and possible outcomes of Myanmar's political opening.[53] Looking at the agency of political actors, explanations of regime change in Myanmar generally emphasise the role of behind-the-scene negotiations between soft-liners within the military regime and moderate democrats. Yet, the scholarly debate is

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[50] Chambers and McCarthy, "Myanmar Transformed?," 4–6.
[51] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 219.
[52] Owen Bowcott, "Aung San Suu Kyi Heads to The Hague for Myanmar Genocide Showdown," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2019, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/08/aung-san-suu-kyi-heads-to-hague-for-myanmar-genocide-showdown.
[53] Trevor Wilson, "Debating Democratization in Myanmar," in *Debating Democratization in Myanmar*, ed. Nick Cheesman, Nicholas Farrelly, and Trevor Wilson, Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), 11–18.

polarised around two competing sets of causes and outlooks. Bünte et al. make a broad distinction between an optimist camp and a negative camp.[54] The first position generally considers that a split within the military enabled the development of an electoral democracy, which is a work in progress.[55] As Morten Pedersen noted, "while the 2008 constitution is clearly not democratic, it has provided the framework for one of the most promising experiments with democratisation."[56] The second stance stresses that reforms reflect the *Tatmadaw*'s changing strategy to guarantee the survival of its privileges; thus, further democratisation is unlikely.[57] Indeed, serious flaws continue to constrain the democratic process including: the existence of military reserved domains; weak political representation; limited freedoms and rule of law; institutional weaknesses due to centralisation and a poor separation of powers; and an authoritarian political culture.[58] Nonetheless, these viewpoints are not mutually exclusive: while reforms have gone further than the partial liberalisation that the *Tatmadaw* intended, scholars generally agree that Myanmar remains a hybrid regime, which combines both democratic and authoritarian features.[59] Martin Smith's description of political change in Myanmar stresses the limited nature of this "democratic" evolution: "Clearly, political transition from *Tatmadaw*-based government is still at a beginning, not at an end."[60]

Although the question of the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule has by and large occupied the forefront of discussions on Myanmar's democratisation, experts have

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[54] Marco Bünte, Patrick Köllner, and Richard Roewer, "Taking Stock of Myanmar's Political Transformation since 2011," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 3 (December 1, 2019): 254.
[55] See Marie Lall, *Understanding Reform in Myanmar: People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule* (London: Hurst, 2016).
[56] Morten B. Pedersen, "The NLD's Critical Choice," *The Myanmar Times*, February 17, 2016, https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/19036-the-nld-s-critical-choice.html.
[57] See for instance, Aurel Croissant and Jil Kamerling, "Why Do Military Regimes Institutionalize? Constitution-Making and Elections as Political Survival Strategy in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 2 (2013): 105–125.
[58] Bünte, Köllner, and Roewer, "Taking Stock of Myanmar's Political Transformation since 2011," 254–58.
[59] See for instance, Renaud Egreteau, *Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar*, Comparative Politics and International Studies Series (Oxford University Press, 2016); Marco Bünte, "Perilous Presidentialism or Precarious Power-Sharing? Hybrid Regime Dynamics in Myanmar," *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 3 (2018): 346–360; Kristian Stokke and Soe Myint Aung, "Transition to Democracy or Hybrid Regime? The Dynamics and Outcomes of Democratization in Myanmar," *European Journal of Development Research*, 2019.
[60] Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 27.

been increasingly calling for the ethnic issue to be granted full attention for genuine transition to happen.[61] The following section seeks to shed light on the question of ethnic belonging and the concept of *taingyintha* or "national races."

1.1.2 Taingyintha and ethnic groups in Myanmar

In Myanmar, ethnicity is referred to by the general term *lumyo* (literally "person-type"), which encompasses both ethnic and religious identities. More specifically, the concept of ethnicity is referred to as *taingyintha*, which is translated as "national races". After giving an overview of the controversy surrounding the number of *taingyintha*, this section addresses the political saliency of this term, which, according to Nick Cheesman, denotes "different linguistic and cultural groups joined together by an imagined and shared ancestry or a common homeland."[62]

Myanmar is a deeply plural society with 135 officially recognised *taingyintha*, which are divided into eight main groups and a number of sub-groups. The Bamar is the majority group and represents over two thirds of Myanmar's population. The remaining third of the population firstly includes the seven other main ethnic groups: the Shan, the Karen, the Mon, the Rakhine, the Kayah, the Kachin and the Chin. These groups each enjoy an ethnic state named after their ethnonym in the area where they represent the majority population. Secondly, this last third of Myanmar's population also includes members of "sub-groups" such the Pa-O, Wa, Lisu, Lahu, Intha, etc., which are located across the country. As discussed below, this official list as well as the denomination "sub-groups" is contested. Drawing on Shane Barter's distinction between first and second order minorities, I thus use the term "second nationality" to refer to those groups who are a minority in a particular area.[63] Thirdly, in addition to these *taingyintha*, the country counts the descendants of immigrants from South Asia and China who came during colonisation. Adding to the complexity, while the majority of the population –

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[61] See for instance, Ian Holliday, "Ethnicity and Democratization in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (2010): 111–28; Nehginpao Kipgen, "Ethnicity in Myanmar and Its Importance to the Success of Democracy," *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 19–31; Martin Smith, "Ethnic Politics in a Time of Change," in *Myanmar, the Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, ed. David I. Steinberg (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2015), 135–58.
[62] Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya."
[63] Shane J. Barter, "'Second-Order' Ethnic Minorities in Asian Secessionist Conflicts: Problems and Prospects," *Asian Ethnicity: Second Order Minorities* 16, no. 2 (2015): 123–135.

including the Bamar, the Rakhine, the Mon and the Shan - are Buddhist, some groups such as the Chin and the Kachin are majority Christian. Furthermore, among immigrant groups, there are a number of Hindus and Muslims.

The census conducted in 2014 counted a total population of over 51 million people, which is now estimated to have risen to 54.4 million by 2019.[64] While the census data on ethnic groups was originally withheld because it was deemed sensitive ahead of the upcoming 2015 general election, it is unlikely that it will be released in the near future. Most importantly, the methodology used to collect it was criticised for being deeply flawed, mostly because it was based around the contested classification recognising 135 ethnic groups.[65]

The military government has officially recognised 135 "national races" since the early 1990s, a number commonly criticised for its unclear origin as well for its artificial division of ethnic groups. [66] The first government reference to the 135 national races can be found in a 1990 newspaper article, which claims that the number was based on a list used in the 1983 census, which would have been drawn up from the list established in the 1931 colonial census. Despite inconsistencies between the groups listed in each census, this first official reference to the 135 national races has since been institutionalised as an extension of the eight official races.[67] Interestingly, the first reliable list of names specifying these ethnic identities was only released just ahead of the 2014 census.[68] According to this list, the Kachin are subdivided into twelve groups, the Karen into eleven groups, the Chin into fifty-three groups, the Rakhine in seven

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[64] Government of Myanmar, "The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census" (Department of Population Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2014), https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MyanmarCensusAtlas_lowres.pdf.

[65] Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context," 2014, https://www.tni.org/files/download/bpb_13.pdf.

[66] Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 468; Bertil Lintner, "A Question of Race in Myanmar," *Asia Times*, June 3, 2017, https://www.asiatimes.com/2017/06/article/question-race-myanmar/; Jane M. Ferguson, "Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar," *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-Land- En Volkenkunde* 171, no. 1 (2015): 15; Helene M. Kyed and Mikael Gravers, "Representation and Citizenship in the Future Integration of Ethnic Armed Actors in Burma/Myanmar," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 63.

[67] Ferguson, "Who's Counting?," 15; Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 468.

[68] Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights* (Anti-Slavery International, 1994); Lintner, "A Question of Race in Myanmar."

groups, the Mon into one group and the Shan into thirty-three groups. However, as Ferguson highlights the list exhibits many inconsistencies, which results in the unnecessary subdivision of groups, often against their own self-identification.[69]

This classification was drawn from colonial ideas of categorising people first introduced by the British. During military rule, these categories have gradually been internalised and institutionalised, particularly through the use of the concept of *taingyintha*.[70] As South and Lall note, while ideas of citizenship and indigenous descent appeared after independence, the concept of being *taingyintha* became prominent during the Ne Win period.[71] Cheesman stresses that *taingyintha* has implications that extend its habitual translation as race, ethnicity or indigeneity because it provides the "contrivance for political inclusion and exclusion, for political eligibility and domination."[72] The term was subsequently more closely tied to citizenship rights during the years of military rule through the notorious 1982 citizenship law, which defines different degrees of citizenships. While not explicitly referring to the 135 national races, it restricts full citizenship to groups that are *taingyintha*. This law makes it harder for groups who migrated during the colonial era to get citizenship rights and even disenfranchised certain groups such as the Rohingya.[73]

Clarke et al. further commented on this definition of indigeneity, noting that it reflects a primordialist view of ethnicity, which requires the creation of fixed categories with well-defined boundaries in order to document social membership. This conception of indigeneity explains why the government has gradually come to rely on the list of 135 national races.[74] According to Cheesman, such classification supports the translation of "a political idea like national races into a truth regime for differentiation, domination and exclusion of populations."[75] As Clarke et al. note, the fact that these imposed

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[69] Ferguson, "Who's Counting?," 15.
[70] Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, "Re-Examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar," 24.
[71] South and Lall, "Introduction," 6.
[72] Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 462.
[73] Some of the groups that are not included in the list are: Panthay Chinese Muslims, overseas Muslims, Anglo-Burmese, Burmese Indians, Gurkhas, Pakistanis and Rohingya. See Ferguson, "Who's Counting?," 16.
[74] Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, "Re-Examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar," 25.
[75] Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 469.

categories were used to implement a differential treatment between groups is the most problematic aspect of ethnic identity.[76] The concept of *taingyintha* also played a role in the rigidification of ethnic identities as well as state attempts to impose a Bamar vision of the national identity which will be discussed in the following sections.

1.1.3 The construction of ethnic identities in Myanmar

While chapter 2 will discuss different approaches to thinking about ethnic identities in order to understand ethnic conflict, I highlight here a debate on how the Myanmar literature describes the construction of ethnic identity. While Myanmar historians and anthropologists commonly see ethnic identity as socially constructed, they disagree regarding its persistence or evolution. While some tend to emphasise its fluid character, others argue that ethnicity has solidified into a strong identity marker.

The fact that before their consolidation by the British colonial power, ethnic identities in South and Southeast Asia were rather fluid and only one among other possible markers of socio-political position is commonly accepted.[77] The assumption by British colonial administrator John Furnival that Myanmar was a "plural society," characterised by a variety of ethnic groups who would engage with each other but not combine, was criticised as exaggerated.[78] Victor Lieberman shows that rather than being based on static features and permanent cultural attributes that are mutually exclusive, ethnic identity was "but one of several factors determining political loyalty."[79] Looking at pre-colonial identity in lower Myanmar, he finds a great fluctuation of identification between Bamar and Mon communities depending on the predominance of distinct centres of power and patron-client relationships.[80] Likewise, Robert Taylor claims that political identity in Myanmar was dependent on patron-client relationships rather than on an affiliation to a state entity, which often led to identification to the patron's religion or ethnicity, although not automatically or permanently.[81] Still to this day, some

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[76] Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, "Re-Examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar," 18.
[77] South and Lall, "Introduction," 4.
[78] John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 304; Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?," 275.
[79] Victor B. Lieberman, "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma," *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 482.
[80] Lieberman, "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma."
[81] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?," 265.

authors stress the fundamental fluidity of ethnic identity in Myanmar. Taylor notes that when asked about their ethnicity, people may answer promptly Shan or Kachin or Bamar, but often this does not reflect the possibility of an ethnic mix due to the potential of having parents from different ethnicities.[82] This view is particularly explicit in Edmund Leach's famous monograph, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, which stresses significant fluidity between communities in northern Myanmar.[83] Similarly, Sadan argues that while the development of ethnic categories may be useful from the perspective of administrative and political elites, it does not always reflect the reality of how ethnic people perceive themselves.[84]

Despite these fluid aspects, many scholars agree that a number of factors have contributed to the rigidification of ethnic identities. According to Walton, ethnicity as a static concept has only recently developed in Myanmar, illustrating a gradual solidification of historically fluid identity markers[85] Colonial rule undeniably contributed to the consolidation of ethnic categories: since the concept of race was central to the social organisation of the colonial state, colonial subjects were extensively classified.[86] In the years surrounding the declaration of independence in 1948, ethnicity further developed into "a defining category of political orientation" as ethnic elite leaders came to perceive their own ethnic group as a basis for demanding political rights.[87] The process of state formation occurring during the Panglong negotiations was particularly divisive because it reflected the use of cultural differences as primordial and antagonistic.[88] In addition, the 1947 constitution further reinforced the idea that ethnicity should be the basis for political representation.[89] Since a specific number of parliament seats were allocated to six distinct groups, communities were thus mobilised along ethnic lines during the brief parliamentary period between 1948 and 1962, leading

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[82] Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?," 263.
[83] Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.
[84] Sadan and Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*.
[85] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness.'"
[86] Violet Cho, "Ethnicity and Identity," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (London: Routledge, 2018), 44.
[87] South and Lall, "Introduction," 4.
[88] Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma : An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: Routledge Curzon, 1999), 50, 153.
[89] Ferguson, "Who's Counting?," 10.

to the spread of ethnic-based political parties.[90] Military control between 1962 and 2011 also largely contributed to the solidification of ethnic identities. Seeking to emphasise unity within a common national identity, the Burmese socialist government began another period of knowledge production on ethnicity, including the identification and categorisation of races.[91] As previously highlighted, this resulted in the official recognition of 135 *taingyintha*.

During these years of state oppression and assimilation policies, ethnic categories gradually gained further economic, social and political significance and subsequently solidified as "markers of personhood."[92] For instance, Sai Kheunsai argues that the suppression of ethnic languages in government schools is largely responsible for the birth of ethnic consciousness.[93] Similarly, Ashley South explains that, for example, the *Tatmadaw* played a role in the reinforcement of ethnic identity in 'ordinary' Mon people. While daily survival is the primary concern of most people who are poor farmers, "routine persecutions because of their ethnicity have strengthened ethnic identification, particularly for those who had to flee to insurgent controlled territory."[94] As such, South views ethnicity in Myanmar not just as the foundation of a cultural identity but also as a strengthened cultural identity for defensive purposes and as a symbol of resistance against the central government.[95] Moreover, identity and ethno-nationalism offered ways to mobilise communities in the post-independence period that are self-reinforcing. In particular, the emergence of narratives emphasising pre-colonial and colonial practices of autonomy and justifying armed insurrection based on the right to self-determination have contributed to polarisation and resentment towards the Bamar majority.[96] Finally, the implementation of assimilation policies reinforcing a Bamar identity and the institutional consolidation of the advantages of the dominant Bamar group – which is discussed at length in the following section – have further

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[90] Robert H. Taylor, "Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 10, no. 1 (1982): 15.
[91] Cho, "Ethnicity and Identity," 46.
[92] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 4.
[93] Sai Kheunsai, "How I Became Shan," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 188–92.
[94] Ashley South, "Ceasefires and Civil Society: The Case of the Mon," in *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, ed. Mikael Gravers, International Burma Studies Conference (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007), 162.
[95] South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*.
[96] Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, "Re-Examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar," 24.

contributed to the rigidification of ethnic identities.[97]

This perspective on the construction of ethnic identity in Myanmar, which recognises the gradual solidification of historically fluid identity markers, resonates with the constructivist and ethno-symbolist approaches on the nature of ethno-national identities which is further discussed in chapter 2. While the persistence of ethnicity across various economic, social and political spheres tends to show that ethnic based identities in modern-day Myanmar are enduring, the following chapter also stresses that ethnic identification can vary in intensity depending on the degree of politicisation and mobilisation.

1.1.4 Membership to the national community and dominance of the Bamar identity

The question of belonging to a political community dominated by the Bamar national identity has been a major issue for ethnic nationalities in Myanmar since independence. This section first discusses the implementation of Burmanisation policies as key to the military state's attempts to impose a Bamar vision of the national identity. It then discusses Matthew Walton's theorisation of Bamar supremacy as "a form of institutionalised dominance similar to Whiteness", which provides a useful analytical lens for this thesis.

David Brown describes Myanmar as an "ethnocratic state", one that "acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community in terms of its ideologies, its policies and its resource distribution."[98] Elites of ethnic nationalities have traditionally resisted the intention of elements of the Bamar dominant community to impose a single national identity based on their own history, culture, language and religion to the detriment of the identities of ethnic nationalities. This process, which Houtman describes as the "Myanmafication" (or Burmanisation) of culture and history played a central role in fuelling ethnic conflict and demands for self-determination.[99] While the implementation of this Burmanisation policy by the militarised state was never fully explicit, this agenda was mostly reflected

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[97] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 7.
[98] David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.
[99] Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 142–48.

in General Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism"[100] as well as education practices.

Ne Win attempted to develop a pan-Myanmar identity for the whole country in order to address perceptions that ethnic diversity was divisive.[101] However, military rule instead resulted in the centralisation of government functions under the control of a military institution that became more powerful and increasingly associated with the Bamar identity. Despite the acknowledgement of eight major "national races" as part of the Myanmar national identity, such identity was actually derived from the Bamar's culture, language and traditions and therefore reduced ethnic people's opportunities for feeling a sense of national belonging.[102] The Burmanisation of education practices through the gradual suppression of ethnic languages in schools and the imposition of historical narratives remains the most obvious evidence of Myanmar's history of imposed Burmanisation.[103] These practices reflect a Bamar chauvinist conception of the nation, prioritising the diffusion of a single language (the language spoken by the Bamar), and the celebration of heroes that promote a Bamar national identity. This further justified the mistrust of non-Bamar communities.[104] The change of the country's name, decided by the military government in 1989 on the ground that Burma referred to the Bamar group while Myanmar included all *taingyintha*, illustrates well the conflation between the national identity and the Bamar identity.[105] As Cheesman notes, while "Myanmar" was meant to represent national races or *taingyintha*, it "above all was to signify the pre-eminent linguistic and cultural group, the Burmans. To speak and read the language of the Burman, to be civilised and cultured like a Burman was nothing other than to

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[100] South and Lall, "Introduction," 4; Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 11.
[101] Robert H. Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015), 277–78.
[102] Kyed and Gravers, "Representation and Citizenship in the Future Integration of Ethnic Armed Actors in Burma/Myanmar," 60.
[103] See Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Rosalie Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar," *Journal of Burma Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 27–78; Marie Lall and Hla Win, "Perceptions of the State and Citizenship in Light of the 2010 Myanmar Elections," in *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities*, ed. Monique Skidmore; and Trevor Wilson (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2013); Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-Based Teaching in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, February 2016), https://asiafoundation.org/publication/schooling-and-conflict-ethnic-education-and-mother-tongue-based-teaching-in-myanmar/.
[104] Steinberg, "Burma, the State of Myanmar," 190.
[105] David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30.

belong to Myanmar, which is to say, to be *taingyintha*."[106] As a result, as South and Lall explain, ethnic actors widely believe that: "Burmanisation is deeply ingrained within the majority community, and reflected in attitudes of superiority and chauvinism."[107]

The internalisation of the Burmanisation of the national identity among the Bamar community has been given some attention. Drawing on the critical race theory framework, Walton looks at the recent reinforcement of Myanmar national identity as Bamar through the lenses of Whiteness and White privilege. Although race and ethnicity have some conceptual differences, Walton conceptualises "Burman-ness as a form of institutionalised dominance similar to Whiteness" and demonstrates that ethnicity in Myanmar plays a similar role to race.[108] As John Rex argues, while ethnicity is not as ascriptive as race because it does not have the same physical element, they are both socio-political constructs, and as a result "a racial group may be no more stable or unstable than an ethnic one."[109] In Myanmar, the translation of *taingyintha*, the Burmese term used to designate ethnic groups, as "national races", underlines the similarity between ethnicity and race.

Walton demonstrates that "Burman-ness" operates as a localised version of Whiteness. Historically benefiting those deemed to be "White" with a set of civic, social, economic and psychological privileges, Whiteness is at the same time perceived as the norm.[110] This is true in Myanmar where "Burman-ness" appears as a dominant identity, resulting in a clear distribution of power as well as opportunities along ethnic lines. In addition, Bamar culture, language and values are presented as the norm and therefore characteristic of a Myanmar identity.[111] Drawing on David Roediger's argument that white privilege also benefits exploited members of a dominant group who are exploited within that group, Walton demonstrates that this applies in Myanmar where, despite having been to some degree victims of government oppression, the Bamar nevertheless

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[106] Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," 468.
[107] South and Lall, "Introduction," 4.
[108] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 1.
[109] John Rex, *Race and Ethnicity* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 16.
[110] Joel Olson, "Whiteness and the Participation-Inclusion Dilemma," *Political Theory* 30, no. 3 (2002): 385.
[111] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 5–6.

enjoy a privileged position because of their ethnicity. This privilege is most visible in the ways in which ethnic populations have been intentionally targeted and structurally disadvantaged as a result of the military's counter-insurgency strategies.[112]

Despite conceptual differences between race and ethnicity, critical race theory and Walton's theorisation of Bamar supremacy have informed my analysis. While Walton seeks to explicate the historical processes that have contributed to institutionalise Bamar privilege, the purpose of my analysis is to build a grounded understanding of how ethnic people in Myanmar experience discrimination based on their ethnicity when interacting with state institutions and how this impacts their sense of belonging to the national identity.[113] I follow Gillian Cowlishaw in her contestation of the censorship of race in the Australian 'post-colonial' anthropology discipline: I believe that racial as well as ethnic categories should be given analytical weight because "while speaking of race may appear to reproduce racial categories, … not speaking about race allows racial differentiation to flourish unchallenged."[114] I insist, like Walton, that the purpose of this study is not to blame today's Bamar population for a system of ethnic dominance that is "invisible to itself" but I agree that comparing Bamar privilege to White privilege can offer an interesting perspective that may encourage the recognition of such privilege and shed light on the role the Bamar could play in deconstructing it.[115]

The conflation of national identity with a Bamar identity as a result of an institutionalised form of dominance implies that ethnic identities have generally been excluded from the national identity. Unlike Robert Taylor who suggests that fifty years of independence have resulted in the involuntary creation of a new primary political identity for many,[116] South and Lall warn that resentment towards Bamar chauvinism remains the main challenge to "equitable political and social progress in Myanmar." [117] Adopting this second view, I join South and Lall in asking whether and how people of ethnic nationalities can have multiple identities, such as being citizens of Myanmar,

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112 Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 6; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev ed. (London: Verso, 2007), 13.
113 Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 3.
114 Gillian K. Cowlishaw, "Censoring Race in 'Post-Colonial' Anthropology," *Critique of Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2000): 101.
115 Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 3.
116 Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?," 286.
117 South and Lall, "Introduction," 4.

and/or members of an ethno-national group.[118] Seeking to expand on that fundamental question, this thesis thus explores whether and how ethnic actors can regain a sense of belonging to the national identity.

1.1.5 Ethnic aspirations unfulfilled by successive centralised constitutions

After briefly highlighting the grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationalities, I show that Myanmar's three successive constitutions have failed to accommodate ethnic demands for autonomy. EAO demands stem from four main grievances.[119] First, the sidelining of ethnic communities from the political process and therefore the inability to influence policy decisions that impact them has been the major source of contention. Political autonomy is perceived as the only possible response and it is currently being framed as a federalist option in negotiations with the government. Second, economic hardship as a result of conflict and economic mismanagement has been worse in ethnic areas than in other parts of the country. While conflict has generated a humanitarian crisis and hampered economic development, the proliferation of army bases has put local populations under increased demands for contributions and new investors are exploiting natural resources in former conflict areas. Thus, economic equality, particularly through the sharing of natural resource revenues represents another major demand. Third, implementation of Burmanisation policies preventing ethnic groups from using their own languages as well as a nation building strategy based on Buddhism have been threatening the preservation of ethnic identity. As a result, measures recognising and protecting ethnic identity form another core demand. Fourth, calls for the protection of the human rights of Myanmar's ethnic populations is based on abuses experienced as a result of the "four cuts" policy, which aimed to deprive ethnic armed groups from access to food, funds, recruits and intelligence.

As Pedersen notes, while ethnic struggles are nationalist to varying degrees and ethnic populations' resentment to the central state may differ, most ethnic groups find it hard to feel loyalty to the state. Instead, people often give their allegiances to EAOs, which can be perceived as local service providers especially in the education and justice

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[118] South and Lall, "Introduction," 3.
[119] Morten B. Pedersen, "Burma's Ethnic Minorities: Charting Their Own Path to Peace," *Critical Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2008): 45–66.

sectors.[120] This, however, can change depending on the context, particularly with regard to the nature of the EAO and its relationship with the state and how connected people feel to it.[121] For instance, as this thesis will explore further, this is mostly true for the Mon armed group who recently signed the NCA and is often praised by Mon for protecting their culture against assimilation. By contrast, the main Pa-O armed group is a militia cooperating with the *Tatmadaw*, whose soldiers are often accused of taking advantage of their position. As a result, although Pa-O are generally still far from giving their allegiances to the central state, many are likely to prefer non-violent ways to promote their interest.

In response to the political transformation and the peace process initiated by the Thein Sein government, ethnic strategies in the semi-democratic period have changed but the substance of claims for political autonomy, economic equality, ethnic and human rights remains unaltered.[122] The current unitary system still represents Myanmar's main challenge to handling the varieties of ethnic political interests. Indeed, although consensus has grown over the country's political future as both President Thein Sein and the NLD have advocated for federal reform, the country's constitutions have consistently promoted a strong centralisation. Despite the existence of some federal features, the longstanding ethnic demand for federalism has never been fulfilled.

While the 1947 constitution included statements of principle and intent guaranteeing equality of all ethnic groups, protection from exploitation and sharing of sovereignty, they were not fully implemented in practice. Similarly, the 1974 constitution guaranteed the protection of ethnic cultures and a form of institutional autonomy for territorially

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[120] Helene M. Kyed, "Justice Provision in Conflict-Affected Areas with Multiple Authorities" (Danish Institute for International Studies, February 2019), https://www.diis.dk/en/research/justice-provision-in-conflict-affected-areas-with-multiple-authorities; Brian McCartan and Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, October 2016), https://asiafoundation.org/publication/ethnic-armed-actors-justice-provision-myanmar/; Marie Lall and Ashley South, "Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-State Ethnic Education Regimes in Burma" (Privatisation in Education Research Initiative, 2013), http://www.periglobal.org/role-state/document/education-con%EF%AC%82ict-and-identity-non-state-ethnic-education-regimes-burma.

[121] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2012); Mary P. Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States : Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence*, Policy Studies (Southeast Asia) 31 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007).

[122] Nicholas Farrelly, "Cooperation, Contestation, Conflict: Ethnic Political Interests in Myanmar Today," *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 2 (2014): 251–66.

concentrated groups, which Taylor describes as "one of the major ways governing parties in Burma have attempted to deal with the national unity problem."[123] However, this attempt was not followed through with concrete measures. The formal creation of seven ethnic states did not grant any autonomy and the right to secession was abandoned. In addition, the central unicameral *Hluttaw* (parliament) concentrated all legislative power and few substantive powers remained for the states.[124] As a result, states had significantly more autonomy in the parliamentary democracy period (1948-1962) than in the following military backed socialism period during which the 1974 constitution was adopted.

Likewise, despite constitutional features delegating limited power to the sub-national level, the 2008 constitution does not establish federalism "in intent or in practice."[125] Nevertheless, it embodies the main legal effort to balance ethnic nationalities' political interests against the Bamar political, cultural and economic predominance. In this respect, Crouch shows that the constitutional design of central-local relations attempts to accommodate diversity through legal recognition of some ethnic minority rights.[126] First, it reiterates the territorial division established by the 1974 constitution, which provides a form of symbolic recognition. In addition to seven regions based on geography, which are mostly populated by the Bamar majority, there are seven ethnic states named after the seven other main ethnic groups. Second, limited self-governance is granted to six ethnic groups who obtained the SAA status. Third, the 2008 constitution provides a special representation with the election of ministers for national race affairs - also herein referred to as ethnic affairs ministers[127] - to represent groups that are territorially concentrated within a region or state and constitute 0.1 percent of the total population in the country. However, these three forms of recognition reinforce the *Tatmadaw*'s idea of a rigid concept of identity with a fixed number of national

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[123] Robert H. Taylor, "Burma's National Unity Problem and the 1974 Constitution," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 1, no. 3 (1979): 232.
[124] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 25.
[125] Melissa Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar: A Contextual Analysis*, Constitutional Systems of the World (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 125.
[126] Melissa Crouch, "Ethnic Rights and Constitutional Change: The Recognition of Ethnic Nationalities in Myanmar/Burma," in *Constitutional Systems of the World: Thematic Sud*, ed. Andrew Harding and Mark Sidel (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2015), 200.
[127] National race affairs ministers are also called ethnic affairs ministers. Since "national race" is often translated in English as ethnicity, I use both designation intercheangeably.

races, and the recognition of some groups to the detriment of others.[128] In addition, such recognition does not involve meaningful decentralisation of powers. For instance, little substantive legislative power is delegated to the state and regional parliaments. Similarly, state and region governments, who cannot choose their chief minister, also have limited executive powers. Likewise, the SAAs' legislative and executive competences are minimal: they only include urban and rural projects, construction and maintenance of roads and bridges, public health, and development affairs.[129] Finally, despite the gradual consolidation of their privileges and the expansion of their responsibilities, the role of ethnic affairs ministers remains ambiguous and limited.[130]

As such, the successive constitutions have only superficially attempted to counterbalance the Bamar's cultural, economic and political supremacy and thus failed to fulfil ethnic demands. Ultimately, the question of the army's willingness to accept reforms moving towards the autonomy of ethnic nationalities remains a major obstacle. Indeed, the *Tatmadaw* has persistently rejected decentralisation and the reduction of their power.[131] This is further prevented by the military veto established by the constitution, which thwarts the adoption of any amendments that challenge their authority.[132] Since such lack of political will raises questions regarding the relevance of any institutional strategies seeking to accommodate ethnic conflict in Myanmar, I argue that to be successful, institutional reforms should first address the deeper question of national belonging, which may involve policies that do not challenge the power of the *Tatmadaw* while nevertheless promoting inclusion.

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[128] Melissa Crouch, "The Constitutional Implications of Myanmar's Peace Process," *Tea Circle* (blog), July 27, 2016, https://teacircleoxford.com/2016/07/27/the-constitutional-implications-of-myanmars-peace-process/.

[129] Hamish Nixon et al., "State and Region Governments in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, 2018), https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/State-and-Region-Governments-in-Myanmar-Full-Report_Eng-version_6-March-2019.pdf.

[130] Ardeth Maung Thawnhmung and Yadana, "Citizenship and Minority Rights: The Role of 'National Race Affairs' Ministers in Myanmar's 2008 Constitution," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, n.d.), 113–39.

[131] Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History," 46.

[132] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Sections 14, 74 (a) and (b).

1.1.6 Identifying gaps in Myanmar's literature on state building

In this section, I identify two gaps in the discussions on state building in Myanmar which this thesis seeks to address: their partial engagement with the literature on conflict management and their limited consideration of grassroots perspectives.

The literature on ethnic conflict management and state building has developed a number of institutional models as possible solutions to manage ethnic diversity - which chapter 2 articulates as a conceptual framework to support this study. The Myanmar literature has widely examined the significance of ethnic conflict as an impediment to democratisation. However, apart from Michael Breen's new federal paradigm (see chapter 2) which stems from a comparative analysis of the development of federal systems in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, scholarly discussions on state building in Myanmar have not fully engaged with the institutional models proposed by the general literature.[133] They have mainly focused on two institutions that are usually part of the more comprehensive institutional models: the territorial division of power (i.e. federalism) and the electoral system.

Ethnic elites have demanded an ethno-federal state since the country's independence. Following that model, the first proposal of a federal constitution of many to come was drafted in 1997 by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the self-proclaimed government in exile formed after the *Tatmadaw* ignored the 1990 election. However, Myanmar activists and scholars have diverging opinions on which type of federalism would be best suited to address ethnic conflict. Democracy activist Igor Blazevic argues that the country should explore the range of institutional alternatives available in order to avoid choosing between these two opposing views, either a highly centralised state constructed around a Bamar Buddhist identity as desired by the *Tatmadaw* and the Bamar majority, or an ethno-federal state, to which ethnic groups aspire.[134] He therefore suggests the adoption of India's asymmetrical federalism or Indonesia's highly decentralized unitary system.[135] Looking at the structural constraints of the current system, Nehgingpao Kipgen suggests that a form of federalism that is not

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[133] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 174.
[134] Blazevic, "Burma Votes for Change: The Challenges Ahead," 106–7.
[135] Igor Blazevic, "My Article in Journal of Democracy about Burma after Elections," April 11, 2016.

based on ethnic territory would be best suited to address Myanmar's decades old problems.[136] Although this view contradicts the demands of ethnic nationalist elites, Breen et al. similarly suggest that a non-territorial form of federalism would be preferable.[137] The question of the choice of the electoral system has also generated much debate in Myanmar prior to the 2015 election, and was mostly formulated in terms of first-past-the-post versus proportional representation.[138] Scholars tend, however, to recommend a move towards a mixed system in order to promote ethnic representation.[139] Institutional strategies focusing solely on the institution of federalism and the reform of the electoral system have a number of major limitations which chapter 7 discusses further. Indeed, the military veto on any constitutional amendment considerably reduces the likelihood of their implementation. In addition, the question of national belonging is left unaddressed.

Second, Myanmar-specific debates on state building have been elite-focused while grassroots voices have been marginalised and the needs of the general population have rarely been paid more than cursory attention. While there has been a significant increase in research seeking local perspectives since the country started its liberalisation and access restrictions have been eased, there are only a handful of studies engaging with state building issues. There is, for instance, a growing body of quantitative studies involving opinion polling of community members being conducted since 2014.[140] However, the few surveys that are focused on issues related to state building do not

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136 Nehginpao Kipgen, "The Quest for Federalism in Myanmar," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 6 (2018): 612–626.

137 Michael G Breen, Baobang He, and Khin Z. Win, "Deliberative Polling on Federalism in Myanmar: Policy Brief," Report (University of Melbourne, 2018), http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/219138.

138 Michael Lidauer and Gilles Saphy, "Elections and the Reform Agenda," in *Law, Society and Transition in Myanmar*, ed. Melissa Crouch and Tim Lindsey (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2014), 217.

139 Kyle Lemargie et al., "Electoral System Choice in Myanmar's Democratization Debate," in *Debating Democratization in Myanmar*, ed. Nick Cheesman, Nicholas Farrelly, and Trevor Wilson (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 229–56; Hunter Marston, "Myanmar's Electoral System: Reviewing the 2010 and 2012 Elections and Looking Ahead to the 2015 General Elections," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 3 (2013): 270.

140 International Republican Institute, "Survey of Burma Public Opinion," 2014, https://www.iri.org/resource/iri-releases-survey-burmese-public-opinion; International Republican Institute, "Survey of Burma/Myanmar Public Opinion," 2017, https://www.iri.org/resource/iri-releases-survey-burmese-public-opinion; International Republican Institute, "Public Opinion Survey: Myanmar," 2019, https://www.iri.org/resource/iri-releases-survey-burmese-public-opinion; The Asia Foundation, "Myanmar 2014: Civic Knowledge and Values in a Changing Society" (The Asia Foundation, 2014).

move beyond the discussion of federalism.[141]

Similarly, a small number of studies using in-depth qualitative interviews as primary data debate the question of possible state building strategies. The Asia Foundation has produced several reports on Myanmar's local governance, justice system and militias. While they have provided a rich source of information for this study, these reports are concerned with describing current institutions instead of assessing how they could be changed to meet ethnic aspirations.[142] Ian Holliday's assessment of the respect of religious and ethnic minorities as a key variable for the creation of a stable democracy is very valuable. However it does not consider how institutional design can facilitate minority inclusion.[143] The Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center (ENAC)'s 2019 sectoral policy recommendations to establish a "federal democratic union" represent a significant effort to adopt a bottom-up approach, with opinions and suggestions of various stakeholders, including community-based organisations representing a grassroots perspective.[144] It provides useful recommendations with regards to the division of political authority between central government and ethnic states. However, none of these studies address the question of inclusiveness or national membership.

While these studies mark the beginning of a bottom-up approach to research on political issues, there is still a significant lack of studies paying full attention to the needs and aspirations of the general population. This is problematic because as Eric J. Hosbawm warned us: "We know too little about what… goes on, in the minds of most relatively inarticulate men and women, to speak with any confidence about their thoughts and

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[141] Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang, "Myanmar's Political Aspirations & Perceptions 2015 Asian Barometer Survey Report" (Center for East Asia Democratic Studies National Taiwan University, 2016); Michael G. Breen, *Deliberative Polling on Federalism in Myanmar: Report*, 2018.

[142] Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, July 2015); McCartan and Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar"; Kim Jolliffe and Emily Speers Mears, "Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar's Ethnic Areas" (The Asia Foundation, October 2016), https://asiafoundation.org/publication/strength-in-diversity/; John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, July 2016); Kyed, "Justice Provision in Conflict-Affected Areas with Multiple Authorities"; South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict."

[143] Tamas Wells, "Democratic 'freedom' in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 1 (2018): 1–15; Roman David and Ian Holliday, *Liberalism and Democracy in Myanmar*, First edition., Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford: University Press, 2018).

[144] Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center, "Sectoral Policy Recommendations for Building a Future Federal Democratic Union," January 2019, http://www.burmaenac.org/?p=2565.

feeling towards the nationalities and nation states which claim their loyalties."[145] Given the centrality of the issue of national membership, I argue that it is essential to give space to ethnic voices in order to put an end to their exclusion from political life.

1.2 Methodology

The issue of public inclusion in the research raises a methodological question, as both quantitative and qualitative research involves the public in different ways.[146] Broad inclusion of participants and thus generalisation to a larger population are certainly the main strengths of quantitative studies. However, opinion surveys have a number of limitations, in particular a reduced sensitivity to the local context.[147] As a result, they may produce contradicting results on similar issues. For instance, Breen et al.'s deliberative polling in Myanmar emphasises that a non-territorial form of federalism is preferred while Bridget Welsh and Kai-Ping Huang's survey highlights that ethnic autonomy is widely supported.[148] The existence of such contradictory findings seems to confirm an issue that one of my main informants suggested was common: that without in-depth discussions of the issues studied and the existence of a form of trust between the researcher and the participants, some participants may say what they think the researcher wants to hear rather than expressing their genuine opinion.[149] Given the explorative nature of my research question, the qualitative approach, which involves in-depth interviews or observation, is better suited to my analysis. Indeed, unlike surveys and opinion polling, qualitative methods can "empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices" and offer ways to explore whether existing theories "adequately capture the complexity of the problem."[150]

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[145] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 78.
[146] For details on surveys, see John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 116–24.
[147] Katherine C. Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens: Studying Public Opinions through Ethnography," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 165–82.
[148] Welsh and Huang, "Myanmar's Political Aspirations & Perceptions 2015 Asian Barometer Survey Report"; Breen, *Deliberative Polling on Federalism in Myanmar*.
[149] Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #26, August 2016.
[150] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 48.

In this section, I present how I became involved with Myanmar and how this research came about. Then I outline the methodological journey that led me to adopt a political ethnographic design and discuss the theoretical reasons for such a choice and its methodological consequences. Next, I describe the rationales for choosing the Mon and Pa-O ethnic groups as the ethnic sites of this study and outline my selection of research participants. Afterwards, I examine in greater detail the ethnographic methods I used to gather evidence and discuss my approach to data analysis. I also highlight the various strategies I used to enhance the validity of the research. Then I critically reflect on my position as the researcher and discuss the limitations of listening to people's voices as the basis for the prescription of what institutions would be suitable to manage ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Finally, I address ways that my research upheld ethical considerations.

1.2.1 Longstanding connection with Myanmar

My involvement with Myanmar first started as a volunteer teacher with an organisation supporting Burmese refugees on the Thai-Burma border in 2007, at a time when prospects for democratisation seemed far-fetched. At the time I did not know this experience was just the beginning of a decade long commitment to support, in my own small ways, the struggle of ethnic peoples for the development of a democratic and peaceful multinational state. As this experience sparked my interest in trying to learn more about the situation in Myanmar and understand the plight of my students, I sought ways to stay in the region. I found another volunteer position with an organisation supporting Burmese migrant workers in Chiang Mai that lasted for a few more months. Then in 2008, I worked as head teacher for a political empowerment program organised by the Women's League of Burma. Fourteen women interested in breaking gender barriers to political participation attended this program. Between 2009 and 2011, I worked as program coordinator and foreign affairs teacher for another training program set up in Chiang Mai. During this time, I was closely involved with two groups of sixteen students from Myanmar committed to bringing about political change.

These programs deliberately targeted participants from ethnic backgrounds because ethnic areas have been marginalised as a result of the decade long conflict. As a result, Bamar participants always represented a minority in each student group: in each

program no more than two persons of non-mixed Bamar background participated. Between 2008 and 2011, I was in close contact with young people of Mon, Pa-O, Karen, Kayan, Kayah, Palaung, Kachin, Rakhine, Dawei, Lahu, Shan and Bamar ethnicities and had the privilege to learn about their respective struggles first-hand. In addition to being directly involved in discussions and presentations concerning their social, economic and political experiences during teaching hours, I came to understand different aspects of their lives after teaching hours because they were living on-site for periods of six or nine months. Formal social activities were also organised on a monthly basis. The close relationships I formed with these young people led me to care strongly about their interests, particularly their concerns for and deep commitment to the development of a peaceful and sustainable democratic state in Myanmar. I had the chance to meet many of these young activists again in the following years. In particular, there were two Pa-O alumni from the programs who participated in this research. Having stayed in close contact with the person who took over my role, I was briefly introduced to another group of students. This gave me the opportunity to meet another Pa-O person, who later became a key informant for this research.

Between 2012 and 2015, I worked with EarthRights International, an organisation seeking to "combine the power of the law and the power of the people in defence of human rights and the environment" in the Mekong region and Myanmar particularly. Travelling between Chiang Mai and Yangon, my role as alumni program coordinator was to provide capacity building support to the two hundred plus students who had completed the nine-month long program run by the Earthrights school in Chiang Mai and returned to Myanmar to work for their communities. Until I started this role I was based in Chiang Mai and had only been to Myanmar once, in 2010. This changed when I started working with EarthRights. The year after I took up my role, the Thein Sein government took office and Myanmar was undergoing tremendous changes in terms of opening of the political space. As such, by 2013 EarthRights International considered it safe for its international staff to work inside the country. This meant that, although I was officially based in Chiang Mai, I was spending two thirds of my time in Yangon, where I was meeting students from ethnic areas who came to attend the capacity building workshops I was organising. Again, I was in close contact with young people from various ethnic backgrounds, helping them develop projects to address the needs of

their communities, or trying to respond to their other capacity building requests. Significantly, because of its emphasis on empowering grassroots communities and the fact that its executive director is of Karen background, Earthrights International resembles a local organisation instead of a traditional, international non-governmental organisation where both international and ethnic staff are in decision-making positions. During my time as alumni coordinator, I had the opportunity to participate in and observe numerous discussions where voices of powerless ethnic communities were made heard through the intermediary of EarthRights alumni or staff members. Through this role, I built many friendships, including with two people who would become key informants for this research in Mon and Pa-O regions.

Throughout these years, I became increasingly interested in how democracy could be shaped in Myanmar so that ethnic people would feel that their rights are protected. I also came to believe that a bottom-up approach should inform the process of state building in order to ensure that voices of people who have been prevented from having a say could be heard. With these thoughts in mind, I was ready to undertake my doctoral research on state building in Myanmar, in the hope of bringing a different contribution to political change in Myanmar.

1.2.2 Preliminary reflections on research design

The "transformative" research paradigm has influenced my decision on the research design I chose to adopt. According to this worldview, knowledge reflects the power and social relationships within society and thus the aim of knowledge creation is to support people to advance society.[151] Focusing on marginalised or disenfranchised people, it upholds the idea that research must be done *with* people and not "on" or "for" people. Thus, research should be collaborative in order to avoid the further marginalisation of the participants, involving them with the design of questions, data collection and analysis so they may reap the benefits of the research.[152] Drawing on the transformative

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[151] Donna M. Mertens, "Transformative Mixed Methods," *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, no. 6 (2012): 804; Donna M. Mertens, "Mixed Methods and the Politics of Human Research: The Transformative-Emancipatory Perspective," in *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, ed. Charles Teddlie and Abbas Tashakkori (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 135–64.
[152] John W. Creswell, *Research Design : Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*, International student edition, fourth (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2014), 10.

research paradigm, this project was developed as a result of numerous discussions on the issue of ethnic representation with a number of ethnic people over the years. Key informants have also provided advice at every stage of implementation, especially with question design, as well as data collection, and analysis. In accordance to this worldview's emancipatory aims, I also imagined that the research could raise the participants' consciousness and improve their lives.[153]

I thus initially embraced a participatory action research design, which is usually associated with this worldview. As a social process that is participatory, practical and collaborative, emancipatory, critical and recursive, I thus sought to build the research participants' capacity, based on needs identified during informal discussions.[154] I hoped that capacity building could act as a vehicle to raise awareness of state building and support people to articulate their needs and aspirations. While direct involvement of participants in the research was a main advantage of such approach, I quickly realised that the scope of participatory action research whereby community members are included in the research team and engage in "collaborative action-based projects" was not suited to the nature of my research question.[155] Although my research seeks to contribute to social change, I could not consider all participants as members of my "research team" and associate them with a specific action-based project. Indeed, collecting people's opinions on the state building process required meeting many people from different socio-economic backgrounds and potential recommendations would remain at the policy level. Time and financial constraints, meant I could only provide one capacity building workshop as a form of "pay back."

I then turned to critical ethnography, which also focuses on marginalised groups such as race or gender in order to advocate for their needs. However, I rapidly realised that while critical ethnography is mainly concerned with power, privilege and authority in society, it maintains a cultural perspective that is not the right fit for my politically

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153 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 26.

154 For an explanation of the participatory action research process, see Stephen Kemmis and Mervyn Wilkinson, "Participatory Action Research and the Study of Practice," in *Action Research in Practice: Partnership for Social Justice in Education*, ed. Bill Atweh, Stephen Kemmis, and Patricia Weeks (London: Routledge, 2002), 23–24.

155 Alice McIntyre, *Participatory Action Research*, Qualitative Research Methods 52 (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008), 5; Cathy MacDonald, "Understanding Participatory Action Research," *Canadian Journal of Action Research* 13, no. 2 (2012): 40.

oriented research question.[156] Indeed, I argue that ethnic perceptions at the ground level should contribute to shaping institutions in order to develop a legitimate multinational society in Myanmar. To achieve this, I use an innovative ethnographic approach to political studies, which increasingly comes under the banner of political ethnography.

1.2.3 Political ethnographic design

As a strong supporter of methodological pluralism Edward Schatz argues that an ethnographic sensibility provides important contributions to the political science discipline.[157] Considering its place in political science, Schatz defines ethnography as "approaches that rely centrally on person-to-person contact as a way to elicit insider perspectives and meanings."[158] This definition sees ethnography as both a process and an end-goal. As a process, ethnography involves various data-collection methods, such as participant and non-participant observation, interviews and focus groups. As an end-goal, ethnography seeks to uncover insider perspectives.[159] Many scholars have highlighted the valuable contribution that ethnographic methods make to the study of politics. De Volo and Schatz explain that "ethnography focuses the research lens at a level of analysis that is often ignored or assumed to be insignificant, the micro level."[160] This insight into people's lived experiences contributes to enhance the quality of political analyses.[161] Indeed, as Schatz and Lisa Wedeen highlight, it brings a normative grounding to the study of politics by keeping the researcher connected with the people that are directly touched by power relations.[162] This therefore increases the likelihood of

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156 See for example, Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, Qualitative Research Methods 26 (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1993); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2011).

157 Edward Schatz, "Disciplines That Forget: Political Science and Ethnography" 50, no. 1 (2017): 135–138.

158 Edward Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools: Ethnography and the Limits of Multiple-Methods Research," Working Paper 12, Committee on Concepts and Methods, International Political Science Association, 2007, 2.

159 Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 5–6.

160 Lorraine Bayard De Volo and Edward Schatz, "From the Inside out: Ethnographic Methods in Political Research," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37, no. No. 2 (2004): 269.

161 Lisa Wedeen, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 261.

162 Edward Schatz, "Introduction," in *Political Ethnography:What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 11.

producing arguments that maintain a connection to politics on the ground.[163]

Furthermore, Evelyn Brodkin stresses that ethnographic methods are especially suitable for the contextualisation of political behaviours and beliefs that would otherwise remain unseen and unrecognised. This is possible because ethnography enables an analysis of the ways in which these beliefs and behaviours are developed and articulated in real-life settings.[164] Thus, ethnographic methods encourage the researcher to examine issues that initially did not seem important and therefore generate an "unusual perspective."[165] Although the insights developed as a result of an insider perspective can sometimes appear as counter intuitive, they are very useful for developing a deeper understanding of power and macro-political processes.[166] The evidence uncovered can in fact question generalisations or expand meanings developed in other disciplines.[167] For instance, exploring the differences between ordinary citizens' and elite perceptions of democracy, Frederic Schaffer suggests that fluctuating meanings of democracy may have implications for the way elections are implemented and received.[168]

Political ethnography can also be used to test assumptions and determine the applicability of general theories to a specific case.[169] This may seem to contradict Schatz's view that the revelation of insider perspectives constitutes the end goal of ethnography. However, he readily concedes that with its focus on the struggles of ordinary people, ethnographic research unsurprisingly produces a reformist social agenda.[170] While not suggesting that ethnography should be used specifically for normative purposes, other scholars argue that ethnography lends itself well to

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[163] Wedeen, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science," 267.
[164] Evelyn Brodkin, "The Ethnographic Turn in Political Science: Reflections on the State of the Art," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, no. 1 (2017): 131–32.
[165] Cédric Jourde, "The Ethnographic Sensitivity: Overlooked Authoritarian Dynamics and Islamic Ambivalences in West Africa," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 203.
[166] Lorraine Bayard De Volo, "Participant Observation, Politics, and Power Relations: Nicaraguan Mothers and U.S. Casino Waitresses," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 234; Enrique D. Arias, "Ethnography and the Study of Latin American Politics: An Agenda for Research," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 244.
[167] Schatz, "Introduction," 10.
[168] Frederic C. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 85. Check reference
[169] De Volo and Schatz, "From the Inside Out," 270.
[170] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 6.

challenging existing theories or building new ones. Contrasting political ethnography with anthropology, Brodkin contends that understanding the micro-level at which the data is collected is not the overarching purpose of this approach. Rather, it is "the point-of-departure for analyses of broader macro-level political phenomena. In this sense, ethnographic methods provide a way of seeing big by looking small."[171]

Ethnographic methods are particularly suitable to the purpose of my analysis, where people's lived experiences hold a central place. Through the ethnographic study of public opinions, the contextualisation and grounding of macro-political issues such as ethnic conflict and democratisation becomes possible. Ethnography is particularly suitable to the study of public opinions, which is at the core of my analysis. Unlike polls or quantitative surveys, ethnographic methods can capture how participants actually interpret the issues they are asked to share their views on. As Katherine Walsh explains, participant observation, as an "act of spending time with people, as unobtrusively as possible, to listen to what individuals say and how members of groups interact with one another, in the settings in which they normally meet, under the conditions they set for themselves" has much to offer into the study of public opinions.[172]

At the same time, I seek to use my "ethnographic material" to address broader debates in comparative politics and suggest ways to reform society. Similarly to Schaffer's analysis of the meaning of democracy, I look at differences between elite and ordinary people's perspectives on how they experience ethnicity in the context of the current democratic transition in Myanmar in order to understand their implications for conflict management and state building. Thus, I adopt what Schatz describes as an "extrinsic-value" ethnographic approach, where ethnography is used to generate "epistemic" or generalised knowledge about social or political life. According to this approach, a theory should leave space for "emic" or insider perspectives in order to be complete. In other words, the researcher is concerned with "a positivist drive to develop decontextualized laws governing social and political life" but only if such generalisations "save conceptual space for the role that emic perspectives play".[173] For

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[171] Brodkin, "The Ethnographic Turn in Political Science," 132–33.
[172] Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens," 169–70.
[173] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 10–11.

instance, Schatz cites Allisa-Pisano's use of ethnography to question a common theory about economic transitions in post-Soviet societies as a good example of using ground-level truths to interact with epistemic knowledge.[174] My use of ethnographic methods similarly seeks to use insider perspectives in order to engage with conflict management theories.

1.2.4 Multi-sited ethnographic research

In this section, I explain my reasons for choosing a multi-sited ethnographic approach, and introduce briefly the Mon and Pa-O sites. I also explain how the research participants were selected and discuss some characteristics of my fieldwork.

Rationale for multi-sited approach

In order to produce empirically grounded but general knowledge, I deliberately chose not to conduct a traditional single-site study. As De Volo and Schatz argue, unlike early cultural anthropology, characterised by the researcher's immersion in a remote village, there is now a push for ethnographic methods to go beyond micro-scale studies.[175] Because of Myanmar's ethnic diversity, any ground-level insights on state building would require taking into account the views of groups that are in different situations, which might reveal different perspectives. The persuasiveness of my argument, which aims to suggest ways that state building could promote a sense of national belonging, rests on the analysis of variations and similarities across ethnic sites in terms of institutional insecurities, attitudes towards nation building and aspirations.

Ideally, the perspectives of all ethnic groups in Myanmar should be included in the research to support generalisation claims. However, my intent is not to conduct quantitative surveys involving members of all groups who are randomly selected. In accordance with the "extrinsic-value" ethnographic approach, cross-contextual generalisation should be based on data collected in other specific contexts through ethnographic methods exclusively.[176] For this reason, time and resource restrictions limited my study to two ethnic groups. The cross-contextual generalisation I make when

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[174] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 15.
[175] De Volo and Schatz, "From the Inside Out," 267–68.
[176] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 16.

I question general theories on state building and suggest ways to shape institutions is based on ethnographic data from the Mon and the Pa-O. Focusing on these two groups thus enabled me to consider contextual variations when assessing the relevance of classic theories of conflict management to the Myanmar context.

However, I acknowledge that by essence, ethnographic research cannot be replicated strictly speaking.[177] Because each piece of research conducted reveals insider meanings and is inherently unique, it was not possible at each site to interview the same amount of people, observe the same types of events, or organise focus groups with the same type of participants. However, as detailed below, I ensured that while choosing sites that had distinct situations, data collection was conducted with similar conditions. These conditions included living among the participants for an extended period of time, developing close relationships with key informants and interpreters, seeking research participants across similar socio-political backgrounds and from townships where they represent a majority population. More particularly, I also ensured that within each site, elite and community members as well as people under government control and those under EAO control were represented.

Two ethnic sites: The Mon and the Pa-O

The Mon and the Pa-O both have a majority of their population concentrated in one area with some people spread out between different states or regions. Since my research seeks to expose discriminations faced by ethnic people through the uncovering of ethnic voices, I excluded Bamar people from the study. The Mon and Pa-O are two distinct ethnic groups with their own cultural, linguistic, demographic, geographical and political characteristics which will be described in detail in chapter 3. These groups were chosen for two intertwined reasons: in addition to representing two very different situations that ethnic groups face in Myanmar, I had a strong work connection and friendship with a Mon woman and a Pa-O man who are active members of their communities. They endorsed my research and expressed their commitment to help me because of the benefits they thought it could bring for their people. Since I observed that people living in different areas faced a variety of situations, data was collected in most

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[177] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 16.

townships where Mon and Pa-O are located in order to reflect different perspectives within each ethnic site. Indeed, as Dvora Yanow notes, an ethnographic study can involve multiple observational areas within each site's geographic and political settings.[178] Based on these differences, I propose to classify research participants in a number of analytical categories, as will be detailed later. I now provide a brief outline of the Mon and Pa-O sites, while a comprehensive background will be provided in chapter 3.

Mon people are mostly concentrated in Lower Myanmar's Mon State, where they represent the majority group. Some communities live in the neighbouring Karen State and to a lesser extent in the Tanintharyi region. The Mon are one of the eight main ethnic groups recognised in Myanmar, who have given their name to the state where they historically represented the majority population. The Mon ethnic struggle is led by the NMSP who first signed a ceasefire agreement in 1995 and then joined the NCA in early 2019. Taking into account important distinctions in terms of governance between townships resulting from the 1995 ceasefire, this research included a total of seven townships in Mon State and one in Karen State: Mawlamyine, Chaungzon, Paung, Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships (Mon State) are considered to be under government control; Thanbyuzayat and Kyaikmayaw Townships (Mon State) present elements of mixed administration; and Ye Township (Mon State) and Kyainseikgyi (Karen State) are fully under NMSP control - although the central government and the *Tadmadaw* are also present in Ye city and along the coast.[179]

Unlike the Mon, the Pa-O do not have a state named after their ethnonym. Thus they represent a second nationality in each state and region in which they live. Pa-O are mostly located in Myanmar's borderland, particularly in the mountainous Shan State. Concentrated around the state capital, Taunggyi, they represent the biggest minority in Shan State. Some Pa-O people also live in the neighbouring Kayah State as well as further down south, in Bago Region, Mon State and Karen State. The constitution granted SAA status to Pa-O near Taunggyi in three townships where they constitute the

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[178] Dvora Yanow, "Dear Author, Dear Reader," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 294.
[179] See chapter 3 for background information on the NMSP's territorial control.

majority of the population. However, Pa-O also dominate a number of neighbouring townships that are not included in the SAA. The PNO led the Pa-O nationalist struggle since Myanmar's Independence until it entered into a close collaboration with the military government after signing a bilateral ceasefire in 1991. It is mainly present in Shan State, where it exercises direct and indirect influence in the SAA and its neighbouring townships.[180] The research took place in six townships in Shan State including the SAA - Hsiseng, Hopone and Pinlaung - and neighbouring townships – Taunggyi, Kyauttalone and Loilem - as well as in Thaton and Bilin townships in Mon State, Pa-an Township in Karen State, and Loikaw Township in Kayah State.

Since Mon and Pa-O people are scattered across several states, the determination of the "site" is personal rather than territorial. "Mon site" or "Pa-O site" thus refer to places where Mon or Pa-O live, rather than a specific location. For instance, Pa-O people living in Mon State still belong to the "Pa-O site" while Mon people living in Karen State belong to the "Mon site".

Selection of participants

Research participants were selected with the help of key informants, who, according to Valerie Gilchrist and Robert Williams, "possess special knowledge, status, or communication skills" and "have access to perspectives or observations denied to the researcher through other means."[181] Key informants are thus distinctive in that they are crucial to the researcher's access to the field and understanding of the local context. As mentioned above, my fieldwork was greatly facilitated by two previous work connections who were actively involved in their respective communities.

In the Mon site, a woman leading a civil society organisation (CSO) acted as the key informant, taking the lead in supporting each step of the research, even while pregnant and as a young mother. In the Pa-O site, a civil society leader was the initial key informant, helping with the introduction to a number of other key informants, who supported the research to various extents. A social welfare worker passionate about the

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[180] As Chapter 3 will explain further, they are also a number of other Pa-O EAOs.
[181] Valerie G. Gilchrist and Robert L. Williams, "Key Informants Interviews," in *Doing Qualitative Research*, ed. Benjamin F. Crabtree and William L. Miller, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1999), 73.

Pa-O struggle took on the role of primary key informant, organising most fieldwork trips across Pa-O townships in Shan State and driving me to remote communities in his own car where possible. In order to help with translation and driving, we were sometimes accompanied by two other mutual acquaintances, who also became - to a lesser extent – key informants. They were civil society members whom I had met during my previous work experience. I already had a close relationship with one of them who was a former student. He often invited me to come along to events and we regularly met in teashops to discuss issues that came up during interviews and for which I needed clarification. I also developed a new relationship with a civil society member who would often meet me at the teashop where we would talk about other research participants. The fieldwork conducted with Pa-O living in Mon State was mostly organised by the Mon key informant, with support from her Pa-O husband.

Because they were trusted members of Mon and Pa-O communities, key informants played a crucial role in identifying most research participants who agreed to take part in interviews and focus groups, and invited me to observe events. I also selected a number of participants via a commonly used method of purposive sampling, known as "snowball sampling." This strategy enables the researcher to access research participants through contact information provided by other participants, leading to "the point of saturation," as one starts to hear the same answers to substantive questions.[182] Most of the time, this method confirmed the choice of participants recommended by my key informants but it also contributed to opening new doors. For instance, a Pa-O civil society activist, to whom I happened to be connected through my work at EarthRights, organised several focus groups in his home town of Hopone with neighbourhood leaders, armed group members and with villagers from surrounding areas. He also invited me to observe a stakeholder meeting in preparation for national dialogue consultations held ahead of a 21st Century Panglong Conference. My Pa-O housemate connected me with a local activist who invited me to meet farmers from his village. A PNO official helped me organise a focus group with PNO members from Kyauttalong Township, in a village located an hour drive from Taunggyi. In turn, some of them took

[182] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1985), 233; Anton G. Kusel and Robert L. Williams, "Sampling in Qualitative Inquiry," in *Doing Qualitative Research*, ed. Benjamin F. Crabtree and William L. Miller, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1999), 41.

me to a remote village, where I later went back to spend more time. In another village, the *sayadaw* of the monastery where I first met my primary key informant helped me organise a consultation with the villagers.

In addition to the recruitment of research participants for interviews and focus groups, key informants offered their assistance with the facilitation of focus groups and with translation from the local language to English. As trusted and respected members of their respective communities, their involvement as facilitators and interpreters ensured that people were comfortable to share their opinions. Furthermore, as we spent extended periods of time living and traveling together, they developed a deep understanding of my research and I came to consider them as research collaborators, which is not uncommon.[183]

The use of key informants, however, while extremely useful in opening doors, came with a number of inherent limitations. The existence of prior personal contacts originating from my CSO networks may have directed the recruitment of participants linked with the nationalist community, particularly in Mon State, where I only had one key informant. While this limitation was partly addressed in the Pa-O site by the multiplicity of key informants, they were also mostly members of the nationalist community. While access to local communities largely depended on my connections with key informants, they usually contacted local community leaders who selected participants based on their availability and interest in the discussion. I now turn to a detailed presentation the research participants.

This research involved 499 research participants.[184] As advised by my key informants, I ensured that they came from a variety of socio-political backgrounds and geographic areas in order to reflect different perspectives within each ethnic site. For analytical purposes, a number of broad distinctions between participants can be drawn. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that ethno-nationalist leaders and urban intellectuals are more likely to have rigid positions on ethnicity than community members and rural people who may have more flexible attitudes. Based on this assumption, research

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[183] Gilchrist and Williams, "Key Informants Interviews," 75.
[184] This number includes 32 Mon and 61 Pa-O interviewees as well as 123 Mon and 182 Pa-O focus group discussion participants. See table in Appendix A for a breakdown of research participants per area.

participants can be categorised to reflect two main socio-political categories: members of the nationalist community (or "elites") and members of local communities.

Members of the nationalist community are characterised by their involvement in the nationalist movement and higher levels of education. As such, they are part of the "elite", which includes EAO-affiliated members who have been directly involved in the nationalist struggle, such as NMSP and PNO members. It also includes urban intellectuals who are politically or socially engaged people working with civil society organisations and political parties, as journalists, or through Buddhism. While the ethnic elite is concentrated in major cities such as Mawlamyine in Mon State and Taunggyi in Shan State, their networks expand to rural towns. Members of local communities are mostly located outside these main cities and live in rural towns or villages. They are characterised by their limited access to economic opportunities and lower levels of education. "Community members" thus refers to, for instance, villagers, farmers, shopkeepers, local teachers, and restaurant or hotel managers.

While the elite vs. community member distinction often overlaps with the traditional geographic divide between urban and rural areas, there is also another important geographic distinction: areas under government control vs. areas under ethnic control. Community members (rural or urban) living in areas under government control are likely to face a very different situation than those living under EAO control (rural or urban). The NMSP's control is direct in "liberated areas" and shared in a number of areas under mixed administration. The PNO's influence is direct in the SAA townships and indirect in neighbouring townships which are under government control but have a majority Pa-O population, excluding Taunggyi. The PNO's influence is, however, very limited in townships located in lower Myanmar. Although data analysis is the primary aim of such categorisation, the research will either verify the assumption that certain socio-political backgrounds or geographic areas hold a specific set of views or determine that such categories are irrelevant to explain what is just a continuum of views.

Immersion and language

Fieldwork was conducted during three successive trips in May-August 2016, December

2016-February 2017 and May-August 2017. The first trip was mostly spent in Mon State while the second trip was mostly spent in the Pa-O SAA in Shan State. During the last trip, I went to both areas. While this time in the field does not qualify as long-term fieldwork, my research is rooted in existing connections with ethnic people from Myanmar which enabled the rapid development of strong trust-based relationships with my key informants. In Mon State, I lived in an apartment rented by my key informant and her family at the outskirts of Mawlamyine. As the only westerner in the neighbourhood, I was undeniably raising looks of curiosity every time I ventured out the flat, riding my bike to visit local CSOs or attend events. In the Pa-O SAA, I first lived in the heart of Taunggyi, in a house shared by young Shan and Pa-O activists working for a CSO led by my Shan friend. Then I spent time in a Pa-O monastery where my key informant was staying. Following his advice, I initially participated in a meditation retreat, and later the *sayadaw* allowed me to stay without meditating while I was conducting my research. There, I had the chance to meet with a young woman who became my friend and regularly invited me for dinner in her family's traditional bamboo house. My daily presence in the informants' settings gave me invaluable access to their respective communities by creating a sense of trust and rapport.

My Burmese language skills also greatly supported my access to the field. I started learning the fundamentals of Burmese language in the years prior to commencing my PhD research. In 2013, as part of my professional development, I started taking short-term intensive courses with the famous and late John Okell in Chiang Mai and Yangon, twice a year. Between 2007 and 2012, I was living in Thailand and therefore focused on learning Thai language. My priorities changed to Burmese language, however, as I started spending most of my time in Yangon. Since the fluency I developed in Thai had opened so many doors, I was determined to gain a similar level in Burmese language. Not only did I want to navigate the practicalities of everyday life, but I also strived to genuinely connect with the people I met and ultimately develop a deeper understanding of Myanmar's culture. My command of Burmese rapidly improved as I seized any everyday life opportunity to interact with taxi drivers, shopkeepers, friends and colleagues. Equipped with an intermediate command of Burmese when I started my doctoral studies, I further improved my language skills during my fieldwork. The fact that I spent my first fieldwork trip living with my Mon friend and key informant helped

me greatly with my command of sentence structures as well as with developing vocabulary specific to my research. Since she is married to a Pa-O man, Burmese was the household language. In addition, when I was in Canberra for a few months before returning to the field, I greatly benefited from bi-weekly one-on-one conversation sessions with several Burmese students who were living in Canberra.

Despite the fact Burmese is not the first language spoken in the sites of the research, I chose to refine my Burmese language skills instead of learning Mon and Pa-O languages from scratch prior to conducting my fieldwork because learning a language is a slow process. Furthermore, Mon and Pa-O languages are very different from Burmese language and from each other. I thought that since Burmese is the lingua franca, I would be able to have informal conversations with most participants and possibly conduct interviews and focus groups with the help of an interpreter to ensure that I could grasp the entirety of the conversation and its nuances.

Speaking the language of the majority provided me with invaluable insights but I was well aware of its intrinsic disadvantage. Although being unable to speak the native language is not ideal when conducting ethnographic work, I was able to mitigate this limitation in several ways. First, unless the participants were fluent in English or did not speak their ethnic language, I engaged the help of a local interpreter to conduct the focus groups and interviews in Mon and Pa-O language. The choice of the interpreter was critical: in each site, the main interpreters were known, respected and trusted community members, which meant that research participants felt confident to express themselves. The main interpreters were also my key informants, whom I considered research collaborators. As highlighted earlier, their insights into my research meant I could fully trust them in acting as focus group facilitators and as language intermediaries between the participants and myself. Since our interaction went beyond formal interviews or focus groups their input was also invaluable when analysing events and discussions, and unpacking meanings. Finally, my main key informants proved quite skilled at making people of all backgrounds feel comfortable, through a mixture of professionalism and friendly humour.

Another reason I chose to enhance my Burmese language skills was that, although Burmese is not the first language used in Mon and Pa-O sites, some participants were

more comfortable responding in Burmese. This was either because they were not able to speak their ethnic language or because their own languages had limited vocabulary to discuss the issues studied. As a result, discussions sometimes defaulted to Burmese or fluctuated between two languages. This meant that in addition to the translation provided by my interpreters, I was able to mostly understand discussions that had this dual language feature. There was one exception, however, to translation from the local language to English: when interviewing or discussing with Pa-O people living in Mon State, translations relied on the joint efforts of my Mon key informant and her Pa-O husband, who did not speak English.

1.2.5 Data collection and analysis

Reflecting an ethnographic sensitivity, my research relied centrally on what Schatz describes as "person-to-person contact as a way to elicit 'insiders' perspectives' and meanings."[185] Indeed, I use "site intensive methods" which Benjamin Read defines as "the collection of evidence from human subjects within their own context."[186] I managed to gather such "insiders' perspectives" through participant observation of meetings and social gatherings, interviews and focus groups as well as – to a lesser extent the review of documents. This thesis may draw on more interviews and focus groups than many ethnographic works do because comparison across sites is essential to the research design and as a result, prolonged participant observation in one area was more difficult. My choice is similar to Wood's, who argues that the types of data collected can represent a "compromise between the needs for multi-sites and for in-depth local research with an ethnographic sensitivity despite less sustained participant observation than a single site would have allowed."[187] Nonetheless, as the following sections further demonstrate, interviews and focus groups also provided invaluable opportunities for participant observation.

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[185] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 2.
[186] Cited in Jourde, "The Ethnographic Sensitivity," 202.
[187] Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ethnographic Research in the Shadow of Civil War," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 120.

Participant observation

Participant observation is a unique way of collecting data and has its roots in anthropology. As a method relying on everyday life processes, scholars have defined participant observation in many ways. With respect to political ethnography, Walsh defines participant observation as a balance between the two roles: "The researcher is enough of a participant that she has access to the people she wishes to study and is allowed to remain in the setting in which they meet, but she is mainly an observer."[188] This definition characterised various unplanned events or visits in which I was involved, as well as, in some respects, interviews and focus groups.

In the Mon site, I attended the 69th Mon Revolution day, which also marked the highly acclaimed inauguration of the *Hinthar* statue (a Brahminy duck, symbolic of the Mon) at the entrance of Mawlamyine. This replacement of a Bamar symbol by the Mon statue was a major event during my first fieldwork trip where I also had the opportunity to observe its construction. Travelling back and forth between Mawlamyine and Chaungzon Township using the newly built bridge, the name of which encountered strong resistance from local people, I observed that crossing the bridge systematically triggered reactions from other fellow travellers. I was also involved in Pagoda visits with my key informant and participated in a donation ceremony where we provided food to 800 monks in Mon State's renowned Pa-Auk forest monastery. On several occasions, I also participated in recreational trips with my key informant's family.

In the Pa-O site where I stayed in a monastery for several weeks, I had the opportunity to observe the importance of Buddhism in villagers' everyday life. I unexpectedly witnessed an important full moon day celebration, one that involved a donation ceremony to a thousand monks coming from different townships and involving hundreds of villagers. More than just a demonstration of devotion, it was also an occasion for families and friends to gather and connect around snacks. Despite the important role the monastery plays in providing important services, including Pa-O literature classes, English languages classes, food conservation and school dormitories, I learned that religious life was sometimes also perceived as an additional burden, with

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[188] Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens," 171.

the requirement that each family provided a volunteer member to prepare food for the monks and meditators on a regular basis.

With friends, or people I interviewed more formally, I also visited pagodas and attended dance competitions. These reinforced my observations that Pa-O take a strong interest in religious and cultural traditions. Notably, I spent a day at the Thamseng cave pagoda during a twelve-day monthly festival organised by its well-known abbot. I witnessed the devotion of Pa-O volunteers who preach Buddhist teachings every single hour of the festival. My key informant invited me to participate in his family's donation lunch organised in his native village's monastery. I also had a chance to spend time in a remote village without sealed road access and electricity, which gave me an invaluable insight of what life looks like for a majority of Pa-O people.

My participation in such events and visits created a level of rapport with participants and demonstrated that I was accepted in the community. It thus enabled the collection of data that would not have been otherwise possible. Indeed, beyond participant observation as a form of data collection, such events or visits always provided opportunities for unstructured interviews and often resulted in the organisation of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These semi-structured interviews and focus groups also gave me a chance to collect data as participant observer as explained in the following sections. As a result of these direct interactions with Mon and Pa-O individuals over time, I developed an understanding of my research participants' behaviour in their own context. I was thus able to "internalize their basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations."[189] This process was recorded in field notes that form part of my analysis and inform my "thick descriptions".[190]

Interviews

I used a mix of semi-structured and unstructured interviews because, as David Fetterman argues, "interviews explain and put into a larger context what the

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[189] David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography : Step by Step*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998), 35.
[190] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

ethnographer sees and experiences."[191] I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews in the Mon site and 54 in the Pa-O site. Sometimes an interview included two or three participants, as more participants than expected spontaneously joined the conversation. Semi-structured interviews mostly took place at the interviewees' offices and homes. In the Mon site, since my key informant and interpreter was pregnant and then had a young baby, some participants were happy to come to her home. The majority of interview respondents belonged to the nationalist community, including CSO leaders, religious leaders, community leaders, social welfare workers, writers, political parties and EAOs. Where possible community members, such as farmers, teachers or tour guides were also interviewed, but the opinions of these groups were mostly recorded through focus groups. In order to respect the respondents' security concerns and promote open answers, I avoided recording interviews unless participants offered to do so. Depending on the formality of the interview, I took notes directly on my computer or on a notebook, which I reviewed in the evening.

Interviews usually lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and a half, with an average of one hour depending on the interlocutor's eloquence. Discussions were inspired but not limited by a series of open-ended questions relating to perceptions of ethnic identity, perceived challenges to the community with a focus on specific threats to ethnic identity, aspirations and policies that could create a sense of inclusion, relationship with the majority group, representation of EAOs, administrative division of power, perception of the country's name, trust in state institutions, political allegiances and identification with the state. I gradually developed and adjusted my interview protocol after conducting interviews as new themes emerged and others appeared as irrelevant.

In addition, I conducted unstructured interviews, which are also very common in in ethnographic work.[192] I often carried out informal interviews with individuals that I had previously interviewed in a more structured way, either because a new situation piqued my interest in hearing their opinion, or because I wanted to further explore some issues that were unexpectedly raised during an interview, or because it was not possible to elicit authentic answers in a semi-structured setting. For instance, in the Pa-O site, I

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[191] Fetterman, *Ethnography*, 37.
[192] Fetterman, *Ethnography*, 38.

interviewed a political party member at his office during office hours and later realised through other informal conversation that unless I came back without an official interviewing purpose, other members may monitor the interview and thus have an impact on the answers.

I also had many opportunities to participate in what David Gray describes as "informal conversational interviews."[193] For instance, I had ongoing informal discussions with my key informants as we prepared and debriefed interviews. I also had multiple interactions with other people involved in the organisations or political parties where I had already interviewed participants more formally. I also engaged in multiple conversations with people who did not know anything about my research at such times as: during or after the observation of an event, as well as during every-day life interactions with hotel or restaurant staff, shopkeepers and villagers. These discussions provided me with useful information on the research setting that I recorded in my field notes as soon as I had a moment to do so.

Importantly, interviews also gave me a chance to collect data as participant observer. Indeed, I was often involved in what Walsh describes as a "post-interview conversation" whereby I was "primarily a listener and a guest in a person's home and community" when they were in a position to connect contemporary events with personal stories in a way that reflected their own identity and perspectives.[194] After every interview, I always put down my pen or closed my laptop. Often, participants started a new conversation either to clarify one aspect of the interview or to ask my thoughts on certain issues. In these moments, reflecting Walsh's comments, I noticed that people often stopped being "interview respondents" and started to be themselves. [195]

Focus groups

I chose to use focus groups because they can generate "rich and diverse views, opinions

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[193] David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 217.
[194] Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens," 170.
[195] Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens," 171.

and experiences from diverse participants."[196] I conducted 14 focus groups in the Mon site and 25 focus groups in the Pa-O site. Following the snowball sampling method, participants were identified with the help of my key informants who personally knew one of the participants, whom would then take responsibility for inviting other people from their community. The number of participants varied between three to sixteen people and was never predictable: some people who said they would come were not available and other spontaneously interested people showed up. As mentioned earlier, impromptu focus groups also took place, often in connection with a particular event I was able to observe. As a result, the implicit consent to participate in the focus group was expressed by the mere voluntary presence of the participants.

The use of focus groups enabled me to emphasise a grassroots perspective and therefore counter-balance views from the nationalist elite. Indeed, participants predominantly included local community members, including farmers, villagers, women, youth and community leaders. Considering the lower level of education and political awareness of community members, focus groups were very useful to generate rich and diverse views from participants who might not have been able to articulate their thoughts in a one-on-one context. In a limited number of cases focus groups also involved "elites" such as members of a CSO, a cultural organisation or a political party.

Focus groups usually lasted between one and two hours and started with an explanation of the purpose of the research. Taking into account the limited political knowledge of people living in remote communities, discussions were set around five main topics drawn from the interview questions: ethnic identity, the main challenges faced by the ethnic community and how to address them, policies that could promote inclusiveness, the representation of armed organisations and identification with the state. Depending on the participants' preferences, the topics were discussed in smaller groups or as a whole group. In order to foster trust and rapport, I ensured that participants had an opportunity to ask any question or engage in any issue at the end of the session.

While I initially led the focus groups, I gradually let my key informants and interpreters

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[196] Judith B. Brown, "The Use of Focus groups in Clinical Research," in *Doing Qualitative Research Benjamin F. Crabtree and William L. Miller*, ed. Benjamin F. Crabtree and William L. Miller, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications, 1999), 113.

act as facilitators as they developed an in-depth understanding of my research. The first seven focus groups were conducted with the help of three Mon participants who are grassroots activists and were selected with the support of my key informant. I organised a two-day workshop to get feedback on the discussion questions and activities as well as prepare them to conduct focus groups on their own. A month later, we met again to discuss the data gathered. This method, which indirectly involved a high number of participants, was detrimental to the qualitative nature of the research and not appropriate to answer the research question for reasons outlined above. Indeed, the insights gained through my presence as participant observer were as valuable as the data gathered through the discussions. This is because focus groups also often turned into "post-interview conversations" which provided me with a great opportunity for participant observation. Since focus groups involved voluntary participation or were organised impromptu after attending particular events, it felt like I was observing conversations between people who gathered of their own free will.[197] In addition, Jenny Kitzinger argues, interaction between the participants and the group dynamics can also be a source of data and I found this to be the case.[198] While differences of opinions within a group were common, these sometimes led to intense discussions and to "turning points", where people changed their mind after hearing personal evidence from other participants.[199] On several occasions, I could observe that only a few participants were leading the discussion while others listened attentively. It seemed that some were eager to learn something while others were bored and rapidly left the discussion. Often women were very shy, especially when men dominated the conversation. The facilitators gently tried to encourage quiet people and particularly women to speak up to break the cultural expectation that politics is men's business. It was thus very powerful when some women unexpectedly took the floor and made brief but very strong statements. In the Mon site, my key informant organised a focus group with a family in their own house and I could observe that a grandmother was always interrupting her son. Soon after he understood that I noticed that his answers made her feel uncomfortable, he explained that his mother was traumatised by previous oppression.

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[197] Walsh, "Scholars as Citizens," 171.
[198] Jenny Kitzinger, "The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction between Research Participants," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 16, no. 1 (1994): 103–121.
[199] Kitzinger, "The Methodology of Focus Groups," 113.

In the Pa-O site, I experienced some difficulties in meeting Pa-O people from the remote villages of Karen State. The only time I visited a village, it was impossible to talk to people as a member of the Myanmar intelligence, wildly known as the Special Branch, was in the same room. The discussion was awkward and not very meaningful as participants requested to give their answers on paper. Although in such situations, it was difficult to gather information through the traditional discussion, the dynamics of the situation itself revealed important aspects of people's lives.

Data analysis

Between each fieldwork trip, I reviewed documents, field notes, interviews and focus groups transcripts and started analysing them through an inductive process of coding. The process of coding refers to the description and aggregation of data from different sources into small categories of information. I then sought to connect and cluster these codes into broader units of information or themes.[200] For instance the codes "negation of symbolic representations", "Bamar vision of history", "restrictions of language in education", and "demographic assimilation" were clustered under the theme "cultural insecurity"; the codes "sharing natural resources", "developing markets", and "job opportunities" were aggregated under the theme "access to economic opportunities". I then identified three central themes around which I organised my analysis: ethnic insecurities; attitudes towards a common identity; and ethnic aspirations. In order to generate analytical coherence in accordance to an ethnographic approach, I did not look at the data through a pre-existing framework.[201] I created a framework that reflects local context when, for instance, I identified four types of "ethnic insecurities" (see chapter 4). I also used a number of existing frameworks that I combined in order to present the various "ethnic aspirations" (see chapter 5) in a way that reflects the local context. Because comparison between two ethnic sites is central to the persuasiveness of my argument, I deliberately chose to present my findings thematically rather than focusing on each site separately. However, within each theme, data concerning the Mon and the Pa-O is presented separately and then followed by comparative remarks.

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[200] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 184–86.
[201] Schatz, "Methods Are Not Tools," 6.

Finally, in accordance with the transformative worldview, my interpretation of the data seeks to propose "transformative solutions."[202] I interpret ethnic perspectives to appraise existing theories of ethnic conflict management and the institutional models they propose, which will be developed in chapter 2. The interpretation I propose is thus questioning the relevance of these models in Myanmar and suggesting ways to adapt such models so that inclusive institutions are developed in a way that reflects the local context.

1.2.6 Reflections on my position as a researcher

I was mindful of the potential for researcher bias and how my position as a researcher might impact the inquiry. Engaging in a process of reflexivity, I acknowledge that ethnographic research is not " insulated from the wider society and from the biography of the researcher."[203] As Yanow points out, the nature of interpretative research implies that objectivity understood as "the ability of the researcher to stand outside the subject of study" is conceptually impossible.[204] I therefore recognise that any truth-claim I make in this thesis is necessarily partial.[205] I was thus sensitive to the fact that my personal experiences may affect my interpretation of the findings. For instance, I am aware that as a result of my professional experience with people from ethnic backgrounds on the Thai-Burma border I may have developed a bias towards the plight of ethnic people. As highlighted earlier, this experience clearly determined my choice to focus on ethnic minority groups and not on the Bamar majority. Furthermore, the research prompted me to reflect critically as to my position as a foreign Western researcher. For instance, because I was questioning the assumptions that I was carrying towards state building and inclusiveness, my analysis reveals conflicting perspectives in order to convey the diversity of views expressed by Mon and Pa-O people. As a "white" outsider and therefore member of the dominant section of my own society, I also reflected on my legitimacy to conduct research on power and privilege. Inspired by Ackerly and True's reflections on positionality, I sought to stay mindful of the "relationship of power" in which research participants are embedded. I also attempted to

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[202] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 32.
[203] Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography : Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routlegde, 2007), 15.
[204] Yanow, "Dear Author, Dear Reader," 287.
[205] Schatz, "Introduction," 15.

recognise such a relationship between myself and the research participants or the key informants.[206] Consequently, I was aware of the potential impact of my presence or the presence of my interpreters on the perspectives communicated by individuals and how it might contribute to co-create narratives.[207] For instance, the discrepancy between the narratives of certain political party officials and those of ordinary people led me to suspect that my position as a researcher would prevent me from eliciting corroborating information. Nevertheless, I encountered words of appreciation from a majority of research participants who were very grateful for having a chance to share their opinions and stories.

I also reflected on the limitations inherent in the nature of my inquiry. Indeed, making judgements and recommendations about a particular institutional model can be problematic, irrespective of the variety of the data gathered. Listening to peoples' voices regarding what institutions to build presents a major challenge: the distinction between what are the researcher's a priori prescriptive assessments and what is actually the result of research and analysis. The use of statements from participants, who already represent a biased sample, to assess people's perspectives and what they actually "want", and develop a narrative about the right institutions for Myanmar may appear arbitrary or at least not entirely objective.

Since the assessment of what institutional model appears as the right fit to address concerns of Mon and Pa-O participants is based on my own judgment of the informants' responses, such an assessment was inevitably made through the filter of my own preferences as the researcher. However, I sought to minimise this pitfall by ensuring that I did not probe interview subjects about specific institutional models as "solutions". Instead the questions I asked in relation to potential "solutions" were open-ended and general, such as, "What changes would you like to see in the way the country is governed?" Sometimes I asked sensitive questions about the current institutions such as "What do you think about the existence of ethnic based states and SAAs?" The fact that many respondents actually emphasised the need for policies promoting equality rather

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[206] Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, "Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations," *International Studies Review* 10(4) (2008): 698.
[207] Ackerly and True, "Reflexivity in Practice," 703.

than specific institutional arrangements, with the exception of federalism, is also evidence that the research participants were not explicitly consulted regarding various models. Instead, their aspirations and correlations with these models were made as inferences of the researcher. In the case of responses that directly mentioned specific institutions, such as federalism, I ensured that respondents were aware of what it implied and discovered that the range of knowledge on its possible implementation varied greatly. In summary, this thesis is just an attempt to advance our understanding of how local perspectives can inform state building strategies that promote more inclusiveness.

1.2.7 Validation strategies

In this section, I emphasise how various elements discussed in this methodology section contribute to the validity of my study. More specifically, I want to discuss some "validation strategies" I employed, which Creswell describes as "accepted strategies" documenting the accuracy of the findings.[208] First, as emphasised earlier, my longstanding connection with the country and continued observation allowed me to develop a holistic understanding of the context and build trust with participants. This enabled me to check for misinformation on a regular basis, whether it be a misunderstanding from my part or a distortion of facts by the participants. Second, a triangulation strategy guided my data analysis. My research is not only based on primary data, which I collected through different methods - participant observation, interviews and focus groups – but it also draws from secondary data such as academic literature, government and organisation reports, and news articles. I was thus able to corroborate evidence by testing one source against the other in order to identify themes. Third, I used a "member checking" strategy by which I solicited participants' perspectives on the credibility of my findings and interpretations.[209] The first time I used this strategy was when I organised the workshop to prepare Mon participants who would conduct the first focus groups. As mentioned earlier, the first part of the workshop was about getting their feedback on my research. More specifically, we discussed the relevance of my questions as well as the validity of a preliminary analysis

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[208] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 250–52.
[209] Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 314.

by which I identified a number of analytical categories classifying ethnic aspirations. I then had an opportunity to present my findings at conferences, one of which was a Mon forum, organised by the Australian National University. There, I was able to meet again with some participants who provided me with valuable comments.

1.2.8 Ethical considerations

As with any other form of human activity, social research is subject to ethical considerations, which according to Hammersley and Atkinson include informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research.[210] The political context in Myanmar had implications in the way I upheld these ethical principles.

Decades of military control, oppression of political dissidence and restrictions on research have largely eased in the years after the Thein Sein government took office. My experience in talking about political issues in public areas was very different in 2012 and the subsequent years compared to what it was in 2010. Back then, I met a number of people who were willing to talk about sensitive issues in teashops or in their offices but I was very concerned that my mere presence would cause them trouble. When I came back in 2012, the situation seemed totally different: there was mobile phone reception, a lot more traffic and people were very upbeat about political change and seizing every opportunity to talk about political issues. In addition, I was gradually allowed to conduct work activities in ethnic areas as by 2014 my organisation considered it safe for me as well as for the local people involved. However, the psychological effect of military rule on ordinary people described by Christina Fink is still present today, especially in rural areas where little has changed except phone coverage and some infrastructure development.[211] This context had implications mostly in terms of consent, privacy and harm.

First, I did not use consent forms because they tend to make people nervous, mostly because they may believe I could hold what they say against them.[212] Despite this, I complied with the university ethics approval requirement. After I explained the purpose

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[210] Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 209–18.
[211] Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*.
[212] Lisa Brooten and Rosalie Metro, "Thinking about Ethics in Burma Research," *Journal of Burma Studies* 18, no. 1 (2014): 12.

of my research and its potential outcome, participants expressed their oral consent to be part of it and they were aware of the ways in which they could withdraw it. While the trust and rapport I had with my key informants was essential to gain access to the research participants, the assurance of confidentiality was critical to ensure that they were at ease to express their opinions. I consider that respect of their privacy implies that they "own" the information furnished about themselves and thus can control its use in the thesis or other publications.[213] While all participants agreed that the information they disclosed would be made public, some were not comfortable to be publicly associated with that information because they feared possible retributions. Since the question of confidentially was interconnected with protecting participants from harm, I decided that I would not identify any participants, with the exception of public figures. In addition, I was mindful that my research on ethnic aspirations involved a sensitive issue which is still the cause of armed conflict in some areas, including a part of Shan State were the Pa-O site is located. Because my research is conceptually interconnected with ethnic conflict, I applied what Kovats-Bernat describes as a "localized ethic" by which I relied on the local knowledge of my key informants to assess research risks for participants and decide on the appropriate behaviour.[214] For instance, the decision to go to areas controlled by the NMSP in Mon State or in townships with restricted access such as Loilem in Shan State was based on their judgement. Finally, I always sought to develop a relationship with participants, which is built on "mutual respect, dignity and trust". I certainly did not want engage in any form of exploitation whereby the "researcher takes what is wanted and leaves."[215] I thus always provided an opportunity for the participants to ask questions and also ask what I could do to further support them. For most people, the outcome of the research was already a form of pay back as they were eager for me to "let other people know". In one case, I organised a follow-up workshop at the demand of the participants.

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[213] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, "Ethics: The Failure of Positivist Science," *The Review of Higher Education* 12, no. 3 (1989): 236.
[214] J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat, "Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork amid Violence and Terror," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 1 (2002): 214.
[215] Lincoln and Guba, "Ethics," 230.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide context to Myanmar's current identity crisis. The description of ethnic identity in Myanmar as having recently solidified into a strong and politicised marker of identity will be further discussed in chapter 2 as I examine different perspectives on the nature of ethno-national identities and in chapter 5 as I look specifically at Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity. Stressing how the dominance of the Bamar cultural identity has contributed to the rigidification of ethnic identities in Myanmar, I signalled that exclusion from the national identity and the absence of an institutional response accommodating ethnic nationalities' demands for autonomy continue to fuel the seven decade long conflict that Myanmar is facing. Highlighting that the lack of political will was a major obstacle to political reform in Myanmar, I stressed the importance of exploring ways that institutional design could support ethnic actors regain a sense of belonging to the national identity while not directly threatening the military establishment. I thus suggested that this study could address the Myanmar literature's lack of broad engagement with institutional models for ethnic conflict management and its limited consideration of grassroots voices. Turning to the methodology, I presented my approach to the study of state building in Myanmar as a political ethnographic endeavour and discussed the methods employed at length. By including descriptions of concrete fieldwork situations to illustrate my methodological choices, I sought to use information that is not necessarily included in the analysis to set a backdrop for my research. The following chapter will outline the conceptual framework underpinning this study.

CHAPTER 2 - A Conceptual Framework: Democratisation, Ethnic Identity and Institutional Design in Divided Societies

> *"It is probably in divided societies that institutional arrangements have the greatest impact [and that] institutional design can systematically favour or disadvantage ethnic, national, and religious groups."* [1]

While there is consensus in the state building and conflict management literature on the importance of institutions to accommodate and manage differences in a peaceful way, there is no agreement on what institutions are the most suitable to achieve the twin goals of peace and democracy.[2] This chapter considers the theoretical debates underpinning the challenges of nation building in democratising multinational societies and the question of institutional design for the management of deeply divided societies.

Firstly, I provide some theoretical background to the concepts of democracy and democratic transition, which is helpful in justifying the broad characterisation of Myanmar as a "democratising state." Secondly, seeking to understand the challenges of nation building in democratising multinational societies and Myanmar in particular, I introduce distinct theories on the nature of ethnic identity and discuss a number of factors that are helpful in explaining the occurrence of ethnic violence. I argue that the question of national belonging is central to the issue of ethnic conflict and that the process of state building should take into account the political salience of ethnic identities. Thirdly, I discuss the role of institutions in promoting the effective management of ethnic conflict. After explaining how institutional design can contribute to sustaining peace while the process of state building takes places, I introduce the conceptual debate underpinning possible state responses to diversity along an integration/accommodation continuum. I then turn to three different areas in which institutions can have an impact on the management of ethnic conflict: territorial

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[1] Katharine Belmont, Scott Mainwaring, and Andrew Reynolds, "Introduction: Institutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy," in *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy*, ed. Andrew Reynolds (Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.
[2] Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building," 1778.

structure; powers and relationships of government institutions; and the recognition and protection of different identities. I finally introduce six institutional models that combine these strategies in different ways. While this chapter evaluates how the political salience of ethnicity might influence the choice of a model, the final chapter will examine the relevance of these models to Myanmar in conjunction with an analysis of the ethnographic findings reported in chapters 4-6.

2.1 Democracy and democratisation

This thesis requires a definition of democracy in order to understand the need to adapt democratic institutions to manage diversity and respond to the specific context of divided societies. A definition of democratisation and democratic consolidation is helpful to situate the challenges that characterise this period and provides an opportunity to characterise Myanmar's current political changes and support its qualification as a "democratising state."

2.1.1 Democracy and its limitations in divided societies

Definitions of democracy can take two different forms, substantive and procedural. While substantive definitions are concerned with the outcomes of democracy, procedural definitions are concerned with how democracy works.

Arguing that a democracy does not involve a unique set of institutions, Schmitter and Karl draw from Joseph Shumpeter's earlier definition to propose the following substantive definition: "Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives".[3] The value of a substantive definition of democracy is that it identifies meaningful political participation and the accountability of rulers to citizens as core characteristics while leaving space for each democratic system to define its own political community. However, by failing to specify what institutions democratic systems have in common, such substantive definitions lack analytical clarity as specific attributes cannot be

[3] Philippe C Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 76; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: G. Allen & Unwin ltd, 1943).

verified empirically.[4]

By contrast, procedural definitions emphasise the democratic mechanisms or institutions that a system must have to be considered a democracy. Rather than focus on the outcome, procedural definitions are interested in the processes of the democratic system. Since these definitions are concerned with how the system works, the question of which procedural standards should be included have been widely debated. As a result, the literature on democracy offers different procedural definitions: minimalist democracy, electoral democracy, polyarchy and liberal democracy.

Minimalist definitions are limited to elections only and do not contain any rights protections. Larry Diamond described a minimalist democracy as "free and fair multiparty elections by secret and universal ballot".[5] The limitation of such procedural definition is that while elections can be free and fair, it does not guarantee the existence of political freedom and therefore the process may not actually be competitive and meaningful. Zakaria has described freely elected governments that do not protect civic and political freedoms as "illiberal democracies."[6] By contrast, an electoral definition of democracy includes the existence of two components: regular free and fair elections, and adequate political freedoms. Free and fair elections imply that elections are held on a regular basis, that all adult citizens can vote, and be candidates without coercion and that adequate political freedom such as the freedom of association and speech must be present.[7] Indeed, without these conditions, voters could not access vital information and as a result, elections would be meaningless. While the electoral definition is more complete than a minimalist definition, Dahl's seminal "polyarchy" offers one additional condition: the control of government power and policy making by elected representatives, which implies that unelected forces such as the military cannot have any political power.[8] Liberal democracy offers the most rigorous procedural definition of democracy. Building on polyarchy, Diamond's definition broadens freedoms to

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[4] Guillermo A. O'Donnell, "Democracy, Law, and Comparative Politics," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 1 (2001): 12.
[5] Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 5.
[6] Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004).
[7] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 269–72; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave : Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 7.
[8] Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

incorporate extensive individual and group rights. In addition, it stresses the importance of ensuring the rule of law through the existence of checks and balances between the branches of government.[9]

The strength of a procedural definition of democracy is that it highlights how institutions should work to guarantee that participation is meaningful and that power can only be in the hand of elected representatives who are accountable to the people and each other. The weakness of such a definition is however that it rests on two assumptions which are not valid in divided societies: the assumption that opposition parties will have a chance to get elected and the assumption that the parties in power will not abuse that power. [10] Indeed, the leading figures on the debate on constitutional design for divided societies have argued that a procedural conception of competitive democracy can be insufficient in divided societies. Donald Horowitz has warned that in majoritarian democracy for instance, democratic procedures can result in the complete exclusion of minority groups.[11] In his seminal work on *Democracy in Plural Societies*, Arend Lijphart claimed that in divided societies, cleavages based on identity are self-reinforcing and create immoderation.[12] As a result, although their solutions – which will be explored in more detail in section 2.5 - are radically different, they both propose to address this challenge of plural democracy through constitutional design. Indeed, even within a liberal democracy, which provides more guarantees to protect minority rights, minority groups would still be excluded from the decision-making unless complementary institutional arrangements were specifically designed to accommodate minority demands. Similarly, while defending a minimalist definition of democracy Adam Przeworski still acknowledges that elections are not enough to resolve conflict and recognises "the need for thinking about institutional design."[13] This implies that democracy should not only be defined by its procedures, but also by its outcome.[14] Both

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[9] Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 10–11.
[10] Sujit Choudhry, "Bridging Comparative Politics and Comparative Constitutional Laws: Constitutional Design in Divided Societies," in *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.
[11] Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," 31.
[12] Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 3.
[13] Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense," 1999, 16.
[14] Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization Theory and Experience* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 11–12; Schmitter and Karl, "What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not," 81–82.

the substantive and procedural definitions should be used conjointly to characterise the democratic system, which is both a process and an outcome. This study therefore adopts Diamond's liberal definition of democracy while retaining Schmitter and Karl's substantive definition, which emphasises meaningful participation and accountability as the core outcomes of the democratic system.

2.1.2 Democratic transition and the case of Myanmar

In this thesis, democratic transition and democratisation are used interchangeably. Dan Reiter describes a democratic transition as "the movement from a system of authoritarian rule to one of institutionalised, democratic governance".[15] Alternatively, Bertrand and Haklai define democratisation more broadly as a "significant and relatively sudden shift away from authoritarian to more open politics involving some rotation of government through periodic elections."[16]

Read in conjunction with the liberal definition of democracy, Reiter's broad definition suggests that democratic transition refers to the process of state building during which democratic rules, procedures and institutions are gradually established in four areas: the introduction of political competition through free and fair elections, the extension of civic, political and group freedoms, the removal of any unelected power, and the institutionalisation of checks and balances to limit the executive power. Such definition may therefore exclude countries that have not started reforms in all four areas. By contrast, Bertrand and Haklai's definition seems to consider the presence of political competition as sufficient to signpost the existence of a democratisation process. Democratic transition or democratisation should however be distinguished from "liberalisation", which refers mainly to the expansion of freedoms. According to Huntington, liberalisation implies that steps are made in the democratic direction, without changing the regime through elections.[17] Nonetheless, whether a country is going through a liberalisation or transition away from authoritarian rule towards a more democratic form of government, there is no guarantee that democratic consolidation will be the result.

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[15] Dan Reiter, "Does Peace Nature Democracy?," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 3 (2001): 936.
[16] Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," 2.
[17] Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 9.

The consolidation of a democratic transition has been widely discussed.[18] While the liberal definition of democracy points towards the realisation of four essential features – political competition; presence of freedoms; removal of unelected powers; and checks and balances – Alfred Stepan et al. suggest that a democracy is consolidated when it is deeply internalised as the "only game in town".[19] However, O'Donnell and Schmitter warn that the process of democratic transition may perhaps never be complete.[20] States which have adopted one of the features of a consolidated democracy while maintaining non-democratic characteristics are usually referred to as "democratising states".[21] For instance, Bertrand and Haklai note that democratic transitions in multinational societies have commonly produced new regimes characterised by the dominance of a majority group and the ethno-centrism of its political leaders, which cast the nation as an expression of their specific group. Despite regular elections, the majoritarian executive remains unchecked and ethnic minorities are deprived of protection and rights.[22]

Such description resonates with the situation in Myanmar, which this thesis considers as a "democratising state" rather than just as a liberalising country. Most would argue that the *Tatmadaw*'s goal in 2010 was only to partially liberalise and go no further. Indeed, since 2011, Myanmar has had a hybrid regime in which civilian governments have been highly constrained by the *Tatmadaw*, particularly in regard to the peace process and political reform. However, with the introduction of free and fair elections since 2015, Myanmar has moved beyond the mere expansion of freedoms – although some analysts note a "democratic backsliding" in particular in relation to the arrest and prosecution of activists, journalists and social media users for discussing sensitive topics or

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[18] For a discussion of democratic consolidation, see for example: Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 266; Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 5–6; Wolfgang Merkel, "The Consolidation of Post-Autocratic Democracies: A Multi-Level Model," *Democratization* 5, no. 3 (1998): 40; Thomas Carothers, "The 'Sequencing' Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 12–27.

[19] That is, "when no significant group seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime or secede"; when "the overwhelmingly majority of the people believe that any further political change must emerge from within the parameters of the democratic formulas"; and "when all the actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to the established norms." Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 5.

[20] Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, "Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 6.

[21] Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence : Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York London: New York London : W.W. Norton, 2000), 26; Ted R. Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), 38.

[22] Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities."

criticising the government.[23] Nevertheless, since Aung San Suu Kyi was able to create the state counsellor position and become the de facto head of government, the current political reforms have gone further than the *Tatmadaw* intended.

While Myanmar has moved beyond liberalisation, it has yet to initiate reforms in all four areas included in the definition of democratisation adopted in this thesis. As Bünte et al. demonstrate, all the well-known democracy indexes show that although Myanmar has made some progress in recent years, it is still far from genuine democratisation as serious political governance issues still plague the country.[24] As a result, 2018 indexes still qualify Myanmar as a "hard-line autocracy", "hybrid regime", "partly free" and an "electoral autocracy.[25] Indeed, as discussed in chapter 1, with the unelected *Tatmadaw* still holding parliamentary seats and key ministries, limited freedoms and rule of law as well as a weak system of checks and balances, I acknowledge that Myanmar remains a hybrid regime and is far from becoming a democratic country. Yet, I adopt Bertrand and Haklai's broad definition of democratisation and their use of the terminology "democratising state" to describe countries that have a mix of democratic and authoritarian features. I therefore consider that the existence of political competition enables the characterisation of Myanmar as a "democratising state". Embracing a more positive outlook, this label also implies that the current hybrid regime is still "transitioning" rather than fixed.

After looking at the challenges of nation building in multinational democratising societies, this chapter will further explore the importance of institutional design to accommodate ethnic diversity.

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[23] Jonathan T. Chow and Leif-Eric Easley, "Myanmar's Democratic Backsliding in the Struggle for National Identity and Independence," *The Asan Forum*, June 25, 2019, http://www.theasanforum.org/myanmars-democratic-backsliding-in-the-struggle-for-national-identity-and-independence/.
[24] Bünte, Köllner, and Roewer, "Taking Stock of Myanmar's Political Transformation since 2011."
[25] Labels respectively used in the Democracy sub-index of the biannual Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the Economic Democracy Index and by Freedom House and V-Dem Institute.

2.2 State and nation building challenges in multinational democratising societies

Since liberal democracy does not necessarily result in the inclusion of minority groups, democratic transitions in multinational countries can face a number of challenges which this section explores further. I first outline diverging approaches on the plasticity or persistence of ethnic identities, which are useful for understanding ethnic conflict. I then discuss several factors – nationalist state policies, elite agency and the role of institutions - that can explain ethnic conflict. I argue that in multiethnic countries such as Myanmar, where the cultural identity of the majority group dominates the national identity, the question of national belonging is central and thus should be given some consideration. Finally, employing the constructivist assumption that state building and identity formation are co-constitutive, I argue that the political salience of ethnic identities is a key variable when designing institutions because different institutions can contribute to increase or decrease the mobilisation and polarisation of identities around ethnic markers of identity.

2.2.1 Understanding conflict: the persistence or plasticity ethnic identities?

After stressing the link between ethnicity and nation, I outline different approaches to thinking about ethnic identity, which are useful in understanding ethnic conflict. Each approach stems from different ontological and epistemological positions about the persistence and plasticity of mobilised ethnic identities.

Ethno-national identities

Debating the origins and formation of nations, scholars have long debated the relationship between an ethnic community and a nation. The definition of ethnicity adopted in this study reflects that of Anthony Smith, who defines ethnic communities or "ethnies" through six main attributes: a collective name, a common myth and descent, a shared history, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the

population.[26] According to Smith, while ethnic groups have a distinctive consciousness based on those attributes, they become nations as soon as they seek self-rule, which can range from sovereign statehood with a common economy and laws to limited forms of self-rule involving control over a range of issues such as education and language. Indeed, Will Kymlicka's definition of a nation as "a historical community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and culture" shows that the difference between ethnic community and nation is subtle.[27] Focusing on the essence of the nation as a psychological bond, Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined political community", which reflects a sense of communion between members even though they will never meet, can also be applied to an ethnic community.[28] As a result, Walker Connor claims that a nation is "the largest group that can command a person's loyalty because of felt kinship ties."[29] According to Smith, the existence of certain characteristics such as a shared economy and shared legal rights and responsibilities can help differentiate nations from ethnic communities.[30] However, Paul Brass considers that an ethnic group will move beyond ethnicity to full-fledged nationhood when its efforts to achieve and consolidate group rights through political action and mobilisation have been successful.[31] In other words, not all ethnic groups are nations and only when the goal of an ethnic conflict is the establishment or protection of self-rule does it involve nationalism. In Myanmar, the six characteristics that Smith uses to define an ethnic group are relevant to various groups (see chapter 3). However, since many of them have been seeking self-rule since independence, they potentially qualify as nations. As already highlighted in the introduction, this is why ethnic elites in Myanmar generally prefer to be designated as "ethnic nationalities" rather than ethnic "minorities."

The discussion of the formation of ethnic communities and nations belongs to a broader

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[26] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), 22–30.
[27] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11.
[28] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 4–5.
[29] Walker Connor, "Beyond Reason: The Nature of the Ethnonational Bond," in *Ethnicity*, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71.
[30] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 43.
[31] See Paul R. Brass, "Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation," in *Ethnicity*, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86.

debate on the development of nationalism, which is helpful in understanding ethnic conflict. Scholars have been asking whether ethnic groups and nations reflect primordial, fixed solidarities or, to the contrary, are socially constructed realities resulting from ongoing constitutive processes. The original debate hinges on two binary competing approaches.[32] When referring to ethnic groups, a primordialist view is traditionally opposed to an instrumentalist stance. Building on these theories, the constructivist and ethno-symbolism approaches offer new perspectives on identity

The primordialist approach

The primordialist conception of identity offers an explanation for the inevitability of ethnic conflict in plural democratising societies. Primordialists believe that nations and ethnic groups reflect primordial, fixed solidarities that are more transcendent and enduring than other identities.[33] From this perspective, democratisation enables the expression of immemorial aspirations of an ancient nation that are conflicting with those of other nations. As a result, primordialism considers that nationalism and ethnic conflict are emotional givens.[34] According to Demet Mousseau, this approach even claims that ethnic diversity is necessarily linked with violence in democratising societies.

The primordialist approach is vulnerable to several criticisms. Indeed, according to primordialist claims, we should expect that ethnic violence should characterise all plural societies. However, Mousseau demonstrates that assumptions linking heterogeneity to violence in the consolidation of democratic systems lack robust evidence.[35] According to Bertrand and Haklai, violence seems to be the exception and ethnic diversity may affect democratisation chances only indirectly.[36] Indeed, history shows that many "first

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[32] Eric Kaufmann and Daniele Conversi, "Ethnic and Nationalist Mobilization," in *The Study of Ethnicity and Politics: Recent Analytical Developments.*, ed. Jean Tournon and Adrian Guelke (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2012), 53.
[33] David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural, and Multicultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8; Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism : The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 204.
[34] Kaufmann and Conversi, "Ethnic and Nationalist Mobilization," 53.
[35] Demet Y. Mousseau, "Democratizing with Ethnic Divisions: A Source of Conflict?," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 5 (2001): 565.
[36] Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," 3; Mark R. Beissinger, "A New Look at Ethnicity and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 86–87.

wave" democracies in North America and Western Europe were highly diverse states. Hence, this approach cannot explain why conflict does not occur in all democratising multinational countries.

The instrumentalist approach

Instrumentalists consider that ethnicity is constructed as a result of the strategic value it has in promoting the material social or political interests of the elite. Rather than an ancient and irrational bond, ethnic identity is perceived as one of the many identities than can be invoked to satisfy the needs of groups or individuals, usually to generate material, social or political benefits.[37] One assumption of the instrumentalist approach is therefore that ethnic identities represent variables that can be changed over time.[38] This rational-choice approach usually attributes ethnic violence to manipulation of ethnic identities by the elite.[39] From this perspective, elites exploit differences to create identity-based political movements as a response to perceived threats or opportunities. [40]

The limitation of the instrumentalist approach to ethnic violence is that it fails to account for emotionally powerful identities. As Fearon and Laitin ask, "if violence and hardened ethnic boundaries serve elite but not popular interests, then what explains popular ethnic antipathies?"[41] Furthermore, other scholars question the extent to which elites can create "the symbolic material from which to draw their mobilizing power."[42] Similarly, Bertrand argues that elites are successful at mobilising people only "when prior grievances are present and sufficiently widespread."[43]

The constructivist approach

Unlike primordialists, who view identity as an instinct and instrumentalists who

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[37] Ted R. Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004), 96.
[38] Kaufmann and Conversi, "Ethnic and Nationalist Mobilization," 54.
[39] Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," 52.
[40] Gurr, *Peoples versus States*, 4; Gurr and Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, 2004, 96.
[41] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (2000): 853.
[42] Kaufmann and Conversi, "Ethnic and Nationalist Mobilization," 55.
[43] Jacques Bertrand, "Democratization and Religious and Nationalist Conflict in Post-Suharto Indonesia," in *Democratization and Identity : Regimes and Ethnicity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Susan J. Henders (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), 195.

consider identity as an interest, constructivists see it as an ideology.[44] According to Brown, ethnic identities are "enduring social constructions", which are dependent on external circumstances but not completely plastic.[45] This approach stresses that while group boundaries are inherently ascriptive, they may vary over time. For instance, in the absence of clear physical characteristics, ethnic lines can be crossed and ethnic identity may disappear through inter-marriages.[46] Despite perceptions that ethnic identities are real for those who invoke them, this non-rational choice approach considers such perceptions as a form of "ideological consciousness which filters reality, rather than reflects it".[47]

The constructivist approach appears to address the weaknesses of both the primordialist and instrumentalist views. Emphasis on the local construction of identity can explain variation in ethnic conflict across time and space. At the same time, it also recognises that ethnic identity remains the most problematic cleavage to manage in a democracy because of its appeal to cultural and symbolic legitimacy issues such as group worth and entitlement.[48] In addition, the constructivist conception that ideas and practices are co-constitutive is particularly helpful in explaining why ethnic identities may become significant when a critical juncture such as regime change occurs.[49]

The ethno-symbolist approach

Antony Smith's explanation of nationalism, which he describes as "ethno-symbolism", represents a synthesis between the primordial and constructivist arguments. While his focus on the use of ethnic symbols by the "intelligentsia" to promote nationalist ideologies echoes the constructivist argument, his description of ethnic communities as durable cultural collectivities that provide a strong sense of identity to their people

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[44] Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, 5.
[45] Gurr, *Peoples versus States*, 4; Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, xvii; Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 13.
[46] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 55.
[47] Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, 20.
[48] Larry J. Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), xviii.
[49] Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, 21; Susan J. Henders, "Political Regimes and Ethnic Identities in East and Southeast Asia: Beyond the 'Asian Values' Debate," in *Democratization and Identity : Regimes and Ethnicity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Susan J. Henders (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004), 6; Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 16.

resonates with a primordialist view. According to Brown, while viewing ethnic groups in primoridalist terms, he sees the "nationalisms into which they sometimes transform, largely in ideological constructivist terms."[50]

Nevertheless, Wolf notes that the link between tangible and intangible aspects of Smith's definition of an ethnic community mentioned above is especially interesting to grasp the political implications of ethnic identity and of the development of conflicts between groups.[51] Indeed, tangible or objective characteristics (e.g. different elements of a shared culture such as traditions, language or religion for instance) matter only to the extent that they contribute to create intangible or subjective characteristics (e.g. a sense of solidarity among group members and the group's sense of self-identity and uniqueness).[52] As a result, any real or perceived threat to these objective characteristics is considered as a threat to self-identity and uniqueness. An ethnic group then becomes a political actor when it resists such a threat on account of its shared identity. However, once politicised Smith argues, it is almost impossible for ethnic communities to withdraw from the political arena.[53] The ethno-symbolist approach, with its emphasis on the objective and subjective aspects of ethno-national identities is thus especially helpful for the study of ethnic conflict as it can explain the intense emotions that identities can create and account for the extreme violence that can characterise ethnic conflicts.[54]

Both the constructivist and ethno-symbolist lenses have informed this thesis. While a constructivist approach is consistent with the literature's description of ethnicity in Myanmar as reflecting a gradual solidification of historically fluid markers of identity (chapter 1), Smith's ethno-symbolism lends itself well to explain how Mon and Pa-O ethno-national identities have become relatively rigid. In addition, as this chapter further develops, the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between institutions and identity formation propounded by the constructivist approach is at the core of my argument on institutional choice.

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[50] Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, 169.
[51] Stefan Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict: Towards an Analytical Framework," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49:2 (2011): 174.
[52] Also see Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 104.
[53] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 157.
[54] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 174–75.

2.2.2 The problem of state policies using an ethnic nationalist rhetoric

After outlining different types of nationalism based on the vision of the nation that is promoted, this section highlights the challenges of state building when policies reflect an ethnic nationalist discourse. David Brown distinguishes between three forms of nationalism.[55] First, "ethnic nationalism" envisions the nation as a uniform community based on the ethnic attributes of the majority group and therefore characterises the nation-state model. The attempts of Myanmar's authoritarian regimes to impose a Bamar/Buddhist vision of the nation reflect such a form of nationalism. Second, "civic nationalism" sees the nation as an equal community of citizens loyal to the state, irrespective of their ethnic attributes. Third, "multicultural nationalism" pictures the nation as a diverse community where multiple ethnic components are integrated by their shared commitment to state institutions which protect their equal position. This form of nationalism echoes Jack Snyder's definition of nationalism as "the doctrine that a people, who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles, should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics."[56] It also reflects the vision of the nation that many ethnic nationalities in Myanmar have been pushing for since independence, when demanding autonomy and the protection of their cultural identity within a federal state.

Although most organised polities worldwide are multinational as they were established on territories previously occupied by self-governing peoples, scholars in the field of democracy and nationalism traditionally promoted an ethnic nationalist rhetoric. They believed that strong national unity was a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of legitimate political regimes and therefore democratic institutions.[57] As a result, the nation-state model was promoted as a successful nation building strategy, assuming that ethnic diversity constituted an obstacle to the establishment of democracies particularly

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[55] Brown, "The Democratization of National Identity," 49–56.
[56] Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 23.
[57] Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European Statemaking," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly and Gabriel Ardant (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3–83; Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 1–7.

when one group had the potential to dominate a country such as the Bamar group in Myanmar.[58]

Ethnic nationalism's assumption that the demos and the polity should be congruent is problematic. Indeed, since less than ten percent of countries worldwide are populated by a single ethnic group, only a very limited number of non-democratic states undertaking democratic transition have a high level of cultural homogeneity.[59] In the case of a country composed of several groups such as Myanmar, the pursuit of such an ideal homogenous political community clashes with the empirical reality of the demos. As a result, transitions can be characterised by a number of policies attempting to integrate ethnic minorities into the dominant group.[60] This is the case in Myanmar, where successive military governments have for decades, attempted to impose a Bamar vision of the national identity. If nation-state policies do not necessarily violate human rights, they tend to clash with democratic policies. Indeed, with a focus on promoting cultural homogeneity rather than citizen participation and equal rights, the state building process excludes some members of the political community and this hinders any chances for consolidation.[61]

In addition, the fact that the majority group embraces an ethnic nationalist vision may clash with a multicultural conception of the society promoted by minority groups seeking the protection of their distinctiveness and guarantees of equality. This creates a risk of radicalising minority groups' demands with a move towards self-determination, which may include separatism. In established democracies, a civic nationalist vision could neutralise those two competing visions by redirecting ethnic and multicultural claims towards the reforms of the civic institutions instead of against each other. However, since democratising countries often lack trust in civic institutions, such a nationalist vision is unlikely to occur.

However, the existence of policies reflecting an ethnic nationalist rhetoric is not sufficient to explain why violence may occur during democratic transition. More

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[58] Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, 115.
[59] Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 96.
[60] John S. Mill, *Three Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 382–84; Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 2.
[61] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 25–37.

emphasis should be put on the presence of external factors that may improve or deteriorate ethnic relations during democratisation. Indeed, some studies of "third wave" democratising countries demonstrate the existence of a number of independent variables associated with democracy or its absence, which considerably reduce the statistical significance of the relationship between ethnic diversity, democracy and conflict.[62] While ethnic nationalist policies may contribute to ethnic conflict because the need for a shared national identity is ignored, theoretical explanations of ethnic violence, which consider elite agency and institutional factors, should also be considered.

2.2.3 Instrumentalist explanation

Drawing from the instrumentalist view on identity formation, proponents of this explanation argue that nationalist wars are more likely during democratic transitions because of the character of leadership in the early stages of democratisation, which manipulates identities for economic or political gains.[63] This view holds that the leadership's use of nationalist appeals for popular support determines the likeliness of ethnic conflict that democratisation brings. Snyder's "elite-persuasion" theory suggests reasons that the elite appeal to a nationalist cause during democratic transitions. The threat represented by the arrival of full democracy creates a greater incentive for elites to use a nationalist argument in order to thwart such outcome.[64] Identity is instrumentally used to serve their own interests, such as consolidating votes and reducing checks on their power. At the same time, nationalism is used to justify elite claims that their rule is based on mass political participation.[65] According to Snyder, ethnicity is likely to be salient and thus mobilised when it is a major factor of a people's status, access to power and material security.[66]

The problem with Snyder's theory is similar to the limitation of the instrumentalist view

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[62] Such variables may include national income and economic growth, oil-based economies, colonial heritage, the dominance of Islam, governmental performance, institutional design, the strength or weakness of civil society, instability and large-scale violence, the presence of weapons, the degree of ethnic division, concentration and government suppression. See Beissinger, "A New Look at Ethnicity and Democratization," 86–87; Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," 12.
[63] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 94.
[64] Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 35.
[65] Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 36.
[66] Gurr, *Peoples versus States*, 6.

on ethnicity. It does not account for the emotionally powerful attachments that non-elites consider as real.[67] In addition, there is no reason why the elite's use of nationalism should be exclusive to democratic transitions. Indeed, both authoritarian and democratic governments regularly legitimise their rule through nationalism.

In Myanmar, the promotion of Bamar nationalism as the national identity is not specific to the current political changes (chapter 1). Rather it was a common denominator of the successive military government policies spanning over five decades of military rule. In addition, the instrumentalist explanation fails to account for the development, during the same period, of various ethnic nationalist agendas in reaction to the hegemonistic Bamar identity. Nevertheless, the agency of elites in articulating a nationalist agenda remains an important factor to take into consideration when explaining ethnic violence in Myanmar. For instance, Aung San articulated demands for independence around a Bamar nationalist agenda, which was used as a foundation by politicians such as Ne Win to promote a strong unitary state based on the Bamar identity. As noted in chapter 1, his implementation of Burmanisation policies to unify the political community denied ethnic nationalities' demands and thus continued to fuel ethnic conflict for several decades.

2.2.4 Institutionalist explanation

The role of political institutions in managing or exacerbating ethnic conflict during democratisation has been widely noted. Drawing from the constructivist assumption that ideas and practices are co-constitutive, the institutional explanation claims that change in the formal state structures can account for ethnic conflict. The use of a historical perspective is particularly helpful in understanding that sudden institutional changes such as during democratic transitions can be linked to violence because the national identity is open for contestation. As Linz and Stepan note, ethnic identities can become politically salient during democratic transitions because "the crisis of the nondemocratic regime is also intermixed with profound differences about what should actually constitute the polity (or political community) and which demos or demoi

[67] Bertrand, "Democratization and Religious and Nationalist Conflict in Post-Suharto Indonesia," 195.

(population or populations) should be members".[68] Indeed, according to Bertrand, state institutions embody a conception of the nation and different institutional arrangements explicitly or implicitly impact ethnic relations by defining criteria of exclusion or inclusion. When a critical juncture such as democratic transition puts into question the existing state institutions and the national model they support, ethnic groups will attempt to renegotiate the conditions of their inclusion.[69]

Proponents of the institutionalist explanation argue that while certain institutional mechanisms can accommodate ethnic relations and successfully address conflict, democratising countries often lack the resources and institutional power to accommodate pluralist interests. This, according to Huntington, can lead to a "democracy paradox" where institutions can facilitate ethnic violence. For instance in new democracies, institutions are often not structured in ways that minimise incentives to appeal to tribal, religious or ethnic constituencies, which represent the easiest strategy to win votes.[70] Indeed, since ethnicity provides clear lines of inclusion or exclusion through ethnic-based political affiliations, transitions to "procedural democracies" can result in the institutional dominance of the majority group and the marginalisation or even democratic oppression of minority groups.[71]

Ways in which state institutions could prevent such a negative outcome have been debated. According to the advocates of the "sequencing" approach, it is important to develop a rule of law and a well-functioning state prior to elections in order to prepare for political change in a non-democratic society.[72] In particular, Mansfield and Snyder argue that the existence of impartial state institutions prior to democratisation can enable the creation of cross-ethnic linkages and civic ties and thus avoid violent inter-

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[68] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 16.
[69] Jacques Bertrand, "Ethnic Conflicts in Indonesia: National Models, Critical Junctures, and the Timing of Violence," *Journal Of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 435–37.
[70] Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy for the Long Haul," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 6; Ted R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk : A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), 138.
[71] Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," 18–31; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 682; Bertrand and Haklai, "Democratization and Ethnic Minorities," 7.
[72] Jack L. Snyder and Edward D. Mansfield, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 265–66; Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 41.

ethnic conflict.[73] However, such approach is questioned by Carothers, who has claimed that developing the rule of law and state building are actually in direct tension with autocratic rule and would instead be best pursued simultaneously to democratisation.[74] Indeed, many authoritarian regimes lack the legitimacy, capacity or incentives to develop strong institutions. As a result, Carothers stresses the importance of reinforcing the legitimacy of the political unit through the adoption of a gradual approach where political competition is achieved in repeated and cumulative ways.[75]

The institutionalist explanation to ethnic conflict during democratisation presents a main limitation: while the lack of effective institutions prior to democratisation is likely to contribute to instability, solely focusing on this factor neglects the agency of actors both inside and outside the state. Its main strength lies in its explanation, based on a constructivist assumption, of how state institutions can influence the development of identity. The institutionalist explanation is partly relevant to explain ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Neither the liberalisation initiated during the Thein Sein government nor the existence of a dysfunctional state prior to the opening of political competition triggered Myanmar's ethnic conflict, which has been going on for decades. However, institutionalised discrimination has certainly contributed to rigidify identities.

2.2.5 The question of national belonging

Stressing the role of influential elites in creating violence and the institutional factors behind violence, the instrumentalist and institutionalist explanations are most useful if viewed as mutually supporting rather than competing explanations. Both theories indicate that the issue of national membership can often trigger conflict in multiethnic countries such as Myanmar, where the national identity is a reflection of the dominant group's cultural identity.

The instrumentalist explanation to ethnic conflict sheds light on the role of influential elites in formulating a nationalist agenda. In Myanmar, General Ne Win in particular, played a significant role in initiating a form of Bamar chauvinism that would

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[73] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, "The Sequencing 'Fallacy,'" *Journal of Demococracy* 18, no. 3 (2007): 7.
[74] Carothers, "The 'Sequencing' Fallacy," 20–21.
[75] Carothers, "The 'Sequencing' Fallacy," 25.

characterise military government policies for decades. At the same time, the successive military regimes' use of Burmanisation policies resulted in encroachments on the cultural, political and economic existence of the various ethnic minority groups. While such policies widely benefited those in the military leaders' circles they also contributed, as Walton highlights, to the institutionalisation of Bamar dominance.[76]

The institutionalist explanation offers a complementary perspective. State institutions play an important role in creating or managing ethnic conflict because they reflect the legitimacy of the political unit. This explanation therefore highlights the need for the perception of the state to reflect a shared identity in order to avoid violence. As Dahl argues, the question of belonging to the political community should be addressed in order to achieve consolidation into substantive democracies because political representation is the *raison d'être* of a democratic system.[77]

Drawing from the institutionalist argument, I propose that in order to avoid conflict, institutions should be renegotiated to embody a conception of national identity that is accepted by all and therefore reflects a multicultural nationalist vision. Such a nationalist vision emphasises that the survival of a multicultural state depends on the recognition and protection of its distinct nations. As a result, in functioning multinational democracies, citizens usually have a strong sense of loyalty to the larger community in addition to their ethno-national allegiances.[78]

The importance of the question of national membership is particularly relevant to Myanmar where the legitimacy of the state is contested as various ethnic groups refuse to accept the single Bamar identity that it represents. Discussions on state building in Myanmar confirm that this process is deeply inter-connected with the question of national belonging. As Igor Blazevic asks: "Will Burma be the nation-state of its Burman Buddhist majority, with a genuinely democratic and decentralized system that will tolerate and respect the country's minorities? Or will Burma be the common state of multiple ethnic nationalities "coming together" while keeping their individual

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[76] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness.'"
[77] Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: New Haven : Yale University Press, 1989), 207.
[78] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 13.

sovereignty?" According to him, an inclusive and consensual discussion on "the nature of the state and the relationship among the various identity groups" is necessary for genuine democracy and to guarantee that peace is possible.[79] Thus, Larry Diamond calls for a "political pact", where the demos in Myanmar - in other words, the citizens of the polity taken as a whole - would be defined prior to any proposal of institutional arrangements. This would ensure that institutions respond to the need for a legitimate state where cultural rights are recognised at the same time as state membership is guaranteed.[80] While the contestation of the national identity in Myanmar is rooted in years of ethnic conflict, the current democratic transition offers a unique opportunity to develop institutions that embody an inclusive, shared identity. However, as Linz & Stepan warn, the more diverse the population of a state is, the more difficult it will be to agree on the fundamentals of democracy. As a result, the success of a multicultural nationalist vision in consolidating democracy in multinational states will take "considerable crafting of democratic norms, practices and institutions".[81]

2.2.6 State building and the political salience of ethnicity

In this section, I argue that the choice of an appropriate institutional response to ethnic conflict requires considering the intensity of ethnic identification. According to a constructivist approach, the political salience of ethnicity can vary depending on a number of factors. Gurr and Harff note that it can fluctuate based on the degree of group cohesion, the use of violence by the government, the type of political environment and the extent of external support.[82] For Marvin Mikesell and Alexander Murphy, the tenacity of ethno-nationalism depends on leadership, government responses, economic conditions, discriminatory attitudes of the majority towards the minority and emotionally charged symbols.[83] Wolff argues that a group's size, its geographical distribution and its relationship to the centre will influence its aspirational stance.[84]

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[79] Blazevic, "Burma Votes for Change: The Challenges Ahead," 106–7.
[80] Diamond, "The Need for a Political Pact."
[81] Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 28.
[82] Ted R. Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Westview Press, 1994), 88–92.
[83] Marvin Mikesell and Alexander Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 584.
[84] Wolff, S. (2011a). Managing ethno-national conflict: towards an analytical framework. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 49*(2), p. 182; A Framework for Comparative Study of

The constructivist conception that identities are not fixed and its assumption that practices and ideas are co-constitutive are helpful in understanding how existing group identities can be magnified into strong nationalist ideologies.[85] In addition, the ethno-symbolist idea that identities politicised along ethnic lines are not easily demobilised is useful to understand how ethnic identities can become rigidified. In this thesis, I thus consider that attitudes towards ethnicity represent a continuum where the intensity of ethnic identification and mobilisation vary on a scale from rigid to flexible. Rigid identification or strong attitudes toward ethnicity tend to characterise close communities with firm intra-group cohesion and imply the primacy of ethnicity as a political identity. By contrast, flexible identification or moderate attitudes towards ethnicity reflect a form of openness to cooperation with others and involve coexistence with other identities.

Reflecting such views, scholars have repeatedly noted that the choice of institutional arrangements should carefully consider the intensity of ethnic identification. Indeed, failure to appreciate the forces that underpin ethnic identity could compromise efforts to manage ethnic conflict. As Yash Ghai argues, because of the malleability of ethnic identity markers, constitutional responses to ethnic demands need to be skilfully crafted as this very process can have a major impact on the definition of ethnicity and therefore mitigate or intensify conflict.[86] For instance, Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds associate variations in the strength of ethnic identity with different policy recommendations.[87] With rigid ethnic identification, intense conflicts, a maximum of four groups and geographic concentration, they argue that institutions that represent groups according to their size and power should be preferred. With flexible identification lower levels of conflict, a higher number of groups (preferably intermixed and with a variety of sizes), they claim there is more space for multiethnic coalitions

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Minority-Group Aspirations. *Association of American Geographers. Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 81*(4), p. 584.

[85] Yash P. Ghai, "Ethnicity and Autonomy: A Framework for Analysis," in *Autonomy and Ethnicity: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-Ethnic States*, ed. Yash P. Ghai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–28.

[86] Ghai, "Ethnicity and Autonomy."

[87] Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, Papers on International Conflict Resolution, no 2 (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999), 45–50.

and the promotion of crosscutting cleavages as this creates the heterogeneity necessary for the success of vote pooling.[88]

In summary, while ethnic identity is a social construct that depends in part on the nature of various political regimes, it is a key variable that influences the subsequent articulation of aspirations in order to protect this identity. It therefore determines the suitability of institutional arrangements and the likelihood of conflict when particular aspirations are not met with an appropriate policy response. At the same time, the reverse is also true. The choice of appropriate institutions or policies may positively contribute to reducing the mobilisation and polarisation of identities around ethnic markers.

2.3 Institutional management of ethnic conflict

Before discussing different tools of institutional design for divided societies at greater length, it is necessary to provide some conceptual clarification to situate the debate on the institutional management of ethnic conflict, which underpins this thesis. The literature discussing the relationship between institutional design, conflict management and democratisation is contingent upon an understanding of what institutions and institutional design mean and what strategies they reflect. This section first provides some definitions and explains why eminent scholars claim that political institutions can contribute to the democratic management of conflict in divided societies.[89] It then situates the available conflict management strategies along a continuum of assimilation, integration, accommodation and disintegration. Looking more specifically at the integrationist and accommodationist approaches, I show that while the latter two dominate the debate, any institutional proposal may incorporate elements of all strategies.

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[88] Crosscutting cleavages refer to the situation when societal division such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender etc cut across each other. This helps build bridges over divisions and makes agreement more likely. By contrast, reinforcing cleavages overlap with each other and make compromise more difficult. Vote pooling is defined here as the use of the electoral system to encourage alliances across ethnic groups.

[89] Eminent scholars include Robert A. Dahl, Arend Lijphart, Donald Horowitz and Alfred Stepan.

2.3.1 Institutional design as a core component of post conflict state building

The literature on state-building and conflict management widely agrees on the importance of institutions to accommodate and peacefully manage differences in democratising societies. In this thesis, an institution is defined according to March and Olsen's commonly accepted definition:

> *A relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances.*[90]

According to an institutionalist perspective, it is widely accepted that institutions impact both social structures and outcomes.[91] Scholars have indeed demonstrated that institutional design particularly at the constitutional level contributes significantly to the failure or success of state structures. For instance, in terms of success, democratic institutions can influence political stability. Lipset et al., argue that: when institutions organise behaviours into established, foreseeable and regular patterns and guarantee civil rights and meaningful representation, effective socio-economic policies are more likely to be created and military involvement in politics is more likely to be reduced.[92] In addition, as Reilly and Reynolds argue, since democracy is a system of institutionalised competition, institutional designs are essential in democratising plural societies because the political institutions take on the role of primary channels of communication between opposing forces.[93] For instance, Simeon and Conway identify four types of institutional designs as minimum requirements for a multinational democracy to be successful.[94] Conversely, in terms of failure, Henry Hale argues that ethno-federal states are more likely to collapse when the majority population is

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[91] James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "Elaborating the 'New Institutionalism,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.
[92] Larry J. Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour M. Lipset, *Politics in Developing Countries : Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), 33.
[93] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 4.
[94] Richard Simeon and D.-P Conway, "Federalism and the Management of Conflict in Multinational Societies," in *Multinational Democracies*, ed. Alain Gagnon and James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 338–365.

institutionalised in a single ethnic federal region.[95]

The reason behind considering constitutional engineering of institutions as the main tool for conflict management is that "formal institutions can be modified and adapted to suit specific needs and circumstances more readily than other factors that influence the risk of resurgent conflict, such as the level of economic development or the cultural and ethnic make-up of societies."[96] Furthermore, in the post-conflict environment of divided societies, institutional design connects peace building and democratic state building. Indeed, as Wolff explains, the development and reinforcement of state institutions can contribute positively to achieving sustainable peace. "Choosing institutions, means to agree on governance arrangements in which peace and security can be sustained while the broader process of state formation takes place, in the course of which a full range of democratic and legitimate institutions is established."[97]

As Belmont et al. argue it is useful to think of political institutions as a "holistic package" because they can interact with each other in complex ways.[98] Furthermore, they are rarely sufficient when taken separately for managing conflict in multinational democracies.[99] In this study, the term "institutional arrangement" refers to the way political institutions such as federalism are designed in a specific context, while the concept of "institutional models" implies a combination of several political institutions and/or cultural or economic policies directed towards managing ethnic diversity in divided societies. Indeed, since there is a realisation that sustainable peace and sustainable democratic states are dependent on a broader context than just the design of political institutions and their effect on society, this definition aims to encompass a broad range of policies that support a sense of inclusion.[100] Thus an institutional model may contain cultural and possibly economic arrangements.

While the following section situates ethnic conflict management along a spectrum of strategies, the remainder of this chapter will introduce political institutions used to

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[95] Henry E. Hale, "Divided We Stand: Institutional Sources of Ethnofederal State Survival and Collapse," *World Politics* 56, no. 2 (2004): 166.
[96] Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building: The Debate on Institutional Choice," 1779.
[97] Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building," 1780.
[98] Belmont, Mainwaring, and Reynolds, "Introduction," 4. Check page
[99] Swenden, "Territorial Strategies for Managing Plurinational States," 61.
[100] Wolff, "Post-Conflict State Building," 1778.

manage ethnic conflict prior to examining their combination as institutional models.

2.3.2 Approaches to the management of ethnic conflict

The state's response to cultural diversity runs along the continuum of assimilation, integration, accommodation and disintegration, where the first three elements can be associated with one of the different nationalist visions (ethnic, civic or multicultural) articulated by David Brown as described earlier.[101] On one end of the spectrum, disintegration refers to major changes of international boundaries and is therefore beyond the scope of this thesis which is interested in mechanisms of conflict management that avoid such contested changes. On the other end of the spectrum, assimilation refers to an approach that seeks to dilute cultural differences in both the private and public spheres, and develop a national identity through the fusion of existing communities or the acculturation into the dominant group. Assimilation policies can therefore be associated with a nation state characterised by an ethnic nationalist vision. Since poor assimilation policies have resulted in negative development outcomes and relapses to authoritarianism, many countries now accept that it is not the best way to manage diversity.

Thus, the debate on constitutional design in divided societies hinges on the integrationist and accommodationist approaches to managing ethnic diversity, which respectively reflect civic and multicultural nationalist visions. Indeed, according to McGarry et al., integration "while respecting differences in the private domain, involves the elimination of differences in the public sphere." In contrast, accommodation promotes "the public and institutional expression of differences in the public sphere".[102] As Aisling Lyon explains, this debate illustrates "a fundamental normative disagreement over the mechanisms of inter-ethnic cooperation."[103] Each approach has diverging assumptions and epistemological positions on the persistence and plasticity of mobilised ethnic identities.

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[101] See previous section 2.2.1, Brown, "The Democratization of National Identity," 49–56.
[102] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 42.
[103] Aisling Lyon, "Between the Integration and Accommodation of Ethnic Difference: Decentralization in the Republic of Macedonia," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe : JEMIE* 11, no. 3 (2012): 86.

Integrationists are opposed to the translation of ethnic difference into politics. They believe that identities are flexible and that as a result, crosscutting cleavages should always be promoted.[104] As a result, they promote the development of a single public identity.[105] Integrationists embrace an instrumentalist approach to ethnic identity as they believe politicisation of ethnic divisions creates conflict because "they empower elites that have a vested interest in maintaining these social divisions."[106] By contrast, reflecting a constructivist approach, accommodationists assume that in divided societies, identities are resilient although not primordial.[107] As a result, the existence of dual or multiple public identities should be encouraged and equality should be promoted through "institutional respect for differences."[108] Thus, based on these distinct assumptions on the nature of identity, each approach recommends a different institutional solution. While integration responds to plurality through institutions that seek to homogenise differences, accommodation entails recognition and protection of the state's distinct ethnic communities.[109]

Integrationists advocate constitutional strategies which encourage a common public identity that surpasses and reduces ethnic differences while respecting cultural differences in the private sphere.[110] This approach, which is supported by many scholars, therefore appears as a central underpinning of liberal democracy.[111] Examples of such strategies include a centralised unitary state, "ethnically blind" public policies, ethnically neutral decision-making bodies, mixed or non-ethnic territorial structure, and electoral systems which foster crosscutting cleavages.

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[104] Choudhry, "Bridging Comparative Politics and Comparative Constitutional Laws," 27.
[105] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 41.
[106] Lyon, "Between the Integration and Accommodation of Ethnic Difference," 86.
[107] Jacques Bertrand, "Indonesia's Quasi-Federalist Approach: Accommodation Amidst Strong Integrationist Tendencies," in *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?*, ed. Sujit Choudhry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 209; McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 52–53.
[108] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 41.
[109] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 42.
[110] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 42.
[111] See, for example, Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism.* (Oxford: Wiley, 2013); David Brown, "Regionalist Federalism: A Critique of Ethno-National Federalism," in *Federalism in Asia*, ed. Baobang He, Brian Galligan, and Takeshi Inoguchi (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), 57–81; Brian Galligan, "Federalism in Asia," in *Federalism in Asia*, ed. Baobang He, Brian Galligan, and Takeshi Inoguchi (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), 290–314; Philip G. Roeder and Donald S. Rothchild, eds., "Conclusion: Nation-State Stewardship and the Alternatives to Power Sharing," in *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 319–46.

By contrast, the accommodationist approach recommends constitutional strategies that allow the "public and institutional expression of differences in the public sphere" and thus enable the coexistence of multiple identities as part of the national identity.[112] Thus, there is recognition that the state is comprised of distinct ethnic communities and that its institutions should be crafted with respect to their interests and guarantee protection against the majority. Two main accommodationist strategies have dominated discussions on institutional management of ethnic conflict. First, consociationalism, developed and advocated by Arend Lijphart and second, centripetalism, associated with the work of Donald Horowitz. Yet, these strategies have profound differences that will be discussed below. Despite the fact the centripetalism, with its incentives for moderation, tends to lie towards the integrationist end of the spectrum, they are both accommodationist because they assume the inevitability of ethnic parties in the democratic space. By contrast, integrationists are adamantly opposed to the organisation of parties on an ethnic basis.[113]

As Choudhry argues however, the integrationist solution to managing ethnic diversity is vulnerable to a number of criticisms.[114] Indeed, liberal democracies are usually not culturally neutral as state institutions will to some extent reflect the dominant group's cultural preferences such as its religion or language. As result, many minority groups face a number of historical and social discriminations that stop them from enjoying fundamental freedoms and distributive justice.[115] Furthermore, while both integrationists and accommodationists are against forceful assimilation, there is an important difference. Integrationists tend to promote voluntary assimilation because it supports "blindness to difference" in the public sphere. By contrast, acommodationists perceive voluntary assimilation as a destabilising factor, because it generates a "fear of extinction."[116] Although integration seeks to respect cultural differences, many see it as a first step towards assimilation, especially when the state is based on a dominant identity.[117] As a result, McGarry et al. argue that nation-states may also follow

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[112] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 42.
[113] Choudhry, "Bridging Comparative Politics and Comparative Constitutional Laws," 27–28.
[114] Choudhry, "Bridging Comparative Politics and Comparative Constitutional Laws," 27.
[115] See, for example, Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*; Ian O'Flynn, *Deliberative Democracy and Divided Societies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
[116] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 44.
[117] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 183.

integrationist strategies in addition to assimilationist policies.[118] Most scholars now agree that accommodation is the best way to manage ethnic diversity and recommend designing institutions and policies in consideration of their interests.[119] As Sisk advocates however, any institutional proposal may incorporate elements of these two conceptual poles along the spectrum of policies available for ethnic conflict management.[120] This theoretical debate will guide the discussion of the different dimensions of institutional design aimed at managing ethnic diversity, which can reflect either approach.

2.4 Dimensions of institutional design

Before examining how political institutions can be combined together, it is necessary to expose three different areas in which institutions can have an impact on the management of ethnic conflict. Adopting Stefan Wolff's analytical framework, this section explains how territorial structure, power sharing and recognition and protection of different identities can be used as conflict management tools.[121]

2.4.1 Territorial self-governance

The territorial structure of the state can be used as a tool of state building in the context of conflict management. Wolff and Weller use the concept of "territorial self-governance" to refer to the "the legally entrenched power of territorially delimited entities within the internationally recognised boundaries of existing states to exercise public policy functions independently of other sources of authority in these states, but subject to their overall legal order."[122] While the main choice is generally between unitary and federal systems, each category can have different variations as well as a

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[118] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 87.
[119] See, for example, Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*; O'Flynn, *Deliberative Democracy and Divided Societies*; Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford Political Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[120] Timothy D. Sisk, *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*, Perspectives Series (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), x.
[121] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 164.
[122] Stefan Wolff and Marc Weller, "Self-Determination and Autonomy: A Conceptual Introduction," in *Autonomy, Self-Governance, and Conflict Resolution: Innovative Approaches to Institutional Design in Divided Societies*, ed. Marc Weller and Stefan Wolff (London: Routledge, 2005), 13.

number of hybrid forms.[123] Overall, territorial self-governance encompasses the following governance arrangements: confederation, federation, federacy, devolution or regional autonomy and regional decentralisation. Confederation refers to the voluntary association of sovereign states, pooling some competences without granting executive power to the confederal government. In contrast, in a federation the state's entire territory is divided in distinct political sub-units, which exercise a number of constitutionally guaranteed exclusive legislative, executive and judicial powers independent of the federal government. While a federacy possesses comparable powers and constitutional safeguards as federal entities, it does not necessarily imply territorial sub-divisions throughout the whole state territory. Devolution or regional autonomy is implemented in designated territories within a unitary state and is characterised by the weaker legal protection of sub-units than in a federation. Decentralisation refers to the delegation of executive and administrative powers only, usually without any constitutional protection.[124]

Confederation

A confederation refers to an empirically rare form of alliance of independent states, instituted for specific purposes such as economic cooperation or defence. In addition, the relationship between central authorities and the citizens is based on an indirect interaction through the member states' bureaucracies. Since the relationship between member states must respect the principle of sovereignty, the decision-making process is often based on unanimity and it is easy to leave the confederation.[125] Since independence of certain states is not currently considered in Myanmar, the confederation option is not included in the analysis.

Federation: national federation vs. plural or ethnic federation

Ronald L. Watts notes that in unitary systems the authority is in the hand of the central

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[123] Ronald. L. Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," in *Routledge Handbook of Regionalism and Federalism*, ed. John Loughlin, John Kincaid, and Wilfried Swenden (Milton Park: Routledge, 2013), 19.
[124] Stefan Wolff, "Conflict Management in Divided Societies: The Many Uses of Territorial Self-Governance.," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, Special Issue on Rethinking Territorial Arrangements in Conflict Resolution, 20, no. 1 (2013): 32–33.
[125] John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 253.

government while federal systems are characterised by the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy exercised by its sub-units.[126] While the broad "species" of federal systems encompasses a whole spectrum of categories that are not exclusively demarcated, including constitutionally decentralised unions, quasi-federations and federations, confederations, federacies and beyond, this section focuses on the federation category, which also includes the quasi-federation. Indeed, while this hybrid form features overriding powers characteristic of unitary systems, it is predominantly a federation in its constitution and operation. [127]

In a federation, sovereignty is distributed between a federal government and the federation's segments, which have exclusive or shared responsibilities for certain functions. The division of powers is entrenched in a written constitution, which cannot be changed unilaterally by the federal government or the segments and an impartial tribunal has authority to decide constitutional disputes. In addition to entrenching regional self-government, federations usually have bicameral federal legislatures, with the lower house representing the federation's people and the upper house representing the segments and allowing them to play a role in the federal institutions. The extent of self-government granted to the segments fluctuates: in symmetrical federations segments have identical powers while in asymmetrical federations some segments may have fewer powers than others. While offering more secure autonomy than decentralised unitary states, federations do not inevitably give more autonomy.[128]

The literature usually identifies two main ways in which federations can be developed. First, previously independent states - including members of a confederation - or ex-colonies agreeing to "come together" such as the United States; second, a unitary state endeavouring to "hold together" as in the case of Belgium.[129] These two developmental paths are associated with different types of federalism: "coming together" federations

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[126] Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," 20.
[127] Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," 21.
[128] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 251.
[129] Watts identifies a third way, which combines the first two processes, as in Canada and India, where devolution was granted to states that were already provinces and previously separate princely states were incorporated. Alfred Stepan identifies another less frequent process whereby a federation is 'put together' by force as the Soviet Union, which was formed by Red Army troops. See Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," 27; Alfred C. Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 4 (1999): 23.

usually involve an administrative type of federalism which is also referred to as a national federation; "holding together" federations usually involve an ethnic type of federalism, also referred to as a pluralist federation.

A federation is national when the federation-wide majority is also a majority in each segment and is therefore perceived as representing the national will, as in the United States, Germany or Australia.[130] The decision to form such federations is based on other reasons than minority accommodation, such as accessible governance in a big country for example in Brazil or Australia; to persuade independent units to join a union while preserving their identities for instance in the United States and Canada; or to prevent abuse of power like in Germany and the United States. [131] In addition to be formed as a result of an agreement to "come together", national federations tend to have a symmetrical devolution of power, where each segment has similar competences.[132]

A main criticism of the national federation is the creation of "demos-constraining" rules by which decision-making does not necessarily represent the will of the majority. According to Stepan, evidence suggests that a federal system that gives symmetrical powers to each of its sub-units is less able than a unitary system with decentralised participation to uphold the democratic values of participation, decentralisation, and equality. [133] Indeed, as Stepan explains, the upper house is often based on the symmetric principle of equal representation, which leads to the over representation of lower populated segments. This, combined with a supermajority as a constitutional requirement to adopt certain types of legislation, "could in certain extreme cases, lead to a situation in which legislators representing less than 10 percent of the electorate are able to thwart the wishes of the vast majority." [134] Furthermore, since national federations seek to erase ethnic differences from institutional representation, they can effectively prevent minorities from forming self-governing entities. [135] However, although national federations tend to lie on the integrationist side of the spectrum, some

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[130] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 258.
[131] Alfred C. Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations : India and Other Multinational Democracies* (Baltimore: Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 257–75.
[132] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 32.
[133] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 32.
[134] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 23–24.
[135] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 257–75.

scholars have proposed to use them as possible accommodation strategies. Horowitz argues that it can effectively divide groups into units to reduce majority dominance and therefore promote a single overarching national identity that cuts across group differences.[136] In states such as Nigeria, where ethnic groups are spread out across the country with majorities in some segments, national federations have been used to develop internal boundaries across minority communities and effectively prevent the exercise of self-government based on ethnic cleavages.[137]

By contrast, a federation is pluralist when it provides autonomy to the different groups of the state with exclusive competences defined constitutionally and the existence of different identities constitutionally protected. According to McGarry and O'Leary, a pluralist federation has the following characteristics: First, territorial divisions respect nationality, ethnicity, language or religion. Second, the constitution enshrines the devolution of powers, providing the segments with significant autonomy and an equitable distribution of fiscal resources. Third, decision-making within the federal government is consensual rather than majoritarian. Fourth, the multinational character of the federation is recognised either symbolically or through multilingualism.[138] In addition, Stepan notes that plural federations tend to be constitutionally asymmetrical and therefore "demos-enabling" in their political consequences.[139]

The most prominent criticism of the plural type of federation, which is valid for other forms of territorial self-government based on cultural cleavages, is that by providing minority nationalist elites with economic, fiscal, administrative and political resources the state is on a slippery slope towards secession or even disintegration. Indeed, elites may have a vested interest in sustaining ethnic conflict. Furthermore, in his seminal work *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Horowitz criticised such an arrangement for contributing to reinforcing ethnic cleavages and therefore undermining successful

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[136] Donald L. Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? : Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (Berkeley: Berkeley : University of California Press, 1991), 222.
[137] Donald L. Horowitz, "Ethnic Conflict Management for Policy Makers," in *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, ed. Joseph V. Montville (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1990), 122.
[138] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 252–53.
[139] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 32.

conflict management.[140]

In contrast, the main strength of the plural federation is that it "provides protection against domination by the majority, an opportunity for self-fulfilment and self-development for the minority through institutions that it controls, while maintaining the ability of both groups to pursue common goals."[141] Indeed, ethnic federalism can be successful only if, in addition to strong ethno-national identities, shared values and overarching common identities simultaneously exist.[142] This stresses again the importance of combining political institutions with other cultural or economic arrangements in order to sustain such dual loyalties and values.

The asymmetrical character of plural federations also presents important advantages. Although it adds complexity and can create tension between demands for distinctiveness and concerns for equality between constituent units, it is for some federations the only way to accommodate diversity.[143] Apart some from Switzerland, all multinational democracies are constitutionally asymmetrical. In order to hold the state together, they allocate different linguistic, cultural, and legal powers to different subunits.[144] This allows for territorially concentrated groups to retain history-acquired prerogatives or adopt certain laws found nowhere else in the country. Such flexibility thus enables bargains and compromises on these issues, which may be critical for voluntary membership in the political community.[145] In addition, the existence of asymmetrical political structures is "demos-enabling" in the sense that it fosters the principles of representation and equality by respecting the rule of the majority. This can be crucial for political stability in multinational countries. For instance, it is because India did not follow the "demos-constraining" principle of equal representation in the upper house that it was able to create six new culturally distinctive states in the conflict ridden northeast region, which barely comprised one percent of India's population.[146]

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[140] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.
[141] Simeon and Conway, "Federalism and the Management of Conflict in Multinational Societies," 339.
[142] Simeon and Conway, "Federalism and the Management of Conflict in Multinational Societies," 361; Swenden, "Territorial Strategies for Managing Plurinational States," 68–71.
[143] Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," 28.
[144] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 30.
[145] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 18.
[146] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 25.

Myanmar can be identified as a hybrid form of ethno-administrative federal system because in addition to seven ethnic units the dominant group is split across seven units.[147] However, Myanmar's political system in practice is closer to that of a unitary state. As highlighted earlier, apart from the constitutionally recognised territorial division, which in theory creates sub-units with legislative, executive and legislative powers, the constituent units remain subordinate to the centre, which according to Watts is characteristic of a unitary state.[148] Since as Stepan claims, every enduring democracy in a territorially based multinational country is a federal state, it appears natural given Myanmar's deep cultural diversity, to consider federalism in general and asymmetrical federalism in particular as the most suitable form of territorial self-government.[149] It is therefore not surprising that EAOs in Myanmar unanimously call for the establishment of a plural federation, which is now accepted in principle both by the NLD government and the *Tatmadaw* as the territorial solution to ethnic conflict.

Federacy

A federacy is a political system in which a unitary state develops a federal relationship with a territorial community while all the rest of the state stays under unitary rule.[150] Asymmetrical autonomy is therefore constitutionally recognised for a smaller unit or units – usually islands.[151] Since in Myanmar, there are numerous territorial communities who wish to develop a federal relationship with the state, this option is not considered.

Devolution or regional autonomy

Although some authors use autonomy as a generic term to refer to any of the arrangements described above, there are important differences, particularly in terms of benefits and limitations. Despite Ruth Lapidoth's warning against the conflation of regional autonomy with the concepts of self-administration or self-government, it appears that it mainly reflects different degrees of "self-rule" ranging from

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147 Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 154.
148 Watts, "Typologies of Federalism," 20.
149 Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 19.
150 Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 20.
151 McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 253.

administrative autonomy to a high degree of territorial autonomy.[152]

Reflecting an accommodationist approach, Lapidoth defines regional autonomy as "an arrangement aimed at granting powers to a group that differs from the majority population in the state, but that constitutes the majority in a specific region, a means by which it can express its distinct identity".[153] The division of powers between the central and autonomous entities is a major issue in the establishment of regional autonomy. This involves a transfer of functions, with a clear distinction between reserved, transferred, parallel, and joint powers in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. While there are different degrees of regional autonomy, the powers usually devolved to the autonomous unit involve cultural, economic and social matters and their exercise usually involves consultation, coordination and collaboration. Procedures or institutions are usually established in order to address difficulties of interpretation regarding the competencies of each authority. While it is assumed that power is exercised by the representatives of the population in the autonomous region's areas of competence without control of the centre except in situations where the security of the state is threatened, the centre is often involved in their designation. Furthermore, abrogation or amendment of the autonomy agreement is decided by consensus.

Although there are important similarities with a federal arrangement, Lapidoth demonstrates that this regime of autonomy should be considered as a distinct institutional mechanism, with important constitutional differences.[154] A federation is typically established by a constitution whereas regional autonomy can be created by a treaty or a statute. Further, the constituent units of a federation participate in the activities of the federal government, essentially through membership in the upper house and involvement in the revision of the federal constitution, whereas the autonomous unit does not usually play a role at the centre. Moreover, although there may be a process for settling disputes between the autonomous and central units, there is no special tribunal. Additionally, the federal structure is applicable to the whole territory whereas regional autonomy will generally be granted to areas having a specific ethnic

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[152] Ruth E. Lapidoth, *Autonomy : Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 49–56.
[153] Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, 33.
[154] Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, 50.

character.

While regional autonomy is vulnerable to the same criticism as the plural federation, flexibility is certainly the greatest strength of autonomy: it offers a wide range of options, from a minimum of powers to a high number of competences, just short of complete independence. In addition, autonomous settlements can contribute to establish political trust and enable the peaceful settlement of subsequent disputes.[155] Stressing how historical evidence demonstrates that autonomy can effectively manage ethnic conflict Gurr and Harff warn that the lack of such an option for territorially concentrated minorities can result in armed conflict.[156] The very flexibility of regional autonomy makes it highly relevant for Myanmar, where amending the 2008 Constitution remains extremely contentious. While not meeting the demands of EAOs in Myanmar, the advantage of such devolution is that it does not require constitutional amendment to be implemented. Without such pressure, this arrangement could effectively support trust building between the *Tatmadaw*, the NLD government and EAOs, by granting meaningful autonomy to territorially concentrated groups, at least in the cultural sphere.

Decentralisation

While decentralisation is commonly used to refer to any form of power delegation from the centre to the periphery, its narrower meaning refers to a limited delegation of authority to one or more regions within a unitary state, with possibly asymmetric degrees of autonomy granted to each region. While the extent of authority delegated can be quite substantial and sometimes surpass the powers devolved in a federation or a federacy, it remains to varying degrees under the control of the central authorities.[157] This monistic conception of sovereignty means that the centre can modify unilaterally the power granted, the territorial boundaries, and may retain the capacity to legislate within the competence devolved.

From the standpoint of pluralist accommodation and political stability, decentralisation

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[155] Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 301–5.
[156] Gurr and Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, 2004, 186.
[157] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 250.

is deemed to have certain benefits. It is said to provide the central authorities with the flexibility necessary to adjust failed experiments, to take measures to protect regional minorities or to restore order. However, except in the case of a "constitutionally decentralised union", where sub-units – such as Corsica in France - of the unitary government are constitutionally protected or certain minorities have constitutionally recognised group rights, those benefits are profoundly ambiguous. As Lapidoth notes, unlike in regional autonomy, the participation of locally elected representatives in the regional institutions is limited while the central government can interfere extensively.[158] Furthermore, final power is therefore in the hands of the central authorities, which often represent the dominant group. In addition, the subordination status of regional institutions is unlikely to satisfy groups seeking equality. Unlike regional autonomy, where abrogation or amendment of the autonomy agreement is decided by consensus, decentralisation is unilaterally revocable. In post conflict situations, such settlement is even less likely to be accepted.[159] According to Schrijver, decentralisation is often considered a trade-off solution, falling short of a federation or breakaway, yet granting an ethnic group more control over its territory than centralisation.

While decentralisation can be described as a "mechanism for integrating ethnic communities into unitary state structures", the case of Macedonia, with its design of decentralisation featuring local power sharing mechanisms reveals however that the integrationist and accommodationist approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive.[160] Nevertheless, despite its potential for effectively accommodating the claims of a territorially concentrated group and reducing extremist elements, empirical evidence demonstrating that it can actually manage conflict in the short term often remains ambiguous (for example the ETA separatist group in the Basque region of Spain).[161] Ethnic EAOs in Myanmar firmly reject decentralisation as a form of territorial self-government because of the very ambiguity that characterises this mechanism. For this reason, it is usually perceived as too weak to address the strong centralisation tradition of the Myanmar government that people have experienced so

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[158] Lapidoth, *Autonomy*.
[159] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 251.
[160] Lyon, "Between the Integration and Accommodation of Ethnic Difference," 81.
[161] Frans Schrijver, "Ethnic Accommodation in Unitary States," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, 2010, 268.

negatively.

To summarise, decentralisation in unitary states does not appear to address ethnic conflict satisfactorily because the delegation of power is not legally guaranteed. Although some argue that they may entrench ethnic cleavages, pluralist or ethnic federations seem to offer the most guarantees for large multinational democracies. Regional autonomy offers a flexible alternative, with a power delegation that is legally guaranteed, although participation at the centre is usually limited.

These five forms of territorial self-governance can be differentiated through a number of aspects such as the extent of powers exercised, the degree of constitutional protection, the presence of mechanisms for dispute resolution and the level of symmetry and asymmetry between sub-units.[162] However, as Swenden notes, "territorial strategies are often part of a wider toolkit of institutional devices for managing divided societies, and as such they are rarely sufficient in their own right for governing plurinational democracies."[163] In addition, they can operate in combination with other specific governance mechanisms for conflict management, such as power sharing or cultural autonomy, which the following sections explore further. As Wolff explains, when sub-state units are ethnically mixed, additional features of conflict resolution that reflect local demography are needed.[164] The combination with other specific governance mechanisms for conflict management is important because it enables a more context-sensitive approach.

2.4.2 Powers and relationships of government branches

Wolff identifies three institutional aspects characterising the powers of the legislative, executive and judiciary branches of government and the relationship between them.[165] First is the nature of the government system, which can be parliamentary, presidential or semi-presidential. The choice of system partially determines the degree of separation of powers between its branches. For example, the separation between the legislative and executive is the weakest in parliamentary systems and the strongest in presidential

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[162] Wolff, "Conflict Management in Divided Societies," 32.
[163] Swenden, "Territorial Strategies for Managing Plurinational States," 61.
[164] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 165.
[165] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 165.

systems. The degree of independence of the judiciary branch also determines this separation. Separations of power can also vary greatly between systems, sometimes leading to a characterisation as "hybrid". Myanmar for instance is considered a hybrid presidential system as the president who is indirectly elected holds central executive powers and significant legislative powers.[166]

A second aspect is the existence and extent of a "prescribed inclusiveness" through mandatory power sharing within the executive and/or the legislative branch. Wolff defines power sharing as "a governance arrangement whereby representatives of different groups make decisions jointly in one or more branches of government".[167] It can arise through the formation of a coalition as a result of the electoral process or emerge as a result of guaranteed arrangements (for example reserved seats and quotas in parliamentary elections) together with specific decision-making procedures such as qualified or concurrent majorities and mutual veto in the different branches of government. This section examines more closely the circumstances that can lead to power sharing arrangements: the electoral process and special representation arrangements.

Electoral systems

Electoral systems are commonly accepted as one of the most essential mechanisms of democratic competition because they have the potential to influence political behaviours by offering incentives and posing constraints and therefore can have a major impact on the amplification or reduction of the conflict.[168] This is why it is usually adopted as one of the central instruments of institutional arrangements developed to address conflict in deeply divided societies. Electoral systems have three main functions: to translate the votes cast into seats in a legislative assembly; to provide an accountability channel for the voters; and to structure political behaviours through rewards and constraints. Electoral systems can be classified into four main categories: plurality, majoritarian (such as first-past-the-post), proportional representation (PR) and semi proportional

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[166] Bünte, 351–52; Renaud Egreteau, "Parliamentary Development in Myanmar, an Overview of the Union Parliament 2011–2016." (Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2017), 30; Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 107.
[167] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 186.
[168] Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, 40.

systems.[169] This variety of systems reflects a gradation between integration and accommodation strategies. For instance, on the accommodation end of the spectrum, a PR system will enable the inclusion of all ethnic minorities and thus promote electoral legitimacy. On the integration side of the spectrum, a majoritarian system will favour the formation of a parliamentary majority by the dominant parties and therefore support the efficient enactment of legislation without deadlock.

Reilly and Reynolds seek to evaluate under what circumstances, electoral systems can have the most influence on reducing conflict in divided societies.[170] They posit that four key variables should be carefully considered when choosing a system: the nature of group identity and the degree of politicisation of ethnicity; the nature of the dispute; the spatial distribution of the groups; and the nature of the political system.[171] First, Reilly and Reynolds argue that different assumptions about the nature of ethnic identity will favour distinct electoral designs. If ethnic identities and voting patterns are fixed, then electoral incentives promoting moderation cannot work. If ethnicity is actually used as a proxy for other interests, incentives can be developed to support the emergence of other cleavages as ethnic divisions decrease. Second, the concurrent use of other institutional arrangements such as federalism or minority vetoes will directly impact the choice of an electoral system to work effectively. Third, the geographic distribution of ethnic groups will influence the intensity of the conflict. Proportional representation may therefore be required with territorially concentrated groups in order to avoid creating "ethnic fiefdoms" which would be encouraged by plurality or majoritarian systems. With intermixed groups, where ethnic cleavages are often reduced by other crosscutting divisions, the electoral system should encourage support for multi-ethnic parties to break-down inter-ethnic antagonism. Fourth, the nature of the political system also plays a role. In transitional democracies with a history of conflict, the plurality system

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[169] In a plurality system, the elected candidate is the one having the highest number of vote. It includes first-past-the-post or winner-takes-all, the block vote and the party block vote. By contrast, in a majoritarian system, the candidate must receive an absolute majority of the votes. It includes the alternative vote and the two round system. In a PR system, the electorate divisions are reflected proportionaly in the elected body. It includes list PR, which is the most common type of PR system, mixed member proportional system and the single transferable vote. Finally, semi-proportional systems combine an element of plurality or majoritarian system with proportional representation. It includes single nontransferable vote, parallel or mixed systems and limited vote.
[170] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 6.
[171] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 10 and 15–17.

has often been described as a factor for democratic collapse, as it prevents minorities from accessing parliamentary representation, while encouraging the dominance of one ethnic group. In Myanmar, the constitution provides for a plurality system by which candidates compete in single-member constituencies following township boundaries.[172] This system has been criticised by ethnic parties for minimising their political participation to the benefit of the NLD, who won a landslide in the two elections it competed, in 1990 and 2015. Given the context of Myanmar, analysts are encouraging the choice of a semi-proportional system.[173]

Special representation

Power sharing can occur as a result of guaranteed arrangements, which provide an explicit recognition of communal groups. Several strategies have been designed to recognise groups in practice.[174] First, the system of communal rolls enables each community to benefit from its own electoral roll by choosing only members from its own group as representatives. Second, the system of reserved seats seeks to provide representation to specific minority groups in parliament. This system is currently used in Myanmar with the institution of ethnic affairs ministers, which as highlighted earlier, is criticised for its limited and unclear role. However, the manipulation of the electoral system can produce token representatives, trigger resentment from the majority population, and foster mistrust between groups. The system of ethnically mixed lists – as used in Singapore - where parties are obliged to present mixed lists, means that voters cannot choose their representatives based on ethnicity. The risk here however is that a party can claim almost all the seats with only a simple majority of votes. Finally, the system of best losers allocates a number of seats to the highest candidates from under-represented groups.

The main advantages of this accommodationist approach are to contain ethnicity as a political problem by explicitly recognising it in the electoral law in order to maximise inclusion and minimise potential pre-election conflicts. This approach however implies

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[172] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 109 (b).
[173] Lemargie et al., "Electoral System Choice in Myanmar's Democratization Debate"; Marston, "Myanmar's Electoral System," 270.
[174] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 40–43.

the official determination of group identity, which as already noted, assumes that identities are fixed and primordial therefore lacking flexibility and hindering the alleviation of ethnic politics.[175] In addition, empirical evidence demonstrates contradictory results, with successful use in some divided societies as well as democratic collapse in others. As a result, such systems are probably best used in only the most extreme instances of conflict. According to Horowitz, group representation privileges are unlikely to promote minorities' interests because "they consign minorities to a minority position."[176] It is therefore at most, a transitional trust building measure, not one that can help build democracy in a plural society.

2.4.3 The recognition and protection of different identities by the state

When institutional design is concerned with the relationship between the state, individual citizens and identity groups, it involves the recognition and protection of different identities by the state and the determination of the degree to which certain groups enjoy privileges.[177] In this section, I first examine the discussion on the constitutional recognition of collective rights and link this to the other two dimensions of institutional design. I then look more specifically at cultural autonomy, which offers a comprehensive protection of collective rights.

Constitutional recognition of collective rights

Proponents of an accommodationist approach have long argued that in addition to individual rights, collective rights should be constitutionally recognised for specific cultural groups.[178] Kymlicka claims that special protections are justified for minority groups as they are vulnerable to the political, economic or military dominance of the majority group.[179] Many countries accept that some types of cultural difference can be protected only through constitutional or legal arrangements. Such arrangements go beyond the individual rights of citizenship by providing members with "group specific

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[175] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 55.
[176] Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa?*, 136.
[177] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 166.
[178] See, for example, Will Kymlicka and Wayne J. Norman, eds., *Citizenship in Diverse Societies* (Oxford: Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000); Janusz Bugajski, "The Fate of Minorities in Eastern Europe," in *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, ed. Larry J. Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 102–16.
[179] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 26.

rights". While it is true that a state cannot be democratic if the individual rights of all citizens are not protected by the constitution and enforced throughout the state, in multinational states some groups may not be able to partake fully as individual citizens if they do not gain, group-specific collective rights relating to education, media, religion and customary law that are important to their language and culture. In addition, Stepan stresses that although such group specific rights may be inconsistent with the traditional conception of citizenship in a nation-state, they do not infringe on individual rights; what's more they enable democratic loyalty to be stretched throughout the political community.[180]

The literature on cultural rights has identified a number of measures aimed at accommodating national and ethnic differences based on different ideas. Kymlicka identifies three group specific measures based on the type of group making the claim: self-government rights, multicultural rights and special representation rights.[181] First, self-government rights refer to claims from national groups within a state for some kind of political autonomy or territorial authority in order to guarantee their cultural development and protect their constituent's interests.[182] It is embodied in the principle of self-determination, which international law recognises but limits to overseas colonies thus denying this right to many national minorities which have been involuntarily incorporated into a state. Second, multicultural rights include demands from immigrant or religious groups within a state for public funding of cultural practices, and exemption from laws and regulations that disadvantage them. Although self-government rights differ from multicultural rights as one tends tend to promote accommodation while the other aims to promote integration in the larger society, both are permanent because they defend cultural differences rather than try to eliminate them.[183] Third, special representation rights are meant to secure self-government and overcome systemic discriminations, through proportional representation, the reduction of barriers or reserved seats. While group representation can play a significant though limited role in representative democracy in ensuring an adequate voice for minority interests under some circumstances, it faces a number of challenges, including the identification of

[180] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 32.
[181] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 27.
[182] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 27.
[183] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 31.

groups, the number of seats granted and the question of accountability of representatives.[184] While the first and third rights actually reflect to the two other dimensions of institutional design (territorial self-governance and power sharing), the second one offers new perspectives on the types of privilege that a group can enjoy. Criticising Kymlicka's classification for being based on the type of group making the claim,[185] Jacob Levy proposes to classify cultural rights into eight categories based on the policies and arguments characterising the claim: exemption rights, assistance rights, self-government claims, external rules, recognition of the customary law of the community, internal rules and symbolic claims.[186] While his classification only includes the first dimension of institutional design (territorial self-governance), it offers a broader range of privileges that can be recognised for a group. In Myanmar, the constitution only recognises in broad terms the protection of ethnic language, literature and culture, which has yet to translate into any solid advantage or affirmative action for ethnic groups.[187]

Cultural autonomy

Cultural autonomy is a form of non-territorial pluralism: an institution that derives directly from the recognition of collective rights. As Ruth Lapidoth explains, this form of autonomy may be granted to all members of a certain group within the state (usually ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious minorities), regardless of their location in the state.[188] It consists mainly of the right to protect and promote the identity of such a group through institutions created by the group itself and which are actually binding

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[184] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 144.
[185] Jacob T. Levy, *Classifying Cultural Rights*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Will Kymlicka, Ethnicity and Group Rights (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 49–52.
[186] Exemption rights enable minorities to take part in practices, religious but not only, which differ from those of the majority; assistance rights seek to provide funding to overcome impediments to engaging in common practices that the majority culture can already do such as language and art; self-government claims are related to government structure as ethnic, cultural or national groups seek a political unit where they are ruled by members of their own group; external rules involves restrictions on the freedom of neighbouring non-members in order to protect a particular culture; the recognition of the customary law of the community rather than the general law of the state, which is closely linked with arguments for self-government, but sometimes used to avoid consideration of issues such as autonomy ; internal rules which sets expectations on community members' behaviour; guaranteed representation in order to protect some privileges or prevent discrimination; symbolic claims to recognition as a group with distinct identity, which concerns matters such as flag, anthem, name, holiday. See Levy, *Classifying Cultural Rights*, 25–48.
[187] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 22 (a).
[188] Lapidoth, *Autonomy*, 37–40.

only to people who voluntarily choose to identify with the group for which it was established. First used by the Ottomans to manage religious diversity, it was developed by Karl Renner as a theory proposed to solve minority challenges in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Cultural autonomy was first constitutionally recognised in Estonia in 1920, where it was the most consistently applied. Estonia's Law of Cultural Autonomy specified that any ethnic group with at least 3,000 registered members could institute an elected cultural council, which would have authority over schools and other cultural institutions. As Mc Garry & O'Leary note, cultural autonomy offers one way to prevent discrimination against minorities that can be found in territorially based governance and it is definitely useful for nationalities that are too small or spread out to claim territorial self-governance, especially to ease ethnic tensions when various ethnic groups are intermixed.[189] A main argument for the implementation of cultural autonomy holds that it can avoid the secessionist dangers of territorial pluralism, while recognising the need to accommodate the diversity of the population. Some authors such as Gurr actually conflate cultural autonomy with their definition of autonomy because it can be used in conjunction with other forms of territorial diffusion of power, to deal with "the group's right to teach and use its own language, to practice its religion, and to protect traditional values and lifeways from assimilationist pressures."[190]

However, cultural autonomy presents a number of limitations. First, it is highly doubtful that large and geographically concentrated nationality claims will be fulfilled with cultural autonomy, especially if they draw from previous territorial self-governance. Indeed, the authority sought over the economy, the police, immigration and language necessitate control over territory. In addition, cultural autonomy significantly fails to recognise the primordial relationship that most mobilised communities sustain with their homeland. McGarry and O'Leary argue that the concept of a national homeland, expressed in the discourse of indigenous communities and mobilised ethnic nationalities, conveys the idea of a symbolic and emotional relationship, which cannot be satisfied simply through self-government over its members. Kymlicka argues that in the case of geographically concentrated communities, the depth of the link between national identities and territory requires that cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance

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[189] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement."
[190] See Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 299.

should be viewed as an approach that is complementary rather than alternative.[191] Indeed, as David Smith points out, some nationalities are clearly stateless and even within groups that can claim a historical bond with a specific territory, some of its members will inevitably remain outside this category.[192] The combination of cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance can therefore offer a comprehensive solution: the same group enjoying a form of territorial self-governance in one region and cultural autonomy in another region.

Second, in its assessment of Hungary's cultural autonomy mechanisms Athanasios Yupsanis argues that since cultural autonomy only focuses on the cultural dimension, it fails to address the concerns of a group such as the Roma, which are mainly of an economic nature. The nature and scope of the autonomy system and the powers of the autonomous bodies should therefore be clearly specified by the constitution.[193] Third, while cultural autonomy may support the development of loyalty to the state, Smith warns that it is far from fully guaranteeing the formation of a multinational polity. According to him, the existence of guaranteed equal rights and opportunities irrespective of ethnicity and the presence of a cross-ethnic civil society are essential to avoid reinforcing ethnic particularity and encouraging the marginalisation of certain groups.[194]

In Myanmar given the existence of groups such as the Pa-O, who are territorially concentrated in one area (Shan State) and spread out across several areas (Kayah, Mon and Karen States as well as Yangon and Bago Regions) cultural autonomy offers an interesting institutional alternative that can complement a territorial self-government solution. Other groups, such as the Inthar in Shan State who are territorially concentrated but too small to claim territorial self-governance could also benefit from such a measure.

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[191] Will Kymlicka, "National Cultural Autonomy and International Minority Rights Norms," in *Cultural Autonomy in Contemporary Europe*, ed. David J. Smith and Karl Cordell (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 52.
[192] David Smith, "National Cultural Autonomy," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 286.
[193] Athanasios Yupsanis, "Cultural Autonomy for Minorities in Hungary: A Model to Be Followed or a Futile Promise?," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 26, no. 1 (December 9, 2019): 38–39.
[194] Smith, "National Cultural Autonomy," 282.

To sum up, institutions can have an impact on the management of ethnic conflict in three different areas: territorial self-government, power sharing and the recognition and protection of group identities. Each element of institutional design implemented separately may have limited impact. For instance, the electoral system may not be enough to address overlapping disputes, which can be resource based, primarily cultural or territorial. Each issue may require other types of institutional arrangements to reduce conflict. In turn, this will also affect the choice of an electoral system.[195] Moreover, as indicated earlier, each element of institutional design may be critiqued for making things worse. For instance, territorial self-government may be criticised for empowering essentially separatist elites and providing them with resources needed to move forward on the path to secession.[196] These mechanisms of conflict management are thus often used in conjunction together, increasing their chance of success. For instance, bi-cameral systems can establish a major connection between the first two elements of institutional design, when the upper house of parliament provides institutional representation to state sub-units.[197] I now turn to the theoretical debates advancing several institutional models based on distinct institutional combinations.

2.5 Institutional models for divided societies

As already noted, the development of a procedural democracy is not necessarily linked to the substantive outcome of inclusive political participation in countries characterised by deep cultural diversity, especially when one group is likely to dominate others. While the institutions discussed in the previous section represent a variety of mechanisms that can be used to manage ethnic diversity, the literature on ethnic conflict management has suggested specific ways to combine these institutions into models that can successfully manage ethnic cleavages in deeply diverse societies. Although accommodation is commonly considered as the most suitable strategy to manage diversity, scholars do not agree on the approach to adopt. This section is therefore concerned with a discussion of six models which combine the institutions presented earlier in different ways. As mentioned earlier, two main strategies have dominated

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[195] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 10 and 15–17.
[196] Wolff, "Conflict Management in Divided Societies," 38–39.
[197] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 165.

discussions on institutional design: consociationalism and centripetalism. These models propose antithetic versions of democratic design for managing ethnic conflict: minority rule versus a modified form of majority rule. However, the two approaches diverge along the same institutional lines: executive design, electoral systems, governing coalitions and the division of powers. In addition, this section looks at other approaches designed by different scholars: the integrative consensualist approach, the hybrid federalism paradigm, the power-dividing approach, and the state-nation model. Finally, I briefly outline how the intensity of ethnic identification and mobilisation will impact the choice of model. The question of which model would be most suitable in Myanmar will be developed in chapter 7, based on the Mon and Pa-O context.

2.5.1 The consociational model

Lijphart's study of fragmented and unstable societies led him to the conclusion that culturally divided societies can get a level of stability similar to those of more homogenous states if rivalling elites can agree on a basic understanding of how to manage deep cultural cleavages and enshrine this understanding constitutionally.[198] Consociationalism is a normative model for plural societies, which entails important deviations from the majority rule. It is also an empirical description of political stability in four European countries: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. The main features of Lijphart's consociational institutions are: a grand coalition central government which includes the polity's main segments; mutual vetoes on matters of importance to segments; proportionality in the public sector with regards to the distribution of legislative seats, government posts and public funds; and segmental autonomy in order to accommodate cleavages. Since consociationalism is a flexible type of governance, those features can manifest into various institutions.[199]

First, the grand coalition is a power sharing mechanism which is the most important instrument of consociationalism. It is classically associated with parliamentary systems and the establishment of a multiparty cabinet that is collegial and hence reduces

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[198] Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969): 207–25; Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*.
[199] Allison McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division: Consociationalism and Centripetalism in Comparative Perspective," 2009, 34.

majoritarianism.[200] Second, the guarantee of mutual veto, which enables the participation of minorities in the decision-making process, can be either informally implemented or formally recognised in the constitution.[201] Third, Lijphart advocates for an electoral system based on the proportional representation because it allows groups to assert themselves politically.[202] Indeed, proportionality can ensure the inclusion of all groups in proportion to their numerical strength, at all levels of government and in terms of financial resources allocation.[203] Fourth, segmental autonomy implies that decisions on matters of common interest are made at the centre while each segment makes decisions on other matters.[204] The institutionalisation of this principle can translate into two different forms: territorial self-government or cultural autonomy.[205]

Lijphart identifies nine main factors that facilitate the implementation of a consociational solution: the lack of a majority ethnic group; few socio-economic differences; ethnic groups of identical size; a limited number of groups; a moderately low population density; the existence of external threats that encourage internal unity; the existence of overarching allegiances; the geographic clusters of groups; and previous traditions of cooperation. However, Lijphart stresses that these factors are only helpful and neither required nor sufficient for the effective development of a consociational regime.[206]

For many deeply divided democratising societies, the inclusion of the main political groups in the legislature permitted by proportional representation is seen as an essential condition for democratic consolidation because it creates a legitimate and inclusive regime. Critics, however argue that consociationalism can be extremely difficult to adopt, with practical implications leading to various challenges. Consociational

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[200] McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division," 36.
[201] Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 38.
[202] Arend Lijphart, "Self-Determination versus Pre-Determination of Ethnic Minorities in Power-Sharing Systems," in *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, ed. Will Kymlicka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 281.
[203] Additional features such as district magnitude and electoral thresholds have repercussions for the extent of proportionality provided and therefore require to consider carefully the percentage of the population minority groups to be represented to ensure they do not hinder group participation. See Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 1999), 137–40.
[204] Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 41.
[205] Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 43.
[206] Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 53–103.

institutions have been criticised for being highly ineffectual and even contributing to state disintegration because they weaken the commitment of minorities to the state while empowering their capacity to put pressure on the state.[207] In addition, despite Lijphart's objections, Horowitz argues that a grand coalition is unsustainable due to the political tensions inherent in deep ethnic cleavages, which will result in immobilism.[208]

In order to address some of those criticisms, the consociational model has been theoretically refined to include additional features that support the advancement of political stability such as the establishment of strong human rights and minority rights charters and the consideration of other issues that go beyond institutional design.[209] Alison McCulloch's comparative study demonstrates that consociationalism is likely to be an efficient institutional design for divided societies if it also includes policies on peace processes, security sector reforms, the return of refugees and property restitution in order to form a "comprehensive consociation".[210] According to Rupert Taylor, the "new wave" of consociational settlements that can be found in in Ireland, Sri Lanka and Bosnia-Herzegovina, show that such adaptation of Lijphart's model remains one of the most supported strategies of ethnic conflict management.[211]

2.5.2 The centripetal model

While consociationalism proposes a collaborative approach, centripetalism offers an integrative approach by creating political incentives for moderation that makes majorities dependent on minority support.[212] According to Horowitz, even severe conflict divisions do not mean that a country will face violence as long as it can adopt

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[207] Zachary Elkins and John Sides, "Can Institutions Build Unity in Multiethnic States?," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 693–708.

[208] Donald L. Horowitz, "Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 2 (2014): 5–20; Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 52. According to Lijphart, the experience of European democracies demonstrates that immobilism is not inevitable. In addition, it is always easy to move to a more competitive form of democracy when the diminution of cleavages makes consensus less necessary.

[209] Lijphart, "Self-Determination versus Pre-Determination of Ethnic Minorities in Power-Sharing Systems"; Brendon O'Leary, "Debating Consociational Politics: Normative and Explanatory Arguments," in *From Powersharing to Democracy*, ed. Sid Noel (Montreal, Quebec: McGill/Queen's University press, 2005), 13; Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 168.

[210] McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division," 47.

[211] Rupert Taylor, "The Promise of Consociational Theory," in *Consociational Theory: McGarry & O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, ed. Rupert Taylor (New York, Abingdon: Routlege, 2009), 1–7.

[212] Horowitz, "Ethnic Conflict Management for Policy Makers."

institutions that promote cooperation rather than polarisation. To the contrary, the separation measures propounded by consociationalism can foster mistrust between groups by rigidifying national identities when their fluidity should actually be used to encourage all-encompassing civic identities and cross-ethnic political alliances. Centripetalism stresses that instead of crafting rigid institutions where cooperation takes place among representatives after elections, electoral systems can be used to promote moderation of "ethnocentric political behaviour". This can be achieved by providing incentives for parties to make "interethnic political cooperation rewarding" and favour the formation of coalitions across group lines.[213]

There are four centripetal institutions developed by Horowitz: a majoritarian electoral system to reward moderates, the formation of "coalitions of commitment" at the centre, an executive coalition restricted to moderate parties, and a decentralised government not focused on promoting ethnic based autonomy. Firstly, considering the electoral system as "the most powerful constitutional device for accommodation in deeply divided societies", Horowitz specifically advocates for the use of the alternative vote because it promotes a cycle of moderation and cross-community cooperation.[214] Indeed, as a majoritarian-preferential electoral system, political leaders have to campaign outside their own ethnic group in order to receive enough votes to get elected. Secondly, this preferential voting system encourages the formation of "coalitions of commitment". These coalitions are made of ethnic parties that find it electorally worthwhile to take moderate stances on interethnic issues and are therefore willing to engage in vote pooling through pre-election pacts across ethnic divisions.[215] The third institutional arrangement is the position of a president, directly elected under a territorial distribution system or at least under a majoritarian-preferential system. In addition to majority support across the country, the requirement of a regional threshold encourages intergroup conciliation, as cross-community support is needed for any candidate to be victorious.[216] The fourth centripetalist institution seeks to "disperse power away from the centre" through administrative federalism or decentralisation. Unlike in

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[213] Donald L. Horowitz, "The Alternative Vote and Interethnic Moderation: A Reply to Fraenkel and Grofman," *Public Choice* 121, no. 3–4 (2004): 508.
[214] Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa?*, 163.
[215] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 378–79.
[216] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 205.

consociations, the constituent units are not designed along group cleavages. Ideally groups would be intermixed in order to encourage intergroup cooperation.[217]

The main appeal of centripetalism is the production of incentives for moderation as a result of the preferential system. [218] It is however vulnerable to several criticisms: first, there are no practical examples of successful centripetalism using all the institutions recommended by Horowitz. Second, it is highly disproportional, although the vote system proposed by Horowitz is the least disproportional majoritarian system. For these reasons, McCulloch concludes that the consociational model is better suited than centripetalism to promote stability in deeply divided societies.[219]

2.5.3 The integrative consensualism model

Reynolds proposed the integrative consensualism model, which draws from the consociational and centripetal approaches. [220] It retains the key elements of consociationalism - an executive power sharing and a proportional representation electoral system - but employs the centripetal electoral incentives of the single transferable vote system rather than the rigid proportional representation system. The main devices of integrative consensualism are its electoral system and the dismissal of institutions that establish ethnic division within the party system such as minority vetoes, federalism and cultural autonomy. This model is premised on the belief that voting behaviours are not based on ascriptive identities and therefore recommends the use of a single transferable vote system in order to promote cross cutting ethnic cleavages while guaranteeing that minorities are represented and included in decision making. While consociationalism may be the only possible option in societies driven by primordial affiliation, integrative consensualism is a viable option for societies where other cleavages such as class, wealth, regionalism and clan may be more significant than ethnicity. The main criticism of the model is that the single transferable vote system has been rarely used in divided societies, with inconclusive evidence of cross-ethnic voting.

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[217] Timothy D. Sisk, *Power-Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), p. 42; Horowitz, "Conciliatory Institutions."
[218] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 34–36.
[219] McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division," 9.
[220] Andrew Reynolds, "Electoral Systems and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Africa," ed. Arend Lijphart, 1996, 237.

Despite this downside, Reilly and Reynolds argue that it offers an interesting middle way solution which combines vote-pooling incentives with proportionality.[221]

2.5.4 The hybrid federalism paradigm

In a comparative analysis of the development of federal systems in three divided societies, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Michael Breen advances a hypothesis on federal design that combines accommodation and moderation strategies and therefore bridges the traditional divide between the consociational and centripetal approaches. He argues: "a hybrid form of ethnic and territorial federalism, that encourages ethnicity at the lower levels and multiethnicity at the centre, and which includes accommodating institutions designed to incentivise deliberation, is more likely than other types of federalism to maximise political equality."[222] This model suggests the creation of deliberative incentives through the promotion of multi-ethnic institutions at the centre - such as political parties – as well as the preservation of group autonomy and ethnic parties at the sub-unit level.[223]

2.5.5 The power-dividing model

In the context of conflict resolution, Philip Roeder and Donald Rothchild have developed the theory of power-dividing, as part of a "stewardship" strategy to maintain peace in ethnically divided societies where the stability of the constitutional order can be threatened particularly as a result of peace agreement negotiations.[224] Power-dividing has three main institutional devices. First, there is a comprehensive human rights bill which grants important decisions to the private domain and civil society. Second, power is decentralised between the branches of government and a variety of specialised agencies overseeing specific and delimited areas. This decentralisation enables the creation of numerous and shifting majorities, therefore increasing the possibility for ethnic minorities and majorities to be part of the political majority or minority depending on the issues. Third, the distribution of power to different levels of

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[221] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 39–40.
[222] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 174.
[223] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 5.
[224] Philip G. Roeder and Donald S. Rothchild, eds., *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 15.

government facilitates a system of checks and balances that can effectively limit the power of each of those decision-making centres. Theoretically appealing, the power-dividing model is vulnerable to the criticism that it has very limited practical examples of its application to ethno-nationalist conflicts.[225]

2.5.6 The state-nation model

According to Stepan et al., the nation-state paradigm has only one conceptual alternative for diverse societies: the state-nation.[226] Unlike the nation-state characterised by its ethnic uniformity, which is promoted through a national language, centralised education system and a predominant history, the state-nation has significant multinational components but still manages to create strong identification and loyalty from its citizens. It is the result of intentional policies, which create "a sense of belonging (or "we-feeling") with respect to the state-wide community while simultaneously creating institutional safeguards for respecting and protecting politically salient sociocultural diversities. [227]

If a country were to be defined as a state-nation, four empirically verifiable patterns should be documented in terms of public opinion: a positive identification with state or pride in the state; the presence of multiple but complementary political identities and loyalties, with an emphasis on identification to both state-wide identity and ethnic identity; institutional trust relating to the most important constitutional, legal and administrative components of the state; and support from the various segments of society for democracy.[228] Exemplary state-nations include India, Canada, Spain or Switzerland and Belgium,

Those patterns are not all present from the beginning; rather they are the outcome of a deliberate "nested policy grammar", by which seven policies are sequenced as follows: an asymmetrical federal state; individual and collective rights; a parliamentary government; policies encouraging the formation of polity-wide and regional-centric

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[225] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 171.
[226] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 2–11.
[227] Alfred C. Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, "The Rise of 'State-Nations,'" *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 53.
[228] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 7.

parties and careers; policies promoting the political integration and not the cultural assimilation of the population; policies encouraging cultural nationalists rather than secessionist nationalists; and policies favouring the formation of multiple but complementary identities.[229] However, the proposed policy sequence has a number of weaknesses. The policies are not very specific and the authors do not provide systematic examples of how each of the recognised state-nation countries has implemented the seven nested policies. Furthermore, the "nested sequence", which implies that each policy is made possible by the implementation of the previous, lacks analytical clarity. Indeed, it is not clear how the last two policies are independent, as they appear more as consequences of the previous policies. This is obvious in the fact that the "the formation of multiple but complementary identities" is also one of the four empirically verifiable patterns. Nevertheless, this imprecision represents at the same time an advantage as it does not restrict ways a state-nation can be crafted.

The state-nation model is a *holding together type of* federation, characterised by strong asymmetrical elements in its origin and intention, with cultural prerogatives constitutionally guaranteed for sub-units with strong territorial identities.[230] Ethno-federal arrangements are often criticised for granting prerogatives to sub-national identities, to the detriment of identification with common symbols, institutions and individual rights.[231] As McGarry and O'Leary note, the endurance of territorial pluralism is more probable when there is some sense of loyalty to the whole state in addition to the national homeland.[232] Interestingly, looking at average trust rankings in longstanding federal democracies that meet state-nation characteristics, Stepan et al. demonstrate that they have ethno-national features as well as strong "polity-wide trust."[233] As a result, Stepan et al. claim that the state-nation would be a good fit for a country like Myanmar, because according to them, its democratic consolidation requires an institutional arrangement that contains an important ethno-federal dimension as well

[229] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 17–22.
[230] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 26.
[231] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 15.
[232] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 260.
[233] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 37.

as mechanisms facilitating identification with common symbols and institutions.[234]

2.5.7 Political salience of ethnicity and the choice of a model

In this section, I argue that the choice of any institutional model should be conscious of its assumptions about the political salience of ethnicity and its perceptions of the role institutions can play in managing ethnic mobilisation. I mainly discuss the assumption held by the two dominant approaches, the consociational and centripetal models, and briefly highlight that the middle way solutions offered by some of the other models offer an interesting alternative. Although the centripetal and consociational theories are constructivist in the sense that they see ethnic identities as historically constructed, they have different assumptions about the impact of conflict on ethno-national identities. For the consociationalist approach, ethnic conflict will spawn rigidified identities, which are harder to demobilise and thus must be accommodated. Conversely, for the centripetalist, the power-dividing and integrative consensualism approaches, identities are always flexible and must not be encouraged to hold on to the political process.[235] In this sense, the debate focuses on the balance between institutions playing the role of representatives in the communication process or institutions transcending those roles in order to breakdown the political salience of ethnicity.

Critics of Lijphart's model suggest the differential treatment proposed by consociational arrangements can reinforce a fixed conception of ethnic identity and presents the risk of crystallising common ties and interest and therefore politicising cultural differences.[236] According to Reilly and Reynolds, the consociational model is best suited for societies with no hopes for accommodation, because it may entrench identity politics in societies where ethnic voting is tenuous. Indeed, the use of proportional representation encourages the replication of social divisions in the parliament instead of promoting cooperation. This trend is reinforced by the minorities' autonomous status, which

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[234] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 16–17.
[235] Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict," 175.
[236] Donald L. Horowitz, "The Northern Ireland Agreement: Clear, Consociational, and Risky," in *Northern Ireland and the Divided World : The Northern Ireland Conflict and the Good Friday Agreement in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John McGarry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 93; Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 3–4; Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 40.

focuses on ethnic differences and hinders the alleviation of segmental cleavages.[237] This leads Timothy Sisk to recommend that consociationalism should only be used as a temporary measure during democratic transitions. [238]

Conversely, proponents of Horowitz's model argue that centripetalist strategies promoting civic identities and guaranteeing individual rights should be preferred because the watering down of differences will contribute to lessen mobilisation around ethnic markers of identity.[239] However, the idea that it is possible to foster multi-polar fluidity through the promotion of accommodating institutions encouraging moderate behaviours is not corroborated empirically. McCulloch's comparative study demonstrates that centripetal practices seldom support political stability in deeply divided societies because of their need for a sufficient level of pre-existing moderation, which may be far from the reality in such situations.[240] Divisions may even be deepened if centripetal institutions are adopted in the wrong context as this can lead to the dominance of one group.[241]

While consociational and centripetal arrangements seem to be only relatively pertinent, the hybrid federalism and state-nation models offer interesting middle way solutions. They recommend a combination of institutions, which accommodate rigid attitudes while also encouraging more flexible attitudes. The state-nation model is particularly interesting as it does not only encourage ethnic-based territorial pluralism but also proposes a comprehensive set of policies aimed at promoting the formation of multiple identities and therefore a sense of belonging to the national community.

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[237] Reilly and Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies*, 30–31.
[238] Timothy D. Sisk, "Power Sharing," Beyond intractability, 2003, http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/power-sharing.
[239] Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 3–4; Snyder, *From Voting to Violence*, 40.
[240] McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division," 4.
[241] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 260.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the challenges of nation building in democratising multinational societies and stressed the importance of institutional design to accommodate ethnic diversity. Seeking to explain the factors behind violence during democratic transitions, I introduced different approaches to thinking about ethnicity and signalled that the constructivist and ethno-symbolist approaches were consistent with the literature's description of ethnicity in Myanmar examined in chapter 1 and further confirmed in chapters 3 and 5. Since the lack of a cohesive national identity is central to explanations of conflict in democratising multinational countries, I also argued that democratic consolidation requires addressing the question of national belonging. This echoes the problematic Bamar dominance of national identity exposed in chapter 1 and will be confirmed in chapter 5 as Mon and Pa-O views highlight the importance of promoting a sense of belonging to the national identity. In addition, recognising the constructivist idea that institution building and identity formation are co-constitutive, I highlighted the importance of considering the political salience of ethnicity when choosing a state building strategy because the very process of state building can have a major impact on the rigidification of ethnicity and therefore the intensity of the conflict. After outlining how six different institutional models propose to combine the main institutional strategies for ethnic conflict management, I thus examined their assumptions about the political salience of ethnicity and the role of institutions in managing ethnic mobilisation. This led me to highlight the relevance of the state-nation model which offers ways to accommodate rigid attitudes towards ethnicity while encouraging moderation at the same time.

In order to understand which model would resonate in the context of the Mon and Pa-O, I first need to further investigate how the Mon and Pa-O experience of ethnic discrimination has influenced their attitudes towards ethnicity and a common identity (chapter 4 and 5). If the findings reveal moderate attitudes, then the centripetal and integrative consensualism models would be a good fit. If they show that identities are rather rigid, then the consociational model would be a better fit. If it appears that although attitudes tend to be rigid, there is room for more moderate attitudes, then middle way solutions such as hybrid federalism or the state-nation model would be more suitable. In parallel, the characteristics of each model should be compared with the

local context and more particularly they should resonate with Mon and Pa-O demands for addressing the insecurities they face (chapter 6).

CHAPTER 3 –The Nationalist Struggles of the Mon and Pa-O

This chapter seeks to present the Mon and the Pa-O ethnic groups as the "ethnic sites" of this study, and highlight important contextual variations between them. After briefly summarising the state of the current peace negotiations involving the *Tatmadaw*, the NLD and a number of EAOs, this chapter provides some background information on each group, following a similar outline. Drawing from interviews, focus groups and participant observation as well as secondary sources, I show that Mon and Pa-O commonly identify themselves as distinct ethnic communities, exhibiting both the tangible and intangible aspects of Smith's definition discussed in chapter 2. Then, using mostly secondary sources, I give a historical overview of their nationalist struggles and describe some of their governance mechanisms such as the Mon National School system and the Pa-O SAA, which both play a central role in the articulation of aspirations examined in chapter 6 and 7. Finally, drawing again on ethnographic findings, I present how Mon and Pa-O people perceive their respective EAOs.

3.1 State of the nationwide peace process

The implementation of a nationwide peace process culminated with the adoption of the NCA in 2015. Yet, the way forward to peace is fraught with obstacles that seriously undermine the legitimacy of the process.

3.1.1 The adoption of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

The armed resistance against successive ultra nationalist Bamar governments started in ethnic areas right after independence. Decades of long-standing hostilities with the central government have caused severe damage to the economy as well as deep ethnic cleavages and mistrust between the ethnic nationalities and the majority Bamar population. While all EAOs generally share claims for political autonomy, economic development and cultural recognition, they have varied objectives, and different degrees of commitment to political autonomy. As Christina Fink noted, "there is no unity of opinion on political strategy within minority communities" and even within minority groups, "unity has been created through coercive mechanisms: by marginalizing or

removing dissenters."[1] Despite such variations, a number of EAOs have entered into alliances, which promoted common goals.[2] Following a classic divide-and-rule strategy, the military regime however, refused to negotiate alliances with any EAO and entered instead into individual ceasefire agreements with 15 insurgent organisations between 1989-95, including with the Pa-O and Mon groups.[3] However, these did not lead to the negotiation of a political solution.

As a result of international pressure, the government has initiated peace negotiations with sixteen armed groups represented in the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team, which resulted in the adoption of the NCA in October 2015, although it was only signed at the time by eight signatories.[4] Indeed, some of the most powerful EAOs declined signing the NCA after the *Tatmadaw* excluded six groups from signing the text.[5] This contributed to the continued fighting along the Chinese border with the Kachin Independence Army and three of these groups, known as the Northern Alliance.[6]

Following the adoption of the NCA, the previous Thein Sein government initiated the current political dialogue phase, which was envisaged as a series of Union peace conferences. Rebranded by Aung San Suu Kyi as the "21st Century Panglong Conferences" (herein referred to as peace conferences) in reference to the pre-

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[1] Christina Fink, "Ethnic Politics at the Periphery," *Burma Debate*, 2003. Cited in Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong," 906.
[2] For instance, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) or the Union Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) or more recently the Northern Alliance.
[3] Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma : The Golden Sheldrake* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 166.
[4] The initial NCA signatories included: All Burma Students' Democratic Front, Restoration Council for Shan State, Arakan Liberation Party, Chin National Front, Karen National Union, Pa-O National Liberation Organization, KNU/KNLA Peace Council, and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army. The NMSP and the Lahu democratic Union joined in 2018.
[5] The six groups included the Arakan National Congress, the Lahu Democratic Union, the Wa National Organization, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Northern Burma, and the Arakan Army. Although the first three groups have separate ceasefire agreements and can therefore participate in negotiations, the *Tatmadaw* initially did not invite them to sign the NCA because they lack well-defined territories and active military operations. They are now allowed to sign the NCA, which, the Lahu Democratic Union did in 2018. Regarding the last three groups, the *Tatmadaw* still rejects their signature of the NCA and participation in negotiations because they are connected to larger EAOs and are still involved in fighting with the military. See Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue: The Problem of 'All-Inclusiveness' in Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process," in *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*, ed. Justine Chambers et al., Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 241–42.
[6] The Northern Alliance thus includes: the Kachin Independence Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Northern Burma, and the Arakan Army.

independence historical event, these conferences aim to reach a comprehensive peace agreement and pave the way for amending the 2008 constitution. This agreement, the Union Peace Accord, should deal with the most challenging issues: the type of federalist arrangement, revenue sharing and the question of the integration of EAOs in the military. Yet, as Sadan notes, the revival of the highly contested Panglong symbolism to begin a resolution of Myanmar's deep-rooted ethnic conflict is ironic. Indeed, instead of facilitating a transition towards a multiethnic state, the historical agreement entrenched the Bamar/Buddhist dominance of the economic and political system.[7] Similarly, the fragile peace process faces critical limitations.

3.1.2 The limited impact of ethnic-based national dialogues

The NCA established an "inclusive political dialogue process" in order to secure lasting peace.[8] Its purpose is to provide a channel for ordinary citizens, CSOs and EAOs to discuss issues that the peace process should resolve.[9] Under the Framework for Political Dialogue, which was adopted shortly after the NCA, the "National Level Political Dialogues" (herein referred to as national dialogues) focus on five thematic areas: political affairs, economic affairs, social affairs, land and natural resources, and security.[10] These thematic areas are discussed within three different types of national dialogues: ethnic-based, which involves a particular ethnic group; region-based, which covers a particular state or region; and thematic, which covers a specific issue discussed at the national level.[11] Guidelines or terms of references were subsequently prepared for the implementation of each type of national dialogue and resulted in pilot projects whereby sub-national consultations would be held to provide input for each national dialogue, however in reality such input very limited. [12]

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[7] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 219.
[8] Government of Myanmar, "Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement" (2015), Preamble.
[9] International Crisis Group, "Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar," 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/287-building-critical-mass-peace-myanmar.
[10] Government of Myanmar, "Framework for Political Dialogue" (2015), Section 5; "National Dialogues and Public Consultations Explained - Myanmar," ReliefWeb, accessed March 1, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/national-dialogues-and-public-consultations-explained.
[11] Government of Myanmar, Framework for Political Dialogue, Section 4.1.4.
[12] Lun Min Mang, "Drafting of National-Level Dialogues' Terms of Reference under Way," *The Myanmar Times*, September 21, 2016, https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/22643-drafting-of-national-level-dialogues-terms-of-reference-under-way.html.

Indeed, my participation in preparation meetings for the organisation of consultations prior to the Pa-O ethnic-based national dialogue meeting revealed that there was very little time for people to discuss issues. Consultations were organised in all townships where Pa-O people live, however they only lasted a day, most of which was filled by speeches from political stakeholders leaving little time for villagers to discuss issues meaningfully. The feelings the consultations generated are thus quite mixed. For a Pa-O EAO member, these community consultations represented an unprecedented process.[13] However, a CSO member thought that they were not very meaningful, commenting that it was "just ticking a box."[14]

In addition, although the consultations are meant to provide an avenue for NCA signatories to feed their perspective into the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC), the ethnic-based national dialogue has a limited impact on the peace process. The UPDJC, which is divided into five thematic working Committees reflecting the thematic issues discussed in the national dialogues, is where preparation is taking place for the next peace conference.[15] However, to the discontent of many EAOs, the agenda setting remains pretty much independent of the ethnic nationalities' national dialogues. Indeed, under the Framework, if a bloc within the UPDJC Secretariat - usually formed by the delegates from the military, government and parliament - rejects a topic proposal, then it will not be included in the conference agenda.[16]

3.1.3 Stumbling blocks of the peace conferences

While initially designed as bi-annual events, there has been only one peace conference per year due to multiple postponements, until the processed finally stalled in 2019. The first peace conference was held in August 2016, the second in May 2017 and the third in July 2018. As the first peace conference merely launched the NLD-led political dialogue, its main achievement was rather symbolic: "This was the first time in more

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[13] Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52, December 2016.
[14] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56, December 2016.
[15] Joint Peace Fund, "The People of Mon Hold Their National Dialogue Just Three Months after Signing the NCA," Joint Peace Fund, May 8, 2018, https://www.jointpeacefund.org/en/blog/people-mon-hold-their-national-dialogue-just-three-months-after-signing-nca.
[16] Kyaw Lin Htoon, "Peace Conference Opens amid Low Expectations and Calls for Reform," Frontier Myanmar, 2018, https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/peace-conference-opens-amid-low-expectations-and-calls-for-reform.

than fifty years that [representatives of almost all armed groups were] able to express their desires and pent up aspirations to a national audience without fear of being arrested and put in prison."[17] In preparation for the second peace conference, public consultations were held as part of the ethnic-based dialogue in Chin, Karen and Pa-O areas but were blocked by authorities in Shan and Rakhine States.[18] These consultations resulted in a set of 41 principles covering four sectors: political, economic, social and land/environment. The second peace conference (May 2017) reached consensus on the adoption of 37 principles to be included in the Union Peace Accord.[19] However, the question of possible secession of ethnic areas under EAO control has become a point of contention: the *Tatmadaw* refuses to discuss further any political topics such as self-determination unless EAOs commit to a non-secession clause. This led to a deadlock in negotiations because NCA signatories commonly reject such a clause, arguing that the term would mean that they were not trusted as members of the Union.[20] Furthermore, they claim that it denies the principles adopted by EAOs during a high level conference in 2005, which included the dropping of the demand for the right to secede.[21]

The third conference was postponed at least four times due to restrictions on political dialogue consultations in Shan State, although a Mon political dialogue went ahead only three months after the NMSP signed the NCA.[22] When the conference was finally held (July 2018), the UPDJC approved another 14 principles to be included in a Union Peace Accord in addition to the 37 principles adopted at the second conference. These principles covered social and economic matters, political arrangements as well as land and the environment but were very minimal.

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[17] Euro-Burma Office, "Political Monitor No 20," 2016, http://www.euro-burma.eu/activities/research-policy/ebo-political-monitors/.
[18] International Crisis Group, "Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar."
[19] For a detailed list of the 37 principles, see Kyaw Lin Htoon, "Peace Conference Opens amid Low Expectations and Calls for Reform," Frontier Myanmar, 2018, https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/peace-conference-opens-amid-low-expectations-and-calls-for-reform.
[20] Chan Thar and Naw Betty Han, "Self-Determination Tops Issues Aired at Mon Dialogue," *The Myanmar Times*, August 5, 2018, https://www.mmtimes.com/news/self-determination-tops-issues-aired-mon-dialogue.html.
[21] Kyaw Zaw Moe, "Why Peace Is so Elusive," 2018, https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/why-peace-is-so-elusive.html.
[22] Chan Thar and Naw Betty Han, "Self-Determination Tops Issues Aired at Mon Dialogue."

There was no progress on security issues which remain another major point of disagreement: the EAOs' request to have ethnic armies integrated in a federal defence force was rejected by the *Tatmadaw* and used as a reason for refusing to move forward with demands for territorial autonomy. Furthermore, NCA signatories are increasingly frustrated with the current peace architecture imposed by the political dialogue framework, which as noted earlier, makes it difficult for them to have a say on the agenda of the peace conference. Since no headway was made on this problematic procedure, it was not possible to organise a conference in 2019 and as a result, the peace process stalled.[23] In this regard, the Karen National Union (KNU), concerned that the process was moving away from an effective implementation of the NCA, withdrew from official peace negotiations in early 2019.[24] Given the KNU's role as "a major force behind the NCA process" this withdrawal is very significant.[25]

3.1.4 The credibility of the NCA in question

First, the unequal representation and status of EAOs in the peace negotiations continues to be a point of contention: out of the twenty-one recognised EAOs, there are now ten signatories, eight non-signatories who can still attend the conferences as observers, while three EAOs are excluded altogether from negotiations.[26] As Lwin Cho Latt et al. demonstrate, the fact that the government and the *Tatmadaw*'s understanding of an "all-inclusive peace" differs from the EAOs', is slowing down the process and could

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[23] Ye Mon, "Controversy, Progress at the Third Panglong Conference," Frontier Myanmar, 2018, https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/controversy-progress-at-the-third-panglong-conference; Nyein Nyein, "For Myanmar's Peace Process, 2019 Ends With Little Progress to Show," *The Irrawaddy*, December 6, 2019, https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/myanmars-peace-process-2019-ends-little-progress-show.html.

[24] Su-Ann Oh, "The Karen National Union's (KNU) Withdrawal from Official Myanmar Peace Negotiations and the State of the Peace Process," ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, January 11, 2019, /media/commentaries/the-karen-national-unions-knu-withdrawal-from-official-myanmar-peace-negotiations-and-the-state-of-the-peace-process-by-suann-oh/.

[25] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, "Signs of Life in Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement? Finding a Way Forward," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 388.

[26] The 10 NCA signatories are: All Burma Students' Democratic Front, Restoration Council for Shan State, Arakan Liberation Party, Chin National Front, Karen National Union, Pa-O National Liberation Organization, KNU/KNLA Peace Council, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, New Mon State Party, Lahu Democratic Union. The 8 non-signatories are: National Democratic Alliance Army, National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang, United Wa State Army, Kachin Independence Organization, Karenni National Progressive Party, Shan State Progressive Party, Arakan National Congress, Wa National Organization. The 3 groups excluded from negotiations because they do not have a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the *Tatmadaw* are: the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in Northern Burma, and the Arakan Army, who are also part of the Northern Alliance.

possibly derail it. Indeed, the Tatmadaw's interpretation of the all-inclusiveness principle involves that only groups with previous bilateral ceasefires are invited to join the NCA. In addition, it insists that political negotiations cannot seriously begin unless all eligible groups have signed the NCA.[27] As a compromise, the NLD government proposed supporting the participation of the three excluded groups provided they agreed to momentarily surrender their arms to a third party.[28] By contrast, non-signatories, represented by a new coalition formed in 2017, the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee under the leadership of the United Wa State Party and thus also known as the Wa alliance, argued that the negotiations should include all armed groups and the NCA should be renegotiated.[29] On the other hand, while NCA signatories initially tended to support the government's position, the second conference showed that they were increasingly becoming open to a wider interpretation of the all-inclusiveness principle.[30]

Second, the implementation of the NCA raises a number of concerns. If the government fails to bring in new signatories, current signatories who wish to move forward with the political dialogue may lose patience.[31] Indeed, the NLD only succeeded in persuading two new groups to sign the NCA: the NMSP and the Lahu Democratic Union in 2018. Similarly, the lack of progress in implementing NCA agreements in ceasefire areas raises doubts on the credibility of the NCA within signatories' own organisations.[32] Furthermore, continued fighting with the non-signatories included in the Northern Alliance, and clashes involving NCA signatories, cast a shadow on the prospects of the NCA.[33]

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[27] Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue," 244–45.
[28] Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue," 237.
[29] Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue," 236.
[30] Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue," 241.
[31] Lwin Cho Latt et al., "From Ceasefire to Dialogue," 244.
[32] Thawnghmung, "Signs of Life in Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement?," 387–88.
[33] See for instance, clashes between the *Tatmadaw* and the Restoration Council of Shan State. Nyein Nyein, "Venerable Myanmar EAO Leaders Plead for End to Fighting," *The Irrawaddy*, August 22, 2019, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/venerable-myanmar-eao-leaders-plead-end-fighting.html; Sai Wansai, "Constitution-Making and Peace Process Stagnation in Myanmar: Will a Conditional Clause Help Restore Confidence in the 21st Century Panglong Conference?," Transnational Institute, September 3, 2018, https://www.tni.org/en/article/constitution-making-and-peace-process-stagnation-in-myanmar-will-a-conditional-clause-help.

3.2 Mon nationalism

In this section, I provide some background on the distinctive characteristics of Mon people and argue that they tend to have a strong sense of separate identity. I then describe the Mon nationalist struggle and discuss the strategy of the NMSP, which always maintained a relative degree of independence from the state despite agreeing to a ceasefire in 1995 and signing the NCA in 2018. Finally, I introduce the NMSP as a government-like structure with territorial control, its own laws as well as its own education system, and emphasise that these factors contribute to very positive perceptions of the NMSP among Mon people.

3.2.1 A strong sense of separate Mon identity

Figure 3.1: Mon Revolution Day, Mawlamyine
Photo credit: Cecile Médail

According to the NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar,[34] the Mon struggle for recognition and equality started immediately after independence, as demands for recognition as a

[34] Nai Hong Sar, "Nai Hong Sar Message, Part 1," 2014, http://www.burmaenac.org/?p=131.

distinct ethnic group were ignored by the Bamar-dominated government on the pretext that the Mon and the Bamar were so alike that they did not need a separate identity or rights.[35] However, Mon people do identify themselves as a distinct ethnic community, which possesses both the tangible and intangible aspects of Smith's definition: a name, a shared culture, a distinct language and literature, a common descent, a common history and an association with a specific homeland as well as a sense of solidarity and uniqueness. [36]

Common descent, name and history

The Mon, who are now mostly located in Mon State, historically use the name *Raman* to refer to themselves. This ethnonym first appeared in Mon language inscriptions in the 12th century in Bagan, but was also referred to in pre-Angkor inscriptions dating from the 6th/7th century.[37] Also called *Talaing* by the Bamar and later the British, the Mon reject this term, which is considered derogatory.[38] *Ramanya* is used to name Mon territory instead of Mon State, in reference to the early Mon kingdoms, collectively known as *Ramanyadesa.*[39]

The Mon are the descendants of the Mon-Khmer people who first settled in Southeast Asia at least two thousand years ago.[40] While linguistic considerations have led scholars such as Nai Pan La to believe that the Mon-Khmer settlers originally came from the Yangtze Kiang Valley in China, Mon myths suggest that they arrived from southeast India.[41] As recounted by Ashley South, the Buddha himself prophesised that a great nation would emerge from the sea after observing two sheldrakes, (Brahmany

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[35] General Ne Win in 1962 as well as General Saw Maung in 1991 made statements denying the need for a separate Mon identity see South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 33.
[36] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 22–30.
[37] Christian Bauer, *A Guide to Mon Studies*, Working paper No. 32, 1984, 2.
[38] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 23; Robert Halliday and Christian Bauer, *The Mons of Burma and Thailand*, vol. 1: The Talaings (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000), 11.
[39] Raman, Ramanya and Ramanyadesa can also be spelt as Yaman ,Yamanya or Yamanyadesa since the Burmese letter 'ရ' can have the two pronunciations.
[40] The city-state of Hongsawaddy, also spelt Hanthawaddy, refers to the kingdom of Pegu, its capital, now known as Bago. See Donald M Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, Md. : Scarecrow Press, 2006), 203, https://trove.nla.gov.au/version/51404502; South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 55.
[41] Nai Pan Hla, *The Significant Role of the Mon Language and Culture in Southeast Asia* (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), 1992), 6–8.

ducks - *Inthar* in Burmese or *Hongsar* in Mon language), perched on a summit protruding from the sea that used to submerge Mon lands.[42] Several centuries later, the city-state of Hongsawaddy became the centre of the Mon Kingdom. The translation of Hongsawaddy as *the kingdom of the golden shekdrake* explains why the flying sheldrake holds a distinctive place in Mon culture as a symbolic representation of Mon identity. Statues of flying shledrakes oriented in the direction of Hongsawaddy's capital Pegu – nowadays known as Bago - can be observed in present-day pagodas and at the entrances of Mon villages, showing how important the link between history, Buddhism and territory is for Mon people.[43]

Gordon H. Luce, a classic Myanmar historian, highly regards the Mon, starting his significant work "Old Burma, early Bagan" by defining the Mon as "The pioneers in civilization, both in old Burma and old Siam."[44] This historical claim, which is well established in Mon consciousness, has played a major role in the construction of Mon identity. Participants repeatedly expressed pride in their belief that the Mon are the most ancient living culture in Myanmar.[45] Although the study of early Mon history is uncertain due to limited evidence, it seems that the Mon arrived in Myanmar sometime after the Pyu (an ethnic group that vanished), and settled in central and lower Myanmar several centuries before the arrival of hill peoples such as the Karen, who themselves were established well before the arrival of the Bamar in the 9th century.[46] Although it is difficult to determine the exact beginning of early Mon kingdoms, it is believed that Pegu was founded after the principality of Thaton, in 825 AD.[47] This era, which lasted until the Bamar king Alaungphaya defeated the last Mon ruler of Pegu in 1757, is

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[42] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 52–54.
[43] Also see Maxime Boutry, "Burman Territory and Borders," in *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds*, ed. Su-Ann Oh (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2013), 113.
[44] Gordon H. Luce and Bo-Hmu Ba Shin, "Old Burma: Early Pagán," *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum* 25 (1969): 3.
[45] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1, July 2016; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19, July 2016; Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1, August 2016; Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2, August 2016; Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3, August 2016; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12, June 2017; Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13, July 2017; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16, July 2017.
[46] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 55.
[47] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 59.

perceived as the golden age of the *Ramanya* kingdom.

This history is contested however. As a civil servant explained, a number of Burman scholars have repeatedly attempted "to turn Burmese history upside down."[48] Throughout his scholarship, the US-based Professor Michael Aung-Htwin has indeed sought to revisit Burmese history and more particularly in his "*Mists of Rāmaññа: the Legend that was Lower Burma*" came to question what he calls the "Mon paradigm", which alleges that the Mon brought civilisation to the Bamar during the classical period of Burmese history and were therefore at the origin of the golden age of Burmese culture.[49] Aung-Thwin argues that there were no Mon people in lower Burma before the 13th century and that the "Mon paradigm" is rather the result of British efforts to reinforce ethnic categories in order to weaken Bamar achievements and consolidate colonial control. Referring to "a war on Facebook", the civil servant added that other Myanmar-based Bamar scholars such as Pon Thi Kyaw, Khit San Win or Sant Thi Oo respectively claim that all archaeological discoveries made before this time should be attributed to the Pyu, that the Pyu are actually the "real Bamar" and that the Mon were civilised by the Bamar.

Such claims have caused outrage among the Mon nationalist community, but I was told that there are only two Mon scholars who have been in a position to contest these arguments, anthropologist U San Win and stone encryption expert Nai Ba Shin. In addition, a number of foreign scholars have criticised Aung-Thwin's work. Victor Lieberman disagrees with Aung-Thwin's dual view on inter-ethnic relations, arguing that he failed to mention historic texts, which show the existence of "Mon bitterness over their marginalization" after the mid-sixteenth century.[50] Michael Charney similarly points at Aung-Thwin's use of ambiguous evidence as questionable, particularly a selection of historical elements, which supports his claim while ignoring other contradicting features.[51] Likewise, Patrick McCormick questions the lack of references

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[48] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8, July 2016.
[49] Michael Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Rāmaññа: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), ix.
[50] Victor B. Lieberman, "Excising the 'Mon Paradigm' from Burmese Historiography," ed. Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 377–83.
[51] Michael Charney, "Review of Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma,'" *H-Net Book Reviews*, 2006, 3.

supporting Aung-Twin's claim in its *History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times* that the first sources referring to Mon kingdoms appeared quite late.[52]

Mon homeland and population

For more than a thousand years before the fall of Hongsawaddy, the Mon homeland stretched over central and lower Myanmar.[53] *Ramanyadesa* or the Mon kingdoms consisted of Mon settlements across Tanintharyi Region and around the Irrawaddy, Sittaung and Salween river deltas, with the cities of Pegu and Thaton as its main principalities.[54]

Nowadays, Christian Bauer explains that Mon communities can be found in the areas that used to be under Mon rule: in Mon State and the neighbouring townships of Karen State,[55] in Bago and Tanintharyi Regions all the way down to Dawei, as well as in the cities of Yangon and Mandalay, where many Mon have resettled.[56] In addition, there is a Mon population in Thailand who descend from refugees who escaped from Myanmar between the 17th and 19th centuries. While many members of the Mon nationalist community perceive the golden age of *Ramanyadesa* as a source of inspiration and legitimacy, others feel frustrated, describing the shrinking of the homeland from free kingdom to a state under the Myanmar government as "a kind of ethnocide."[57] According to the last colonial census in 1931, no more than 8% of Mon people were located outside of Mon State, of which 5% live in Pegu District, the old Hongsawaddy.[58] In addition, although Mon people are now mostly located in Mon State, they hardly represent a majority with only 38.8 % of the total population against 37.2 %

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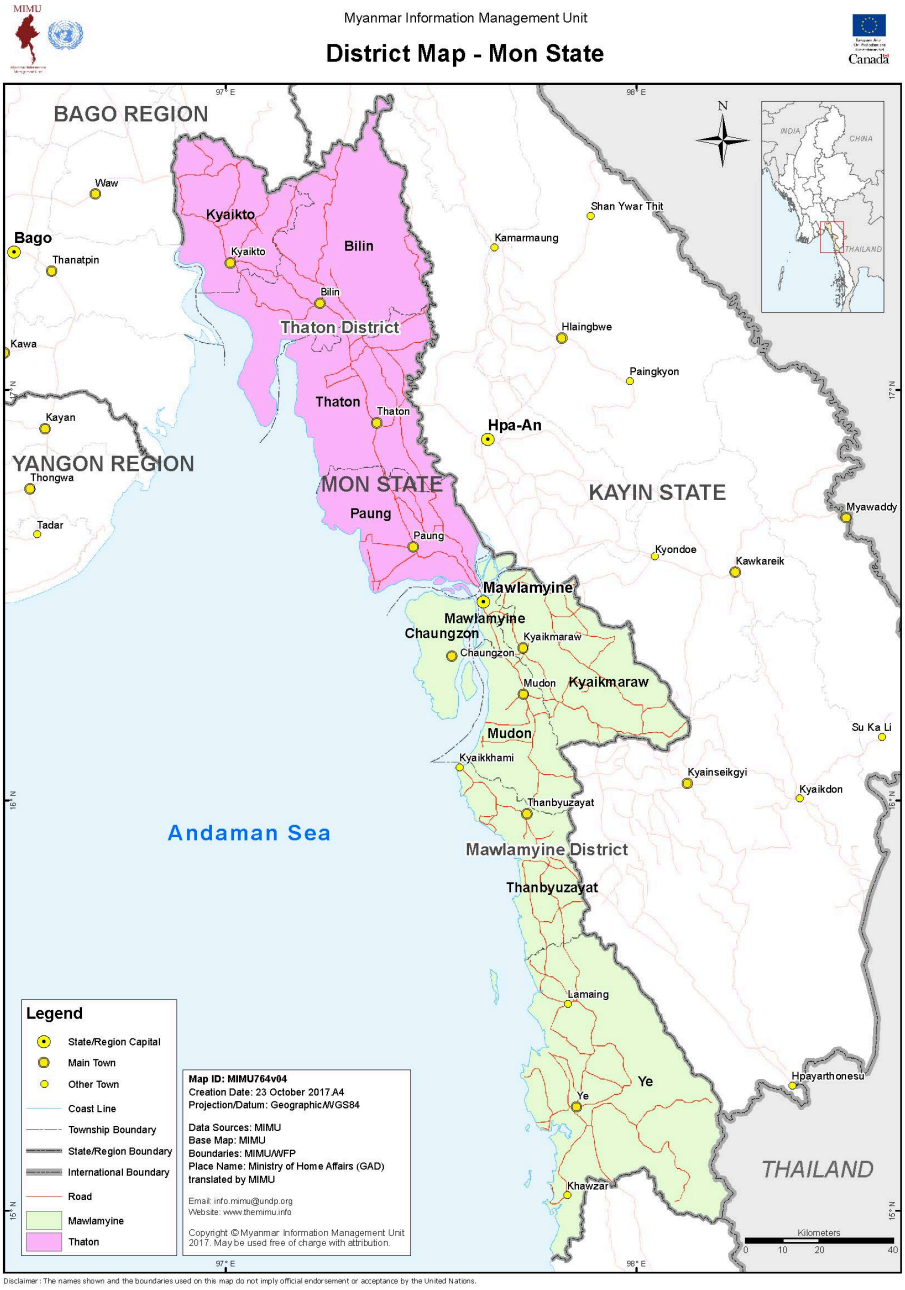
[52] Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); Patrick McCormick, "Review of Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations," 2013, New Mandala edition, https://www.newmandala.org/book-review/review-of-history-of-myanmar-since-ancient-times-tlc-nmrev-lv/.
[53] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 3.
[54] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 19.
[55] Kawkareik, Kyainseikgyi and Pa-an Townships
[56] Christian Bauer, "Language and Ethnicity: The Mon in Burma and Thailand," in *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 19–20.
[57] Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20, August 2016.
[58] J. J. Bennison, "Census of India, Vol X1, Burma, Part 1: Report" (Rangoon Office of the Supdt.: Government Printing and Stationery, 1933), 196, http://www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=4158.

Bamar and 15.7 % Karen, according to the 1983 census in Mon State.[59]



Map 3.1: Mon State districts
Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit

For more than a thousand years before the fall of Hongsawaddy, the Mon homeland

[59] Government of Myanmar, "Mon State 1983 Population Census" (Rangoon: Immigration and Manpower Department, August 1987), http://www.dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/1983_mon_census_report.pdf.

stretched over central and lower Myanmar.[60] *Ramanyadesa* or the Mon kingdoms consisted of Mon settlements across Tanintharyi Region and around the Irrawaddy, Sittaung and Salween river deltas, with the cities of Pegu and Thaton as its main principalities.[61]

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However, as Bauer warns us, the available reports that provide indications on the size of Mon population, both in Myanmar and Thailand, offer figures that are difficult to interpret because the censuses may have used language literacy as a parameter to the detriment of language ability and language use.[67] With these varying degrees of language skills in mind, Bauer roughly estimates the total Mon population in Myanmar to represent one million people.[68] Similarly, Ashley South criticises the reliability of censuses to provide accurate data on ethnic groups because religion and language have

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[60] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 3.
[61] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 19.
[62] Kawkareik, Kyainseikgyi and Pa-an Townships
[63] Bauer, "Language and Ethnicity," 19–20.
[64] Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[65] Bennison, "Census of India, Vol X1, Burma, Part 1: Report," 196.
[66] Government of Myanmar, "Mon State 1983 Population Census."
[67] Bauer, "Language and Ethnicity," 23.
[68] Bauer, *A Guide to Mon Studies*, 31.

often been used as parameters instead of self-ascribed ethnicity.[69] With this in mind, South estimates that Myanmar counts about one and a half million Mon-speaking people, a figure that excludes many people of Mon descent who do not speak the language.[70] A 2014 UNHCR Mon State profile further reinforces this strong disconnect between language and descent, considering that while one million people only could speak Mon language, over 8 million people in Myanmar could be of Mon descent.[71] The Mon nationalist community members interviewed for this research commonly argue that official figures largely underestimate Mon population.

On a number of occasions, I heard research participants complain that a high number of people of Mon descent are likely to have been registered as Bamar by government officers, sometimes as a result of an automatic assumption and sometimes as a result of their own will.[72] This issue will be discussed further in chapter 4, when exposing insecurities generated by such cultural assimilation. One would hope that Mon population figures would be clarified if the government released information on ethnic populations collected during the last official census in 2014. However, the continued use of a contested methodology based on the 135 *taingyintha* casts doubts on such prospects. [73]

A common language

While Burmese language derives from the Tibeto-Burman group, Mon is a non-tonal language coming from the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic group. This results in profound linguistic differences, which become important markers of identity. The naming system provides a good example: using a distinct name prefix, *Mi* for women and *Nai* for men, which is different from the *Ma* or *Daw* for women and *Ko* or *U* for men in Burmese, the Mon are easily recognised as Mon by other groups. While Mon language is traditionally

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[69] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 21.
[70] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 18.
[71] UNHCR, "Mon State Profile," trans. UNHCR South-east Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2014, 3, data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=22.
[72] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4, August 2016; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9, July 2016; Human Rights Foundation of Monland member, Yangon, Interview #22, July 2016; Shopkeeper, Mudon, Mon State, Interview #23, August 2016, 23.
[73] Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context."

divided into three historical categories – old Mon, middle Mon and Modern Mon –, modern Mon has three main dialects, which are mutually comprehensible.[74] This relative linguistic homogeneity places the Mon in a quite unique socio-linguistic situation in Myanmar, where other ethnic groups beside the Bamar generally present a great socio-linguistic diversity.[75]

Many civil society members considered the long history of Mon script as a source of pride.[76] Indeed, with a written language that can be traced back to the sixth century, the Mon are the most ancient literate living culture in Myanmar from which the Burmese and other scripts are derived.[77] The research participants have highlighted the importance of language on several levels. For some, it represents a defining characteristic of ethnic identification. As a Mon Women Organization (MWO) member put it: "A real Mon has to speak Mon language. If not, we would feel ashamed to be a member of this ethnic group even though we are of Mon descent." This view was confirmed among community members in Chaungzong Township, where non-Mon speaking youths expressed how they felt looked down on by Mon speakers.[78] Similarly, an NMSP officer stressed that language was an important medium to understand people and their needs.[79] However, as explained earlier, defining language as an essential aspect of Mon identity may have impacts of Mon population figures. Indeed, this has often resulted in non-Mon speakers who self-identify as Mon being registered as Bamar. In order to avoid restrictions on the classification of Mon people, NMSP founder Nai Shwe Kyin expressly discarded language use as a criterion for ethnic identification so

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[74] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 26.
[75] Nicolas Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today: Great Opportunities, Giant Pitfalls? (Part II)," *Tea Circle* (blog), October 2, 2018, https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/10/02/teaching-ethnic-languages-cultures-and-histories-in-government-schools-today-great-opportunities-giant-pitfalls-part-ii/.
[76] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2, July 2016; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10, Mawlamyine, July 2016; Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16, August 2016; Mon Youth Progressive organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #11, July 2016.
[77] Bauer, "Language and Ethnicity," 16–17.
[78] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2.
[79] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3, July 2016.

that assimilated Mon people could reclaim their identity.[80]

Shared culture and religion

As previously mentioned, Luce defines the Mon as the "pioneers in civilization" in Myanmar.[81] Based on commerce and agriculture, the Mon civilization with its literature, art and religion, is believed to be one of the earliest and most significant in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. D. G. E Hall indeed praised them for being the pioneers of beans and rice cultivation in Myanmar and for having created the first irrigation system in the dry zone.[82] Closely located to rivers and seas, Mon people have always been traders and were as a result exposed to various cultural influences, particularly from India and Ceylon. According to South, "the genius of Mon civilisation was that it combined these classical Indian traditions, to create a sophisticated and original culture".[83] As Guillon points out, while the city-states of *Ramanayadesa* were not unified in the modern sense, they shared the same culture with local variations.[84]

The origin of Mon influence is closely related to the introduction of Buddhism to Southeast Asia through exchanges with India. As Nai Pan Hla puts it, "historians had regarded [Thaton] as the cradle (…) of Buddhism in old Burma."[85] A legend explains that the mythical ancestors of the Mon were two brothers, who were merchants from India and disciples of the Buddha. As they went on to spread Buddhism to the east, they received Buddha hair relics soon after his enlightenment, as a memorial of their service. While one of the brothers is said to have founded Thaton, these Buddhist relics are said to have been later enshrined beneath a chedi in Dagon [Yangon] that become the renowned Shwedagon Pagoda.[86] According to Mon chronicles, contacts would have indeed been established between India and *Ramanyadesa* through religious missions by the third century BC.[87] In addition, Charles Keyes explains that in the 11th or 12th

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[80] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 26.
[81] Luce and Shin, "Old Burma," 3.
[82] Daniel G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 156.
[83] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 60.
[84] Emmanuel Guillon, *The Mons: A Civilization of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: Siam Society under Royal Patronage, 1999), 74.
[85] Nai Pan Hla, *The Significant Role of the Mon Language and Culture in Southeast Asia*, 45.
[86] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 54–55.
[87] Venerable Acwo, History of Kings. 1776. Journal of Burma Research Society. Vol Xiii pp 1-67; translated by Robert Halliday 1923. Also see South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 55–56.

century, the Mon transmitted Theravada Buddhism to the Bamar, who were practicing a less pure form of Buddhism.[88] According to the 19th century glass palace chronicles, shortly after being converted to Theravada Buddhism by a Mon monk, King Anawratha requested the Theravada Buddhist scriptures (the *Tripitaka)* from the Mon king of Thaton Manuha who refused. As a result, an angered Anawratha led an invasion of Lower Myanmar.[89] This conquest resulted in the destruction of Thaton, the abduction of the Thaton royal family as well as the displacement of numerous Mon monks and artisans who then helped the Bamar kings to build thousands of monuments in Bagan.

While the fall of Thaton is attested in the 15th century Kalyani inscriptions, Daniel Hall points out that the reasons for this campaign remain unclear, casting doubt on the historical reliability of the 19th century chronicles.[90] This led Luce to doubt that Theravada Buddhism was introduced right after this conquest.[91] Nevertheless, there is no questioning that Mon influence was essential in the adoption of Theravada Buddhism by the Bamar and that Mon culture dominated the Bamar kingdom of Bagan. As Hall puts it: "The defeated conquered their conqueror: Mon culture became supreme at the court of Pagan. […] the Mon alphabet was ultimately adopted for the literary expression of the Burmese language."[92]

However, while the prevalence of the Mon started to wane after the last kingdom of Pegu was defeated, evidence suggests that groups that arrived later such as the Bamar actually appropriated these contributions while implementing coercive assimilation policies on the population.[93] For instance, when I visited a forest monastery in Chaungzon Township, I was surprised to see many ancient looking alms bowls exposed as ornaments because I was told numerous times that the alms bowl was a Bamar symbol. When I inquired about this apparent contradiction, the *sayadaw* told me that the

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[88] Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 71; Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 158.
[89] Pe Maung Tin and Gordon H. Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 77–78.
[90] Nai Pan Hla, *The Significant Role of the Mon Language and Culture in Southeast Asia*, 77; Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 158.
[91] Luce and Shin, "Old Burma," 33.
[92] Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 160.
[93] George Coedés, "The Making of South East Asia," 1966, 113; Patrick McCormick, "Mon Histories: Between Translation and Retelling," 2010, 1; Guillon, *The Mons*, 53.

alms bowl used to be a Mon symbol that was appropriated by the Bamar.[94] He insisted that it was just another example illustrating the ancient character of the Mon civilisation, of which the Bamar have taken numerous elements.

Nevertheless, while the Mon lost their cultural and political dominance they still hold a special position in the history of Southeast Asia because their political, cultural and religious ideas have influenced neighbouring civilisations for more than a thousand years.[95] Although Robert Halliday concedes that nowadays it is difficult for the casual observer to distinguish the Mon from the Bamar, they retain some distinct ethnic attributes, including their dress.[96] The *longyi* pattern, which is different for men and women, and a preference for the red colour systematically worn during festivals, differentiate them from the traditional Burmese *longyi*. Similarly, the traditional *Kalok* dance and musical instruments such as the crocodile guitar constitute another expression of Mon identity that is part of Mon cultural events, such as Mon Revolution Day or Mon National Day.

A strong sense of solidarity and uniqueness

The tangible characteristics of Mon identity discussed above have created a strong sense of solidarity and uniqueness. The Mon appear to be a very united people. According to Robert Halliday, even the tradition identifying the three tribes of Mon, the Mon *Duin*, the Mon *Da* and the Mon *Nya* does not refer to actual tribal distinctions.[97] Instead, the Mon are considered as one of the rare groups in Myanmar that does not have any sub-groups, reinforcing their unique socio-linguistic situation. Research participants have articulated this sense of unity in different ways. Among the Mon nationalist community, some CSO and political party members emphasised their commitment to work for the benefit of all Mon people, to promote development and to protect Mon language and culture.[98] Similarly, some community members stressed the importance of relying on

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[94] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27, June 2017.
[95] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 49.
[96] Halliday and Bauer, *The Mons of Burma and Thailand*, 1: The Talaings:25–27.
[97] Halliday and Bauer, *The Mons of Burma and Thailand*, 1: The Talaings:10.
[98] Mon National Party member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #6, July 2016; Mon National Party member, Yangon, Interview #13, July 2016; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.

the Mon community's own effort to maintain and promote Mon identity.[99]

In addition, contrary to Robert Taylor, who claims that Mon identity was already disappearing in the pre-colonial era, Ashley South demonstrates that a strong Mon identity undoubtedly existed during this time.[100] As Robert Halliday argues, although the Mon did not have their own laws and government while they were under the domination of the Bamar kings and later the British colonial power, they maintained "a sense of separate nationality and pride of race".[101] Such sense of uniqueness was apparent among the research participants, who often took pride in the rich and long history of the *Ramanya* kingdom.[102]

Yet, some informants made interesting statements revealing the existence of some more fluid aspects of Mon identity. For instance, a Mon National Party (MNP) member noted that Mon and Bamar people were not very different, highlighting that many people identified as Bamar on their ID card often came from a mixed Mon and Bamar descent. As a result, they spoke Mon language, participated in Mon cultural life, and equally resented military policies and civil war.[103] A CSO member thus suggested that people with a mixed identity should simply have the right to choose which ethnicity they identify the most with.[104] Interestingly, some participants suggested that political allegiance was an important aspect of Mon identity. For instance, a CSO member claimed that Mon people who chose to work for the NLD instead of a Mon party should not be considered as Mon anymore.[105] Conversely, another nationalist elite argued that whether born from Mon parents or not, one could be called a Mon if he was working for

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[99] Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6, August 2016; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10, August 2016.
[100] Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 24; South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 31.
[101] Halliday and Bauer, *The Mons of Burma and Thailand*, 1: The Talaings:25.
[102] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5, July 2016; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; Mon Youth Progressive organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #11; Jeepyah, civil society development organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #17, July 2016; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[103] Mon National Party member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #6.
[104] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[105] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4.

the benefit of Mon people.[106] Finally, I observed that in rural areas both under government control and under NMSP, some women and youths were uncertain about elements defining Mon identity because income was their main concern.[107]

While such malleability echoes the constructivist descriptions of pre-colonial identity highlighted in chapter 1, it does not reflect the majority of views: most participants proudly identify with a unique Mon heritage, the defence of which has been at the centre of the Mon nationalist struggle. Indeed, confirming Smith's ethno-symbolist approach, the Mon's sense of separate identity gave rise to a relatively rigid nationalist spirit in response to Myanmar's coercive assimilationist policies. This nationalist spirit has continued to the present day and become united under the banner of the NMPS.[108]

3.2.2 The Mon nationalist struggle

After providing a brief historical overview of the Mon armed resistance against the central government through to the creation of the NMSP, this section shows that despite agreeing to bilateral ceasefires and finally the signing the NCA in 2018, the NMSP has remained quite critical of the government.

Armed resistance against the central government

At present the NMSP and its armed wing the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) lead the Mon struggle for autonomy and self-determination but several nationalist movements preceded them.[109] The first Mon political organisation, the United Mon Association, was established in 1945 and the first Mon political party, the Mon Freedom League (MFL), was established in 1947. These were followed by the creation of several Mon nationalist movements conceived as umbrella groups: the Mon Affairs Organisation and the Mon United Front (MUF). The first Mon armed organisation, the Mon National Defence Organisation, was established in 1948 as the military wing of the MFL-MUF. The Mon People's Solidarity Group was established in 1952 to reunite the Mon insurgent forces and was reorganised as Mon People's Front (MPF) in 1955. The

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[106] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8.
[107] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.
[108] The Mon nationalist struggle led by the NMSP will be detailed in the following section.
[109] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma : The Golden Sheldrake,* 105.

NMSP was initially formed as an underground organisation in 1958 by Nai Shwe Kyin after the MPF signed a ceasefire with the U Nu government, in order to continue the armed struggle.[110] The NMSP eventually became the main Mon insurgent group.

In 1972, NMSP President Nai Shwe Kyin stated that their aim was "to establish an independent sovereign state unless the Burmese government is willing to permit a full confederation of free nationalities exercising the full right of self-determination inclusive of [the] right of secession".[111] This policy was reaffirmed in the NMSP's 1994 constitution, which recommends the creation of a Mon National Democratic Republic within a larger Union of National Democratic Republics (i.e. a federal union). This Union would be "based on equal rights of self-determination for all ethnic people, including the Mon National Democratic Republic", an arrangement that would ensure "a fully democratic system" and "multi-nationality unity."[112]

NMSP ceasefires and the bearing of a critical stance

The NMSP signed a ceasefire agreement with the *Tatmadaw* in 1995 for a number of reasons. According to NMSP Chairman Nai Shwe Kyin, the need for internal peace, the pressure of the Thai army and the forced repatriation of Mon refugees were the main drivers for this agreement.[113] Although the ceasefire led to internal divisions in the Mon army and the subsequent creation of splinter groups and local militias, it also brought a well-needed peace.[114] The agreement recognised the situation on the ground by granting the NMSP exclusive control of specified areas. Those included Ye Township in Mon State; along the Ye river on the border with Thailand (where Mon refugee camps were established); including parts of Tanintharyi Region; Kyainseikgyi Township in Karen State; and other patches along the Mon and Karen State border.[115] While the NMSP has

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[110] For more details, see South, 99–124.
[111] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 171.
[112] Quoted in South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 171.
[113] Democratic Voice of Burma, "Mon Leader Views Failure of Cease-Fire Talks with Junta," BurmaNet News, January 23, 1995, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/014.html.
[114] Internal divisions around the ceasefire led five ex-Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) factions to split from NMSP, and other small anti-ceasefire local militias to emerge, especially in areas of Ye and Yebyu Townships, where the NMSP had to depart according to the ceasefire. See South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 162.
[115] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 19; South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 160.

full authority in these autonomous ceasefire zones, they are not categorised as Special Regions.[116] In addition, the NMSP, and its military wing the MNLA, also exercise variable degrees of administrative and military authority in the Mon-populated areas of Mon and Karen States.[117]

In addition, the NMSP was granted development assistance and economic concessions, which were withdrawn in 2005 as a result of the NMSP's strong demands during the constitution writing process at the National Convention, which it eventually boycotted.[118] The already tenuous ceasefire agreement was eventually invalidated when the NMSP refused to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) in 2010. This meant that the NMSP was preparing for a return to war.[119] However, outright armed conflict was avoided and another state level ceasefire agreement was eventually reached under President Thein Sein's government in February 2012.[120] This ceasefire granted the NMSP control over small areas contiguous with the original ceasefire zone. [121]

Although the NMSP was involved in the NCA negotiations, it was among the ten groups that initially refused to sign the NCA, mainly because of the exclusion of three EAOs from the negotiations. However, since only NCA signatories can participate in the political dialogue, the NMSP expressed in May 2017 its intention to join the NCA.[122] The NSMP finally signed the NCA on February 13th 2018, in order to participate in the dialogue and "obtain the right to amend the 2008 constitution."[123]

After this, the NMSP worked hard to arrange its first ethnic-based political dialogue in order to submit its own perspective to the UPDJC before the third peace conference took place in 2018. Preparations for this were difficult, notably because of the

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116 Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 56.
117 Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 35.
118 South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma States of Conflict*, 160–61.
119 Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies, "Awaiting Peace in Mon State," 2012, https://cdes.org.mm/book_detail/17.
120 Myanmar Peace Monitor, "NMSP," Burma News International, accessed March 19, 2019, http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/myanmar-peace-center/164-nmsp.
121 Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 35.
122 Hintharnee, "New Mon State Party to Sign Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement," *The Irrawaddy*, May 12, 2017, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/128581.html; Network Media Group, "NMSP, LDU Will Sign NCA on February 13," Burma News International, February 6, 2018, https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/nmsp-ldu-will-sign-nca-february-13.
123 Shwe Yoe, "NMSP Says NCA Is Not Its Goal," *Hinthar Media*, February 4, 2018, https://www.burmalink.org/nmsp-says-nca-not-goal/.

Tatmadaw's restriction on the public consultations planned ahead of the dialogue. As a result, the NMSP initially suspended the national level political dialogue until consultations could be held without restrictions.[124] While the NMSP could not freely choose the location of its public consultations, a restriction limiting the number of participants to between 20 and 30 people was finally agreed on after the Mon State National Level Coordination Committee was formed and after the NMSP received support from Aung San Suu Kyi.[125] The first Mon ethnic-based political dialogue was finally held on May 5-7, 2018 in Ye Township and attended by 500 representatives from the NMSP, Mon political parties, civil society organisations and technical experts.[126]

Unfortunately, Mon actors were generally disappointed by the outcome of the third peace conference as many issues raised during the Mon ethnic-based political dialogue were not discussed at the conference. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, NCA signatories are frustrated with the political dialogue framework, which excludes them from the peace conference agenda setting. As NMSP spokesperson Naing Aung Ma Ngay put it: "Ethnic groups, civil society groups and the communities of each ethnic group have been preparing for this conference for about a year. But if we can't even discuss the topics that we want, then there is clearly a need to review the whole process."[127]

3.2.3 Mechanisms of governance

This section highlights the NMSP's existence as a parallel authority with full territorial

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[124] Lun Min Mang, "NMSP Faces New Tests after Signing Ceasefire," *The Myanmar Times*, March 16, 2018.

[125] Chan Thar, "NMSP Worse off after Signing Accord: Official," *The Myanmar Times*, July 20, 2018, https://www.mmtimes.com/news/nmsp-worse-after-signing-accord-official.html; Sai Wansai, "Mon National Political Dialogue: A Way Forward?," *Mizzima Business Weekly*, May 17, 2018, https://www.pressreader.com/.

[126] Joint Peace Fund, "The People of Mon Hold Their National Dialogue Just Three Months after Signing the NCA." Around 900 people joined the opening ceremony, including Union ministers, officials from groups involved in the peace process (the National Reconciliation and Peace Center, the Peace Commission, the Joint Monitoring Committee) the union-level supervisory committee, ethnic armed organizations, and political parties. See Min Thuta, "Mon National-Level Political Dialogue to Strive for Emergence of Healthy Federal Principle," *Mon News Agency*, May 7, 2018, http://monnews.org/2018/05/07/mon-national-level-political-dialogue-to-strive-for-emergence-of-healthy-federal-principle/.

[127] Kyaw Lin Htoon, "Peace Conference Opens amid Low Expectations and Calls for Reform."

control in the autonomous ceasefire zones and describes its government-like structure with its own laws. Special attention is paid to the administrative department's education committee, the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), which runs a parallel education system celebrated as a model of best practice in Myanmar.

A government-like structure with territorial control and its own laws

The parts of old *Ramanyadesa* where Mon population remained significant included areas in Mon and Karen States and Tanintharyi Region. These areas constitute the basis of the NMSP territorial division into districts.[128] The NMSP currently recognises three districts: Thaton, Moulmein and Tavoy, where its headquarters are based. After the ceasefire, a fourth district, Mergui, was merged with the Tavoy District as a result of the NMSP's diminishing influence in the region.[129] Following the colonial administration as well as the KNU model each district is subdivided into townships and village tracts as main civilian administrative units. However, some districts lack clearly defined borders and the situation on the ground is complicated by an important overlap with KNU districts as well as the existence of state structures. While the NMSP exercises full authority in the autonomous ceasefire zones, including the power to restrict the *Tatmadaw*'s access, the government tolerates the NMSP interaction with communities in other Mon populated areas. Such interactions include taxation and the provision of social services and basic justice. However, this results in a form of mixed administration, which often means that on the ground, people have to handle multiple authorities: the NMSP, the government and the KNU.[130]

A Central Committee counting 27 members elected at the party congress governs the NMSP. It selects seven members to form the Central Executive Committee, which administers the party on a daily basis and represents the top tier of leadership.[131] The NMSP party membership functions like a parliamentary political party as people can become members, participate in party congresses and indirectly elect the members of

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[128] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 174; Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 56.
[129] As the NMSP uses official names recognised prior to the junta's change of the country and city names in 1989. Moulmein therefore stands for Mawlamyine, Tavoy stands for Dawei and Mergui for Myeik.
[130] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 56.
[131] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 172.

the Central Committee. On the other hand, community members directly elect village headmen, village committees, and justice bodies, sometimes outside the party.[132] Three departments are under the authority of the executive committee: administration, party affairs, and defence. The administration department oversees committees in eight areas: revenue, agriculture, forestry, religious affairs, justice, logistics, health and last but not least education, with the well-known MNEC. In addition, it informally exercises some kind of influence over civil society organisations, such as the Mon Women Organization, the Mon Relief and Development Committee and the Remonhya Peace Foundation. The party affairs department deals with policies, party member registration, training and civil society organisation cooperation. The MNLA embodies the defence department.

At the district and township levels, the same department structure is followed, under the respective authorities of district committees and leadership committees, which enjoy significant autonomy from headquarters while maintaining substantial authority in their respective constituencies. For instance, the justice department functions through a three-tiered system of judicial committees, which are established at the central, district and township levels.[133] However, these justice committees lack independent judges as they have members from the both the NMSP administration and the MNLA and are directly under the administrative department.[134]

The Mon legal code, the "Law for Making Decisions in Cases" was developed in the 70s and re-printed in 1998. This law incorporates civil and criminal cases and describes the jurisdiction of the three-tiered system of justice.[135] It is periodically revised and updated, with inputs from experts outside the NMSP ceasefire zone.[136] This law guides NMSP justice committees acting as judicial investigation teams at the village and township levels or operating as juries. Decisions are made by consensus at the district

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[132] For more details, see Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 57.
[133] McCartan and Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar," 29–30; Helene M. Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution: Exploring Everyday Justice Provision in Southeast Myanmar" (Danish Institute for International Studies and the International Rescue Committee, January 2018), 43–51, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/community-based-dispute-resolution-exploring-everyday-justice-provision-southeast.
[134] Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution," 43–44.
[135] Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution," 44.
[136] McCartan and Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar," 30.

and central levels, on cases most commonly related to social disputes, narcotics, divorce and family problems, and land issues.[137] However, as Helen Maria Kyed notes the law is rarely applied directly as justice committees *combine* it with negotiation and reconciliation methods both at the township and district levels. [138]

A parallel authority with its own education system

Since 1972 the NMSP has developed a parallel mother tongue based education system run by the MNEC to address restrictions on teaching Mon language, culture and history which will be discussed further in chapter 4.[139] With the open goal of maintaining ethnic identity, the Mon National School system still preserves a connection to the government school system.[140] As Ashley South and Marie Lall explain, the MNEC uses a Mon translation of the government curriculum in combination with teaching the mother tongue and the ethno-national history.[141] While all subjects are taught in Mon at the primary school level, middle and high school students keep studying Mon language and history in addition to the Myanmar national curriculum, using Mon as a classroom language. On top of this, tenth grade Mon school students have the option to take government matriculation exams in order to access the state's higher education system. As a result, the Mon education system does not disconnect young people from the rest of the country. For this reason, it is generally considered as a "model of best practice for ethnic education schooling in Myanmar."[142]

The expansion of the NMSP's education networks within the ceasefire zones and in adjacent government-controlled areas is celebrated – together with the growth of civil

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[137] Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution," 49; McCartan and Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar," 29–30.
[138] Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution," 46.
[139] W. Gray Rinehart, "MTB-MLE in Parallel Ethnic Education Systems: A Case Study of Indigenous Language Education Policy and Implementation within Mon National Schools in Southeastern Myanmar," in *Sustainable Development through Multilingual Education* (5th International Conference on Language and Education, Bangkok, Thailand, 2016), http://www.lc.mahidol.ac.th/mleconf/2016/Documents/PresentedFiles/Parallel%20V/T1-5/42A-W_Gray_Rinehart.pdf.
[140] The NMSP differs from other groups such as the Karen and later the Kachin after the breakdown of the ceasefire, who have adopted clearly separatist characteristics by teaching only in the mother tongue. See Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016): 144.
[141] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 137–39.
[142] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 143.

society networks - as a major post-ceasefire achievement.[143] According to U Min Soe Lin, Member of Parliament (MP) representing Ye Township, around 20,000 pupils attended the Mon National Schools in 2017.[144] Indeed, the ceasefire provided an essential space for the Mon education system to prosper. The spread of Mon National Schools to government-controlled areas in Mon State as well as parts of Karen State, Bago, Yangon and Mandalay Divisions was dramatic, with 70% of the Mon school students living outside the ceasefire zones by 2000.[145] The number of Mon National Schools also increased significantly from 106 schools in 1996 to 156 in 2011 although it decreased to 136 in 2016, including 12 middle schools and 3 high schools.[146] This is due to a shift in funding priorities since the peace process has started, as international development partners increasingly support government reforms rather than cross-border funding of EAOs' education programs.[147]

The MNEC has also administered a large number of schools defined as "mixed institutions", in which Mon language, culture and history were officially taught as subjects, after regular classes. Although the ceasefire did not grant Mon language teaching during school hours in state schools, the MNEC has been able to approach a large number of government-run schools, in which elements of the Mon-national curriculum were introduced and Mon language and history teachers provided.[148] Referring to a form of dual administration, the "mixed school" label has initially enabled the NMSP to reach areas where Mon National Schools would have otherwise been repressed.[149] The number of mixed schools has however decreased from 177 in 1996 to 116 in 2011 and 95 in 2016, due to tensions with the government.[150]

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143 South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 308.
144 Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29, June 2017.
145 Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 35.
146 For figures in 1996 and 2016, see respectively South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 309; Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 136; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.
147 South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 30.
148 Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 35.
149 In 1996, the MNEC administered 283 schools, of which 177 were "mixed institutions" and 106 Mon national schools. See South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 309.
150 For figures in 1996, 2011 and 2016, respectively see South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 309; Marie Lall and Ashley South, "Comparing Models of Non-State Ethnic Education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 314; Gray Rinehart, "MTB-MLE in Parallel Ethnic Education Systems: A Case Study of

However, some participants identified a number of limitations that affect the Mon National School system. Young people from Kyaikmayaw Township in Mon State and from Kyainseikgyi Township in Karen State are concerned that students are not able to speak Burmese properly after attending Mon-national schools.[151] This is particularly challenging for children who try to enrol in government schools after the primary level, where Mon is the medium of instruction. In addition, Mon National School students from Kyainseikgyi complained about the cost implied by transfers to government schools and the lack of recognition of their Mon student ID as a travel document in Myanmar, which can hamper chances of attending government schools.[152] In addition, transfer to government schools is made harder by Bamar teachers who often dislike that Mon school students ask many questions as a result of the Mon National Schools' student-centred approach.[153] Furthermore, Mon teachers from the same township in Karen State as well as villagers in Ye Township cast doubts on the capacity of Mon National Schools to effectively maintain Mon literature in the long run. Since teacher salaries are very low, many qualified teachers seek better paying positions in government schools and therefore most Mon teachers are not skilled. This has a negative impact on a double level: not only the quality of Mon school is declining, but many Mon school students prefer to join government schools, which may eventually result in the closing of some Mon-national schools.[154] This concern echoes one of the main threats of the Mon school system identified by South and Lall in their report on non-state education in Myanmar.[155]

3.2.4 Positive perceptions of the NMSP

The NMSP is generally perceived as embodying the Mon resistance against assimilation into Bamar culture. This is not surprising since the NMSP has always remained critical

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Indigenous Language Education Policy and Implementation within Mon National Schools in Southeastern Myanmar."

[151] Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.

[152] Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.

[153] Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7, August 2016.

[154] Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8, August 2016; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

[155] Lall and South, "Education, Conflict and Identity," 37.

of the government despite agreeing to ceasefires and has acted as the main service provider across many Mon populated areas. Thus, there is a general sense that the NMSP is representative of Mon people's aspirations. Unsurprisingly, in Mawlamyine, the members of the nationalist community interviewed view the NMSP very positively. While one might question whether ordinary Mon people would share attitudes voiced by a small educated segment of the population, South highlights that the wide participation in Mon National Day celebrations and the victory of Mon politicians in the 1990 election seem to confirm "the existence of a strong nationalist spirit."[156]

During my fieldwork, I found a generally high level of support for the NMSP across communities under NMSP control as well as in areas under government control, particularly where the NMSP retain various degrees of influence. In villages under NMSP direct influence, opinions are predictably very supportive. In the Karen State township of Kyainseikgyi, where the NMSP has exclusive authority and therefore manages education, justice, health and infrastructure development, it is naturally considered the only legitimate and representative institution.[157] Likewise, in the ceasefire zone of Ye Township, villagers are very confident about maintaining Mon identity thanks to the protective authority of the NMSP. Consequently, a villager explained that "even if the country changes to federalism, we want to stay under NMSP control."[158]

In government-controlled areas, support for the NMSP depends on the level of influence they exercise. The village of Koughchoukala (in Kyaikmayaw Township) is officially under government control but the NMSP remains the main fund and service provider.[159] In Mudon Township, where the NMSP influence is less direct, villagers still highly regard the group as representative of their interests: "We have our Mon literature because our monks maintain it; in the same way, we exist because the NMSP is

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[156] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 40.
[157] Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8; Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9, August 2016; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.
[158] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[159] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.

here."[160] In Paung Township, the NMSP's presence is also very beneficial to villagers. As political party members from Sein Jain village explained, many NMSP members are living in the area and helping the community.[161] A group of women in Paung Township shared a similar view, praising the NMSP for representing them in cases with government institutions.[162] However, the younger generation in Thanbyuzayat Township expressed a limitation to the overall very positive attitudes towards the NMSP: "The NMSP is more representative for older people. We are trying to meet them to discuss about future plans, but they don't want to meet us.[163] During this research, only villagers from Chaungzon Township denied having any connection with the NMSP.[164]

To sum up, the discussion of Mon ethnicity has shown that it is based on a revered and respected history that gives rise to a strong sense of unique identity. Since the Mon have been under assimilation pressure from the Bamar for centuries, the preservation of Mon identity has been at the heart of the Mon nationalist struggle led by the NMSP. With its government-like structure, the NMSP is perceived positively by Mon in general, especially around the establishment of the Mon National School system which is probably the most effective institution active in protecting Mon identity. While this parallel education has its limitation within the current system, its preservation is a main demand of Mon people, as illustrated in chapter 6. Furthermore, as a model of best practice which presents features of a form of cultural autonomy, it is a central element of possible institutional reform discussed in chapter 7. I now turn to the Pa-O site.

3.3 Pa-O nationalism

Similarly to the Mon, the Pa-O also identify themselves as distinct from the Bamar majority. The fact that they are not part of Myanmar's eight main ethnic groups is the first striking difference with the Mon. Instead they represent a "second nationality", as they are located in areas dominated by other ethnic nationality groups. I will describe

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[160] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13.
[161] Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.
[162] Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6.
[163] Women, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Focus group #17, July 2017.
[164] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2; Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7.

how the Pa-O nationalist struggle has been radically different to the NMSP as the PNO and its armed militia the Pa-O national Army (PNA) developed a high level of cooperation with the state after agreeing to a ceasefire in 1991. After introducing some of the PNO's mechanisms of cooperation with the government, I reflect on the reasons why Pa-O people generally perceive the PNO negatively.

3.3.1 A strong sense of Pa-O separate identity

Figure 3.2: Pa-O Cultural Dance Competition, Namca village
Photo credit: Cecile Médail

Like the Mon, Pa-O people similarly identify themselves as a distinct ethnic community, which possesses both the tangible and intangible characteristics of Smith's definition.[165] Pa-O from all walks of life describe themselves through a common descent that has its

[165] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 22–31.

roots in a legend that gave the Pa-O people their name, a long history that is different from the Bamar, a connection to a territory despite being spread out across several states, a distinct language and literature and a shared culture. This, in turn, has contributed to generate a deep sense of solidarity and uniqueness.

Common descent, name and history

The origins of the Pa-O are a subject of controversy.[166] Pa-O have existed in the country since ancient times with a majority living in Shan State mountains and a minority mostly concentrated around Thaton in lower Myanmar. People were always very eager to tell me the story of the mythical origins of the Pa-O. During a focus group with residents of the town of Hopone, one of the community leaders who dominated the discussion told me once again the legend, under the nods and proud looks of the audience.[167] "According to an oral story transmitted from our grandmothers and grandfathers, we believe that Pa-O people come from the union of a dragon and a magician (*Naga* and *Weiza* in Pa-O language). They met in the forest while the dragon was in its human female form. They lived in a cave and *Naga* became pregnant. While *Weiza* was away she fell asleep and changed back to her dragon form. As *Weiza* saw her in this appearance, he ran away. Soon, she laid two eggs, and as *Weiza* did not return she also left and forgot about the eggs. One egg cracked and a girl came out. A hermit discovered the other unbroken egg, peeled it and found a boy. "Pa" means crack. "O" means peel."[168] This is how Pa-O, which is sometimes written "Pa-Oh", became the name of this ethnic group. Pa-O are also called *Thaungthu* by the Bamar, a term with several possible translations that Pa-O people reject.[169] It can be translated either as the "hill people" referring to the Pa-O living in Shan State's mountainous areas or as "Southern people" referring to the Pa-O living in Thaton Township in Mon State, or as "peasant", which Pa-O people consider very derogatory.[170]

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[166] William Dunn Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma: A Sociological and Ethnographic Study of the Pa-o (Taungthu) People" (1953); Russ Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O: Rebels and Refugees* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2006); Mika Rolly, *Pa-Oh People* (Dūang Kamon, 1980).
[167] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20, January 2017.
[168] Nandar Chann, "Pa-O: The Forgotten People," *The Irrawaddy*, May 2004, https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=971&page=1.
[169] Rolly, *Pa-Oh People*, 20.
[170] According to William Hackett, some Pa-o say that the original meaning to the term was the second [as] they claim Thaton as their ancient capital and say that the name is derived from tha-ton, the Pa-o

The non-mythical origin of the Pa-O is debated as no written records of their history were kept. As William Hackett argues, since only partial evidence is available, "only tentative statements on the origins and tribal affinities of the Pa-O and the migration by which they came to the Southern Shan States" can be made.[171] First, many agree that they can be affiliated to one of the major Karen tribes, mostly on the ground of language affinities.[172] However, there is disagreement even among Pa-O leaders: While *Papraye* (grandfather) Khun San Aung, MP during Myanmar's first democratic phase denied any descent from the Karen group, a senior PNO advisor claimed that Pa-O people are related to Dawei, Kayan, Karen and Danu people.[173] Unsurprisingly, there is also disagreement on the number of tribal divisions among Pa-O people, which vary between 10 and 24.[174] Second, Pa-O people migrated southward from the Central Asia high plains, and reached by stages Southern Shan State where they are now mostly living. Here also, history takes on different nuances as educated people claim that Pa-O migrants came from various locations and different paths.[175] Third, the pressure of the Shan and Bamar pushed them further south to Thaton in Mon State where they developed a flourishing civilisation, with a written language and one of the first conversions to Buddhism as explained below.

Although Thaton is known as a main city of the Mon kingdom, Pa-O people claim it as their ancient capital. This, as well as the ethnic origin of the kings of Thaton is until today a source of dispute between the Mon and the Pa-O, which attests to the fluid nature of pre-colonial identity.[176] However, as Georges Coedes highlights, there is no trace of Thaton's early history except legends, which is insufficient to resolve the dispute.[177] And

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word for laterite, of which mineral the hills in that district chiefly consists." See Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 36–37.

171 Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 36.

172 Mika offers a study of the Pa-O tracing their Karen origins. Hackett and Marshall classify the Pa-O as part of the Pwo, one of the three main Karen tribes alongside the Sgaw and the Karenni. Christensen and Sann Kyaw classify he Pa-O as a fourth Karen tribe. Hackett found however that Pa-O language is closer to the language of the Padaung, a sub-group of the Karenni tribe. See Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Colombus: The University, 1922), 1; Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 28; Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 3; Rolly, *Pa-Oh People*.

173 U Khun San Aung, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #40, December 2016; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35, December 2016.

174Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 3.

175 Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44, January 2017.

176 For more information on this dispute see Christensen and Sann Kyaw 2006, p 4.

177 Coedés, "The Making of South East Asia," 69–70.

a fourth subject of disagreement is that Thaton was destroyed in 1057 AD by Anawrahta, reportedly because the king Manuha – whom again Pa-O people consider as theirs - insolently refused to share Buddhist scriptures. According to a *sayadaw*, Pa-O identity was born out of this attack.[178] Among different interpretations, it is believed that after the sack of Thaton, the wealthier part of the population – the Mon – were forcibly relocated to Bagan, while those who were left behind – mainly Pa-O farmers – migrated north to Shan State.[179] As Hackett highlighted, the migration of Pa-O people back to Shan State would explain the contradicting claims that I kept hearing: people living in Thaton say they come from a place of the same name in the Shan hills while the people of Hsa Tun (Thaton in a local Shan dialect, currently Hsiseng) insist that they come from lower Myanmar.[180]

Pa-O homeland and population

As a result of these migrations, the Pa-O homeland is not continuous, stretching from the hills of Shan State to the lowland Myanmar town of Thaton in Mon State. According to a senior PNO member, Pa-O people are present in 17 townships spread out through Southern Shan State, Kayah State, Bago Region, Karen State, Mon State and Yangon.[181] A senior PNO advisor claimed that the Pa-O population represents about 1 million people, which is higher than other states, such as Kayah or Chin States and means that the Pa-O would be the sixth highest ethnic population in Myanmar.[182]

Similarly to the Mon case, finding exact figures on Pa-O population is challenging. Since the last 2014 census did not reveal sensitive information on ethnicity, we can only guess the current Pa-O population based on the growth of the general population since the last census. The last figures available on Pa-O population trace back to the 1931 census,

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178 Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44.
179 Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 7–8; James G. Scott, *Burma and Beyond* (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1932), 31.
180 Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 36.
181 Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76, July 2017.
182 The population of Kayah State with 286,738 inhabitants and the population of Chin State with 478,690 in habitants represent the lowest figures among the 7 ethnic states. If the Pa-O population represents 1 million people it would therefore hold the 6th position. Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Government of Myanmar, "The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census," XIII.

which counted 222,714 "Thaungthu" people.[183] Since the general population in 1931 was estimated at 14, 647, 497 and the 2014 census reveals a total population of 51, 486, 253, it roughly indicates a growth of 3.5 percent, which if applied to Pa-O people would reveal roughly 780,000 people.[184] Although some Pa-O nationalist elites tend to exaggerate Pa-O population figures up to 3 million people, the proposed hypothetical figure is likely an underestimation.[185] Indeed, as a farmer noted, many Pa-O people living in the mountains were not included in the census because they do not have ID cards.[186]

Nowadays, there are two main groups of Pa-O people mainly based on geography: the highland and the lowland peoples. The "highland people" are the majority of Pa-O people who are now living in Southern Shan State as a result of the second migration wave. They are settled mostly on the hills left vacant by Shan people or in unoccupied valleys.[187] They represent the second largest ethnic group in Shan State after the Shan. During informal conversations with one casual key informant who is close to the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO) - a Pa-O armed group distinct from the PNO - I learnt that the total population of Pa-O people in Shan State could be guessed by looking at Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing's declaration in the New Light of Myanmar made on the first anniversary of the NCA.[188] In this declaration, he specified the percentage of each ethnic group in Shan State, including the Pa-O. Since the Pa-O are said to represent 8.94 % of the population of Shan State estimated at 5.8 million in the last 2014 census, we can say that there are about 500,000 Pa-O people in Shan State.

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183 The Pa-O group, which is included in the Karen speaking groups in the 1931 census, is not mentioned specifically in the 1973 and 1983 censuses. See Bennison, "Census of India, Vol X1, Burma, Part 1: Report," 200; Ismael Khin Maung, "The Population of Burma: An Analysis of the 1973 Census," *Papers of the East-West Population Institute*, no. 97 (1986): 16–17, http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19860401_analysis-on-1973-burma-census.pdf; Government of Myanmar, "Shan State 1983 Population Census" (Rangoon: Immigration and Manpower Department, September 1987), 1–14, http://www.dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/1983_shan_census_report.pdf; Government of Myanmar, "Karen State 1983 Population Census" (Rangoon: Immigration and Manpower Department, August 1987), 1–14, http://www.dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/1983_karan_census_report.pdf.

184 Government of Myanmar, "The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census," XIII.

185 Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54, August 2016.

186 Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71, July 2017.

187 Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 10.

188 Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Min Aung Hlaing, "Greetings of Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing at the First Anniversary of the NCA," *New Light of Myanmar*, October 16, 2016, 5.

The "lowland people" include the remainder of Pa-O people who are living in lowland Myanmar, in Mon, Karen and Kayah States as well as Bago and Yangon Regions. In Mon State, Pa-O live mainly in Thaton and Bilin townships. According to a local PNO officer, there are officially 70,000 Pa-O in Thaton Township but Pa-O led research has shown that there are over 120,000 Pa-O just in Thaton district.[189] In Karen State, Pa-O stay in five townships. The local Literature and Culture Organisation (LCO) chairman mentioned that according to the last 2014 census, there are 120,000 Pa-O living in Karen State.[190] In Kayah State, the local LCO chairman claims that the Pa-O population represents 12,000 people who live in Loikaw Township.[191] A CSO member I met in Taunggyi but who was originally from the Bago Region estimated there were 40,000 Pa-O people living in two townships of the region.[192] A CSO member working for a Yangon based organisation estimated the Pa-O population in Yangon at about 5,000.[193] Interestingly, if we add all these estimates from different sources, we obtain a number close to 800,000 people, which roughly corresponds to the estimates based on population growth suggested earlier.

A common language

Pa-O language is very different from Burmese, which is reflected for instance in the name prefix used - *Khun* for men, *Nang* for women. It has six tones while Burmese only has three. In addition, the sentence structure order is different, which makes it, as discussed earlier, closer to Karen and Karenni languages.[194] However, within the Karen sub-group, only the Pa-O developed a written language.[195] Based on Hackett's discovery in a monastery of "handwritten manuscripts [...] of fairly ancient times […] which had been brought [to Hsiseng] when they moved from Thaton", Christensen and Sann Kyaw conclude that Pa-O script was probably developed during the golden age of Pa-O civilisation before the destruction of Thaton and is therefore more than a thousand years

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189 Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54.
190 Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63, July 2017.
191 PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18, December 2016.
192 Pa-O Youth Organization secretary, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50, January 2017.
193 Pa-O CSO member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #85, August 2017.
194 Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 27; Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 6.
195 Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 16.

old.[196] However, as some monks explained, the current script has shifted away from its original version, adopting most of the features of Burmese script while conserving a number of distinctive characters.[197] In addition, there are some variations of languages among the subgroups. A female CSO leader explained that the script used in Shan State was very different from the one used in Thaton, which was very old.[198] In Loikaw, capital of Kayah state, the script is also different, as noted by the chairman of the Pa-O LCO.[199]

Shared traditions, culture and religion

The Pa-O appear as a more distinctive people than the Mon in the eyes of the stranger. They are easily recognisable by their distinct traditional clothes, which consist of a dark outfit and a colourful turban made of a towel as a headdress. A black colour costume is usually worn to work on the farm while a dark blue costume is reserved for festivals. This outfit has a symbolic meaning that is connected to the Pa-O legend. Pa-O women's dress symbolises the dragon *Naga* with many layers imitating the dragon's scales. Their turban also has many layers and the two pins worn during festivals represent the dragon's eyes and comb. Men dress like *Weiza*, with a white shirt that represents their spirit as well as a towel-made headdress.[200] Furthermore, a CSO leader claimed that the dark colour represented Pa-O people's mourning for their king Manuha who was killed by Anawrahta.[201]

Nowadays, such clothing is commonly worn in highland areas. In every village I visited or any cultural celebrations I attended everyone, with the exception of a few young people, was wearing the traditional dress. While less frequently in towns than in villages, there are still many more Pa-O people traditionally dressed than I could observe amongst the Mon. This is because many villagers are travelling to towns to sell their goods, in markets that take place each day in different towns. The traditional dress is,

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196 Hackett, "The Pa-o People of the Shan State, Union of Burma," 36; Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 5.
197 Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57, Pa-O, July 2017.
198 Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41, December 2016.
199 PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18.
200 Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22, January 2017.
201 Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37, December 2016.

however, more rarely worn in lowland areas where people tend to adopt the Bamar language, dress and customs as will be described in chapter 4.

While the Mon are celebrated for their contribution to spreading Buddhism to the Southeast Asia peninsula, the Pa-O consider themselves as the first people converted to Buddhism in modern Myanmar.[202] According to the *Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma*, Thaton was indeed founded in 680 BC by the king Thuriya Sanda, who personally met Gautama Buddha.[203] The son of King Dhama Pala attended the third Buddhist synod in 261 BC in Ceylon. There, he witnessed the compilation of the *Pitakas* or Buddhist scriptures that he later translated into Pa-O.[204] As mentioned earlier, this religious predominance caused the fall of Thaton as the last king Manuha refused to share those *Pitakas* with the Bamar king Anawrahta. As a *sayadaw* complained, "Since then, Buddhist scriptures were lost, so we had to learn them again from Myanmar people."[205] This version of history is of course contested by the Mon who claim the Pa-O kings as their own, but again since there is no historical evidence from this period, it is difficult to solve the dispute.

The Pa-O people have remained mostly Buddhist until this day. In every village, there is a pagoda and villagers seem to really consider the village *sayadaw* as their leader. The same group of community leaders in Hopone explained people usually give their extra money to the monastery because for a long time monks protected people from the conflict.[206] Cultural celebrations are mostly based on Buddhist traditions such as ordination ceremonies or full moon celebrations. Some full moon days can involve huge celebrations, such as the one I observed when I was staying in the monastery of a small village. A thousand monks came out on that day, walking through the monastery, passing by dressed-up villagers who were lined up with bags of rice, from which they poured a small quantity into the passing monks' alms bowls. There are also some lay celebrations such as the Rocket Festival, the Pa-O National Day and dancing competitions. Sharing traditional foods, playing traditional instruments such as the drum

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[202] Rolly, *Pa-Oh People*, 14–15.
[203] Pe Maung Tin and Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma*, 77.
[204] Rolly, *Pa-Oh People*, 16–17.
[205] Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44.
[206] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.

and singing are usually involved in these. The villagers I talked to often insisted that worshiping traditions differed from Bamar religious celebrations despite some similarities. For instance, big festivals such as the Thingyan New Year festival also include a worship of ancestors, which involves two weeks of visits to older people in order to share information and request forgiveness.[207]

A strong sense of solidarity and uniqueness

The tangible aspects of Pa-O identity explored above have generated a strong sense of solidarity and uniqueness. Despite being spread throughout different states and regions, Pa-O people maintain strong connection among themselves, which is reinforced by a shared history as well as by the existence of distinct institutions working across Pa-O areas. For instance, the PNO and its cultural proxy, the Pa-O LCO, have offices across Pa-O areas. In addition, it was not uncommon for me to meet the same people originating from one area who were working in another area. For instance, my Mon key informant's husband was a Pa-O from Taunggyi, but he was based in Mawlamyine and working with Pa-O people from Thaton and Karen State. A PNLO joint secretary general I met in Taunggyi was originally from Thaton. Furthermore, people from different areas often participate in meetings together. For example, I was invited to attend a forum in preparation for the Pa-O ethnic-based political dialogue organised in Karen State, where Pa-O people from Shan, Karen and Mon States took part. Furthermore, the Pa-O LCO's attempt to combine the languages from Shan and Mon States represent another initiative towards building a sense of unity.[208] As a result, nationalist elites commonly claimed that Pa-O people were united because they shared distinct a culture and customs.[209] As a *sayadaw* concluded, "All Pa-O people are the same, the language is a bit different but we can understand each other."[210]

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[207] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19, January 2017; Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[208] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41.
[209] Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36, December 2016; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47, January 2017; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50, 50; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74, July 2017; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18.
[210] Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44.

Yet, Pa-O identity presents a certain degree of fluidity that is particularly evident in its unclear and contested origins. Illustrating this, some civil society members stressed the confusing contradictions between history books, something I was able to observe.[211] In addition, other elements of Pa-O identity are ambiguous. For instance, the name particle *Khun* for men is the same in Kayah language and *Nang* for the women is the same in Shan language. Furthermore, the Pa-O script is now very similar to the Burmese.[212]

Nevertheless, despite elements of malleability reflecting the constructivist description of ethnicity as historically fluid, the existence of a strong sense of uniqueness that transcends geographic distances resonates with Smith's ethno-symbolist approach. Similarly to the Mon, this sense of separate identity and the perceived disadvantages associated with it sparked a rather rigid nationalist spirit. A strong nationalist movement first resisted the local dominant group, the Shan, and then the military government. Unlike the Mon struggle, the Pa-O nationalist struggle led by the PNO under various iterations has faced a number of major internal divisions and had very different outcomes in terms of its relationship with the state.

3.3.2 The Pa-O nationalist struggle

In this section, I first provide a brief history of the Pa-O nationalist movement, which is greatly inspired by the oral history provided by one of my secondary key informants, who helped me make sense of the recurring contradictions and omissions found in the few available historical accounts for this period.[213] Second, I discuss the implications of the controversial ceasefire agreement signed by the PNO in 1991, highlighting various mechanisms through which the PNO has engaged in a high level of cooperation with the government. Third, I outline a number of criticisms articulated against the PNO, which explain why Pa-O people's feelings about the PNO are more mixed than the feelings of Mon towards the NMSP.

Armed resistance against the Shan feudal system

Alongside with the Mon, the Karenni and the Kachin, Pa-O people embraced the struggle

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[211] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23, January 2017.
[212] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[213] Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52.

for autonomy and self-determination initiated by the Karen after independence. However, rather than a rebellion against the central government, the Pa-O "revolution" started off as a resistance against the autocratic power of the Shan princes or *sawbwas,* who represented the majority group in Shan State. The Pa-O nationalist movement started in Thaton, Mon State when the first "Pa-O National Organisation" was established in 1946-47 under the leadership of U Hla Pe. At the same time, in Shan State, the Pa-O solidarity movement or *Pa-O Luong Bu* was started against the gambling and opium trade supported by the s*awbwas*.[214] With the technical support of the KNU, U Hla Pe moved the PNO up north.[215] Its armed wing, the Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (which is different from the current PNLO), started in 1949 as an armed resistance against the *sawbwas* and rapidly became one of Burma's largest insurgent forces.[216] At the same time, the Union Pa-O National Organisation (UPNO), a political party formed in 1950 to replace the Pa-O Luong Bu, acted as its "above-ground face."[217] In 1958, responding to the U Nu government's "arms for democracy" call for change, the PNLO signed a ceasefire and handed over weapons.[218] Then, in 1959, the Shan *sawbwas* officially surrendered their power and privileges to the Shan State government, successfully concluding the struggle against feudalism.

Armed resistance against the government and internal divisions

In reaction to the military coup in 1962, which led to the arrest of most Pa-O leaders, including U Hla Pe, the PNLO was revived in 1966 by Bo San Thein to start an armed resistance against the government.[219] As a PNO advisor explained, "The insurrection started because ethnic people were not satisfied with the Bamar government, which was not able to support health, education, transportation and security."[220]

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[214] U Aung Sa and U Kyaw Sein were also involved in the leadership of PNO while U Pyu, U Heing Maung and U Aung Sa were involved in the leadership of Pa-O Luong Bu. See Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 17–18.
[215] Smith, *Burma*, 172, 193.
[216] PNLO here should not be confused with the later organization of the same name that was created under the leadership of Khun Okker. This first PNLO is often referred to as 'PNO' by interviewees or by scholars because they are closely linked. Smith himself refers to the PNLO when explaining the capacity of this insurgent force but later refers to it as PNO throughout his book. Smith, *Burma*, 168.
[217] Smith, *Burma*, 168; Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 22.
[218] Smith, *Burma*, 168.
[219] Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 26.
[220] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35.

In 1968 soon after Karen ethnic U Tha Kalei assumed leadership, the PNLO's name was changed to the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organisation (SSNLO) or *Yalalapa* in order to be more inclusive of other groups. Tha Kalei's leadership was destructive for the Pa-O nationalist movement as its embrace of a communist ideology led to a deep split in 1974. Upon their release, U Hla Pe and Kyaw Sein accused Tha Kalei of abandoning the Pa-O nationalist cause and led a group of nationalist leaders including Aung Kham Hti to escape into the jungle and form the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Front (SSNLF).[221] Soon after, the SSNLO decided to showcase its communist influence by adding "people" to its name. The new SSNPLO was often referred to as the "Red Pa-O" as a result of this. In 1976, the SSNLF was renamed Pa-O National Organisation in reference to the original nationalist struggle, which by contrast was also referred to as the "White Pa-O". One year later, Aung Kham Hti took the leadership of the PNO.[222] In 1987, a ceasefire was negotiated between the two organisations. In 1990, PNO's Secretary Khun Okker initiated talks about reintegrating the two organisation's forces at the Mannerplaw headquarters of the KNU on the Thai Border, but his efforts were be thwarted by the PNO's leader Aung Kham Hti who, a year later, agreed to a ceasefire with the military.[223]

Ceasefire and high level of cooperation with the military

The 1991 ceasefire marked a change in the PNO's nationalist strategy, which would from now on embrace a high level of cooperation with the government particularly through the establishment of its armed wing as a "*Tatmadaw* non-integrated militia".[224]

My key Pa-O informant, who was formerly a UPNO member, told me that in 1991 they went on a peace mission at the demand of the military government to negotiate a peace deal with Aung Kham Hti.[225] As a result, PNO was the sixth ethnic armed group to agree to a ceasefire, although only verbally.[226] As was the case with other main

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[221] Smith, *Burma*, 387; Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 29.
[222] Christensen and Sann Kyaw, *The Pa-O*, 30–31.
[223] Smith, *Burma*, 339.
[224] Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar," 26.
[225] The peace mission members were: U Khun San Aung - a friend of the SLORC chairman - U Kyaw Tin, U Maung Mwe, U Kyaw Saya, U khun Maung To. Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38, December 2016.
[226] Interestingly, a senior PNO leader highlighted that no formal agreement was signed. "We just have a verbal agreement with the *Tatmadaw* and officially we are still holding arms." Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.

ceasefire groups, PNO's peace deal involved the cessation of hostilities and the provision of economic benefits.[227] However, the ceasefire's lack of political dialogue led to yet another split in the Pa-O struggle: PNO's Secretary Khun Okker formed another EAO, later re-branded as PNLO, which eventually signed the NCA in 2015.[228] While the PNLO is now part of the peace process as an NCA signatory, the PNO participates as a political party with elected MPs. Their joint involvement in the organisation of the Pa-O ethnic-based political dialogue shows they are now working together in the peace process. However, they have very different ideas about nation building. As Khun Okker put it:

> "*After the 1991 ceasefire PNO changed its philosophy: they want to keep a Pa-O status and identity, but they are not involved in nation building for the whole country anymore. They just have a contentment strategy and lack any broader idea for the whole country. This is because after the ceasefire, they became under the control of the military*." [229]

Two main reasons were advanced to justify the peace deal agreed to by the PNO in 1991. First, a senior PNO member invoked a concern for the communities affected by the conflict and the prospect of education, development and business opportunities if peace was achieved.[230] A PNA senior officer confirmed that since the ceasefire, they have been consistent in working for community development, building more roads, schools and bridges than in other ethnic areas.[231] Indeed, a number of villagers agreed

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[227] The PNO was granted a mining concession in Kachin State and the right to operate tourist businesses around Inle Lake. For more details on the provision of substantial business concessions that can turn a state enemy into a successful entrepreneur, see Ricky Yue, "Pacifying the Margins: The Pa-O Self-Administered Zone and the Political Order in Southern Shan State," in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, ed. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 103. In this article, more information can also be found on the business empire built by former PNA General Nay win Tun and its role in funding the PNO.

[228] Khun Okker initially established the Pa-O People Liberation Organization (PPLO) on the border. In 2007, SSNPLO (who made a ceasefire with the government in 1994) split into three groups: a group which surrendered and worked with the government, a group which did not surrender but did not fight and a group which resumed fighting and moved to the border. In 2009, PPLO, the active SSNPLO faction and some individuals organized a Pa-O congress and formed the current Pa-O National Liberation Organisation. PNLO first signed a ceasefire with the Shan State government in 2012 and with the Union government in 2013. Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52.

[229] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62, July 2017.

[230] Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.

[231] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58, July 2017.

that peace has significantly improved local people's lives.[232] Second, a CSO leader explained that Pa-O leaders have always sought to counter Shan dominance, "fearing that the Shan would ask them to go back to Mon State". As a result, an alliance with the government was perceived as a strategic move to ward off Shan influence.[233] This interpretation accurately reflects what Callahan refers to as "a pragmatic acceptance" of the PNO's weakness vis-a-vis the state.[234] Indeed, this ceasefire marked the beginning of high level of cooperation with the government, by which the PNO managed to secure what Kim Joliffe categorises as an "accommodated claim" to control Pa-O affairs.[235] This was possible through its transformation into a state-backed militia and its open cooperation with the government in exchange for access.[236]

The PNO's armed wing, the PNA, can be classified as what John Buchanan calls a "*Tatmadaw* non-integrated militia," which is a type of militia operating under the command of the *Tatmadaw*.[237] Such militia usually performs a security role within their area of operation and are allowed to undertake business activities. Generally, the main ceasefire groups had their territory delimited and defined as a Special Region.[238] Other groups were often granted a *pyithusit* (ပြည်သူ့စစ်) or People's Militia status, which act as a proxy of the *Tatmadaw*.[239] Although the PNA's territory was not clearly demarcated, it was assigned a Special Region, the Shan State Special Region 6. However, unlike other main ceasefire groups, the PNA established from the outset, a much closer collaboration with the military. A senior PNA officer summed up the relationship of the PNO with the government, "Politically, we have no alliance with other ethnic groups, we work with the government. Whoever is in power is our government. This is our PNO

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[232] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33, July 2017; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38, July 2017; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39, July 2017.
[233] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.
[234] Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States*, 45–47.
[235] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 63.
[236] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," vii.
[237] Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar," 26.
[238] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 19.
[239] People's Militias refer to various types of state-backed militia established after 1973, including groups created by the state and others that were previously EAOs or factions of EAOs. See Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," i.

policy."[240]

After 2009, as the political system transitioned from direct military rule to a more open semi-democratic rule, *Tatmadaw* leaders pressured EAOs to transform themselves into state-sponsored militias – Border Guard Forces (BGF) and People's Militia Forces (PMF).[241] Unlike the BGF, the PMF, which formalised the practice of *Pyithusit,* are not fully integrated to the *Tatmadaw*.[242]

The PNA officially parted from the PNO and formed a PMF in 2009 so that the PNO could contest the 2010 elections.[243] The context in which the PNO formed a political party also indirectly demonstrates its high level of cooperation with the government. According to the UPNO's secretary general at the time, the entry of the PNO into the legal fold weakened the UPNO as a political party.[244] The 2010 election was the time for PNO and UPNO leaders to decide under which name to register a Pa-O political party. A senior PNO advisor explained that "PNO" was chosen because, again, "It had a good relationship with the *Tatmadaw* during the military government unlike the UPNO which had the image of a pro-democracy party".[245] Since the PNO did not represent the UPNO's views, previous UPNO members and leaders decided to register themselves again as UPNO to contest in the 2015 election.[246]

In conclusion, power dynamics have evolved through state co-optation, which has brought the PNO to perceive this patron-client relationship as more beneficial than continued resistance.[247]

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[240] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[241] Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar," 18–20.
[242] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," i; Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar," 26–27.
[243] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 64.
[244] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[245] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35.
[246] Since the PNO did not represent UPNO's views, previous UPNO members and leaders decided to register themselves again as UPNO to contest in the 2015 election. According to Yue, the PNO's corruption and collaboration with the government were the main reasons supporting UPNO leaders' move. Yue, "Pacifying the Margins," 99.
[247] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 63; Yue, "Pacifying the Margins," 94.

3.3.3 Mechanisms of cooperation

There are two main mechanisms of cooperation between the PNO and the state. First, the PNO's official capacity as successful political party within the Pa-O SAA has provided a new avenue for cooperation. Second, the parallel administration structure of the powerful PNA is largely responsible for the success of the PNO's cooperation with the government. Third, to a lesser extent, a number of proxy organisations have helped the PNO achieve a lasting influence over the local population.

The Pa-O Self-Administered Area: a new official platform

Map 3.2: Shan State South, Pa-O SAZ
Map has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It can be accessed at: https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Ethnic-Armed-Actors-and-Justice-Provision-in-Myanmar_EN.pdf (p.36).

The 2008 constitution established the SAAs with the explicit goal of granting increased self-governance to a number of ethnic groups. As noted earlier, this was a main contribution of the ethnic armed group participation during the constitution drafting

process at the National Convention.[1] While Khun Okker criticised the PNO for supporting the drafting of a pro-military constitution, one PNO leader considered their participation in the drafting process as very positive: "Previously, we had no chance to influence constitutional outcomes because no Pa-O representatives were involved in the conferences. This time we got a Self-Administered Area."[2] However, although the Pa-O represent a majority in more than just three townships in Shan State, the Pa-O SAA includes only Pinlaung, Hsiseng and Hopone townships.

During the two general elections in 2010 and 2015, the PNO won a total of ten seats. At both elections, the PNO took three seats at the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (lower house of parliament), one at the *Amyotha Hluttaw* (upper house of parliament) and six at the Shan State *Pye-nay Hluttaw* (regional assembly). This result at the regional assembly meant that the PNO won all of the vacant seats in the Pa-O SAA Leading Body.[3] However, a senior PNO advisor complained that the PNO could only represent 40% of Pa-O people because it only won seats in the SAA, where only 40% of Pa-O people live.[4]

Since Pa-O representatives are now sitting in parliament, some Pa-O leaders claimed that the SAA created an official structure that has enabled increased cooperation with the government regarding development and social affairs and has provided greater freedom to promote Pa-O identity.[5] In addition, one CSO member explained that the PNO's strong linkages with the government meant that the Pa-O SAA could access more development funding than other SAAs.[6] Nevertheless, the PNO's influence over the SAA is in reality rather limited (as chapter 4 will develop further) and many Pa-O criticised the SAA for not achieving meaningful decentralisation. Interestingly, a

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[1] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 28–29.
[2] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.
[3] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Sections 49, 50 and 56. The leading body that administers a Self-Administered Zone is composed of at least ten members and includes the *Pye-nay Hluttaw* members as well as members nominated by the military.
[4] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Interview #35, December 2016.
[5] Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, July 2015), 64.
[6] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56, December 2016.

participant pointed out that while SAA in Burmese language, ပဒေသိုလျားကိုယျပိုလျအုပျခုပြုခုလျရဒသေ, meant "autonomous area" it was translated in English as "Self-Administrative Area," because the SAA is far from granting an autonomous status.[7] Similarly, many villagers complained that they had to stay under the authority of the Shan and Bamar governments.[8]As one villager from Pinlaung Township told me, "We are feeling like dependents or guests. We cannot develop our area because we need to follow those who control us, even if we do not like it."[9] As a result, many participants commented that not much has changed since the SAA was created.

The Pa-O National Army's parallel administration system

The PNO's ongoing influence in the SAA and other nearby townships – Taunggyi, Loilem and Kalaw - where Pa-O people also live was significantly enabled by the PNA which maintains a strong parallel informal administration presence.[10] While its predecessor used to count 5,000 members and form one of Burma's largest armed forces in the 1950s, a senior PNA officer revealed that the PNA nowadays still counts between 2500 and 2700 members, including soldiers and administrative staff.[11] Although the PNA has no official mandate beyond its security duties, the government has openly accommodated this presence, which seems to have enhanced continued cooperation. Regardless of official township boundaries, the PNA's jurisdiction is divided into four areas, which are organised into townships, village tracts and villages. In addition to the PNA's command structure, each of these four areas has representatives of the PNA's departments who cooperate frequently with government officials.[12] The PNA retains several departments including administrative, economic and information. In addition, it has the semi-official responsibility to support the government in some areas including development, social services and cultural affairs. It also shares responsibility with the government in terms of justice provision regarding

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[7] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42, January 2017.
[8] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[9] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30, July 2017.
[10] Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 34.
[11] Smith, *Burma*, 168; Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[12] Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, July 2015), 64.

minor crime and narcotics.[13] Referring to what Kevin Woods calls "ceasefire capitalism," Ricky Yue observes that the co-optation used by the state to secure loyalty and control of Pa-O authorities trickles down to village tract leaders who use fear to influence villagers and get monetary benefits for settling disputes.[14] The fact that this is the political wing of an EAO that controls the Pa-O SAA, with armed EAO members going around enforcing policies contributes to explain why the PNO probably has more authority at least over the local population than some other SAA authorities, which do not follow that governance model.

Proxy organisations

Additionally, the PNO also exercises influence over the local population through a number of proxy organisations, which facilitate the mobilisation of communities across townships.[15] First, the Parami Development Network was formed in 2012 as a civil society organisation independent from the PNO.[16] Yue describes this move as a "damage control strategy" developed in response to the direct confrontation of local CSOs in order to build a good image.[17] Second, the PNO established a Pa-O Youth Network in order to create connections with young people and civil society workers. Lastly, the PNO works closely with a Religious Leader Team as well as the Pa-O LCO in order to promote Pa-O identity. Through these proxies, the PNO exercises what Yue calls a "soft power", which delivers "tangible benefits that Pa-O villagers appreciate."[18]

3.3.4 Perceptions of the effectiveness of PNO's cooperation strategy

PNO's ceasefire with the government secured an "accommodated claim" to manage Pa-

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[13] Brian McCartan and Kim Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Actors and Justice Provision in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, October 2016), 41–42, https://asiafoundation.org/publication/ethnic-armed-actors-justice-provision-myanmar/.

[14] Kevin Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military–Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military–State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 747–70; Ricky Yue, "Pacifying the Margins: The Pa-O Self-Administered Zone and the Political Order in Southern Shan State," in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, ed. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 108–12.

[15] Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52.

[16] Since the party registration law prevents political party to receive foreign funding, this third wing has actually split from PNO in order to have the capacity to raise development funding from international aid actors. See Jolliffe, "Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar," 64.

[17] Yue, "Pacifying the Margins," 99.

[18] Yue, "Pacifying the Margins," 113.

O affairs. This section first discusses PNO's arguments in defence of this strategy. Second, it presents Pa-O people's perceptions of the PNO's achievements. Third, it shows that many participants criticised the PNO for its lack of meaningful representation, its repressive style of governance and its widespread corruption, therefore denouncing the co-optation of the PNO by the government as counter-productive.

PNO's positive self-assessment of the cooperation strategy

PNO members are generally confident that they made the right choice to work with the central government. A senior LCO member in Taunggyi argued that the PNO's cooperation with the military was for the benefit of the people.[19] A senior PNO member claimed that the PNO should be praised for its experience in promoting development at the grassroots level: "Projects are prepared according to people's desire. Some MPs do not visit villages but our party will do that for them."[20] Some local PNO members that I met in their office in Kyauttalong Township commented that people could count on them when they had problems.[21] A PNO leader in Thaton Township added that if some people used to suspect the PNO because of its cooperation with the military government, "They now understand that if our Pa-O leaders did not act in this way, we could not have built roads and schools."[22] As a result, a senior PNO leader claimed that PNO's current position represented an achievement: "PNO can now be a role model for other ethnic groups as we are still holding arms, while having a political party which won seats in the upper, lower and state *Hluttaws* and having control over an SAA."[23]

Outside of Shan State however, opinions of PNO members on the success of their organisation are more mixed. While a PNO leader in Thaton Township in Mon State considered that 80 per cent of Pa-O people supported the PNO, a senior LCO member in Karen State thought that the PNO was not representative because people never heard

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[19] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34, December 2016.
[20] Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.
[21] PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27, July 2017.
[22] Pa-O National Organization, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54, August 2016.
[23] Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.

of or saw them.[24] Similarly, Pa-O Youth Network leaders in Kayah and Mon States have different views, the former claiming that the PNO was supporting development and cultural issues through the PLO, and the latter indicating that they did not receive any development funding.[25]

Perceived PNO achievements

Only a few elite and community members, living in the SAA or Kyauttalone Township, which is under the direct leadership of PNO leader U Aung Kham Hti, expressed relatively positive views. First, the positive developments that peace has enabled, including transportation, education and health were celebrated.[26] Some nationalist elites explained that the PNO's close cooperation with the government has played a major role in bringing about such improvements, especially in the SAA.[27] Yet, a group of youths noted that even when roads were improved, people often had to build them voluntarily because the SAA did not provide a sufficient budget.[28] Similarly, a retired doctor living in Yangon as well as a social welfare worker living in Hopone town acknowledged infrastructure development but complained that progress was very slow.[29] Second, some participants pointed out a number of areas where the PNO has had a positive impact. Farmers from different townships praised the PNO for its actions against drug use, for facilitating capacity building delivered by foreign development organisations and for its mediation role in addressing land disputes between members of the community.[30] In one case, the SAA government was even successful in stopping a

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[24] Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63.
[25] PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55, August 2016.
[26] Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[27] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32, December 2016; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49, January 2017; Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57.
[28] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28, June 2017.
[29] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66, July 2017; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78, July 2017.
[30] Farmer, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #48, January 2017; Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84, 2017.

mining company from building a road to which villagers were opposed.[31] Finally, a group of villagers from Hopone Township indicated that their relationship with the PNO has improved. The fact that they were providing more information on their policies and making efforts to be more approachable than before was appreciated.[32]

Lack of meaningful representation

Some members of the nationalist elite living in Taunggyi, however, feel that since the ceasefire, the PNO does not represent Pa-O people very meaningfully. A social worker noted however that, "We do not dare saying this because they are holding guns and can give us trouble."[33] The PNO was accused of not listening to people's voices, not being transparent and not communicating enough with the community. For instance, MPs do not meet villagers to understand their economic situation and villagers cannot come to a PNO office to express their difficulties.[34]

Repressive governance

Many participants from all socio-political groups, inside and outside the SAA, accused the PNO of using its economic and military power to oppress people instead of representing people's needs. Many criticised the PNO for using fear in order to control people's behaviours. As another social worker noted, "I heard reports that people were beaten if they refused to give money to the PNO. Similarly, when people criticise them, the militia threatens their family."[35] For instance, a group of villagers in Pinlaung Township claimed that if they argued back, the PNA would sometimes come back with guns. "We are facing dictatorship from the government and from our own leaders because they don't give us a chance to talk."[36] Some villagers in Taunggyi Township added that they were ordered to vote for the PNO or forced to give money for the

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[31] Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[32] Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35, July 2017.
[33] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[34] Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45, January 2017; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[35] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51, January 2017.
[36] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.

election or different festivals.[37]A group of village leaders in Hopone further commented that, "from the outside, it looks good, with new roads and schools, but inside it is still like a dictatorship. People fear punishment if they don't vote for the PNO or the USDP."[38]

In addition, intimidation tactics used against potential political competitors demonstrate that there is no political freedom. Pa-O people were reportedly afraid of attending NLD rallies, expressing concerns of being fined or threatened if they showed their support.[39] A social welfare worker from Taunggyi explained that, "The PNA stoned the cars of candidates, destroyed billboards, forced villagers not to vote for the opposition party UPNO and vote for USDP in constituencies where the PNO did not have candidates. A candidate was even threatened by the militia with guns. When the UPNO tried to present a candidate in the constituency of the SAA chairman, the militia forced his family to pressure him to resign."[40]

Furthermore, some villagers said the PNO was preventing local people from participating in political, economic or social events.[41] A secondary key informant confirmed that the PNO usually stopped CSOs from supporting community development or human rights training unless they operated under their control.[42] On the other hand, villagers complained that they were forced to attend and cover the costs of meaningless meetings organised by the PNO. Indeed, since authorities are wearing uniforms, no dialogue can happen because people are afraid. As one of them said "when we receive an invitation letter, we feel like soldiers are marching. When we attend one of these meetings, we feel like a robber captured by authorities."[43] According to UPNO members, people are not satisfied with the PNO but they obey them because they are afraid of their weapons.[44]

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[37] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[38] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
[39] {Citation}
[40] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51.
[41] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[42] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.
[43] Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29, July 2017.
[44] Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65, July 2017; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74.

Corruption

Similarly, people from all socio-political backgrounds, inside and outside the SAA, complained that the PNO was self-interested. According to a CSO leader, the PNO has a lot of economic opportunities, which means that leaders are getting rich instead of working for Pa-O people.[45] For instance, villagers reported corruption in relation to road construction, criticising the PNO for giving just enough money to buy construction materials while the villagers had to build the roads by themselves.[46] Some farmers regretted that PNO leaders were not chosen for their management skills, noting that some PNO members also committed faults intentionally. According to them, Pa-O people actually only benefit from 60% of the budget granted by the government while the PNO keeps 40% for themselves.[47]

Moreover, many participants complained that the PNO asked people to pay various taxes that are actually used to support the PNA directly without any transparency.[48] A senior PNA officer I met in Hsiseng Township was very outspoken and frank about this sensitive issue: since the PNA does not get any financial support from the government and is legally prevented from collecting taxes, they have difficulties stopping their own soldiers from doing it illegally to complement their low salaries.[49] Unfortunately, avenues to denounce these practices are very limited: when an active villager in Pinlaung Township reported an illegal tea tax on Facebook, he was sued and had to pay a fine.[50] In addition, a group of young women from ten different townships, who were participating in a training led by the Pa-O Women Union (PWU), reported that opium farmers had to pay an extra tax to the PNA as well as the *Tatmadaw*.[51] The same PNA officer also recognised that many PNA soldiers are involved in the drug trade to support their families.[52] As villagers complained, a sense of helplessness is created among local people who feel that security forces such as the PNA, the police or the *Tatmadaw* are

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[45] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.
[46] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[47] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21, January 2017.
[48] Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61, July 2017; Restaurant manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #79, June 2017.
[49] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[50] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30, July 2017.
[51] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26, June 2017.
[52] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.

not reliable because they encourage the drug trade instead of stopping it.[53] PNLO leader Khun Okker explains that these problematic behaviours occur because PNA's new recruits hold arms without any knowledge of the nationalist ideology.[54]

Furthermore, although the PNO is sometimes involved in resolving land disputes between members of the Pa-O community, the PNO is notoriously accused of confiscating a lot of land: many villagers accused PNA crony Nay Win Tun of "squeezing Pa-O people by grabbing land."[55] Indeed, the same PNA officer I talked to bluntly explained that land confiscation was "a never ending issue involving companies, cronies, PNA militia and villagers."[56] While in rare cases, villagers could get their land back with the help of CSOs such as the Pa-O Youth Organization many others are left without options.[57] As we visited my key informant's hometown Saikow, he heard about a meeting that had just happened between the PNO and a nearby village about land confiscation. Villagers were gathered in the village leader's home, reflecting on the meeting and sharing their impression with us. In this meeting, several high-ranking people gave speeches, including Nay Win Tun, the MP representing Hsiseng Township constituency, and the SAA Chairman U San Lwin. The gist of their speeches was that the land was grabbed legally, because the government had previously given that land – which villagers have been cultivating for generations – to the PNO. As a result, they announced that villagers could now only cultivate 3 acres of land instead of 7, which is insufficient to support their families. Feelings of unfairness were only met with feelings of helplessness. As one villager explained, "I stood up to talk but after only one or two words they stopped me, saying that I was outside the law, so I had no right to speak."[58]

Because of these problems, many people expressed their dissatisfaction with the PNO's performance. One of the quiet women who attended the land confiscation meeting suddenly let her anger out, shouting "I will not vote for them anymore!" Other women who participated in the PWU training called them "liars" because they did not respect

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53 Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30, July 2017.
54 Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
55 Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19, January 2017; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30, July 2017; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31, January 2017.
56 Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
57 Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
58 Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.

their electoral promises.[59] A religious worker concluded that although the government gave some opportunities for the PNO to work in Pa-O areas, people's hard work was the actual root cause of improvements."[60]

Negative impacts of co-optation

Many elite members point at the co-optation of the PNO by the government to explain the PNO's repressive governance and ultimately the destruction of its relationship with its own people. An old man and former monk that I met several times in his Taunggyi home provided a very useful insight on the negative influence of the *Tatmadaw*. "Since the PNO started obeying the military government, it increasingly became alike, conducting similar misconducts against their own people. As a result, the aim, vision and mission of the PNO have faded out because they do and think like the Myanmar army, which is why the public does not like the PNO."[61] In addition, while the entire Pa-O society considers U Aung Kham Hti as the PNO's uncontested leader since the late 70s, his leadership style has also drawn a number of criticisms. The same old man, who used to be close to U Aung Kham Hti when he was a monk himself, criticised him for not accepting any support or advice: "He wants to control everything by himself, like a dictator. He does not deal with the public, consultants or even his own PNO members, but the government and the army only."[62] A retired teacher that I met in Loilem, further blamed him for portraying himself as the only Pa-O leader and therefore failing to recognise other Pa-O leaders who fought and sacrificed their lives.[63]

During our trip to Loilem Township decided at the last minute by my key informant because it was hard to confirm whether foreigners needed permission to go there, I had the chance to meet one of the respected leading figures of the Pa-O revolution that my key informant called with affection and respect *Papraye,* now in his nineties. Eager to talk, he explained that as a soldier, he distanced himself from U Aung Kham Hti because he signed the ceasefire without consulting him.

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[59] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.
[60] Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70, July 2017.
[61] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[62] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[63] A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72, July 2017.

> "*Before making this agreement, he should have consulted us. I wanted rights and opportunities right now, but he said that we should negotiate slowly, steadily, and not confront with the government. Personally, I think we are going to die first with this method. I want to cut the tree urgently. If he consulted us, we could have had a strong unity. I thought that we deserved more than three townships, so we should have claimed that right then. Our political objective has only been achieved half way. Although we have sacrificed a lot, it is disappointing. We deserve more than that. We fought against Shan feudalism and against the military dictatorship but now our leaders are becoming like them, acting like dictators on our own people. For ordinary people in the SAA, they think PNO is good but they do not have high political consciousness. People with political awareness are not satisfied.* "[64]

As the retired teacher concluded, instead of trying to improve their relationship with the people, the PNO focuses on maintaining their privileged relationship with the *Tatmadaw*.[65]

To summarise, while the Pa-O nationalist struggle started as a rebellion against Shan domination and continued as an armed resistance against the central government, the PNO's ceasefire significantly altered its nationalist strategy. The PNO secured an "accommodated claim" to manage Pa-O affairs, characterised by a high level of cooperation with the state through the SAA, the PNA and proxy organisations. While ensuring the PNO's control over local people, these institutions also maintain the state's power. Despite the PNO justification of this position pointing out the benefits of peace and development, many participants were not satisfied with the co-option of the PNO, complaining that they have to face oppression from their own leaders.

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[64] "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73, July 2017.
[65] A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to introduce the Mon and the Pa-O ethnic groups as ethnic sites of this study, and highlight important contextual variations between them. After briefly summarising the state of the current peace negotiations, I continued the discussion initiated in chapter 1 on the construction of ethnic identity in Myanmar, showing that both groups exhibit a strong sense of separate identity. Yet, they possess significantly different geographic situations and nationalist strategies, which the following chapters will continue to highlight. While the Mon have a state in their name, perceptions that it has been assimilated into the Bamar culture - a concern addressed in chapter 4 - are widespread. By contrast, although the Pa-O represent a second nationality in each state or region where they live, they do not seem as concerned by assimilation as the Mon. Furthermore, each group has distinct nationalist strategies, which translate very differently in terms of popular support. The NMSP, who remains quite critical of the government and acts as service provider, is very popular. By contrast, Pa-O informants tend to perceive the PNO negatively, particularly because it was co-opted by the state. Chapter 4 and 6 will demonstrate that these differences influence Mon and Pa-O concerns and aspirations. For instance, since assimilation to the dominant Bamar culture is a main concern for the Mon, the preservation of the NMSP's parallel education system is thus unsurprisingly at the heart of Mon aspirations. By contrast, although an obvious benefit of PNO cooperation with the government, the SAA status has yet to address Pa-O people's perceptions of political disadvantage and fulfil demands for autonomy. Finally, chapter 7 will discuss which institutional model would be best suited to fulfil such aspirations.

CHAPTER 4 - Bamar Privilege, Ethnicity, and Insecurities

This chapter is concerned with Mon and Pa-O people's experience of ethnicity as a form of state discrimination, which reflects and reinforces the existence of "Bamar privilege." As Walton argues, decades of conflict between the Bamar-led military and ethnic rebellions have institutionalised differential treatment between Bamar and non-Bamar people. This institutionalised dominance of the Bamar functions as a privileged identity and enables them to experience some benefits merely because of their ethnicity. As a result, acknowledgement of such privilege by the Bamar themselves is fundamental to achieving ethnic unity.[1]

The purpose of this chapter is to expose a number of discriminatory policies, which reflect different degrees of inequality when compared with the Bamar. Mon and Pa-O perceptions not only confirm the existence of Bamar privilege but also reveal that institutionalised differential treatment has created insecurities that are felt at the cultural, economic, social and political levels. The cultural insecurity reflects fears that Mon and Pa-O cultural identities may be assimilated into the dominant Bamar culture. The economic and social insecurities are perceived as a form of exclusion from the country's economic opportunities and access to basic services. The political insecurity is linked to perceptions that if Mon and Pa-O voices are not heard, their needs cannot be satisfied and as a result, they have no control over their destiny.

4.1 Cultural insecurity

The dominance of Bamar culture has created a deep feeling of insecurity for many Mon and Pa-O with regards to the preservation of their cultural identity. The linguistic, cultural and demographic dominance of the Bamar has created an indirect assimilation pressure. Furthermore, the military government policies have generally affected Mon and Pa-O people's capacity to "live" or enjoy their ethnic identity, with the implementation of restrictive, sometimes coercive policies institutionalising a Bamar vision of the nation. Such policies include the imposition of a Bamar version of the

[1] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 2–3.

country's history, the Burmanisation of symbolic representations, the restriction on the use of ethnic languages in education and the containment of cultural events. Although the country is officially moving towards a democratic system, with the protection of ethnic literacy and culture mentioned in the first chapter of the 2008 constitution, this has only been implemented minimally.[2] As a journalist working for the PNO put it, "It is just on paper; we never hear the parliament talk about supporting ethnic cultures."[3]

4.1.1 Linguistic domination of the Bamar

Many Mon and Pa-O feel the dominance of Bamar language is a primary driver of assimilation to the majority group. As a PNLO member put it, "The dominance of the Bamar group is a major problem for ethnic cultures because it is indirectly imposing Burmese language.[4] This happens through the change of local place names to Burmese names, the recognition of Burmese as only the official language and through the use of Burmese language in schools. However, the dominance of Burmese language is felt differently among Mon and Pa-O communities, depending on their geographic situation.

First, the systematic change of Mon and Pa-O village names to Burmese names is perceived as an assimilation policy. Mon villagers in Karen State recalled that throughout the civil war up until 1995, most Mon names on pagodas and in villages were changed to Bamar names.[5] Similarly, Mon people in Chaungzon and Mudon townships and Pa-O people in Thaton and Bilin townships reported the systematic change of local place names to Burmese names.[6] A PNLO member from Thaton Township explained that in order to set up their village name signboard in Pa-O language, permission from the municipal and township authorities was required, but not granted: "This is not respectful of our ethnic language."[7] Some Pa-O in Shan State expressed similar complaints. A CSO leader in Shan State explained that this also

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[2] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 22 (a).
[3] Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69, July 2017.
[4] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64, July 2017.
[5] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9.
[6] Shopkeeper, Mudon, Mon State, Interview #23; Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #26; Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41, July 2017.
[7] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60, July 2017.

happened to Taunggyi, which used to be a Pa-O village called *Taun Ti*. He argues that as a result, many people believe that Taunggyi was not Pa-O before.[8] A group of farmers from Hsiseng Township also blamed the government for changing the welcome signpost at the entrance of Taunggyi. Previously written in Pa-O, Shan and Burmese, it now includes only Shan, Burmese and English. "This shows that we cannot celebrate our culture freely. We cannot blame the Burmese, but this is Burmanisation: since most people speak Burmese, we do not prioritise our language."[9]

Second, the fact that Burmese is the only official language is a main challenge. As some Pa-O community leaders in Hopone noted, "Pa-O language is used in the community but if we go to the administration we need to speak in Burmese, so we are worried that Pa-O language might disappear."[10] Similarly, a village committee member noted that vocabulary was being lost because Pa-O language was not often used to communicate, especially in businesses.[11] In addition, other indirect pressures, such as the need to ask permission to print books in ethnic languages, further hinder the preservation of Pa-O language.[12] The same thing happens in Mon State. For instance, in focus groups held in Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, I noticed that although Mon was the mother tongue, villagers tended to use Burmese when communicating with each other. Answering my interrogation, a woman said: "This is because Burmese is the common language used for everyday transactions."[13] During a focus group with young Pa-O women, one of them expressed anger at the unfairness of this situation, highlighting how the use of Burmese was imposed on them: "People did not vote for the language that should be used in the whole country so why do we have to use it?"[14] The dominance of the Bamar language causes difficulties in people's everyday lives, which can be dramatic. Some Mon participants explained that they really felt insecure when they went to hospital because doctors did not speak Mon language. Some people have even died because they were not able to explain their symptoms and did not get a proper

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[8] Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53, December 2016.
[9] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[10] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
[11] Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32, July 2017.
[12] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[13] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11, June 2017.
[14] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.

cure.[15]

Third, the imposition of Burmese language is indirectly furthered through education. As a group of villagers in Pinlaung Township put it, "Since most school teachers are Bamar, Burmanisation comes with them; this is a soft but great challenge."[16] Indeed, a tour guide – who is the sister of an old student of mine - told me as we were visiting the famous Kakku Pagoda with a group of friends, that Bamar teachers encouraged their pupils to avoid speaking Mon or Pa-O whenever possible because it slows down their learning of Burmese.[17] Both Mon and Pa-O participants experienced Burmanisation at an individual level, as teachers commonly changed their pupils' names because they could not pronounce Mon or Pa-O names.[18] In addition, many Mon and Pa-O parents speak in Burmese and prevent their children from speaking their mother tongue because they are worried that their children will face difficulties at school if they are not fluent.[19] Moreover, a group of Pa-O youth noted that since education was not good in Pa-O rural areas, parents often sent their children away to lower Myanmar. As a result, most of them only learn and use Burmese to communicate and therefore cannot speak Pa-O anymore when they return to their villages.[20] A young woman originally from Tiha, the remote Pa-O village where I stayed, told me she was sent to Yangon when she was seven years old. Because of that, she graduated from university while her brother who stayed in the village could only finish Grade 9. However, she sadly confessed that she cannot speak Pa-O anymore: "I need my brother to translate when I talk to my mum."[21] Finally, a well-known Pa-O writer I met in his Taunggyi home was dismayed that some people with better education refrained from speaking Pa-O language, as if speaking

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[15] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15, July 2017; Women, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Focus group #17.
[16] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[17] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12, July 2016; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61.
[18] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
[19] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
[20] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.
[21] Young girl, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan state, Interview #83, July 2017.

Burmese was a sign of social advancement.[22]

However, Mon and Pa-O people experience the dominance of Burmese language differently, depending on people's geographic situation. Many Pa-O people living in rural areas seem to feel more secure about the preservation of Pa-O language than those living close to cities and therefore the influence of the Bamar culture. Villagers in Taunggyi and Hopone townships explained that people living in big cities were losing Pa-O language because they did not have an opportunity to practice it and therefore become "Burmanised."[23] My key informant's brother, a retired doctor living in Yangon whom I met as we were travelling to their native village for a donation ceremony, explained that unlike Pa-O people living close to other groups, Pa-O people living in mountainous areas were only speaking Pa-O language.[24] This was confirmed by a group of villagers from Taunggyi Township who remarked: "Since we live on the mountain, we can practice our culture without assimilation."[25] Thus it would seem that Burmanisation is not such a big issue in rural areas.

The situation is different in Mon State where people are not as geographically removed. An MNEC member explained that many Mon who have been living alongside Bamar cannot speak Mon language at all.[26] According to a CSO leader from Chaungzon Township, only 18 villages out of the 81 located in Bilugyun speak Mon. She explained that some Mon people like herself only learned Mon language as adults, often when attending training camps organised by exile groups on the Thai-Burma border.[27] Unlike in government-controlled areas, which have a high proportion of Bamar, NMSP-controlled areas are characterised by the preservation of Mon language as the main medium of communication.[28] For instance, villagers in Ye Township did not feel that there was any threat to Mon identity: "We can protect our Mon language, this is not a

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[22] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.
[23] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.
[24] Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78.
[25] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19.
[26] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2.
[27] Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #26.
[28] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.

problem for us because our area is under NMSP control."[29]

To sum up, the institutionalisation of Burmese language as the only official language and its enforcement through education illustrate the existence of Bamar privilege at the linguistic level, which people experience differently depending on their geographic situation. The geographic factor is also contributing to the weakening of cultural traditions.

4.1.2 Weakening of cultural traditions

Similarly, Mon and Pa-O traditions which are slowly eroding as a result of globalisation, tend to disappear more quickly when in proximity to the Bamar. A number of participants highlighted that some traditions were slowly fading. Pa-O full moon day celebrations involving donations at the monastery and drumming ceremonies such as the one I observed are still happening in villages, but less near towns.[30] An old *papraye*, who lives in Tiha village, remembered that celebrations used to start two days before the full moon, with people gathering in the village leader's house, playing music, cooking and talking the whole night.[31] Some villagers mourned that Pa-O people used to have many musical instruments but now only old people know how to play them.[32] Others regretted that the tradition of sharing poems or "awareness talk shows" which used to be very common during festivals was disappearing.[33] Similarly, a number of Mon youth noted that the belief in Mon spirits was decreasing.[34]

Some Mon and Pa-O respondents from different socio-political backgrounds attributed the decline of cultural traditions to the globalisation of cultures spread through the youth, which hinders cultural transmission to younger generations.[35] However, many

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[29] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[30] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84.
[31] Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82, July 2017.
[32] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38.
[33] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.
[34] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2.
[35] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75, July 2017; Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; PNO members, Namca village,

pointed to the cultural dominance indirectly exercised by the majority group. Indeed, proximity to the majority group is an indirect cause of cultural assimilation, as people will tend to adopt the majority's lifestyle, therefore weakening local traditions. As people from Tiha village noted, people used to wear traditional Pa-O clothing when working at the farm, and children were dressing up too.[36] "This changed after the ceasefire as people could travel more easily and see how Bamar people dress."[37] Tiha farmers and a group of young women from different townships noted that while most people living in the mountainous regions were still wearing their traditional outfit, people living in villages located near cities or in lower Myanmar mostly copied the culture and practices of the Bamar.[38] In remote places however, villagers highlighted that most young people wore only Pa-O costume at the monastery or during festivals.[39] Similarly, according to some villagers in the NMSP-controlled area in Karen State, Mon people who live close to Bamar people are losing their traditions because no one remembers how to maintain them.[40] In addition, most villagers I met both in government-controlled and NMSP-controlled areas did not wear the traditional Mon *longyi*. As a monk and some villagers explained, they wear it mostly for special occasions.[41]

Furthermore, Pa-O also faced additional challenges as a result of being a second nationality. Some members of the nationalist elite reported that because of tensions between Shan and Pa-O, many people living on the border between southern and eastern Shan State preferred to hide their identity. As a result, they do not speak Pa-O language or wear traditional clothes and sometimes even choose to wear Shan ethnic

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Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27; Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5, August 2016.

[36] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40, July 2017.

[37] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84.

[38] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.

[39] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38.

[40] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.

[41] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.

costumes.[42] The situation is worse outside Shan State where the Pa-O are an even smaller second nationality. Since people are more inclined to follow the practices of the majority group, some Pa-O villagers from Shan State feared that Pa-O identity in Thaton and Bago was going to disappear entirely.[43]

The question of the weakening of cultural traditions was more a concern for Pa-O participants than for the Mon, perhaps because as noted in chapter 3, the assimilation of Mon culture started long ago, notably after the fall of Pegu. By contrast, contacts between the Pa-O and the Bamar have dramatically increased in the past two decades mainly as a result of infrastructure developments. Nevertheless, Pa-O participants were optimistic regarding the preservation of their cultural traditions, principally thanks to Buddhism, which Pa-O people practise fervently.[44] The example of villagers who voluntarily come to preach about Pa-O culture and Buddhism at the Thamseng cave pagoda taking turns every hour for 12 days each year demonstrates how Buddhism operates as a catalyst to involve local people in the promotion of their culture.[45] By contrast, Mon participants seemed more pessimistic. Some Mon civil servants and a monk complained that although the twenty-day Mon literacy summer schools included cultural and historic components, they were too short to have a real impact.[46]

Overall, the proximity with dominant groups is another illustration of ethnic privilege, which contributes to the loss of traditional strength. However, urbanisation and the globalisation of cultures have also played a non-negligible role in the weakening of traditions, which similarly affect the Bamar. Indeed, there are ethnic Bamar who feel that many Bamar traditions, such as puppet shows and the traditional Bamar entertainment "*anyeint*" have been lost. Similarly, many urban Bamar do not wear

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[42] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.
[43] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.
[44] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78; Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81, January 2017; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[45] Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37, July 2017.
[46] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.

traditional Bamar clothing. However, in the case of the Mon and Pa-O, the cultural insecurity resulting from the loss of traditions is reinforced by feelings of being demographically assimilated by the Bamar.

4.1.3 Demographic assimilation

Many Mon and Pa-O people view migration and its resulting high number of mixed marriages as the main threat to the preservation of ethnic identity, notably because the mixed marriages indirectly lead to the registration of a Bamar identity. An MNEC member explained that due to difficult economic conditions – discussed later in this chapter - large numbers of Mon people living in remote areas seek job opportunities in neighbouring countries where salaries are much higher.[47] As a CSO member noted, with as much as one man per Mon household working abroad, this migration is extremely high and has negative consequences on identity.[48] As a monk explained, since many people migrate, there are not enough people to work on the farms and thus people sell them. In addition to this loss of ownership, those working abroad eventually marry there and their children adopt the identity of their country of birth.[49] Moreover, a shopkeeper noted that those who came back have been influenced by the global culture and would not wear traditional clothes anymore.[50] Meanwhile, a journalist commented that the preservation of Mon identity was also affected by a high number of Bamar workers migrating from upper Myanmar who accept lower wages and replace the lost workforce. They eventually marry Mon women who often default to their Bamar husband's language and cultural practices rather than vice-versa.[51] In addition, a CSO member criticised the placement of Mon civil servants in other areas where they have to speak Burmese and eventually marry Bamar women, a policy they perceive as promoting assimilation.[52]

The situation follows a similar trend in Pa-O areas. Since the ceasefire, high numbers of Bamar workers from lower Myanmar have migrated to Pa-O communities while many

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[47] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2.
[48] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[49] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.
[50] Shopkeeper, Mudon, Mon State, Interview #23.
[51] Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[52] Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5.

Pa-O migrated abroad to find jobs.[53] As a result, according to an old Red Pa-O officer, nowadays, Pa-O represent only 50% of the population in Taunggyi Township compared to 70% in the past.[54] Some villagers from Kyauttalong Township also expressed concerns about the preservation of their identity.[55] The situation seems to be worse in lower Myanmar, where Pa-O represent only a small minority. In Mon State, a senior member of the Pa-O LCO in Thaton deplored that while Pa-O represented the majority population in Thaton district during the U Nu years, many Pa-O have since mixed with other ethnic groups and do not identify as Pa-O anymore.[56] A group of youths were concerned that since many Pa-O did not know how to maintain their identity and the government did not support it, the Pa-O population was becoming smaller and might eventually disappear.[57] The situation seemed similar in Karen State: the group of villagers who asked to write their answer on paper because of the presence of a Special Branch member, believed that since many people migrated abroad and their children did not speak Pa-O anymore, the Pa-O were almost extinct.[58] Likewise in Bago Region, a CSO leader explained how as a result of inter-ethnic marriages an entire Pa-O village eventually became Bamar.[59]

Migration and inter-ethnic marriages therefore appear as threats to Mon and Pa-O identity because they affect population homogeneity and reduce the willingness or capacity to self-identify as Mon or Pa-O. Indeed, many Mon and Pa-O people argue that the ID registration process negatively impacts ethnic population numbers because it implicitly supports the recognition of Bamar identity. Several Mon CSO members explained that inter-ethnic marriages usually resulted in the registration of children with parents from two different groups as Bamar, often because people are afraid to express and choose their identity.[60] Moreover, some CSO members as well as villagers from

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[53] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35.
[54] Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47.
[55] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.
[56] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67, July 2017.
[57] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24, June 2017.
[58] Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25, June 2017.
[59] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[60] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.

Kyaikmayaw Township even complained about the automatic registration of children as Bamar when both parents are Mon. The problem is that the registration officer – who is usually Bamar – does not ask people's ethnicity and automatically writes Bamar on the birth certificate. In addition, it is often very difficult for people to know what is happening because they cannot read Bamar language.[61] However, as a journalist noted, if parents do understand and oppose their children's registration as Bamar, the officer will approve the request and make the change.[62] My key informant was successful in asking that her son be registered as both Mon and Pa-O but this is a rare case: people are so fearful they will not be able to obtain a birth certificate that they seldom dare to confront the authorities.[63] According to some CSO members, since changing ethnic identity would be a four-year long process with an uncertain outcome - which many are not even aware of - only a few will consider trying this avenue for recognition of their identity.[64]

The situation is similar for Pa-O people in Thaton Township where government staff automatically register children with only one Pa-O parent as Bamar unless the parents complain. And complaints rarely occur: while the majority of Pa-O would avoid dealing with corrupt government officers, some prefer to hide their real identity in order to access government jobs more easily.[65] In Shan State, some CSO members noted that such voluntary assimilation still happened in rural areas for practical reasons.[66] Indeed, as a PNLO member explained, people do not usually complain when they are registered either as Shan or Bamar because it is easier to obtain an ID when declaring a Bamar Buddhist identity.[67] As Khun Okker put it, "If our religion is Buddhism, they assume

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[61] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Human Rights Foundation of Monland member, Yangon, Interview #22; Shopkeeper, Mudon, Mon State, Interview #23; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[62] Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[63] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8.
[64] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Human Rights Foundation of Monland member, Yangon, Interview #22.
[65] Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54.
[66] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Pa-O Youth Organization chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #31, November 2015; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53.
[67] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60.

that we are Bamar because for them Bamar and Buddhism are identical twins."[68] The lack of ethnic sensitivity of government staff is reflected in the fact that in some rural areas, even when people are registered as Pa-O, they still use the Bamar name particle instead of the Pa-O name particle.[69] A PNO member in Mon State explained that similarly to the Mon, most Pa-O avoid attempting to change their ethnicity on their ID card because it is still an expensive process. However, according to him it would only take two to four months rather than the four years suggested above.[70] In addition, some youths noted that people whose parents were registered as Bamar don't get the chance to claim their Pa-O identity.[71]

Many Mon and Pa-O participants expressed concerns about the consequences of this automatic registration of Bamar identity in terms of population numbers. Some CSO members argue this accounts for the decrease in Mon population everywhere as well as the existence of a Bamar majority even in Mawlamyine.[72] As a CSO member involved in a community led census conducted in Yangon put it, "During this census, I realised that many parents are Mon, but their children are registered as Bamar."[73] This has a noticeable political impact, when for instance, it prevents Mon in Yangon from reaching the threshold necessary to get special representation through the election of an ethnic affairs minister, an issue which this chapter will cover further. Pa-O in Mon State face a similar issue. According to a member of the Pa-O Youth Network, the election commission declared that in a Thaton Township village of 500 households there were only 18 Pa-O residents where he believed half of the population is actually Pa-O. Like the Mon, the automatic registration of Bamar identity is interpreted as a government strategy to reduce Pa-O population and avoid claims for a Pa-O ethnic affairs minister in Mon State.[74]

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[68] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
[69] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53.
[70] Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54.
[71] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[72] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4.
[73] Human Rights Foundation of Monland member, Yangon, Interview #22.
[74] Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55.

Since the official registration of Mon and Pa-O as Bamar lowers ethnic population numbers, it can arguably be understood as a strategy used by the government to weaken the validity of ethnic nationalist arguments for autonomy. At the same time, it leads many Mon and Pa-O to actually fear that they are being demographically assimilated. Perceptions of linguistic, cultural and demographic assimilation are further reinforced by a number of restrictive policies, which institutionalise the dominance of the Bamar.

4.1.4 Imposition of a Bamar vision of history

Participants claimed that the Bamar have imposed their vision of a national identity by appropriating the country's history. Indeed, the teaching of history has been largely focused on enforcing a Bamar perspective to the detriment of ethnic histories. As Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Rosalie Metro explain, history curricula have repeatedly been used for nation building purposes, particularly through the promotion of heroes that promote a Bamar vision of history.[75] Textbooks have indeed conveyed for decades ideological messages stressing traditions of nationalism and militarism that are essentially linked to a Bamar identity, reflecting an attempt to assimilate ethnic minorities.[76] For some youths, the government has destroyed Mon history by taking it out of the curriculum.

The damage caused by such policy could be experienced during focus groups with youths and villagers, where participants admitted to having a limited knowledge of Mon history and actually felt that they learned a lot from the focus group facilitators.[77] In the government-controlled town of Mudon, a resident explained that: "My mum told me that the history I learnt at school was wrong, so we know that the government is trying to brainwash us."[78] In another case, some political party members suggested that the appropriation of Mon heroes such as Tamainbarang, Logooneain or Byatsa, who are depicted in middle school history textbooks as Bamar heroes, has contributed to

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[75] Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building."
[76] Lall and Hla Win, "Perceptions of the State and Citizenship in Light of the 2010 Myanmar Elections," 87.
[77] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.
[78] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13.

downplaying the Mon's historical significance.[79] Similarly, Pa-O Participants from various socio-political groups described how the curriculum was yet another expression of the identity of the majority group. As a Pa-O Youth Network leader and villagers in Taunggyi and Pinlaung townships complained, government textbooks only mention Bamar history, heroes and issues while Pa-O history is completely overlooked.[80] The neglect of ethnic history in government school curricula represents another obstacle to the preservation of Pa-O identity, which as discussed in chapter 3, is already unclear and contested. A CSO leader feared that as a result, the actual origin of Pa-O people might already be lost.[81] Both Mon and Pa-O commented on the impact of imposing a Bamar vision of history. An MNEC teacher and a Mon CSO member stated that because the history suppressed ethnic identities people came to perceive the Bamar as a colonising force.[82] As a result, some Pa-O CSO members stressed that such policy generates a feeling of resentment towards the Bamar.[83]

In addition to government school curricula, some Mon participants noted other ways in which the Bamar have appropriated Mon history. For instance, some civil servants expressed discontent at the claims of Bamar historians such as Aung-Thwin, who, as highlighted in chapter 3, argue that there were no Mon in lower Myanmar before the 13th century.[84] Moreover, in 2002, the name of the "Mon Museum" in Mawlamyine, which provided a unique opportunity for Mon to learn about their history, was changed to "literature and culture museum". At the same time, the Bamar military took away a number of pieces emblematic of Mon history and changed the descriptions of other pieces, relating them instead to Bamar history. This produced, according to a CSO member, "A shift in the identity of Mon People because a symbolic link to our identity was being removed and identity links to the existence of people."[85]

While the imposition of a Bamar vision of history reflects one way Bamar privilege has

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[79] Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.
[80] Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59, July 2017; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[81] Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53.
[82] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[83] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[84] Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.
[85] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.

been institutionalised which both Mon and Pa-O participants experience, the Bamar appropriation of Mon history is more obvious, perhaps because of the Mon's historical significance, as discussed in chapter 3.

4.1.5 The Burmanisation of symbolic representations

Related to the appropriation of Mon history, Mon in particular complained of the Burmanisation of symbolic representations. This section discusses the destruction or appropriation of certain Mon symbols into Bamar culture and focuses in particular on the naming of a Mon bridge and the erection of statues celebrating General Aung San to illustrate what is perceived as the imposition of a Bamar identity.

During my fieldwork, the theme of Mon symbolic representations destroyed or absorbed into Bamar culture was recurrent. For instance, the Mon origin of a significant symbol of Myanmar national identity such as the Shwedagon pagoda is often forgotten.[86] In Mon State, the military regime's replacement of the Mon *Hinthar* at the entrance to Mawlamyine by an alms bowl was seen as the imposition of a Bamar cultural symbol.[87] However, as explained in chapter 3, the alms bowl itself is present in many Mon monasteries and would have been a Mon symbol appropriated by the Bamar.[88] The trauma caused by such appropriation is so strong that participants from Thanbuyzayat Township whom I met shortly after a *Hinthar* statue was destroyed in a traffic accident, inevitably attributed the destruction to the Bamar. "It was done by someone nationalist who does not like Mon people, probably Bamar people who think that they own the country."[89] In NMSP-controlled areas, villagers in Ye Township remembered that, "When Burmese soldiers came to our village […], they asked for money and food and if we could not give what they wanted, they destroyed houses and Mon symbols."[90]

The imposition of symbolic references to Bamar heroes in ethnic areas, such as naming places or building statues is also perceived as an expression of Bamar imperialism. In

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[86] Daniel G. E. Hall, *Burma* (New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1974), 35; South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 54.
[87] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[88] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27.
[89] Women, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Focus group #17.
[90] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

2017, the decision of the national parliament's lower house, the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, to name the Mon bridge connecting Chaungzon Township to Mawlamyine after General Aung San brought the issue of symbolic representations to the national spotlight.[91] Perceived as an inappropriate imposition of Bamar identity, the decision triggered the biggest protest since the NLD was elected as some 20,000 people joined in.[92] As I talked to people during my second fieldwork trip in 2017, discussions inevitably revolved around what Walton dubbed "Bridge-gate," often triggering frustration that the name did not reflect local identity.[93] A *sayadaw* who runs a monastic school in Chaungzon sees this decision as "one strategy of Burmanisation". He noted: "They chose a Bamar hero name even though the bridge is situated in a Mon area. Later, they will change more things. This way is the scariest: now all our Mon village names have changed to Burmese names."[94] Some villagers from Paung Township were frustrated that the bridge did not refer to the local area or a Mon leader: "The bridge was not built by Aung San, he never came here, he is not from here, therefore, this is not his business!"[95] Even in conflict-affected villages far away from Chaungzon Township, people made reference to the bridge: "Now we have peace but the government does not care about ethnic people, they do not recognise that Mon and Burmese people are different."[96] In addition to sustaining a fear that the Mon are being culturally assimilated, the case of the Mon bridge also illustrates a political insecurity, as discussed in the final section of this chapter.

The erection of statues of General Aung San in the capital cities of ethnic states similarly appears as an act of Burmanisation. As I was walking on the streets of Mawlamyine, I noticed that such a statue had been already been built in a park in the centre of the city, even before the bridge controversy started. I was a bit shocked by such a move from the NLD, but people did not seem to have paid much attention then,

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[91] The entire Chaungzon Township is situated on an island known as "Bilugyun", which literally means "Ogre Island".
[92] For an outline of the controversy, see Cecile Medail, "What's in a Name: Is the NLD Building Bridges or Burning Them?," *Tea Circle* (blog), November 14, 2017, https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/11/14/whats-in-a-name-is-the-nld-building-bridges-or-burning-them/.
[93] Matthew J. Walton, "Has the NLD Learned Nothing about Ethnic Concerns?," *Tea Circle*, 2017, https://teacircleoxford.com/2017/03/29/has-the-nld-learned-nothing-about-ethnic-concerns/.
[94] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #28, June 2017.
[95] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[96] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

perhaps because that park is much less used than the bridge. However, the statues that were built in other ethnic states after the Mon bridge controversy triggered strong community opposition, particularly in Kayah State.[97] For Mon journalist Lawi Weng, this is not a minor issue. "Gen Aung San is a hero of the Burmese, but not for all ethnic people. Some Mon are worried that the statues are intended to be a signal that all the ethnic areas will one day belong to the Burmans."[98]

The destruction or appropriation of ethnic symbolic representations or the imposition of Bamar symbols such as the bridge particularly affect the Mon and illustrate a form of Bamar imperialism that contributes to creating a Bamar privileged identity and also generates fears of extinction. By contrast, only a few Pa-O complained about the disappearance of symbolic representations, referring mostly to the fact that the NLD dominated Shan State government did not allow them to have their flag at the entrance of Taunggyi alongside the Myanmar and the Shan flags.[99]

4.1.6 Restrictions on language in education

The linguistic dominance of the Bamar has been institutionally reinforced by the imposition of restrictions on the teaching of ethnic languages. Although these have eased, the current lack of adequate support for the teaching of ethnic languages reflects a passivity that perpetuates the assimilation of Mon and Pa-O culture. The gradual although uneven suppression of ethnic languages in government schools after the 1962 military coup orchestrated by Ne Win has always been a main grievance of ethnic nationality groups towards the state in Myanmar. Succeeding military regimes have destroyed the education sector and crushed the independent media in order to secure power.[100] In many cases, particularly in areas controlled by EAOs, ethnic language

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[97] Strong community opposition against the erection of a statue in Loikaw led to the arrest of six young people who took a leading role in the protests. Currently held under custody while their trial is continuing, they are facing three-year imprisonment charges under the citizen privacy and security law. See Ye Mon, "No Deal: NLD Prepares to Go It Alone in 2020," *Frontier Myanmar*, October 28, 2019, https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/no-deal-nld-prepares-to-go-it-alone-in-2020.

[98] Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Groups Have Lost Faith in the NLD," *The Irrawaddy*, April 27, 2018, https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/ethnic-groups-lost-faith-nld.html.

[99] Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49.

[100] See Cecile Medail and Amy Doffegnies, "Student Responses to the Absence of a Functional University System: Alternative Pathways to Higher Education in Myanmar," in *Universities and Conflict: The Role of Higher Education in Peacebuilding and Resistance*, ed. Juliet Millican (London: Routledge, 2018), 179–90.

classes were forbidden, reflecting a Bamar chauvinist conception of the nation, which prioritises the diffusion of the national language. Such restrictions on teaching ethnic languages were also motivated by the fear that ethnic language classes could spread ethno-nationalist attitudes supporting the armed struggle. While appearing as the main evidence of Myanmar's history of coerced Burmanisation, language restrictions have paradoxically contributed to the birth of the ethnic consciousness.[101]

As explained in chapter 3, a number of ethnic EAOs such as the NMSP in Mon State, the KNU in Karen State and the Kachin Independence Organisation in Kachin State have responded to this threat to an essential aspect of ethnic identity by creating their own education system. The PNO, however, who closely cooperated with the government, did not develop such a parallel education system. In government-controlled areas, while restrictions on teaching ethnic languages in government schools varied greatly between groups and even within the same group, ethnic children generally lacked access to mother tongue based education, except when provided through informal education delivered by CSOs or monasteries.[102] Especially in Mon and Karen States as well as in the Pa-O SAA, monastic schools offer culture and language summer programs in collaboration with ethnic LCOs.[103]

In Mon State, Mon language used to be a university subject from 1954 till 1964, a couple of years after the military coup. The takeover however did not directly affect Mon teaching as it is commonly believed: it was indeed taught as a subject in government primary schools located in certain Mon communities between 1962 and 1988. However, between 1988 and 2014 ethnic language teaching was banned and during this time children who attended government schools could only learn Mon

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[101] Sai Kheunsai, "How I Became Shan."

[102] For a re-assessment of the language-in-education policy history, see Nicolas Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today: Great Opportunities, Giant Pitfalls? (Part I)," *Tea Circle* (blog), October 1, 2018, https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/10/01/teaching-ethnic-languages-cultures-and-histories-in-government-schools-today-great-opportunities-giant-pitfalls-part-i/; Marie Lall and Ashley South, "The Future of Mother-Tongue Education," *The Myanmar Times*, February 9, 2016, https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/18871-the-future-of-mother-tongue-education.html.

[103] Marie Lall, "Diversity in Education" (Pyoe Pin Programme, November 2016), 16–17; Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8; Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.

language in Mon monasteries during summer literacy programs run by the Mon LCO.[104] In 2014, the National Education Law officially granted states and regions the power to implement ethnic language and literature classes at the primary level, stating that curricula can be developed in each region and that ethnic languages can be used as a medium of instruction if needed.[105]

While the first ethnic language classes in government schools actually started in 2013, Mon language, culture and history began to be taught as subjects in state primary schools in April 2014, a few months before the adoption of the law.[106] As South and Lall explain, the government worked in collaboration with the Mon LCO and the MNEC, with some support from UNICEF, to develop a Mon textbook to teach pupils in government schools during school hours till Grade 4. According to them, Mon would have been taught in government schools in five or six townships in 2015 and up to eight townships in 2016. In addition, Karen and Pa-O languages have also been taught even during school hours in some areas.[107]

Despite such progress, many members of the Mon nationalist community have realised that there is a lack of supportive measures from the government. For instance, a female Mon activist explained that the effectiveness of Mon classes was hampered by the fact that they were not compulsory, had no exams and mostly took place before or after school time.[108] A monk emphasised that this represented an important barrier for

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[104] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 137.
[105] See Myanmar National Education Law sections 44, 39g and 43b. For an analysis of the law see E. Thin Zar, "Myanmar Language Education Policy," in *Language Education Policy Studies (Online)*, ed. Francois V. Tochon (Madison: University of Visconsin-Madison, 2018), http://www.languageeducationpolicy.org/regionasia/myanmar.html.
[106] Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today (Part I)"; Lawi Weng, "Mon State to Allow Ethnic Language Classes in Government Schools," *The Irrawaddy*, April 10, 2014, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/mon-state-allow-ethnic-language-classes-govt-schools.html. According to the Mon representative at the *Pye-nay Hluttaw*, eleven points for improving ethnic education were accepted by the Mon State government. The main points included the wearing of the traditional dress during class time, ending classes at 4 pm, rewarding good students, providing certificates for volunteer teachers, ensuring a minimum 30,000 kyat salary from the Mon Culture and Literature Committee, a quota for students in the class.
[107] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 28; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29. According to the Mon representative at the *Pye-nay Hluttaw*, eleven points for improving ethnic education were accepted by the Mon State government. The main points included the wearing of traditional dress during class time, ending classes at 4 pm, rewarding good students, providing certificates for volunteer teachers, ensuring a minimum 30,000 kyat salary from the Mon Culture and Literature Organisation, and a limit on the number of students in the class.
[108] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1.

parents to support Mon classes, because children are tired and therefore not interested.[109] In addition, I noticed that soon after school is over, students gather in different houses to attend tuition classes. My key informant's sister was running one of these daily evening classes in their family home in Chaungzon. As I understood later, since students generally have to participate in tuition classes if they want to succeed in school, it is difficult for them to attend Mon classes. Finally, it is difficult to find well-qualified teachers, as salaries are very low and often paid late.[110] The situation is different in areas under NMSP control where the armed group established the Mon National Schools. However, this independent education system still faces a number of limitations as noted in chapter 3.

However, although the NLD government started an education reform process, the peace negotiations have not prioritised issues of ethnic language and education. However, despite an increase in teaching of ethnic language as a subject in government schools demands for the use of ethnic language as a medium of instruction at the primary level have not been fulfilled. According to Mon MP U Min Soe Lin, ethnic education has not improved much since the NLD came to power because Aung San Suu Kyi does not prioritise it. He deplored a missed opportunity, arguing ethnic languages were not a concern for the military so they would not prevent her from supporting it. "She does not understand the needs of ethnic people and the importance of ethnic conflict in the country."[111]

Similarly in Pa-O areas, policies restricting the capacity to learn and use Pa-O language in government schools negatively affect the preservation of Pa-O language. A senior UPNO member estimates that 90% of Pa-O cannot write in Pa-O language and mix it with Burmese language when they speak.[112] Since 2016, it is possible to learn Pa-O language after school but this is not available everywhere yet. In Shan State, according to a CSO leader, teaching Pa-O language in government schools happens mostly in

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[109] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.
[110] Mon teacher salaries range between 30,000 to 80,000 kyat while full-time government teachers are paid 200,000 kyat. See Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today (Part I)"; Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Language Teachers Missing Months of Govt Pay," *The Irrawaddy*, December 4, 2017, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ethnic-language-teachers-missing-months-govt-pay.html; Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1.
[111] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.
[112] Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65.

areas included in the SAA.[113] However, there are disparities within the same township. For instance, people from one village in Hopone Township said they had no chance to study Pa-O in government schools while people from another village could.[114] The same is true for Pa-O people living in Mon State.[115] For instance, another CSO leader explained that in Thaton district only 29 villages out of 42 were actually teaching Pa-O language.[116] In Pinlaung Township, villagers complained that the permission to teach Pa-O literature was given only for the first grade.[117] Other villagers were even further dismayed that even when the teacher was Pa-O, they were obliged to teach the government curriculum and Pa-O classes could take place only twice a week.[118]

Consequently, like Mon participants, many Pa-O informants considered that current measures were not enough to maintain the Pa-O language. A group of Pa-O youth from Mon State similarly pointed to low salaries and the lack of children and parents' interest to explain the limited impact of such classes.[119] Moreover, as a CSO leader explained, "It is just impossible to learn Pa-O language with just an hour and a half classes after school time."[120]

In addition, some participants criticised the lack of local Pa-O teachers as a major obstacle for primary education.[121] Indeed, according to UNICEF, 70% of teachers in ethnic states cannot speak local languages.[122] Some youths and a CSO member criticised the lack of support for local language use in the classroom as very damaging because children who do not understand any Burmese therefore do not learn

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113 Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53.
114 Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34, July 2017; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
115 Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
116 Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41.
117 Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
118 Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
119 Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
120 Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53.
121 According to Salem-Gervais, "this situation is due to the lower performance of minority students due to the language barrier, but also to specific perceptions of the State and the pull of economic opportunities, which often draw minority graduates away from civil servant positions and their unattractive salaries." See Nicolas Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today: Great Opportunities, Giant Pitfalls? (Part III)," *Tea Circle* (blog), October 4, 2018, https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/10/04/teaching-ethnic-languages-cultures-and-histories-in-government-schools-today-great-opportunities-giant-pitfalls-part-iii/.
122 Jolliffe and Speers Mears, "Strength in Diversity."

anything.[123] In Tiha village, I briefly met the primary school teacher, who came from lower Myanmar and lived in the village for several months at a time before going home to visit her husband. She seemed very nice to students and since she had been teaching in the village for a long time, she made the effort to learn some Pa-O. While recognising that this made the situation better, villagers commented that children would learn better if the teacher was Pa-O.[124]

A recent shift in government policy seems to increasingly address this issue, as demonstrated by a new initiative developed by the PNO in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in order to train local teachers.[125] However, a CSO leader and a farmer commented that there was still a majority of Bamar teachers.[126] Indeed, in the village where the monastery I stayed at is located, the primary, middle and high schools, which welcome children from surrounding villages, have only 5 out of 20 teachers who are Pa-O. As one of them told me, while Pa-O teachers use Pa-O language in the classroom, there are no Pa-O literacy classes after school; thus children only learn Pa-O during a summer course organised by the monastery. As a result, Pa-O teachers usually run tuition classes several days a week, to help children whose parents can afford the extra cost.[127] In addition, in urban areas such as Taunggyi, another Pa-O teacher explained that since classes often include a mix of students from different ethnic backgrounds, Pa-O teachers still have to use Burmese in the classroom.[128]

In conclusion, although constraints on the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools have been eased, the lack of meaningful support combined with the pressure to learn the dominant language constitute another expression of Bamar state assimilationist policies. The question of language in education is essential, particularly for Mon in government-controlled areas. As noted in chapter 3, the capacity to speak an ethnic language has a definite impact on Mon population figures, which exclude many people

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[123] Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55.
[124] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84.
[125] Lall, "Diversity in Education," 27.
[126] Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[127] Pa-O teacher, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #86, August 2017.
[128] Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49.

of Mon descent who do not speak the language.[129] In addition, it might impact the decision to self-identify as a member of this group. As one young person from Paung Township noted, "Many Mon people who did not have an opportunity to learn the language are more likely to register as Bamar."[130] As a result, restrictions on teaching ethnic languages largely show once again how the Bamar are institutionally favoured to the detriment of preserving ethnic cultures.

4.1.7 Restrictions on cultural celebrations

Similarly to the constraints placed on teaching ethnic languages, restrictions on cultural celebrations are perceived as very detrimental to the preservation of Mon and Pa-O culture. Mon National Day is the most popular celebration for Mon as it offers an opportunity to exhibit Mon strength and unity, and encourage cultural and linguistic resurgence.[131] Some political party members consider that the repeated prohibition of this event has accelerated the destruction of Mon culture.[132] While large-scale cultural celebrations with traditional dances, music and food are now allowed, villagers from Chaungzon Township still complained that, "It is not easy to get a permit from government offices to organise our Mon activities, so we don't feel equal."[133] Furthermore, only a few people can enjoy this cultural event because it is not recognised as a public holiday.[134] This is also the case for other cultural celebrations such as Mon Revolution Day and other festivals. For example, a community leader complained that government offices did not close for the Chaungzon annual traditional festival because government staff are not familiar with Mon culture.[135]

Unsurprisingly, villagers living in NMSP-controlled areas have a different perspective: "We have no problem to hold our Mon National Day celebrations. This year, we did not put the Union flag up and Burmese soldiers did not say anything."[136] However, as this

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[129] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 18.
[130] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1.
[131] South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 38.
[132] Burma Relief, "SLORC's Oppression of Mon Culture," Burmalibrary, February 4, 1998, http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199802/msg00110.html; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4, August 2016.
[133] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[134] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2.
[135] Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16.
[136] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

quote shows, the presence of soldiers holding rifles – which I could observe at the Mon Revolution Day I attended in Mawlamyine – rather than just police officers, does not inspire confidence in the freedom to practice culture.

Pa-O people face similar restrictions. Pa-O farmers denounced the difficulty of getting permission for cultural celebrations as an obstacle to preserving Pa-O culture.[137] A CSO member explained that people always needed to get approval to hold the traditional Rocket Festival.[138] A group of youth in Mon State mentioned that a Pa-O ceremony calling for rain was not allowed by the government because it involved shooting in the sky.[139] Similarly, an old guerrilla leader complained that if they wanted to be creative and organise a new festival to attract people, it was not allowed.[140] Still, a PNLO affiliate noted that Pa-O people have been in a better position than other groups as they have been able to celebrate their Pa-O National Day since independence and are now able to celebrate their Pa-O Revolution Day.[141] However, the situation is not ideal: as for the Mon, participation in Pa-O National Day celebrations is decreasing partly because there is no corresponding public holiday in government schools.[142]

At the same time, while limits are imposed on the expression of Mon and Pa-O cultural identities, both Mon and Pa-O participants complained that the celebration of Burmese identity was reinforced through cultural competitions. In Mon State, these competitions, whether taking place within or outside school, always feature Bamar costumes and dances only. As a result, a monk complained that teenagers lacked awareness of and lost interest in Mon culture.[143] The secretary of the Pa-O LCO in Karen State similarly denounced such competitions for not being respectful of ethnic diversity within ethnic states, explaining that Pa-O people in Karen State were forced to wear Karen costume if they wanted to participate.[144]

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[137] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[138] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[139] Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[140] "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[141] Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52.
[142] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32.
[143] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.
[144] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63.

In conclusion, this section has demonstrated that many Mon and Pa-O informants experience the linguistic, cultural and demographic dominance of the Bamar group as a major threat to their identity. They denounced a number of assimilationist policies that impose a Bamar vision of nationhood and neglect ethnic culture. Both Mon and Pa-O participants expressed concerns regarding migration, inter-ethnic marriages and an implicit ID card registration policy that favours the Bamar and therefore results in a decrease in Mon and Pa-O population numbers. While more Pa-O complained about the weakening of cultural traditions, many Mon seemed to be particularly affected by the Burmanisation of symbolic representations. Mon and Pa-O participants widely perceived the imposition of a Bamar version of the country's history as well as restrictions on language in education and on cultural celebrations as very damaging for the preservation of ethnic identity. Although some positive changes were welcome, particularly regarding the language in education policy, many Mon and Pa-O feel that this is not enough to address their cultural insecurity. In addition, both the Mon and Pa-O see restrictions on cultural celebrations as restraining cultural revival, which is vital in the face of the changing cultural dynamics of globalisation.

These assimilationist policies are rooted in Bamar privilege because as Walton notes, while the government is pushing these policies, people do have some degree of choice as to whether they adopt them or not. Unlike ethnic Bamar who are not put in that position, it is a choice they have to make, and it can be extremely difficult because of various pressures.[145] For instance, parents can decide not to have their children learn the language of the majority or to oppose the registration of their children as Bamar, but such choice has significant consequences in terms of accessing university education or job opportunities.

Finally, confirming conclusions made in chapter 3, the geographic and demographic variations between Mon and Pa-O and within each group can explain the differences in how people experience cultural insecurities. For instance, while both groups noted that the prevalence of the Burmese language had an impact on their use of ethnic language, Pa-O from remote areas, who represent a majority of the Pa-O population do not appear to fear linguistic assimilation. A smaller portion of Mon participants also expressed

[145] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 11.

feeling secure regarding the preservation of their language, particularly those living in areas under NMSP control. Similarly, despite the additional challenge of being a second nationality and are thus vulnerable to the cultural assimilation pressure of other dominant groups, Pa-O tend to be more confident in their capacity to resist it. This is probably because, unlike the Mon, their geographic isolation reduces contacts with the Bamar, although this is changing as urbanisation and globalisation tend to promote a standardisation of cultures.

4.2 Economic insecurity

Looking at how Mon and Pa-O experience economic inequalities in relation to natural resources, infrastructure development and access to livelihoods, this section stresses that many participants think they have been denied a proper share in the country's economic opportunities. While it can be tempting to trace the Bamar dominance of the economy to the existence of Bamar privilege, it only contributes to reinforce it indirectly. Indeed, inequalities in the economic sector are the result of Bamar elites using their position - in the *Tatmadaw* for instance - to dominate the economy. As a result, there are plenty of poor ethnic Bamar who are similarly exploited and have had their land confiscated by the government, the *Tatmadaw* and corporations. While such hardship indicates that ethnic Bamar also suffer economically, it also makes it harder for ethnic Bamar to acknowledge their privileged position in society. As Walton argues, poor ethnic Bamar may have trouble recognising their ethnic privilege because similar to disadvantaged whites, who were persuaded to identify with people of the same skin colour even though it is against their economic interests, ethnic Bamar are inclined to identify with Bamar supremacy even though rich Bamar also economically exploit them.[146]

While not denying the economic deprivation of ethnic Bamar, this section highlights the fundamental economic inequalities that underpin conflict in Myanmar.[147] Most importantly, I show how the exploitation of ethnic natural resources by the Bamar dominated central government has generated a sense of exclusion from the national community. And although the issues of infrastructure development and access to

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[146] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 20.
[147] Sadan, "Can Democracy Cure Myanmar's Ethnic Conflicts?," 217.

livelihoods represent a macro challenge that affects the whole country, I highlight a number of factors that lead many Mon and Pa-O to think that they are more affected by this challenge which then reinforces perceptions of Bamar privilege.

4.2.1 Exploitation of natural resources

Many Pa-O and Mon from all backgrounds linked the existence of economic inequalities between Bamar regions and ethnic states to the central government's exploitation of natural resources, which are mostly located in ethnic areas. Mon intellectuals commonly complained that the reaped benefits were not shared with ethnic people living in the area where the resources came from. As a community teacher explained, Mon State has a lot of natural resources, including gas, gold, coal, wood, cement and rubber, which are now only used at the Union level.[148] According to the Deputy Speaker of the Mon State parliament, U Aung Naing Oo, such exploitation of natural resources is playing a central role in the lower development of ethnic States. He lamented that, "Although ethnic areas are resource rich, we cannot benefit an equal proportion because there is no fair redistribution by the central government."[149] Unsurprisingly, this has negative consequences on people's sense of belonging. As a CSO member put it, "We cannot feel that we are part of a nation if we are exploited."[150]

Similarly, Pa-O are often disappointed that they have natural resources but cannot benefit from them. In the words of some participants, the military governed the country "only to build their own strength and as a result neglected ethnic development."[151] Because of this, some farmers consider that the country is still a dictatorship, which economically benefits the *Tatmadaw*, armed groups and cronies.[152] According to an old guerrilla leader, the *Tatmadaw* and Pa-O cronies control natural resources in Pa-O areas. "They work together to exploit vulnerable Pa-O farmers and dominate all markets." For instance, in the extractive industry sector, the process of getting a permit for logging or mining is expensive, takes time and does not grant good quality resources. Consequently,

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[148] Social worker, Paung, Mon State, Interview #21, August 2016.
[149] U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #30, June 2017.
[150] Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18, July 2016.
[151] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78.
[152] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

big crony companies control most resources and thus 70% of the benefits go to the government.[153] In addition, the Hsiseng Township MP deplored the fact that all too often in Myanmar, people were living next to hydroelectric power plants but did not get any of the electricity produced as it is distributed directly to Yangon or Mandalay instead.[154] Likewise in the tourism sector, a PNLO member in Hopone complained that although there were a lot of attractive places for tourists in Pa-O areas, people did not have a chance to invest in tourism because of the crony monopoly.[155]

Overall, this unfair distribution of natural resources, which prevents Mon and Pa-O from accessing development revenues negatively affects feelings of belonging to the national identity. In addition, the following sections show that ethnic Bamar are usually seen as suffering less from economic inequalities or even benefiting from them, which indirectly contributes to reinforce perceptions of Bamar privilege.

4.2.2 Unequal infrastructure development

While a number of Mon and Pa-O noted inequalities between ethnic states and Bamar regions in terms of infrastructure development, discussions mostly focused on the disadvantage of rural areas, revealing a rural vs. urban divide, which affects the whole country in terms of development. Many Pa-O complained about poor roads and insufficient access to electricity and water in rural areas, where most Pa-O live. Some community members and the Pa-O MP I interviewed stressed that traveling in Pa-O areas was difficult as a result of the poor quality of road infrastructure, particularly when accessing remote villages.[156] The situation is worse during the rainy season as many roads are not paved.[157] In Thaton and Bilin townships, sometimes villages are flooded so people need to use boats to travel.[158] In Tiha village, some farmers told me that they had to build the unpaved road link to the main road by themselves.[159] Many villagers also

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153 "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
154 Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
155 Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64.
156 Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
157 Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
158 Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
159 Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84.

complained about the disparities in access to electricity.[160] South of Taunggyi, villagers protested that only rich people could access the electricity grid as they had to set it up themselves and this was very expensive. They also wondered why electricity charges were three times more expensive than in the towns.[161] The situation is similar in Thaton Township and as a result, most villages have not had electricity until recently.[162] Similarly, some villages lack access to water. Villagers in Hopone Township explained how they had to walk a long way through rugged terrain in order to fetch water.[163] Other villagers in Kyauttalong Township said they had to use a pipe to access water from another village, but it was not enough to cover the needs of all the villagers.[164] Despite such unequal development, some people recognise, as highlighted in chapter 3, that infrastructure provision has improved a lot after Pa-O people were granted an SAA. As a farmer from Mokmei Township declared, "We feel the government is working for the people but it is still not enough."[165]

Likewise in Mon State, the situation has improved a lot since the Thein Sein government. In Chaungzon Township in particular, the previous government developed new roads as well as a connection to the electricity grid.[166] However, the situation is not the same everywhere. Villagers from other rural areas under government control said that they are still lagging behind in terms of infrastructure development.[167] The situation is worse in NMSP-controlled areas. In Kyaikmayaw Township, villagers complained that roads were frequently flooded.[168] Similarly, access to villages in Kyainseikgyi, Karen State or in Ye Township is still very challenging during the rainy season.[169]

Overall, the divide between ethnic and Bamar areas cannot fully explain development inequalities. Ethnic Bamar living in rural areas are also affected by limited access to

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[160] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[161] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[162] Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[163] Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[164] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[165] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[166] Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #26.
[167] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[168] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[169] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

development opportunities highlighting the importance of the rural vs. urban distinction. However, since Pa-O people are mostly located in remote rural areas, they feel that such rural-urban inequality affects them more.

4.2.3 Livelihood crisis

Both Mon and Pa-O community members in rural areas have expressed concerns regarding their ability to generate adequate livelihoods, whether through family farming or through accessing job opportunities. In Mon State, the main sources of income are from rice and rubber agriculture, payments from migrant family members, non-farm enterprises, waged labour and fishing.[170] However, as many noted, they do not adequately fulfil family needs and as a result, poverty is a major concern. In the government-controlled Chaungzon Township, farmers complained that they found it difficult to make any profit because of high labour costs and low rice prices.[171] Finding additional income is challenging as there are not many job opportunities. A woman from Chaungzon stated that, "Livelihood is the main challenge, as for us it is hard to get money, so it is hard to eat."[172] In NMSP-controlled areas, some villagers said that, "During the civil war, it was very difficult to find income for our survival. Now, it has only changed a little bit."[173] Furthermore, farmers' land rights and tenancy remain insecure because of land confiscations by the military, which has yet to hand-back land or justly compensate farmers.[174] For instance, a villager in Ye Township complained that he has never been compensated for his land that was taken ten years after the ceasefire to build a government school. "I would like to get my land back but I don't dare to do anything."[175]

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[170] Aung Hein et al., "Rural Livelihoods In Mon State, Myanmar: Evidence From A Representative Household Survey," Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research Papers (Michigan State University, Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, September 9, 2016), https://ideas.repec.org/p/ags/miffrp/259064.html.
[171] Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14, July 2017.
[172] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[173] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[174] The Human Rights Foundation of Monland - Burma, "Yearning to Be Heard: Mon Farmers' Continued Struggle for Acknowledgement and Protection of Their Rights," February 2015, http://www.rehmonnya.org/reports/Yearning-to-be-Heard-word-Eng-Full-Report.pdf.
[175] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

By contrast, agriculture is the Pa-O's main source of livelihood. Pa-O are famous for growing cheroot leaves that are used to make cigars, but they also produce chilli, garlic, pineapple, rice, corn, and tea. As some members of the nationalist community noted, Pa-O prefer to live and farm in the forest or in the mountains away from the cities because they are not interested in running businesses.[176] For some Pa-O, life is simple but satisfactory. A restaurant manager in Taunggyi, referring to his parents living in Pinlaung Township explained: "In the village, people live simple lives and are happy because they don't need much. All my eight siblings can go to school."[177] However, a majority of Pa-O participants reported economic difficulties simply because they did not have adequate markets for their crops. As a monk and CSO members noted, although people are growing many different crops, selling them can be difficult.[178] A group of farmers complained that despite working hard, they could not make a good income.[179] Other farmers stated that they had to sell their product to Bamar businessmen and cronies who buy their goods very cheaply and then sold them for a high price in the towns. They also complained that despite low market prices they had to buy seeds and very expensive fertilisers from companies owned by cronies.[180] Furthermore, the Hsiseng MP explained that since all ethnic areas do not have good roads, products cannot make it in time to the Mandalay and Yangon markets.[181] Since agriculture is the main source of livelihood, land confiscation is a problem in almost all areas: it has dramatic impacts on income as people are left little or no farmland.[182] This scenario is very common and farmers often lack access to possible remedies or even compensation, as was the case of the villagers I met with just after the PNO announced that their land had been legally confiscated.[183] Some farmers find it hard to make ends meet because they have to pay taxes not only to the government, but also to local EAOs such as the

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[176] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[177] Restaurant manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #79.
[178] Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[179] Farmers, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #42, August 2017.
[180] Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[181] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
[182] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
[183] Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.

PNA or the KNU.[184] Environmentally unsustainable practices also affect livelihood. Farmers are facing a water crisis because of deforestation, which is contributing to global warming and irregular rainfall patterns that lengthen the time needed to grow a crop.[185] Moreover, the use of fertilisers results in the loss of land fertility, pollution of water sources and lower product quality.[186] Some villagers noted that development projects had very negative impacts on the quality of the plants and on human health.[187]

In addition to the challenges of family farming, many Mon and Pa-O expressed disappointment that university studies did not help access job opportunities.[188] Ethnic people are often disadvantaged in accessing jobs and higher positions because they do not speak Burmese well enough.[189] As this chapter will later develop, this is particularly true for the selection of civil servants in both Pa-O and Mon areas. As a Mon villager put it, "Only people familiar with the government can get good opportunities even if they are university graduates. As such many graduates are shopkeepers."[190] In addition, a group of Pa-O preachers made the following comment: "We must pay the same costs as the Bamar to study at school, but we do not have the same opportunities after we pass the exam," illustrating another example of Bamar privilege.[191] Consequently, some Pa-O community members do not encourage the youth to study, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty.[192]

As a result of the decrease of family farming and the lack of job opportunities, many Mon and Pa-O decide to migrate to cities and foreign countries.[193] As a Monk and

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[184] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[185] Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
[186] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.
[187] Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[188] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77, July 2017.
[189] Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[190] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[191] Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
[192] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[193] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81; Young girl, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan state, Interview #83; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.

social welfare worker explained, many people sell their land to live in cities but soon realise that they cannot make a better living there and unfortunately cannot afford to buy their land back.[194] The migration of young people has yet another negative impact on livelihood as the loss of manpower impacts the production.[195]

In conclusion, on many levels, the economic hardship that Mon and Pa-O face reflects a challenge that is real for the whole country. However, many Mon and Pa-O feel that they are particularly vulnerable to the economic dominance of the Bamar. In particular, the exploitation of natural resources by successive Bamar military regimes to the detriment of local development specifically affects resource rich ethnic areas and has led many to feel excluded from the national wealth. Moreover, while discussions on poor infrastructure development revealed a divide between urban and rural areas that also affects ethnic Bamar, many Pa-O perceive this inequality more acutely than the Mon because they mostly live in remote rural areas. Although the situation in the Pa-O SAA is better than elsewhere as a result of increased government funding, a lot more needs to be done, as many villages have not experienced any change yet. Furthermore, while a number of factors such as high labour costs and land confiscation affect the sustainability of family farming throughout the country, the Pa-O, who predominantly rely on agriculture, are particularly vulnerable to the absence of guaranteed markets because of poor rural infrastructure development. In addition, the increased interference of Bamar intermediaries, who may benefit from Bamar officials' willingness to facilitate their enterprises in ethnic areas, reinforces the perception that Bamar are privileged over others. Finally, while people struggle to generate adequate incomes throughout the country, employment opportunities often favour ethnic Bamar.

4.3 Social insecurity

Similarly to economic insecurities, participants from different socio-political backgrounds, particularly the Pa-O, commented on the social inequalities between Bamar regions and ethnic states as well as the divide between urban and rural areas in

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[194] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[195] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.

terms of access to education and healthcare. This is perceived as a central source of insecurity because it limits people's fundamental right to access basic services. In some cases, conflict and the drug trade represent additional challenges.

4.3.1 Inadequate education

Many Pa-O feel that they are particularly affected by a lower level of education for a number of reasons, including: conflict, poverty, lack of school facilities, poor quality education, and limited employment prospects. According to the Hsiseng Township MP, education standards are lower in ethnic states than in Bamar regions because the government used ethnic insurgencies as a reason for not providing any support.[196] Some farmers also explained that up until five or ten years ago, children did not have any chance to study because their area was classified as a "black area" due to fighting between Pa-O groups, the Shan armed forces and the *Tatmadaw*.[197] In fact, the EAOs stopped the government from opening schools in black areas. Ethnic stakeholders even started to complain in the 2010s that as a result of the peace process, the government was pushing to open schools in previously black areas as a way to promote assimilationist policies.[198] While there were no Pa-O graduates before the ceasefire, a former monk and a PNO leader were positive that the situation had now changed with many young Pa-O studying at university.[199] Despite this, one writer was dismayed that the impact of conflict in ethnic areas on education could still be felt today, as the majority of Pa-O people are farmers without education.[200] As this comment from a tour guide demonstrates, this compromised access to education has further contributed to the institutionalisation of Bamar privilege and discrimination: "Bamar people from lower Myanmar think we are idiots because education in ethnic areas decreased during the military regime while Bamar people had more opportunities."[201]

In addition, a number of reasons that are applicable to other parts of the country explain the low quality of education in Mon and Pa-O areas. First, poverty is a main cause of

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[196] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
[197] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19.
[198] See for instance, South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 132; South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 9–10.
[199] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.
[200] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.
[201] Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61.

underdevelopment because it prevents people from acquiring a good education. Although between 2012-2015 schooling became free through high school, people still have to pay a range of school related fees, including taxi ferry, exercise books and extra-curricular tuition classes.[202] In Mon State, people in both government and NMSP controlled areas complained that although education was free, parents have to pay expensive tuition fees if their children are to succeed. While this is true throughout the country, many Mon parents cannot afford these fees so their children do not get a proper education.[203] Similarly, many Pa-O villagers explained that because of low product prices or land confiscation, some families did not have enough money to send their children to school while others could only just afford it.[204] Interestingly, some Pa-O villagers expressed that they had to pay various school fees that people in Bamar areas didn't.[205] This perception of inequality indicates the extent to which Bamar privilege has been internalised even when it is based on facts that are not accurate: although in remote villages teachers may expect residents to provide them with food, families living in Bamar areas also have to pay a range of school fees.

Second, there are not enough schools in rural areas. As a result, most children are not able to attend high school because they have to go to another village.[206] For instance, in Mokmei Township, 36 villages have only one high school within a 20 kilometre area. Consequently, children cannot study after primary school because the high school is too far away.[207] In Tiha village, the government failed to respond to a request to build a primary school so the villagers built it by themselves. However, since the middle school is located 45 minutes away by foot, most children will not study after Grade 4 and work on the farm instead.[208] In Mon State's NMSP-controlled areas, many people are still uneducated because the years of conflict preceding the establishment of the Mon

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[202] Mya Kay Khine, "The High Cost of 'Free' Ed," *The Myanmar Times*, May 18, 2015, https://www.mmtimes.com/special-features/207-education-2015/14536-the-high-cost-of-free-ed.html.
[203] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[204] Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.
[205] Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35.
[206] Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[207] Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69.
[208] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.

National Schools prevented many from accessing a basic education.[209]

Third, even when there are schools, the quality of education is very low. Schools are often in bad condition making it impossible to study. For instance, a group of young women reported that their school roof was leaking during the rainy season.[210] Furthermore, there are not enough qualified teachers. A social welfare worker explained that in Pa-O areas, the ratio was 120 students per teacher as opposed to 30 students per teacher in Yangon.[211] Some people mentioned that although they had a high school in their village, it had to function in connection with another high school because there were not enough teachers.[212] As noted earlier, the fact that teachers are mostly Bamar creates learning difficulties for children.[213] In addition, teaching resources are limited and the teacher centred learning system is not efficient. Consequently, many children who attend school do not pass their exams.[214]

Pa-O seem to experience lower levels of education than the Mon, except for Mon living in NMSP-controlled areas. As in a vicious circle, the Pa-O's lack of access to education reinforces Bamar privilege. Both elite and community members concede that Pa-O people cannot get a good education because they live in rural areas, which then means there are not enough educated Pa-O that can claim senior positions.[215] According to the same former monk some Bamar leaders now consider that Pa-O people are not educated enough to manage their own affairs and as a result they implement even more discriminatory policies.[216]

4.3.2 Poor healthcare facilities and standards

The Pa-O are very disadvantaged and face many problems in regards to accessing healthcare. First, there are not enough clinics in villages. According to some PNO

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[209] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[210] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.
[211] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68, July 2017.
[212] Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[213] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[214] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[215] Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[216] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.

leaders, there is only one clinic for 50 villages whereas a leading doctor's recommendations stated that a clinic should operate for no more than 5000 patients.[217] Consequently, villagers complained that they have to travel to another village or even to town to get treatment.[218] In addition to being impractical, such travel is expensive.[219]

Second, when there are clinics, doctors and medicine are in short supply. For instance, although there are dispensaries in villages, nurses refuse to visit houses even in cases of emergency such as childbirth. Public hospitals are overcrowded with patients and hygiene conditions are not good. As a result, people have to spend a lot of time waiting to see a doctor and corruption is the only way to speed up the process. Poor people feel discriminated against because they cannot afford the much quicker private hospitals.[220]

Third, poor health education among health professionals as well as community members is another challenge. For instance, some midwives do not have adequate training to make appropriate recommendations for pregnant women to give birth in hospitals and as a result many deaths occur during childbirth. Some pharmacists give the wrong medicine but are not held to account. Among community members, some people with low income choose not to treat older people, believing that they will die soon anyway.[221] Unsurprisingly, Pa-O living in the mountainous – and thus difficult to access - Shan State seem to experience this insecurity particularly strongly.

A number of reasons account for the inequalities in the education and healthcare sectors between ethnic states and Bamar regions. While armed conflict has contributed to the underdevelopment of ethnic states, it is not just a deliberate strategy of neglect from the military government. First, it is related to rural-urban inequalities existing throughout the country, which were highlighted in the previous section. Second, decision-makers are likely to apply a "cost-benefit analysis", which is an economic appraisal method that is widely used in governments to assist policymaking, particularly in the infrastructure

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[217] PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[218] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[219] Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25.
[220] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[221] PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.

sector.[222] For instance, the consideration of geographic and demographic factors will probably influence the decision to build roads in mountainous areas, where many ethnic states are located. Ethnic states are thus most disadvantaged mainly because they are located in areas that are geographically difficult to access and have low population density. Indeed, it is expensive to build a road many kilometres up into a mountain to facilitate the building of a health clinic or school serving just a few villages. However, post-2010 governments have acknowledged these inequalities and made steps towards addressing them. The Thein Sein government put money into ethnic poverty reduction funds, allocating more money to the least developed states. INGOs were also allowed to implement development projects in the ethnic states.

4.3.3 Armed conflict

While peace has brought well-needed economic improvements, some participants still experience the impacts of armed conflict on their physical security and access to basic services such as education and healthcare. Before the PNO ceasefire in 1991, conflict was a major issue for Pa-O, often caught between hostilities involving Pa-O armed groups, Shan armed groups and the *Tatmadaw*. As a social welfare worker put it, "If it was not one group causing trouble, it was the other."[223] A farmer from Mokmei Township explained that as a result, at that time, people did not distinguish between the different armed forces and were afraid of all of them.[224] Villagers mainly reported that before the ceasefire, the Bamar military used to forcibly take anything they needed, burn houses and force people to carry their loads. As a result, people had to flee several times, even when it put their lives in danger.[225] However, as discussed in chapter 3, the situation has improved a lot since the ceasefire between the PNO and the *Tatmadaw*, especially for instance in Pinlaung and Kyauttalong Townships.[226]

Despite this improvement, the position of the Pa-O as second nationality in Shan State leaves them vulnerable to the military action of the dominant group. Shan armed forces

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[222] E. J. Mishan and Euston Quah, *Cost-Benefit Analysis*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 422–25.
[223] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68.
[224] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[225] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[226] Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.

are still causing trouble, particularly in Mokmei Township where the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) is still active, taxing and forcibly recruiting Pa-O.[227] A senior PNA officer explained that people still had to pay money - more than if they were Shan - in order to avoid being recruited.[228] The same farmer from Mokmei Township mentioned that due to the nearby activity of the RCSS, 209 people including children and old men from two different villages fled their homes in May 2017, thereby becoming internally displaced people.[229] Even in Hopone Township, a villager explained that his friends were recruited in the recent past.[230]

While Mon used to face similar conflict before the 1995 ceasefire, the situation has greatly improved in Mon areas. Yet, some villagers still expressed concerns for their security. A group of villagers from Kyainseikgyi Township in Karen State revealed that when tensions between the government and the NMSP occurred, Mon National Schools would close for the security of the children.[231] A CSO leader explained that the *Tatmadaw* was still patrolling near villages to provide security for leaders or companies and sometimes, for no reason, claiming that it was not safe for people as ethnic armed groups might fight back.[232]

4.3.4 Drug production and use

Many Pa-O participants recognised that drug production was the most threatening social issue. As demonstrated by Bertil Lintner, conflict and drug production are often tied together.[233] This is the case in the mountainous Pa-O areas in Shan State, which are well known for opium production.[234] Both elite and community members have mentioned

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[227] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
[228] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[229] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[230] Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[231] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9.
[232] Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18.
[233] Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
[234] Pa-O Youth Organization, "မြေယာ၊မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး နှင့်အခွန်ဘဏ္ဍာ ဆိုင်ရာများလေ့လာခြင်းအစီရင်ခံစာစာအုပ် (Land, Drug and Taxation)," https://www.paoyouth.or/wp-content/uploads/ / /report-book.pdf 2019. Pa-O Youth Organization's report provides recent information on the link between drugs and peace at the community level.

the drug trade numerous times as one of the biggest challenges for Pa-O society.[235] According to the Mokmei farmer, "Drugs are a much bigger threat than the decline of culture and literature."[236] Drug use undeniably creates many social issues, for instance domestic violence, lack of education, begging and even murder.[237] Similarly, according to a senior PNA officer based in Hsiseng Township, drugs are the biggest social threat because people lose their community spirit.[238]

Furthermore, many people stressed that youth appeared to be the main victims. The former Pa-O ethnic affairs minister for Karen State warned that, "The next generation will be lost because unlike during civil war, young Pa-O people now have many opportunities to use drugs."[239] Indeed, as a youth in Mokmei Township explained, most villages have drug dealers and users as young as fourteen years old. "The problem is that many old people are using drugs themselves, therefore creating a harmful model for the youth."[240] As a result, many parents encourage their children who have not yet finished their education to go to Thailand and become illegal migrant workers in order to keep them away from drugs.[241] Some village committee members in Hsiseng Township explained that the PNO set up a youth rehabilitation centre in 2015, but since it has no support from the government, only young people supported by their families can successfully finish the program.[242]

As some community members explained, many people choose to grow opium because they do not have other livelihood opportunities and want to make easy money.[243] A UPNO member explained that after the ceasefire, opium cultivation increased a lot because the PNO and the *Tatmadaw* permitted it in exchange for taxes. Since the

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[235] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[236] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[237] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[238] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[239] Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.
[240] Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.
[241] Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.
[242] Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[243] Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.

government started to prohibit opium cultivation and cut plantations without effectively supporting conversion to another crop, many farmers have lost their investment and ended up migrating.[244] Villagers expressed that drug production could not be tackled with prohibition measures because authorities have vested interests.[245] The same PNA officer explained that while PNA officers were involved in the drug trade for reasons covered in chapter 3, the police were destroying poppy plantations "just for show" and actually bringing drugs back into town.[246] Some farmers explained that although authorities know exactly who brings drugs in their area, they only arrest small time dealers and users.[247] The problem is so widespread that, as the one Mokmei farmer put it, "If we arrested all the drug dealers, the jails would be full!"[248]

In conclusion, poor social development particularly affects the Pa-O, who like the Mon experience poor education standards and an inadequate healthcare system as well as suffering the direct consequences of conflict and the drug trade. While this lack of social progress perpetuates a sense of inequality with Bamar regions and thus the perception of Bamar privilege, conflict is not the only factor explaining such underdevelopment. It is also connected to rural-urban inequalities that are present throughout the country and decision-making based on a cost-benefit analysis. As a result, since Pa-O are mostly rural people, generally living in mountainous areas which are difficult to access and where drug production is prolific, they tend to feel social inequities more acutely. The impact of these social inequalities, which reinforce the perception of Bamar privilege, was summed up by a group of Pa-O villagers: "Because our needs are not satisfied, we feel like we have a lower status than the Bamar."[249]

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[244] Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74.
[245] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.
[246] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[247] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[248] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[249] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.

4.4 Political insecurity

As discussed in chapter 1 and 2, Myanmar has experienced profound political transformations since 2011, with a peace process now under way. However, the Mon and Pa-O experience of ethnicity in this context shows that political reforms are yet to address Bamar privilege. The dominance of the Bamar group at all levels of government and the persistence of centralised policies that favour ethnic Bamar are perceived as a major insecurity because Mon and Pa-O feel that their voices are not included in the decision-making process. This section discusses the constitutional entrenchment of Bamar privilege, which contributes to a weak legislative representation of ethnic groups. It also discusses the weak ethnic presence in the executive and judicial branches, which Mon and Pa-O experience as discrimination, particularly in their relationship with the General Administration Department (GAD). Finally, it discusses the lack of meaningful decentralisation, looking particularly at the case of the Pa-O SAA.

4.4.1 Constitutional entrenchment of Bamar dominance in Parliament

The military sponsored 2008 constitution was criticised for entrenching a Bamar vision of the nation via three main mechanisms that affect representation in Parliament: it reserves 25 % of all the parliamentary seats for Bamar *Tatmadaw* officers; it entrenches a territorial division that perpetuates Bamar dominance in the upper house; and its electoral system favours the success of Bamar-led parties in the lower house.

First, both Mon and Pa-O participants complained the 2008 constitution is biased towards the Bamar as 25% of parliamentary seats are reserved for the Bamar-dominated military.[250] Some members of the Mon and Pa-O nationalist elite argued that this was unfair to ethnic people because Bamar officers are likely to have limited knowledge of ethnic civilian needs and these reserved seats create another institutional advantage for the Bamar. For instance, some argue that Bamar regions are likely to be favoured because development projects require parliamentary approval.[251] However, this is not accurate: only development loans - not international development grants - require

[250] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Sections 14, 74 (a) and (b).
[251] Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65.

parliamentary approval. Furthermore, the problem with some of the loans is not that they are for development projects in ethnic Bamar regions but that they are for projects in the ethnic states and require large-scale land confiscation and other negative impacts on communities in those states.[252]

Second, some Mon and Pa-O perceive the territorial division of power established by the constitution as symbolically reinforcing Bamar dominance, with tangible effects in the upper house (the *Amyotha Hluttaw)*.[253] The 2008 constitution's establishment of seven territorial units ("regions" or *tai-data-gyi* in Burmese) where Bamar people are mostly concentrated and seven states where seven main ethnic groups are concentrated is seen as undermining the principle of equality upheld by Aung San's one kyat promise. As a Mon *Sayadaw* put it, "It is not fair because for each ethnic state, the Bamar took one region".[254]A Pa-O CSO member lamented that this contributed "to create the Bamar's sense of ownership over the country."[255] In addition, some Pa-O participants explained that the word *tai-data-gyi*, which literally means "big region", contributed to giving a symbolic superiority to the Bamar regions.[256] More importantly, the fact that the *Amyotha Hluttaw* is based on territorial representation - twelve seats are elected in each state or region, plus one in each SAA - has generated some criticism.[257] According to a civil servant, this means that the Bamar, whose members mostly live across the seven regions, have more representation than the other ethnic groups in the *Amyotha Hluttaw*.[258] As a Pa-O political member in Mon State put it, "This shows that the perceived inequality is real and not just emotional."[259] However, as Stepan argues, the principle of equal representation in the upper house is "demos-constraining" in the sense that it does not reflect the fact that the Bamar represent the demographic majority.[260] Indeed, if the ethnic Bamar population really represents two third of the

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[252] See for instance projects related to the Chinese Belt Road Initiative.
[253] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[254] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27.
[255] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[256] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[257] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 141 (a).
[258] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8.
[259] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60.
[260] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 23–24.

country's total population, it could be argued that it would not be fair to the ethnic Bamar to have just one geographic region.

Third, the constitution was criticised for reinforcing Bamar dominance with the choice of a plurality voting system, which distorts representation in the lower house (the *Pyithu Hluttaw)* to the advantage of Bamar-led parties.[261] Although Nicholas Farrelly demonstrates that representation in the *Pyithu Hluttaw* is skewed towards the less populated ethnic areas,[262] the first-past-the-post system actually favours political parties that can run candidates across the whole country. Since such parties need resources, they tend to be Bamar-led. As a result, some Pa-O argue that the right to form ethnic parties is pointless. Indeed, since the PNO is unable to compete with the two main Bamar-led parties, the NLD and the USDP, it did not win any seats in Kayah and Mon States.[263] Many Pa-O therefore think that inequality starts with the election as this tour guide commented: "Most people feel that the election is orchestrated by the Bamar government and therefore does not give a voice to ethnic people."[264] In addition, the Mon and Pa-O MPs interviewed for this research noted that the weak representation of ethnic parties in parliament was reinforced by the necessity to obtain the deputy speaker's approval in order to ask any question. Although this is also true for NLD MPs, ethnic MPs feel that they have fewer chances to ask questions especially when the deputy speaker is from a Bamar-led party.[265]

Finally, many members of the Mon nationalist community criticised the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* – the third chamber that combines the *Amyotha* and *Pyithu Hluttaws* for being dominated by the Bamar. Indeed, the body could presumably have a negative impact on ethnic people if Bamar politicians are making decisions about what happens or does not

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[261] For the constitutional entrenchment of the electoral system, see Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 69.
[262] Nicholas Farrelly, "Electoral Sovereignty in Myanmar's Borderlands," in *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds*, ed. Su-Ann Oh (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), 56.
[263] Pa-O Youth Organization chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #31; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[264] Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61.
[265] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.

happen in ethnic states.[266]

Since these constitutional provisions imply that Bamar are likely to dominate all Hluttaws, whether they belong to the *Tatmadaw* or a Bamar dominated party,[267] the 2008 constitution was therefore criticised for further institutionalising Bamar privilege.

4.4.2 Weak representation of ethnic groups in the current legislature

The following section discusses the weak legislative representation of Mon and Pa-O since the 2015 election in the national legislature and most regional *Hluttaws*, as well as the limitations of the new mechanism of special representation for ethnic nationalities.

NLD dominance in the national and state legislatures

The NLD won the 2015 election by a landslide, securing 79% of the seats available at the national legislature, the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw,* against 11% for ethnic parties.[268] The Mon won only one seat at the *Amyotha Hluttaw* while the Pa-O scored better with one seat at the *Amyotha Hluttaw* and three at the *Pyithu Hluttaw.* Mon State *Pye-nay Hluttaw* has three representatives from Mon parties while the Pa-O scored better again with six PNO representatives in Shan State *Pye-nay Hluttaw*.[269] According to U Min Soe Lin, the only Mon representative at the *Amyotha Hluttaw,* the electoral system does not support proper ethnic representation when only 11% of MPs are of ethnic origin.[270] However, in many ethnic states, including Mon State, the fact that two or more ethnic-based political parties were competing for votes contributed to decrease chances for ethnic parties to win seats. Indeed, this resulted in vote-splitting in some cases, and in others, voters deciding to vote for the NLD. While the actual number of seats affected by vote-splitting represents less than 4 percent of all seats in the ethnic states, the

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[266] Mon National Party second chairman, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #14, July 2016; Jeepyah, civil society development organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #17; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[267] The Shan State Hluttaw is the only legislature where the NLD did not win the majority of seats. It was obtained by the USDP, which is another Bamar dominated party.
[268] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar," 6-7;13.
[269] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar," 8.
[270] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.

absence of unified parties certainly favoured tactical voting in favour of the NLD, a decision that is harder to gauge.[271]

The NLD has taken control of five state assemblies, including the Mon *Hluttaws*, where it won 61.3% of the seats.[272] Mon State Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aung Naing Oo explained that people generally did not trust this institution because of its limited Mon representation and its lack of powers and budget.[273] However, some of my informants noted a number of improvements that were possible with the help of the Deputy Speaker, in particular the provision of Mon language classes and the development of checks and balances on the powers of the state government.[274] In the Shan *Pye-nay Hluttaw* the NLD scored less than the Shan party, but another Bamar party, the USDP, won the majority of seats. As a result, some Pa-O nationalist elites expressed that the Shan *Hluttaw* was not able to promote ethnic interests because Bamar representatives controlled it.[275]

This reflects a widely shared view that the NLD, although often described as a multi-ethnic party because many members have ethnic backgrounds, is not representing ethnic interests. As a Mon NLD representative at the Mon *Pye-nay Hluttaw* argued, the NLD could not have won as many seats if almost half of its candidates in Mon State were not Mon. According to him, many ethnic members chose to join the NLD because they perceived that the NLD was the only way to defeat the military and achieve civilian participation.[276] This was also the view of the Pa-O NLD chairman that I met at a meeting of Pa-O stakeholders in preparation of public consultations for the Pa-O ethnic-based dialogue.[277] However, while strong beliefs in the NLD's potential to fulfil ethnic aspirations contributed to the poor performance of ethnic parties in the 2015 election, ethnic people have gradually lost faith in the NLD's capacity to represent them. Indeed,

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[271] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar," 10.
[272] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar," 7–8.
[273] U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #30.
[274] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Mon Youth Progressive organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #11; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.
[275] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56.
[276] Mon NLD representative, Mon State Pye-nay Hluttaw, Mawalyine, Mon State, Interview #24, August 2016.
[277] Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43, January 2017.

some participants stressed that ethnic affairs were not a priority of the NLD. Some Pa-O elite and community members believed that the NLD was not working for ethnic rights.[278] The Pa-O NLD member himself conceded that "Even though Aung San Suu Kyi declared that every ethnic group should have equality, unless Pa-O people come together to create a collective idea and advocate in the parliament, nobody will take care of us."[279] In addition, the fact that many NLD members have an ethnic background does not change anything as they are bound by party policy. As a Mon CSO member explained, ethnic people from the NLD do not raise ethnic issues.[280] In some cases, such as "Bridge-gate" they even work again ethnic people's desires. Indeed, the NLD *Pyithu Hluttaw* representative from Paung Township, who suggested that the *Pyithu Hluttaw* decide whether the bridge should be named after Aung San, was of Mon background.[281]

The repetition of such moves that promote a Bamar identity has deteriorated perceptions that the NLD could ever represent ethnic interests. As Mon journalist Lawi Weng explains, "Ethnic Mon today no longer view the NLD as a party that will help them attain equal rights. It is just a party that tries to rule and manipulate the ethnic minorities to serve its own purposes."[282] Pushing the boundaries even further, the NLD is now perceived as being on the same side as the military. As Lawi Weng continues, "When other ethnic groups look at the situation in Kachin State, they increasingly view the NLD and the *Tatmadaw* as one and the same. Both are Burmese and the NLD government stays silent when the *Tatmadaw* attacks the Kachin."[283]

Weaknesses of the new special representation mechanism

As mentioned earlier, the 2008 constitution created another structure to represent ethnic communities, through the election of ethnic affairs ministers to the state and regional

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[278] Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[279] Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43.
[280] Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[281] Medail, "What's in a Name."
[282] Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Groups Have Lost Faith in the NLD."
[283] Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Groups Have Lost Faith in the NLD."

Hluttaws in order to represent geographically dispersed ethnic groups,[284] The constitution allows ethnic groups representing more than 0.1% of the country's population to elect a representative at their regional legislature if they are not already the majority group or do not already have an SAA.[285]

There are currently a total of 29 ethnic affairs ministers in state and region *Hluttaws*, who do not need to be from the particular ethnic group they stand for. As a result, since 21 of them are from the NLD, they are not able to work for the community they represent.[286] For instance, a youth activist noted that the Pa-O ethnic affairs minister in Mon State, who cannot speak Pa-O language, is focused on infrastructure rather than culture or education.[287] In addition, such representation was criticised for not covering ethnic groups below the 0.1 percent threshold required by the constitution. A *sayadaw* complained that the Mon only had one ethnic affairs minister in Karen State, which means that Mon people in Bago, Yangon and Tanintharyi Regions are not represented.[288] Mon *Hluttaw* Deputy Speaker U Aung Naing Oo criticised the fact that because Mon are considered the majority group in Mon State it prevents them from having an ethnic affairs minister, arguing that the Bamar already represent the majority population in the State. [289]

Similarly, some Pa-O elite members complained that the Pa-O had ethnic affairs ministers only in Karen and Mon States, which means that Pa-O people living in Bago Region and Kayah State do not have any representation in the regional *Hluttaw*.[290] While the Pa-O population in these areas is well below the official threshold, the case of the Mon is more disputed because of controversial census criteria and registration issues as demonstrated earlier. In Yangon for example, the Mon were not eligible for such special representation because the official census counted only 40,000 Mon. However, a census conducted by the Mon community counted around 55,000 Mon, which is above

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[284] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 14.
[285] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 161.
[286] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar," 7–9.
[287] Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55.
[288] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27.
[289] U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #30.
[290] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18.

the threshold.[291] The same situation was reported for Mon in Tanintharyi Region.[292]

In addition, while this institution was a welcome positive development, both Mon and Pa-O participants noted that budget and staff restrictions clearly limited the performance of the ministers.[293] Some Pa-O CSO members in Mon State criticised the budget allocated to each minister for not being proportional to the actual population.[294] According to a former Pa-O ethnic affairs minister in Karen State, although the promotion of infrastructure development has increased, the budget remains the main challenge: "It is very difficult to negotiate: I need to request funding from the Union government for every project. It is not difficult to get approval within the budget limit, but I need to ask many times."[295]

To sum up, the legislative branch, which is currently dominated by the NLD, is widely criticised for failing to represent Mon and Pa-O voices. As a result, many Mon and Pa-O feel that the government cannot adopt policies that meet their needs.

4.4.3 Weak ethnic presence in the executive and judicial branches

Similarly to the legislative branch, many Mon and Pa-O participants complained that Bamar people dominated both the executive branch, in the central and regional governments as well as in Myanmar's civil service body, the GAD. The composition of the judicial branch was also criticised for favouring ethnic Bamar.

The central and regional governments

Since the party that won the parliamentary election can form the central or regional government cabinets, the executive branch similarly fails to share power with ethnic people. As a Pa-O religious leader pointed out, "Mostly Bamar people hold high

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[291] Human Rights Foundation of Monland member, Yangon, Interview #22.
[292] Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5.
[293] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #30; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[294] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[295] Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.

positions in the central government."[296] In addition, the new ministry for ethnic affairs instituted by the NLD in 2015 to represent ethnic groups within the central government is very weak. While it is notable that the first appointed ethnic affairs minister at the Union level is a Mon ethnic politician, and one of only three appointed cabinet ministers from another party other than the NLD, many participants including Mon MP U Min Soe Lin questioned the efficiency of this new department as a result of limited competencies and budget.[297] For instance, his influence in the Mon State bridge name controversy was very limited although he publicly criticised the authority of the *Pyithu Hluttaw* to make a decision on a local matter such as the name of a bridge.[298]

The state and region executives are composed of the chief minister, a varying number of cabinet ministers and three additional members: the advocate general, the auditor general and the executive secretary. The number of cabinet ministers varies because the number of portfolio ministers appointed by the chief minister is not consistent across regions – although the minister of security and border affairs is consistently a military appointee. In addition, it may include ethnic affairs ministers depending on the ethnic composition of each state and region: in addition to their legislative responsibilities, they are automatically appointed as cabinet ministers in their state or region government. Finally, the cabinet includes chairmen of the SAAs, which are predominantly located in Shan State. Currently, NLD *Hluttaw* members hold 60 percent of the cabinet posts and all state and region chief ministers are NLD party members, even in Rakhine and Shan State where the NLD did not win the majority.[299] As some CSO members explained, the appointment of state and region government chief ministers by the president reinforces the dominance of the majority group to which the president belongs. Although some NLD chief ministers are of ethnic background, they are bound by their party's policy.[300]

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[296] Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70.
[297] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.
[298] Pyae Thet Phyo, "Mon Bridge Name a State Matter: Union Minister," *Myanmar Times*, March 17, 2017, https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/25361-mon-bridge-name-a-state-matter-union-minister.html.
[299] Nixon et al., "State and Region Governments in Myanmar," 29.
[300] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 261; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.

In Mon State, a *sayadaw* noted that Bamar dominate the executive.[301] Indeed, among its 11 cabinet members, only Dr Aye Zan, the chief minister (who is an NLD member) and Nai Kyi Win, the minister of natural resources and environment are of Mon ethnicity. The rest of the cabinet ministers are ethnic Bamar, including the Karen and Pa-O ethnic affairs ministers. The situation is different in Shan State, which is the most ethnically diverse state in Myanmar. The state government is twice as big as the Mon government: in addition to the chief minister and nine portfolio ministers, it counts seven ethnic affairs ministers and five SAA chairmen. In total, eight ministers are from the NLD, six from the USDP and six are from ethnic parties – including U Khun San Lwin, the Pa-O SAA chairman from the PNO. In addition, there is one independent ethnic minister and one minister appointed by the military.[302] Although Bamar led-parties dominate the cabinet, ethnic Bamar do not represent the majority. Indeed, there are also two NLD members of ethnic background - the Kayah and Intha ethnic affairs ministers - and three USDP members of ethnic background - the Kokang and Danu SAA chairmen and the Pa-O minister of transportation. As a result, half of the Shan State government cabinet ministers are of ethnic background, including two who are ethnic Pa-O.

Nevertheless, some nationalist elites consider that overall the Shan State government remains under the control of Bamar-led parties because party policy matters more than the ethnic background of its members. As a writer explained, policies are thus developed without the consultation of local communities and often have negative impacts on them.[303] For instance, some farmers noted that although they have been working on the land for a long time and know how to use it effectively and carefully, the government did not consult them before forbidding the plantation of potatoes where they have always planted them. In addition, they blamed the central government and the Shan State government for not listening to Pa-O authorities' recommendations in favour of the construction of cheaper and safer road options.[304] However, just because the powerholders are of ethnic background does not mean they will always consult local communities. As highlighted earlier, although the PNO runs the SAA, consultations with local communities are limited.

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[301] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #28.
[302] Nixon et al., "State and Region Governments in Myanmar," 30–31.
[303] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.
[304] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

The general administration department (GAD)

Mon and Pa-O experience discrimination even more directly when interacting with the GAD. Until December 2018, this public administration body was overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs, which according to the 2008 constitution is one of the three ministries under the direct control of the *Tatmadaw*.[305] Acting for more than 30 years as the backbone of public administration in Myanmar, this affiliation had implications on the mindset of public servants, who were often retired military officers. While the recent decision of the NLD to transfer the control of the GAD to the Office of the Union Government is a positive step towards a civilian-led government, it is unlikely to yield any instant improvements in local governance.[306]

Indeed, many Mon and Pa-O complained that Bamar officers generally dominate the GAD. In Mon and Karen States for instance, there are no ethnic people in administration departments except in schools, and none of these are schoolmasters.[307] This is a direct consequence of the discrimination in accessing government jobs mentioned in the previous section. In Mon State, villagers from Mudon Township pointed out the following problem: "Here 90 percent of the people are Mon, but the elite is Bamar, appointed by the government."[308] Other villagers in Paung Township lamented that although the village was Mon, the Mon village headman had no power.[309] A civil servant and a CSO member explained that many people did not even try to join the administration because of the need to try harder than a Bamar person, the high levels of corruption and the belief that authorities represent the oppressor.[310]

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[305] Nan Lwin, "Union Gov't Office Minister Unveils Reform Plan for GAD," *The Irrawaddy*, May 23, 2019, sec. Burma, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/union-govt-office-minister-unveils-reform-plan-gad.html.
[306] Frontier Myanmar, "Now for the Hard Work," *Frontier Myanmar*, January 7, 2019, https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/now-for-the-hard-work.
[307] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Militia soldiers, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #36, July 2017.
[308] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13.
[309] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[310] Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8.

The dominance of Bamar in the GAD poses a number of problems. First, this results in discrimination against ethnic people. Some community leaders in Hopone town cited the widely shared perception that Pa-O people had to pay six times more money than Bamar people to make ID cards.[311] In addition, as explained earlier, the fact that there are no Mon or Pa-O people in senior positions of the GAD makes it difficult to obtain permission to hold cultural events, therefore adding to the difficulty of preserving culture.[312] Moreover, people's experience of discrimination when trying to enter public administration often results in voluntary assimilation. Indeed, those who do want to enter the civil service will usually hide their identity and avoid speaking their language in order to avoid background checks and thus manage to access higher positions.[313] In addition, as a journalist explained, some Mon parents register their children as Bamar to avoid discrimination. This also contributes to the under-estimation of the Mon population by official figures highlighted at the beginning of this chapter.[314]

Second, some people tend to avoid contacts with authorities because they cannot speak Burmese and they are still traumatised by previous oppression. For instance, many Pa-O villagers commented that Bamar officials were often corrupt.[315] While this may be true of many Bamar officials, there are some officials of ethnic background working in the GAD who are also involved in corruption. Reasons for corruption include low salaries and inadequate budgets, such as insufficient transportation allowances for lower level civil servants' official business.

Finally, the Bamar dominance of the GAD reinforces a sense of exclusion from the political life. A group of farmers commented that without distributing power within the community, people could not participate in the political process.[316] Similarly, a senior PNO member explained how the exclusion of Pa-O people from the GAD contributed

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311 Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
312 Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
313 Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1.
314 "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
315 Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.
316 Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

to the lack of Pa-O people's capacity and readiness to manage their own affairs.[317]

The judicial system

Most Mon and Pa-O try to avoid the judicial system because it is expensive and time consuming.[318] Similarly most ethnic Bamar try to avoid the courts unless they are powerful and well connected because it is often unfair for poor people. However, since the judicial system is dominated by ethnic Bamar, Mon and Pa-O perceive that they face additional challenges primarily because of language issues. As Mon from Paung Township explained, those who cannot speak Burmese struggle with the official court system and so prefer the NMSP justice system if it is available.[319] In addition, mistrust of ethnic Bamar appears as another factor for avoiding the courts. Some Pa-O community leaders expressed a widely shared fear that problems would be amplified: "A small case always becomes a big case."[320] As a *sayadaw* explained, Pa-O thus also prefer to solve problems by themselves, often following the decisions of religious leaders.[321]

To sum up, the composition of the central and regional governments as well as the public administration and judicial branch, which are dominated by members of the Bamar majority, illustrates the institutionalisation of Bamar privilege. This generates more political insecurity as policies fail to address local needs. The perpetuation of institutional discrimination by the GAD, which seems to be experienced more directly, also contributes to the cultural insecurity.

4.4.4 Lack of meaningful territorial self-governance

The centralised administration established by the 2008 constitution was criticised for perpetuating the rule of the Bamar, who already dominate the government branches. While the constitution actually establishes a territorial division of power that reflects

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[317] Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.
[318] For the Mon, see Kyed, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution."
[319] Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[320] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
[321] Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.

that of a federal system, with the designation of states and regions as territorial units boasting their own governments, parliaments and courts, Myanmar's political system remains unitary and highly centralised.[322] The fact that the Mon have their own state and the Pa-O have a SAA does not illustrate decentralisation. While the NMSP and the PNO's distinct relationship with the state is reflected in their attitudes towards such decentralisation, Mon and Pa-O participants criticised it for being meaningless. Many Pa-O in particular expressed their dissatisfaction with the SAA not only for failing to achieve territorial decentralisation but also for contributing to create conflict among ethnic groups.

As explained in chapter 3, the NMSP and the PNO relate very differently with the state, the former being openly critical and the latter embracing a cooperation strategy. Unsurprisingly, the NMSP directly criticised the centralisation of the 2008 constitution with its lack of meaningful powers delegated to the state level as being a major obstacle to ethnic peace.[323] The fact that ethnic states have no power to choose their heads of states in particular gives an important indication of the centralisation of state governance.[324] Similarly, the Mon State bridge controversy shows the extent of the centralisation of power by the NLD government, which some villagers think is worse than under the previous military-backed Thein Sein government.[325] As a result, many are frustrated. As one villager from Ye township put it, "Myanmar people act as if they own the country."[326]

By contrast, PNO leaders did not openly condemn the centralisation of the 2008 constitution. Instead, as noted in chapter 3, they welcomed the creation of the Pa-O SAA as a first step towards decentralisation. Yet, the fact that many Pa-O participants expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the SAA demonstrates that the PNO's cooperation with the government has not helped address perceptions of political disadvantage. Indeed, many Pa-O elite and community members criticise the current

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[322] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 125.
[323] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3.
[324] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4.
[325] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[326] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

self-administered status for failing to delegate powers to the local level. A former monk complained that the only Pa-O leader was the SAA Chairman U San Lwin, who would not even have as much power as the governor during the British colonial system.[327] Many Pa-O elite and community members protested that civil servants in the SAA belonged to the Bamar dominated GAD. Moreover, since the head of the GAD in Shan State is the Secretary of the SAA's Leading Body, the government holds most of the power.[328] Although the MP from Hsiseng Township praised the opening of a new channel to work with the government, he conceded that since government staff were in charge of most of the arrangements, it was not even close to self-determination.[329] Numerous participants further commented on Pa-O authorities' lack of real decision-making power.[330] Even PNO members highlighted difficulties such as the requirement for the Shan State government approval of budgets or the management of most departments by central ministries. For instance, a bad doctor or teacher cannot be removed unless the relevant Union government ministry approves it.[331] As some CSO members explained, in practice, this means that Pa-O authorities are involved in policy making only in relation to a narrow range of issues such as infrastructure development.[332]

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[327] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[328] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[329] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
[330] Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78; Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[331] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Pa-O National Organisation lawyer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #39, December 2016; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[332] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.

Consequently, some CSO members concluded that Pa-O authorities were just administrators, a word that a social welfare worker even found pretentious.[333] More bluntly, another CSO member accused the SAA Leading Body of supporting the central government in attracting investments and confiscating land.[334] Indeed, many farmers and villagers recognised that if authorities had stood with the villagers instead of promoting development in their own interest, the area would be more developed.[335] According to a group of preachers, "The SAA is not meaningful because it is just a cover for a lot of corruption, drug trading and disunity."[336] Reflecting this view, people from all backgrounds were not short of metaphorical criticisms of the SAA, calling it "a name on paper" and comparing it to "a frame with nothing inside", "a tent instead of a house" or "a peel without the fruit."[337]

Finally, for a number of Pa-O participants, the SAA engendered two major negative impacts: the creation of disunity between Pa-O living in different areas, and conflict with other ethnic groups. Many participants complained that the SAA was not inclusive enough as 60 percent of the Pa-O population was located outside its boundaries.[338] According to a senior PNA officer, these boundaries create disunity amongst Pa-O people, because areas outside the SAA are not as developed and sometimes still face conflict.[339] Villagers from Tiha expressed how they felt neglected despite their proximity to the stronghold of PNO Chairman U Aung Kham Hti, which ensures they

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333 Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
334 Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
335 Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Militia soldiers, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #36.
336 Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
337 Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
338 Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77; Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34; Farmers, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #42.
339 Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.

are more advantaged than other Pa-O living outside the SAA.[340] Likewise, some people in Karen State complained that they did not get any funding to support their ethnic affairs.[341]

Somewhat contradicting the idea that the SAA should even include more townships to promote equality among Pa-O people, some nationalist elites suggested that the creation of SAAs has additionally created conflict with other ethnic groups.[342] Indeed, while some groups such as the Intha are not big enough to get anything, there are many areas with mixed ethnic populations who might not feel happy to be integrated into the SAA of a dominant group. For this reason, some argued that the creation of SAAs reflected another strategy of the military government to create divisions among ethnic groups in Shan State.[343]

In conclusion, this section has demonstrated that many Mon and Pa-O participants, elite and community members included, perceive the dominance of the Bamar group at all levels of government as a major challenge. The constitution is accused of entrenching inequalities and perpetuating Bamar privilege because it favours the supremacy of ethnic Bamar in parliament and promotes a strong centralisation of powers. Since the weak representation of Mon and Pa-O in all branches of government is reinforced by the absence of real decentralisation many Mon and Pa-O feel that they are voiceless. The fact that the power of the majority actually supports the dominant ethnic group creates a "political insecurity" which leads many to doubt whether democracy can succeed at all.[344]

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[340] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[341] Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25.
[342] Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36.
[343] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[344] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the Mon and Pa-O's experience of ethnicity, which points towards a number of discriminatory policies reflecting or reinforcing the existence of "Bamar privilege." It also confirms perspectives of the Myanmar literature highlighted in chapter 1 that Bamar dominance is central to ethnic conflict. Drawing on Mon and Pa-O perceptions, I introduced these discriminatory policies based on the insecurities that they generate, at the cultural, economic, social and political levels. First, the existence of a cultural insecurity is based on the linguistic, cultural and demographic dominance of the Bamar group that Mon and Pa-O experience as a major threat to their identity. Second, the economic insecurity that Mon and Pa-O experience actually affects the whole country and reveals a divide between urban and rural areas that also exists for ethnic Bamar. However, many participants feel that they are particularly vulnerable to the economic dominance of the Bamar. While the exploitation of resource rich ethnic areas by successive Bamar military regimes has equally excluded both groups from the national wealth, Pa-O feel that their geographic concentration in mountainous areas particularly disadvantages them in terms of infrastructure development and family farming. Third, Mon and Pa-O's experience of poor social development in ethnic states particularly in the health and education sectors has generated a social insecurity that particularly affects the Pa-O. While this perpetuates a sense of inequality with Bamar regions and thus the perception of Bamar privilege, differences between urban and rural areas and policy-makers' use of a cost-benefit analysis play an important role in explaining such inequalities. Indeed, the Pa-O who tend to live in rural and difficult to access areas seem to be more severely affected than the Mon. Fourth, the Mon and Pa-O experience of the dominance of the Bamar at all levels of government has created a form of political insecurity. The constitution is not only blamed for entrenching Bamar supremacy in the legislative and executive branches, but also for establishing a centralised administration that reinforces the democratic rule of the Bamar majority despite the existence of territorial entities such as Mon State and the Pa-O SAA.

The fact that Mon and Pa-O are affected in different ways demonstrates the existence of a number of variables. Cultural insecurities seem to particularly affect Mon while economic and social insecurities seem to affect Pa-O more. This confirms the conclusions made in chapter 3, that the geographic and demographic variations between

the Mon and Pa-O influence their concerns. However, they do not impact perceptions of political inequalities as both the Mon and the Pa-O feel that they are excluded from the political game. This shows how Bamar privilege has entrenched a differential treatment throughout the cultural and socio-economic spheres that is facilitated and perpetuated in the political sphere. What this means in terms of designing institutional features that could change perceptions of Bamar privilege will be examined in chapter 7, based on Mon and Pa-O aspirations presented in chapter 6. In the following chapter, I consider the impacts of Bamar privilege on Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and examine the prospects for the implementation of policies promoting a sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 5 – Ethnic Attitudes towards the National Identity

The following chapter considers the implications of Bamar privilege on Mon and Pa-O identity and examines its impact on the question of national membership. Building on the discussion from earlier chapters on the construction of ethnic identity, I look more closely at Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and national belonging in light of the previously presented insecurities. Indeed, as argued in chapter 2, the intensity of ethnic identification is an important variable that should be considered when designing institutions to manage ethnic conflict. In addition, from an institutionalist perspective, the question of national membership is central to the nation-building process and hence democratic consolidation in Myanmar. I first introduce how Mon and Pa-O experience the dominance of a Bamar national identity as creating feelings of inferiority and exclusion. I then consider the degree of ethnic identification and national belonging expressed by Mon and Pa-O from different walks of life in order to determine whether Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity are rigid or moderate. Finally, I investigate whether Mon and Pa-O perspectives indicate what kind of policies could reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege and also support a sense of inclusion in the national identity.

5.1 The dominance of a Bamar national identity

As Matthew Walton notes, the Bamar dominance of the national identity is reflected linguistically. While Bamar are always "Myanmar" without question, the inclusion of non-Bamar groups in the national identity is always conditional, depending on factors such as the degree of assimilation to a Myanmar cultural identity and the type of potential opposition to the state.[1] Even though statements such as Aung San Suu Kyi's declaration, "our Bamar group is an ethnic group" can be perceived as very positive for nation building, one should note the way in which such a statement is only selectively employed by the Bamar to emphasise solidarity when it is politically expedient and how rarely their language includes themselves in words like *taingyintha* which is

[1] Matthew J. Walton, "Nation Building," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 394.

commonly used to designate only *minority* ethnic groups.[2] It is therefore not surprising that the question of belonging to such a national identity can be problematic for ethnic groups such as the Mon and the Pa-O. As exposed in chapter 4, many Mon and Pa-O from all socio-political backgrounds experience ethnicity as a form of institutionalised discrimination generated by Bamar privilege. At the macro level, the existence of Bamar privilege implies that the Bamar dominate the national identity, or in other words, a form of Bamar chauvinism. Mon and Pa-O participants perceive this dominance as a feeling of inferiority and a sense of exclusion.

5.1.1 A feeling of inferiority

In this section, I highlight how the dominance of a Bamar national identity leads many Mon and Pa-O to feel that they have a lower status. In addition, I emphasise that the question of belonging to an ethnic state's community is also a challenge.

A number of Mon and Pa-O described their experience of differential treatment discussed in chapter 4 as contributing to create a sense of inferiority and helplessness. A CSO member stated that although the Bamar claimed that Mon and Bamar were identical, Mon people actually did not get the same opportunities.[3] For instance, an MNEC teacher criticised the centralised education system for always favouring the majority's political, economic and cultural interests.[4] In addition, Mon and Pa-O experience the Bamar's tendency to treat other groups as inferior on a daily basis. According to an old guerrilla soldier, this mindset is the main cause of the Pa-O's problems: "Pa-O people who mostly come from mountainous villages do not get the respect they deserve when going to towns, schools or hospitals."[5]

At the local administration level, some Mon villagers complained that, "Only the Bamar have power, they are proud of themselves and look down on other ethnic people."[6] Many participants similarly complained that they are regularly being looked down upon,

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[2] Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-Ness,'" 7.
[3] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66; Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5.
[4] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2.
[5] "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[6] Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7.

for instance when Bamar people laugh at their Burmese accent.[7] Finally, the dynamic of a focus group I conducted in Mudon Township highlighted that the position of inferiority is connected to past oppression. A participant's mother seemed uncomfortable each time her son was trying to explain that they did not enjoy the same rights as the Bamar and always interrupted him: "I would like to say more, but my mother tells me not to speak too much. She is still afraid of the Bamar military because we lost our kingdom. Even though she is feeling something, she is still afraid to speak out."[8]

Like this example shows, many participants feel powerless when comparing themselves to the Bamar majority and they were not short of metaphors to communicate their feelings. The Hopone city neighbourhood leaders regretted that Pa-O did not have the same impact when speaking out: "We are like grandsons, not sons: even though we do not like it, we must accept it."[9] A young woman originally from a remote Tiha village but now living in Yangon with an adoptive family proposed a similar image: "It is like we are not the owner of the house; the situation is similar to when my adoptive family asks me to do something, I cannot talk back to them."[10] Likewise, a CSO leader commented that, "Even in Mon State, where we are the 'house owners', the Bamar will win in any legal process."[11]

Unsurprisingly, many participants thus described their feeling of inferiority as a sense of being "second citizens". For instance, a Mon National School teacher noted that the Bamar considered themselves as first class citizens.[12] More bluntly, a senior PNA officer explained that "Although Bamar people are also ethnic people, there are in reality two classes of citizens, ethnic citizens and Bamar citizens, because the Bamar politically see themselves as big brothers."[13] Similarly, a retired Pa-O teacher noted that while people have lived most of their lives "under military boots," now that there was a

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[7] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[8] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13.
[9] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
[10] Young girl, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan state, Interview #83.
[11] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1.
[12] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.
[13] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.

democratically elected government in power, "The majority still has a superiority complex and acts like big brothers."[14] Likewise, a Pa-O social worker said that in the SAA she felt fine, but as soon as she mingled with other ethnic groups, she felt that Pa-O were not the priority.[15]

This statement illustrates that the Pa-O as a second nationality experience feelings of inferiority more strongly than the Mon. Not only are they a minority in relation to the Bamar but also in relation to the Shan, the Mon, the Karen, or the Kayah, depending on the state in which they live. As noted by a former monk, the lack of equality is the reason why Pa-O people started a revolution in the past: "We are under the domination of different ethnic groups who are bigger than us in terms of population, so we feel that discriminative policies are threatening us politically."[16] Some community members expressed that the relationship between Pa-O and Shan people was mostly good.[17] However, a number of participants said that they could still feel the remnants of the pre-independence autocratic power of the Shan. As a result, in addition to sixty years of military rule that have institutionalised the military's discriminatory behaviour towards ethnic people, some CSO members said that they felt like third-class citizens in Shan State.[18]. Some elite members criticised the Shan for disliking the Pa-O because they believed that Shan State belonged to them.[19] The senior PNA officer even claimed that Shan authorities have sent letters to Pa-O authorities ordering them to go back to Thaton.[20] Not only does proximity with the Shan affect the preservation of Pa-O cultural traditions, but also the Pa-O are more vulnerable to conflict (as discussed in chapter 4). As a result, Pa-O feel that Shan people look down on them and act like the Bamar, similarly practising "Shanisation."[21] Pa-O living in Karen State share to a lesser extent similar feelings. A member of the Pa-O LCO explained that before Karen State was

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[14] A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72.
[15] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66.
[16] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[17] Farmer, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #48; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[18] Pa-O Youth Organization chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #31; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[19] Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[20] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[21] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.

established 60 years ago, all ethnic people living in the area including Pa-O enjoyed the same rights and opportunities. According to him, this changed after the area was named Karen State as Karen were now prioritised over Pa-O. [22]

To sum up, many Mon and Pa-O participants described feelings of inferiority and helplessness as a result ethnic discrimination. Many felt like "second class citizens" or even "third class citizens" in the case of some Pa-O. Indeed, being a second nationality represents an additional challenge as this raises the question of membership at the state level.

5.1.2 A sense of exclusion from the national community

In addition to experiencing ethnicity as an inferior status, Mon and Pa-O often face a feeling of exclusion from the national identity, which is linked with the political insecurity discussed in chapter 4. While chapter 4 stressed that many participants still see the NLD as a Bamar dominated party, this section further highlights how the NLD perpetuates a form of Bamar chauvinism that numerous Mon and Pa-O resent as a form of exclusion. Furthermore, it discusses the country's name, which many also experience as a form of Bamar chauvinism.

First, the Bamar dominance of the political system is described as a "dictatorship of the majority" because many feel that the democratic election of the NLD perpetuates the supremacy of the Bamar. It is thus not uncommon to hear Mon and Pa-O talk about the NLD as the "Bamar government".[23] In NMSP-controlled Kyainseikgyi Township, Mon villagers don't talk about the "government office" or the "government school" but about the "Bamar office" and the "Bamar school."[24] Likewise, many Mon community members in government-controlled areas perceive the NLD as a chauvinist party.[25] For

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[22] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63.
[23] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[24] Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.
[25] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12; Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14;

instance, referring to "Bridge-gate" and the actions of the NLD majority in the *Pyithu Hluttaw,* a group of women said that, "The Bamar are trying to control us by imposing names."[26] This reference to the majority ethnic group clearly demonstrates that they do not feel included by government institutions. A Pa-O social welfare worker explained that the government did not make people feel that they were part of the country. "They think that they are responsible for building the whole country. They use 'Union' as a country name, but they are working to maintain Bamar superiority. If they really had a 'Union' mindset, everything would be fine."[27] Similarly, a group of Pa-O villagers complained: "Now, the winner group does not care about us because we are not from the same ethnic group. It feels like they are not our parents or they are parents that do not look after us."[28] This sense of exclusion is also reflected in the peace negotiations, where many Mon feel that they do have much weight. A Mon political party member noted that the behaviour of Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing was particularly condescending as he considers himself the actual leader of the country.[29]

Second, a majority of participants experience the country name as a form of exclusion. In 1988 the former military government decided to change the country's English name to "Myanmar" instead of "Burma" without consulting its people. This decision was based on the claim that "Myanmar" is an older term, which unlike "Burma", represents all ethnic groups and does not carry any colonial connotation.[30] To the contrary, most of the participants argued that Myanmar was not representative of all ethnic groups because there was no clear distinction between Bamar and Myanmar. Indeed, since "Myanmar" can be interchangeably used with "Bamar" in order to refer to the majority group, a majority of participants from all socio-political backgrounds view the name as a reminder of Bamar dominance and an expression of Bamar privilege.[31] As several

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Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4.

[26] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.

[27] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.

[28] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.

[29] Mon National Party member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #6.

[30] Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, 30.

[31] Pa-O Youth Organization chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #31; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43; Farmer, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #48; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Pa-O National

Mon and Pa-O participants explained, "Myanmar" is not inclusive because it is also used to refer to the majority group's language and culture.[32] In addition, as a group of Pa-O youth noted, "Since Bamar people say that the country flag is their own ethnic group's flag, Myanmar country means that it is Bamar people's country."[33]

A number of Pa-O elite and community members, however, accepted the government's claim that "Myanmar" was representative.[34] Some Pa-O elites argued that calling the country Myanmar was actually fair because Myanmar people represented the majority group or because it was the country where the Myanmar language was spoken.[35] In some focus groups conducted in Pa-O areas, participants were divided as some pointed at contradictions within the government discourse, referring to a statement that Aung San Suu Kyi's would have made, saying that Bamar and Myanmar were alike.[36] Comparatively, less Mon people accepted the government's claim.[37]

As a result, many participants rejected the use of Myanmar as the name of the country because it is not inclusive. As some villagers living in the NMSP-controlled area of Ye Township commented, the name "Myanmar" made them feel that the Bamar own the country.[38] Other villagers in a government-controlled area simply said that they did not

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Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Farmers, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #42; Militia soldiers, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #36; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.

[32] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35.

[33] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.

[34] Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45, 61; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; Retired veterinary, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Interview #80, July 2017; Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.

[35] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45, 45; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.

[36] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.

[37] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.

[38] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

accept the name because they were Mon, not Myanmar.[39] Several Pa-O people were angry about the government's insistence that Myanmar was representative of all ethnic groups.[40] A Pa-O woman, who was mostly silent during the focus discussion held in Pinlaung Township, had a strong reaction when the issue of the country name was raised, saying: "The Myanmar name is a symbolic oppression of Pa-O people."[41] Finally, one Pa-O made the following statement, which captures the feeling of exclusion that a simple name can cause: "Myanmar does not refer to a diverse country, this is a Bamar country, so we ethnic people feel like we are 'country-less'; Bamar is the boss and ethnic people are slaves."[42]

To conclude, the dominance of the Bamar is experienced as a form of Bamar chauvinism that creates feelings of inferiority and exclusion from the national identity. The following section examines how this impacts attitudes towards ethnicity and nation building.

5.2 The question of belonging

The question of belonging to a national identity that creates feelings of inferiority and exclusion can be problematic for ethnic groups such as the Mon and the Pa-O. However, as Walton explains "non-Burman national sentiment has varied in the degree to which it is oriented primarily in opposition to a dominant Burman national identity."[43] While framing the Bamar as the enemy only reinforces and legitimises conflict between groups, framing Bamar chauvinism as the main obstacle can potentially make space for an ethnically cohesive national identity. In this section, looking at Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and the national identity, I seek to determine the intensity of Mon and Pa-O nationalism and whether it is oriented mostly against Bamar chauvinism. In light of the insecurities highlighted in chapter 4 and the feelings of inferiority and exclusion discussed above, this section considers the

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[39] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14.
[40] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.
[41] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[42] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[43] Walton, "Nation Building," 400.

question of belonging and whether one identifies more as ethnic Mon or Pa-O, or as a citizen of Myanmar. I thus examine three main views that can be classified along a continuum: rigid ethnic identification therefore rejection of Myanmar citizenship as an inclusive national identity; acceptance of a dual identification with both ethnicity and the Myanmar national identity; and recognition of Myanmar national identity as primary identification. When possible, I seek to understand people's attitudes towards ethnicity in light of their group's specific contextual variation (as described in chapter 3). I also argue against the assumption that community members may have more flexible attitudes towards ethnicity than members of the nationalist elite.[44] Finally, I contend that while many Mon and Pa-O participants expressed strong nationalist attitudes, many recognise the possibility of identifying to the national identity.

5.2.1 Rigid ethnic identification and rejection of Myanmar identity

Rigid identification to one's ethnic group usually implies the outright rejection of any identification to a common identity. While the Mon tend to reject identification to a Myanmar identity because of the discriminations induced via Bamar privilege, some Pa-O participants expressed negative feelings towards the Bamar and the repressive nature of the government. A majority of Mon participants declared that they identified primarily as Mon nationals, with many rejecting any identification with Myanmar citizenship, principally because they do not get any benefit from a government that is associated with the Bamar ethnic group. Unsurprisingly a number of CSO members closely affiliated to the Mon armed group strongly refused to acknowledge their Myanmar citizenship even when going abroad, preferring to present themselves as Mon.[45]

Among community members living in government-controlled areas, a strong sense of dissatisfaction was generally expressed. Women from Chaungzon Township clearly identified more as Mon nationals. "We are not satisfied being citizens of this country

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[44] For a detailed analysis of this assumption across Mon socio-political categories, see Cecile Medail, "Forming an Inclusive National Identity in Myanmar: Voices of Mon People," in *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*, ed. Justine Chambers et al., Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 277–308.

[45] Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.

because there are no job opportunities and incomes are not good."[46] One of them shared how she experienced discrimination when mentioning her Myanmar citizenship abroad: "When I worked in Thailand, I said I was a Myanmar citizen. Because Thai people understand that "Myanmar citizen" equals Bamar ethnicity, they did not give me a job easily. After I explained I was Mon, I could get a job easily. Even I cannot understand this well, I feel it is different." Similarly in Mudon Township, a group of villagers consider themselves primarily as Mon. "In former times, we were not Myanmar citizens. We were Mon, because we had our own palace, culture, traditions and literature. We are Mon ethnic and should be Mon citizens."[47] In Paung Township, villagers were straightforward in rejecting identification to Myanmar: "We are Mon ethnic people living in Myanmar country, not Myanmar citizens."[48]

In conflict-affected areas, since villagers had to endure abuses committed by the Myanmar army and relied on the NMSP for their basic needs, strong nationalist standpoints are found more often. Unsurprisingly, villagers living in remote NMSP-controlled areas tend to reject Myanmar citizenship. They did not, however, report negative relationships with the Bamar. In Kyainseikgyi Township, Mon National School teachers and students accepted Mon identification only because they live in a Mon area.[49] Villagers in Ye Township shared rather negative feelings towards Myanmar citizenship, pointing at the impacts of the civil war: "I am really disappointed to be a Myanmar citizen. Since it was difficult to travel and find income, many people under 40 are not educated. Currently it is very similar: many other states and townships are developed but not ours."[50] A youth group in Kyaikmayaw Township equally rejected Myanmar citizenship: "We don't want to be Myanmar citizens because we never get support from the government. Whenever I see 'Myanmar citizen' on my ID card, it is

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[46] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[47] Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13.
[48] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[49] Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8; Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10.
[50] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

really painful […] actually we should be Mon citizens."[51]

Similarly, a majority of Pa-O participants declared that they identified primarily as Pa-O nationals, with many rejecting any identification with Myanmar citizenship, principally because it is associated with the Bamar ethnic group.[52] Unlike Mon participants, many Pa-O participants often still perceive the Bamar as the enemy. Some PNO members in Kyauttalong Township explained that since the military committed many abuses in the past, "It is automatic in people's minds, we hate Myanmar people."[53] A group of villagers south of Taunggyi similarly declared that: "We hate Bamar people because of Burmanisation: they have a lot of army stations, even in town."[54] Some community members - particularly from rural areas - still found it difficult to deal with the Bamar because of their lack of honesty or aggressive behaviours.[55] Some nationalist elites still expressed resentment towards Bamar people: some because they were victims of bullying, others because they faced discrimination abroad as a result of the Bamar's bad reputation.[56]. According to a former monk, Bamar were never good to Pa-O, so they were disliked even within the family: "If my daughter married a Bamar, I would not like him."[57] A farmer whose house was burned down three times by the Bamar army summed up these negative feelings: "There might be some good Bamar people; however, most of them are not good; I am not talking with hatred, it is my true life experience."[58]

Gradually however, the view that Bamar people are the enemy seems to be losing ground. Some villagers described how the hatred previously felt towards Bamar people has started

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[51] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[52] Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[53] PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[54] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[55] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.
[56] Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[57] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.
[58] Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.

to shift since the ceasefire and later the transition.[59] Interviews generally confirmed that feelings of hatred against Bamar people were not very high: many participants expressed neutral feelings when discussing their relationship with Bamar people. Some villagers even said that although there might be some issues at the leadership level, they did think they were much different from the Bamar.[60] As a CSO leader concluded, although some old or young people still hold negative stereotypes about Bamar who used to treat Pa-O badly, the relationship with the Bamar is now mostly good.[61]

Many Pa-O participants refused to accept a "Myanmar identity" because it is still associated with a repressive government. A writer described how the military requested him to wear Myanmar clothes during a literature award ceremony. He refused the request, wearing a Pa-O costume instead and thus expressing his attachment to a Pa-O identity.[62] A group of farmers living in a village situated north of Taunggyi rejected Myanmar citizenship because until now, the government was still under the control of the military.[63] Some CSO members in Thaton Township were not proud of being Myanmar citizens because the government did not respect citizen rights. "The government does not do anything that people can be proud of. If they respected community voices, they would not impose the bridge name in Mon Sate."[64] As PNLO leader Khun Okker summed up: "All ethnic people advance their ethnic identity above their citizenship because Myanmar has never referred to a common identity."[65]

To summarise, a majority of Mon and Pa-O – including those in rural areas inside and outside the PNO and NMSP's influences – rejected a Myanmar identity as it is mostly associated with the more privileged Bamar. While Mon participants tended to reject Myanmar identification because of their experience of discrimination, a number of Pa-O community members blamed a repressive form of government or even expressed

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[59] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[60] Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[61] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[62] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.
[63] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19.
[64] Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[65] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.

feelings of hatred towards the Bamar. The fact that the NMSP has never been co-opted by the government and has remained very popular is not sufficient to explain how people living under its control tend to adopt radical views because many Mon people living in government-controlled areas also expressed strong views. Also contradicting the assumption that when income is the main concern ethnic consciousness may be weaker, was the observation that the nationalist elite did not seem to hold stronger nationalist views than community people.

5.2.2 Mixed recognition of a dual belonging

A number of Mon and Pa-O expressed views recognising a dual belonging to their own ethnic group as well as to the Myanmar national identity. Surprisingly perhaps, a Mon National School teacher expressed a rather moderate view: "I am equally proud to be a Mon national and a Myanmar citizen because Mon State is a part of Myanmar, where different ethnic people with similar cultures live."[66] Similarly a Pa-O social welfare worker views citizenship and ethnicity as referring to two types of duties, "the duty to respect the law and the duty to maintain our culture," and therefore thinks that both should be equally accepted.[67] Other members of the nationalist community invoked various practical reasons for accepting a dual identification. For some Mon and Pa-O elites, it depends on the circumstances, as ethnicity can be used inside the country and citizenship outside the country.[68] Educated Pa-O people often accepted a dual identification simply because both Pa-O ethnicity and Myanmar citizenship appear on their ID cards.[69] Some PNO leaders recognised a dual identification while still insisting on the fact that Myanmar should not be confused with Bamar ethnicity.[70]

In rural areas, more Mon than Pa-O seemed to accept a dual identification. As some Pa-O village committee members put it, "Even though we are not yet being treated equally, it hurts when I think of the fighting in Kachin state, so I feel a sense of belonging as a

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[66] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.
[67] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[68] Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46, January 2017; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69.
[69] Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78.
[70] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.

Myanmar citizen."[71] In government-controlled areas, Mon living alongside Bamar seemed to be more oblivious of their identity, perhaps because they are more vulnerable to assimilation. A group of youth from Chaungzon Township did not understand questions of identity and initially identified more as Myanmar citizens until the discussion facilitator explained the difference between ethnicity and citizenship. Then they changed their minds and identified as both.[72] Many focus group participants expressed rather neutral views, recognising that as a matter of fact they identified both with Mon ethnicity and Myanmar citizenship.[73] A group of men from Chaungzon Township similarly shared their indifference, while not hiding a feeling of unfairness: "We cannot think whether we are proud to be Myanmar citizens or not. We just know that it is difficult to survive in this country. But even though we are Myanmar citizens, we are Mon and we have no chance to study Mon as an official subject even at university."[74]

Finally, many Pa-O from different socio-political backgrounds and some Mon nationalist elites accepted the possibility of dual identification if certain aspects of Bamar privilege could be diluted through the realisation of certain conditions which the final section of this chapter discusses further. [75]

In summary, some Mon and Pa-O are ready to accept a dual identification in the name of diversity while others would accept it for practical reasons. The fact that some Pa-O and Mon nationalist elites expressed some willingness to identify both as members of

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[71] Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[72] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2.
[73] Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5; Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6; Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7.
[74] Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14.
[75] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Pa-O Youth Organization chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #31; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.

their ethnic group and as Myanmar nationals shows that although they are involved in promoting their ethnic identity in various ways they do not always have strong ethno-nationalist views. Similarly, some community members expressed support for a dual identification, but the pattern is different between Mon and Pa-O participants. Pa-O community members living inside the SAA expressed more support for a dual identification than those living outside the SAA. The fact that non-SAA residents may have experienced discrimination more directly by the Bamar while not benefiting from the PNO's accommodation strategy can explain such a trend. Conversely, only Mon people living under government control expressed indifference and agreed to a dual identification, perhaps because of their proximity with the Bamar and their economic situation.

5.2.3 Few responses in favour of primary identification to a Myanmar national identity

Positive responses in favour of primary identification to the Myanmar national identity were unsurprisingly very few. Among Pa-O political figures who primarily identified as Myanmar citizens were several participants outside the Pa-O stronghold in Southern Shan State, including the former Pa-O ethnic minister in Karen state, a Pa-O LCO member and a Pa-O Youth Network leader in Kayah State.[76] While such positions within the Pa-O nationalist elite may be surprising, the distinctive characteristics of the Pa-O group may provide an explanation. Indeed, the loose geographic connection of Pa-O people in Kayah and Karen States to their counterparts in Shan State may contribute to a need to align with a national identity. More predictably, a Pa-O member of the NLD identified as a Myanmar citizen because according to him, "All ethnic people in Myanmar can be compared to a family, where brothers and sisters own the house together." Other elite members advanced a number of reasons for valuing the national identity more than ethnicity. For instance, since many ethnic groups live together, it was argued that working for the whole country would bring more benefits than working for

[76] Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18.

a single ethnic identity.[77] Finally, it is interesting to note that among non-elite community members, primary identification with Myanmar citizenship only occurred once and this took place during a discussion with Pa-O villagers in Karen State, which, as mentioned earlier, was attended by the village's Special Branch agent.[78] Among Mon participants, only a Mon party member chose Myanmar citizenship as a main identity, "because it creates a responsibility to work to change the country."[79]

To conclude, although more research could be conducted to expand the sample, Mon and Pa-O from all socio-political groups expressed attitudes ranging across a continuum of views from rigid ethnic identification to primary identification with the Myanmar national identity. This contradicts the assumption that participants could be rigidly classified within a shared set of attitudes. The fact that only a few participants accepted a Myanmar national identity while a majority of participants rejected it indicates that Mon and Pa-O overwhelmingly hold rigid attitudes towards ethnicity. Many participants also accept the possibility of a dual identification, and this indicates that there is room for policies promoting a sense of belonging to the national community. Indeed, the fact that only some Pa-O participants directed their nationalist behaviour against Bamar people shows that Bamar chauvinism is the main obstacle to national belonging (and not the Bamar as a people). This reflects NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar's view that non-Bamar groups have been engaged in armed conflict against the central government for decades only because "the successive governments in power, espousing chauvinism/ultra-nationalism, have employed force to attempt to deny the rights of the other ethnic nationalities in order to absorb them into (…) the dominant ethnic Burman group."[80]

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[77] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72.
[78] Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25.
[79] Mon National Party member, Yangon, Interview #13.
[80] Nai Hongsa, "The Way Forward for Peace, Progress and Stability in Burma/Myanmar," in *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma.*, ed. Ashley South and Marie Lall (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), 88–89.

5.3 Promoting national belonging

The limited recognition of a sense of belonging to the state-wide community confirms perceptions that currently, the national identity mostly refers to the Bamar. Indeed, with a vision of the national identity that perpetuates Bamar privilege and creates feelings of inferiority and exclusion, it is understandable that a majority of Mon and Pa-O will primarily identify with their ethnicity. Building on Walton's claim that recognising Bamar privilege is essential in order to achieve ethnic peace and unity, Mon and Pa-O perceptions seem to indicate that in order to redress Bamar privilege and simultaneously strengthen a sense of belonging to the Myanmar national identity, discriminatory practices and assimilationist policies should be revised or abandoned. Indeed, as noted earlier, many Mon and Pa-O suggested they would be ready to accept a dual identification, including the recognition of a Myanmar national identity, if policies promoting equality and thus addressing the cultural, economic, social and political insecurities were implemented.

First, equality as understood in terms of access to opportunities is essential to reduce the feeling that people are under the control of the majority group and commonly experience discrimination as a result of their ethnicity.[81] According to a senior PNLO leader, "If all citizens of Myanmar could have more equal rights and opportunities without discrimination between the Bamar and other ethnic groups, people would be more willing to adopt a Myanmar spirit."[82] Similarly, some PNO members explained that it would be possible to overcome people's dislike of a Myanmar identity if Bamar leaders were open minded and gave equal rights so that the same standards would apply to all ethnic groups.[83] For an old Pa-O man in Tiha village, the major issue was "to have equality and safety for our lives."[84]

Second, equality as understood in terms of self-rule and cultural protection is perceived as essential to promote national belonging. In the words of NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong

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[81] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[82] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33, December 2016.
[83] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59.
[84] Old man, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #82.

Sar, claims for recognition of ethnic identity and self-rule do not exclude potential identification to the national identity: "Only if people can feel that their identity is recognised can they then start to feel they belong to the country."[85] Similarly, a Mon CSO leader expressed that the accommodation of political demands for equal rights is essential in order to develop a sense of belonging to Myanmar as a nation.[86] Farmers from Hsiseng Township noted that: "In order to be part of a Myanmar identity, we want complete equality because we are afraid to be assimilated to the Bamar nation."[87] For a PNO lawyer, "it would be easier to feel as a 'Myanmar' if the military really promoted a mutual understanding, respected ethnic people and promoted ethnic rights."[88] Many villagers from Tiha expressed that they would be proud to identify as both Pa-O and Myanmar citizens if people could have equality and cultures could be protected.[89] For elite and community members, this often implicates the creation of a federal state. As some Pa-O villagers noted, "We did not choose to be citizens of Myanmar. I would like to be a citizen of a federal country."[90] Similarly, members of the Pa-O nationalist community would proudly accept a dual identification as Pa-O and Myanmar citizens, if such equality could translate into the creation of "a real federal union" that "respects of human rights, ethnic rights and citizen rights."[91]

In summary, Mon and Pa-O perceptions indicate that the promotion of equality through the adoption of policies ensuring access to opportunities, self-rule and protection of ethnic cultures would effectively redress Bamar privilege and thus support a sense of belonging to the national community.

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[85] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3.
[86] Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18.
[87] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[88] Pa-O National Organisation lawyer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #39.
[89] Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38; Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.
[90] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22.
[91] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the dominance of the Bamar is experienced by Mon and Pa-O as a feeling of inferiority and exclusion from the national identity. However, an examination of Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnic identity and the national identity revealed that there is room for policies promoting national belonging. Indeed, while a majority of Mon and Pa-O participants tend to identify strongly with their ethnicity, many participants also have moderate attitudes as they can imagine the possibility of a dual identification, both as member of their ethnic group and as a Myanmar national. Despite the persistence of perceptions of the Bamar as the "enemy", Mon and Pa-O attitudes generally indicate that Bamar chauvinism is the main obstacle to national belonging. Indeed, for many Mon and Pa-O, policies promoting equality would significantly enhance a feeling of belonging to the national community. While this confirms Walton's claim that Bamar privilege should be acknowledged to achieve ethnic peace and unity, I argue that that defining reforms in terms of promoting a sense of belonging to the national identity as opposed to redressing Bamar privilege, could be very positive for nation-building. Indeed, since this terminology does not directly blame the Bamar it would perhaps appear a bit more acceptable for the majority. The following chapter further considers what Mon and Pa-O people perceive as conditions for a redress of Bamar privilege and the promotion of an inclusive national membership.

CHAPTER 6 - Ethnic Aspirations: Equality and Autonomy

This chapter considers the aspirations expressed by Mon and Pa-O nationalist elites and community members in response to the insecurities exposed in chapter 4. As noted in chapter 1, the Panglong agreement is still celebrated for its symbolic achievement of national unity.[1] However, Aung San's promise of autonomy and equality is yet to be fulfilled and as a result, the country has not found its way to peace. Instead, as highlighted in earlier chapters, inequality with the Bamar constitutes the Mon and Pa-O's main overarching grievance and the dominance of a Bamar national identity is perceived as the main obstacle to national membership and therefore peace.

Building on the previous chapter's indication that policies promoting equality at all levels at which Mon and Pa-O people experience insecurities could promote a sense of belonging, I seek to understand, from perspectives shared by Mon and Pa-O, what specific institutions and policies should be in place to fulfil Aung San's promise. While I found that Mon and Pa-O aspirations reflect these two basic demands, I analysed them using an "ethnic aspirations framework" that I developed using concepts from the ethnic conflict management literature outlined in chapter 2.

6.1 Ethnic aspirations framework

To organise the various cultural and political policies or institutions that Mon and Pa-O referred to as a way to address their insecurities, I propose to use a framework which draws from two existing classifications.[2] After giving a brief overview of each categorisation, this section describes how they can be adapted to fit into the context of present-day Myanmar.

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[1] Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma."
[2] Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*; Gurr, *Minority at Risk*; Levy, *Classifying Cultural Rights*; Mikesell and Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations."

6.1.1 Gurr's three types of minority group grievances

Ted Gurr identifies three general issues of contention between communal groups and states: demands for secession; for greater autonomy; or for equality of status.[3] First, demands for secession refer to the severing of the relationship between the group and the state through the creation of a new state or transfer to a neighbouring state. Second, demands for greater autonomy imply that a group has a regional collective power base. Within this second demand, Gurr identifies five forms of "arrangements" that can be employed to accommodate autonomist claims, depending on the extent of the powers devolved to the group: confederalism, federalism, regional autonomism, administrative decentralisation and community autonomism.[4] Within these frameworks, issues specific to communal movements can be dealt with more easily. These issues include the group's rights to teach and use its own language through cultural autonomy, guarantees of control over natural resources and economic development, development funding from the central government, communal control of internal security and justice, the right to participate in decisions that affect the group, and protection of the rights of communal members living outside the regional boundaries. Third, Gurr explains that demands for equality of status can have different "objectives": acceptance through the recognition and protection of their unique collective status; access through a combination of guaranteed economic opportunities or public subsidies; and participation when access to power is needed to protect the community's interests.

6.1.2 Mikesell and Murphy's framework for minority aspirations

Mikesell and Murphy propose to examine the aspirations of minority groups by focusing on a shared characteristic: the "expressed opposition to the established territorial-political order". They classify these aspirations into six categories: recognition, access, participation, separation, autonomy and independence.[5] Each aspiration is associated with several policy options along a unitarist-pluralist continuum. Since the first three claims are non-territorial, they can be accommodated within a unitarist state. Referring to the acknowledgment of group identity and the respect of its

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[3] Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 292.
[4] Gurr, *Minority at Risk*, 299.
[5] Mikesell and Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations," 588–89.

distinctiveness, recognition can be achieved through the establishment of special cultural institutions or the recognition of an official language or religion. Claims for access are associated with policies aimed at tackling discrimination such as anti-discrimination laws, affirmative actions and economic development assistance. Associated with power sharing and input in decision-making, participation can be achieved through proportional representation, quotas in government, special legislative majorities or vetoes. Conversely, the last three claims (separation, autonomy and independence) all involve a degree of territorial concentration. This can only exist in a pluralist state, except in the case of independence which would result in the creation of a new state. Separation reflects a group's desire to be exempted from certain social norms, often through community autonomism, such as the Chinese in Thailand or the Amish in the US.[6] Autonomy involves demands of territorial control which can translate into confederalism, federalism, regional autonomism or regional decentralisation.

While such a continuum may overlap with the integration/accommodation spectrum described in chapter 2, unitarist policies do not necessarily integrate communities into state structures if they allow the "public and institutional expression of differences in the public sphere."[7] However, they often reflect an integration move and thus are generally not considered sufficient to accommodate diversity in deeply divided societies. The advantage of such a framework is that it introduces different degrees of accommodation, which can be combined in order to characterise fully the demands of minority groups.

6.1.3 A framework for ethnic aspirations adapted to the Myanmar context

The analytical framework used in this chapter combines and adapts the classifications of both Gurr, and Mikesell and Murphy, to fit the Myanmar context. The main adaptation concerns demands of secession or independence, which both categorisations include. As chapter 3 has highlighted, the question of possible secession of ethnic areas under ethnic armed control has become a point of contention in the current peace process. This led to a deadlock in negotiations because NCA signatories commonly reject the wording of a non-secession clause, claiming that they should be trusted, as EAOs already dropped the

[6] Mikesell and Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations," 588.
[7] McGarry, O'Leary, and Simeon, "Integration or Accommodation?," 42.

demand for the right to secede in 2005.[8] In addition to not being on Myanmar EAOs' agendas anymore, demands for secession were not supported by any of the nationalist elite or community members that participated in this research. As a result, the proposed framework discards the claim for secession that both categorisations have included. I thus retained Gurr's two ethnic grievances that reflect the Panglong promises: demands for greater autonomy and demands for equality of status. I then divided these two main categories into sub-categories inspired by Mikesell and Murphy's aspirations. Finally, the policies associated with each aspiration often overlap with Gurr's proposed "arrangements" and "objectives."

Demands for equality of status therefore include recognition, participation and access. In addition, the category "symbolic measures" borrowed from Levy's classification, which concerns matters such as a flag, an anthem, a name and holidays, was added because of its relation to the concept of "belonging to the state".[9] Demands for greater autonomy distinguish between cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance. I use the term cultural autonomy instead of the "separation" concept proposed by Mikesell and Murphy because its contrast with territorial self-governance is more obvious: cultural autonomy demands focus on control over education, cultural and religious affairs, but not over territory.

Echoing the constructivist assumption that ideas and practices are co-constitutive advanced in chapter 2, the main advantage of this framework is that the association of each aspiration with a range of unitarist or pluralist policies reveals different possible degrees of accommodation and reflects variations in the intensity of ethnic identification and mobilisation. Indeed, from a constructivist perspective, the degree of ethnic identification can influence the type of claims articulated by a group as much as government responses can impact the tenacity of ethno-nationalism. As such, each aspiration and its associated policies have the potential to provide some indication on attitudes towards ethnicity. For instance, claims for equality of status, which include recognition, symbolic measures, access to opportunities and participation in political life involve cooperation with others and the coexistence of different identities. As

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[8] Kyaw Zaw Moe, "Why Peace Is so Elusive."
[9] Levy, *Classifying Cultural Rights*, 46–48.

highlighted in chapter 2, this tends to reflect moderate attitudes towards ethnicity. As a result, they are likely to be implemented within a unitary state and reflect a move towards integration. By contrast, claims for greater autonomy (cultural or territorial), suggest firm intra-group cohesion primarily based on ethnic markers of identity, which tend to be associated with more rigid attitudes towards ethnicity. Consequently, they can only be realised within a pluralist state, revealing a purer form of accommodation.

The following sections outline a number of policies reflecting demands for equality of status, and demands for greater autonomy which Mon and Pa-O people have identified as essential to address the insecurities covered in chapter 4.

6.2 Demands for equality of status

Demands for equality of status appear as a first step to overcome Bamar privilege because they partly address insecurities caused by cultural, economic and political discrimination. Such aspirations include the recognition and protection of the Mon and Pa-O's unique collective status; access to economic opportunities (through a combination of guaranteed economic opportunities or public subsidies); and political participation in order to protect the interests of Mon and Pa-O communities.

6.2.1 Recognition and protection of cultural rights

As noted earlier, current policies promoting the cultural assimilation of ethnic nationalities were criticised for creating a cultural insecurity. Mon and Pa-O participants indicated that the recognition and protection of cultural distinctiveness was essential to address this insecurity. Feeling that the protection of the rights of individuals would not be enough to achieve equality, many participants called for the adoption of laws protecting cultural rights and also including affirmative actions in order to ensure that past inequalities are addressed. They demanded that several official languages be recognised, that the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools be increased and that culture and history be promoted.

Recognising several official languages

For Mon people from all social groups, the recognition of ethnic languages as official languages in the states where they are spoken, would help address perceptions of Bamar privilege.[10] By contrast, only two Pa-O participants sought such recognition.[11] Several reasons were invoked. First, this would ensure that people find it less difficult to interact with the administration.[12] For example a group of villagers described how important such measures were since they would not feel disadvantaged or neglected when going to hospitals or to court.[13] However, participants disagreed on which languages should be recognised. For instance in Mon State, some community members argued that only Mon and Burmese should be government office languages,[14] while some nationalist elites claimed that Pa-O and Karen should also be recognised as they represent a decent proportion of the population.[15] A CSO member even claimed that Burmese should not be included.[16]

Second, the existence of several official languages would support ethnic cultures if combined with some affirmative actions. For instance, a monk suggested that this could positively contribute to the establishment of a Mon TV channel if technical support was provided to develop the capacity of Mon to make movies and TV shows.[17] Finally, it would also support a sense of inclusion. According to a Mon CSO leader, the use of

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[10] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Local Resource Centre Director, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #7, July 2016; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Mon Youth Progressive organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #11; Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Jeepyah, civil society development organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #17; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20; Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27; Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5; Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.

[11] Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.

[12] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1, 1.

[13] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.

[14] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5; Women villagers, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #7, 7.

[15] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.

[16] Mon Youth Progressive organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #11.

[17] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.

Mon language for ID cards registered in Mon state would have a very positive impact.[18] Likewise, a group of Pa-O farmers stressed that getting Pa-O language back on to the welcome sign at the entrance of Taunggyi would have similar benefits.[19]

Increasing the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools

The recognition of several official languages should be supported an affirmative action policy that ensures the promotion of ethnic languages. Many participants called for an increase in the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools. As discussed in chapter 4, Mon language education in state schools was reintroduced in 2013 (in Mon State) and Pa-O language education began in 2016 (for Pa-O living in Shan State).

While the Mon State government and political parties are somewhat praised for their role in achieving this, many Mon still requested that Mon language classes in government primary schools should occur during the regular school day and continued until high school in all Mon areas.[20] In addition, some Mon participants requested that the government should provide more proactive support in order to promote equality between government teachers and Mon teachers in order to ensure quality teaching in Mon language. For instance, salaries for Mon teachers are currently well below those of Bamar teachers - these should be increased and paid on time, and the government should provide training for Mon language teachers.[21] To a lesser extent, a number of Pa-O participants asked that Pa-O be taught as a subject in government schools during regular school time.[22] According to some Pa-O youth, without this, people won't really be able to understand "the deep meaning of words."[23] A teacher in Taunggyi added that in addition to promoting the introduction of daily Pa-O classes, the government should

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[18] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[19] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[20] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 21; Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2; Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.
[21] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.
[22] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74; Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35.
[23] Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.

support the training of qualified Pa-O teachers. This highlights that the joint PNO-Ministry of Education's initiative to train local teachers (mentioned in chapter 4), has yet to be implemented consistently.[24]

Promoting culture

Mon and Pa-O participants from different backgrounds asked that their culture be promoted. Some Pa-O elite members asked that permission be granted for cultural celebrations, support be given for educational cultural celebrations showcasing ethnic cultures and that there be participation in national cultural events using local language with translation.[25] A member of PNLO's development organisation asked that customary laws for ownership of farm, forest and natural resources be recognised.[26] In Mon State, nationalist elites and community members asked for the establishment of ethnic museums in places where different ethnic groups live.[27] Similarly, a Mon *sayadaw* and a group of Pa-O youth suggested that maintaining culture, literature and traditions implied that ethnic studies should be valued and thus asked for the creation of ethnic subjects as majors in universities for all ethnic groups.[28] Such measures would be significant in addressing Bamar privilege because they promote cultural equality.

Protecting ethnic history

Many Mon intellectuals noted the importance of protecting history. As a group of political party members from Paung Township put it, "This is the first step towards maintaining identity."[29] As a result, measures promoting research and changing government curricula were suggested. Some civil servants from the same township called for the government to support historical research.[30] While McCormick

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[24] Lall, "Diversity in Education," 27; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49.
[25] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64.
[26] Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52.
[27] Youth, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #1, 1; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60.
[28] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #28; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[29] Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.
[30] Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.

encourages research conducted by non-Mon people to counterbalance the tendency to adopt a lower threshold of verification for factual histories of one's own group, the same political party members called for research on Mon history by Mon experts only, in Mon State and other areas where Mon people live.[31]

In addition, despite the introduction of Mon textbooks in government primary schools noted in chapter 4, a number of Mon participants requested the reform of the history curriculum throughout the government school system. A group of youths from Chaungzon Township who did not know any Mon history before attending the focus group finally suggested that the Mon LCO should encourage the government to share Mon history with the next generation.[32] More specifically, a group of women in Paung Township requested the inclusion of Mon history in the government curriculum so that children could learn about it during school hours and not only after school or during summer school.[33] Similarly, some Pa-O nationalist elite members demanded that the government curriculum include elements of Pa-O history.[34] Both Mon and Pa-O elites stressed that not only could curriculum reform effectively protect ethnic cultures from assimilation but could also significantly reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege and therefore address a feeling of exclusion. Indeed, the adoption of a multicultural curriculum emphasising historical plurality and peaceful coexistence instead of the current centralised curriculum could significantly promote understanding between groups.[35]

To sum up, the recognition of cultural rights to protect linguistic, historical and cultural distinctiveness is perceived as an important step to redress Bamar privilege. Mon participants appeared to be more engaged with this claim than Pa-O because as noted in chapter 4, they generally feel more threatened by cultural insecurities.

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[31] McCormick, "Mon Histories"; Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.
[32] Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2.
[33] Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6.
[34] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74.
[35] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59.

6.2.2 Symbolic measures

Both Mon and Pa-O suggested that symbolic measures represent another way to address cultural insecurity. Closely linked to the recognition of cultural identity vs. assimilation, the symbolic measures called for included: the respect of local symbolic representations, names and days and the recognition of a symbolic territorial status. In addition, highlighting a desire for inclusiveness, Mon and Pa-O discussed the question of representative country and state names.

Respecting local symbolic representations, names and days

Claims for the respect and promotion of local symbols, ethnic holidays and names were again more frequent among Mon than among Pa-O. During my fieldwork, I witnessed the replacement of the alms bowl at the entrance of Mawlamyine by the Mon *Hinthar*, which was inaugurated on Mon Revolution Day. Although the uniforms of armed *Tatmadaw* soldiers stood out amidst the predominantly red and yellow coloured celebrations, the atmosphere was very festive and hopeful as the inauguration of the Brahminy duck was widely perceived as a symbolic step towards recognising the unique cultural heritage of the Mon. This is a start but there are many other symbolic measures needed in order to promote a sense of belonging to the national identity. For instance some Mon elite and community members believed that significant Mon cultural days (like Mon Revolution Day) could include even more people if they were declared as public holidays.[36] Such measures would not only support but value local identities. Putting ethnic special days on the same level as those decided by the Bamar (such as Independence or Martyr's Day) would thus help reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege and create a sense of inclusion.

Likewise, names can have the potential to increase or reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege. The "Bridge-gate" controversy in Mon State, which started only a few months after the *Hinthar* inauguration, demonstrates the impact of symbolic measures. As Walton lamented, while the re-writing of Myanmar's history is "a basic component of national reconciliation (…) the much simpler step of just recognizing local agency in

[36] Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Youth, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #2; Political party members, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #4; Civil servants, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #5.

naming a landmark is even too difficult for the current government."[37] The symbolic decision of renaming the bridge according to local desire would indeed be positively perceived as an effort to contribute to national reconciliation thereby reducing the perception of Bamar privilege. A Mon woman from Chaungzon expressed that she would feel respected: "If the government respected local people, we could have many places with Mon names."[38] Similarly, a group of political party members from Paung Township hoped that the name of the old Hongsawaddy Palace could be changed back to its Mon name to reflect its true history.[39] In addition, although exhibiting the Mon flag in NMSP-controlled areas was not an issue at the time of my research, a CSO member commented that people in government-controlled areas should be allowed to use the Mon flag without facing questions from authorities.[40]

The symbolic dimension of territorial recognition

Territorial recognition can have a strong symbolic dimension, as the SAA status granted by the 2008 constitution to three Pa-O Townships in Shan State demonstrates.[41] Even though in chapter 4, people expressed the view that the SAA is essentially irrelevant because it has no real autonomy, many members of the nationalist community expressed satisfaction with this new official status, which gives them a sense of ownership and also promotes their existence around the country.[42] As a social welfare worker put it, "With the SAA, I feel like I own my house, I am not renting anymore."[43] Similarly, many community members expressed pride in the SAA because they perceive it as an important way to promote their identity.[44] Some of the research participants however criticised the SAA for not providing an equal status with the

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[37] Walton, "Has the NLD Learned Nothing about Ethnic Concerns?"
[38] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[39] Political party members, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #3.
[40] Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[41] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 56 (c).
[42] Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.
[43] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66.
[44] Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38.

majority group and therefore not sufficiently redressing Bamar privilege. Furthermore, interviews and focus groups revealed that a high number of Pa-O participants were attached to the creation of a Pa-O State in Southern Shan State.[45] Arguing that the Pa-O population is higher than the entire population of Kayah State or Chin State, a number of elite members believed that a Pa-O State should be created because this would provide a higher symbolic status and therefore ensure that Pa-O would not be looked down upon.[46] When discussing the status of Pa-O territory, community members often declared with a strong emphasis: "Of course we want a Pa-O state!" "We want [a Pa-O state] immediately!" or with sadness "Why do we not have our own state yet?"[47]

Changing the name of the country

As noted in chapter 5, Myanmar as country name illustrates the sense of exclusion experienced as a result of the dominant Bamar identity. Many people feel uncomfortable that "Myanmar" and "Bamar" can be used interchangeably and therefore do not consider "Myanmar" as representative of all ethnic groups. As a result, a majority of Mon and Pa-O participants from all socio-political groups expressed a desire to change the country name so that it does not refer to any ethnicity in particular. Some participants, such as a Mon villager in an NMSP-controlled area, made very strong statements: "I would like to change it so much, even since before I was born!

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[45] Monks, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #57; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78; Retired veterinary, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Interview #80; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.

[46] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66.

[47] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Militia soldiers, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #36; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.

Others feel the same."[48] Several Pa-O elite members explained that such a move would support a sense of belonging and therefore promote reconciliation.[49] Even the Pa-O MP who accepts the name as representative of the majority group expressed that, "As the majority, the Bamar are the big brothers and therefore should be good minded with the young ethnic brothers by changing the country name."[50] Many focus group participants were eager to come up with new names such as "Ethnic federal Union" or "Union of ethnic states."

Since changing the name of the country is a sensitive issue, a few participants who disagreed with the name expressed some reservations. For U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of the Mon *Pye-nay Hluttaw,* who strongly opposed the bridge naming decision, the name of the country is not as important as local place names.[51] For the NMSP, since the name of the country is highly controversial, discussions should first prioritise political and institutional solutions.[52] Similarly, a number of Pa-O elites and some villagers insisted that the recognition and protection of ethnic identities, equality, self-determination and the capacity to live together were more important.[53] Furthermore, many Pa-O from different backgrounds expressed feelings of helplessness, deploring that changing the name was not a realistic option unless the majority group acknowledges the existence of its privilege.[54] Indeed, as a PNLO member argued, holding a referendum on the name would be unfair to ethnic people because the Bamar

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[48] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[49] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[50] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
[51] U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #30.
[52] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3.
[53] Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[54] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46; Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.

majority group would inevitably win the vote.[55] A few Mon people, who resigned themselves to accept Myanmar as a country name, stressed that a public statement defining the use of Myanmar would be helpful.[56]

Overall, while a majority of Mon and Pa-O people indicated that changing country's name would help redress Bamar privilege, many participants acknowledged the great difficulty involved (as this would imply an active recognition of Bamar privilege by the Bamar) and thus they suggested that other measures promoting inclusiveness should be prioritised.

The question of state names

Illustrating the additional challenge of building of an inclusive intra-state common identity, many participants debated whether the state names should be changed in order to reflect their cultural diversity or whether they should be kept in order to promote ethnic identity. Unlike the Pa-O who are a second nationality within Shan State, the Mon represent the dominant group in Mon state. Thus while the renaming of ethnic states rarely came up in discussions with Mon participants it was pretty common among Pa-O participants.[57] Many Pa-O argued that attachment to ethnic state names can fuel ethnic nationalism among different groups living in the same state. They thought choosing state names that do not reflect the name of a state's ethnic majority could ideally help avoid conflict among ethnic groups.[58] According to a CSO leader, people

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[55] Pa-O National Organisation Media, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #69.
[56] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[57] Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.
[58] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O National Organisation lawyer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #39; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.

could be more united around a common identity if geographic names such as "*Kamboza Dain*" instead of Shan State were used. It would indeed be more difficult to organise people around a single ethno-centred identity and at the same time much easier to maintain each identity without hatred.[59] However, views remained quite divided. This is not surprising given the importance of the symbolic recognition of the SAA status highlighted earlier.

Many participants thus advocated for the preservation of ethnic state names. Some Pa-O elite members argued that changing the names of ethnic states would be too difficult as it "touches the ethnic ego" and could even be counterproductive.[60] As a senior PNA officer put it, "Ethnic groups deserve their ethnic consciousness and their own rights so they will claim areas with their ethnic names."[61] Some participants stressed that while the creation of non-ethnic states was important to support a sense of belonging and reflect ethnic diversity in multi-ethnic areas, some areas should conserve ethnic names in order to preserve ethnic identity.[62] Others specifically mentioned that while state names based on geography would be preferable they would still support the creation of a Pa-O state if other ethnic groups were not ready to give up ethnic based names.[63] As the Pa-O NLD member put it, "all ethnic people own the country like all brothers and sisters own the family house together, so all ethnic people should be recognised."[64]

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[59] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[60] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.
[61] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58.
[62] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71.
[63] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33; Kaung Rwai social action network chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #36; Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43.
[64] Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43.

Finally, some participants stressed that building trust was more important than names.[65]

To sum up, Mon and Pa-O participants indicated that measures promoting the symbolic representation of a group would be a significant help in reducing the perception of Bamar privilege and promote national belonging. Their views however reflected some variations. Both Mon and Pa-O called for a more inclusive country name although some participants were very sceptical about its likelihood. Mon participants seemed to prioritise local cultural days and place-names while Pa-O participants were more concerned with the recognition of territorial status and the question of state names. To conclude, some symbolic measures such as local cultural days and place-names provide a soft target for policies that seek to promote belonging whereas measures such as changing the country's name or state names are more controversial because they directly touch the "ethnic ego". Consequently, despite their strong potential, any significant measures to overcome Burman privilege and promote national membership, at least in the cultural dimension, remain sensitive.

6.2.3 Access to economic and social opportunities

As noted earlier, the economic dominance of the Bamar is perceived across all socio-political groups as a major cause of economic and social insecurity. Therefore, claims for access to economic and social opportunities appear as essential in order to reduce inequality. In addition, it offers a concrete way to build trust and sustain political legitimacy.[66] Indeed, most participants claimed that a guarantee of equal rights and opportunities to all citizens of Myanmar in terms of economic power and social benefits is essential to promote a sense of belonging. According to Mon and Pa-O participants, measures in this direction should include the fair distribution of revenue from the sale of natural resources in order to ensure equal development of ethnic areas and the development of strategies to address the livelihood crisis.

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[65] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.

[66] Yaw Bawm Mangshang and Mike Griffiths, "Social Protection in Myanmar: A Key Mechanism for Political Legitimacy?," in *Myanmar Transformed?: People, Places and Politics*, ed. Justine Chambers et al., Myanmar Update Series (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 53–84.

Natural resources distribution and equal development of ethnic areas

Many Mon and Pa-O participants from all social backgrounds expressed that equality implied an equitable share of natural resource revenues with ethnic states. As a social worker explained, "Mon State has a lot of natural resources, so there should be more benefits for the local community.[67] In order to guarantee equality, the control of the economy should not be monopolised by the central government. Indeed, if the control of natural resources were delegated to states, this would ensure that local areas could benefit from taxes imposed on companies.[68] Mon and Pa-O from different backgrounds insisted that when the central government manages development projects, revenues should be shared so that people from where the resources come from benefit from it, rather than just undergoing adverse effects on their health and environment. [69] Similarly, Mon community members in government-controlled areas would like to see that companies contribute to the development of the local area, employ local people and support the youth. By contrast, Mon villagers in NMSP-controlled Kyaikmayaw Township would simply like the nearby coalmine operation to stop.[70] In addition, some Pa-O demanded that the development budget promote equality between rural and urban areas and reach out to ethnic states instead of prioritising the Yangon and Mandalay regions.[71] As some Pa-O villagers noted, "the government should be fair like parents who provide an equal amount of money to each child."[72] Consequently, the fair distribution of natural resource revenues would ensure more equal development of ethnic states in terms of access to education, health and infrastructure.

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[67] Social worker, Paung, Mon State, Interview #21.
[68] Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16.
[69] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9; Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Pa-O NLD chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #43; Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.
[70] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16; Women, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Focus group #17.
[71] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[72] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.

Education

Many Pa-O from all socio-political backgrounds perceive the development of the education sector as the highest priority. A number of community members suggested the adoption of three important measures in order to redress inequalities.[73] First, although since 2015 schooling is free until high school, they argued that education could only be accessible to all, regardless of the family income, if support was provided to address the hidden costs of education highlighted in chapter 4. Second, primary schools should be built in all villages and more middle and high schools should be opened at the village level. Third, better teaching quality should be ensured by reforming the teacher-centred curriculum, providing training for teachers, recruiting teachers from local areas and providing vocational training for youth. Such reforms, however, began during the Thein Sein government and the newer, more child-centred textbooks and training for teachers have been introduced gradually in the last few years, one grade at a time.[74] In addition, some PNO members emphasised the responsibility of the community, arguing that educated people and community leaders should be mobilised in order to share knowledge while parents should be encouraged to support their children to pursue a university education.[75]

One of the main impacts of education is the creation of income opportunities. Some villagers highlighted that if the education system was good, young people could support their parents to improve their lives and help the community.[76] Some participants noted that education was a marker of democracy and therefore an essential tool to improve the struggle for equality and respect. Indeed, democracy can only happen if people are educated and therefore able to access information, think critically, and make informed

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[73] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Hotel manager, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #81; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.

[74] Oxford Business Group, "The Report: Myanmar 2017," February 2, 2017, https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/back-basics-major-changes-education-sector-are-under-way; The Japan Times, "Myanmar Adopts New First-Grade Curriculum with Help from Japan," June 20, 2017, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/20/national/myanmar-adopts-new-first-grade-curriculum-help-japan/.

[75] PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.

[76] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.

choices in order to solve community issues.[77] For this to happen, participants suggested that political awareness training should be provided to community members and youth so they can understand how it links to their daily lives.[78] For instance, it is essential to educate people about their rights and explain strategies of how to engage with authorities so they can be brave and dare to express their needs.[79] As a result of increased political awareness through education, it is more likely that policies can be developed with the participation of the public, at the community level, and therefore provide appropriate support to areas that are most in need.[80]

Health

To a lesser extent, Mon and Pa-O participants requested the improvement of health facilities by supporting clinics, nurses and providing medicine.[81] A Mon villager emphasised the importance of health services, claiming that: "If we do not have education, we can survive but without health we cannot survive."[82]

Infrastructure

Infrastructure development was considered essential to access other opportunities. A lot of infrastructure development has occurred in Mon State since the previous government. However, villagers from rural areas asked for more infrastructure development, in

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[77] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32.
[78] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[79] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45.
[80] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.
[81] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[82] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.

particular to build roads that resist flooding during the rainy season.[83] Similarly, despite improved infrastructure in the SAA, Pa-O from all socio-political groups demanded more. Indeed, there are still many villages such as Tiha village, which are only accessible via dirt road. Such development is fundamental as it can facilitate access to other opportunities. For instance, it would enable farmers to access bigger markets in Yangon and Mandalay instead of relying on brokers who come to their villages in order to buy goods.[84] Furthermore, new roads can be lifesaving when they decrease transportation time to health clinics.[85]

Addressing the livelihood crisis

As covered in chapter 4, Mon and Pa-O face a real livelihood crisis and thus expressed that the adoption of measures improving agricultural income, access to land, and job opportunities, was essential to create a sense of inclusion in the national identity.

Improving agricultural income

Many participants claimed that improving agricultural incomes would not only help to protect cultural identity by reducing migration, but also ease feelings of exclusion from society. Mon farmers suggested that the government should help maintain stable market prices and create loans to help farmers buy machines so they can make more of a profit.[86] These participants were not yet aware that a few months before this discussion, the government launched a program to provide financing for farm machinery on affordable terms.[87] Other villagers in Kyaikmayaw Township recognised that the government had started supporting farmers in 2014. However, they claimed that more subsidies should be provided.[88] A monk argued that such support was fundamental to keep Mon farmers working on their farms rather than risk them migrating to foreign

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[83] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[84] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[85] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84; Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[86] Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14.
[87] Livelihoods and Food Security Fund, "Agribusiness Finance Programme Launched in Yangon," LIFT, December 15, 2016, https://www.lift-fund.org/event/news-event/agribusiness-finance-programme-launched-yangon.
[88] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.

countries which would weaken Mon identity.[89]

Pa-O participants from all socio-political groups were more engaged with this issue, which is not surprising since they are more affected by economic insecurity. Their suggestions were very detailed, but support for the creation of markets to sell agricultural products was top of their list. Some villagers and farmers specified that the government should set a stable price for crops in order to protect farmers from being taken advantage of by brokers. In addition, they suggested the government should create export opportunities by finding foreign markets and put taxes on imports to protect local markets; if other countries do not buy crops, the government should purchase them at a good price.[90] Moreover, production could increase if agricultural best practices, technology, and skills were developed. The quality of products should also be improved, through the selection of long-term crops, the development of labels and quality controls as well as the use of locally produced organic fertilisers instead of depending on the expensive chemical fertilisers imported from China. Many also called for the development of factories in order to manufacture products directly on site and therefore get a higher price than when selling just raw materials.[91]

Finally, a number of Pa-O noted that eradication of opium cultivation was dependent on the availability of markets because farmers need substitution crops that can guarantee a better or at least similar income.[92] In order to support this, the government as well as the PNO should not only provide information on which alternative crop to grow but also provide funding for repairing soils as well as financial support during the conversion

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[89] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.

[90] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.

[91] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Young girl, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan state, Interview #83; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.

[92] Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.

period.[93] In parallel, community members argued that adequate punishment for growing and selling opium should be enforced, awareness-raising on drug effects should be conducted, and rehabilitation programs and vocational training should be provided for drug users.[94] Access to markets is thus perceived as a key economic reform to guarantee a proper income, and therefore promote children's education, reduce migration of youth abroad and simultaneously decrease dependency on opium cultivation.[95] Some farmers summed up the impact of such measures as being "the beginning of freedom."[96]

Increasing access to land

Access to land appeared as an important factor to decrease feelings of injustice and build trust. Many Mon and Pa-O participants highlighted the importance of land control particularly the need for the government to return land previously confiscated by the military and protect farmlands against further land grabbing.[97] Indeed, some participants argued that this would enable farmers to increase farming surfaces and thus improve agricultural productivity. Furthermore, a Mon CSO leader stressed that land and investment policies should be reformed to support small landholders and customary agricultural practices.[98] Finally, some Pa-O called for the protection of forests and trees in order to preserve a productive environment.[99] Such measures would not only help decrease feelings of unfairness and economic insecurity but also enhance the legitimacy of government authorities.

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[93] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74.
[94] Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.
[95] Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29.
[96] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[97] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31.
[98] Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[99] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.

Providing employment opportunities

Participants who did not own land claimed that the creation of job opportunities was fundamental in promoting national belonging. In rural areas under government control, people perceived employment as essential to help families stay together and prevent migration.[100] Some women in Chaungzon Township thought that people should be able to work according to their education level rather than because they have a connection with the government.[101] Youth in Kyaikmayaw Township would like to get vocational training to increase their family's income.[102] To a lesser extent, some Pa-O called for the creation of job opportunities for youth as well as the institution of a minimum wage in order to prevent migration and to ensure that incomes were sufficient to afford the currently high prices.[103]

To sum up, many Mon and Pa-O participants from all social backgrounds called for an equitable share of natural resources in order to ensure equal development of ethnic areas and requested the implementation of measures to tackle the livelihood crisis. Such policies promoting equality outside the cultural sphere are essential to help develop a sense of national belonging. Indeed, a number of participants stressed that they would feel included in the Myanmar national identity if steps towards economic and social equity were taken.[104] As a retired doctor put it, "Everybody would cheer the central government."[105]

6.2.4 Participation in political life

As noted in chapter 4, the current political system was criticised for failing to share power in a way that guarantees proper representation and inclusion of ethnic groups, leaving many to feel that their voices did not count and thus their needs were ignored. In

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[100] Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.
[101] Women villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State in Bilugyun, Focus group #11.
[102] Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[103] Farmer, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #48; Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.
[104] Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12; Villagers, Loisamsip village, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #31; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34; Preachers, Pinlaung, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok townships, Shan State, Focus group #37.
[105] Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78.

order to address this political insecurity, many Mon and Pa-O participants called for a number of reforms promoting the participation of ethnic groups in political life. Suggestions for improving representation included power sharing at the national and sub-national levels, as well as a redefining of territorial representation.

Power sharing at the national level

Some participants argued that for the political system to be inclusive, real power sharing at the national level requires withdrawal of the military from politics and reformation of the electoral system which favours Bamar dominated parties.

Withdrawal of the military from politics

Mon and Pa-O participants from various backgrounds called for an end to military rule and the establishment of "a real union" where power is shared equally among ethnic groups. As a result, some respondents suggested that amending the constitution was central to redressing Bamar privilege because at the moment, it only benefits the military and their cronies.[106] This implies taking away the *Tatmadaw*'s executive and legislative powers, including its veto on constitutional amendments. As a social worker put it, "The government should be above the army, not at the same level."[107] In addition, according to some villagers, since Bamar officers dominate the *Tatmadaw*, this would ensure that ethnic people can have an equal voice and decision-making power, specifically on economic issues.[108]

Reformation of the electoral system

As noted earlier the first-past-the-post system favours the large Bamar-dominated parties. Some participants argued that reforming the electoral system was important to ensure equal representation of ethnic groups and thus create a sense of inclusion. A Pa-O MP supported a proportional representation electoral system because it would ensure that small ethnic groups can obtain seats in parliament proportionally to the number of

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[106] Jeepyah, civil society development organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #17; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.
[107] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38.
[108] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

votes received.[109] Pa-O elites in Kayah and Mon states expressed that with such a system each ethnic group within a state could have representatives both at the state and national levels.[110] A Pa-O youth leader in Mon State stressed that proportional representation was essential to bring ethnic perspectives into policy making because only ethnic representatives have a real understanding of ethnic needs and can therefore meaningfully work for ethnic affairs.[111] As a result, according to a CSO leader, accountability would increase: "MPs would work more for the people, not just for their interest."[112] For Pa-O villagers in Karen State, having representatives at the *Pyithu Hluttaw* would be helpful to promote farmer access to opportunities while representatives at the *Pye-nay Hluttaw* could help promote development.[113] According to a tour guide, "a fair electoral system, which does not preference Bamar but instead makes ethnic people feel they have a voice, would be the first step towards creating a feeling of inclusion."[114] Some considered that proportional representation was therefore not only the best measure to support equality, but also more feasible than having a state and perhaps more important than having an autonomous area.[115]

While this could be true, the electoral system is not the only factor that affects the outcome of an election. The nature of the political parties and the popularity of party leaders can play a major role. For example, if there were two or even three Bamar dominated parties that secured approximately equal shares of votes, then ethnic based parties (separately or as a coalition) could emerge as king-makers. As a result, they may well determine the president, demand cabinet positions, and have substantial influence over some of the legislation.

Power sharing at the sub-national level

Several Mon and Pa-O participants proposed to improve power sharing at the sub-national level through expanding the mechanism of special representation to all second

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[109] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75.
[110] Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24.
[111] Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55.
[112] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50.
[113] Villagers, Tiloun village, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Focus group #25.
[114] Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61.
[115] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.

nationality groups, electing executive bodies and opening the GAD to all ethnic groups.

Reform of the special representation mechanism

A number of elite members called for the reform of the ethnic affairs special representation mechanism in order to promote inclusion. Some Pa-O participants called for the possibility to elect such ministers even where Pa-O population represented a small minority and did not reach the current threshold. This would enable Pa-O representation outside of Shan State, particularly in Kayah, Karen and Mon States. Furthermore, adequate financial and technical support should be provided so that they can meaningfully represent the Pa-O in these areas.[116] In Mon State, the NMSP expressed a similar view, stating that each minority group in a state or region should have reserved seats at the regional legislatures.[117]

Electing executive bodies

Some Mon elites claimed that representatives of Mon people should be able to elect Mon State's chief minister instead of the current presidential appointment.[118] Similarly, some Pa-O elites suggested that an SAA leader should be elected.[119] These measures appear as important steps towards power sharing because popular legitimacy would contribute to increasing the powers of these sub-national executive bodies.

Opening the GAD to all ethnic groups

Many Mon and Pa-O participants from all socio-political backgrounds called for the reform of the Bamar dominated GAD in order to include more ethnic people and therefore enhance understanding and communication between local people and

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[116] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63.
[117] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3.
[118] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[119] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70.

government staff.[120] Some village leaders further suggested the delegation of power to "a middle level department authority" which could work as a bridge between local people and government officials in order to receive and dispatch people's requests.[121] A Mon village leader called for the presence of Mon people in positions of power as essential to promote a sense of inclusion in the national identity and guarantee that government staff are aware of the local cultural context.[122] As a social welfare worker explained, "It is very hard to solve the problems that happen at the community level unless we have power, so the government should foster a democratic culture by which power is shared with local authorities."[123]

Redefining territorial representation

In order to address the symbolic and electoral inequalities entrenched by the territorial division described in chapter 4, Mon and Pa-O people suggested the redefinition of region and state territories in two ways: implementing the "one Kyat" promise; and changing the borders of states and regions.

Implementing the "one Kyat" promise

As noted earlier, General Aung San's "one Kyat" promise is generally understood as a basis for changing the territorial division so that each group has a state, irrespective of population, including the Bamar. Some Pa-O participants claimed that ethnic equality would require the institution of one Bamar state alongside ethnic states so that the Bamar are represented as one ethnic group with a single territorial unit.[124] This reflects a feeling shared by many Mon. According to a Mon political party member, Mon people want to hear more statements such as Aung San Suu Kyi's declaration, "Our Bamar group is an ethnic group" because its implied sense of equality with other ethnic

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[120] Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #41; Youth, Mokmei, Hopone, Loilem and Hsiseng townships, Shan State, Focus group #28.
[121] Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20.
[122] Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16.
[123] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51.
[124] Shan State National Liberation Organisation, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #47; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30. Interestingly, the same participants supported the idea of fostering an intra-state common identity through the adoption of names based on geography in order to reduce ethnic conflict.

groups is very positive for nation building.[125] As a Mon MP put it, "We stand for the eight-states, eight-unit federalism; the Bamar should get one Bamar state as mentioned in the 1961 ethnic conference in Taunggyi."[126] While such a view is shared by a third of EAOs, it lies on the extremist end of the demands. According to Breen, it "would create an essentially bipolar federation, a kind that has proven to be unstable in the past, including in Myanmar."[127] In a more moderate demand, a CSO member argued that in addition to the creation of a Bamar state (which would include the three regions where Bamar people are dominant), a number of multinational states should be created where the population is highly intermixed such as in Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Sagaing and Tanintharyi Regions.[128] This reflects a proposal made by EAOs leaders when discussing a draft federal constitution in 2016.[129] Some Mon people perceived such territorial reform as a way to increase equal participation in politics arguing that it would ensure that the *Amyotha Hluttaw* would effectively represent ethnicity.[130] However, as noted earlier, such a measure could be problematic as it ignores the reality of the demographic majority of the Bamar.

Changing the borders of states and regions

Some Mon people considered more radically that equality could only be achieved through changing the borders of states and regions, in order to align geography with the majority group in a given area. While it is commonly accepted that it is not possible to go back to historical borders (the Mon kingdom was very large and spread from Bago to Tanintharyi), the current boundaries of Mon State do not represent adequately Mon demography: many Mon reside in Karen State, Bago and Tanintharyi regions while only a few of them are located in the north of Mon State, where Pa-O are

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125 Mon National Party member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #6.
126 Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.
127 Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 131.
128 Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5.
129 Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Armed Group Leaders Discuss Formation of a Burman State - Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy*, July 27, 2016, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/ethnic-armed-group-leaders-discuss-formation-burman-state.
130 Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #5; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20; Sayadaw, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #27.

concentrated.[131] While Nicholas Farrelly's research demonstrates that the present system of parliamentary constituencies favours the representation of ethnic nationalities in the *Pyithu Hluttaw*, some elite members claimed that such a redefinition of borders would promote representation of the majority group at the *Pye-nay Hluttaw*.[132]

Since all states are ethnically very mixed – which, some argued, is a result of the former military governments' policies – some members of the Mon elite doubted the feasibility of redefining the borders.[133] Others claimed that the question of equality could be best addressed through the recognition and protection of the rights of minority groups, including those of second nationalities.[134] From the Mon armed group's perspective, it is essential to focus on important issues rather than on the sensitive ones. The question of borders, which may hinder the process, should be discussed later down the track. Rather, "since redefining borders is difficult, we must learn how to stay together and actively work together in order to overcome the mistrust created by previous governments."[135] Although many considered the border issue an important matter, its difficulty was fully acknowledged, as the redefinition of boundaries might create more a sense of division than a sense of inclusiveness.

To conclude this section, we can say that Mon and Pa-O generally expressed similar views, with a number of variations due to their distinctive contexts. To ensure legislative power sharing at the national level, both Mon and Pa-O participants considered the withdrawal of the military from politics as a necessary step towards equality because the *Tatmadaw* represents a major component of Bamar privilege. The Pa-O however, seemed to be more concerned with the reform of the electoral system so that small groups can be represented proportionally in the *Hluttaws.* To guarantee executive power sharing at the sub-national level, both Mon and Pa-O elite members called for the expansion of the mechanism of special representation embodied by the ethnic affairs ministers and the election of executive bodies. Elite as well as community members

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[131] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[132] Farrelly, "Electoral Sovereignty in Myanmar's Borderlands," 56; Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Mon scholar, Canberra, Australia, Interview #25, November 2015.
[133] Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #9.
[134] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20.
[135] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3.

from both groups also called for the inclusion of ethnic people in positions of power in the GAD. Regarding the question of territorial representation, while Mon and Pa-O participants equally considered the question of creating one Bamar State, Mon participants seemed to be more concerned with the re-delineation of state boundaries. This is because, unlike the Pa-O who are spread out across states that have no common boundaries, the Mon population outside Mon State remains in nearby states and regions.

6.3 Demands for greater autonomy

Demands for greater autonomy appear as a second step to address the perception of Bamar privilege because autonomy is perceived as essential to guarantee equality. Autonomy would provide Mon and Pa-O with the space to control their destiny and thus address insecurities caused by cultural, economic and political discriminations. Demands for greater autonomy can achieved through cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance.

6.3.1 Cultural autonomy

The implementation of cultural autonomy represents an additional strategy to address the cultural insecurity caused by assimilation policies. Indeed, the delegation of power over education, cultural affairs, and religious affairs (but not over territory), to the ethnic groups themselves, would significantly increase the impact of cultural rights. While this system is more likely to be accepted as a temporary step for groups that are geographically concentrated, such as the Mon in Mon State, it is particularly suitable for groups that are spread out, and therefore beneficial to minorities within states or regions, including Pa-O living outside Shan State and Mon people living outside Mon State. The findings indicate that cultural autonomy can positively respond to Mon and Pa-O aspirations, at least temporarily, in relation to two different issues: in Mon areas, cultural autonomy would enable the accreditation of the Mon National School system and thus effectively accommodate Mon demands for mother-tongue education; in Pa-O areas, cultural autonomy would involve the accreditation of the Pa-O LCO in order to strengthen its role in overseeing Pa-O cultural affairs.

Mother-tongue schooling and accreditation of Mon National Schools

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education was accepted in principle by the government as part of the Incheon Declaration. This multilingual education system works as follows: at the primary school level, teaching of academic subjects is in the ethnic language (mother-tongue schooling) and Burmese language is a subject; at the middle school level, the focus starts to shift towards Burmese as a medium of instruction and the mother-tongue (e.g. Mon language) as a subject; finally at the high school level, Burmese is the medium of instruction and the main focus of the classes. The government has yet to implement this mother-tongue schooling system, which is practiced by the Mon National Schools (chapter 3), and very popular among Mon communities. Although ideal for territorially concentrated groups such as the Mon, Salem-Gervais notes, however, that this system has a number of limitations, especially regarding the question of other ethnic or Bamar students whose mother-tongue is not Mon and who would then start school in a foreign language.[136]

While the teaching of ethnic languages as a subject during school time in government schools is considered a minimum, many Mon participants perceived mother-tongue schooling as essential.[137] As a Mon teacher explained, some government schools at the kindergarten level have started to use Mon as a medium of instruction. However, the Mon National Schools remain the only institution that provides multilingual education in Mon State.[138] Moreover, the Mon school system is also commonly considered as a best practice model for ethnic education in Myanmar. This is because student learning is facilitated by the use of their mother-tongue while the emphasis on Burmese increases throughout their schooling so that they are ready to sit government matriculation exams after high school.[139] As a result, South and Lall argue that although government schools teach Mon as a subject, "Mon National Schools are still required and necessary,

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[136] Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today (Part II)."
[137] Mon Women Network member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #1; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Local Resource Centre Director, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #7; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Village leader, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Interview #16; Mon Youth Progressive Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #18; Women villagers, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #6.
[138] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.
[139] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 24.

especially in majority Mon speaking areas."[140]

The generalisation of a mother-tongue-based multilingual education system is thus unsurprisingly a major demand of the Mon armed group and of Mon participants from all backgrounds. It is indeed perceived as a necessary step to protect identity and generate a sense of inclusion. As farmers in Chaungzon Township put it, "If we had real democracy, the government should listen to people, give ethnic rights and give a chance to teach our language fully."[141] Such multilingual education would positively support a sense of national belonging. As a monk put it, "The use of the mother-tongue as a medium of instruction should be a right for all ethnic groups [because] it is very important for people to feel that they are part of the country."[142] Indeed, as South and Lall explain, "Ethnic minority children receive the benefits of mother-tongue schooling but are still able to position themselves as citizens of a multi-ethnic Union, including through the possession of Burmese language skills."[143]

Some participants argued that an increased cooperation between the state and non-state education system could address the limitations of both systems. For instance a Mon teacher stressed that if the government paid more attention to the interests of ethnic groups, understood what difficulties students have, and changed what they learn in government schools by looking at the Mon system, then ethnic people would feel more valued and part of the country."[144] Some villagers in Karen state noted that the adoption of such a system in government schools would avoid the language skills issues (chapter 3) that Mon National School students face when transferring to government school after primary school. At the same time, Burmese classes in Mon National Schools should be improved to further alleviate the student transfer problem.[145]

However, some teachers and students in NMSP-controlled areas disagreed with such a convergence and argued for an increased separation of both systems. For instance, the building of government schools near NMSP-controlled areas is perceived negatively. At

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[140] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 21.
[141] Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14.
[142] Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12.
[143] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 144.
[144] Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10.
[145] Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9.

the moment, they feel that the closure of such government schools is necessary in order to avoid the loss of qualified Mon teachers and the drain of Mon students towards the government system.[146] This echoes South and Lall's observation that while Mon nationalists and educators generally want to see "a structured interaction and convergence between state and non-state education systems", they largely prefer that the MNEC remains independent from the state system until a comprehensive political settlement is reached.[147]

Despite these reservations, a number of Mon elite and community members living in NMSP-controlled areas called for the accreditation of the Mon National School system.[148] According to NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar, "The decentralisation of the education system is the first step towards autonomy." The adoption of cultural autonomy could involve endorsing and regulating the role already acknowledged in chapter 6 of the NCA, which recognises its signatories as education providers in areas under their control. At the same time, cultural autonomy could effectively guarantee a certain separation from the state education system during the transitional period of the peace process. South and Lall explain how the lack of state school capacity to offer Mon classes as a subject has created an opportunity for the MNEC, which already has teaching materials and qualified teachers, to potentially take up that role and therefore ensure the sustainability of the Mon education system in the long run.[149]

Accreditation of the Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation

Unlike the Mon, the PNO did not develop such a parallel education system, probably because Pa-O people do not perceive the loss of language as a threat as much as the

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[146] Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10; Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8, 9.
[147] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 143.
[148] Mon National Education Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #2; Mon National School teacher, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #10; Monk, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #12; Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #26; Mon National Education Committee teachers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #8; Villagers, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #9; Mon National Education Committee students, Koughchoukala village, Kyainseikgyi Township, Karen State, Focus group #10; Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12; Youth, Kyaikmayaw Township, Mon State, Focus group #16.
[149] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 143.

Mon. As a result, only a few participants called for the government to institute a multi-lingual education system.

The vulnerability of Pa-O outside of Shan State where they do not enjoy – at least symbolically – the protective status of the SAA, led a number of Pa-O elite and community members to identify cultural autonomy as a useful aspiration. In addition to the recognition of cultural rights, some Pa-O called for accreditation of the Pa-O LCO as an institutional authority with specific competence over cultural affairs. While criticised for not being functional, as a result of structural and financial constraints, the Pa-O LCO is still considered the best institution to manage matters related to cultural affairs including education. Many called for the recognition of its legitimacy in protecting Pa-O identity and for the provision of financial support to implement activities supporting Pa-O culture, specifically targeting the youth. Such activities would for instance include organising educational forums explaining traditional activities, providing vocational training in traditional music, overseeing university education in Pa-O language and culture, and publishing newspapers or magazines in Pa-O language.[150]

To conclude, discussions around cultural autonomy reflected contextual variations between the Mon and Pa-O, and differences in the way they experience discrimination as noted in chapter 4. The Mon are particularly worried about linguistic assimilation due to their proximity with the Bamar and grateful for the NMSP's Mon National Schools program and its contribution toward protecting Mon language. In contrast, the Pa-O expressed more concerns regarding the weakening of cultural traditions particularly in areas where they do not enjoy the perceived protection of the SAA status. As a result, Mon claims for cultural autonomy revolved around the promotion of mother-tongue-based education through the accreditation of the Mon National School system, while Pa-O claims for cultural autonomy focused on the accreditation of the Pa-O LCO's competence over cultural affairs.

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[150] Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.

6.3.2 Territorial self-governance as plural federation

This section discusses Mon and Pa-O understanding of territorial self-governance and what form it should take to bring them control over their destiny. For many Mon and Pa-O participants, the centralised system of governance established by the 2008 constitution perpetuates the democratic rule of the Bamar majority and deprives them from the right to control their destiny. There is a common sentiment that if ethnic nationality groups had the space to manage their own affairs, their cultural, economic, social and political insecurities could be addressed more effectively. As a result, a majority of participants see territorial self-governance guaranteed through a plural federation as the most sustainable way out of the ongoing conflict and therefore as essential to promote a sense of belonging to the national identity. First, Mon and Pa-O generally used the concept of self-determination to refer to territorial self-governance. Second, self-determination was commonly associated with the institution of federalism, which was praised for its potential to protect ethnic cultures, promote equality and create a sense of inclusion. Third, the idea of federal reform often raised the question of the creation of a Pa-O state: while a majority of Pa-O participants were inclined to support such measures, many considered that it was a challenging process and thus not a priority. Finally, many Mon and Pa-O participants suggested that the institution of an asymmetrical form of federalism would be necessary in order to accommodate ethnic diversity within each state.

Territorial self-governance understood as self-determination

The principle of self-determination often came up in conversation and seems to be generally associated with the concept of territorial self-governance. For instance, Pa-O participants understood self-determination as "having our own government" or "the power to govern ourselves by ourselves"; "to make decisions and manage their implementation"; "the power to create our own future"; "to stop following government orders."[151] For some Mon villagers in NMSP-controlled areas, it meant that "the Bamar

[151] Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Community leaders, Hopone town, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #20; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23; PNO members, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #27.

government should not interfere in Mon State" and that they "should be governed by the NMSP."[152] More specifically, some Pa-O nationalist elites defined self-determination as a form of decentralisation where sovereignty over the legislative, executive and judiciary powers is delegated to ethnic regions.[153] Furthermore, some villagers specified that self-determination implied that power was shared based on the territory.[154] According to many Pa-O, self-determination is essential to ensure that people can improve their situation because it would enable them to: manage the preservation of their literature, history and culture; protect the land; regulate population migration and the extraction of natural resources; manage education provision; and oversee health and infrastructure development.[155] Furthermore, others stressed that self-determination was essential because it would enable an accurate reflection of the various historical, geographical and social contexts in different ethnic areas. As a result, governance of Pa-O by Pa-O would ensure that local needs are more effectively expressed and met.[156]

Enshrining territorial self-governance through an ethnic federation

As noted in chapter 1, the establishment of a federal union is one of the main demands of EAOs because it is commonly accepted as the best form of territorial self-governance. Unsurprisingly, Mon and Pa-O views often indicate that territorial self-governance should be implemented through an ethnic federation because it can effectively preserve ethnic identities.[157] As Pa-O leader Khun Okker put it, "Individual rights are not enough to guarantee equal opportunities and equal status before the law: a defined territory is needed to protect our collective identity."[158]

When asked to clarify their understanding of federalism, participants identified a

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[152] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[153] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Pa-O National Organisation lawyer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #39; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54.
[154] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.
[155] Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23.
[156] Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39.
[157] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #38.
[158] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.

number of features that actually characterise this institution. Several members of the Mon nationalist community claimed that in order to guarantee self-determination, the constitution should detail the devolution of powers between the central government and ethnic states.[159] An MNP member argued that federalism was the only way to ensure that Mon can choose their own representatives and that the Mon State government can control their own economy, education, health, natural resources and social welfare. A CSO member added that the institution of federalism would ensure that state governments have sufficient budget for development based on local needs, as well as the capacity to make laws based on the cultural context.[160] For instance, the Mon minister of natural resources and environmental conservation argued that as a result, his department could have the power to control the companies that operate in Mon State instead of just being able to receive complaints and wait for the Union government's decision.[161] Similarly, some Pa-O participants particularly emphasised the importance of giving authority to state governments in order to manage and share state resources and to oversee education, development and border trade.[162] In addition, some Mon and Pa-O elite members further stressed that the adoption of state constitutions to specify state powers was essential. These constitutions should also be written jointly by the different groups living in each state in order to ensure that all voices are represented.[163]

Many participants perceive these characteristic features of federalism as essential to promoting a sense of inclusion because it can bring about equality and thus counter balance the power of the Bamar majority. The NMSP described the amendment of the 2008 constitution to establish a federal system as a top priority, because it would guarantee equal rights for all ethnic people. Similarly, Pa-O participants from different backgrounds argued that it was the only measure that would be able to ensure equal

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[159] Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[160] Mon National Party second chairman, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #14; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19.
[161] Mon State Natural Resources Minister, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #15, July 2016.
[162] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65; Women, multiple townships, Shan State, Focus group #26.
[163] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Mon Women Organization member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #4; Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #19; Union Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #65.

representation of ethnic people.[164] Likewise, Mon villagers living either under government or NMSP control mentioned that people would get equal rights only if each state could be self-managed instead of being controlled by the Bamar.[165] Some Pa-O elite members believed that federalism could significantly reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege because it would create more equality with the Bamar group in terms of economic power and social benefits, therefore promoting trust and facilitating peace.[166] As a Mon woman put it, "The institution of federalism would ensure the existence of a Union country instead of a Myanmar country."[167] This shows that such a form of territorial self-governance is perceived as the most hopeful avenue to redress Bamar privilege when compared with all the other aspirations previously examined in this chapter.

Demands for the creation of a Pa-O state

Discussions of federalism with Pa-O participants almost inevitably raised the question of a Pa-O state. According to a number of Pa-O elite and community members, the creation of a Pa-O state as part of a federal reform would bring a number of advantages that go beyond the symbolic dimension highlighted earlier. A number of statements such as "a name on the map is meaningless", "we don't want a pretending state" or "we want a real state" suggest that establishing a state with meaningful powers is preferred to the mere recognition of a symbolic status.[168] The creation of a Pa-O state would have several very positive impacts for Pa-O. First, local governance would benefit the economy: local needs could be better identified and supported; the direct allocation of resources to the Pa-O state instead of going through Shan State would result in increased education and development opportunities; measures could be more effectively taken to prevent cronies

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164 Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #46; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76; Retired doctor, Yangon, Interview #78; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.

165 Villagers, Mudon, Mon State, Focus group #13; Villagers, Kwangwakapaw village, Paung Township, Mon State, Focus group #15.

166 Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Pa-O National Organisation, Thaton Township representative, Mon State, Interview #54; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55.

167 Men villagers, Kahnwa village, Chaungzon Township, Mon State, Focus group #14.

168 Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74; Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

from abusing farmers.[169] Second, it would provide a better protection of Pa-O identity from the influence of the majority group.[170] As a farmer explained, "We would not feel like guests in our own home anymore."[171]

The realisation of this objective is very difficult under the current constitutional framework, which does not allow for the creation of a new state. However, as Crouch claims, there may be space for bypassing this.[172] According to a senior PNO advisor, the first step would be to get a Self-Administered Division (SAD), which the constitution granted to the Wa because they represent a majority in six townships. Since Pa-O can claim to be the majority population in three additional townships, the Pa-O SAA could potentially become a SAD under the sections governing the re-delineation of SAAs.[173] The second step would be to create a Pa-O state under section 53, which regulates the re-delineation of states and regions.

However, it would be difficult to meet the requirements set forth by the constitution which specifies that if the state *Pye-nay Hluttaw* does not support such re-delineation, the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* must decide by a qualified majority.[174] Since Pa-O have only 6 MPs against 100 Shan MPs, it would be difficult to win the vote in the Shan *Pye-nay Hluttaw*, even if alliances were made with other ethnic groups and the military backed USDP. For this reason, the PNLO chairman explained that instead of demanding a Pa-O state directly, Pa-O leaders should focus on amending the constitution in order to reduce the *Hluttaw*'s vote to a simple majority.[175] In addition, a number of participants stressed that any request to include more townships in the SAA would already create major tensions with Shan State. As a result, the expansion of Pa-O territory depends not only on the good will of the central government and the *Tatmadaw* but also of the Shan State

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[169] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation joint chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #32; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #39; Villagers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Focus group #40.
[170] Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #63; Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[171] Farmers, Tiha village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Interview #84.
[172] See Crouch, "The Constitutional Implications of Myanmar's Peace Process."
[173] See chapter 2, sections 54 and 56 (f)
[174] Pa-O National Organisation advisor, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #35.
[175] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.

government and other ethnic groups in Shan State.[176] Finally, some Pa-O participants argued that the Pa-O needed more time before they would be ready to manage their own state.[177]

These difficulties led many to claim that the creation of a Pa-O state was not a priority. Although a majority of Pa-O participants in Shan State associated federalism with the creation of a Pa-O state, many would be satisfied with some form of territorial self-governance as long as equal treatment and control over local affairs were guaranteed.[178] Many insisted that in order promote national belonging, it was more important to get a real autonomous area rather than an administrative state.[179] Some participants even argued that measures other than territorial autonomy were more important. A former monk argued that as long as equality was guaranteed in the economic, health and education sectors, the creation of a Pa-O state was not needed.[180] Others elite members suggested that efforts should be directed towards building cooperation and unity.[181] As highlighted earlier, the old soldier *Papraye* perceived the institution of a proportional

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[176] Pa-O National Army, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #58; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #66; Social welfare worker, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #68; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34.

[177] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #37; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Farmers, Saleh village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #19; Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Village administrators and PNA, Saikow town, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #32; Farmers, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #42.

[178] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #38; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70; Pa-O Women Union, Taunggyi, Shan State, Focus group #23; Villagers, kyang-ngaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #29; Villagers, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #35; Militia soldiers, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #36.

[179] Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #67; Farmer, Mokmei Township, Shan State, Interview #71; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Villagers, Pinlaung Township, Shan State, Focus group #30.

[180] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.

[181] Sayadaw, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Interview #44; PNO affiliates, Loikaw, Kayah State, Focus group #18.

representation system as more important.[182]

Crafting an asymmetrical federal state

The perspectives of Mon and Pa-O nationalist elites seem to indicate that asymmetrical federalism would most effectively achieve ethnic equality. According to some Pa-O politicians and also a tour guide, genuine federalism requires self-determination within each state in order to guarantee the political economic and cultural rights of all ethnic groups who do not constitute the majority in a given state.[183] It was suggested that Myanmar should adopt several administrative levels of autonomy to accommodate ethnic groups depending on their size, with variations in the powers granted.[184] For instance, in Shan State, there could be an autonomous state for the Wa, an autonomous region for the Pa-O, and within the Pa-O autonomous region, a national area for the Lisu. According to PNLO Chairman Khun Okker, "This kind of arrangement is necessary for federalism to function in Myanmar otherwise this is just on the surface."[185] Autonomous regions would have all powers except in relation to defence, currency and foreign affairs.[186] National areas would have a small territorial basis – such as the Pa-O in Mon or Karen States – and would thus have powers limited to educational and cultural affairs.[187] This reflects a form of cultural autonomy similar to what the previous section described, which could be easily nested within an asymmetrical federal system. To sum up, a Mon civil servant described this form of asymmetrical federalism as "cultural federalism", in order to emphasise that the protection of second and third nationalities

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[182] "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[183] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33; Tour guide, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #61; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Union Pa-O National Organisation member, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #74.
[184] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29; Social welfare worker, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #51.
[185] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
[186] A former PNO guerilla soldier and a retired teacher, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #72; Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Interview #75; Pa-O National Organisation, Interview #76.
[187] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8; Thanlwin Times journalist, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #20; Writer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #45; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Pa-O Youth Network member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #59; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #60; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62; Youth CSO, Tathon Township, Mon State, Focus group #24; Youth, Bilin and Tathon townships, Mon State, Focus group #41.

within a state was essential.[188]

To conclude this section, we can say that a majority of Mon and Pa-O participants understand self-determination as a form of territorial self-governance that could be best achieved through federalism. Since equality among groups would be guaranteed, federalism is often perceived as positive for national belonging. While the creation of a Pa-O state remains controversial, some nationalist elites suggested that an asymmetrical form of federalism was needed to achieve ethnic equality. For a minority of participants however, territorial self-governance is not necessary to guarantee equality as long as a proportional representation electoral system is adopted.

[188] Civil servant, Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, Interview #8.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined a number of aspirations, which according to Mon and Pa-O perspectives could reduce the insecurities described in chapter 4. These aspirations were organised into a framework which echoes precisely the Panglong promise of equality and autonomy. Many Mon and Pa-O emphasised the importance of promoting equality of status with the Bamar majority, through cultural recognition and protection, symbolic measures, access to economic opportunities and participation in the political life. In addition, demands for greater autonomy emphasised that the achievement of such equality should be institutionally guaranteed, principally through some form of cultural autonomy and the institution of federalism as a system of territorial self-governance. This shows that Mon and Pa-O aspirations can be associated with the entire continuum of unitarist-pluralist policy responses. In addition, reflecting chapter 5's findings, the fact that many Mon and Pa-O perceive both greater autonomy and equality of status as necessary steps towards redressing Bamar privilege and fostering inclusiveness indicates that despite the existence of rigid attitudes towards ethnicity, there is scope for policies promoting national belonging. Having completed the presentation of my ethnographic findings, the following chapter discusses which of the institutional models proposed in chapter 2 would best resonate with Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and their particular aspirations for equality and autonomy.

CHAPTER 7 - Towards an Institutional Model for Peaceful Democratisation in Myanmar

Using ground-level realities and insiders' perspectives revealed in the ethnographic chapters 4 to 6, this chapter explores how state building may work in Myanmar. While chapter 4 has shown that Bamar privilege was the root cause of the insecurities experienced by the Mon and Pa-O, chapter 5 suggested that improvements in ethnic equality could help overcome perceptions of Bamar privilege and thus promote a sense of belonging to the national community. Chapter 6 indicated that this could be achieved through policies that bring about equality of status as well as greater autonomy.

This is where my political ethnographic endeavour takes a normative turn as I seek to use these ethnographic findings to address broader debates of ethnic conflict management in comparative politics and suggest ways to reform society in Myanmar. Employing an "extrinsic-value" ethnographic approach, I seek to understand the implications of the Mon and Pa-O experience of ethnicity for state building. In this chapter, I thus examine Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and their aspirations for autonomy and equality to determine whether any institutional model proposed by the state building conflict management literature would be appropriate and how it could be adapted to reflect the local context. Drawing on the constructivist assumption that formation of collective identities and institutions is co-constitutive, I first revisit the six models introduced in chapter 2 in light of Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and aspirations. I argue that the state-nation model most resonates with the degree of Mon and Pa-O nationalism because its policies aim to protect ethnic identities while also creating a sense of belonging to the national identity. Second, I critically examine each of the norms and policies proposed by the state-nation model and show their relevance to Mon and Pa-O aspirations. Third, I claim that the current political context in Myanmar requires an adaptation of the state-nation model. I suggest a new policy sequence which prioritises measures that promote inclusiveness and protect ethnic identity without threatening the current political order.

7.1 Relevance of institutional models in light of the nature of identity in Myanmar

The constructivist assumption that identity formation and institution building have a co-constitutive nature imply that the intensity of ethnic identification, which can vary on a scale from flexible to rigid, is a key variable in determining the relevance of a model to a specific context. As discussed in chapter 2, the degree of ethnic identification influences the type of claims articulated by a group. It will therefore determine the relevance of institutional arrangements and the probability of conflict when policy responses do not meet those demands appropriately. At the same type, the choice of policy response can have a major impact on the definition of ethnicity and therefore mitigate or intensify conflict. In this section, I examine six institutional models and compare their potential impact on ethnic identification with Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity. At the same time, I examine whether the institutional arrangements and policies they recommend are relevant to Mon and Pa-O aspirations for equality of status and greater autonomy.

7.1.1 The consociational model

The consociationalist approach offers an accommodation strategy, which assumes that ethnic conflict will spawn rigidified identities. It therefore emphasises the role of ethnic representatives in the communication process. As a result, it proposes to accommodate ethnic groups through a grand coalition, mutual vetoes on matters of importance to segments, proportionality, and segmental autonomy.

Although, as developed in chapter 5, Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnic identity indicate the existence of a strong nationalist spirit, the consociational approach does not seem to be relevant in the context of Myanmar. First, it is not encouraging that the nine factors, which, according to Lijphart, are not pre-requisites per se but can facilitate the implementation of a consociational arrangement, are nearly all absent in Myanmar.[1] The existence of a majority group is undeniable with the Bamar representing 70% of the population. Although there is a moderately low population density, the non-Bamar

[1] Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 53–103.

population is composed of a consequent number of groups with various sizes. Moreover, as demonstrated in chapter 4, there are many socio-economic differences between groups, principally between the majority group and the other ethnic nationality groups. Finally, there are no obvious external threats or overarching allegiances. Indeed, as demonstrated in chapter 5, the majority of the research participants do not yet identify with an overarching Myanmar national identity. [2]

Second, although proportional representation and segmental autonomy match Mon and Pa-O aspirations for political participation and greater autonomy, the two other institutions do not support Mon and Pa-O aspirations and attitudes towards national belonging. While the implementation of a grand coalition that involves the representatives of all ethnic groups is likely to lead to political immobilism given the high number of groups, it does not reflect Mon and Pa-O demands for power sharing, which focus on: the withdrawal of the military, the reform of the electoral system, improving special representation and inclusion on the GAD. In addition, the institution of mutual veto poses a risk of further antagonising groups, which does not support the fact that Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity indicate the possibility of belonging to the Myanmar national identity. In fact, the consociational model does not offer policies that promote a sense of belonging to the national identity, which, as demonstrated in chapter 5, is interconnected with the reduction of Bamar privilege.

7.1.2 The centripetal model

By contrast, the centripetalist approach holds that identities are always fluid and must not be strengthened in an ethnical dimension by the political process. It thus proposes "moderation" strategies that transcend roles of ethnic representation and avoid the solidification of division along ethnic lines. However, it is not appropriate in the context of Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and it fails to meet Mon and Pa-O aspirations.

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[2] Some ethnic groups may, however, possess most of these contributing factors internally. For instance South argues that the Karen could use a consociational arrangement for their internal governance. See Ashley South, "Karen Nationalist Communities: The 'Problem' of Diversity," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 1 (2007): 55–76.

The centripetal model seeks to encourage moderate attitudes towards ethnicity through the promotion of accommodating institutions that provide politicians with incentives to behave in moderate ways through a majoritarian electoral system, the formation of "coalitions of commitment" at the centre, an executive coalition restricted to moderate parties, and a decentralised government not focused on promoting ethnic based autonomy.[3] However its assumption that identities are necessarily fluid may be counterproductive when in practice there is not a sufficient level of pre-existing moderation.[4] The fact that Mon and Pa-O people do not entirely reject the possibility of belonging to the national community provided some conditions are realised should not overshadow the dominant view that ethnic identification is largely preferred. As such, assuming that identities are always flexible in Myanmar does not reflect Mon and Pa-O views. The adoption of institutions that only seek to create incentives for inter-ethnic cooperation - such as the majoritarian preferential electoral system and its resulting "coalitions of commitments" – thus presents the risk of further entrenching the dominance of the Bamar majority group.

In addition, the institution of a national or administrative form of federalism, which seeks to breakdown divisions along ethnic lines, clearly contradicts the main aspiration expressed by many Mon and Pa-O participants: the realisation of an ethnic federation. Although Michael Breen's survey suggests that ethnic people in Myanmar do not really want ethnic federalism anymore, my findings indicate the contrary.[5] As noted in chapter 6, most research participants, including community members and nationalist elites, considered an ethnic federation as the best way to ensure that equality is guaranteed at the cultural, economic, social and political levels. In addition, contrary to the centripetal assumption, Mon and Pa-O views suggested that both cultural autonomy and territorial self-governance would support a sense of inclusion.

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[3] Donald L. Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 4 (1993): 35.
[4] Allison McCulloch, "Seeking Stability amid Deep Division: Consociationalism and Centripetalism in Comparative Perspective," 2009, 4; John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 260.
[5] Michael Breen, *Deliberative Polling on Federalism in Myanmar: Report*, 2018.

7.1.3 The integrative consensualist model

Although the integrative consensualist model seeks to offer a middle-way solution by combining the consociational and centripetal approaches, it does not provide a suitable solution for Myanmar. The adoption of a grand coalition without the minority veto represents an improvement that partly addresses the risk of further antagonising groups that the consociational solution poses. Similarly, the adoption of a modified form of the proportional voting system, the single transferable vote system, which employs the centripetal electoral incentives for moderation, potentially addresses centripetalism's criticism of favouring the dominance of a single group. Such a strategy may indeed be suitable for Myanmar where it could facilitate the promotion of a sense of national belonging. However, its dismissal of ethnic federalism and cultural autonomy goes against the Mon and Pa-O's central claims. Furthermore, similarly to the centripetal approach, the fact that the integrative consensualism approach considers that identities are always fluid neglects the fact that in Myanmar the level of pre-existing moderation is low.[6] In such circumstance, failure to accommodate popular claims such as demands for greater autonomy could lead to the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations.[7]

7.1.4 The hybrid federal paradigm

Breen's new paradigm for federalism in ethnically divided Asian societies proposes a form of hybrid federalism "designed to embed deliberative conditions and encourage multi-ethnic institutions, particularly political parties, at the centre while leaving space for ethnic parties and lower-level group autonomy at the unit levels".[8] In spite of a combination of accommodation and moderation strategies, which similarly offers a middle-way solution between the consociational and centripetal approaches, this model does not seem to resonate with Mon and Pa-O views. First, while the recognition of "lower-level group autonomy" seems to consider Mon and Pa-O's rigid attitudes towards ethnicity, it does not adequately respond to their demands for territorial self-

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[6] Stefan Wolff, "Managing Ethno-National Conflict: Towards an Analytical Framework," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49:2 (2011): 175.
[7] McGarry and O'Leary, "Territorial Approaches to Ethnic Conflict Settlement," 260; Timothy D. Sisk, *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*, Perspectives Series (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).
[8] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 5.

governance through the establishment of an ethnic federation.

Second, although the existence of multi-ethnic parties at the national level can promote a sense of national belonging by acting as a platform for cross-ethnic deliberation, this is not relevant to the current context in Myanmar.[9] His claim that the political party system is significant to bring about proportionality, moderation and power sharing is based on the argument that in Myanmar, the NLD is a multi-ethnic party and that ethnic representation would thus most substantially come through its own members.[10] Indeed, as noted in chapter 4, the NLD increasingly includes members from different ethnic backgrounds and in the 2015 election ethnic people trusted the NLD more than ethnic parties to bring about change. However, as argued earlier, these truths have not met ethnic people's hopes. Through a number of symbolic moves such as "Bridge-gate" and the Aung San statues, the NLD has proven to the vast majority of ethnic people that it pursued the interests of the Bamar majority. This shows that, as many Mon participants have argued, ethnic members of the NLD have no choice but to follow the party policy. Consequently, the promotion of ethnic representation through multi-ethnic political parties at the centre does not reflect Mon and Pa-O criticisms of the current electoral system for favouring Bamar parties. To the contrary, they would like to achieve ethnic representation through the institution of a proportional electoral system.

7.1.5 The power-dividing model

The power-dividing model is not relevant to Myanmar as it mainly seeks to maintain peace in ethnically divided societies where the stability of the constitutional order can be threatened particularly as a result of peace agreement negotiations. In Myanmar, Mon and Pa-O want to reform the 2008 constitution which they perceive as a major cause of their insecurities. Indeed, as noted in chapter 4, Mon and Pa-O participants criticised the constitutional order for entrenching a system that perpetuates military control and institutionalises Bamar privilege through parliamentary seats reserved for Bamar *Tatmadaw* officers, an electoral system that favours the Bamar dominated parties, and a territorial division that symbolically perpetuates Bamar dominance.

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[9] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 149.
[10] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 161.

7.1.6 The state-nation model

The seven "nested policies" of the state-nation model include three constitutional attributes, one element of politics and three policies that are less specific.[11] First, the key constitutional attributes are: the institution of asymmetrical federalism; the recognition of collective rights; and the adoption of a parliamentary system. Second, the element of politics refers to the recognition of regional political parties and their coalition at the centre. Third, the last three policies have the following characteristics: they promote a move towards political integration rather than cultural assimilation; they encourage cultural nationalists rather than secessionists; and they support the recognition of multiple and complementary identities.

The state-nation model offers a middle-ground solution with a combination of accommodation and integration strategies. Assuming that in a society with strong multi-national components, the range of available political arrangements would lean towards the pluralist end of the spectrum, this model proposes a form of ethno-national federalism, while simultaneously encouraging the development of some sense of loyalty to the whole state.[12] While one may wonder how an institutional model can articulate two seemingly contradictory aims, Stepan et al. argue that transition to stable multinational democracies requires that ethnic identities should be protected in order to gradually encourage a sense of national belonging that transcends ethnic identification.[13]

Not only does the state-nation model seem to resonate with Mon and Pa-O attitudes toward ethnicity, but it also offers an appropriate response to their policy demands. As described in chapter 5, participants tend to have rigid attitudes towards ethnicity although more moderate views are also reflected in the acknowledgement that national belonging is possible. As argued in chapter 6, this range of attitudes towards ethnicity is reflected in Mon and Pa-O aspirations, which can be associated with the entire

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[11] Yogendra Yadav, "The Rise of State-Nations" (March 25, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdFP6fUG0v8.
[12] See Marvin Mikesell and Alexander Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 589–90; Alfred C. Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations : India and Other Multinational Democracies* (Baltimore: Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 7–10.
[13] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 22.

continuum of unitarist-pluralist policy responses. First, the institution of asymmetrical federalism and the constitutional protection of cultural rights would respond to demands for territorial self-governance and cultural autonomy and thus accommodate the more rigid aspect of Mon and Pa-O ethnic identification. Second, policies promoting a sense of inclusion in the national identity would help with the promotion of equality and the reduction of Bamar privilege while positively encouraging more moderate attitudes that embrace the idea of national belonging. These two elements echo directly what a number of Pa-O elite and community members expressly called for: that the government simply respects ethnic identity and takes active steps to promote national belonging.[14] While this is a good indication of the relevance of the state-nation model to the Mon and Pa-O context, the following section demonstrates the relevance of the seven nested policies to Mon and Pa-O aspirations.

7.2 Policies reflecting Mon and Pa-O aspirations

As highlighted in the previous section, the policies of the state-nation model contribute to the realisation of two aims which in theory can satisfy Mon and Pa-O aspirations: the protection of ethnic identities, and the promotion of a sense of national belonging. The argument underpinning the state-nation model is that in countries with deep cultural diversity, the state building process should first acknowledge and legitimise that diversity through institutional arrangements, while additional norms and policies should support national membership. The state-nation's "nested policy grammar" thus proposes a specific sequence where the institutional legitimisation of cultural diversity comes first and the promotion of national membership second.

Although this model differs slightly from the ethnic aspirations framework used in this study, the ethnographic findings appear to confirm its virtue. On one hand, policies bringing about equality of status with the Bamar majority group would positively support a sense of belonging and trust in the state. Indeed, according to the research findings, many Mon and Pa-O participants would feel more included in the wider nation

[14] Pa-O National Liberation Organisation liaison officer, Interview #33; Pa-O National Organisation lawyer, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #39; Pa-O Youth Network members, Thaton Township, Mon State, Interview #55; Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21; Villagers, Thihanswe village, Taunggyi Township, Shan State, Focus group #22; Villagers, Jakhai village, Hopone Township, Focus group #34; Farmers, Namca village, Kyauttalone Township, Shan State, Focus group #42.

with the adoption of policies that recognise ethnic diversity as well as ensure their participation in economic and political life. On the other hand, many Mon and Pa-O perceive ethnic based autonomy, which is the strongest protection for ethnic identities, as a condition for the realisation of these other aspirations specifically because there is not yet enough trust in the state's capacity to redress Bamar privilege. This explains the paradox of why many participants see federalism as a form of inclusion.

In this section, I examine in detail the state-nation policies that contribute to realise each aim and examine critically how they relate to the aspirations of Mon and Pa-O. I first examine norms ensuring the protection of ethnic identity, which include asymmetrical federalism and the protection of cultural rights, particularly through cultural autonomy. Second, I look at policies promoting a sense of inclusion, which include a parliamentary government; policies encouraging the formation of polity-wide and regional-centric parties and careers; policies promoting the political integration and not the cultural assimilation of the population; policies encouraging cultural nationalists rather than secessionist nationalists; and policies favouring the formation of multiple but complementary identities.

7.2.1 Norms protecting ethnic identities

The protection of ethnic identities is achieved through the first two policies: the constitutional principles of asymmetrical federalism and collective rights, which seek to provide a legal safeguard to politically active territorially concentrated linguistic-cultural groups. These institutional norms respond to three aspirations expressed by Mon and Pa-O participants: territorial self-governance, the recognition of cultural rights and the institution of cultural autonomy.

Asymmetrical federalism

The state-nation model specifically requires the implementation of asymmetrical federalism, which Stepan describes as the exercise of self-government by a large territorially concentrated cultural group with possibly its own language and script.[15]

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[15] Alfred Stepan, "Comparative Theory and Political Practice: Do We Need a 'State-nation' Model as Well as a 'Nation State' Model?," *Government and Opposition* 43, no. 1 (2008): 7.

Stepan strongly recommends asymmetrical federalism as a possible approach to democracy in countries such as Myanmar where there are "at least two territorially based and politically activated linguistic-cultural cleavages within the state."[16] Such a style of ethno-federalism indeed entails various bargains and compromises with each group, which would not be acceptable in a symmetrical federal system.

Asymmetrical federalism reflects Mon and Pa-O aspirations for *territorial self-governance*. As noted in chapter 4, Mon and Pa-O participants criticised the 2008 constitution for not delegating any substantial powers to regional bodies. In reaction to this, we saw in chapter 6 that many Pa-O and Mon longed for the power to govern themselves particularly in the economic, education, health, natural resources and social welfare sectors. For a majority of the research participants, a federal form of territorial self-governance would ensure that local needs are more effectively met and that people therefore enjoy equal rights. Confirming Stepan et al.'s assumption that the safeguarding of salient ethnic identities is essential for creating a sense of belonging in the wider community, a large number of participants perceive the institution of federalism as the sensible way to transform the current feeling of Bamar dominance into a feeling of inclusion.

Moreover, some members of the nationalist elite suggest that federalism should have an asymmetrical feature in order to be genuine. To achieve ethnic equality at the cultural, economic and political levels, all ethnic groups who do not represent a majority within a state should also have the right to self-determination. This would imply that within a state, several administrative levels of autonomy with variations in powers would be granted to each group, depending on their size. For instance, the Pa-O in Shan State could have an autonomous area with all powers except in relation to defence, currency and foreign affairs while the Pa-O in Mon or Karen States could have a national area, with powers limited to educational and cultural affairs. If a Pa-O state was created, then the Intha could have their national area. While a majority of Pa-O participants in Shan State associate federalism with the creation of a Pa-O state, many insisted that a genuine autonomous area would more effectively promote a sense of national belonging than an

[16] Stepan, 6.

administrative state.

This asymmetrical feature also represents an incentive for the establishment of a federal system in Myanmar. In addition to granting different powers to different subunits, asymmetrical federalism allows the allocation of a different number of seats in the upper house based on the population. Asymmetrical federalism is thus "demos-enabling": voices of the majority group would not be unheard regarding matters concerning the state as a whole. By contrast, a symmetrical federation, which is characterised by the "demos-constraining" principle of equal representation in the *Amyotha Hluttaw,* could be more difficult to adopt because it ignores the demographic majority of the Bamar.[17] To establish a symmetrical federation, not only would the majority group have to accept that smaller groups are granted autonomy, but that they also have an equal number of seats in the upper house.[18]

Even though asymmetrical federalism would seem easier to adopt in the Myanmar context, the implementation of the "one kyat" promise, which Mon and Pa-O have been calling for, would involve adopting a symmetrical feature. As noted in chapter 6, some Mon and Pa-O call for an eight-state solution – with the creation of one Bamar state instead of seven Bamar regions – which would enable the principle of equal representation in the *Amyotha Hluttaw* based on ethnicity. However, while the creation of one Bamar state may be possible provided the Bamar demonstrate a willingness to recognise their privilege, the symmetrical principle of equal representation is, as noted above, unlikely to be accepted.

Calls for the implementation of such an interpretation of the "one-kyat" promise seem to be based on the perceived injustice of the current system where the Bamar dominated national parliament makes all the important decisions. In an asymmetrical federal system, the *Amyotha Hluttaw* would only have a limited number of powers, while all other powers would be reserved for the *Pyithu* and *Pyi-ne Hluttaws.* In addition, if the Bamar were to have only one state to support equality at a symbolic level, they could still have the number of seats that reflects their population in the *Amyotha Hluttaw*.

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[17] Stepan, 260.
[18] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 25.

Given the difficulty involved in agreeing on anything substantial during the peace process discussion, the prospects of a political settlement that places asymmetrical federalism as the first measure to be implemented are highly unlikely. The second most relevant form of territorial governance would thus be *regional autonomy.* As noted in chapter 2, by granting substantial asymmetrical autonomy to territorially concentrated groups in relation to cultural, economic and social matters while not requiring any constitutional amendment, this arrangement has potential to build trust between the peace stakeholders – EAOs, the *Tatmadaw* and the NLD government.

Individual and collective rights

The state-nation model requires the constitutional endowment of collective rights in order to guarantee that individual members of a specific cultural, religious or linguistic group can enjoy individual rights. Stepan et al. mention for example that to ensure the realisation of the individual rights of a member of a territorially concentrated group, it may be required to recognise the group's language officially: using it in local government, schools and the media.[19] In addition, collective rights may involve the development of affirmative action policies that ensure entrenched inequalities are addressed.[20]

This fits in with Mon and Pa-O people's aspirations for *recognition and protection of cultural rights* as well as *cultural autonomy.* In the ethnic aspirations framework, the recognition and protection of cultural rights belongs to *demands for equality of status* while cultural autonomy claims belong to *demands for greater autonomy*. However they represent two sides of the same coin, achieving different degrees of protection of ethnic identity. In the state-nation model, these two sides are merged because they come after the establishment of asymmetrical federalism, which facilitates the adoption of cultural autonomy. Furthermore, these two claims both address the cultural insecurity generated by the dominance of the Bamar's language, culture and history.

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[19] Stepan, "Comparative Theory and Political Practice: Do We Need a 'State Nation' Model as Well as a 'Nation State' Model?," 8.
[20] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations : India and Other Multinational Democracies*, 19.

Recognition of cultural rights

Although the 2008 constitution mentions the protection of ethnic language, literature and culture, this has yet to be implemented.[21] As discussed in chapter 6, many Mon and Pa-O participants called for laws protecting their language, culture, and history, as well as a number of affirmative action policies that would guarantee the recognition and respect of ethnic cultures. For instance, a large number of Mon participants called for the recognition of ethnic languages as official languages in the states where they are spoken. This would reduce difficulties faced by community members when dealing with the administration or public services. In addition, many participants suggested the following affirmative action policies: the increase of ethnic language classes in government schools; the development of ethnic teachers' capacity and salaries; support for education and cultural celebrations; the opening of ethnic museums; the creation of ethnic subjects as majors in universities; permitting the use of customary laws; support for research into ethnic history; and the inclusion of ethnic history in the general curriculum. Not only would these measures help protect ethnic cultures but it would also promote understanding among cultures. Since ethnic LCOs with limited capacity already exist, they could easily channel more government funding to implement such measures. Some farmers insisted that such cultural recognition should constitute the first step of any reforms.[22]

Cultural autonomy

While the recognition of cultural rights naturally appears as a first step to address the cultural insecurity that Mon and Pa-O people are facing, the impact of such recognition could be increased by measures securing greater autonomy in the cultural sphere. Indeed, cultural autonomy implies that the power to protect and promote ethnic identity is delegated to the group itself, so that they are free to decide how they will achieve such protection and promotion. In the Mon case, claims for cultural autonomy are mainly related to the decentralisation of education to promote mother-tongue based learning. As Nai Hong Sar put it, "The government should not only allow us to speak

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[21] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 22 (a).
[22] Farmers, Hsiseng Township, Shan State, Focus group #21.

our language, practice our culture and religion, but it should also promote those rights through education using Mon as a medium language."[23] This statement reflects what many community members feel. In Mon State, cultural autonomy would therefore involve the acknowledgement of the role of the Mon armed group in providing one of Myanmar's most promising parallel education systems. Considered as a best practice model for ethnic education in Myanmar, the Mon education system promotes identification of its students as citizens of a multi-ethnic union through the development of Burmese language skills.[24] This feature demonstrates that unlike what David Smith claims, cultural autonomy does not necessarily reinforce ethnic particularity.[25]

South and Lall argue that ethnic education systems reflect what future federal arrangements could look like, referring to the initiative of local stakeholders who develop their education governance systems in the absence of settlement at the political level as "federalism from below". [26] For this reason, the Mon model is often presented as a potential inspiration regarding the language and education policy for other groups as the country moves towards a more decentralised approach to education.[27] However, as Salem-Gervais explains, the Mon situation has a number of comparative advantages, such as "a relative linguistic homogeneity, a somewhat "compact" population setting, a very ancient written tradition, (…) [and] a strong mobilization for mother-tongue education over the last few decades".[28] Indeed some of these characteristics are impossible to replicate with other groups that have a great variety of socio-linguistic situations. Other obstacles include: the fact that some languages do not have scripts or have insufficient vocabulary; the lack of skilled ethnic teachers or textbook materials;

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[23] NMSP Vice Chair Nai Hong Sar and a Central Committee member, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3, July 2016.

[24] Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-Based Teaching in Myanmar" (The Asia Foundation, February 2016), 33, https://asiafoundation.org/publication/schooling-and-conflict-ethnic-education-and-mother-tongue-based-teaching-in-myanmar/; Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (2016): 144.

[25] David Smith, "National Cultural Autonomy," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 282.

[26] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 33.

[27] Lall and South, "Comparing Models of Non-State Ethnic Education in Myanmar," 316.

[28] Nicolas Salem-Gervais, "Teaching Ethnic Languages, Cultures and Histories in Government Schools Today: Great Opportunities, Giant Pitfalls? (Part II)," *Tea Circle* (blog), October 2, 2018, https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/10/02/teaching-ethnic-languages-cultures-and-histories-in-government-schools-today-great-opportunities-giant-pitfalls-part-ii/.

and most importantly the lack of consensus over which language should be the mother tongue in areas where a multiplicity of languages exist.[29] Nevertheless, the institution of asymmetrical federalism implies that such a form of cultural autonomy would only be implemented where relevant.

By contrast, Pa-O participants' claims for cultural autonomy involved the legitimisation of the role of the Pa-O LCO as a cultural institutional authority with specific competence over cultural affairs, particularly in Pa-O areas outside of Shan State. Since inadequate financial resources explain its current limited capacity, its efficiency would rely on significantly increased government funding.

To conclude, it would certainly be easier to implement such measures if an asymmetrical federal state was already in place. While cultural autonomy would certainly be insufficient to satisfy the claims of large territorially concentrated groups such as the Mon, it could be very relevant to smaller groups as part of an asymmetrical arrangement. However, the existence of such a federal structure is not a requirement for the implementation of the cultural measures called for by Mon and Pa-O.

7.2.2 Policies promoting inclusiveness

The five remaining state-nation norms seek to promote inclusiveness in different ways. These are: one more constitutional provision; one element of politics; and three policy aspects.

Parliamentary government

According to Stepan et al., the adoption of a parliamentary executive (as opposed to a presidential executive) constitutionally guarantees the creation of cooperation beyond ethnic lines.

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[29] This information was originally published on the website of the International Network for Language Education Policy Studies (http://www.languageeducationpolicy.org) as E. Thin Zar, "Myanmar Language Education Policy," in *Language Education Policy Studies (Online)*, ed. F. V. Tochon (Madison: WI: University of Visconsin-Madison, 2018), http://www.languageeducationpolicy.org/regionasia/myanmar.html.

> *"The elected executive in a presidential or a semi-presidential system is an 'indivisible good' – it is necessarily occupied by one person, from one nationality, for a fixed term. However, a parliamentary system creates the possibility of a 'sharable good'. That is, there is a possibility of other parties, composed of other nationalities, helping to constitute the ruling coalition."*[30]

This relates to Mon and Pa-O people's claims for *participation in political life* which seek to address the insecurity generated by the political dominance of the Bamar. As discussed in chapter 4, the dominance of the Bamar group at all levels of government and the persistence of centralised policies that favour Bamar are perceived as a major insecurity because many Mon and Pa-O feel that their voices are unheard. After defining Myanmar's unique system of government this section discusses how, from Mon and Pa-O perspectives, executive power should be shared at both the national and sub-national levels of government.

In Myanmar, the sharing of executive power rests on a unique form of presidentialism, which was designed by the military to facilitate transition from military rule to civilian government.[31] The 2008 constitution institutes a hybrid governmental system between presidentialism and parliamentarism where the president who is indirectly elected holds central executive powers: they are not accountable before the parliament; they choose their cabinet members; they have some budgetary authority; they appoint and remove region and state chief ministers as well as supreme court judges; they chair the National Security Council, they have a leading role in law making; and they have some ceremonial functions. Finally, there is a strong separation of powers as the president and cabinet members have to resign from their parliamentary seats in order to exercise their executive functions.[32]

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[30] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 20.
[31] Marco Bünte, "Perilous Presidentialism or Precarious Power-Sharing? Hybrid Regime Dynamics in Myanmar," *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 3 (2018): 347, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1413500.
[32] Bünte, 351–52; Renaud Egreteau, "Parliamentary Development in Myanmar, an Overview of the Union Parliament 2011–2016." (Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2017), 30; Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 107.

However, unlike other presidential systems, the president's powers are limited in certain areas by the influence of the *Tatmadaw.* Most importantly, he is not the commander-in-chief of the army. As Crouch notes, "there is no civilian control of the *Tatmadaw* and this is a key feature of the military state."[33] In addition, the constitution grants the commander-in-chief the power to nominate *Tatmadaw* officers who will be responsible for the exercise of executive power in the most important areas of government administration: home affairs, immigration and national security.[34] On 28 December 2018, however, an intentional effort was made to place the GAD under civilian control instead of under the Ministry of Home Affairs.[35]

Nevertheless, this institutional framework has been partly reshaped by Aung San Suu Kyi's role as de facto leader of the NLD government. In order to bypass the constitutional rules barring her from becoming president, the NLD-dominated parliament passed the State Counsellor Law. This granted Aung San Suu Kyi effective control of the civilian administration and made her accountable to the legislature. This law has therefore effectively introduced an element of semi-presidentialism, where the executive power is shared between the elected government and the *Tatmadaw*.[36] The president, who is not elected directly by the people and therefore does not benefit from the popular legitimacy that Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys as a result of her sweeping victory, has become a considerably less powerful "proxy" president. Although this brings Myanmar closer to a parliamentary system of government, the fact that the executive is shared with the military constitutes a first obstacle to political legitimacy.

Participants thus suggested some executive power sharing measures both at the national and sub-national levels. First, at the national level, both Mon and Pa-O participants considered the withdrawal of the military from politics as a necessary step towards equality because the *Tatmadaw* represents a major component of Bamar privilege. However, as highlighted earlier, the *Tatmadaw*, which posits itself as "the guardian of

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[33] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 108.
[34] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 17 (b); Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 42.
[35] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar,* 43.
[36] Bünte, "Perilous Presidentialism or Precarious Power-Sharing?," 355–57; Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 102].

the constitution", retains a veto power on its potential amendment.[37] As a result, the only alternative path to amending the constitution is through the peace process and the adoption of a Union Peace Accord, which according to the NCA should be the basis for amending, repealing or adding provisions to the constitution.[38] Second, at the sub-national level, both Mon and Pa-O elite members called for the election of executive bodies such as state chief ministers and SAA leaders. While a proposed constitutional amendment proposing the election of chief ministers failed in 2015, it is likely that such a demand would be granted if a federal system was adopted.[39]

Encouraging polity-wide and regional-centric parties and careers

The element of politics required by the state-nation model is a development of "centric-regional parties" whereby state-wide parties and regional parties form interlocking alliances to help each other achieve a majority, at the central or regional levels: "Regional secessionist parties [become] centric-regional because they co-rule at the center". In addition, citizens will feel more loyal to the center if they can benefit from "polity-wide careers".[40] As Yogendra Yadav explains, in India, regional political parties did not take the secessionist route because they were given "the front door entry and provided a legitimate political play."[41]

This political element complements the previous section, referring to Mon and Pa-O people's claims for *participation in political life*, which address the weak legislative representation of ethnic parties and the Bamar dominance of the administration and justice systems. This section looks at how policies encouraging centric-regional parties in Myanmar involve the potential reform of the electoral system. It also highlights requests of Mon and Pa-O to be employed within the administration and justice systems.

First, policies that encourage centric-regional parties seek to promote the representation as well as the political integration of ethnic parties. While Stepan et al. do not explicitly

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[37] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 210.
[38] Government of Myanmar, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, Section 22 (d); see Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 203.
[39] Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar,* 129.
[40] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 20.
[41] Yogendra Yadav, "The Rise of State-Nations" (Center for International Governance Innovation, March 25, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdFP6fUG0v8.

refer to the electoral system, many Mon and Pa-O identify it as a way to ensure ethnic representation and legislative power sharing through coalition making. Given the demographic dominance of the Bamar, there are limited opportunities for coalition making. As highlighted in chapter 4, this is the main challenge for the legislative representation of ethnic people reported by Mon and Pa-O participants.

Indeed, with an electoral system favouring the Bamar dominated parties and a Bamar population representing almost 70 percent of the country's population, there is no real opportunity for the other ethnic nationalities to help constitute the ruling coalition. The NLD's landslide victory in the 2015 election implied that there was no need for coalition making at the national parliament. In addition, while vote-splitting and ethnic trust in the NLD contributed to ethnic parties scoring poorly in their regional parliaments – with the exception of Rakhine and Shan States -, the fact that the NLD ran candidates in all constituencies including in ethnic areas undermined the role and integration of regional parties.[42] Despite the recent strengthening of ethnic parties in order to address vote-splitting issues – such as, for instance, the merging of several Mon parties into a Mon National Unity Party -, the NLD announced in October 2019 that it would not make alliances with ethnic parties ahead of the upcoming 2020 general election. Instead, it created an ethnic affairs committee in order to showcase its attention to ethnic issues.[43]

In the absence of an intention from the NLD to recognise the legitimacy of ethnic regional parties, Mon and Pa-O participants thus suggested that proportional representation would more appropriately support ethnic representation than first-past-the-post. As noted earlier, the NLD may, over time, change its politics of coalition making with ethnic parties, particularly if another Bamar dominated party such as the USDP won a similar number of seats. However, it is more likely that if proportional representation was introduced, the NLD would have to enter a coalition with ethnic parties in order to form a government. However, while some claim that a semi-proportional system may not necessarily require changing the constitution, a

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[42] Transnational Institute, "The 2015 General Election in Myanmar."
[43] Ye Mon, "No Deal."

constitutional tribunal declared in 2014 that only first-past-the-post was constitutional.[44] Nevertheless, some participants think that it is still more feasible than having a state and even more desirable than having an autonomous area.[45]

In addition, the reinforcement of special representation rights at the sub-national level requested by many Mon and Pa-O participants could also contribute to the promotion of centric-regional parties. Indeed, reforming the institution of ethnic affairs ministers so that it is not based on a threshold, and that each minister preferably comes from an ethnic party, could increase interactions between ethnic parties and nationwide parties, even if it is only within the regional parliaments.

Finally, people from all socio-political backgrounds demanded policies that encourage the integration of Mon and Pa-O in the administration and justice systems. This would ensure that ethnic people are also in positions of power, enhancing understanding and communication between local people and government staff. While decreasing the dominance of the Bamar, such reforms would generate a sense of inclusion.

Overall, among the reforms that would encourage "polity-wide and regional-centric parties and careers", some require political will (the NLD's willingness to make alliances with ethnic parties and the recruitment of Mon and Pa-O into the GAD), and others require constitutional amendment (the adoption of proportional representation and changes in the designation of ethnic affairs ministers).

Promoting political integration instead of cultural assimilation

The state-nation model requires three policy aspects, the first of which promotes integration without assimilation. According to Stepan et al., this appears as a consequence of the previous norms and policies.[46] Indeed, norms protecting ethnic identity (asymmetrical federalism and cultural rights) imply that ethno-national groups will be accommodated within, rather than assimilated into, a country's dominant culture.

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[44] Lidauer and Saphy, "Elections and the Reform Agenda," 218; Lemargie et al., "Electoral System Choice in Myanmar's Democratization Debate"; Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar*, 69.
[45] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.
[46] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 21.

Beyond that, the implementation of a parliamentary system of government and the promotion of "polity-wide and regional-centric parties and careers" directly contributes to political integration. Yogendra Yadav's lecture on "the rise of the state-nations" helps to clarify what measures promoting "integration without assimilation" could imply. According to him, "this is where the concept of unity in diversity comes into play", which is particularly obvious in two areas, which ought to celebrate diversity: the key symbols of the state; and the language and cultural policy.[47] The realisation of such "unity in diversity" thus refers to the creation of a sense of belonging to the national identity.

This policy element relates to Mon and Pa-O people's claims for *symbolic measures*, which can partly respond to the cultural insecurities identified in chapter 4, in particular the negation of symbolic representations and the containment of cultural celebrations. Highlighting that the "unity in diversity" policy is significantly absent in Myanmar, this section summarises Mon and Pa-O aspirations for such unity in diversity within the key symbols of the state, and to a lesser extent through the language and cultural policy.

First, the concept of unity in diversity requires that the key symbols of the state celebrate diversity such as for instance India's anthem, which, according to Yadav, names all the groups. In Myanmar, the country's name is the main symbolic issue for many Mon and Pa-O who perceived it as only representing the Bamar. As a result, participants overwhelmingly requested that the name of the country be changed. Similarly, the question of the names of ethnic states was debated, showing the symbolic dimension that names retain and how divisive they can be. Since each ethnic state is named after the majority group living in that state (for example the Mon in Mon State), the names do not reflect the intra-state ethnic diversity. Unlike the country's name, opinions were quite divided. A high number of Pa-O participants argued that attachment to ethnic names as the highest symbolic identity was problematic in terms of supporting ethnic peace while others considered that, to the contrary, questioning the ethnic ego would be counterproductive. The case of the Pa-O SAA, which is a source of pride despite not granting the real autonomy that people want, illustrates the attachment to ethnic names well, and therefore suggests that the building of an intra-state common

[47] Yadav, "The Rise of State-Nations."

identity would be challenging.

Second, the concept of unity in diversity offers a more symbolic approach to the question of the language and cultural policy, which is largely addressed with the recognition of cultural rights. It requires, for example, that the national language is not the language of one of the groups.[48] In India, this meant that English is recognised as the language of the nation. This is not the case in Myanmar where the Burmese language is generally accepted as the lingua franca. Furthermore, the concept of unity in diversity implies that one group's culture should not be the culture of the nation. For instance, a majority of Mon and Pa-O participants would like that issues such as "Bridge-gate" stop happening. In addition, a number of Mon and Pa-O called for the recognition of ethnic holidays in addition to those decided by the majority, as this would promote local culture and reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege.

Encouraging cultural nationalists rather than secessionist nationalists

This second policy element appears mainly as a consequence of the previous norms and policies. Indeed, Stepan et al. refer to a situation where:

> *"a 'cultural nationalist' movement, nested in an asymmetrical federal, and a parliamentary system, wins democratic political control of a component unit of the federation; and governs and educates the citizens of its territory in the language, culture and history of their nation, and is also coalitionable at the centre."*[49]

They argue that in such a circumstance, if the "cultural nationalists" in power were to be challenged by "secessionist nationalists", it is likely that they would use the political and security resources they have acquired against the secessionist movement. This policy is not very relevant to Myanmar, as EAOs already abandoned secessionist claims at a conference in 2005.[50] In addition, appearing more as a consequence than a policy by itself, it is vulnerable to the criticism that it does not refer a proper institutional, political,

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[48] Yadav, "The Rise of State-Nations."
[49] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 20.
[50] Kyaw Zaw Moe, "Why Peace Is So Elusive," 2018, https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/why-peace-is-so-elusive.html.

or cultural arrangement.

Supporting a pattern of multiple but complementary identities

This third policy element appears as the consequence of the six previous norms and policies characterising the state-nation model. Stepan et al. conclude that, as a result, citizens are very likely to strongly identify to "both their culturally powerful ethno-federal unit and to the polity-wide center."[51] In addition, the overall polity would have earned their "multiple but complementary identities" if it was able to create trust in the centre and its historical institutions. According to Stepan et al., this can be achieved if the centre was able to provide: "some valued collective goods, such as independence from a colonial power, security from threatening neighbours, and possibly even ensuring a large growing and common market."[52] This section first briefly revisits findings from chapters 4-6, confirming that Mon and Pa-O aspirations that are relevant to the first six policies of the state-nation model do support a sense of belonging to the national community. Second, it focuses on the ethnic aspiration framework claim that has not been covered yet: *access to economic and social opportunities*.

First, as highlighted in chapter 5, although Mon and Pa-O people identify more with their ethnicity than with the wider polity, a sense of national belonging is possible and depends on the realisation of two conditions: equality and the protection of identity. These two conditions have been explored in chapter 6 using the framework for ethnic aspirations, which identifies two main reforms that resonate with these conditions: equality of status and the protection of ethnic identity through greater autonomy. Chapter 6 highlighted that participants identified all the policies associated with these reforms as important for the promotion of national membership: recognition measures such as a multicultural curriculum; symbolic measures such as changing the name of the country; participation measures such as a fair electoral system and the inclusion of ethnic people in the GAD; cultural autonomy measures with support for mother-tongue based education and parallel education systems; and territorial self-governance through the institution of asymmetrical federalism. The impact of these policies on the development of multiple identities while simultaneously diluting Bamar privilege would

[51] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 22.
[52] Stepan, Linz, and Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations*, 22.

be remarkable.

Second, the creation of trust in the central institutions through the provision of valued collective goods is highly relevant to Myanmar, in particular policies ensuring a prosperous economic market. Although it is guaranteed by the constitution,[53] chapter 4 has highlighted that economic and social insecurities are a core challenge that Mon and Pa-O people face. To address these issues, many Mon and Pa-O people asked for the fair distribution of natural resource revenue in order to ensure equal development of ethnic areas and the development of strategies to address the livelihood crisis. Most importantly, each of these measures is perceived as essential to create a sense of trust in the centre and therefore develop multiple identities. However, control over land and natural resources and their revenue is one of the most critical points of contention between ethnic actors and the *Tatmadaw* with regards to the division of powers implied by the institution of a federal state.[54]

The assessment of Mon and Pa-O aspirations seem to support the claim that the state-nation model is a good fit overall. Indeed, these demands can adequately fulfil the state-nation's dual aim: while demands for policies bringing about equality of status support national belonging, demands for institutions granting greater autonomy contribute to the protection of ethnic identity. This confirms Stepan's view that:

> *"If countries such as Indonesia, Russia, Nigeria, China, and Burma are ever to become stable democracies, they will have to craft workable federal systems that allow cultural diversity, a robust capacity for socioeconomic development, and a general standard of equality among their citizens."*[55]

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[53] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 22 (c).
[54] Kevin Woods, "In Myanmar, Conflicts Over Land and Natural Resources Block the Peace Process," East-West Center, January 26, 2019, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news-center/east-west-wire/in-myanmar-conflicts-over-land-and-natural-resources-block-the-peace.
[55] Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy," 20.

7.3 Adapting the state-nation model to a Myanmar context

This section seeks to determine whether the state-nation aims could be reached in Myanmar following the proposed policy sequence and potentially offer a normative alternative. My findings indicate that Mon and Pa-O aspirations are reflected in the state-nation policy sequence: greater cultural and territorial autonomy can effectively protect ethnic identity, while policies promoting equality of status can encourage a sense of national belonging. In addition, the lack of trust in the government's commitment to change implies that autonomy is perceived as a necessary step to achieve ethnic equality. However, does this mean that the political system, especially its institutional features, should be changed first to enable efforts towards reducing perceptions of Bamar privilege in the other spheres? Or could the reform process be started in the less controversial cultural and economic spheres in order to support change in the political sphere?

Indeed, despite the fact that the state-nation policy sequence matches Mon and Pa-O aspirations, its implementation remains problematic in Myanmar as many research participants have highlighted. Drawing on the previous section, I first shed light on the obstacles to the implementation of the state-nation policy sequence in Myanmar. Then, I argue that since belonging to the Myanmar national identity is something that many Mon and Pa-O participants from diverse socio-political backgrounds desire, it is important to define priorities that can contribute to supporting institutional reform by creating a sense of inclusion and trust. Taking a normative turn, I suggest a policy sequence that could support Myanmar to move on the path of the state-nation.

7.3.1 Obstacles to the policy sequence

In this section, I highlight two obstacles to the implementation of the state-nation policy sequence. The first major challenge is constitutional, as some policies require amending the constitution. The second challenge is related to the re-delineation of state and region borders, a question which the adoption of federalism is likely to raise.

Constitutional reforms dependent on a lengthy and stalled peace process

The implementation of two constitutional measures - the adoption of federalism and parliamentary government - directly affects the constitutional order established by the *Tatmadaw* to protect its interests. Since the military veto established by the constitution prevents the adoption of any amendments that challenge the power of the *Tatmadaw*, any major reform depends on the outcome of the peace process. As noted in chapter 3, although all the peace process stakeholders agreed in principle to the establishment of a federal union, the peace negotiations have since stalled.[56] This casts a shadow on the likelihood of a political settlement that places asymmetrical federalism as the first measure in the near future. Likewise, the adoption of a parliamentary government is directly questioning the continued role of the *Tatmadaw*, which designed Myanmar's unique form of presidentialism to ensure its continued control. Adoption of a parliamentary government thus also depends on the success of the peace negotiations. As result, some people are losing hope: "If it continues this way, the process […] might take more than 20 years."[57]

Practical challenges: boundary issues

The implementation of a federal system raises three important boundary issues which were discussed in chapter 6: the question of an eight-state solution, the redefinition of borders to align ethnicity and geography and the creation of new units. Since the first two issues are very sensitive because they directly confront Bamar privilege, nationalist elite members seem to prefer prioritising discussions on power sharing and territorial self-governance. The question of creating new units within an asymmetrical federal system, however, is a main demand for a number of Pa-O participants. Contrary to Breen's claim that ethnic groups with their own state did not seem concerned with the possibility of additional SAAs, Pa-O participants expressed that the expansion of Pa-O territory would create major tensions within Shan State.[58] Since such practical

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[56] Joshua Kurlantzick, "Peace Conference Offered Myanmar Great Promise, but Huge Obstacles Remain," *World Politics Review* (blog), September 7, 2016, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/19840/peace-conference-offered-myanmar-great-promise-but-huge-obstacles-remain.

[57] Min Aung Htoo, coordinator for Mon State at Nyein Foundation, Cited in Kyaw Lin Htoon, "Peace Conference Opens amid Low Expectations and Calls for Reform."

[58] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 132.

challenges may slow down the process of creating a federation, some participants suggested focusing on ensuring equality in the economic, health and education sectors instead.[59]

7.3.2 Defining priorities

Since any constitutional amendment depends on a lengthy political settlement, policies that do not necessarily require constitutional change should be prioritised in order to build trust. I argue that federalism and a parliamentary government without military involvement can only be implemented after the following policies are in place: first, policies supporting equal access to economic and social opportunities; second the recognition of collective identities and the institution of cultural autonomy; third, policies promoting equal participation in politics; and lastly, policies supporting the development of inclusive state symbols. However, while the proposed policy sequence is more likely to realise the dual aims of the state-nation model (the protection of ethnic identities and the promotion of national belonging) in Myanmar it does not mean that it will be easy. Indeed, the implementation of the following policies mostly depends on the political will, and particularly a willingness to acknowledge Bamar privilege.

Access to economic and social opportunities

While policies responding to claims for access to economic and social opportunities are part of the last policy recommended by the state-nation model, the findings tend to raise it as the first priority because of their positive impact on the sense national belonging. In addition, since access to social and economic development is already recognised by the 2008 constitution and the 37 principles adopted during the second peace conference, no constitutional change is required. While control over natural resource revenues is the most contentious economic demand, the implementation of other less sensitive measures could be very positive for the development of a sense of inclusion. Many Mon and Pa-O participants from all social backgrounds called for prioritising the development of ethnic areas, with an emphasis on rural areas, as a first step towards equality. Impacts of policies securing access to markets, promoting agriculture and access to land would be very positive as these policies would create attractive

[59] Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42.

alternatives to opium cultivation, reduce migration and enable families to support their children's education. Illustrating the importance of securing incomes, a Mon shopkeeper said, "Good jobs and good incomes would be enough to make us proud of our country."[60] Furthermore, improving education would not only increase access to employment opportunities but also ensure adequate participation of people in the democratic process and therefore promote access to development based on local needs. Also demonstrating the positive impact on a sense of belonging that such policies would provide, some villagers said: "If the government can provide better access to education, if people are more educated, we will be proud of being Myanmar citizens."[61]

Collective rights and cultural autonomy

The protection of ethnic identity does not necessarily imply the adoption of federalism. The recognition of collective rights is a constitutional measure that is already in place: both the constitution and the Panglong 37 principles recognise that ethnic languages, literature and culture should be protected.[62] The promotion of such collective rights through the implementation of the affirmative actions highlighted in chapter 6 is therefore just a matter of political will. The protection of ethnic languages in particular has strong potential for creating trust in the government's intention to accommodate ethnic demands. As South and Lall explain, "a sustainable resolution to Myanmar's long-standing ethnic conflicts will be difficult to achieve without education reform which leads to the right language policies."[63]

However, as Mon MP U Min Soe Lin noted, ethnic education has not improved much despite NLD education reforms and this represents a missed opportunity because ethnic languages are not a concern for the military."[64] Since the National Education Law requires education provision to all children across the union, the government could collaborate with the ethnic schools that are already in place. As noted in the previous chapter, many Mon called for an increased cooperation between the non-state and state education systems. As the NCA already recognises the role of its signatories in

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[60] Villagers, Kabyarwa village, Ye Township, Mon State, Focus group #12.
[61] Villagers, Tanertaw village, Hopone Township, Shan State, Focus group #33.
[62] Government of Myanmar, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Section 22 (a).
[63] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 130.
[64] Pyithu Hluttaw representative for Ye Township, Mon State, Interview #29.

education provision, the adoption of laws ensuring cultural autonomy would enable the accreditation of such roles without requiring an asymmetrical federation. South and Lall suggest that such a convergence could involve the accreditation of teachers and schools that use the government curriculum like the Mon National Schools, while a form of government aided school programs could be adopted for ethnic schools that do not use the government curriculum.[65] These policies would not only benefit ethnic education departments, communities, and the Ministry of Education, but they would also promote trust by providing some guarantees towards the protection of ethnic identities. While discussions on mother-tongue based education and support for EAO's education delivery services during the transition process should be a priority, it is also a matter of political will. As South and Lall put it:

> *Although inherently sensitive and more 'political' than health issues, some of the needs and challenges in relation to education and language policy may constitute relatively 'low hanging fruit' in the peace process, i.e. topics which could be addressed post-NCA in fast-track talks, to provide concrete benefits to conflict-affected communities ('peace dividends'), without necessarily requiring constitutional change (but rather, needing political will on the part of the stakeholders)".* [66]

Alternatively, access to economic and social opportunities as well as the protection of collective rights could be implemented through *regional autonomy,* a form of territorial self-governance which could act as a transitional measure before federalism can be adopted. Indeed, as noted earlier, the provision of substantial asymmetrical autonomy on educational and cultural matters without any constitutional amendments needed has strong potential to build trust among peace stakeholders.

Participation in politics

Power sharing does not require the adoption of a parliamentary system of government and the exclusion of the military from politics as first steps towards the promotion of national belonging. Although the politics of encouraging centric-regional parties is

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[65] Lall and South, "The Future of Mother-Tongue Education."
[66] South and Lall, "Schooling and Conflict," 34.

difficult to implement given the dominance of the Bamar majority group that does not encourage coalition making, the NLD would benefit greatly from informal deals made with regional parties. Moreover, as Breen suggests, working toward the development of an NLD with a multi-ethnic character that goes beyond the token inclusion of members with ethnic backgrounds could have moderating impacts.[67] In addition, the integration of ethnic members in the administration and justice systems would have very significant benefits for community members. However, this is again dependent on political will.

While the institution of proportional representation appears as the fairest measure to guarantee ethnic participation, it would most likely require an amendment to the constitution. Nevertheless some participants think that it is still more feasible than having a state and perhaps more important than having an autonomous area. [68] Similarly, reforming the institution of ethnic affairs ministers so that it is more representative seems to be more feasible than pushing for territorial self-governance. However, despite its apparent popularity, the principle of equal representation at the upper house would equate to granting a veto to small minorities and therefore constraining the will of the majority. Since this may encourage extremists in the majority and be counter-productive, it is not recommended here.

Elements of integration instead of cultural assimilation

The implementation of symbolic measures in relation to the symbols of the state and the cultural policy appears as essential to support a sense of national belonging. Although voluntary assimilation is sometimes used as a way to cope with unfair circumstances, it is not perceived as a durable solution. Since peace and normalisation introduce an element of organic assimilation, it is not enough to simply stop aggressive Bamar assimilation policies. It is essential to actively promote ethnic identity. Importantly, the findings show that much more is required than simply "awareness". Indeed, Bamar regimes have been "celebrating" ethnic difference in meaningless, and often patronising, ways for a long time.

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[67] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 149.
[68] Pa-O Youth Organization, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #50; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73.

The development of a real sense of equality between the different ethnic groups is needed. Symbols that promote integration rather than assimilation can be a great tool for that. However, some measures are more likely to be implemented than others. Measures that celebrate local identity through the promotion of names and local symbols rather than imposing Bamar identity through names or statues are relatively easy to implement, although this is once again a matter of political will. By contrast, changing the symbols of the state, particularly the country name, the state names or even the number of Bamar units, will be more difficult. This is not only because it involves constitutional amendment, but also because it touches more directly at the "ethnic ego". For instance, the issue of the country name was one of the key disagreements in the third peace conference as EAO representatives wanted to call it "union that is based on federalism and democracy" while military delegates insisted on the inclusion of the word Myanmar.[69]

This shows any significant measure promoting equality, at least in the cultural dimension, requires questioning more directly the existence of Bamar privilege. In this case, political will can be problematic because it implies that those in power acknowledge their own privilege. As many Mon and Pa-O recognise, this remains a highly sensitive issue and thus a key challenge, requiring strong leadership as well as grassroots education. [70] Mon and Pa-O armed group leaders made comments confirming the importance of taking such steps. Nai Hong Sar suggested that training open-minded leaders was essential to promote peace while Khun Okker stressed that political change should go hand in hand with campaigns tackling the ethnic inferiority complex.[71] As a religious leader put it, "Since the election, physical improvements are visible but this is not enough, we - ethnic and Bamar people - also need a mindset improvement."[72] This

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[69] Ye Mon, "Controversy, Progress at the Third Panglong Conference."
[70] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #34; Former monk, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #42; Teacher, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #49; Pa-O Peace and Development Association, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #52; Demo media group coordinator, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #53; Taunggyi Youth Center, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #56; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation member, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #64; "Papraye", former guerilla leader, Loilem Township, Shan State, Interview #73; Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs, Pa-an Township, Karen State, Interview #77.
[71] NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer, Mawlamyine, Mon State, Interview #3; Pa-O National Liberation Organisation chairman, Taunggyi, Shan State, Interview #62.
[72] Religious leader, Thamseng cave pagoda, Hopone Township, Shan State, Interview #70.

is why, in the policy sequence I recommend, the question of common symbols comes last. Indeed, other policies that less directly challenge Bamar privilege are more acceptable and yet would still bring about a sense of inclusion.

Conclusion

In summary, using the nature of ethnic identity as a key variable, this chapter examined the different institutional models proposed by the ethnic conflict management literature and compared them with Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity expressed in chapter 5 and their aspirations described in chapter 6. I argued that the state-nation model appears as the most relevant to accommodate the intensity of Mon and Pa-O ethnic identification, which, despite a tendency towards rigidity also leaves space for the idea of national belonging. This is because, in addition to upholding core institutional reforms to protect ethnic identity (such as the institution of federalism), the state-nation model also promotes policies that create a sense of belonging to the national identity. While the research should be expanded to include the views of other groups, a thorough assessment of the relevance of each of the state-nation's recommended norms and policies to Mon and Pa-O aspirations has confirmed the relevance of this model. However, its implementation faces a major obstacle: the stalled peace process decreases the likelihood of any political settlement or constitutional reform that could institute federalism or a parliamentary government in the short term.

I thus propose a different policy sequence in order to build trust without threatening the current political order. Although the military does not trust ethnic stakeholders enough to relinquish its power through a federal form of territorial self-governance and the establishment of a power sharing arrangement that does not include the *Tatmadaw*, nothing is stopping them from implementing other less challenging measures such as: ensuring access to economic and social opportunities; recognising cultural rights and possibly developing cultural autonomy; supporting the participation and representation of ethnic people in politics; and promoting inclusive symbols. Since these policies are moderate, I argue that by reducing perceptions of Bamar privilege and encouraging national belonging, their implementation would significantly support trust building. However, since the very existence of Bamar privilege is going to create resistance in terms of political will, I recommend focusing first on measures that do not directly require acknowledgement of such privilege. In addition, I highlighted that *devolution* is a form of territorial self-governance that could be promising as a transitional measure.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to uncover ethnic people's lived experiences of ethnicity and discrimination in order to identify what institutional and policy reforms could contribute to developing an inclusive multinational state in Myanmar.

Chapter 1 sought to provide context to Myanmar's current nation building crisis. A brief historical overview was helpful to situate and understand the underlying factors. For instance, the discussion of the different interpretations of Myanmar's founding myth, the Panglong Agreement, shed light on the persistence of ethnic conflict since independence. Betraying the Panglong promises of equality and autonomy, successive governments have not addressed issues of economic and political discrimination, and have not led Myanmar towards multiculturalism. Turning to discussions on the construction of ethnic identity in Myanmar, I stressed that as a historically fluid marker of identity, ethnicity has recently solidified into a strong politicised identity. The Bamar dominance of the national identity in particular had a definite impact on the rigidification of ethnic identities. Institutional discrimination and assimilation policies have not only fuelled ethnic conflict since independence, but also excluded ethnic people from the national community. In relation to this, I indicated that Walton's analysis of the reinforcement of Myanmar's national identity as a localised form of Whiteness provided a useful lens to shed light on the nation building crisis in terms of Bamar chauvinism and exclusion from the national identity. Furthermore, I stressed how the failure of Myanmar's successive constitutions to accommodate demands for autonomy emphasised the military's grip on power as the main obstacle blocking institutional change. I consequently argued that institutions or policies supporting ethnic actors reclaim a sense of belonging to the national identity should be prioritised over more threatening reforms. Finally, I claimed that this study's broad engagement with institutional models for divided societies and wide consideration of grassroots voices could potentially bridge two important gaps in the Myanmar literature.

The rest of this chapter outlined the methodological considerations guiding my analysis. Drawing not only from my fieldwork but also from my previous professional experience, I discussed the rationale for a political ethnographic design and for my

choice of the Mon and Pa-O "ethnic sites", in addition to outlining the methods of data collection and data analysis used. I also reflected on how my position as a researcher might have impacted the inquiry and highlighted ways in which I sought to minimise the pitfall of making judgements and recommendations about a particular institutional model based of my interpretation of people's perspectives.

Chapter 2 elaborated on the challenges of state building and nation building that democratising multinational societies such as Myanmar can face, and highlighted the role of institutional design in the management of conflict. Since liberal democracy does not always guarantee the inclusion of minority groups, I sought to understand the factors behind ethnic violence during democratic transitions prior to examining potential institutional solutions. I first introduced and linked different approaches on the nature of ethnicity to the construction of identity in Myanmar. I found that the constructivist and ethno-symbolist lenses resonated with some descriptions of ethnicity in Myanmar highlighted in chapter 1. These implied that historically fluid identity markers have gradually solidified ethnicity into a static concept.

Seeking to understand the reasons behind conflict in democratising multinational societies, I highlighted the impact of state policies that ignore the need for a multicultural national identity; the agency of elites in articulating nationalist agendas; the existence of weak institutions; and the possibility that sudden institutional change can lead to the contestation of the national model they support. I thus argued that the question of national belonging and inclusiveness is likely to trigger conflict in multinational countries. This resonates with the situation in Myanmar where the dominance of the Bamar identity in the state's nation building efforts has fuelled decades of conflict. Most importantly, looking at the process of democratic transition in multinational countries as a "transition in the character of national identity", I argued that the existence of a sense of belonging to national identity was central to the state building process and thus democratic consolidation. However, I warned that given the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between institutions and identities, state building strategies should carefully consider the political salience of ethnicity in order to avoid further intensifying conflict.

I then discussed how institutional design can have an impact on the management of

ethnic conflict in multinational societies by looking at three different areas: the state structure with the establishment of territorial self-government; the powers of the branches of government and the relationship between them as a form of power sharing; and the recognition and protection of group identities within the state. I introduced the theoretical literature on how these institutions can be combined for greater effectiveness. In particular, I looked at six institutional models - consociationalism, centripetalism, integrative consensualism, power dividing, hybrid federalism and the state-nation – and reflected on their assumptions about the intensity of ethnic identification and the impact of institutions on ethnic mobilisation. This gave a first indication that the state-nation model may be relevant to the situation in Myanmar because it suggests ways to accommodate rigid identities while encouraging moderation at the same time.

Chapter 3 introduced the Mon and the Pa-O "ethnic sites", stressing contextual similarities and variations between them. Continuing the discussion on nature of ethnic identity in Myanmar, I found that the character of both Mon and Pa-O identities exhibits a strong nationalist spirit that reflects Smith's ethno-symbolist definition of an ethnic community. I also found that two main variations suggest different concerns and aspirations which were further elaborated upon in chapters 4 and 6. First, Mon and Pa-O people have very different geographic and demographic situations. While the Mon represent one of Myanmar's eight main ethnic groups, they are geographically concentrated and have a state in their name where they constitute - although not by much anymore - the majority population. By contrast, the Pa-O are geographically spread out and represent a second nationality in each state or region in which they live. As a result, Mon people are more vulnerable to assimilation to the Bamar culture while the Pa-O face other challenges due to their position as a second nationality. Second, their armed struggle reveals two opposing strategies. The preservation of Mon identity has been at the heart of the Mon nationalist struggle, led by the NMSP since 1958. While it has signed several ceasefires including the NCA, it remains quite critical of the government. By contrast, the PNO stopped its nationalist resistance when it agreed to a ceasefire in 1991, which marked the beginning of a high level of cooperation with the state. The popularity of the NMSP's service provision, particularly in the education sector, is likely to influence Mon people's demands towards consolidating such systems. By contrast, the cooperation of the PNO with the *Tatmadaw* has generated

negative perceptions among Pa-O participants, which may explain why many Pa-O are not satisfied with the economic development and the SAA obtained as a result of this relationship.

In chapter 4, I found that the Mon and Pa-O experience of ethnicity translates into a number of insecurities that they are facing in the cultural, economic, social and political spheres as a result of discriminatory state policies reinforcing Bamar privilege. While confirming the view expressed in chapter 1 that Bamar dominance is at the heart of ethnic grievances, I found that Mon and Pa-O people experience these insecurities more or less intensely depending on contextual variations.

Firstly, I found that a cultural insecurity results from feelings that the linguistic, cultural and demographic dominance of the Bamar puts Mon and Pa-O identity in peril. Both the Mon and the Pa-O appear to be affected by demographic assimilation, the imposition of Bamar history, the restrictions on cultural celebrations, and the use of ethnic languages in education. The Pa-O are more concerned with the weakening of traditions while the Mon seem to be more vulnerable to cultural assimilation and the Burmanisation of symbolic representations. While the Pa-O are also facing the assimilation pressure of the other dominant group in their area, particularly the Shan in Shan State, they tend to be more confident in their capacity to resist cultural assimilation, maybe because contacts with the Bamar majority group are more limited than for the Mon.

Secondly, I found that the economic insecurities affecting many Mon and Pa-O are rooted in their experience of being denied a proper share in the economic life of the country. Indeed, although economic hardship affects the whole country, it has been worse in ethnic areas because of conflict and mismanagement. For instance, many participants felt that successive Bamar military regimes have exploited natural resources to the detriment of local development. However, the findings reveal the existence of a divide between urban and rural areas that also affects rural Bamar. This explains why the Pa-O, who are mostly concentrated in remote and mountainous areas, more strongly feel disadvantaged in regard to infrastructure development and family farming.

Thirdly, I found that Mon and Pa-O experienced social insecurities that stem from unequal social development in ethnic states, which has resulted in limited access to basic services, particularly in the health and education sectors. While this has further reinforced perceptions of Bamar privilege and a sense of unfairness for both groups, these inequities also reflect the rural-urban divide and the use of a cost-benefit analysis to assist decision-making on infrastructure projects. Due to their geographic isolation, their position as a second nationality, and their particular vulnerability to ongoing ethnic conflict and the drug trade, the Pa-O are more acutely affected by social insecurities than the Mon. That Pa-O experience both economic and social insecurities more intensely than Mon is an indication that the PNO's cooperation with the government has not helped address perceptions that they are economically and socially disadvantaged.

Lastly, I discovered that political insecurities stem from the absence of effective mechanisms of power sharing and territorial self-governance because many Mon and Pa-O fear that without having a voice, their situation cannot improve according to their needs. Regarding power sharing, the existence of reserved seats for Bamar *Tatmadaw* officers in the national and local parliaments and an electoral system favouring nationwide parties such as the NLD, contribute to the limited legislative representation of Mon and Pa-O, and perpetuate perceptions of Bamar privilege. Likewise, the Bamar dominate the executive branch, as demonstrated by Mon and Pa-O people's limited relationship with the GAD. Regarding territorial self-governance, the centralised administration established by the 2008 constitution continues to deny demands for autonomy, which the existence of territorial entities such as Mon State and the Pa-O SAA fail to fulfil. While both the Mon and the Pa-O dismissed the existing decentralisation as being largely meaningless, the Pa-O's strong dissatisfaction with the SAA highlights the limitations of the PNO's cooperation with the government.

It is notable that, while the Mon and Pa-O experience cultural, economic and social insecurities in somewhat different ways - and to different degrees - both communities feel that they are excluded from the political game. This shows how Bamar privilege has entrenched a differential treatment throughout the cultural and economic spheres that is enabled and continued in the political sphere.

Chapter 5 examined how the dominance of a Bamar national identity has influenced

Mon and Pa-O people's attitudes towards ethnicity and investigated the scope for policies promoting national belonging. I found that Mon and Pa-O people generally experience the dominance of the Bamar as a form of Bamar chauvinism that marginalise them from the national identity. The Bamar privilege-induced discriminations outlined in chapter 4 have created feelings of inferiority and a sense of exclusion, which contribute to the rigidification of Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity. Indeed, a majority of participants struggle to feel a sense of belonging because the national identity is associated with the oppression of the Bamar military and the perpetuation of Bamar privilege. However, the fact that many participants are open to the idea of multiple belonging, both as member of their ethnic group, and as part of a larger Myanmar nation, indicates that there is room for policies promoting a shared identity. Finally, Mon and Pa-O perceptions indicate that the promotion of equality would effectively reduce perceptions of Bamar privilege and correlatively support a sense of inclusion in the national identity.

Chapter 6 presented a number of aspirations expressed by Mon and Pa-O people as ways to reduce the insecurities covered in chapter 4 and thus redress Bamar privilege. Employing an ethnic aspiration framework developed for this purpose, an understanding of Mon and Pa-O people's perspectives on the Panglong Agreement's promises of equality and autonomy was proposed. Confirming chapter 5's findings on Mon and Pa-O attitudes toward ethnicity and national belonging, the significance of demands for greater autonomy indicate that ethnic identification undeniably lies on the rigid side of the scale. However, the presence of demands for equality of status reveals more moderate attitudes and strengthens the conclusion reached in chapter 5, that there is space for policies redressing Bamar privilege and promoting a sense of belonging. Demands for greater autonomy, which emphasise that the achievement of such equality should be constitutionally guaranteed, thus indicate a lack of trust in the willingness of the Bamar to acknowledge their privilege and work towards promoting equality of status. As such, since self-government is perceived as necessary to guarantee that Mon and Pa-O can enjoy the same cultural, economic, social and political advantages as the Bamar, Mon and Pa-O perspectives seem to indicate that strong protection of ethnic identities through a federal form of self-governance could paradoxically reinforce national belonging. In other words, to redress Bamar privilege and promote a sense of belonging,

many Mon and Pa-O seem to perceive that both equality of status and greater autonomy are needed.

Chapter 7 examined the six institutional models identified in chapter 2 to determine the extent to which they resonate with Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity (examined in chapter 5) and their particular aspirations for equality and autonomy (discussed in chapter 6). I argued that the state-nation model, with its two complementary aims, appears as the most appropriate response to the Mon and Pa-O context. First, the protection of ethnic identity through core institutional reforms such as the institution of federalism and the constitutional entrenchment of collective rights would satisfy demands for greater autonomy and therefore accommodate the more rigid element of Mon and Pa-O ethnic identification. Second, policies fostering a sense of belonging to the national identity, such as executive and legislative power sharing, and the promotion of "unity in diversity" resonate with demands for equality of status, which are rooted in more moderate attitudes towards ethnicity. While each of the norms and policies recommended by the state-nation model appear to be relevant to Mon and Pa-O aspirations, I found a number of obstacles that might hinder an implementation of this model. This led me to suggest a new policy sequence that still encourages national belonging and protects ethnic identities but without changing the current political order. Indeed, with a stalled peace process and the *Tatmadaw*'s firm grip on power, the adoption of federalism or parliamentary democracy seems unlikely in the short term. However, it is possible to implement other measures that do not directly affect military power but which could positively build ethnic trust. Such measures might include: promoting access to economic and social opportunities; the recognition of cultural rights and possibly the development of cultural autonomy, in particular in relation to the role of EAOs in education provision services; encouraging the participation and representation of ethnic people, through an increased integration of Mon and Pa-O in the GAD; and supporting inclusive symbols rather than imposing a Bamar vision of national identity. This policy sequence is likely to support a feeling of inclusiveness and create more trust, as Mon and Pa-O people would receive direct benefits and feel more secure about the protection of their unique cultural heritage.

The order of this policy sequence is essential because the very existence of Bamar privilege may limit the political will required to implement the proposed measures.

Efforts towards the promotion of national belonging should first focus on the less challenging elements of the economic, cultural and participation measures. These can significantly enhance trust and thus facilitate discussions on the more difficult question of the symbols of the state. After that, the peace stakeholders are more likely to be in a good position to discuss the more radical questions of territorial self-governance and the military withdrawal from politics. I believe that this policy sequence is the most effective way for Myanmar to re-create itself as a state-nation that generates loyalty from all of its citizens whilst simultaneously protecting ethnic diversity.

Contribution to knowledge

This thesis contributes to the existing literature in several areas. First, based on a rich ethnographic dataset, the thesis makes significant contributions to the Myanmar-specific literature. Employing a political ethnography design with an "extrinsic-value" approach, I have sought to use my data to suggest ways to reform Myanmar's society. I have specifically looked at Mon and Pa-O people's lived experience of ethnicity and their perceptions of what is needed to improve their situation, noting similarities and variations between the two groups as well as differences between elite and ordinary people's perspectives.

Second, it contributes to the literature on the role of institutional design in the management of ethnic conflict and specifically the relevance of six institutional models by critically considering their application to a contemporary empirical context. Employing an institutionalist argument, I stressed that the question of national belonging is central to the resolution of conflict in multinational societies such as Myanmar. Based on the constructivist assumption that institution building and identity creation are co-constitutive, I claimed that the state-nation model, with its dual aims of protecting ethnic identity and promoting national belonging, is the most appropriate to accommodate Mon and Pa-O attitudes towards ethnicity and aspirations. Taking a normative turn based on a singular bottom-up approach, I recommended adapting the policy sequence of the state-nation model in order to better fit the local context.

Finally, I hope that the findings of this thesis will be beneficial for those engaged in promoting peace in Myanmar, including politicians, the *Tatmadaw* and EAOs, as well

as civil society and the international community. By revealing possible state building avenues for the promotion of an inclusive national identity that build trust, I hope to inform future endeavours for the negotiation of institutional design in Myanmar as well as in other challenging contexts. As argued in chapter 7, the difficulty of amending the constitution does not mean that significant measures addressing ethnic demands cannot be taken, particularly in terms of ethnic language use in education, cultural recognition, and access to social and economic opportunities. In fact, less focus on highly contentious and polarising measures, such as the establishment of federalism or the acknowledgment of Bamar privilege, has the potential to create a virtuous circle of trust, which could enhance political will to move forward with non-threatening reforms while gradually reducing perceptions of Bamar privilege and slowly reducing fears surrounding more substantial change. Hopefully, this thesis will help promote more informed debate in this area.

Further research

This thesis represents an initial exploration of how ethnic lived experiences can inform state building in Myanmar. Further ethnographic research could help uncover various ethnic perspectives, test the relevance of the state-nation model and the proposed policy sequence, and possibly support the generalisation of state building strategies that can effectively accommodate ethnic diversity. Since there are many ethnic groups in Myanmar that possess Smith's attributes of an ethnic community - although not as many as the contested but officially recognised 135 *taingyintha* - there is fertile ground for further work to pursue what this study has begun in the investigation and disaggregation of local perspectives on ethnicity and state building.

Given Myanmar's ethnic diversity, any ground level insight on state building requires taking into account the views of groups that find themselves in very different situations, economically and politically as well as culturally. Ideally, further research should include the perspectives of all ethnic groups in Myanmar in order to support generalised claims. Indeed, the analysis of contextual variations and similarities across multiple ethnic sites in terms of institutional insecurities, attitudes towards nation building and aspirations would enable the development of state building strategies that are more systematically representative and thus inclusive.

A first step in that direction would focus on ethnic sites presenting important contextual variations: groups that are still actively fighting against the government, such as the Kachin; or groups that would benefit from any form of representation, such as the Lahu in Shan State. Further research could also comparatively examine the views of different ethnic groups located in the same state or assess to what extent the lived experiences and aspirations of non-indigenous minorities overlap with and differ from those of indigenous minorities. Importantly, further research could - and should - address similar questions in relation to the Bamar: How do Bamar people experience insecurities created by the state and how does this influence their attitudes towards ethnicity? Do current Bamar attitudes indicate whether and how national belonging could be promoted? Such ethnographic work presents important lines of investigation that could build on the groundwork laid by this thesis and explore whether the modified state-nation model policy sequence represents an appropriate response or other ways that state building could be grounded in local perspectives to positively support peace in the Myanmar context.

APPENDIX A - Breakdown of participants per area

Interview participants

	Participants	Village Town	Township/city	State	Date	Lang.
1	Mon women network member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
2	Mon National Education Committee member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	Mon
3	NMSP Vice-Chair Nai Hong Sar and an NMSP officer		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
4	Mon Women Organization member		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug 2016	English
5	Nai Shwe Kyin Foundation		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
6	Mon National Party member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
7	Local Resource Centre		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
8	Civil servant		Thanbyuzayat	Mon	July 2016	Mon
9	Mon Women Organization member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
10	Mon National School teacher		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	Mon

11	Mon Youth Progressive organization member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
12	Monk		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
13	Mon National Party member	Yangon			July 2016	English
14	Mon National Party second chairman		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
15	Mon State Natural Resources Minister		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
16	Village leader	Kahnwa	Chaungzon	Mon	Aug.2016	Mon
17	Jeepyah, civil society development organisation		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
18	Mon Youth Progressive Organization member		Mawlamyine	Mon	July 2016	English
19	Human Rights Foundation of Monland coordinator		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug.2016	English
20	Thanlwin Times journalist		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug.2016	Mon
21	Social worker		Paung	Mon	Aug.2016	Mon
22	Human Rights Foundation of Monland member	Yangon			Aug.2016	English
23	Shopkeeper		Mudon	Mon	Aug.2016	English
24	Mon NLD representative *Mon Hluttaw*		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug.2016	English

25	Mon scholar		Canberra, ACT	Australia	Nov.2015	English
26	Youth Initiative and Human Rights Organization		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug.2016	English
27	Sayadaw		Chaungzon	Mon	June 2017	Mon
28	Sayadaw		Chaungzon	Mon	June 2017	Mon
29	U Min Soe Lin, Pyithu Hluttaw representative		Mawlamyine	Mon	June 2017	English
30	U Aung Naing Oo, Deputy Speaker of Mon State Hluttaw		Mawlamyine	Mon	June 2017	English
31	Pa-O Youth Organization chairman		Taunggyi	Shan	Nov. 2015	English
32	PNLO joint chairman		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	Pa-O
33	PNLO liaison officer		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
34	Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation members		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	Pa-O
35	PNO advisor		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	Pa-O
36	Kaung Rwai social action network chairman		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
37	Pa-O Youth Organization		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
38	Social welfare worker		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	Pa-O
39	PNO lawyers (2)		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	Pa-O

40	U Khun San Aung		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
41	Pa-O Women Union		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
42	Former monk		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
43	Pa-O NLD chairman		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	English
44	Sayadaw		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	English
45	Writer		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
46	PNO advisor		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
47	Shan State National Liberation Organisation		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
48	Farmer		Hopone	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
49	Teacher		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
50	Pa-O Youth Organization		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	English
51	Social welfare worker		Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
52	Pa-O Peace and Development Association		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
53	Demo media group coordinator		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
54	Pa-O National Organisation		Thaton	Mon	Aug.2016	Burmese
55	Pa-O Youth Network members		Thaton	Mon	Aug.2016	Burmese
56	Taunggyi Youth Center		Taunggyi	Shan	Dec.2016	English
57	Monks (2)		Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	
58	PNA		Hsiseng	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
59	Pa-O Youth Network member		Thaton	Mon	Jul.2017	Burmese

60	PNLO member		Thaton	Mon	Jul.2017	Burmese
61	Tour guide		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	English
62	PNLO chairman		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	English
63	Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation		Pa-an	Karen	Jul.2017	Pa-O
64	PNLO member		Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
65	UPNO		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	English
66	Social welfare worker		Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
67	Pa-O Literature and Culture Organisation		Thaton	Mon	Jul.2017	Pa-O
68	Social welfare worker		Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
69	PNO Media		Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
70	Religious leader	Thamseng cave pagoda	Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
71	Farmer		Mokmei	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
72	A former PNO guerrilla soldier and a retired teacher (2)		Loilem	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O

73	"Papraye", former guerrilla leader		Loilem	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
74	UPNO member		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
75	PNO Pyithu Hluttaw representative	Saikow	Hsiseng	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
76	PNO		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	English
77	Former Pa-O Minister for National Race Affairs		Pa-an	Karen	Jul.2017	Burmese
78	Retired doctor	Yangon			Jul.2017	Pa-O
79	Restaurant manager		Taunggyi	Shan	June 2017	English
80	Retired veterinary		Pinlaung	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
82	Old man	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
81	Hotel manager		Taunggyi	Shan	Jul.2017	English
83	Young girl	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Burmese
84	Farmers (2)	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
85	Pa-O CSO member		Mawlamyine	Mon	Aug.2017	English
86		Thihanswe	Teacher	Shan	Aug.2017	English

Focus groups participants

FG	Participants	#	Village/town	Township	State	Date	Language
1	Youth	8	Multiple	Paung	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
2	Youth	8	Multiple	Chaungzon	Mon	Aug. 2016	Bamar
3	Political parties	7	Multiple	Paung	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
4	Political parties	8	Multiple	Chaungzon	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
5	Civil servants	7	Multiple	Paung	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
6	Women	9	Multiple	Paung	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
7	Women	7	Multiple	Chaungzon	Mon	Aug. 2016	Mon
8	MNEC teachers	3	Weangsapaw	Kyainseikgyi	Karen	Aug. 2016	Mon
9	Villagers	10	Weangsapaw	Kyainseikgyi	Karen	Aug. 2016	Mon
10	MNEC youth	4	Weangsapaw	Kyainseikgyi	Karen	Aug. 2016	Mon
11	Women	5	Kahnwa	Chaungzon	Mon	Jun.2017	Mon
12	Villagers	10	Kabyarwa	Ye	Mon	Jun.2017	Mon
13	Villagers	5	Mudon	Mudon	Mon	Jul.2017	Mon
14	Men	6	Kahnwa	Chaungzon	Mon	Jul.2017	Mon
15	Villagers	5	Kwangwakapaw	Paung	Mon	Jul.2017	Mon
16	Villagers	10		Kyaikmayaw	Mon	Jul.2017	Mon
17	Women	4	Thanbyuzayat	Thanbyuzayat	Mon	Jul.2017	Mon
18	PNO affiliates	4	Loikaw city	Loikaw	Kayah	Dec.2016	Pa-O
19	Farmers	8	Saleh	Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
20	Community leaders	4	Hopone	Hopone	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
21	Farmers at PYO	6	Multiple	Hsiseng	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
22	Villagers	10	Thihanswe	Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
23	Pa-O Women Union	7	Taunggyi	Taunggyi	Shan	Jan.2017	Pa-O
24	Youth CSO	3	Thaton	Thaton	Mon	Jun.2017	Pa-O

25	Villagers	10	Tiloun	Pa-an	Kayin	Jun.2017	Burmese
26	Young women at PWU	18	Multiple	Multiple	Shan	Jun.2017	Pa-O
27	PNO members	6	Namca	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
28	Youth at PYO	5	Multiple	Hsiseng, Loilem, Mokmei, Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
29	Villagers	3		Hopone	Shan	Jul.17	Pa-O
30	Villagers	10	Pinlaung	Pinlaung	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
31	Villagers	10	Loisamsip	Hsiseng	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
32	Village administrators and PNA	8	Saikow	Hsiseng	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
33	Villagers (Thamseng)	6	Tanertaw	Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
34	Villagers (Thamseng)	8	Jakhai	Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
35	Villagers (Thamseng)	5	multiple	Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
36	Militias (Thamseng)	6	Lonteun	Hopone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
37	Preachers (Thamseng)	6	Multiple	Pinlong, Taunggyi, Hopone, Yasok	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
38	Villagers	10	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
39	Villagers	7	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
40	Villagers	3	Tiha	Kyauttalone	Shan	Jul.2017	Pa-O
41	Youth	10	multiple	Bilin, Tathon	Mon	Jul.2017	Burmese
42	7 Farmers	7	Namca	Kyauttalone	Shan	Aug-2017	Pa-O

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