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Research paper



Ethnic Conflict and Economic Cooperation in the Borderlands: Burma, Thailand, and the Karen

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Abstract

Since 1949, the Karen ethnic minority has been engaged in an armed uprising against the Burmese government, and this uprising has defined Thai-Burmese border relations. Despite its length and impact, this conflict is easily overlooked, and has been willfully ignored by Thailand, Burma, and the international community in the optimism surrounding the start of the ASEAN Economic Community. Documentary research and interviews with participants in the conflict demonstrate that the Karen, and the armed nonstate groups which represent them, maintain the ability to end any sustained cross-border cooperation between Thailand and Burma. As such, a resolution to the conflict is necessary if the ASEAN Economic Community, and the various other projects that Thailand and Burma have envisioned for the border region, is to succeed.

Keywords: *Thailand, Burma, economic cooperation, ethnicity.*

1. Introduction

The Karen insurgency is one of the world's oldest on-going conflicts, having begun in 1949. Since the emergence of the insurgency, it has not only taken the lives and properties of the people, but it has also affected the bilateral relationship between Thai and Burma. Although it started in lower Burma, it quickly spread into the hills of eastern Burma, on the long frontier that Burma shares with Thailand. Since then, it has been a central factor in Thai-Burmese bilateral relations. The severity and longevity of the Karen insurgency results, in part, from the fractious nature of the Karen themselves. The Karen are represented by several armed groups, and every time the Burmese government has succeeded in making peace with one such group, another has emerged as a government rival. These groups have a real impact on Thai-Burmese relations, as they are capable of shutting down the border between the two countries when Thailand and Burma want to trade, and facilitating illicit trade when Thailand and Burma want the border closed.

Although previous research acknowledge that existence of armed group always deteriorates the bilateral relationship between neighboring countries. However, there are limited studies that how to bring an end to the armed group, especially the Karen armed group that has adversely affected the relationship between Thailand and Burma. The motives of the armed group are numerous such as drug trafficking, extortion or extending political authority in the region (Vité, 2009). Here, we argue that one motive of the Karen group could be extending their political authority in the region. Therefore, understanding the social and political motives of the Karen armed group is critical to understanding the possibility of resolving the Karen insurgency. To the best of our knowledge, there are limited studies that has investigated the social and political motives of the Karen armed group. Furthermore, we believe that investigating the political and social motives of the Karen group will help in resolving the conflict. The resolution of the Karen insurgency, in turn, is critical to enabling sustained economic and political cooperation between Thailand and Burma.

2. Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of the Karen insurgency on Thai-Burmese bilateral relations. The second objective of the study is offer a solution to the conflict, and determine how solving the conflict would benefit economic relations between the two countries. In order to achieve the primary objective, two secondary objectives are necessary. The first secondary objective is to examine the origins of the Karen insurgency, and determine if the factors which led to its emergence as a major conflict are still in place. The second secondary objective is to examine Thai and Burmese policy towards the Karen, and to determine whether or not previously implemented policies have been effective in either lessening the severity of the conflict or reducing its impact.

3. Methodology

For this study, the researcher used qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was adopted as it recommended for exploratory studies or to get in depth understanding of the phenomena of interest (Sahu, 2013). The methodology consisted of documentary research and oral interviews. The documents included secondary literature on the history of the Karen conflict, newspaper articles and government records. Furthermore, we conducted interviews with various stake holders of the Karen uprising. The interviews were conducted with a variety of subjects who remember key moments in the Karen insurgency, who have a personal connection to the conflict, or who have personal interests in the border region. The interviewers include a Thai businesswoman who had carried out business with both the Burmese government and the

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Karen armed groups. One interviewer was an elderly Karen woman who was among the first refugees to flee across the Burmese border in the late 1940s, and a prominent Karen military leader. The precise identities of these three subjects will remain anonymous. In total, twenty-three subjects were interviewed. Interview questions were tailored to individual subjects.

4. Literature Review

This study draws from an extensive pre-existing literature on ethnicity in Burma and Southeast Asia. The Karen have been a central figure in this literature from the start of the century. San C. Po, a Karen nationalist, wrote the first study of the Karen in Burma in 1928. Po (1928) described the Karen as a nation, distinct from and at odds with the Burmese nation. Most post-colonial scholars have not focused on the Karen as a nation, but rather as an ethnic group within the Burmese nation. Cady (1965) and Lieberman (1978) analyzed the role of the Karen as an ethnic group in pre-colonial Burma and showed how their status as a group at odds with the Burmese kings led to tensions in the colonial and post-colonial eras. A more recent study by Walton (2008) takes a similar approach, focusing on the Panglong Conference of 1948, a foundational event of the Burmese nation in which the Karen played a conspicuously minor role.

More recent studies have focused on ethnic conflict and its consequences. For example, Smith (1999) comprehensively studied the Burma's ethnic conflict. Most of Smith's book is dedicated to the analysis of the Karen. He wrote that Karen, along with the various ethnic groups aligned with the Communist Party of Burma, as the most important of Burma's insurgents. Likewise, Lang (2002) discusses refugees in Thailand from the 1980s until the present. He found that that the Karen are the largest group of refugees and that their refugee camps are the largest in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War. Similarly, South (2007) offers a modern take on Po's argument, discussing the Karen as a nation within the Burmese nation and at odds with the Burmese majority. Fong (2008) and Thanghmung (2008) focus primarily on the Karen, analyzing their revolt against the Burmese government within the context of Karen culture and social organization.

The study which comes closest to what this one aims to achieve is the dissertation of Racha Aribarg (2005). Racha describes the role of local interest groups on the Thai-Burmese border on the foreign policy of the Thai government and relations between Thailand and Burma. Unlike Racha's study, this study will focus primarily on the Karen instead of Thai businessmen, and will discuss the impact of the Karen on the ability of either of the country to implement foreign economic policy.

5. Results and Discussion

Documentary and oral research of the present study illuminates three major characteristics of the Karen insurgency. The first is that the Karen insurgency has had a major impact on Thai-Burmese relations, and has adversely affected the economic and political relationship between two countries. The second is that the Karen insurgency is a conflict with its roots in Burma's colonial and pre-colonial eras, and that many of the structural and ideological disparities between the Karen ethnic minority and the Burman minority of the lowlands are still in place. The third is that while Burmese military repression of Karen ethnic groups has proved effective in the short term, it has proved ineffective in the long term as a result of the malleable and fractious nature of Karen political organization.

The impact of the Karen insurgency on Thai-Burmese relations can be seen in two areas – political and economic. The political impact became apparent in the 1960s, when the Thai military government established relations with the Karen National Union (hereafter, KNU) under the right-wing strongman Bo Mya. The Thai government made a policy of supporting Bo Mya's regime in order to act as a buffer in case of a victory by the Burmese communist, thus freeing the Thai army to focus its efforts against communists along the borders with Laos and Cambodia (Smith, 1999: 299-300; Lang, 2002: 141-2). Thailand's support for the Karen insurgents continued into the 1990s, and became an issue when Burma became a member of ASEAN. This corresponded with a major defeat of the KNU and an increase in the flow of refugees into Thailand, and prompted Thailand to propose amending ASEAN's policies against criticising other member states' domestic affairs (Racha, 2005: 51-2). In short, the status of the Karen is a perennial sore spot between Thailand and Burma.

However, the main area in which the Karen conflict has had an impact is on Thai-Burmese economic relations. The Karen are the indigenous population of the Moei River valley, and as such are deeply involved in all aspects of the border economy. Despite their involvement in an active insurgency, the Karen involvement is strongest on the Burmese side of the border, where they monopolize trade from the border to the capital area of Yangon (Racha, 2005: 65). Karen political groups have obtained much of their recent success by usurping the functions of the government in these areas. One interviewee, a Thai businesswoman from the Mae Sot area, told the researcher that in the 1990s, *"she had to pay both the Burmese government and local Karen militias for the right to do business on the Burmese side of the border".* A recent account by a journalist traveling from Myawaddy to Yangon described toll gates along the route run by three Karen armed groups in addition to the Burmese army (Weng, 2015). In short, the presence of an active insurgency, and the territorial ambiguity created by multiple sovereign actors dramatically increases the cost of doing business in Karen state, and renders the trade route from Mae Sot and Myawaddy to Yangon unnecessarily expensive.

Having examined the impact of the Karen insurgency on Thai-Burmese relations, it is now necessary to turn to the conditions that allowed the insurgency to emerge, and which still exist in Burmese society. The roots of the conflict lie in the colonial period. Under the British, a Christian Karen elite emerged in lower Burma (Smith, 1999:44). This population was associated with British rule, leading to refugee movements into British-held territory as early as the 1852, after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (Cady, 1965: 88). Karen nationalism cohered much later, in the final decades of British rule, as part of a larger growth in ethnic minority nationalism in British Burma (Lieberman, 1978: 481). Much of this had to do with British divide and rule tactics, which favored ethnic minorities such as the Karen as soldiers and colonial policemen. Thus, by the start of World War II, the British-led Burma Defense Force was almost exclusively composed of ethnic soldiers, including the Karen (Hall, 1981: 860).

Despite the impact of the colonial legacy, there is a more fundamental, ideological component to the Karen insurgency. Aristide Zolberg (1983: 29-30) proposes that the presence of multiple claimed nationalities within a single nation-state threatens the sovereignty of the majority and leads to the marginalization and persecution of the minority. The Karen, as a minority ethnic group claiming a distinct national identity, are thus at odds with the majority Burmese nationalists. This became apparent in the late colonial period, as Karen opposed the efforts of Burmese nationalists to pressure the British for greater autonomy (Po, 1928; Smith, 1999: 51). The nationalist rivalry between the Karen and the Burmese culminated at the Panglong Conference of 1947, at which the Karen were only allowed to attend as observers (Walton, 1998: 901). Despite the fact that the KNU and other organizations representing the Karen have scaled back their demands, they still constitute a minority nationality within a modern nation-state. In addition, they still are associated with foreign intervention, as they are subject to aid from the United Nations and western NGOs. As such, the fundamental disagreement between the Karen and Burmese nationalists has not been resolved.

Thus, from the deliberation above, it is cleared that the Burmese military policy towards the Karen has been effective in the short

term, however it has been ineffective in the long term. The first major policy shift towards the Karen occurred after Ne Win took power in Burma in the coup d'etat of 1962. In an effort to consolidate the Burmese government's control of the countryside, Ne Win instituted a program called the "Four Cuts." The Four Cuts program aimed to sever the "food, funds, intelligence, and recruits" of the KNU and other insurgent groups by moving locals into fortified villages under army supervision (Smith, 1999: 259-62). Initially, this strategy was effective, as it ended the Karen insurgency in the Irrawaddy Delta, and forced the Karen to move to the eastern highlands. However, in the long run, it has proved ineffective, as fifty years later, the insurgency continues in Karen State.

A second Burmese military initiative was the creation of government-aligned militias. This began in 1989, when the Communist Party of Burma (hereafter, CPB) collapsed, and a handful of ethnic militias, run by former partisans, took its place. The government signed ceasefires with many of these groups, and allied with them against the remnants of the CPB (Smith, 1999: 377-80). In 1994, the KNU suffered a similar division when a number of Buddhist Karen soldiers mutinied and formed a new militia called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (hereafter, DKBA). The Burmese government may not have engineered the DKBA mutiny, but they supported it, signing a ceasefire with the new group in January 1995 and promptly capturing the KNU capital at Manerplaw (Fong, 2008: 168-9). However, in the long run, the use of government-aligned militias has proved as counterproductive as the Four Cuts. In 2010, elements of the DKBA resisted Burmese efforts to incorporate them into the regular Burmese army, and rebelled against the government (Ferguson, 2010: 52-4).

While the Burmese government has made periodic gains in its effort to suppress the Karen insurgency, none of its strategies have proved effective in the long-term. This is because the fundamental conditions which led to the outbreak of the conflict, including the persecutions of the Karen and conflicting nationalisms, are still in place. A resolution to the conflict is necessary if Thailand and Burma are to maintain stable and sustainable relations, and as such, the Burmese government, and its neighboring states, need to fundamentally rethink their approach.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the about the inception of Karen insurgency, its effect on the bilateral relationship between Thai and Burma, the causes of the conflict and finding a solution that may end the conflict. From the deliberation of previous literatures and interviews, we came to know that there are many factions and organizations which are having stake in the Karen-Burmese conflict. These groups and organization includes the various Karen factions such as the DKBA and the KNU, the Burmese government, the Thai government and the ASEAN. However, the faction which holds the key to putting an end to the conflict is the Burmese government. It seems that, if the needs and demand of the Karen's are addressed, there is possibility that Karen people will end their insurgency. The DKBA began its current insurgency in response to government pressure, and the KNU has already shown its willingness to negotiate with the government. The DKBA and KNU are significantly complicating factors in Thai-Burmese relations, and the Karen conflict has the potential to put a major strain on the nascent AEC. A peaceful, sustainable solution to the Karen conflict is thus necessary for the region's economic aspirations to succeed.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite extensive review of literature and interviews with stakeholders of the Karen conflict, the finding of this study result should be dealt in lights of it limitations. First, the study was exploratory and only limited number of respondents were interviewed, which may limit the generalizability of the study. Future researchers are encouraged to carry out quantitative studies. Further, this study was conducted at a particular point in time. Since the Karen conflict goes back to 1949, therefore, a time series analysis of the Karen conflict will help in better under understanding of the causes and consequences of the Karen insurgency. In addition, we encourage researchers to enhance our understanding of the effect of movement of Karen people across the border and its implication. Likewise, the understanding of Brumes government policies and action toward the Karen insurgency is worth noticing.

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