



BURMA

”National” ceasefire agreement: progress or setback ?

An event
Its decoding
An analysis
Prospects

THE FACTS

➤ On October 15, in the disconcerting administrative capital Naypyidaw, the post-junta government of President Thein Sein welcomed representatives of ten armed ethnic groups for a historical and solemn event; the signature, after half a decade of confrontations between the army and ethnic guerilla groups –some twenty spread out across the frontier regions of the country—, a « national » ceasefire agreement (NCA) that is meant to become the first step towards the establishment of peace.

➤ Burmese themselves and observers would not have recently bet on such an event happening; a result that the authorities will be able to benefit from in the very short term – November 8– when a major political event is scheduled to take place, the organization of the first general elections in a quarter of a century. A poll whose outcome still appears to undecided for all stakeholders.

➤ While welcoming the hard work put into the agreement, it should also be noted that a dozen ethnic groups did not sign the agreement and that clashes are still occurring between the army and several guerilla groups (Kachin and Shan states).

ANALYSIS

■ Should it be seen as the glass half empty or half full? In bringing together the signature of eight armed ethnic groups (including heavyweights such as KNU karen or RCSS shan) to one formal document long judged to be out of reach, the government, after obstinacy giving itself the task since its swearing in in 2011, is giving a concrete example of its work in the national interest to public opinion, to the vigilant international community (notably the West), and to the electorate some days before the election. Certainly.

■ However, how much of a « national » dimension does the document have when it does not include the majority of parties (notably several ethnic communities) concerned?

■ Additionally, does this *partial configuration*, unfinished, not risk being interpreted as a horrible failure of the current administration, which is officially post-junta but is still mostly composed of officers, by the naturally skeptical electorate (pro-democratic, ethnic) that is not favorable to the position of the army?



BURMA : references

Territory: 676 000 km²

Capital: Naypyidaw

Neighbouring countries: Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand

Population: 56 million

Ethnic groups: bamar (68%), shan, karen, arakanese, chinese, indian

Religion: Buddhist

Language: burmese

Regime: Republic

Head of state: Thein Sein

PARTIES INVOLVED

Burmese government
President Thein Sein
National army (*tatmadaw*)
Head of army Min Aung Hlaing
Some 20 ethnic groups (pro or anti NCA)
International community
Burmese civil society

THE QUOTE

“the national ceasefire agreement is the present history that we are making for future generations. It is our heritage (...). The number of signatories is not important. The way that we implement the negotiated terms is more important. If we can do it, others (armed ethnic groups) will sign in their own time”, President **Thein Sein**, *Myanmar Times* and *Democratic Voice of Burma* on 15 October 2015.

RECENT EVENTS

15/10: signature at Naypyidaw of the national ceasefire agreement (NCA)

13/10: confrontations (Shan state; north-east) between army and shan guerrillas

13/10: electoral commission evokes a possible postponement of elections

12/10: Aung San Suu Kyi fears possible « incidents » on election day (8 November)

08/10: confrontations (Kachin state ; north) between army kachin guerillas

05/10: government "suggests" the date of October 15 for the signing of the NCA

29/09: divisions amongst armed ethnic groups (20) on the opportunity to sign ceasefire agreement as it

Ethnic groups as signatories du NCA:

All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), Chin National Front (CNF), Democratic Karen Benevolent Party (DKBA), Karen National Liberation Party-Peace Council (KNLA-PC), Karen National Union (KNU), Pa-O National Liberation Party (PNLA), Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS).

Ethnic groups as non-signatories

New Mon State Party (NMSP), Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP), Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Arakan National Council (ANC), Wa National Organisation (WNO), Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), United Wa State Army (UWSA), Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang

ETHNIC GUERRILLAS ENGAGED IN CONFLICT

WITH THE ARMY: Shan State Army-South (SSA-South), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), MNDAA (Kokang).

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CHALLENGES and CONSEQUENCES

Three weeks before the elections, which few observers or actors are able to predict the outcome — victory for the LND of Aung San Suu Kyi but with what result? Will the USDP in power accept an electoral setback in good grace? What will the result be for the ethnic parties (30% of the national population)? Etc.-- the concluding ceremony of the national ceasefire agreement on October 15 would appear as a last minute push that could move a (small) portion of the electorate towards voting for the USDP (in power since 2011, party of head of state Thein Sein).

Amongst this unfinished business, this political/electoral —although well played— should not upset the forecast that gives victory to the Nobel peace prize winning Aung San Suu Kyi and main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Despite the impressive decorum, the emphasis given by the authorities in the event and the volume of guests invited to the ceremony (one thousand guests, Burmese and foreign), the number (a dozen out of twenty-one) and identity of "the missing" --starting with the influential Kachin Independence Army (KIA / KIO)-- while confrontations continue on border areas of the Shan (northeast) and Kachin (north) states, areas incidentally rich in jade and other jewels ... the guns and automatic weapons, sharply devalue the scope of the document initialed in Naypyidaw as much as the credit of the authorities, both civil and military.

If abstaining (so far) ethnic groups (on the grounds of the need for no party is excluded from the signature of the NCA ; plus, the government had invited to the ceremony a dozen ethnic groups) does not close the possibility to continue the peace talks (could sign the CAS later, after having obtained guarantees from the authorities), these 'skeptics' highlight the ambiguity of a process that was certainly called for by the population (along with the continuation of the democratic transition initiated four years ago) but clearly seen in two very different angles depending on how you view the central political power (the presidential administration, heavily involved) and the army, a more questionable position, if not openly worrying.

PROSPECTIVE

The signing of the ceasefire agreement in a more regional than national format does not bring the hostilities in the country to an end.

Under this smaller and rushed scale, (willingness by the government) by the major ballot on November 8 (first organized in Burma since 1990, the 2011 one being boycotted by the opposition), it does however allow the opening of the second phase of this long process of peace, the no less arduous Policy Dialogue, each party in Yangon is in agreement that it will be very hard task for stakeholders.

To be started by the future government who will enter into power in the spring of 2016, the makeup of which is still very difficult to see for the time being.

Paris, October 15