

Book Review

Sadan, Mandy (ed.). *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics 56. Copenhagen: NIAS - Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2016. 517 pp., ISBN: 978-87-7694189-5, (paperback).

This edited volume contains contributions by an impressive list of authors who have expertise on conflict issues in Myanmar. Mandy Sadan, the editor of this 517 page volume and a scholar renowned for her seminal work “Being and Becoming Kachin” (Sadan, 2013), has carefully woven together the narratives and analyses, which aim to elucidate the conflict involving the Kachin and several other ethnic minorities. The 20,000-strong armed group, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), has fought for political autonomy since the early 1960s and conflict reignited in 2011 after a 17 year ceasefire broke down. The KIO has been opposing the ceasefire conditions offered by the military, and the Kachin people strongly endorse the KIO’s position especially in the main urban areas (p. 4).

The book is based on a counterfactual question: What did and did not happen during the 1994-2011 ceasefire period that can explain the current state of the conflict between the KIO and the government and the position of the Kachin civilians? The book release is timely and relevant to understanding the root causes of conflict, including the previous military regime’s policies, and politics among the Kachin and other minorities, which is referred to as ethnic politics in Myanmar. Local participants in and international observers of the Myanmar peace process would do well to study the experience of the past ceasefire, and this makes the book a must-read for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners working on Myanmar.

The contributors of the book have reached a common understanding of the ceasefire in Myan-

mar, a militarised status quo or *armed peace*. During the ceasefire movement in the 1990s, the junta government offered some local autonomy and development aid to ethnic areas in exchange for the insertion of central government authority into borderlands (p.100). The process involved various agents, including new army bases, government agencies and affiliated NGOs as well as business interests in extracting natural resources. Brang Seng, the then KIO chairman, had a new direction in mind and sought a legal status and recognition for KIO in the early 1990s, and his strategy to engage with the military junta was challenged by Kachin and other ethnic leaders (p. 66-7). The ceasefire agreement signed in 1994 between KIO and the government had created a space for civil society and raised hope for political solution, but had led to disillusionment after the junta’s National Convention process failed to deliver any political solution (p. 87-8 & p. 342).

The staggering political process during the ceasefire period was a sign of the lack of serious commitment by the military to make political concession to the demands of ethnic minorities (p. 101). In the meantime the government imposed ‘development’ projects on the local population, which concurred with the co-optation of former rebels, displacing and dispossessing the civilian population, and encouraging an influx of migrant workers from central Myanmar (p. 118-9 & p.301). Such development policy in ceasefire areas has served as a counterinsurgency tactic; it relocates civilian population to be easily policed by the authority, which subsequently cuts the civilian ties to KIO (p.120-122; See also Woods, 2011). Opening up some of the former

KIO held areas also jeopardised the income source. For instance, the legalisation of timber businesses through the state-owned company has been utilised to suppress the financial gains of the KIO from the cross border timber trade (p.138-9). Abundant natural resources in Kachin State, such as jade, hydropower, timber, minerals, and agricultural land, were subjected to government-led development activities, which infuriated directly affected locals and led to the perception of foreignisation of Kachin spaces (p. 218). The natural resource extraction, or 'resource grabs', have been considered sources of injustice and suffering by the Kachins (p.218-221). One prominent case is the Myitsone dam project on the confluence of the Irrawaddy river by a Chinese state-owned company, which has been met with fierce opposition from the beginning of the process (p.125-6).

China is the most important investor and trade partner for Myanmar, and the China-Myanmar relationship has been influenced by the democratic liberalisation in Myanmar. China has adopted a proactive role in mediating the Kachin conflict by hosting rounds of peace negotiations in 2013 (ch. 6). In addition to economic and geopolitical factors, the co-ethnic network across the China-Myanmar border has influenced the position of China the Kachin conflict (ch. 7). The Kachins in Myanmar and China have maintained the vibrant local interactions through the cultural activities and exchanges since 1970s until today (p. 186-196). Since the resumption of the war, the Kachin elites in China urged the Chinese government to advocate their concerns over humanitarian violations on the border (p.171).

Cultural identity is closely connected to political identity and ideologies such as nationalism. One aspect of the hardening of Kachin nationalist rhetoric in recent years points to the collective and personal experiences of the ceasefire period (p. 205-6). The narratives entail the sense of national emergency, the perceived threat of ethnocide, divine predestination, and individuals' subscription to the narratives can be reinforced by personal expe-

riences that reassure the evermore-presiding emergency (ch. 8). Some of the popular notions in the narratives contradict the realities of the complex pan-Kachin ethnicity and demographics (p. 211). The Kachin identity and aspiration can be observed in a visual form of narratives such as calendars (ch. 10).

These individual accounts present important aspects of the Kachin conflict, as the Kachin movement has been sustained by mass mobilisation and affected countless individuals (ch. 8, 9, 11, 12, & 13). For instance, some female KIO and KIA members revealed the ambivalent relationships to the organisation by expressing their personal plight in joining the organisation, and at the same time, their strong conviction to the Kachin cause (p. 249). An absence of a gendered consciousness in the past can be understood in the context of a patriarchal nationalism, whilst a greater gender consciousness has been emerging after the civil war resumed in 2011 (ch. 9).

The book includes biographical texts of important individuals. Nhkum Bu Lu describes her family relationship with the KIO, which caused various predicaments during the civil war, as did her being the wife of Mahkaw Hkun Sa who is a renown Kachin lawyer who became a political prisoner from 1991 to 1998 (ch. 11). Hkanhpa Tu Sadan recalls his time as a student at Yangon University in the mid-1990s and reflects upon the immediate effects of the ceasefire (ch. 12). Mahkaw Hkun Sa explains the political foundation of the Kachin diaspora movement and its relation to the KIO (ch. 13).

The book's title refers to the 'borderlands' of Myanmar, and this allows the authors to include other 'ethnicised' conflict in Ta'ang (ch. 14) and Karen (ch. 15) areas. The book also includes a cross-country comparison with similar conflicts in North-East India (ch. 16, 17). These illustrations show remarkable resemblance with the Kachin experience and provide important lessons for the future political dialogue and negotiation.

The edited volume is an excellent collective work reflecting rigorous efforts by the authors. The book

asserts the importance of understanding the historical context of ceasefire agreements in Kachin State, in order to improve the current fragile peace process. Research on Myanmar's ongoing peace conundrum will surely benefit from this volume.

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