

Guest Column

Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement is Dead

Sunday 17 October 2021, by [MATHIESON David Scott](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2021).

On the sixth anniversary of the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) it is worth considering how much can be salvaged from a discredited peace process, when Myanmar is facing multiple conflicts on top of the world's longest-running and most complex civil war.

Myanmar's latest dictator, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, welcomed the sixth anniversary of the NCA with a statement in the same unhinged cadence that has marked his speeches since he seized power in the February 1 coup.

Outlining steps to galvanize the NCA process ahead of the 75th anniversary of Union Day in 2022 he said, "In line with a saying goes: 'when one has been saying nothing, it would be easier to think nothing', it is impossible to stop the peace process primarily essential for the country. Only when relevant organizations are always talking about something and holding negotiation will they always have critical thinking and ideas on how to do improvement...(S)ome ethnic armed organizations need to practically review the concepts without fictional thoughts that it does not need to talk with the current government as the latter is not the elected one and that the current government cannot fully implement the peace process."

The NCA was signed on October 15, 2015 between the Myanmar military, the nominally civilian government of President Thein Sein and eight ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

Only two 'major' insurgent groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), signed on after years of negotiations that started in 2012, alongside six small, almost insignificant armed groups such as the Chin National Front and two splinter groups from the KNU. Two other small armed groups - the New Mon State Party and the Lahu Democratic Union - who were not permitted to join in 2015 were allowed to sign up in 2018.

In retrospect the NCA was a cobbled-together compromise, as well as a concession to Thein Sein for being such a good sport, as his administration was so accommodating to international engagement and investment ahead of what was an almost inevitable victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The actual text of the NCA isn't problematic. It was the implementation that doomed the agreement, the skeins of committees, procedures, sequencing, the impossibility of having so many diverse armed groups with quixotic leaders and questionable legitimacy, within a milieu of so many other rapid changes in Myanmar.



Former Myanmar President U Htin Kyaw greets Lahu and New Mon State Party representatives at the NCA signing ceremony in February 2018. /The Irrawaddy.

Most commentary on the failings of the NCA stresses three core impediments.

First, the Myanmar military was never fully sincere. It agreed grudgingly to the NCA to give credibility to the 'transition', but felt it had already granted enough concessions just by signing on and discussing federalism. But the military continued to adopt a dual strategy of talking to the EAOs and playing along with the incessant peace process activities, while exhibiting little evidence of changing its behavior in Kachin, Kayin and Shan States, as well as its mass crimes against humanity in Rakhine State. There is probably no better insight to the army's intransigence than the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC), which swallowed an estimated US\$10 million in international funding, a pile of donated cares from China and India, multiple meetings and no peace to show for it. A senior EAO official who attended JMC meetings observed that they were performances of insincerity, not resolution. Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing's approach was to bully, belittle, bluster and belch insults, as he did on the third anniversary of the NCA when he insulted the RCSS leader and the Kachin people, and soon afterwards declare a unilateral ceasefire for 'perpetual peace'. Fighting across Myanmar escalated.

Second, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD government did not treat national peace and reconciliation as a priority. In fact, Suu Kyi thought of peace process matters in two strands. The first was seeking some understanding with the military, it was an accord between Bamar-Buddhist elites, not the ethnic nationalities who had faced crushing discrimination and state violence for seventy years, exacerbated by economic plunder with little development. The second was using her father General Aung San's standing to re-brand the process as '21st Century Panglong', a form of symbolism that failed to conceal the political insincerity and her disdain for ethnic aspirations.

The peace process during the NLD government was kept on life support to maintain some semblance of progress following the crimes against humanity perpetrated against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, in which the international community was complicit. That Suu Kyi was blithely unconcerned with the horrific crimes against the Rohingya was obvious, but she also had no sympathy for civilians in conflict zones in Kachin, Shan and Southeast Myanmar. And all of those fine principles espoused by Western donors such as gender inclusion were lost on Suu Kyi whose misogyny was on par with that of the generals, while human rights, accountability and genuine rule of law were largely ignored, something that many Western donors accepted with alacrity.

The third impediment was the internal divisions between the 'signatories' and the exclusion of non-signatories. It became a cliché to dismiss the NCA as not nationwide. Nor was there much cessation of conflict as fighting continued in Shan, Kayin and Kachin States, and increased dramatically in Rakhine and Chin States from the third NCA anniversary in 2018. That the small and largely moribund Arakan Liberation Party was included but not the Arakan Army, which after 2018 became Myanmar's deadliest EAO, speaks to the absurdity. Many non-signatories refused to sign the NCA and wanted parallel bilateral initiatives. When the government negotiators stated that acceding to the NCA was a prerequisite and that signing the NCA was walking through a door that led to

political negotiations, EAOs heard 'walk into an ambush'. The COVID-19 pandemic generated optimism that the NLD and the military could cooperate with the EAOs on containment measures, but that did not occur. In fact, the army destroyed EAO COVID-19 checkpoints.

The coup gave many, but crucially not all, EAOs a clearer sense of the military's defiance. The KNU said on 15 October in a statement that the coup "has breached all the NCA's principles and implementation" and outlined six calls for a resolution of the crisis including cessation of hostilities, end to abuses and provisions for humanitarian assistance. The RCSS claimed that the "situation has become so bad that it is impossible to continue implementing the NCA and the Peace Process." In other words, the two most significant EAO signatories think that the NCA is under some form of suspension, and appear unwilling to completely declare its demise.

The Peace Process Steering Team (PPST), a highly-divided assembly of the ten signatories, expressed full support for the establishment of the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw [and the Federal Democracy Charter in April this year]. But soon after, the divided PPST suggested that the NCA be used as a vehicle of possible mediation, sending a private letter to international signatories and witnesses urging them to support such an idea. While the anti-NCA faction of the KNU thought this was delusional, the more malleable factions have gotten behind 'the NCA is still breathing' delusion. On the sixth anniversary of the NCA, the PPST said in a statement that they "uphold the essence of the NCA" and commit to continuing a political stance of the peaceful resolution of the current crises. Without diminishing the PPST's sincerity, one shouldn't question their current irrelevance under the circumstances.

The Euro-Burma office recently released a small report titled *Is the NCA Dead?*, in which they argue the NCA may be dead but could be reanimated somehow. Argued with insight and reason, this approach is still completely out of step with the conflict realities Myanmar now faces. Why would any of the post-February conflict actors listen to a bunch of old men who have been talking with the Myanmar army for years without making any real progress?

This is not to suggest that the EAOs, the real ones, not the artificially-inflated groups, have no role to play. They certainly do, but the NCA is not the vehicle for this. The dilemma is that dim-witted or desperate decision makers will throw funds at something they perceive might work, including using the NCA signatories. The caravan of international charlatans creeping to Naypyitaw may have ceased, but shoddy ideas will never die.

Now there is an often unacknowledged fourth reason for the failure of the NCA: the political and financial backing of Western donors. The international community must face a harsh reality: the NCA is kaput. The vital signs were weak for years ahead of the coup, and from late 2018 the NCA was comatose. Advanced rigor mortis started in 2020. Decomposition began on February 1. The cause of death was clearly the coup, but the underlying conditions were clearly evident.

Many Western donors were complicit in the artifice of the NCA. The 11-donor Joint Peace Fund (JPF), which closes up after spending tens of millions in Western funding, plus other funds and bilateral funding for peace related support, have little to show for their support for the formal process.

Western donor chicanery on honestly assessing the state of the peace process could be cast in two extreme pathologies: ignorance to the point of criminal negligence or active connivance in a cover-up. This may sound too strong. But another often unacknowledged feature of the failing NCA was that civilians were being killed and abused in ongoing conflict, and many donors downplayed the extent of this. They tacitly exonerated the abuses of the Myanmar army in the interests of engagement, and cynically sustained support for the NLD when Suu Kyi's commitment to peace was

clearly not there.

It's not just states, there are also a slew of complicit international NGOs involved in the peace-industrial complex who produced shady reports and indemnified analysis to donors to ensure that the cash spigot continued to gush. Western donors who refused to countenance a different course of action financed this make-believe world. Bureaucratic inertia, hubris and misguided optimism are all symptoms of moral cowardice. Regardless of Western donors' insistence on aid accountability, there will be no reckoning with the chicanery of many peace process actors such as the JPF.

How can the West actually support peace in Myanmar in more meaningful ways? One approach to avoid is the 'Great White Man' theory of conflict resolution, something that infected the peace process to the point of incapacitation. If any condescending charlatan from South Africa, Switzerland or Scandinavia declares an interest, drive them away. This is not because people from Myanmar will be beguiled by such expertise, as so many were baffled by the pontificating dolts who showed up at workshops, briefings and during study tours. It's because the Western donors paying for these flimflam artists want to promote the transformative interventions of 'their' sage and bathe in reflected glory, reap political and commercial capital, and generally use peace to advance 'their interests'.

This partly explains the allure of Jonathan Powell and his group Inter Mediate [1]. Powell is a negotiator and former chief of staff to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the author of *Talking to Terrorists* [2] [the NCA signatories were removed from the list of terrorist organizations the day before signing: most didn't even know they were listed as terrorists]. Over several years and possibly several million UK Pounds worth of funding, Powell and his colleagues who were based in secret in Naypyitaw have little to show for his shady dealings or his showy study tours with EAO leaders. That detestable war criminal Tony Blair also travelled to Naypyitaw, where he likely felt in fine company with Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing after his dealings with Middle Eastern despots. A senior EAO leader told me in 2020 that Powell was resented for getting in the way of negotiations, not facilitating them, and had virtually no use for them [this EAO had not signed the NCA or achieved any peace since Powell showed up, which is as solid a metric as one needs].

Similar sentiments were expressed about the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, who were seen as meddling, not mediating, and fawning over the military to maintain access to high-level officials for their workshops. The lavishly Western-funded Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security (MIPS) was also treated with suspicion for their subtly pro-Myanmar military reporting. That a senior member of MIPS joined the junta's administration so soon after the coup cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. The international community had a clear pro-state bias in their approach to peace, and gravitated too close to the senior army leadership.

The Western donors to the process, those who fueled the money pit of the JPF and many other doomed ventures of flawed thinking, should examine their efforts at great length before engaging in any future peace support. The first lesson must be to slow down or suspend support for any process that has stalled or is taking on a clearly-skewed statist stance, as was glaringly obvious after October 2018.

Second, 'inclusion' must be a reality, not rhetoric. To marginalize the actual victims of a conflict is to exacerbate that conflict, and the most acute gauge of the health of a peace process is asking real people who live around men with guns, not some geriatric windbag in the lobby of a luxurious hotel. Office-bound officials become intoxicated around supposedly violent rebels and the thrill of civilizing them, without admitting that most of the ones they engage with are incontinent minor players.

Third, and almost impossible for the mandarins of Western development to countenance, approach

other people's suffering with some humility, empathy and a genuine desire to help. Listen, learn, don't impose and don't believe that throwing money at a problem is synonymous with success. Understanding the nature of the conflict takes time, and isn't helped by incessant comparisons along the lines of, "When I was in Nepal [or Afghanistan, Nigeria, or Cambodia]", when you can't find Kutkai or Hpapun on a map or constantly make the dim-witted amateur joke that Myanmar's proliferation of political acronyms is like the Monty Python skit from the movie Life of Brian. So many peace entrepreneurs spoke incomprehensible nonsense about procedural issues and peace architecture precisely because they didn't know anything about Myanmar. That's why so many of them believed that the Shan artist Sawangwongse Yawngghwe's Peace Industrial Complex 1 (2014) [3] artwork was some secret schematic that explained it all.

It is an absurdist coincidence that just two days before the sixth anniversary of the NCA, the opulent Kempinski Hotel in Naypyitaw closed its doors. So much of the Western experiment with discipline-flourishing democracy was staged from this hotel, including the peace process. Many of its Western guests have already sought fortunes on other foreign shores as Myanmar descends into multiple civil wars. When an inevitable process of peace and reconciliation resumes in Myanmar one of the key characteristics must be the strictly sparing use of foreign carpetbaggers, and all the curdled expertise they retch onto a reality that they care not to comprehend.

David Scott Mathieson

P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 15 October 2021:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmars-nationwide-ceasefire-agreement-is-dead.html>
 - David Scott Mathieson is an independent analyst working on peace, conflict, and human rights issues on Myanmar
-

Footnotes

- [1] http://www.inter-mediate.org/jonathan_powell.html
- [2] <https://www.amazon.com/Talking-Terrorists-How-Armed-Conflicts/dp/1847922295>
- [3] <https://mekongreview.com/underground/>