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A Dangerous Precedent

The UWSA and Statehood

Once again, the leader of the United Wa State Party/United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA) Bao Youxiang has reiterated his call for state recognition of the Wa self-administered zone this time at the organisation's 30th anniversary.

During his speech in the Wa capital of Panghsang, on northern Shan State's border with China, the chairman apparently told the assembled that Wa state is an inalienable part of the Union of Myanmar, and solemnly promised not to split from it or seek independence.¹

In his speech, he was reported as saying,

What we need is ethnic equality, ethnic dignity, ethnic autonomy, and we ask the government to give the Wa an autonomous ethnic state; then we will fight for our lives . . . Until our political demands are realized, we will hold high the banner of peace and democracy on one hand, and armed self-defence on the other, and maintain the status quo.²

The success of the UWSA and its ability to maintain an all but in name autonomous state in Myanmar is largely due to its support from China. The UWSA is especially supported by members of the PLA and Yunnan Province administration.³ Many Chinese advisers, including Chinese intelligence officers and former PLA personnel, are close to the Wa leadership, and the UWSA often echoes official Chinese talking points. China's links with the Wa are also strengthened by language, investment, communications, and transport, all of which are linked to Yunnan.⁴

While other armed ethnic groups up until the 1990s had also been able to maintain semi-autonomous enclaves, the Karen especially, bordering Thailand, this ended when the Thai Government warmed to successive Myanmar military governments.

As a result, pressure was put on such groups to acquiesce to the then government, the NMSP ceasefire being an obvious case.

The UWSA had not previously maintained ethnic aspirations but was borne out of the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma and is largely a political construct underscored by ethnicity. Khin Nyunt after signing a ceasefire with the group used it to fight against the Mong Tai Army (MTA) and in doing so it was able to take over large swathes of Shan territory north and south of Kengtung which they still control today and see as part of a future Wa State.



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After signing the 1989 ceasefire agreement, the UWSA used money from the narcotics trade and invested in a number of casinos, hotels, and other entertainment enterprises. One of the five largest banks in Myanmar, Mayflower Bank, prior to its suspension by the Myanmar Government, had been linked to the UWSA and was subsequently accused of money laundering by the U.S. which has designated the UWSA as significant narcotics traffickers under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act. In addition, the UWSA also set up a number of other businesses including the Hongpang Group, founded in 1998, and involved in import/export, general trading, production of textiles, wires and cables, electric appliances and agricultural goods. It is also engaged in livestock breeding, gem mining and highway construction. In addition to its more legitimate concerns, the UWSA has also been implicated in the arms trade supplying not only other Myanmar based ethnic armed groups but also Naga and in the past Maoist rebels.

Currently, the group has used proxies such as Ho Chin Ting to invest in enterprises such as Yangon Airways and a chain of hotels in Myanmar, among them the luxurious Thanlwin Hotel in Yangon.⁵

In reality, the Wa region is a prefecture of China in all but name, despite this, the government has asked the UWSA to sign the NCA, but as head of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) alliance which also includes the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), Kachin Independence Organization/ Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA), Palaung State Liberation Front /Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA), Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), Peace and Solidarity Committee/Shan State East National Democratic Alliance Association (PSC/NDAA), many of whom continue to fight with government forces, it has rejected calls to do so unless major changes are made to the agreement⁶

While many commentators have generally recognised former CPB organisations on a par with those ethnic armed groups that emerged since 1948, the objectives and most importantly the constructs that define them are not similar. While many in the FPNCC believe that the UWSA shares the same over-arching objective in ethnic unity for all – it remains unclear as to whether the UWSA see this as a genuine objective or merely a convenient identifier to achieve its own aims.

For the UWSA, the overall veneer of ethnic equality is a useful tool towards establishing its own statehood and assuaging doubts about its somewhat controversial past deeds not to mention those alleged in the present. While Bao Youxiang may call for 'ethnic equality, ethnic dignity, ethnic autonomy' which is a particularly noble aspiration, it could be argued when conflict occurred in 2009 against the MNDAA it did little to support their brothers in arms with whom they had an alliance.⁷ Rather, the UWSA moved to secure its own flank and did little else to change the course of the conflict.⁸

According to one source quoted in USIP report,

‘ . . . the UWSA is, therefore, more interested in maintaining the status quo rather than joining forces with other groups—Kachin, Ta'ang, Arakan, and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance—and fighting against the Burmese army. The Kachin leader N'Ban La is known to have asked the UWSA to launch attacks on the Burmese army to relieve

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The argument for recognising the UWSA controlled territory hinges on the precedent such recognition would create. Many of the armed ethnic organisations, both ceasefire and non-ceasefire signatories, seek similar recognition and de-facto control over their own territorial areas. This would put them in direct confrontation with the government which already maintains state administrations.

There is little doubting the UWSA is the strongest and most problematic armed ethnic organisation in the country. There are positives in the government recognising this and allowing constitutional state recognition. To allow the UWSA statehood would most likely see the demise of armed ethnic groups currently in the

Northern Alliance largely because their weapons and support could be curtailed if this was part of a government agreement. While there are other sources of arms and support for such groups, the UWSA still remains the largest benefactor in relation to armed support for many of the north-eastern groups fighting against the government. With a government agreement, it is likely this support would end or at least be greatly diminished.

Alternatively, government recognition of Wa special region as a state will have serious consequences for a future Myanmar. With federalism on the table, although what form it will take is unclear, it is likely that most ethnic groups, especially smaller underrepresented ones, will seek similar recognition. If such a proposition were to be undertaken resulting in, for example, Shan State, being further carved-up, especially those areas lost during the conflict with the MTA, the likelihood of further inter-ethnic conflict would be heightened.

The Myanmar government faces a major conundrum. The Wa are unlikely to be militarily defeated and will always remain a de-facto province of China within the borders of Myanmar. However, giving state recognition to the group, while likely reducing military support to armed ethnic groups currently fighting the government, has the potential to risk a future federal union with all groups demanding an equal seat at the table.

The Government and Tatmadaw need to measure what would be the best outcome for the country going forward, there is a way of reducing armed conflict in the country, but the cost to stability in the future should be a major concern.

Notes

¹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/uwsa-leader-repeats-demands-autonomous-wa-state-30th-anniversary.html>

² Ibid

³ 'China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts', USIP, 2018

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process', Bertil Lintner, USIP, 2019

⁶ See EBO Briefing Paper 2/19

⁷ The four-group military alliance, The Myanmar Peace and Democracy Front, which comprised the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the MNDAA, National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA, or Mongla) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) did little to intervene in the conflict.

⁸ See 'The Kokang Clashes – What Next?' EBO Analysis Paper No.4