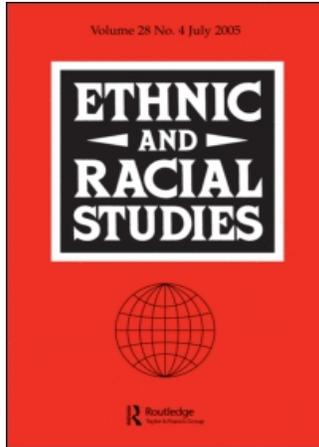


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Revising the ethnodevelopment model: addressing Karen self-determination within the context of the failed ethnocratic state of military-ruled Burma

Jack Fong

Abstract

My paper examines the Karen ethnic nationality and their fifty-eight-year self-determination struggle against ethnic cleansing resulting from the ethnocratic and military governments of Burma. I frame Karen self-determination as a development issue by employing Rodolfo Stavenhagen's *ethnodevelopment* model. Ethnodevelopment argues that, if asymmetrical development occurs within a multi-ethnic state, state-oriented ethnic minority development strategies are needed to neutralize the asymmetry. However, Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment does not question the premise of an authoritarian state or the systemic crisis experienced by ethnic minorities under authoritarian rule. Thus, I revise ethnodevelopment from its top-to-bottom trajectory where ethnic minority development is dependent upon the centralized state, to a bottom-to-top trajectory I designate as *liberation ethnodevelopment*. I argue that Karen liberation ethnodevelopment is also a development process, but one that develops and shields the Karen from ethnic cleansing.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict; Karen; ethnodevelopment; Burma; ethnocracy; self-determination.

Why is it that development strategies fail to garner international support and legitimacy for ethnic minorities engaged in the process of self-determination? A key reason is that in neglecting to discern that self-determination is *not* a derivative of fascism, the implication is that all nationalist trajectories are prototypically fascistic in nature. As

such, self-determination struggles are still viewed as socio-political anomalies by the international community. Moreover, international bodies such as the United Nations will not, without external stimulation, question the legitimacy and premise of the state, even if it is an authoritarian one engaged in ethnic cleansing. Thus, ethnic conflict resulting from contestations against a state engaged in ethnic cleansing becomes relegated to the 'internal affairs' of that state, further exacerbating the human condition of its ethnic minorities.

To understand why self-determination groups often lack international recognition for the legitimacy of their struggle requires a review, critique and revision of Stavenhagen's (1986) Stavenhagen's (1996) *ethnodevelopment* perspective. The case that will allow me to revise Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment is based on how the Karen ethnicity¹ of Burma² has struggled for self-determination against its three pro-Burman military governments: the Burma Socialist Programme Party with General Ne Win at the helm (BSPP: 1962–88), the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC: 1988–97) and the State Peace Development Council (SPDC: 1997–present). The key apparatus controlled by these governments is the *Tatmadaw* – the Burmese Armed Forces.

My analysis of Karen ethnodevelopment takes place in the context of systemic crisis (i.e. institutional and infrastructural breakdown as a result of war). Indeed, to enable full understanding of the implications of ethnodevelopment, I will first outline conventional and progressive development paradigms that do not explicitly factor in systemic crisis. By not factoring in systemic crisis, I make the argument that there is a lack of analytical utility in outlining the anatomy of development during times conflict. I then make visible the emergence of Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment approach from development's more progressive variant, alternative development.

I then point out Stavenhagen (1986, 1996) and Brown's (1994) discussion of the *ethnocracy*, the ethnic stratum with the most social, cultural and financial capital, and one that aims to control the institutions of the state. Although the ethnocracy is an excellent mechanism for viewing multicultural asymmetry, I critique Stavenhagen's employment of it because he fails to situate it within a context where the ethnocracy is authoritarian and where systemic crisis exists.

In the context of Burma, the military governments' ethnic cleansing via the *Four Cuts* (*Pya Ley Pya* in Burmese) and *Burmanization* are argued to be the manifestation and articulation of ethnocratic hegemony.³ I then critique Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment on the grounds that it does not make visible how a self-determination struggle can function as a form of development in an ethnocratically authoritarian context, a context which frames the Karen struggle. At this juncture, I contribute, detail and explain an alternative strategy to

Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment, one that I term *liberation ethnodevelopment*.

I then argue that supporting Karen liberation ethnodevelopment, given the context of (a) a protracted war, (b) the current inefficacy of democratic developments as attempted by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy Party (NLD) and the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC)⁴ and (c) the international community's inability/unwillingness to challenge the premise of a military-ruled Burmese state, is relatively the best option for Karen development, or for development of Burma's ethnic nationalities overall.

When Burma acquired its independence from Britain in 1948, Burman nationalists immediately attempted to consolidate the country's new borders, borders that encapsulated many fiercely independent peoples and their nations. The diverse ethnic nationalities, of which the Karen are part and parcel, were lumped together in a Burman and British construction of the Burmese nation-state. The Karen rejected this construction of a 'union' of Burma. The Karen National Union (KNU)⁵ responded in 1949 by launching the Karen Revolution. Many of Burma's other ethnic nationalities such as the Shan, Kachin, Karenni, Arakan, and Mon soon followed suit.

The Four Cuts were then employed by the Tatmadaw during the 1960s to combat ethnic nationalities fighting for self-determination; by the 1970s, the Four Cuts reached the hills of Karen country. All three military governments have employed the infamous Four Cuts strategy against Burma's ethnic nationalities, a strategy which has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Burma's ethnic nationalities, including thousands of Karen. The military governments have also adopted a Burmanization platform based on promoting a pro-Burman identity founded on de-culturalization through institutional means.

The Karen and remaining non-ceasefire ethnic nationalities have fought Rangoon so intensely that even the current atavism of the Tatmadaw, the SPDC, has yet to consolidate its power fully across the entire country. Historical KNU leaders such as Ba U Gyi, Mahn Ba Zan, Bo Mya and, currently, Saw Ba Thin, have maintained their platform of no surrender. As a result, the fighting between the Karen and the pro-Burman military governments has the dubious distinction of being one of the longest and most under-reported civil wars throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Smith 1999).

'Conventional' development

To analyse the labyrinthine and complex ethnopolitics of Burma requires us to relegate conventional notions of development to a secondary sphere. Yet what is 'conventional' development insofar as ethnodevelopment strategies can be contrasted to and bounced off it?

Cowen and Shenton, in their important work *Doctrines of Development* (1996), divide development into two types: immanent historical process and intentional practice. As immanent historical process, development can historically be viewed as social change where societies are transformed over long periods; and as intentional practice 'consisting of deliberate efforts aimed at progress on the part of various agencies, including governments, all kinds of organizations and social movements' (Thomas 1992, p. 7; Cowen and Shenton 1996). Thus the idea of development is almost always 'synonymous with "progress"' (Thomas 1992, p. 6). Moreover, after World War II, it was progress 'introduced as a postcolonial initiative, framed in national terms' (McMichael 2004, p. 39).

The period after World War II was characterized by two major geopolitical dynamics: (1) the decolonization of many parts of the world into a 'Third World', i.e. the countries 'inhabited by non-Europeans that were poor and for the most part colonized by Europe' (McMichael 2004, p. 28), and (2) the polarization of certain parts of the world under USSR and US attempts at geopolitical influence. It should be noted that, although the two political blocs subscribed to differing representations of human progress, both echoed Walter Rostow's modernist (and economic) paradigm that state-oriented national industrialization would be the vehicle of development for attaining modernity (see Rostow 1960).

From the perspective of democracy, development came to be viewed as a post-World War II national project that aimed to contain communism by alleviating global poverty (Sachs 1992; McMichael 2004). Alternatively, development as practised after World War II could also be viewed as very much an intentional practice that was harnessed by newly decolonized states to free themselves from the socialist/communist and capitalist development agendas of the super-powers. In either case, the state became the manager of societal configurations in a decolonizing world as it navigated varying degrees of 'marketness' between capitalism and socialism (Block 1990), while import substitution industrialization (ISI) became the model for Third World development (Seers 1983; Allen and Thomas 1992; McMichael 2004).

Critiques of capitalist development emerged in the 1950s, and continued until the late 1970s. Many of these perspectives noted how capitalist-oriented development tended to generate underdevelopment and dependency (Frank 1966; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Warren 1980). Hettne identifies the dependency school as emerging from two broad traditions: 'one with its background in the Marxist tradition . . . the other rooted in the Latin American structuralist discussion on development' (1990, p. 83). Dependency theory provided an alternative intellectual perspective rooted in the Third World. It became a

popular approach with development thinkers sympathetic to the decolonized status of developing countries (see Baran 1957; Frank 1966; Amin 1974, 1976; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Warren 1980).

By the 1980s, ISI and its protectionist strategies had not resulted in development as planned, while export-oriented industrialization (EOI) fuelled rapid economic growth in newly industrializing countries. As a result, national development gave way to globalization and variations of EOI, with the World Bank's *World Development Report 1980* defining global development, or globalization, to mean 'participation in the world market' (McMichael 2004, p. 116). However, neoliberal development via globalization during the 1980s generated many contradictions in the global arena, especially through its aggressive structural adjustment programmes. Moreover critics from the South began to reject Eurocentric development strategies that were perceived to have resulted in a crisis in development and global capitalism (Korten 1990; Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Storey 2000).

During the same period interdisciplinary efforts by 'social psychologists, historians, anthropologists and political scientists' all attempted to articulate newer development approaches that could make visible the conditions of poor nations by focusing on issues related to 'ozone depletion, debt, AIDs, drugs, terrorism, currency crises, hunger and human rights' (Bernstein 1971, p. 143; Stavenhagen 1986, 1996; Hettne 1990; Thomas and Potter 1992). Over time definitions on development changed 'extremely fast and in very uncertain ways' (Allen and Thomas 1992, p. 1).

Beyond neoliberal development

Actors engaged in activism and seeking agency in these spheres of life have relied on identity, gender and environmental politics in hopes of countering the anticipated and unanticipated effects of globalization (Thomas and Potter 1992; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994). Demands made by actors in the aforementioned areas have been designated as belonging to the 'alternative development' paradigm (Stavenhagen 1986, 1996; Hettne 1990; Storey 2000; McMichael 2004). Alternative development approaches attempt to steer away from the 'perils of globalization' by situating development in the local (Mander and Goldsmith 1996).

In the alternative development approach there is 'no universal path to development' (Hettne 1990, p. 154). Instead it focuses on funnelling ecological, feminist/eco-feminist, indigenous and ethnic issues of a particular region to a more localized development agenda. It is also an approach that wishes to be 'participatory rather than technocratic' and builds upon 'existing cultural traditions rather than reject them off-hand as obstacles to development' (Stavenhagen 1986, p. 75).

As a development perspective alternative development emphasizes freedom and democratic principles (Clarke 2001); the need for environmental justice (Sharp 1995); and empowerment and agency by actors engaged in voluntary action (Chambers 1983, Korten 1990). It often adopts a basic-needs strategy, i.e. a strategy 'designed to satisfy the fundamental necessities of the largest number of people rather than economic growth for growth's sake' (Stavenhagen 1986, p. 75). Korten (1990) goes as far as crediting alternative development for generating a paradigm shift with regard to theory, thus constituting a 'third paradigm' aiming to redefine the means and ends of development.

An alternative development perspective concentrates on the 'content', not 'form', of development by emphasizing what development should be and not what development is (Hettne 1990, p. 153). It also signifies a shift away from a top-to-bottom bureaucratic mass development towards 'creating development appropriate to needs and interests of the popular majority in Third World countries' (Brohman 1996, p. 324). Ethnodevelopment is thus a derivative discourse of the alternative development paradigm that makes visible the neglect of the 'ethnic question' in development studies' analytical framework (Stavenhagen 1986, p. 77).

Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Prize winner in the category of economic science, has indirectly contributed to the alternative development paradigm in his book *Development as Freedom* (1999). Sen argues that development approaches must be based on the processes of 'expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' and how the 'relative weights of different types of freedoms' affect social progress (Sen 1999, p. 3). Sen's emphasis on the need for development to usher in freedoms extends the concerns expressed by Toye, namely that development studies should not just be based on the examination of indicators related to the 'output of goods and services', but instead, on a host of alternative interdisciplinary indicators of development (1987, p. 3).

Sen argues that, through 'people participation', societies have the opportunities to decide what should be chosen for development. Sen believes that, in democracies where political leaders can be held accountable for their actions, people power can generate the dynamics that lead to the removal of *unfreedoms* (defined as the lack of freedoms). Sen explicitly acknowledges that the freedom-centred perspective has a 'generic similarity to the common concern with "quality of life", which...concentrates on the way human life goes ... and not just on the resources or income that a person has' (1999, p. 24).

Sen's development emphasis is based on how people can achieve full *human capabilities*, defined as 'the ability – the substantive freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have' (1999, p. 293). When there is poverty, famine

and various crises human capability is denied and the capacity for freedoms to convert 'primary goods into the person's ability to promote her end' does not occur (pp. 74–5). It is in this context that people experience unfreedoms. Yet Sen neglected to address state-generated forms of ethnic unfreedoms, or what Stavenhagen (1986) describes as a 'paradigmatic blind spot' in conventional development studies.

Ethnodevelopment

In Stavenhagen's 1986 publication 'Ethnodevelopment: a neglected dimension in development thinking' and his ambitious 1996 work *Ethnic Conflicts and the Nation-state* (1996) sponsored by the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development (UNRISD), ethnodevelopment strategies are conceptualized as programmes that foster 'the development of ethnic groups within the framework of the larger society' (1986, p. 92, 1996).

Rodolfo Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment emphasizes policies that respect and legitimize the rights of ethnic minorities/indigenous peoples to determine their own political, economic and cultural trajectory (Stavenhagen 1986, 1996; Hettne 1990; Clarke 2001). Ethnodevelopment strategy, then, can be conceptualized as development strategy appropriate for ethnic minority groups and, where possible, generated from the ethnic minority group themselves. In contrast to Sen, Stavenhagen switches his units of analyses away from the state, albeit still emphasizing the importance of its role in eliminating unfreedoms, and focuses on how development strategies can be employed towards multi-ethnic configurations *within* the state. Because Stavenhagen aimed to study 'the nature and characteristics of conflict between ethnic groups in the process of development', ethnodevelopment strategy can be viewed as a conflict resolution strategy for ethnic conflict (Stavenhagen 1996, p. ix).

By employing an ethnodevelopment perspective to outline how Karen engage in their own development, I am responding to what Seers, Stavenhagen and Hettne argue to be an inbuilt bias by conventional development thinkers who are 'against ethnic identification and in favour of national identification, regardless of how unrealistic a particular nation-state project may be' (Hettne 1990, p. 193). This bias results from the assumption in much development discourse that ethnic antagonisms and tensions melt away as development occurs. Enloe argues the opposite, that 'development does not automatically herald the demise of ethnicity' (1973, p. 34). According to Enloe the problem is that the vast majority of governments of multi-ethnic nation-states still idealize assimilation and integration towards

an ethnocentric ideal, often against the wishes of its ethnic minorities (Enloe 1973, p. 34; Stavenhagen 1986, 1996; Ryan 1995).

Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment thus acknowledges trajectories where localized non-state actors of the South exhibit their agency to define the arrangements, features and forms of their social and cultural existence. Ethnodevelopment departs from conventional development theory in its emphasis that people are divided into localized *territorial cultural groups* as well as being individual consumers and producers, buyers and sellers, employees and employers (Stavenhagen 1986, 1996). The centre of gravity for ethnodevelopment analyses is based on exploring the human condition of this type of identity rather than a nation-state identity.

Ethnodevelopment is thus a development perspective that no longer perceives ethnicity to be an obstacle to modernization (Thompson and Ronen 1986, p. 1). Nevertheless, despite the thousands of ethnic groups in the world today and the prevalence of many more ethnic groups and nations than nation-states, Stavenhagen concedes that it is difficult to classify such groups. It would be up to Seers to further refine Stavenhagen's view in the *Political Economy of Nationalism* (1983, p. 9), where he argued that, rather than focus on static categories for identifying ethnic groups, emphasis should be on the local and regional economics that promote ethnopolitical cohesion, a prerequisite for successful nation construction.

When we take the ideas presented by Hettne in *Ethnicity and Development* (1996) and superimpose them over the aforementioned features of ethnodevelopment, we see that ethnodevelopment was born from the need to address conflict directed against ethnic minorities, with the aim of minimizing or eliminating the conflict to allow for the development of ethnic minorities. According to Hettne this is a needed response because mainstream development has frequently generated ethnic conflicts between the state and its ethnic minorities simply by overlooking the consequences of development for the latter group. Political entrepreneurs of the advantaged group then attempt to centralize and construct a nation-state, i.e. a nation of one people, by creating an overarching identity that overrides the diversity of different peoples.

Moreover, ethnodevelopment can make visible that the transition from state-oriented development towards globalized development has not occurred for all states; for example, rogue states like military-ruled Burma have not transitioned. As such, Clarke (2001) notes the applicability of ethnodevelopment within Southeast Asia, where since the 1990s ethnodevelopment strategies have been enacted through international donors concerned about the plight of ethnic minorities not only in Burma, but in Laos, Vietnam and Indonesia, with significant successes in liberating East Timor in 1999.

That development programmes need to be specifically directed to ethnic minorities implies an inherent asymmetry in the cultural, social and economic relationships between ethnic groups, resulting in asymmetrical distribution of resources that affect their development. According to Stavenhagen (1986, 1996) and Brown (1994) the asymmetrical development in a multi-ethnic state is skewed by its ethnocracy. Because the ethnocracy is the ethnic collective with the most political, economic and cultural power, it 'attempts . . . to impose its own particular ethnic interests on the whole of national society' (Stavenhagen 1996, p. 197). For Brown, the Four Cuts and Burmanization exemplify how Burma is an ethnocratic state. Brown defines the ethnocratic state as 'where the state acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community in terms of ideologies, its policies and its resource distribution' (1994, p. 36).

There are three main tendencies of the ethnocratic state: first, the majority ethnic group is disproportionately and overwhelmingly granted access to state elite positions, the civil service and armed forces. Moreover, 'state elites use these positions to promote their ethnic interests, rather than acting as either an "autonomous" state bureaucracy or as representatives of the socio-economic class strata from which they originate' (Brown 1994, p. 37). Second, the ethnocratic state positions its own values at the top of a multicultural scale where 'the state is neither ethnically neutral nor multi-ethnic, but . . . mono-ethnic' (p. 37). Finally, ethnocratic states utilize their institutions, '[their] constitutions, [their] laws and [their] political structures' to establish ethnocratic hegemony (p. 37). Overall, politics in an ethnocratic state is based on the 'introduction of values and institutions of the ethnic group into the peripheral communities' (p. 38). Weiner noted the consistency of this pattern in multicultural societies:

In country after country, a single ethnic group has taken control over the state and used its powers to exercise control over others. . . . In retrospect there has been far less 'nation-building' than many analysts had expected . . . for the process of state building has rendered many ethnic groups devoid of power or influence (Weiner 1987, pp. 36–7).

Karen self-determination, then, is a direct response to the Burman ethnocracy's attempts at establishing hegemony through the Four Cuts and Burmanization.

The Four Cuts and Burmanization

Since the 1960s, Burma's military governments have believed that the single best way to counter self-determination groups 'is to destroy the

ability of the civilians to support them', or metaphorically speaking by 'draining the ocean so the fish cannot swim' (Delang 2000, pp. 15–16). As a policy, the Four Cuts has allowed Burman military commanders and soldiers to engage in human rights violations of all articles of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a declaration that applies to how governments should behave towards their citizens. The Four Cuts policy also violates international humanitarian laws 'intended to protect non-combatants and the victims of such conflicts' (Human Rights Watch/Asia 1995, p. 4).

The Four Cuts strategy is an internal colonization process based on severing 'four main links between the insurgents, their families, and the local population' (Fredholm 1993, p. 91).⁶ The four main links to be cut were food supplies, financial flow, intelligence gathering and capacity to recruit new soldiers. The Karen are understandably more cynical, describing the Four Cuts in more forthright terms as a means to: cut off the rebels from their own people, from access to the outside world, from supply lines and as a means to cut off their heads (Falla 1991, p. 28; Fredholm 1993, p. 91; Smith 1999).

The Four Cuts strategy was modelled on the British subjugation of the South African Boers during the Boer Wars of the previous century, a strategy refined into the 'new village' tactics developed by British forces against the Communist Party of Malaysia. The 'strategic hamlet' programme was the US variant and was employed during the Vietnam War forcibly to relocate millions of Laotian and Vietnamese peasants and hill peoples. All these programmes have been criticized for their gross abuses of human rights (Fredholm 1993; Smith 1999).

However, it would be too convenient, a mistake, to view the Four Cuts strategy as a British or Western import. Although Burman nationalists 'looked to Sinn Fein, the Fabian Society, the Indian National Congress and the rise of Japan for their inspiration', the sentiments which characterize the Four Cuts strategy are historically rooted in Burman ambitions for empire (Myint-U 2001, p. 246). The inspiration for such ambitions dates back centuries to the conquering monarchs from the 'three strong Burman kingdoms of Anawratha of the Pagan Dynasty (1044–1287), Bayinnaung of the Toungoo Dynasty (1486–1752), and Alaungpaya of the Konbaung Dynasty' (1753–1885) and leading up to Aung San, founder of the Tatmadaw (Fredholm 1993, p. 21; Smith 1999).⁷

Little has changed. The SPDC still employs the Four Cuts to underscore Burman hegemony by emphasizing the 'primacy of the nation over its parts' (Silverstein 1981, p. 54). Colonel Aung Thein of the Tatmadaw remarked in the late 1980s that the Four Cuts will be used to 'fight the insurgents until they are eliminated' (Lintner 1994). General Saw Maung, Ne Win's main successor, reproduced this

chauvinism in a 1990 radio broadcast: 'In a ... defence of his own Buddhism and Burman ancestry, he looked back over 900 years to the country's first Buddhist ruler at Pagan who had embarked on an era of military conquest to impose his own religious solution on the people' (Smith 1999, p. 419). In 1997, Tatmadaw General Maung Aye was quoted as saying 'the Burmese vow to pursue offensives against rebels indefinitely' (Human Rights Watch/Asia July 1997, p. 13). Not surprisingly, ethnic nationalists claim that there was an 'undeniably racial element' in the implementation of the Four Cuts (Smith 1999, p. 258). Indeed, Four Cuts attacks were undertaken 'by predominantly Burman officers against Karen, Karenni and Mon villagers' (Smith 1999, p. 397).

The Tatmadaw 'rehearsed' their Four Cuts during 1966 against the Kachins and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). It was a 'drastic scorched earth policy employed in the Myitkyina, Hukawng Valley, the Naga hills and the Kanmaing region where thousands died unreported to the world outside' (Smith 1999, p. 220). Its application against the delta insurgents, primarily the delta Karen when the region was still very much under KNU influence, occurred in its rudimentary form even as early as the pre-Ne Win 1950s. However, its initial effects during the 1950s were limited as it only pushed insurgent forces 'deeper into Burma's great mountains and forests. Rebel commanders and their followers invariably escaped, emerging again later to fight another day' (Smith 1999, p. 258).

By the 1970s the Four Cuts would reach the Karen hills. To date hundreds of thousands of Karen have been forced into hard labour for the military, murdered, raped and/or displaced as internally displaced peoples (IDPs) or refugees while their villages are destroyed or relocated closer to Tatmadaw jurisdictions (Human Rights Watch/Asia 1995, 1997, 1998; International Crisis Group 2003). Because KNLA guerrillas are too elusive for the military to confront conventionally, Karen villagers and civilians are 'pacified' in this manner before actual military offensives begin.

Moreover, Burmanization, a process of de-culturalization that frames the Four Cuts, is also employed.

- The Burman language has been mandatory for government business since 1952. The Burman language is the sole language taught from the fourth standard upward (Brown 1994, pp. 48–9).
- Furthermore 'it was necessary to become fluent in Burman in order to progress up the educational ladder; [a student] had to leave his local home area to advance his education because secondary schools were located in the cities and larger towns and the universities were situated in Burma proper. ... By moving to Rangoon or Mandalay for his higher education, a student became

part of Burman culture, and in order not to stand out ... he tended to modify his dress, speech, and living pattern so that he fit in' (Silverstein 1980, p. 221).

- Burma's history was taught from the perspective of Burman nationalism; the military tradition dates back 'across the centuries from the founder of the modern Tatmadaw, Aung San, to the all conquering Burman monarchs, Alaungpaya in the 18th century and Anawratha in the 11th' (Smith 1999, p. 197).
- The Ministry of Culture and Mass Education Movement reinforced the hegemony of Burman history (Brown 1994, p. 49).
- The religion of Buddhism was proselytized in the Karen hills under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Buddha Sasana Organization (Brown 1994, p. 49).

The various governments that have ruled Burma since its independence have all been ethnocratic. Even when Burma had its experience with democracy under Prime Minister U Nu, the Rangoon ethnocracy rejected federalism. Burma's ethnocratic state then evolved into a heavily militarized and authoritarian ethnocracy after the 1962 ousting of U Nu by General Ne Win.

The systems in Burma that allow growth, development and mobility are...dominated by the Burman cultural tradition ... Minority languages are relegated to one's home and cannot be used for the other than local purposes. Education is in Burman; the symbols of the state and the deployment of power are Burman. ... The 'Burmese Way to Socialism' might more accurately be termed the 'Burman Way to Socialism' because it reflects Burman cultural, political, and nationalistic norms (Steinberg 1990, p. 75).

The SPDC continues to reinforce Burman hegemony. Statistics clearly reveal ethnocratic hoarding of resources. In 1995, the military government allocated only 12 per cent of its budget for education, while 4 per cent was spent on health (Brunner, Talbott and Elkin 1998). On the other hand, between 35 per cent and over 50 per cent of Rangoon's budget is channelled towards defence expenditures, although exact figures are unknown and probably much higher (Ashton 2004). Since 1988, defence expenditures have been ambitious and based on modernization where, although an 'increasing proportion of Burma's annual defense expenditure is now used to pay for recurring personnel and maintenance costs, a high percentage is still devoted to the acquisition of new arms and equipment from abroad' (Ashton 2004).

As a result, the Karen State, or what the Karen refer to as Kawthoolei, continues to remain severely maldeveloped at the hands

of the current military government. Yet the Karen are not the only ones to suffer under the ethnocratic state, as all ethnic nationalities of Burma – including Burmans – have suffered under military rule. By now it is well known that the eventual failure of Ne Win's *Burmese Way to Socialism* finally prompted the United Nations to declare in 1987 Burma's status as a least developed country (LDC).

A less known fact is that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and its Human Development Index has also scored Burma as a 'low human development' country. By the end of the twentieth century, Burma ranked 133 out of the 174 countries surveyed by the UNDP, eighty-one places behind Thailand, twelve places below Vietnam and just five places above Laos (Brunner, Talbott and Elkin 1998). This is a far cry from when Burma was perceived, at the time of independence in 1948, as Southeast Asia's prime candidate for economic prosperity. Global finance institutions such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund stay clear of assisting Burma due to its 'excessive military expenditures, lack of macroeconomic transparency, and human rights abuses' (Brunner, Talbott and Elkin 1998).

Critique of the ethnodevelopment model

I have two points to critique regarding Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment approach. First, Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment model does not explicitly address ethnic minorities that aspire to self-determination within the context of systemic crisis and authoritarianism. Stavenhagen's ethnodevelopment, if situated within the context of military-ruled Burma, would not occur through state-oriented policies since it is the Burmese state that is pillaging its peripheral populations; indeed, as has been demonstrated, the opposite, maldevelopment, occurs. Since conditions of war in Burma make development of ethnic nationalities difficult under the current arrangement, ethnodevelopment must include a trajectory that encourages a complete evolution of self-determination, which is, in essence, an evolution of a prototypical state towards some form of liberation.

By not discerning how self-determination can respond to an authoritarian context, Stavenhagen encounters difficulties in employing the term. He concedes that "'self-determination" means different things to different persons' and is 'one of those unexceptionable goals that can be neither defined nor opposed' (Stavenhagen 1993, p. 3). By relativizing self-determination, Stavenhagen essentializes its dynamics and thus its outcome: 'It would seem that for some people self-determination is somewhat akin to an exclusive club: you fight hard to gain access . . . but once you are in, you would rather not see any new upstarts come along' (Stavenhagen 1993, p. 1). As we shall see with the

KNU response to Burman students and democracy activists that fled to Kawthoolei after the 1988 pro-democracy crackdown, the ‘club’ mentality of self-determination and its implied politics of exclusion does not hold.

Second, one can also critique Stavenhagen’s ethnodevelopment for its emphasis on a top-to-bottom development trajectory only. In the case of the Karen, their ethnodevelopment has never occurred from the charitable policies of the military state. Instead, Karen development is its self-determination struggle based on its own institutions and informal economy that exist in ‘structural opposition’ to Burman institutions (Keyes 1979). Given the hoarding tendencies of the ethnocratic state – especially if such a state denies democratic participation while it simultaneously engages in policies of ethnic cleansing – Stavenhagen and Brown’s analyses support Sen’s emphasis that development processes must include the maximization of human freedoms. It is my view that Karen self-determination and its attempts to maximize human freedoms by structurally opposing ethnocratic institutions and policies qualify it as liberation ethnodevelopment, another variant of ethnodevelopment.

Liberation ethnodevelopment

Liberation ethnodevelopment is a bottom-to-top trajectory that views self-determination as a development process where a group’s political economy and social institutions aim to become, in the context of experiencing ethnic cleansing, an institutionally autonomous political unit, i.e. a prototypical state. Since state-oriented policies in Burma have been articulated in terms of an ethnocratic Burman nationalism based on the de-culturalization and ethnic cleansing of Burma’s ethnic nationalities, only a bottom-to-top development trajectory can ensure development of the Karen. Karen liberation ethnodevelopment thus makes visible how ethnicity is a *historically* discernible unit of analysis with material consequences (and, thus, conducive to development analyses).

A liberation ethnodevelopment perspective rejects ‘development’ that has historically been articulated by an oppressive ethnocracy. My employment of liberation ethnodevelopment takes the view that the Karen have historically possessed an autonomous identity and existence that contested Burman hegemony. The arguments that British colonialism and Christian missionaries *constructed* the Karen identity, as pitched by Keyes (1979), Bryant (1997) and Rajah (2002), overlook how the mistrust between the Karen and Burmans predate British colonial machinations to divide and rule. A Karen village elder had reminded a British officer, Major Ian Abbey, of this at the village

of Kya-in during World War II, when Burma's inter-ethnic strife was increasing:

As a minority, our political union with the Burman in the past ... has not been a safe, satisfactory and happy one. ... Centuries ago, before the advent of British rule, our ancestors had continuously suffered the persecution at the hands of the Burmans and no sooner had the British left this shore ... the tell-tale temperament of the Burman made itself felt on the Karen masses. ... We strongly appeal ... that the Karen be allotted a certain part of Burma where we could ... administer ourselves free from the Burman (Rogers 2004, p. 76).

Yet Karen liberation ethnodevelopment was made visible only during the aftermath of Rangoon's bloody 1988 pro-democracy crackdown, when '10,000 students and civilian activists had fled into the insurgent-controlled mountains' (Smith 1999, p. 371). Over 2,000 arrived in Kachin territory and were granted refuge by the KIO while 1,300 were granted refuge by the yet another ethnic self-determination group, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in Mon territory. Over 6,000 democracy supporters, the vast majority of them Burman, were granted shelter by the KNU in the 'liberated areas' of the Dawna Range.

Upon arrival the 'bedraggled' student activists – born with BSPP propaganda that described the ethnic nationalists in the mountains as 'bandits', 'renegades' and anti-Burman 'separatists' – were stunned to find 'schools, hospitals and the machinery of well-run governments and armies functioning around the ethnic borderlands' (Smith 1999, p. 383). These well-run organs of governments, whether the KNU, the KNLA or the Information, Health, Education, Agriculture and Forestry Departments, are the key indicators of a Karen liberation ethnodevelopment at work, where Karen institutions in structural opposition to the military government engage in Karen nation construction.

It was here, in the 'liberated' mini-state of Kawthoolei, a country unmarked on any map, that the flame of the Karen rebellion was kept alive. And here, into the 1990s, travelers could see an alternative vision of Karen society, very different from that under the military-dominated governments in the Delta, where all public expressions of Karen language and culture have been disappearing. From the Mawdung Pass to the Toungoo hills, an impressive network was established of KNU government departments, hospitals and clinics and hundreds of village schools, serving the seven main KNU administrative districts (Smith 1999, p. 391).

Moreover,

Stunned by the contrast between the brutality of the army in the cities and the unexpected generosity of the ‘bandit’ rebels in the hills, many young students, including those who had relatives in the army, pledged themselves to work for the betterment of life in the war-torn ethnic minority regions of the country (Smith 1999, p. 411).

General Bo Mya, then leader the KNU, seized the opportunity to engage in pre-emptive diplomacy with Rangoon. In a letter written to SLORC’s General Saw Maung on 30 November 1989, Mya expressed ‘the sincere goodwill and disposition of the KNU’. Mya reminded Saw Maung that ‘thousands of young Burmans who had taken sanctuary in Kawthoolei since 1988 had been welcomed like their own “kith and kin”’ and that the KNU was thus not involved in a ‘racial war’. Mya further noted that ‘the experiences of 40 years of civil war have proven beyond a doubt that the civil war, which is basically a political problem, cannot be solved by military means’ (Smith 1999, p. 413). Saw Maung discussed the details of the letter in his January 1990 address to SLORC army commanders. However, there would be no resolution on the matter.

Liberation ethnodevelopment and federalist politics

The processes of Karen self-determination and its nation construction through liberation ethnodevelopment are not incompatible with the processes of establishing a democratic and federalized Burma. Although Karen self-determination pursued a secessionist platform at the outset of their revolution, significant territorial losses and lack of international support compelled the KNU to shift its self-determination struggle toward establishing a greater autonomy in a federalized Burma.

The platform of federalism – where governmental power is divided between a central government and territorial subdivisions or between the national state and local governments – is in essence, very much about self-determination from the perspective of local actors. International appraisals of federalism, insofar as it pertains to Burma’s labyrinthine ethnopolitics, could alternatively view Karen self-determination as a precursor or ‘stopping point’ between a Burmese union and Karen national independence (Walzer 1983, p. 223). As such, the KNU continues to entertain the political possibilities offered by the historical events leading up to the Panglong Conference of 1947.

However, it would be the antecedent to the Panglong Conference that took place in London on 27 January 1947 which set into motion an asymmetrical and messy process of constructing a ‘Union’ of

Burma. On this date, the Burman nationalist Aung San and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee formalized the Attlee-Aung San agreement in London. The agreement grants Burma an 'interim government ... in preparation for independence "with or without the British Commonwealth"' (Lintner 1994, p. 339). London, however, still expected Aung San's party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), to achieve unification aims 'with the free consent of the inhabitants' of the 'Frontier Areas', even though ultimately neither the Burmans nor British honoured the stipulation (Rogers 2004, p. 83).

Political controversy followed shortly thereafter. There were no delegates from the ethnic nationalities at the signing in London. Protests immediately emerged from the Karen, Shan and Kachin leadership, all of whom viewed the signing as not legitimate. Neither did leaders of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) believe in the legitimacy of the agreement. Most damaging to the Karen cause was that the agreement did not contain any references to an independent Karen State.

The Panglong Agreement, signed on 12 February 1947, similarly did not yield a conclusive or symmetrical federalist configuration, nor did it include the participation of all the key ethnic nationality groups. Although Aung San, as Chief Minister of the Interim Government of Burma, made a personal trek into the Shan areas to negotiate 'with the hill peoples whose delegates had at last decided to join Burma and ask for independence from Britain' (Lintner 1994, p. 71), and although he assured the various ethnic nationality groups that there would be 'no unequal treatment' in the future Union of Burma (Fredholm 1993, p. 39), these assurances would never materialize because of his assassination less than six months later.

Exacerbating the situation was the fact that Karen revolutionaries did not participate in the conference, fielding only four observers. They also boycotted the Executive Council and the Constituent Assembly elections, bodies that were to draft Burma's new Constitution. Rogers argues that this was a 'strategic mistake' (2004, p. 84).

Instead, a year earlier a Karen 'Goodwill Mission' delegation engaged in pre-emptive diplomacy by travelling to London to negotiate directly with Clement Attlee and the Labour government for Karen independence. The Karen delegation included a 42-year-old barrister by the name of Ba U Gyi, the Karen Revolution's first leader. Ba U Gyi's Four Principles of the Karen Revolution – (1) surrender is out of the question, (2) recognition of the Karen State must be complete, (3) we shall retain our arms and (4) we shall determine our own political destiny – continues to guide the KNU's administration of Karen self-determination to this day.

Political inconsistencies plagued the Panglong Agreement itself: the right to secession was granted to the Karenni and Shan, only after a

ten-year period following Burma's independence. A Kachin State with no right to secede was established and no provisions were made for the other large nations such as the Mons, Chins, Pa-oss, Was and Arakanese (Smith 1999, p. 83). The right of secession granted to the Karenni and Shan states was 'expressly ruled out for the Karens (Articles 178, 201–206)' (Smith 1999, p. 82) even though informal negotiations had been taking place in Rangoon between the KNU and the AFPFL. As a result, Burma's 1947 Constitution – born from the inconsistencies of the Attlee-Aung San and Panglong agreements – made no provisions for a free Karen State. The 'entire question of the Karen's future was left to be decided after independence' (Rogers 2004, p. 84). Moreover, following the birth of Burma in 1948 the right to secession for the Karenni and Shan was never honoured.

Decades later, with the 1976 establishment of the non-Burman ethnic nationalities coalition, the National Democratic Front (NDF),⁸ and given the historically inefficacious inconsistencies in how the Panglong Agreement configured Burma, the KNU's formal adoption of a federalist line represented 'a considerable backing-down from their earlier, separatist demands' (Fredholm 1993, p. 115). The KNU and other ethnic nationalities' approach towards federalism would now emphasize self-determination through the creation of new nationality states to include a Burman state, along with a system of designating autonomous regions for minorities within each of the states (Smith 1999).

Smith describes the difficult transition for the KNU: 'For the KNU, the decision to seek a "Federal Union" represented a considerable compromise. Just two months earlier Bo Mya had issued a declaration announcing "to the world the independence" of the "Republic of Kawthoolei"' (1999, p. 506). Even though hard-line veteran Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan leaders 'may still dream in their hearts of independent nations ... all NDF members have stuck by this "federalist" line through the hard years since' (Smith 1999, p. 386). Since the NDF, the KNU would participate in another inter-ethnic coalition formed in 1988, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), with the KNU's General Bo Mya its first chairman. DAB pledged to work with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD; in return, DAB's Burman democracy activists pledged to continue their work for a federal Burma where greater autonomy was granted to the ethnic nationalities.

Because Karen liberation ethnodevelopment is not incompatible with the federalist aspirations of Burma's democracy-oriented politics, it also needs to be viewed in conjunction with the politics of the NLD and the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), with the latter established in March 2004 as a coalition to promote a federal Burma where 'where ethnic nationalities can enjoy full rights of political equality

and self-determination' (Ethnic Nationalities Council 2004b). Both organizations aim to establish a tri-partite dialogue in which the SPDC, pro-democracy forces and ethnic nationalities and/or ethnic coalitions participate (Smith 1999; Fink 2001).

The NLD has not been effective in its mission to liberate Burma from the SLORC and SPDC. Indeed, since the pro-democracy crackdowns of 1988, the NLD has often depended on KNU 'liberated areas' in Kawthoolei as safe havens. Moreover, key policies about federalism were shaped at the KNU's 6th Brigade at Mae Tha Waw Hta – leading to the Mae Tha Waw Hta Agreement of 1997 that pledged to 'dismantle the military dictatorship' and encourage peoples to 'join hands with the pro democracy forces' of the country, specifically the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi; a feat accomplished in spite of the devastating loss in 1995 of the Karen capital, Manerplaw, to a massive Four Cuts offensive (Smith 1999, p. 431).

Aung San Suu Kyi continues to live under house arrest while NLD members continue to get harassed with impunity. During my interview with a frustrated Colonel Nerdah Mya of the KNLA during Karen National Day, 31 January 2004, regarding the Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, he emphasized that 'it's been over fifteen years and people need change now' (Fong 2004). Moreover:

Aung San Suu Kyi's privileged youth never enabled her to fully realize the magnitude of the nationalities problem within her country. Also unlike her father, she never came into close physical contact with war between the different nationalities. . . . Likewise the early NLD . . . never really considered the nationalities problems. . . . When asked about the future . . . between the Burmans and minorities, the NLD always replied that once civil government was established, this question would be solved. Apparently, a new Panglong Conference would solve the problem, or so it was naively believed (Fredholm 1993, p. 239).

Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are symbolically powerful forces that are politically immobilized. Moreover, in October 2004 SPDC hardliners purged General Khin Nyunt who expressed interest in negotiating a peace with the Karen, other ethnic nationalities and Aung San Suu Kyi. With China having become the SPDC's staunchest ally in the last decade, the military government has strengthened, not weakened. This is the main reason why efforts by the international community to democratize Burma by focusing solely on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD will fail.

Another often overlooked point is that Aung San Suu Kyi is not and was never the leader of Burma's ethnic nationalities. All Burma's self-determination groups have had, for decades, their own political

leaders, as well as the institutional mechanisms that allow for the selection of new leaders. During my stay at the KNLA base at Mu Aye Pu, I was able to witness an Australian journalist ahistorically grilling a KNLA colonel on why the KNU was engaged in informal ceasefire talks while Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest, prompting a somewhat flustered KNLA colonel to remind her that 'Aung San Suu Kyi is not our leader'.

Aung San Suu Kyi's iconic status is valuable for Burma's democratically oriented ethnopolitics and is harnessed by her ethnic nationality allies insofar as coalition politics are concerned. But this does not mean that she embodies the ethnic nationalities' ideologies nor does she govern their respective nations. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are still but one of three loci of power in the democracy politics where the NLD, ethnic nationality coalitions and individual ethnic nationality organizations like the KNU are engaged in politically symbiotic, and sometimes tense, relationships.

The Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), currently Burma's largest non-Burman ethnic coalition, is an important institution that facilitates the self-determination platform of the ethnic nationality groups. According to the current ENC Policy Statement provided by Dr Lia Sankhong, General Secretary of the ENC, 'the ultimate goal of the Ethnic Nationalities Council is to establish a genuine Federal Union of Burma'. It assesses the efforts of the NLD and welcomes calls from the international community to release Aung San Suu Kyi. More importantly, the ENC continues to emphasize a federalist platform. Points six to ten of the ENC's ten-point transition outline the construction of a Federal Burma:

- Formation of various commissions to draft constitutions of the Federal Union and the constituent States;
- Holding a national referendum for the adoption of the Federal Constitution and holding referendums in the constituent States for the adoption of their respective State Constitutions;
- Holding elections at the national and state levels;
- Convening of Federal and State parliaments (legislatures);
- Formation of the Federal and State governments.

The ENC invites international participation by the European Union, the United States and the United Nations to facilitate the transition of Burma into a Federal Union. Unfortunately, ENC efforts garner comparatively less international attention because Burma's ethnopolitics are perceived to be a threat to the state as much as Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD platform are perceived *not* to be. Nevertheless, since certain non-ceasefire organizations such as the ENC and the KNU still possess formidable guerrilla armies (Selth

2000), albeit unable to match the Chinese-supplied Tatmadaw, the SPDC has to deal with them more cautiously than with the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are unable to garner the same effect from the SPDC since predominantly Burman areas are still dominated by SPDC organs of social control.

For example, as the SPDC convened the National Convention during May 2004 and twice in 2005 (with the second meeting adjourned as recently as January 2006), Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest at the onset of the 2004 convention while the 2005 convention was convened days after her house arrest was extended another year. Moreover, although the NLD proposed a 'people's parliament' on 12 February 2006 that would grant the SPDC *de jure* recognition – a historical and difficult concession – they were snubbed and rebuffed by the SPDC in April 2006 as an 'unlawful organization because of its links with terrorist groups and exiled dissident organizations' (*The Irrawaddy* 2006).

The ENC also monitors the credibility of and provides political feedback on the SPDC-organized National Conventions. Although the SPDC touted the National Convention that began on 17 May 2004 as its 'road map to democracy', observers of Burma described it as a 'road map to mockery' in the 22 May edition of the *Bangkok Post* (Erllich 2004). Crucial players in Burma's democratic and ethno-political platforms were not invited, while the Karen delegations that attended the conference were handpicked by the SPDC. The lack of credibility regarding the 2004 convention prompted the ENC to say in their policy statement:

The Ethnic Nationalities Council believes that the SDPC's seven-point 'road map' and its National Convention will not lead to democratization and the establishment of a federal union. The current Convention will only serve to legitimize the military dictatorship (Ethnic Nationalities Council 2004a).

The conditions that compelled the self-determination groups and democracy activists to criticize the convention were based on the Tatmadaw insistence that the new constitution *guarantee* a governing role for the military, so that it could continue to participate in the political dynamics of the country. The SPDC also insisted that Law No. 5/96, drafted in 1996, was to remain in effect. Law 5/96 stipulated that for the sake of law and order there would be no public demonstrations, speeches or written statements regarding the National Convention. This was unacceptable to the various democratically oriented coalitions, such as the ENC, NLD, DAB, NDF, and the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB),⁹ let alone the KNU.

Indeed, the ENC issued five additional modifications following the conclusion of the 2004 National Convention that it believed would make SPDC gestures more credible and legitimate to ENC members.¹⁰ The SPDC rejected all these proposals. The geopolitical implications of the convention spilled over to the international community. Burmese dissidents held a noisy demonstration outside Bangkok's Myanmar embassy on 18 May. Even Cambodia's Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) reiterated its 'unwavering support' for Suu Kyi: 'The SRP condemns the sham May 17th constitutional convention orchestrated by the hardline military regime, and demands the immediate release of Suu Kyi and other prisoners of conscience' (*The Nation* 2004). Then prime minister of Thailand Thaksin Shinawatra similarly noted, 'I don't feel comfortable because . . . a meeting without the participation of the opposition party is affecting the international image of Myanmar' (*The Nation* 2004). This is a relatively surprising response from Thailand's Thaksin, a 'longstanding apologist' for the regime (*Economist* 2004; Erlich 2004, p. 29).

That said, has KNU participation with democratically oriented coalitions been conducive to Karen liberation ethnodevelopment? The ultimate effectiveness of coalitions, which by 2003, included 'over one hundred alliances, associations, armies, committees, fronts, leagues, parties and unions' stretched along the 3,610 miles that border Bangladesh, India, China, and Thailand, remains to be seen (Wechsler 2003). The coalitions explored in this article have been examined insofar as they can enhance our understanding of Karen self-determination. However, there are many other coalitions, such as Marxist-Leninist groups, religious coalitions, as well as ultra-nationalist coalitions. The KNU and the KNLA also supports smaller coalitions, the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF),¹¹ for example. Interestingly, few people in the smaller towns throughout Burma are aware of these dissident coalitions, 'and . . . were very much surprised when told of the number of these groups' (Wechsler 2003).

One consequence of this is a potential lack of unity in the ethno-democratic project. With too many 'united fronts' at the moment, journalist Martin Wechsler wrote, 'had there been a contest for the biggest number of opposition organizations in one nation, Burma would be the winner by a large margin' (Wechsler 2003). Many of the coalitions are also hard to track of because they often form quickly, disband, split apart or completely change ideologies. Nevertheless, Wechsler provides some diversified opinions on the role of coalitions from those engaged in the struggle against the SPDC: U Thein Oo, Judicial Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB),¹² noted:

At this moment there are too many opposition groups. This is not good. We need unity, we must have a strong united front and we must have a common goal and then we can win.

Prince Maha Sang of the Wa National Organization (WNO) said:

If there are so many organizations without unity, there will be problems. The more organizations there are, the less effective we are going to be. Therefore, all organizations should unite and help each other.

David Tharckabaw, the KNU's Joint General Secretary 2, noted:

Having many organizations weakens the movement, since it is very difficult or takes a long time to lay down policies and programmes acceptable to all. The movement often has to hold large meetings which are costly and difficult to arrange.

Colonel Nerdah of the KNU/KNLA, however, sees a benefit:

Several groups committed to an armed struggle, including us, continue to battle the Burmese army with guerrilla warfare, a tactic that enables us to take heavy casualties on the enemy in surprise attacks.

As does U Kyaw Hla of the Muslim Liberations Organisation of Burma (MLOB):

The Burmese people have been under the dictatorial regime for a long time. They all want democracy and freedom. And whenever they get the opportunity, they will form a group. This is good for us. We can't form large organizations because of SPDC repression, and that's why we can only have small groups. This will change after the regime falls. Then we should all join and have the same platform.

Conclusion

Ethnic politics have always intersected and overwhelmed democratic politics in Burma. To continue to focus on democratic politics in Burma as a panacea without acknowledging the protracted problem of ethnic strife misses the 'bull's-eye' of Burma's problems. Former KNU Congress member Dr Timothy Laklem succinctly captured the tensions between Burma's democratic and ethnopolitics: 'You can't bring in new furniture without first removing the old furniture' (Fong 2004, p. 506). This sentiment is shared by virtually all ethnic

nationality leaders of Burma, and even by those of the Kachin and Wa nations who have already signed ceasefires with Rangoon.

In this regard, Karen self-determination should be considered as a parallel site for democratic change. The current and second-generation KNU leadership, diasporic Karen activists and its international contingent of supporters have made great sacrifices to work together and promote a consciousness of liberation. Their efforts should be juxtaposed to the current political situation where neither Aung San Suu Kyi nor the NLD can free Burma from the centre radiating outwards, unless, of course, the military government relinquishes power. Since this scenario is unlikely, the future of a free Burma must emerge from its democratically aspiring periphery.

The democratization of Burma can emanate as a bottom-to-top trajectory that begins with ethnic nationalities like the Karen and their prototypical state institutions. By arguing that liberation ethnodevelopment is not incompatible with Burma's democratic and federalist politics, the liberation and development of the Karen, Burma's other ethnic nationalities and the Burmans should be based on promoting the maximization of freedoms – a maximization of self-determinations – as a means toward conflict resolution. This consideration should be taken seriously because, as Seers noted, it is very difficult for countries with great ethnic diversity to develop as unified nation-state (Seers 1983). Moreover, Seers argues, 'A majority has no inherent right to impose national unity on a minority (or minorities) that wants to cut itself off from a culture it feels alien to, especially if it is also exploited economically' (1983, p. 74).

The quintessential question of any variant of ethnodevelopment strategy still remains: will pro-autonomizing ethnodevelopment strategies that can bring a cessation to ethnic conflict garner international support? The current peace in the former Yugoslavia provides a rudimentary answer. So does East Timor, a model of nation-construction many KNU members aspire to, and at the time of this writing the world's newest nation. Clarke is cautiously optimistic:

Since the late 1980s ... governments across the region have made greater efforts to acknowledge the distinct identities of both ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, while donors have begun to fund projects to address their needs. In many cases, these initiatives have brought tangible benefits to the groups concerned. Yet in other respects progress to date has been modest and ethnodevelopment ... remains confined to a limited number of initiatives in the context of a broader pattern of disadvantage and domination (Clarke 2001, p. 413).

Yagcioglu (1996) argues that, since the defeat of Nazism, Fascism and Japanese militarism, principles of non-discrimination and concepts of minority rights and cultural rights have gained widespread international attention. Yagcioglu is optimistic, believing that it has become 'significantly more difficult for the nation-state governments to implement violent and brutal policies of oppression against minorities' (1996, p. 6). Yagcioglu argues that liberal values and principles have gained an unprecedented popularity so that it is certainly more difficult and less acceptable to violate minority rights in governance. Yet Yagcioglu is realistic:

This does not mean ... that these rights and principles are not or cannot be violated. They are, but the governments that violate human rights or minority rights feel the need and the pressure to present excuses; and if they are not persuasive, they often have to face sanctions. That was not possible in the 19th or in the first part of the 20th century (Yagcioglu 1996, p. 6).

Clarke suggests that there is room to employ ethnodevelopment strategy in Southeast Asia since many Southeast Asian ethnic minorities have frequently been exploited and victimized by their governments. This is not surprising since nine out of ten Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Thailand, achieved their independence only after World War II (Clarke 2001, p. 420). It is imperative then, as Connor noted in his 1972 article 'Nation-building or nation-destroying', for scholars not to treat the unit of analysis of ethnicity as an 'ephemeral nuisance' and he warns against the idealistic promises of nation-state builders. Indeed, the ethnocracies of Southeast Asia still tend to favour the nation-state project where a romanticized quest for national unity is sought.

The justification for international assistance to Burma must first begin with the acknowledgement that a country can fail in its attempts to construct a viable nation-state. As such, development scholars and strategists should be suspicious of nation-state projects that are constructed through violence. From this observation, the international community should question the premise of the state given the specificities of its failures. I believe Burma, in its current form, is such a failed state. In this context, the Karen employment of liberation ethnodevelopment should not be viewed as an anomalous trajectory within the state of Burma, but as process where the severely oppressed seek agency to bring about cultural, economic and political freedom. For the Karen engaged in their self-determination struggle, liberation ethnodevelopment becomes a mobilizing force for countering the crises generated by Burmanization and the Four Cuts, even though the Karen struggle has experienced some credibility problems of its own.¹³

Although there are no perfect options for eliminating Rangoon's military government quickly at this point, there are, according to Yagcioglu, 'clearly wrong options': 'Oppression . . . genocide . . . ethnic cleansing are wrong; assimilation, if forced, is wrong. . . . Let us hope that some day governments will realize that these are not solutions, but the very core of the problem' (Yagcioglu 1996, p. 11). Because of the suffering experienced by the Karen, along with the KNU's fifty-seven-year attempt at self-development, it behoves observers and activists to entertain Yagcioglu's reminder. Harn Yawng hwe, a prominent exiled Shan activist notes, 'The KNU is the backbone of the movement – democratic and ethnic . . . they have fought the longest, suffered the most and have the most at stake. They know what they're doing' (Peck 2004). Let us hope that international recognition of Karen self-determination will soon grant the Karen what Sen would describe as their 'momentous engagement with freedom's possibilities' (1999, p. 298).

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Notes

1. Self-determination groups in Burma employ the term ethnic nationality to refer to their nations; ethnic minority is not an acceptable reference to many groups in Burma that celebrate and base their identities on their historical autonomy from Burman hegemony.

2. As Heppner, founder of the Karen Human Rights Group, notes, 'those who do not recognize the military junta as a legitimate government continue to use the name Burma' over Myanmar (Delang 2000, p. 1). I will do so as well.
3. Karen activists are not the only group employing this designation, as international observers, pressure groups and non-governmental organizations have also designated the events inside Burma as at the very least ethnic cleansing (Rogers 2004; International Crisis Group 2003; Delang 2000; Smith 1999; Human Rights Watch 1995, 1997, 1998; Lintner 1994; Fredholm 1993; Falla 1991).
4. The ENC is comprised of (1) United Nationalities League for Democracy – Liberated Areas (UNLD-LA) and its members of eleven political parties; (2) National Democratic Front (NDF) and its members of eight ethnic armed groups; (3) ethnic armed groups but not members of NDF, such as KNPP, SSA (S) and others, as well as some cease-fire groups.
5. It is important to do away with the relativism that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' (Stavenhagen 1986, p. 71). Not the United Nations nor the European Community nor the United States have ever, during the Karen National Union's (KNU) fifty-seven years of existence, designated or listed the KNU or the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) as terrorist organizations. Neither have the international communities' most respectable pressure groups, watchdog groups or NGOs designated the KNU/KNLA as such. International scrutiny of the military governments of Burma and the Karen ethnic nationality fighting it through its self-determination struggle has unanimously assessed the former as the source of terror.
6. The Four Cuts campaigns against Burma's ethnic minorities were never implemented in one given period. Moreover, in any given year a lull in the fighting frequently occurs during the rainy season between April and November. The violence thus accompanies the jockeying for strategic positions before the monsoon rains arrive. Additionally, the diverse terrains and differing capacities of ethnic nationality armies, as well as their differing periods of military engagements, were all factors that compelled Ne Win and his successors to fight the war 'on several fronts in a systematically seesaw fashion according to the relative strengths and merits of different rebel forces' (Smith 1999, pp. 307–8). All the time numerous attacks and raids occur on smaller villages and villagers throughout various districts. For detailed listings of these villages, see Delang (2000).
7. Falla (1991) provides a reflective journal entry by Dr John Crawford, based upon the latter's 1827 visit to the Royal Burmese Court of Ava. Crawford noted:

The conduct of the Burmans on their predatory excursions is cruel and ferocious to the last degree. . . . 'You see us here', said some of the Chiefs to Mr Judson, 'a mild people living under regular laws. Such is not the case when we invade foreign countries. We are then under no restraints, we give way to all our passions, we plunder and murder without compunction or control. Foreigners should beware how they provoke us when they know these things (Falla 1991, p. 361).

8. The NDF was formed in 10 May 1976 and is comprised of non-Burman ethnic armed opposition groups.
9. The NCUB was as a political alliance among opposition groups to draw up strategies to overcome the military dictatorship, promote understanding and cooperation among Burma's ethnic groups, bring about a democratic system of government that guarantees human rights for all Burma's citizens and establish a Federal Union under which equality among all ethnic groups is guaranteed.
10. (1) The articles adopted by the previous National Convention that are not compatible with democracy should be discussed and revised; (2) While the National Convention is in progress, the delegates must be able to freely meet and consult with all individuals and groups that have recommendations; (3) While the National Convention is in progress, the

delegates must be able to freely communicate, discuss and exchange ideas with their mother organizations; (4) All the Members of Parliament elected by the people in the 1990 elections should have the right to participate in the National Convention; and (5) Only cease-fire groups that truly represent their people should be allowed to participate in the National Convention. Peace with the non-cessate-fire groups should be concluded as soon as possible so that they can participate in the National Convention (ENC 2004a).

11. The ABSDF was formed in 1988 following an influx of predominantly Burman democracy activists/students to Kawthoolei to escape the military crackdown.

12. In late 1990 over a dozen members of parliament who escaped Rangoon after the pro-democracy crackdown established a government in exile, the National Coalition Government Union of Burma (NCGUB: 1990–present). NCGUB leaders have been accepted by Switzerland and Norway, and both governments have given aid to the NCGUB government (Latimer, Bhumpakkaphan and Fehr 1992). Now based in Washington DC, the NCGUB consists of individuals legitimately elected to the People's Assembly but still not recognized by the military regime.

13. Karen liberation ethnodevelopment does exhibit problems. Yet these problems must be seen in the context that no party in a fifty-seven-year war, including the KNU, can consistently claim a moral high ground. Therefore, the analysis of Karen ethnodevelopment must be situated in a context where the KNU and SPDC's relations with the population are analysed in terms of how they qualitatively vary in degree.

In December of 1994 U Thuzana, a Buddhist monk and strict vegetarian from Myaing Gyi Ngu monastery near Pa-an, along with over 1,000 Buddhist Karen decided to join Rangoon as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization (DKBO) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). U Thuzana cited complaints by Buddhist Karen in the KNLA that they had suffered discrimination by the Christian KNU leadership.

There have been accusations that the KNLA have employed child soldiers. The KNLA accepts some child soldiers, but the reasons for their enlistment are entirely different from the forced child soldier conscripts, estimated at roughly 70,000 (20 per cent), of the Tatmadaw (Rogers 2004, p. 239). Many Karen children voluntarily join the KNLA because they have personally witnessed the murder of their family members and friends, as well as seeing their villages razed to the ground. The KNLA discourages children from joining, 'but if they chose to do so, they are accepted' (Rogers 2004, p. 241).

In terms of labour the KNLA will use porters, but their labour is not accompanied by the physical abuse that characterizes Tatmadaw forced portering, and they have to go only for shorter periods. The KNLA also utilizes only able-bodied men as porters. The Tatmadaw force porters of all age groups as well as young women to carry food supplies and military equipment to the site of an offensive.

The environmental degradation caused by decades of war as well as the heavy logging engaged in by some desperate or opportunistic Karen, along with Thai firms, was to test severely the relationship between the KNU's Department of Forestry and its aims to sustain the Karen ecosystem. Yet even this setback should be seen in the context of how the Department of Forestry had devised a list of endangered species to protect them from illegal hunting and poaching at the KNU-managed Kaser Doo Wildlife Sanctuary. The KNU even invited Thailand's Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (RECOFTC) from Thailand's Kasetsart University, a contingent of international personnel with backgrounds in forestry, agriculture, community conservation, ecology and flora and fauna management, and photography, to assess the management of Kaser Doo and the 'integration of villager rights to use forest resources and their ability to manage the same resources' (Latimer, Bhumpakkaphan and Fehr 1992, pp. 1–5). In 1996, a series of Four Cuts offensives in the area allowed the Tatmadaw to seize Kaser Doo WS. It is thus subsumed within the larger boundaries of the Rangoon-sanctioned Myinmoletkat Nature Reserve project.

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