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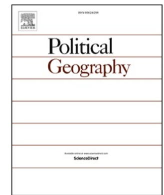

Full Length Article

Illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime. Authoritarian strategies for conflict containment in Myanmar

Kristian Stokke [a,*], Klo Kwe Moo Kham [a], Nang K.L. Nge [b], Silje Hvilsom Kvanvik [a]

[a] *Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1096 Blindern, 0317, Oslo, Norway*
[b] *Independent Scholar, Yangon, Myanmar*

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ABSTRACT

The post-Cold War period has seen the rise of international liberal peacebuilding, as an overarching framework for international interventions in intrastate conflicts. In contrast, the current period is marked by decline of liberal peacebuilding, and a simultaneous rise of domestic illiberal peacebuilding. This has created a gap between the predominant theoretical and policy framework and the actual form of peacebuilding in many conflict-ridden societies. The present article addresses this challenge through a contextual case study of illiberal peacebuilding in Myanmar. The case study shows how a dominant state actor – the military (Tatmadaw) – has used both coercion and co-optation to contain armed resistance against militarized and centralized statebuilding and thereby strengthen the state's territorial control and authority. While the SLORC/SPDC military junta (1988–2011) sought to contain ethnic armed organizations through military offensives, ceasefire agreements and illiberal peacebuilding, the military based USDP-government (2011–2015) institutionalized a hybrid regime as a framework for political transformation of EAOs, and tolerated a degree of dual territorial, administrative and resource control at the local scale. These clientelist measures failed to address the substantive issues behind Myanmar's multiple and protracted conflicts. They were also combined with military offensives against non-ceasefire groups and war by other means in ceasefire areas. Moreover, the case study demonstrates that the Tatmadaw used its tutelary power to obstructs substantive conflict resolution through negotiated state reforms. Myanmar's peace initiatives during the last three decades should thus be understood as illiberal strategies for containing ethnic armed organizations rather than attempts at substantive conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

The period since the end of the Cold War has been marked by the rise and hegemony of liberal peacebuilding, as an overarching discourse and policy framework for international interventions in intrastate conflicts (Chandler, 2017). Its foremost assertion is that peace can be built through liberal democracy and development, and that crafting of liberal institutions enables transitions from war to democracy and peace (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008). In contrast, international liberal peacebuilding now seems to have reached an impasse. The foremost source of crisis is the failure of peace interventions to meet the expectations of peace, democracy, and development. Many peace processes have instead been followed by resumption of war, or they have stalled between war and peace (Mac Ginty, 2010; Özerdem & Mac Ginty, 2019).

The crisis of liberal peacebuilding also reflects the decline of the liberal world order and the emergence of a more 'multiplex' order (Acharya, 2017). The current era is marked by global power shifts, illiberal challenges to the liberal model, and diversification of actors and agendas in international interventions (Carothers & Samet-Marram, 2015). Such changes at the international scale challenge the hegemony of liberal peacebuilding and provide space and leverage for state actors to resist externally imposed agendas and pursue illiberal strategies. It can thus be observed that initiatives to end intrastate conflicts are increasingly driven by domestic elites that employ illiberal peacebuilding strategies and institutionalize illiberal or hybrid forms of peace (C. Q. Smith, Waldorf, Venugopal, & McCarthy, 2020). In this situation, international peacebuilding has turned to realist pragmatism, meaning that interventions are more adaptive to contextual actors and dynamics while prioritizing state security and political stability over democracy and human rights (de Coning, 2018).

The present article argues that the teleological conception of war-to-peace transitions as a linear process of crafting liberal states, economies

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Kristian.stokke@sosgeo.uio.no (K. Stokke).

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and societies should be rejected, and that more attention should be paid to contextual politics of peace and its variegated outcomes. We address this challenge through a contextual case study of Myanmar, where the aim is to identify characteristics, changes, and outcomes of the military rulers' peacebuilding initiatives since the early 1990s. The Union of Myanmar (Burma) has been marked by a long history of direct military rule that is intertwined with multiple and protracted armed conflicts, especially between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the military (Tatmadaw). But the last three decades have also seen ceasefire and peacebuilding initiatives from the military regime, as well as partial military withdrawal from government. The article examines these processes and argues that they do not fit the model of international peacebuilding and liberal peace outcomes. Myanmar is rather a case where a dominant domestic actor has constructed a hybrid (semi-authoritarian) regime and used illiberal peacebuilding to contain intrastate armed conflicts. As these strategies and their outcomes are spatial and contextual in nature, the case also offers new empirical and theoretical insights on the geography of peacebuilding and peace.

The article starts out from a literature review on liberal and illiberal peacebuilding, as a conceptual basis for the interpretation of the Myanmar case. Thereafter follows five analytical sections that examine the history of intrastate conflicts, the military's strategies for illiberal peacebuilding and a post-military attempt at political conflict resolution. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the case study for political geographic research on illiberal peacebuilding.

In terms of methods, the article uses process-tracing to examine the dynamics of armed conflicts and the growth and changes in peacebuilding strategies. The analysis is based on the authors' long-term engagement with peace and democracy in Myanmar. We have had extensive interaction with numerous state actors, ethnic armed organizations, civil society organizations and international agencies over the last ten years and have combined ethnographic fieldwork with semi-structured interviews and document sources. The article is also based on an analysis of conflict events using GIS and an in-depth qualitative case study of peacebuilding in Kawthoolei, the home region of the Karen community in Southeastern Myanmar. Since our purpose is to synthesize complex political processes within the space constraints of the article format, and due to the security concerns of our respondents, we do not include any direct quotes from our primary sources.

2. From international liberal peacebuilding to domestic illiberal peacebuilding

Political geography has made relatively few contributions to the interdisciplinary literature on peacebuilding and peace. Geographers have a strong tradition for studying war, with particular attention to the geopolitics of interstate wars, quantitative research on the determinants of intrastate armed conflicts, and the economic role of natural resources in civil wars (Ingram & Dodds, 2009; Le Billon, 2012; Mamadouh, 2005; Wig & Tollefsen, 2016). But there are few publications by political geographers that focus on peace, and early attempts to fill this gap tended to treat peace studies as an appendage to studies of war (Flint, 2005; Kobayashi, 2012; Williams & McConnell, 2011).

Recent years have, however, seen a growing literature on 'geographies of peace' that examines peace as spatial and located processes and content (Koopman, 2018; Megoran, 2011; Megoran, McConnell, & Williams, 2016; Williams & McConnell, 2011). Its core premise is that: "Peace is always shaped by the spaces in which it is made, as it too shapes those spaces. Peace means different things to different groups and in different times, spaces, places and scales" (Koopman, 2018, no page number). The defining feature of the geographies of peace literature is thus the close attention to plural meanings of peace and how peace is produced through contextual practices by diverse actors, including popular movements as well as political elites (Courtheyn, 2017; Koopman, 2020; Stokke, 2009).

The present article is inspired by this 'geographies of peace' agenda. As political geographers, we examine the contextual and spatial politics of peacebuilding in Myanmar, with special attention to the military's dual strategy of constructing a hybrid regime at the national scale and containing armed conflicts through illiberal peacebuilding at the local scale. Our thematic focus – domestic illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime – has however received little attention among political geographers. The foremost exception is Megoran's contribution on authoritarian conflict management, which is also an important source of inspiration for our analysis (Lewis, Heathershaw, & Megoran, 2018). In this situation, the article draws on interdisciplinary theories and debates on peacebuilding to examine the Myanmar case, and as a basis for theoretical reflections on how authoritarian state actors use geographical strategies to contain armed conflicts.

2.1. *The rise and decline of liberal peacebuilding*

Theories and debates on peacebuilding since the end of the Cold War have revolved around the politics and policies of Western peace engagement in intrastate conflicts at the periphery of the liberal world order (Chandler, 2017). In the 1990s, protecting human rights and security in conflict-affected societies was increasingly seen as an international responsibility that takes precedence over the principle of non-interference in sovereign states. The liberal framing of interventionism reflected the hegemonic rise of the liberal world order, and a discursive distinction between presumably illiberal insurgencies and a liberal peace model with assumed universality. Armed movements were seen as quasi-criminal rebels driven by greed rather than popular movements based on group grievances (Keen, 2012). In this context, constructing liberal states, economies and societies became a common agenda for Western states, multilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations (Chandler, 2017; Duffield, 2001). The core assumption was that external support for elitist crafting of liberal institutions would foster transitions from intrastate war to liberal peace (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Mac Ginty, 2010). Liberal peacebuilding thus emerged as an international agenda that was justified with reference to the humanitarian cost of wars and the assumed universality of liberal values and institutions.

While liberal peacebuilding attained a hegemonic position after the end of the Cold War, it should not be understood as a monolithic agenda. On the contrary, the last three decades have demonstrated that liberal peacebuilding is driven by diverse actors with varied and changing interests and strategies. There is for example a notable divide between the prominence of 'peacebuilding as liberalization' in the 1990s and the rise of 'peacebuilding as statebuilding' in the 2000s (Chandler, 2017). The liberalization approach prioritizes democratization and marketization, in other words, crafting of electoral democracy, neoliberal development governance and liberal civil society. The state-building approach, in contrast, holds that successful liberalization is preconditioned by a strong state with sovereign authority and administrative capacity (Karlsrud, 2018). As state failure and fragility are seen as common characteristics of conflict-affected societies, strengthening state authority and capacity have become a priority for liberal peacebuilding (Paris, 2004; Sisk, 2013). The state-building approach to peace thus advocates a sequential approach – institutionalization before liberalization – that agrees with calls for sequencing of democratic transitions (Carothers, 2007).

The hegemonic rise of liberal peacebuilding has been followed by widespread criticism of its politics and poor performance. On the one hand, neo-Marxian critics argue that liberal peace and neoliberal marketization serve the interests of powerful Western states and corporations, while Foucauldian critics argue that the main objective has been to prevent instability in a neoliberal world order (Duffield, 2001). Their common objection is that liberal peacebuilding, which is presented as value-based diplomacy, is highly political and interest based. Pragmatic critics, on the other hand, question the strategies rather than the politics

of liberal peacebuilding, and call for reforms to improve its performance. This critique includes both conservative calls for increased attention to statebuilding to ensure stability and security in transitions to liberal peace (Karlsrud, 2018; Paris, 2004; Sisk, 2013), and radical critics that argue that liberal interventions fail due to its external origin and universalist assumptions, thus ignoring local concerns with identity and culture (Mac Ginty, 2011). Therefore, liberal peace should be reformed through inclusion of local actors and agendas in peacebuilding processes (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015).

The radical pragmatic critique has been followed by a post-liberal ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding operations and research. Its core premise is that peace should be based on substantive engagement between international peacebuilders and all relevant domestic actors – governments, parties, armed groups, civil society, communities, and businesses – to create contextual and plural forms of peace (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). Such hybridization is needed because neither liberal nor local actors can build lasting peace unilaterally. While the former lacks legitimacy, the latter lacks material power, making them dependent on each other (Richmond, 2015). Deliberate hybrid peacebuilding, as opposed to the hybridization of peace that follows from local resistance to liberal interventionism, are seen as potentially emancipatory because it is more culturally sensitive and addresses local needs and concerns.

The emancipatory potential of hybrid peacebuilding is, however, called into question by critics who maintain that it continues to operate within the framework of liberal peace, reproduces its logics of inclusion and exclusion, and ignores the material power relations between international and local actors (Nadarajah & Rampton, 2014). Far from being an emancipatory alternative, the approach is accused of being a “problem-solving tool for the encompassment and folding into globalizing liberal order of cultural, political, and social orders perceived as radically different and obstructionist to its expansion” (Nadarajah & Rampton, 2014, p. 50). Such grafting of hybridity is seen as tactical concessions to local needs to promote the primary concerns of liberal peacebuilding: state security, liberal democracy, and neo-liberal development.

2.2. The meaning and politics of illiberal peacebuilding

The history of liberal interventions shows that peacebuilding, despite its technocratic appearance, is a matter of contentious politics with complex relations and strategies of power within and across places and scales. This political geography of peacebuilding has undergone major changes in recent years. While the 1990s witnessed the hegemonic rise and hubris of international liberal peacebuilding, the last two decades have been marked by critique and crisis in the context of international power shifts, decline of the liberal world order and growing influence of authoritarian states such as China and Russia (Acharya, 2017). Such changes widen the space and leverage of local elites to resist international peacebuilding and to pursue their own agendas and strategies for containing armed conflicts. Peace researchers have thus argued that attempts to end conflicts are increasingly driven by domestic elites that typically employ strategies of illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarian conflict management rather than liberal peacebuilding (Lewis et al., 2018; C. Q. Smith et al., 2020; Soares de Oliveira, 2011).

This shift towards illiberal peacebuilding has, however, received relatively little empirical and theoretical attention. Illiberal and hybrid forms of peace are explained with reference to local resistance against international interventions or seen as the outcome of military victories, rather than a product of illiberal peacebuilding strategies (Lewis et al., 2018; Mac Ginty, 2011). The foremost exception is a 2020 special issue of *Conflict, Security & Development* on ‘Illiberal Peacebuilding in Asia’ (volume 20, issue 1). In their introductory article, the editors observe that recent examples of conflict termination in South and Southeast Asia have been driven by domestic actors employing illiberal peacebuilding strategies that challenge dominant analytical frameworks (C. Q. Smith et al., 2020). Illiberal peacebuilding is found to be a distinct approach that differs from liberal peacebuilding in three key aspects: “In place of Western powers, illiberal peace-building is dominated by domestic actors. In place of economic neo-liberalism, illiberal peace-building runs on clientelism, cronyism and corruption. In place of liberal ideals of equality and liberty, illiberal peace-building emphasizes illiberal norms of inequality and order” (C. Q. Smith et al., 2020, p. 4).

Illiberal peacebuilding can thus be defined in terms of its illiberal means – the use of coercion and clientelist concessions – to promote a kind of peace that prioritizes state security and political stability over democratic accountability, human rights, and social inclusion. Smith et al. (2020) argue that such peacebuilding can take a ‘thin’ form in the sense that short-term illiberal means are used towards liberal ends. This includes attempts to institutionalize state authority and capacity as a precursor to political liberalization, and the use of economic concessions to incentivize armed non-state actors to sign ceasefire agreements and engage in business activities. Such statebuilding and marketization strategies for liberal peace often gain pragmatic support from international peacebuilders and aid donors, thus demonstrating how domestic and international actors may converge around thin illiberal peacebuilding (Lee, 2020; C. Q. Smith, 2020; Stokke, 2009).

Illiberal peacebuilding can also be of a ‘thick’ kind, when illiberal means are employed to protect an authoritarian regime and the security, influence, and wealth of powerful elites (Lewis et al., 2018). In this situation, both means and ends are distinctly illiberal, in contradistinction to the normative ideals of liberal peace: “The ultimate objective is to enshrine an authoritarian and/or ethnocratic regime that protects the security, influence and wealth of powerful elites” (C. Q. Smith et al., 2020, p. 4). Lewis et al. (2018) use the term ‘authoritarian conflict management’ to describe how authoritarian actors seeks “to prevent, de-escalate or terminate violent conflict within a state through hegemonic control of public discourse, space and economic resources rather than by liberal model of compromise, negotiations and power-sharing” (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 499). This is done by constraining and delegitimizing dissenting voices, attaining physical, political, and symbolic control of space, and by capturing economic resources and limiting the opportunities for armed non-state actors.

Smith et al. (2020) also point to the possibility of a ‘medium’ kind of illiberal peacebuilding, where the dominant actors are unconcerned about the liberal or illiberal form of peace that is created, if it promotes state stability and territorial integrity. Illiberal peacebuilding can thus be used by different actors for different ends, and yield variegated outcomes (Lewis et al., 2018; C. Q. Smith, 2020). It involves a broad range of strategies aimed at containing and/or terminating conflicts rather than resolving the structures and experiences of injustice behind armed conflicts.

These debates on liberal and illiberal peacebuilding provide conceptual pointers for interpreting the politics of peace in concrete cases. The following sections will illustrate this through a case study of Myanmar, with special attention to how the dominant state actor (the military) has used coercive and clientelist strategies to contain armed movements and extend the state’s territorial control, in combination with a constitutional hybrid regime that offers political incorporation but prevents political conflict resolution.

3. Military statebuilding and armed resistance in Myanmar

Historical studies show how the making of states and citizens in Europe was replete with structural, cultural, and direct violence, as it required the elimination of both external threats and internal rival forces (Tilly, 1992). The violent character of statebuilding is equally true for postcolonial states, where European state models were imposed through colonialism, and decolonization was guided by Western templates and contested by local actors and agendas (Boege, Brown, Clements, & Nolan, 2008; Schlichte, 2005). Contentious politics of state- and nation-building has also been a driver of intrastate conflicts in many

postcolonial states. Examining subnational conflicts in Asia, Parks, Colletta and Oppenheim (2013, p. 37) find that "the factors that fuel these conflicts – and sustain them for decades – are political, usually involving contestation between the government (and national elites) and a local group of actors that are resisting central control" (2013, p. 37). We maintain that this holds true for the Myanmar case, where we see the contentious relations between military statebuilding and struggles for democracy and federalism as the core driver of intrastate conflicts (Fig. 1). This section provides a brief review of the historical development of these conflicts, as a basis for the further analysis of illiberal peacebuilding in subsequent sections.

Post-colonial Myanmar has been marked by multiple and protracted armed conflicts over government and state form, or in other words, over the form of rule and the right to rule (Brenner, 2019; Burke, Williams, Barron, Jolliffe, & Carr, 2017; M. Smith, 1991; South, 2008). The foremost example of *conflicts over government*, on the one hand, is the long-standing war against the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) from 1948 until the collapse of CPB in 1989 (Lintner, 1990). This conflict originated in ideological divides within the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) – the dominant political alliance from 1946 to 1958 – that escalated into war after independence and continued throughout the period of military socialist rule from 1962 to 1988. More recently, the military coup d'état in 2021 has been followed by armed clashes between the military and the newly formed People's Defence Force (PDF). PDF is aligned with the underground National Unity Government (NUG), and some troops have received basic training from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), thus mirroring the development of the armed All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) and the exile government National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) after the military coup in 1988. On the other hand, there are also long-standing *conflicts over state form* between the military and multiple ethnic armed organizations. These conflicts revolve around ethnic demands for self-determination, political representation, and equality in opposition to the unitary, majoritarian, and militarized state. It is this ethnic struggle for self-determination and federalism that has been the primary form of conflict since the CPB collapse in 1989 and is also the focus of our analysis.

Myanmar's two kinds of conflict are different but interlinked, with complex and changing relations between them. In the 1950s, armed opposition to the government was marked by organizational and geographical divides between CPB in the Bamar-dominated central regions and ethnic organizations in Karen, Mon, Pa–O and Karenni borderlands (Fig. 2), but there was also collaboration between CPB and the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO), especially in the Irrawaddy delta (M. Smith, 1991). Military campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s, pushed the Karen movement to Kayin State while CPB was forced to retreat to Shan State, where it came to rely on recruits from ethnic groups and cross-border support from China. In the 1980s, military offensives, reduced Chinese support and defections among ethnic troops led to the collapse of the Communist Party.

Since 1989, Myanmar's intrastate conflicts have largely been between the military (Tatmadaw) and ethnic armed organizations (Burke et al., 2017). After the 2021 military coup, there has been a certain re-alignment between ethnic armed struggles and the struggle for democracy, as the National Unity Government has called for genuine federal democracy, the Karen National Union has offered protection and training for democracy activists and there are signs of collaboration between People's Defence Force and EAOs, especially in Chin State. There is also a long history of state-backed militias, including People's Volunteer Organization in the 1940s, People's Militias (Ka Kwe Ye) in the 1960s, and People's Militia Forces (PMFs) and ethnic Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under Tatmadaw patronage today (Buchanan, 2016). Contemporary Myanmar is thus characterized by a complex mosaic of non-state armed actors that have emerged in response to military rule and statebuilding, while armed insurgencies have been used as a pretext for militarization of the state and government. Fig. 3 gives a simplified overview of the geographical location of the major ethnic armed organizations in recent years.

Within this general pattern of mutually reinforcing relations between military statebuilding and armed resistance, there are also notable changes in the form of rule and intensity of armed conflicts during the postcolonial period. Fig. 1 identifies four historical periods of armed conflict, each demarcated by major regime changes. By extension, it can be argued that the 2021 military coup marks the beginning of a 5th period, but it is too early to tell what the implications will be for war and peace. Each conflict period has seen some peace initiatives, ranging from

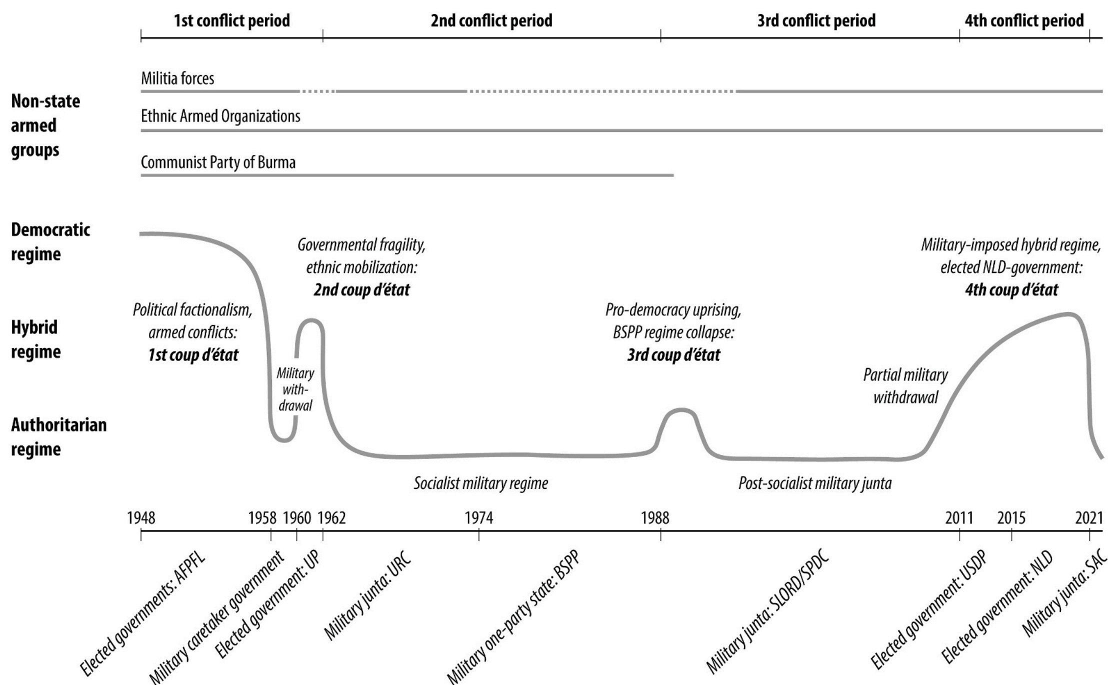

Fig. 1. Political regimes, non-state armed groups and cycles of conflict in Myanmar.

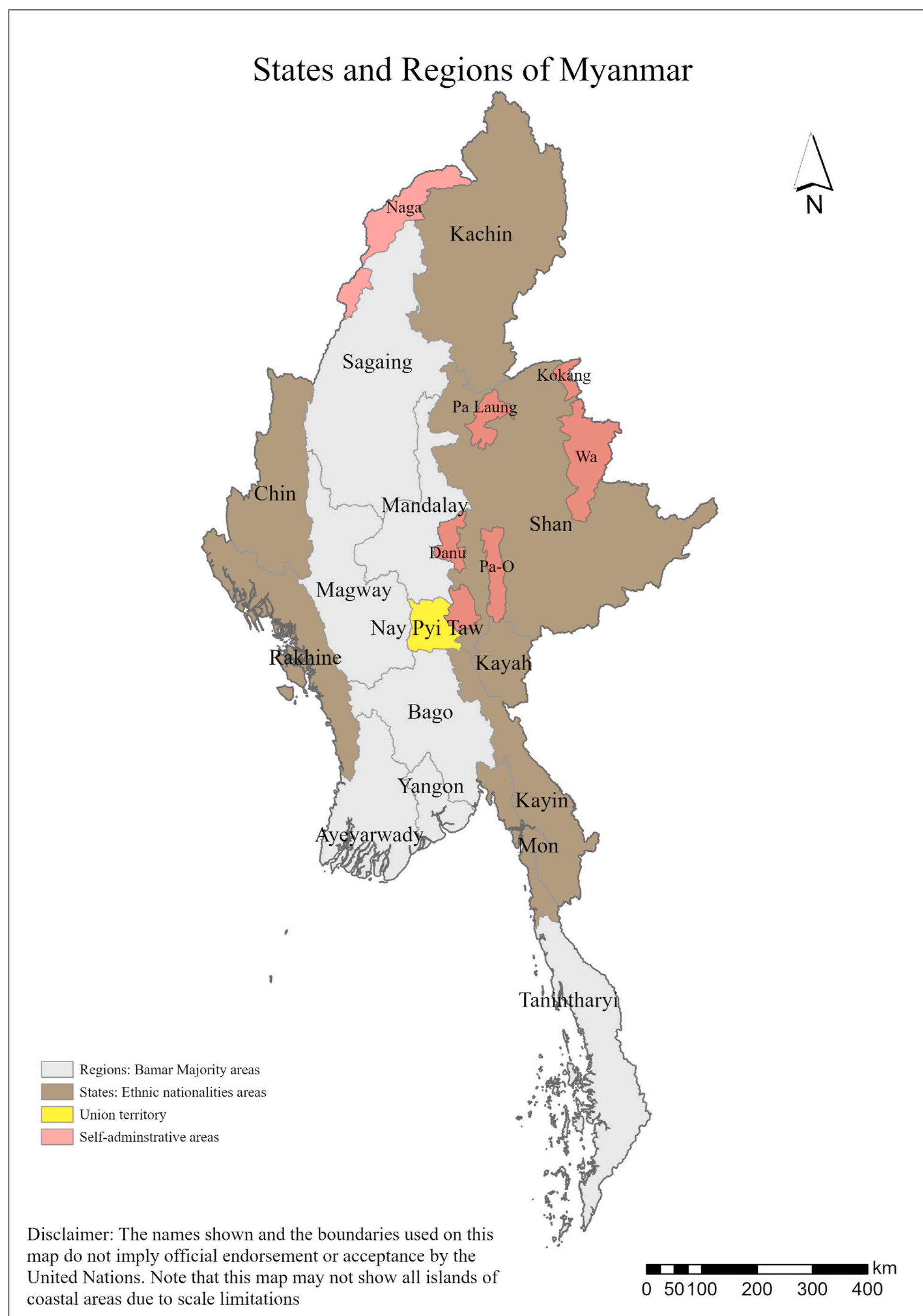

Fig. 2. Subnational administrative units in Myanmar (data source: MIMU, 2020).

informal parlays to political peace negotiations, but all have failed to resolve the core grievances (M. Smith, 2018). While the Tatmadaw has sought to gain unrivalled territorial control and build a centralized unitary state, EAOs have insisted on political peace negotiations and federal state reforms. Being unable to breach this impasse, peace initiatives have been followed by resumed hostilities, deepened distrust, and reinforced obstacles for future conflict resolution (Lintner, 2020). There is nevertheless a difference between the first two conflict periods (1948–1988), when occasional peace parlays were short-lived and had little impact, and the last two periods (1988–2021), when military domination and illiberal peacebuilding contained conflicts for longer time periods. The following paragraphs summarizes the conflict dynamics before 1988, while peacebuilding strategies after 1988 are examined in more detail in the subsequent sections.

3.1. Conflicts and peace parleys during the 1948–1988 period

Myanmar's first period of conflict refers to the early democratic period from independence in 1948 to the military coup d'état in 1962. During the transition to independence, Chin, Kachin and Shan nationalities and territories – which were governed indirectly during colonial rule – were amalgamated into the Union based on the 1947 Panglong Agreement. This foundational pact of a federalist kind ensured transfer of power to a unified Burma and was the basis for the 1947 Constitution, which granted ethnic nationalities the right to self-determination. The Panglong Agreement and the 1947 Constitution have thus framed ethnic

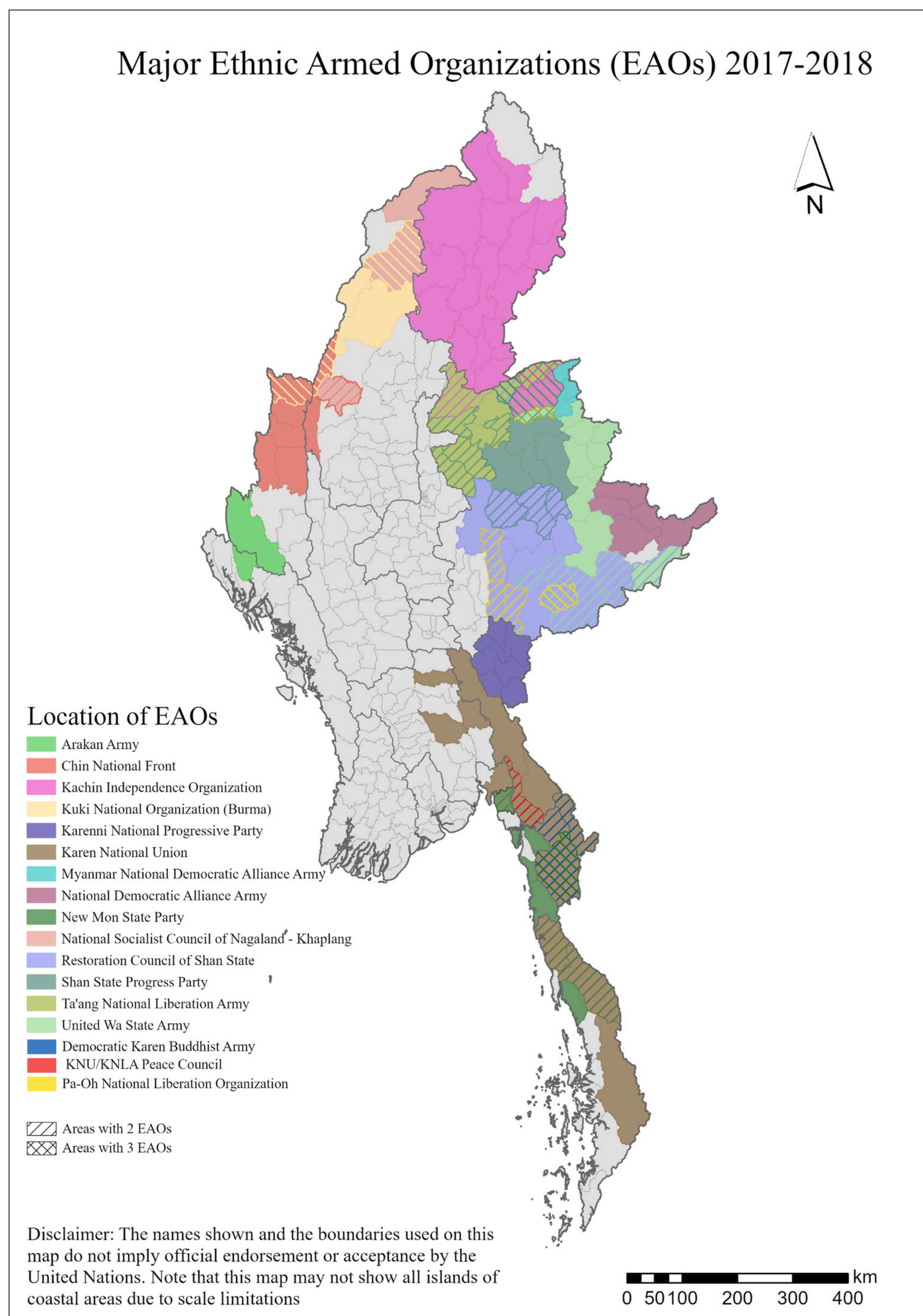

Fig. 3. Location of major ethnic armed organizations in 2017–2018 (data source: BNI, 2020; MIMU, 2020).

grievances and struggles since independence (Sakhong, 2014; M.; Smith, 1991).

The Karen community was not represented at the Panglong Conference but pursued separate statehood through political dialog with the colonial rulers before independence and by militant means thereafter. The 1947 constitution granted ethnic states the right to secede, but not until 10 years after the charter took effect. This brought the question of secession to the forefront in the 1950s and made non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty – the 'Three Main National Causes' – the raison d'être for lasting military rule (Callahan, 2003; Farrelly, 2013).

The early postcolonial period was thus marked by positive prospects for federalism and peace. However, failure to implement the 'Panglong principles', combined with growing bamarization of the Tatmadaw and militarization of politics, furthered the militancy of Karen, Karenni, Mon and Pa–O movements (Sakhong, 2014; M.; Smith, 2018). In terms of political regime, the Union of Burma had democratically elected AFPFL-governments from 1948 to 1958, but this period was also characterized by deepened ideological divides within AFPFL and escalating armed conflicts with the Communist Party and ethnic armed organizations, as well as intrusion of Kuomintang forces in Shan State (Furnivall, 1949; M.; Smith, 1991).

In this context, the Tatmadaw grew from a small and factionalized army to become a sizeable and battle-hardened force that saw itself as the guardians of national unity, state sovereignty and political stability (Callahan, 2003). Political and armed conflicts was thus used as a

pretext for a military caretaker government in 1958, followed by a nominally civilian Union Party-government (UP) in 1960, and a second military coup d'état in 1962 (Callahan, 2003; Nakanishi, 2013). Thereafter, the state remained under direct military rule until 2011, although with a regime re-organization in 1988, when the socialist military regime led by General Ne Win was replaced by a military junta that abandoned socialism but strengthened the Tatmadaw's economic and military power (Callahan, 2003; Nakanishi, 2013; Taylor, 2009).

The second period of conflict refers to the period of socialist military rule from 1962 to 1988 (Fig. 1). During this period, Burma was first ruled by a military junta (Union Revolutionary Council, URC), before being transformed to a socialist one-party state controlled by the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1974 (Nakanishi, 2013; Taylor, 2015). Prior to the 1962 coup, ethnic insurgencies broke out in the Shan Hills when it became clear that the government was not going to honor the constitutional right to hold a referendum on secession. Simultaneously, a Federal Movement organized by Shan *saohpas* (princes) pursued the same demands through political means (Lintner, 2020). In response, the military regime held a peace parlay in 1963, but the Tatmadaw's preconditions for negotiations were unacceptable to the EAOs and the talks broke down without any agreement being reached.

After the collapse of the peace parlay, the Ne Win period was characterized by intense warfare over territorial control, including the Tatmadaw's notorious 'four cuts' strategy that aimed to disconnect EAOs from food, funds, intelligence, and popular support, thereby making civilian populations regular targets of war (M. Smith, 1991). While military campaigns weakened the insurgencies, the Ne Win regime was itself undermined by economic stagnation and crisis. Since the 1960s, the military rulers had pursued a 'Burmese Way to Socialism' through state control of the economy, nationalization of enterprises, central planning, and economic isolationism (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2003; Nakanishi, 2013). In 1988, economic mismanagement and political oppression triggered pro-democracy mass mobilization, which was forcefully repressed but nevertheless led to regime collapse and the formation of a post-socialist military junta (Steinberg, 2001).

This brief review shows that the first two periods of conflict established a mutually reinforcing relationship between military rule and statebuilding, on the one hand, and ethnic armed resistance, on the other. It also points to a cyclical conflict pattern, in the sense that limited political openings and peace initiatives have been followed by renewed warfare. The following sections examine how, during the third and fourth conflict periods, the military rulers have combined armed offensives, illiberal peacebuilding, and the construction of a hybrid regime to contain armed conflicts, expand its territorial control, and prevent federal state reforms.

4. Military offensives, ceasefires, and illiberal peacebuilding

The late 1980s was a critical juncture in the history of armed conflicts in Myanmar. Before 1988, the Ne Win regime relied primarily on the military's capacity to win wars but failed to achieve a monopoly of violence through a victor's peace. After 1988, the reorganized military junta combined military offensives with clientelist concessions to both pressurize and incentivize EAOs to enter into ceasefire agreements, despite their limited prospects for political negotiations and substantive conflict resolution. This broadening of the military's strategy was enabled by two major political events.

First, in 1988, Myanmar saw a democracy uprising that brought the BSPP regime to a collapse and was followed by a military self-coup. The new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) – renamed as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 – abandoned the socialist economic policies from the Ne Win era to mitigate the economic crisis that had triggered the uprising and held multi-party elections to gain political legitimacy (Steinberg, 2001). When the National League for Democracy and allied ethnic parties won a landslide victory, the military rulers refused to cede power and insisted instead on strengthening the military and securing state authority as a precondition for a future political opening. The democracy uprising was thus followed by military build-up and the pro-democratic opposition was persistently repressed throughout the 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, the military increased its economic power through military-owned and crony companies, in the context of a more open economy, exploitation of rich natural resources and inflow of foreign capital from China, Thailand and other Asian countries.

Second, in 1989, the Communist Party of Burma collapsed, thereby giving the military junta the upper hand in the battlefield, and creating new opportunities for conflict termination through military victory or ceasefires. CPB had for long been the foremost challenge to military rule but came under strong pressure in the 1980s and was eventually brought down by a mutiny of ethnic troops in northern Shan State. These troops formed new but militarily weak EAOs that entered into ceasefire agreements with the Tatmadaw (Meehan, 2016). A series of CFAs were signed with important armed groups, including Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), United Wa State Army (UWSA), and National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State (NDAA-ESS) (Lintner, 2020). These ceasefire agreements extended the Tatmadaw's territorial control and allowed them to increase the pressure on remaining EAOs.

The military's territorial control was further extended through additional ceasefires in the mid-1990s, including with Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA), Pa–O National Army (PNA), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Karenni Nationalities Peoples' Liberation Front (KNPLF) and New Mon State Party (NSMP). Important EAOs in Shan and Kachin states were thus pacified, leaving the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Mong Tai Army (MTA) as the foremost armed opposition in the 1990s (Meehan, 2016; Sadan, 2016). These and other EAOs became the targets of further military offensives as well as attempts to deepen internal factional divides. Most importantly, the Tatmadaw used military pressure and clientelist concessions to split the Karen National Union in 1994, when the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA) broke away and signed a ceasefire agreement that granted military and financial assistance in exchange for support for military offensives against KNU (Keenan, 2014; Lintner, 2020; Sadan, 2016; South, 2008). This strategy of coercing and incentivizing splinter groups was continued thereafter and have especially targeted KNU (Fig. 4). In the war against remaining EAOs, the Tatmadaw also mobilized support from UWSA in military campaigns against the MTA and its successor, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) (Brenner, 2019; Keenan, 2014; South, 2008).

While the military-imposed ceasefires changed the balance of power in their own favor, EAOs were also incentivized through clientelist economic concessions. Precursors for this strategy can be found in the 1960s, when the military set up people's militias and allowed them to engage in illicit opium trade (Jelsma, Kramer, & Vervest, 2005). In the 1990s, the Tatmadaw likewise used economic clientelism to strengthen the EAOs readiness for ceasefires. McCarthy and Farrelly (2020) observe that the ceasefires in the 1990s were followed by 'joint extraction pacts' and patronage structures between the Tatmadaw and ethnic elites, and that this strategy was replicated in new ceasefire agreements after 2011. Ceasefire areas have thus seen the development of what Woods describes as 'ceasefire capitalism', that is, "state agencies and military officials granting resource concessions to military-favored business people backed by Chinese state finance" (Woods, 2011, p. 767). In the context of the post-socialist economic opening, the Tatmadaw pursued a combined strategy of military offensives and illiberal peacebuilding to achieve territorial control and accumulation of wealth (Jones, 2014; Meehan, 2016; Woods, 2011, 2016).

The combination of ceasefire agreements and illiberal peacebuilding contained armed hostilities, especially in Shan and Kachin States, but failed to resolve the core conflict issues. At the local level, Brenner (2019) documents that the uneven impacts on differently situated elite and non-elite actors reinforced grievances and revitalized militancy

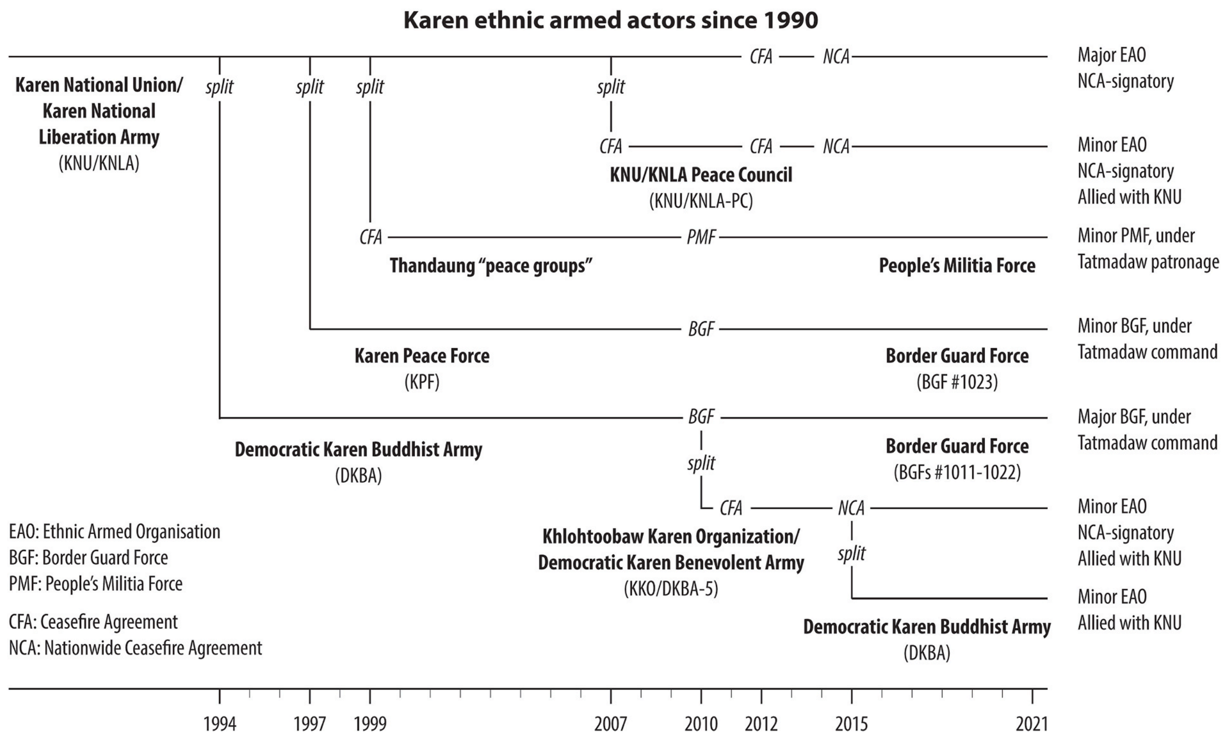

Fig. 4. Karen ethnic armed actors since 1990.

within sections of Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in the 2000s, and within Karen National Union (KNU) since 2012. Consequently, the Tatmadaw's "attempts to co-opt rebel leaders into peace with lucrative business concessions have backfired" as it "left underlying grievances unaddressed and planted the seeds of new ones among local communities and among the rank and file of KIO" (Brenner, 2015, p. 339). In the meantime, the military managed to pacify ceasefire groups, defeat MTA, and weaken KNU and RCSS, hence leaving the Tatmadaw in a strong position in the 2000s (McCarthy & Farrelly, 2020). Jones (2014) thus concludes that the Tatmadaw successfully reduced the threat that had prompted military rule in the first place, allowing it to impose its vision of 'discipline-flourishing democracy' through the new 2008 Constitution that was designed, ratified, and implemented by the military (Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020). The limits of this approach became, however, visible when the military regime demanded that ceasefire groups should be transformed to Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under Tatmadaw command, in accordance with the 2008 Constitution. When the stronger ceasefire groups (KIO, SSPP, UWSA, NMSP and MNDAA) rejected the BGF scheme, the Tatmadaw launched offensives against MNDAA, KIO, TNLA and AA from 2009 onwards.

The SLORC/SPDC period thus produced a complex and shifting pattern of ceasefires and active conflicts. An analysis of quantitative conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme shows that the period since 1989 has been marked by continued 'state-based violence' between the Tatmadaw and non-state armed groups (Fig. 5). Closer inspection of the data reveals that non-ceasefire groups have been targeted in a sequential manner, with offensives against KNU in 1989–1992, MTA in 1994–1995; RCSS in 2000–2002; and NSCN–K in 2006–2007. Since

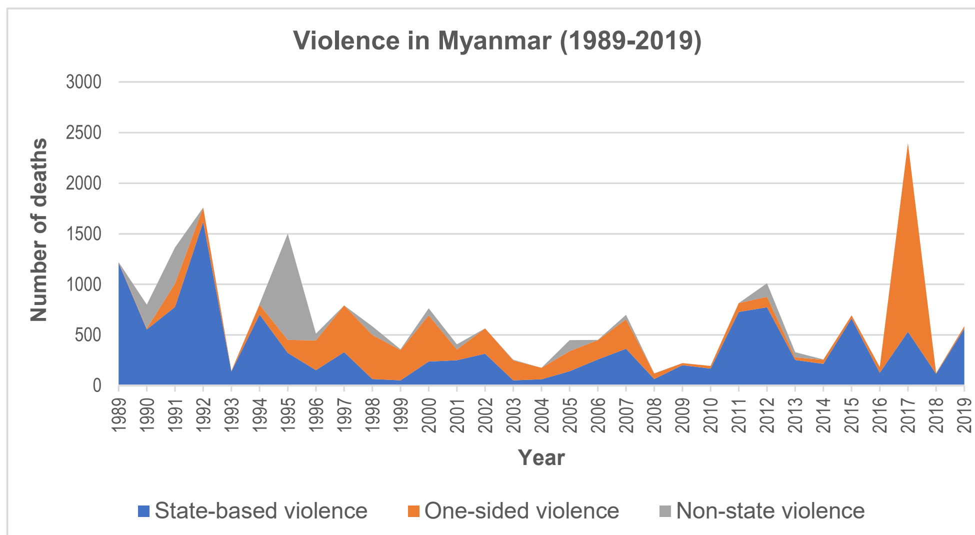

Fig. 5. Violence in Myanmar, 1989–2019 (data source: UCDP, 2020).

2009, military campaigns have especially targeted EAOs within the Northern Alliance – MNDAA (in 2009 and 2015), KIO (during 2011–2015), TNLA (in 2015) and AA (since 2018) – and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in 2017. Such state-based violence has also unleashed 'one-sided violence' against civilians during military offensives, most dramatically demonstrated by the Tatmadaw's large-scale violence against Rohingya civilians in 2017 (Ware & Laoutides, 2018). In comparison, there is relatively little violence between non-state armed groups. The foremost cases of inter-group violence – between MTA and UWSA (1990–1991 and 1995); DKBA and KNU (1994–99), RCSS and UWSA (2005); and anti-Muslim riots (2012–2013) – are also linked to Tatmadaw offensives (Keenan, 2014; Ware & Laoutides, 2018) (see Fig. 5).

This brief review of the third conflict period shows that the military rulers sought to contain EAOs through military offensives, ceasefire agreements and illiberal peacebuilding in a situation where the balance of power shifted in their own favor. The period also shows that although the combined strategy of the SLORC/SPDC junta pacified key EAOs, lasting peace remained contingent on substantive state reforms. Against this background, the next section examines the subsequent political opening and its implications for peacebuilding.

4.1. Hybrid regime and ceasefire politics at the national scale

The period since 2011 has seen both continuity and change in the military's strategies for ending conflicts and achieving a monopoly on violence. During the preceding two decades the Tatmadaw strengthened its military, economic and political power and contained key EAOs through offensives, ceasefires and clientelism (Jones, 2016; Sadan, 2016; Woods, 2016). This illiberal strategy for pacifying the borderlands was continued after 2011 (Gravers, 2016). What was new, however, was that it was pursued within the political context of a nominally civilian government and a parliamentary system that was presented as a framework for political transformation of EAOs and their grievances.

In 2011, following a fraudulent election in 2010, the military junta transferred executive power to a government from the military-based Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), with retired General Thein Sein as President. This political opening has been followed by political and academic debates about its political drivers and outcomes (Cheesman, Farrelly, & Wilson, 2014; Crouch, 2019; Egreteau, 2016; Lall, 2016). The disagreements revolve around two main interpretations, where both perspectives see it as an elite-driven opening but diverge on whether it should be understood as a negotiated transition to democracy or a military-imposed hybrid regime (Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020). Those that see it as democratic transition argue that it was driven by moderates within the military who mobilized support from a 'third force' in civil society and from Western international actors to counter hardline resistance within the military and the opposition (Lall, 2016; Mullen, 2016).

The alternative interpretation portrays the opening as a military-imposed reform designed to safeguard their interests and legitimize a disguised form of military rule, euphemistically described as 'discipline-flourishing democracy' (Crouch, 2019; Egreteau, 2016). The cornerstone of this guarded opening is the 2008 Constitution, which was designed by the military-controlled National Convention, ratified through a flawed referendum, and institutionalized in parliamentary politics, government, and public administration (Crouch, 2019; Egreteau, 2016). The argument is thus that Myanmar's political opening "should not be understood as a pacted transition but rather as a process of rolling out the military's constitutional framework and co-opting the prodemocracy and pro-federalism opposition" (Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020, pp. 283–284).

While the pacted transition discourse held a hegemonic position during the Thein Sein government, the last decade has demonstrated the continued autonomy and power of the Tatmadaw. This has become starkly visible with the 2021 coup, and the dominant understanding now is that the opening was imposed by the military from a position of strength and produced a hybrid regime (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011; Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020). Although the 2008 Constitution introduced a formal framework for elections, parliamentary politics and civilian government at both Union and State/region levels, the democratic substance was constrained by provisions that granted the military reserved seats in parliament, key positions in government and full control over security affairs. It also created a formal framework for power-sharing between government and parliament and between central and local levels of government, but the form of governance remained highly centralized and devolution of power was limited (Crouch, 2019; Stokke & Soe Myint Aung, 2020).

Within this hybrid order, the Thein Sein government continued and expanded the strategy of containing EAOs through military offensives, ceasefire agreements and economic clientelism. Soon after the transfer of power, two negotiation teams were formed to negotiate with the EAOs that had signed ceasefires during the SLORC/SPDC period and with groups without prior agreements (Min Zaw Oo, 2014). Major ceasefire groups such as UWSA and NDAA renewed earlier agreements, while RCSS and KNU entered ceasefires for the first time (Brenner, 2019). Smaller EAOs followed thereafter, so that a total of 14 armed organizations signed bilateral agreements at state and union level between 2011 and 2013 (Table 1). The foremost exceptions were KIO and MNDAA, where pre-existing ceasefire agreements broke down due to the pressure to become Border Guard Forces under military command. Two new EAOs – TNLA and AA – that had been created with support from KIO also refrained from signing ceasefire agreements. These four non-ceasefire groups eventually formed the Northern Alliance and remained in active conflict with the Tatmadaw.

The Thein Sein government's approach, like the preceding junta, failed to initiate political peace negotiations. Instead, the new parliamentary system was offered as a framework for political participation and conflict resolution (Farrelly 2014). The government's Union Level Peace Team advocated a step-wise political transformation, where EAOs were expected to lay down arms and become BGFs, set up political parties and contest elections (Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2016). The EAOs, however, found this approach unacceptable. The Constitution provides limited space for addressing their core grievances, hence active EAOs instead demanded extra-parliamentary peace negotiations. The dominant ethnic alliance, the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), insisted on inclusive political talks to reach an accord on power and resource sharing that would be ratified by the Union Parliament.

The ceasefire groups were organized in the Working Group on Ethnic Coordination (WGEC) and supported by international aid donors through the Euro-Burma Office (EBO). The UNFC and the WGEC disagreed on the question of engagement in the USDP peace process. The WGEC promoted engagement with the USDP peace agenda, including signing a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and participating in aid-funded peacebuilding. In contrast, the UNFC held that political negotiations should be the foremost priority, and a precondition for disarmament, political transformation and peacebuilding. As the USDP government did not accommodate this demand but insisted on a nationwide ceasefire agreement as a precondition for political talks, the 2015 NCA was only signed by two major and six minor EAOs (Table 1). The USDP peace process thus ended in a complex mosaic of bilateral ceasefire agreements, a 'Nationwide' Ceasefire Agreement that was rejected by the majority of large EAOs, and renewed offensives against the Northern Alliance in Kachin State (KIA and AA) and northern Shan State (MNDAA and TNLA).

The new ceasefire agreements and the resumption of war against non-ceasefire groups shifted the geography of armed conflicts. Before 2011, the conflicts in northern Myanmar were contained, while armed clashes continued in the southeast. In contrast, the USDP-government period brought ceasefires in Kayin and southern Shan State and resumed hostilities in Kachin State and northern Shan State (Fig. 6). Large-scale violence also erupted in Rakhine State due to the military's

Table 1
Major ethnic armed organizations and their status in the peace process (data sources: BNI, 2020; Keenan, 2014; Min Zaw Oo, 2014).

Ethnic armed organizations	Acronym	Founded	Ceasefire Agreements			EAO Alliances		Strength
Political and military wings. Common name in boldface			Previous ceasefire agreement	New ceasefire agreement	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement	Northern Alliance	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC)	Estimated number of troops
Arakan Army/United League of Arakan	AA/ULA	2008				Member	Member	7000+
All Burma Students' Democratic Front	ABSDF	1988		2013	2015			400
Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan Liberation Army	ALP/ALA	1967		2012	2015			60–100
Chin National Front/Chin National Army	CNF/CNA	1988		2012	2015			200+
Democratic Karen Benovelent Army/Khlotoobaw Organization	DKBA-5	2010		2011	2015			1500+
Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army	KIO/KIA	1961	1994			Member	Member	10–12000
Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army	KNPP/KA	1957	2005	2012				600+
Karen National Union/Karen National Liberalization Army	KNU/KNLA	1947		2012	2015			5000+
Karen Nation Union/**Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council**	KNU/KNLA-PC	2007	2007	2012	2015			<200
Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army	MNDAA	1989	1989			Member	Member	2000+
National Democractic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State	NDAA-ESS	1989	1989	2011			Member	3000+
New Mon State Party/Mon National Liberation Army	NMSP/MNLA	1958	1995	2012	2018			800+
National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang	NSCN–K	1980		2012				<500
Pa–O National Liberation Organization/Pa–O National Liberation Army	PNLO/PNLA	1991		2012	2015			400+
Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South	RCSS/SSA	1996 (1964)		2011	2015			8000+
Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North	SSPP/SSA	1989 (1964)	1989	2012			Member	8000+
Ta'ang National Liberation Army/Palaung State Liberation Front	TNLA/PSLF	1992				Member	Member	6000+
United Wa State Army/United Wa State Party	UWSA/UWSP	1989	1989	2011			Member	30,000

so-called 'clearing operations' against ARSA and Rohingya civilians, and subsequent offensives against Arakan Army (AA). This created a geographical divide between areas with active warfare and ceasefire zones where armed hostilities were contained but the core issues remain unresolved. But even in ceasefire areas, the Tatmadaw was seen as fighting a war by other means, that is, using military, administrative and developmental means to expand the state's territorial control at the expense of ceasefire EAOs.

5. Authoritarian conflict management at the local scale

Myanmar's subnational conflicts are driven by contentions over state form, form of government and political citizenship at the national scale, but also by contentions over territory, administration, and resources at the local scale (Burke et al., 2017, Fig. 7). The previous section showed that the Tatmadaw sought to contain armed conflicts by constructing a hybrid regime, decentralized authority, and ethnic representation at the national scale. This section adds that the military has also contained conflicts by tolerating a degree of territorial control, administration, and resource extraction by ceasefire EAOs at the local scale. At the same time, the military has enhanced state authority through territorial encroachments, administrative infringements and expanded resource control in areas under EAO control. Armed hostilities have thus been replaced by a war by other means.

Myanmar's history of armed conflicts and ceasefire agreements has produced a mosaic of territorial control by the Tatmadaw and non-state armed actors, as well as parallel and overlapping economic and administrative systems. Jolliffe (2014, 2015) shows that this complexity can be untangled by examining how territorial claims by EAOs have been challenged, tolerated, or accommodated by the Tatmadaw. There are, first, several cases where EAOs have gained territorial control through guerilla warfare and warding off Tatmadaw offensives, but their authority is challenged, and the boundaries are blurred and changing. Past and present examples include the 'liberated zones' that were held by various armed groups during the Ne Win regime; the areas controlled by KNU, KNPP and RCSS during the SLORC/SPDC junta; and the territories under KIO, TNLA, MNDAA and AA control today (Brenner, 2019).

There are, secondly, also several cases where territorial control by

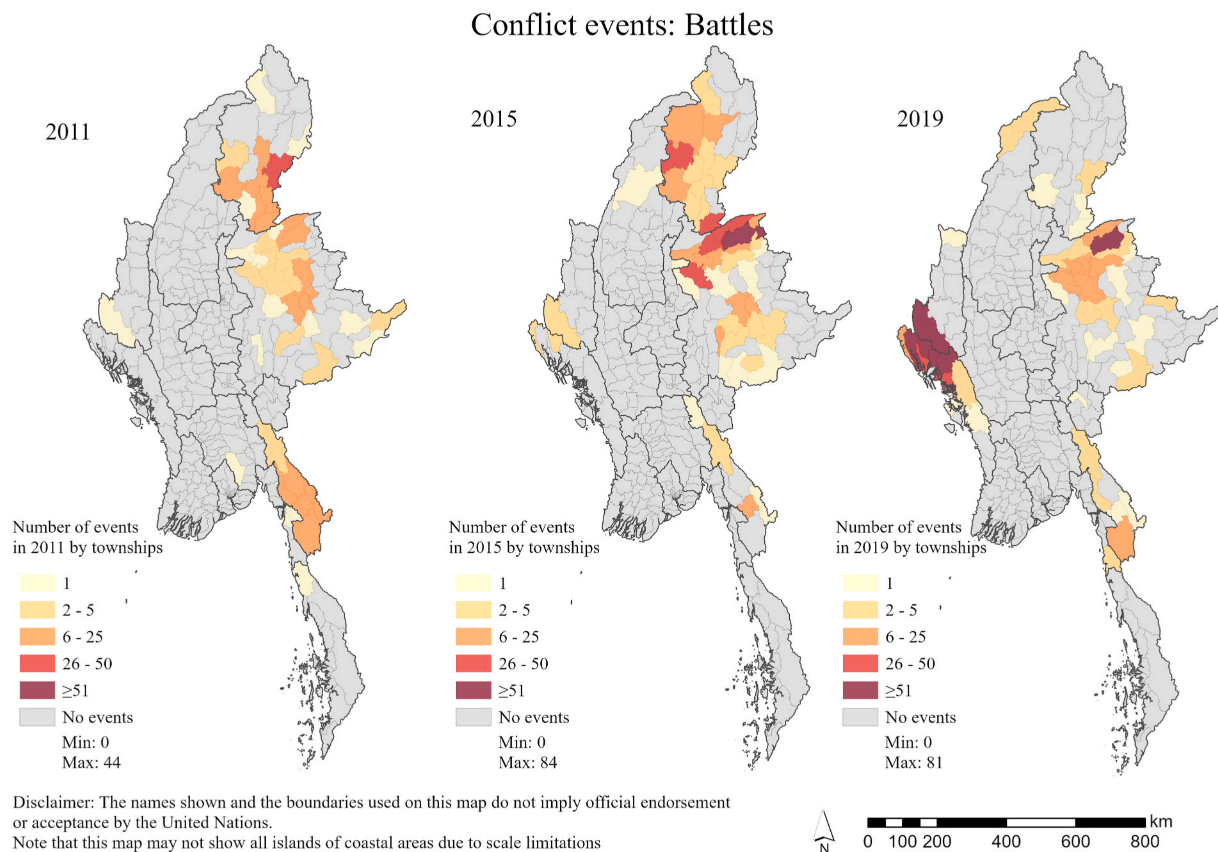

Fig. 6. Conflict events in 2011, 2015 and 2019 (data source: ACLED, 2020; MIMU, 2020).

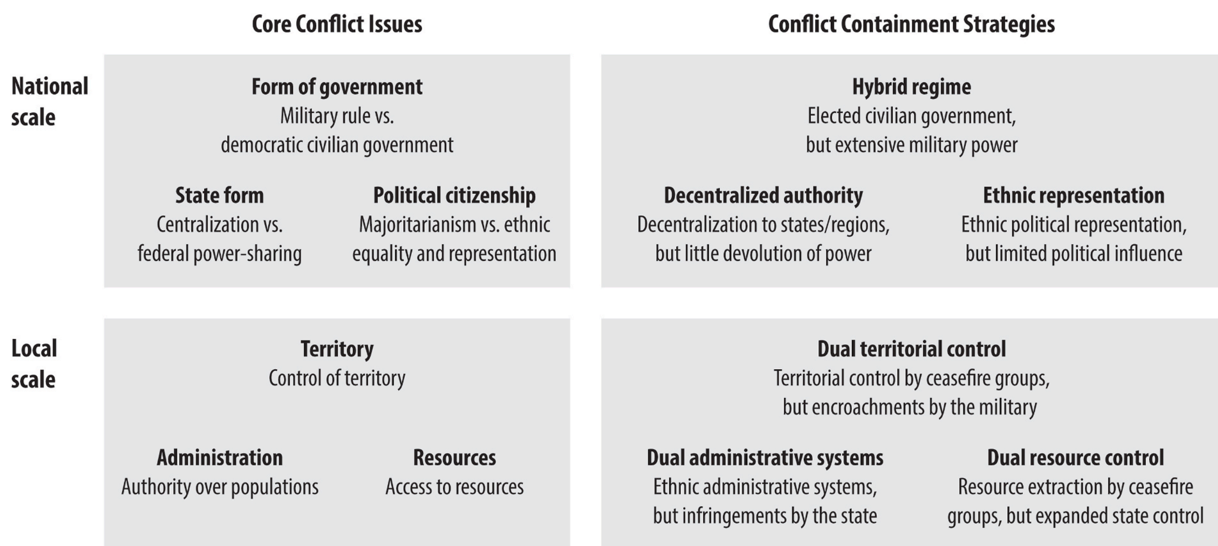

Fig. 7. Core conflict issues and conflict containment strategies at national and local scales.

EAOs have come to be tolerated by the Tatmadaw and institutionalized through ceasefire agreements (Table 1). While the ceasefires in the 1990s included explicit recognition of ethnic territories as Special Regions, territorial demarcations are not included in the new ceasefire agreements since 2011 (Min Zaw Oo, 2014; Zaw & Win, 2007). The Tatmadaw and EAOs may access and influence areas where they do not have direct control, and both sides commonly seek to extend their territorial control (Jolliffe, 2014, 2015). KNU-affiliated respondents, for example, point out that the Tatmadaw has refused to implement ceasefire clauses on relocation of troops and demarcation of ceasefire territories, but has instead strengthened its military capacities and encroached on KNU territory through infrastructure projects (Klo Kwe Moo Kham, 2021).

Third, there are also situations where territorial claims by armed groups have been accommodated by the military (Jolliffe, 2014, 2015). This is most clearly seen in six self-administered areas under the 2008 Constitution that grants a degree of self-rule to small ethnic groups that make up a majority within specific townships (Fig. 1). The autonomy

and politics of these areas vary, ranging from the incorporated Danu Self-Administered Zone to the relatively autonomous Wa Self-Administered Division, which resembles an independent state under one-party rule by the United Wa State Party/Army (Lintner, 2019). There are also smaller EAOs or breakaway factions that have converted to BGFs or PMFs and exert territorial control under military command or patronage (Buchanan, 2016). Such groups provide support for military campaigns and are allowed to engage in illicit business activities. The foremost example is the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) that broke away from KNU in 1994 and became an ally of the military in the war against KNU, before transforming into BGFs under Tatmadaw command in 2010 (Brenner, 2019; South, 2008, Fig. 4).

Within the areas they control, EAOs have developed administrative systems with line departments and local administrative sub-units. Harrisson and Kyed (2019) observe that there is a long history of state-making by EAOs in areas where official state institutions are mistrusted or largely absent: "They have administrations, schools, clinics, courts, and different other departments like agriculture and forestry. They have their own written laws, extract taxes from villagers and businesses, and issue land registers" (Harrisson & Kyed, 2019, p. 298). While the form and substance of statemaking vary, there are also commonalities between different EAOs in their prioritization of social services (especially education and health), economic affairs and justice (Jolliffe, 2014, 2015). Formal ceasefires have created more stable conditions for EAOs to build authority and legitimacy among ethnic communities, but in contentious co-existence with centralized statebuilding. Respondents in KNU-controlled territories report that the state has continued to expand its administrative structures without consultation or cooperation with the parallel ethnic actors. It is especially striking that the education sector, which is essential for Karen identity, has seen an expansion of government schools, staff, and curricula at the expense of the Karen education system (Klo Kwe Moo Kham, 2021). Rather than using the ceasefire as an opportunity to build federalism from below, the state has expanded its administrative control and enhanced the authority of the unitary state (South et al., 2018).

At the local level, the ceasefire agreements have thus produced dual systems of territorial control and administration (Fig. 7). The USDP-government also expanded the strategic use of economic incentives with the help of increased foreign direct investments. International actors, both Western and Asian, engaged pragmatically as funders of peacebuilding projects, investors in resource exploitation in ceasefire areas, and as sponsors of state capacity building at the national scale. While there are important differences between China's conception of 'economic peace' and the liberal framing of Western peacebuilding, there was a convergence around developmental peacebuilding at the local scale and state capacity building at the national scale (Aung Thu Nyein, 2020; Roy, 2020; Roy, Ware, & Laoutides, 2021). International peacebuilding projects such as the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) and the Joint Peace Fund (JPF) were promoted as support for local conflict transformation, but simultaneous resource extraction projects and state capacity building were seen as demonstrating the international actors' lack of conflict sensitivity in a situation where local resource control and administration are core conflict issues that require political conflict resolution (Kvanvik, 2020; Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, 2014).

6. Inconclusive and stalled peace negotiations

Our core findings are that Myanmar's armed conflicts reflect the prevalence of militarization, centralization and majoritarianism in state and government, and that the military rulers have used armed force, ceasefire agreements, illiberal peacebuilding, and disciplined democracy to contain ethnic armed organizations rather than resolve the core conflict issues. Against this background, the electoral victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 and the peaceful transfer of power in 2016 raised hopes for peace through political negotiations, even though the civilian part of government was circumscribed by the tutelary power of the Tatmadaw. Space constraints prevent any in-depth analysis of the contentious politics of peace after 2015, but we will make some general observations on its character and limitations (for further information, see f.ex. Burma News International, 2019; Jolliffe, 2018; Sai Kyaw Nyunt, 2020).

The NLD-government led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi gave the peace process high priority and could rely on strong domestic and international support, including qualified support from China (Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee, 2018; Roy, 2020; Roy et al., 2021). NLD had both a principal and an instrumental interest in achieving peace, as a party championing democracy and human rights, and seeing national security and reconciliation as a precursor to constitutional reform. The NLD administration drafted a framework for political dialog and convened a series of peace conferences and committee meetings from 2016 to 2020. It inherited a complex two-track process from the USDP government: negotiations with EAOs to sign the NCA, and political negotiations with NCA signatory groups. As the government accepted the military's view of NCA as a non-negotiable precondition for dialog, but none of the major EAOs agreed to sign despite military and political pressure, the actual peace process included only a few EAOs and was justly criticized for lack of inclusivity. Most of the non-signatory groups joined forces in the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), led by the large and China-backed UWSA, to reject the NCA and call for fresh negotiations (Burma News International, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020).

The military and the government's uncompromising insistence on NCA also raised worries among the signatory groups, who were concerned about peace negotiations without the largest EAOs and questioned NLD's inflexibility and unwillingness to challenge the military (Jolliffe, 2018). Moreover, the NLD-government's peace process, like the military, continued to prioritize national security and sovereignty. This had the effect that the core grievances of ethnic nationalities and the implementation and monitoring of the NCA at the local level were downplayed (Klo Kwe Moo Kham, 2021; Kramer, 2020). While the peace conferences reached consensus on several key principles, ethnic demands were generally ignored, and the military used its de facto veto power to block claims that they saw as contradicting the 2008 Constitution. This created a situation where "EAO representatives thus fear ending up with a Union Peace Accord that provides them with no essential new provisions that go beyond the 2008 constitution and existing laws" (Kramer, 2020, p. 488). In this situation, the NLD-government failed to achieve national reconciliation with the military while the limitations of the peace process eroded the fragile trust that had existed between the NLD-government and EAOs. The peace process thus stalled with a symbolic final session in 2020, before the 2021 coup returned Myanmar to military rule and armed ethnic resistance (Hmung, 2021).

After the coup, the military junta (State Administration Council, SAC) has sought to co-opt ethnic actors by signing a ceasefire agreement with Arakan Army, appointing representatives from Arakan National Party (ANP) and Mon Unity Party (MUP) to SAC, and promising electoral reforms that are expected to benefit ethnic political parties. The military coup has, however, been firmly rejected by most ethnic armed organizations, political parties, and civil society organizations. The National Unity Government, which was formed by elected Members of Parliament, has launched a federal democracy charter, appointed several ethnic representatives to ministerial positions, has reached out to EAOs and created a People's Defense Force. While most EAOs have refrained from collaboration with NUG, the coup has brought the pro-democracy and pro-federalism forces together in joint rejection of military rule. There is thus both a considerable risk of escalating armed hostilities and prospects for broad alliance for substantive conflict resolution through federal democracy (Hmung, 2021).

7. Conclusion

The Myanmar case study shows how a dominant state actor – the Tatmadaw – has used both coercion and co-optation to contain armed resistance against militarized and centralized statebuilding and thereby strengthen the state's territorial control and authority. While the SLORC/SPDC military junta sought to contain EAOs through military offensives, ceasefire agreements and illiberal peacebuilding, the military based USDP government institutionalized a hybrid regime with decentralization and representation as a framework for political transformation of EAOs, and tolerated a degree of dual territorial, administrative and resource control at the local scale. These clientelist measures failed to address the substantive issues behind Myanmar's multiple and protracted conflicts. They were also combined with military offensives against non-ceasefire groups and war by other means in ceasefire areas. Moreover, the case study demonstrates that the Tatmadaw used its tutelary power to obstructs substantive conflict resolution through negotiated state reforms. We thus conclude that Myanmar's peace initiatives during the last three decades should be understood as illiberal strategies for containing armed groups rather than attempts at substantive resolution of the core conflict issues.

Theoretically, the Myanmar case calls for further theory-development on the drivers, strategies, and outcomes of illiberal peacebuilding. First, regarding the driving forces, the case highlights the centrality of domestic actors but shows that they are inscribed in changing international relations that may offer new opportunities and leverages for the protagonists. Second, regarding peacebuilding strategies, the case shows the prevalence of illiberal strategies and the complementarity of coercion and co-optation. It also demonstrates that illiberal peacebuilding is inherently geographical, in the sense that territorial and scalar strategies are used in myriad ways to contain armed resistance. Third, regarding outcomes, the case demonstrates that domestically driven illiberal strategies are more likely to contain rather than resolve armed conflicts. It also indicates that the outcomes are geographically variegated. The Myanmar case of illiberal peacebuilding thus resonates well with the 'geographies of peace' literature as it demonstrates that peacebuilding and its outcomes are shaped by geography and mean different things in different spaces, places, and scales.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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