

The Role of Karen Policy-Networks in Myanmar's National Peace Process

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Abstract

Myanmar's current peace process is facilitated through the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), agreed to by the central government, the Tatmadaw, and ten ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) including the Karen National Union (KNU). Although not inclusively representative of all Karen people, the KNU has become accepted as a de facto government within Karen State. Political tension has led to factionalism within the KNU itself, creating a small-scale policy subsystem in which various actors attempt to raise their policy concerns at the national level. Current literature discusses Karen politics as they are happening within top-level negotiations on the NCA, often overlooking the influence of policy opponents that do not have direct access to the negotiation space. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how policy opponents in Karen state attempt to influence national level negotiations through advocacy within small-scale policy-networks. These policy-networks advocate for differing imaginaries as part of an existing discursive structure. The research question considered is as follows: What is the role of Karen policy-networks in Myanmar's national peace process? Within the scope of this study, the primary imaginary discussed is the political imaginary, which is based on shared actor perception and used to inform advocacy tactics. Therefore, this study intends to illustrate the influence of individual Karen actors, vis-à-vis the KNU, on Myanmar's peace process.

Introduction

This research intends to provide a new perspective to the current academia on Karen activism and its impact on Myanmar's peace process. While Karen civil society organizations (CSOs) have been discussed in their role as service-providers, their advocacy roles have often been overlooked, particularly following the 2015 signing of the NCA when the level of analysis – both media and academia – took a turn toward the national level processes. Perpetuating a normative understanding of the complex political situation, signatory (and non-signatory) EAOs are implicitly described as non-contested by the constituents they represent. The relatively open democratic political space created in Karen state, however, has allowed agnostic democratic differences to influence policy. It would therefore be a continual disservice to overlook the advocacy of opposition actors in the Karen policy subsystem. This article aims to detail the advocacy of politically active Karen organizations, herein referred to as policy-networks.

Although the KNU has remained a key stakeholder in Myanmar politics, it is not representative of a pan-Karen identity and therefore not representative of a united Karen political goal (South 2007; Brouwer & van Wijk 2013; Thawngmung 2008). Thus, it is important to recognize the diversity within the Karen population rather than using the term “Karen” to signify an ideal-type (armed insurrection, ethnic rebels, and refugees). The ethnic designation “Karen” is comprised of about twenty subgroups with various religious, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. Two main subgroups claim the highest number of members: the Sgaw (mostly highland Christians and animists) and the Pwo (mostly lowland Buddhists), accounting for 80-85 percent of the Karen population, though not all reside in Myanmar (Thawngmung 2008: 3; Jolliffe 2016: 2). The ‘other’ Karen, as referred to by Thawngmung, often live in more ethnically-mixed cities, where some have chosen to collaborate with successive governments and some have even attempted to create political change by working ‘within the system’ (Thawngmung 2008: 11).

In addition to the KNU's political and armed divisions, the KNU administration includes departments for health, education, law, forestry, and other aspects of civilian life (South 2011: 10, 14). Social services are often provided through community-based organizations (CBOs) and CSOs. These organizations were traditionally based at the local level, emerging from religious groups' social welfare activities, fulfilling the

state's service-provider role in areas of conflict (ADB 2015). In fact, Cleary (1997) asserts that civil society organizations in the global south, particularly under authoritarian regimes, are more often service providers than political lobby groups (Simpson 2013: 135). Some Karen CSOs have officially mandated roles in the KNU structure, including the Karen Women's Organization (KWO), Karen Youth Organization (KYO), and the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD) (Jolliffe 2016: 26). Karen civil society thrives both inside and outside of Myanmar resulting in a great amount transnational activism in which a CSO based in Thailand along the Thai-Burma border works inside of KNU territory, such as the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) (Simpson 2013: 144; Jolliffe 2016: 27). Members, directors, and founders of these CSOs may also hold positions in the KNU at various levels (Jolliffe 2016: 27).

The Karen insurgency has always been a heterogeneous movement, involving those from varying political, religious, geographic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds with additional power imbalances between brigades (Brenner 2017: 3; Thawngmung 2008: 9). Policy divides have plagued the Karen political arena since as early as 1945, creating various splinter groups and political factions. Under Mutu Say Poe's leadership, newly voted in during the 15th Congress (2012), the KNU fragmented further. In 2014 Mutu Say Poe attempted to withdraw from the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) as his faction believed membership in the alliance was constraining NCA negotiations with Thein Sein's government, but was pressured to remain a member by the opposition faction. Later that year the opposition faction signed an agreement with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and Karen Peace Council (KPC) to create a new umbrella organization for Karen armed groups, which was met with concern by the incumbent leadership. Although unity was reestablished in a 2014 emergency meeting, the 2015 signing of the NCA reignited that same factionalism (Brenner 2017: 12). After the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi took over the NCA negotiations and national peace process in 2016, two "Union Peace Conference – 21st Century Panglong" (UPC-21CP) events were held, the first in August 2016 and the second in May 2017. The second conference concluded with agreement on 37 basic principles of the Union Accord. However, according to the roadmap-mandate of the NCA, national (political) dialogue must be completed prior to 1) holding UPC events, and 2) discussing, let alone approving, the Union Accord (BNI 2017: 33). This created an additional point of disagreement for the KNU factions, as many signatories and non-signatories have not been allowed to thoroughly conduct the required national dialogue (Mon News Agency 2017).

These examples of fragmentation within the KNU illustrate the policy line between "peace through development" and "political solutions" (Smith 2007: 49-50; Core 2009: 102). As "...many KNU leaders had come to view the term *ceasefire* as synonymous with *surrender*, and the term *development* as a code word for personal profit", the idea that development could be part of peacebuilding was distrusted by many on the "political solutions" side (Jolliffe 2016: 41). Today, this fragmentation still aligns with the decades-old divide essentially between 'compromising' (current KNU leadership under Mutu Say Poe) and 'uncompromising' (policy opponents). In the context of the NCA, the 'compromise' is to follow the order of the process as the government and Tatmadaw are leading it, while policy opponents demand the process to be followed in the order it was originally set out, focusing on the necessity of political dialogue.

Within this small-scale policy subsystem, various actors attempt to raise their policy concerns in an effort to have them heard at the national negotiating level. However, policy opponents do not have access to the negotiating space and therefore must advocate for their policy within the subsystem, vis-à-vis the KNU. Acting through policy-networks, policy opponents are provided an opportunity to advocate for particular policy standpoints. These policy standpoints are referred to as a Political Imaginary, based on shared actor perception.

Method and Materials

The data presented in this work was collected through the author's conduction of semi-structured in-depth interviews with five individual informants. Data was collected between February and May 2018 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. All interviews were carried out in English, the native language of the author though not the native language of the informants. Although this could be seen as a limitation, the author is

confident that the informants were able to express their thoughts clearly as a majority of the advocacy work, they already do is primarily in English.

Findings: Policy Opponents

A Political Imaginary is created through shared perception and ideology within a group of actors. Focusing on the Karen political context, the primary participants in this shared perception are border-based civil society actors who *generally* oppose the current peace process policy of the recently voted-in KNU Leadership. For the purpose of this research, I will refer to these actors as “policy opponents”. Policy opponents are removed from the policy negotiation space, meaning that these actors may have filled top-level positions in the past, but are currently in more minor roles such as consultants or CSO directors/participants.

The basic defining feature of the policy opponents’ Political Imaginary is that the EAOs, Central Government, and *Tatmadaw* should be following the NCA’s peace process step by step. The keyword identifying this feature of the Political Imaginary is “process”. According to Karen policy opponents, each of the NCA’s seven steps should be completed prior to moving on to the next one, however, as of 2018, at least three Union Peace Conferences will have been completed before all political (national) dialogues have been conducted. This has led many Karen policy opponents to criticize the KNU’s seemingly complicit participation in a scattered peace process.

Where Karen policy opponents are watching the process as it is, or should be, completed step-by-step, the KNU leadership appears to be following the process as determined by the central government and/or *Tatmadaw*. Further breaking down the key feature of the Political Imaginary, the process, it is important to note the urgency of national (political) dialogue. The national dialogue provides policy opponents with an opportunity to advocate for their Political Imaginary through relevant policy-networks. A member of the KNU Concerned Group explained:

“If they (the KNU leadership) try to listen to people and they think about how to do better, or how not to rush, I think that can be some way of (progress). But if they worry about how we must go through the NCA and we must go fast, then I think that it won’t be good. So for me, I feel like the NCA failed because nobody followed the NCA. The government did not follow the NCA, the military did not follow, and the signatories did not follow the NCA. They didn’t follow the steps that they should go; they just come up with their own steps. Like how the Arakan did not finish the national dialogue, the Shan RCSS did not finish, but they go to the UPC anyway. So, they do not use their voice. We think that the roadmap, the political roadmap of the NCA means that you have to finish one step before you go to the next one. They also need to think, because it is very complicated when they have the national dialogue because they make it in different groups. But when they come to the conference or before they come to the conference, they have the secretariat team of the UPDJC to look at the papers coming from the CSOs, the 8 signatory groups, something like that. With five or even ten issues, then they have to look at that and come up with (only) one paper. So I think it’s very difficult” (Author’s interview with member of KNU Concerned Group, 16 Feb 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

Here the Political Imaginary is described: if the peace process as defined by the NCA is not followed step-by-step, then the NCA has been violated and should therefore be reviewed or restarted. This policy ideal is conceptualized as a Political Imaginary because the negative consequence of not following the process is a belief shared by policy opponents, but is not necessarily shared by the policy negotiators. The Political Imaginary, then, is identified by ‘the process’ and the urgency of national (political) dialogue. These two factors are interlinked, as the national dialogue is a step in the process. That being said, it can be concluded that the informants’ preoccupation with the ‘process’ is simply a call for completion of national dialogues. Had the UPC conferences been postponed until national dialogues were completed, policy opponents would be less concerned about the process itself as they would have been provided an opportunity to promote their political imaginary at the level of negotiation. However, the opportunity alone is not satisfactory, illuminating the vital role of Karen policy-network advocacy in Myanmar’s peace process.

Findings: Policy Negotiators

While criticized for following the peace process roadmap ‘out of order’, the KNU leadership recognizes the benefit of remaining signatory to the NCA, which subjects them to the decisions of the Central Government and *Tatmadaw*. Although they are a negotiating party, it is vital to recognize the inherent power disparity within the top-level participants. The Political Imaginary that the negotiating parties share, then, is a desire to progress, to move forward. However, it appears that the Future Peace Imaginary is not consistent between the EAOs, central government, and *Tatmadaw*. This leads to differing ‘roadmaps’ to achieve such Future Peace Imaginaries. This research will not divulge into these differing imaginaries, but it is valuable to acknowledge that even at the policy negotiating level, shared actor perception is not as strong as that of the policy opponents’ shared actor perception. One member of the KNU Concerned Group explained further:

“I think that the KNU has the right position [now], but if they do not raise their voice, especially in the presence of the military (Tatmadaw), then they will be under more pressure. So the KNU thinks that if they say something, they will be put under pressure by the military to change their position.” (Author’s interview with member of KNU Concerned Group, 16 Feb 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

This quote illustrates the divide between policy negotiators’ seemingly shared actor perception. Even if the KNU is able to promote the policy opponent’s Political Imaginary within the negotiating space, it is still likely that other policy negotiators would block the policy from progressing upward. More recently the KNU has been realizing this misalignment within the policy negotiators’ “shared” Political Imaginary and may even be more likely to align with the Political Imaginary being advocated for by Karen policy networks:

“The KNU, particularly in the last year, has been pretty clear about their lack of agreement with the peace process. This mean that the KNU leadership is more closely aligned with those activist groups now, and I think the kind of concerns they have are probably similar.” (Author’s interview with KNU Consultant, 25 March 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

This change in shared actor perception cannot be directly attributed to a specific influence, as the scope of this research is limited in tracking such developments. Additionally, the complexity of the current political situation would mean making any sort of normative statement would be not only inaccurate but also a blatant generalization. However, some policy opponents do believe that the advocacy tactics mobilized by Karen policy-networks have impacted the KNU’s current political negotiation strategies.

The Political Imaginary of the policy negotiators, then, is more complex than that of the policy opponents. While commitment to progress is an overarching theme of shared actor perception, the roadmap used to progress is not agreed upon. This leads to political deadlock, further impeding the progress the policy negotiators intended to make. The political deadlock arising in 2018 has severely limited the ability of EAOs to hold national dialogues. As a step in the peace process, national dialogue provides policy opponents and policy negotiators an opportunity to share and promote their Political Imaginaries. With the *Tatmadaw*’s recent limitation of such dialogue, each group’s Political Imaginary remains isolated from the other. This inhibits the possibility of the policy negotiators accepting, and in turn promoting, any of the shared perception promoted through the policy opponents’ Political Imaginary. In short, the limitation of national dialogue creates a closed political environment in which local level discussion and consultation cannot take place, therefore limiting the possibility of influence from any actor already removed from the negotiating space.

Findings: Advocacy

In order to promote their Imaginary, policy opponents act within discursive structures, in this case two main forms of advocacy, to influence the peace process (the Future Peace Imaginary) through policy-networks vis-à-vis the KNU leadership. This research asserts that in promotion of the Political Imaginary, indirect advocacy tactics seem to be more effective than insider advocacy as they are not limited to the KNU and have a more extensive reach.

Insider advocacy, as defined by Mosely (2011), includes participation in government committees, lobbying policymakers, and engagement of actors on the basis of social capital. Informants in the following discussion describe some such tactics within the Karen Political Imaginary context. It should be pointed out that insider advocacy tactics are typically not visible to the public, and therefore the legitimacy they are attributed must be inherent to the actor prior to his/her involvement. Many Karen policy opponents have held political positions within the KNU and have therefore established legitimate public followings. This relationship between the community and policy opponents enhances the strength of the shared ideology and Political Imaginary. However, this legitimacy does not lead in a normative manner to influence change within the policy negotiators' Political Imaginary. In fact, it may isolate the two Imaginaries further.

A member of the KPSN explained why it could be inferred that insider advocacy tactics do not have high success in terms of perpetuating the discourse of the policy opponents' Political Imaginary:

"No, they don't take our policy suggestions to the top level. We know that they have a different level of negotiations on the issues. So you have the states, and then you go down to the union and then under the union you have the working group and each working group has its own secretary team. So for us, our voice doesn't reach up to that level. Probably the highest level is the Karen state-based consultations. So when something is put forward to the working group or the secretary at the UPDJC, our main focus was lost. So we know the people who actually give influence a lot and manipulate the issues is the Tatmadaw. Because the KNU representatives at those levels don't have a lot of knowledge of the issues." (Author's interview with member of KPSN, 26 April 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

Although relationships and connections remain, those do not necessarily facilitate adoption of the policy opponents' Political Imaginary by the actors within the policy negotiators' shared Imaginary. Interestingly, though, insider advocacy in the Karen political context is not confined to the KNU leadership. Rather, policy opponents draw upon insider relationships with other EAOs (signatory and non-signatory) to promote their Political Imaginary outside of the Karen context. With the addition of other EAOs to the policy opponents' Political Imaginary, indirect advocacy is then implicit within the interactions those EAO actors have with the KNU leadership. Insider advocacy is not only based on actor-actor relationships, but also includes direct communication between the policy negotiators and the policy opponents. In the Karen political context, this takes place through CSO consultations:

"Although I can't directly measure influence, I think that since the KPSN was formed, they have had strong connections with the KNU in terms of policy implementation and how the peace process is going. So KPSN members come from a range of CSOs/CBOs in Thailand, along the border, and in Karen state. That's how we are able to engage with the KNU. We actually participate a lot to support the KNU in terms of organizing consultation meetings in Karen state, political national dialogue, etc." (Author's interview with KPSN member, 26 April 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

Karen policy-networks also utilize indirect methods of advocacy primarily as a means to provide the public, both local and international, access to their Political Imaginary. Policy opponents are aware that the more advocacy effort made, the more attention can be garnered toward their Political Imaginary, furthering their goals. A member of the KNU Concerned Group explained the importance of indirect advocacy:

"Sometimes we talk to the media to share our perspective about the process and how we see the process going, and also to raise the points, raise the issues when an issue is getting really 'hot' or more people are expressing their concern. So we want that to be public. If we keep making noise on the side, the KNU will follow it more" (Author's interview with member of KNU Concerned Group, 16 Feb 2018, Chiang Mai, Thailand)

One popular method of indirect advocacy within the Karen political context is releasing papers (individuals) and statements (policy-networks) on particular events. Politically charged statements are typically released by policy-networks such as KPSN, KESAN, KWO, and KNU Concerned Group. Publicly released statements are examples of indirect advocacy tactics, which are intended to raise concerns among the general public about a particular issue. In the case of the Karen Political Imaginary, it can be claimed that the policy opponents' networks maintain issue ownership, as their Political Imaginary encompasses a

more widely held public perception and shared ideology. Some research attributes policy change made by the incumbent leadership to the mobilization of indirect advocacy tactics when the opposing party has issue ownership. Although this research cannot draw such a direct conclusion, it can be argued that the presence of such discourse within the Karen political context has some association.

Conclusions

The discursive structure of Karen policy-networks further informs the advocacy tactics utilized to promote policy imaginaries. The main policy imaginary discussed within the scope of this article is the Political Imaginary, which in turn informs the Future Peace Imaginary. Imaginaries are created through shared actor perception and common ideology; manifest in the physical form of policy-networks. Karen policy opponents, then, act through policy-networks that align with their actor perception in order to influence the Future Peace Imaginary being negotiated at the national level. This research focuses on the competing ideologies, or differing Future Peace Imaginaries, of the KNU Leadership and the primarily border-based policy networks, including CSOs, coalitions, and ad-hoc groups by detailing the opposing Political Imaginaries. In a situation as complex as the one being studied, it is irresponsible to classify actors into dichotomous relationships such as leadership/opposition, or even politician/CSO actor. As Karen political actors tend to blur these lines through various socio-political, socio-economic, socio-ethnic, and socio-geographical relationships, this research sought to illustrate where interactions take place and in what realm of policy creation, further illuminating the role of Karen policy-networks in Myanmar's national peace process.

Though removed from the national negotiating space, Karen policy opponents advocate for policy change through policy-networks. Within the small-scale policy subsystem in Karen state, this advocacy is intended to influence the KNU leadership to promote the policy opponents' Political Imaginary at the negotiating level. Additionally, Karen policy networks utilize advocacy tactics that rely on sharing and promoting their own Political Imaginary outside of the Karen context, to non-signatory EAOs and the international community alike. The primary objective of the policy opponents' Political Imaginary is to follow the NCA process as set out, ensuring that steps such as the national dialogue are allowed space to take place. The national dialogue provides an opportunity for policy-networks to promote their Political Imaginary. With recent limitations set in place by the *Tatmadaw* on completion of such national dialogues, it can be concluded that Karen policy-networks maintain a vital role in the national peace process through their advocacy work. As the KNU does not partake in advocacy, actors outside of the negotiating space must advocate for policy changes that are limited by policy negotiators (EAOs, *Tatmadaw*, and Central Government). Therefore, Karen policy opponents, as individual actors, work through policy-networks to advocate for a shared Political Imaginary with the intention of national policy change vis-à-vis the negotiating authority of the KNU.

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