

Armed Conflict in Karen Area in the Era of Myanmar 2021 Military Coup

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Abstract

Although the revolution has been going on for more than 70 years, the Myanmar military and allies are fighting the KNU and its allies' attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions under Saw Ba U Gyi's four guiding principles of the revolution using the excuse of fighting for autonomy and secession of armed organizations from the Union. Peace talks with the State Law and Order Restoration Council in 1994 failed. Peace talks and a nationwide ceasefire occurred in 2015. Since 2018, sporadic clashes have occurred due to both sides' lack of disarmament and political guarantees. After the 2021 coup, three attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions have emerged, resulting in daily battles. However, the Karen people are no longer fighting for their liberation, most Burmans are joining the struggle, and federal democracy is becoming clearer. Since the coup was staged to rig the 2020 election, the military has been fighting to suppress the rule of law. The chairman of the Japanese Nippon Foundation and the KNU met on March 10, 2022, to coordinate the 2012 NCA between the conflicting parties, but progress has yet to be made. In conclusion, peace and conflict are always in flux, and a compromise is needed to reach a ceasefire. The Myanmar military held similar talks but could not guarantee the outcome, the coup disrupted the peace process, and armed conflict peaked after 2021.

Keywords: Armed Conflict in Karen State, 2021 Military Coup, Karen Conflicting Party, Karen Conflict analysis, Peace and conflict



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I. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's lengthy armed conflict is the most enduring civil war in global history. Several areas predominantly inhabited by the Karen ethnic group experienced severe destruction during World War II and have subsequently encountered persistent armed confrontations following the nation's independence in 1949.¹ While Karen communities residing in the Irrawaddy Delta, lowland regions of Yangon and Bago, as well as the Mon and Karen States, have not been subjected to direct warfare for an extended period, those inhabiting the mountainous areas adjacent to Thailand continue to face the risk of violent conflicts. Numerous human rights violations have been documented amidst prolonged conflict, encompassing torture perpetrated against marginalized populations, specifically women and children, and incidents of rape and sexual enslavement.²

The Karen National Union (KNU) functioned as an effective governing body for fifty years, exerting significant control over extensive areas in the Karen State, as well as adjacent regions such as the Bago Yoma highlands and Irrawaddy Delta, which were inhabited by a substantial Karen population. Nevertheless, after a series of initial triumphs, the Karen National Union (KNU) initiated an extensive defensive maneuver during the initial years of the 1950s. During the 1990s, the entity in question experienced a significant decline in control over a substantial portion of its previously established "liberated zones." However, it still maintained a certain level of influence over territories subject to disputes between government forces and proxy militias, albeit to varying degrees.³

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed by the Karen National Union (KNU) and seven additional rebel groups on October 15, 2015, as reported by Lipes.⁴ Nevertheless, in March 2018, the government of Myanmar violated the agreement by dispatching a contingent of 400 military personnel from Myanmar into the region controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU) to construct a road connecting two military outposts. Consequently, a resumption of armed conflict transpired between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar Military, displacing approximately 2,000 individuals.⁵ Despite the changes in the government and political structure system, the oppression faced by the Karen ethnic group and the persistence of military dictatorship remained uninterrupted. Following the unlawful seizure of power by the

¹ Jittrapon Kaicome, 'Marking 70 Years of War in Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/marking-70-years-of-war-in-myanmar/>.

² B. Adams and J. Saunders, 'They Came and Destroyed Our Village Again' : The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Karen State' (New York: Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2005), 28.

³ Ashley South, 'Burma's Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict' (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2011), 23.

⁴ J. Lipes, 'Myanmar Signs Historic Cease-Fire Deal With Eight Ethnic Armies', Radio Free Asia, 2015, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/deal-10152015175051.html>.

⁵ Steve Sandford, 'Conflict Resumes in Karen State After Myanmar Army Returns', VOA, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/conflict-resumes-in-karen-state-after-myanmar-army-returns/4417421.html>.

Myanmar military in 2021, renewed hostilities ensued. Consequently, the National Cease Fire Agreement between the Myanmar military and the KNU / KNLA was null and void.⁶

After the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, the Karen National Union (KNU) initiated armed conflict against the ruling government. The KNU armed resistance group launched an assault on an army camp situated on the western bank of the Salween River, which serves as the boundary between Myanmar and Thailand, on April 27, 2021. The military of Myanmar responded to the situation by launching airstrikes on the sites affiliated with the Karen National Union.⁷ Subsequently, the Myanmar military has conflicted with ethnic armed organizations, namely the KNU/KNLA and the People's Defense Force. On March 12, 2022, a conflagration occurred involving three trucks along the Asia Road close to Kawkaik, as the Development Media Group⁸ reported.

The Karen Conflict, widely recognized as the world's longest civil war, has garnered significant attention from scholars specializing in conflict analysis. This protracted conflict holds immense potential for generating valuable insights when examined through the lens of conflict theory. This paper examines the historical background, conflict dynamics, and resultant consequences of the Karen ethnic groups, employing theoretical frameworks to analyze the parties involved in the conflicts. Readers have the opportunity to acquire knowledge regarding the historical context surrounding the ongoing armed conflict in the Karen State, the various human rights violations that have occurred, and an understanding of the conflicting parties involved and their respective objectives. This study closely examines the prominent theories proposed by conflict experts. This paper posits that the KNU, an organization implicated in the armed conflict, did not exhibit bloodthirsty tendencies nor espouse separatist ideologies. Furthermore, it contends against the adherence to human rights standards and humanitarian law in the context of the Myanmar military's engagement in the conflict. Additionally, it posits that the conflict cannot be oversimplified as a mere power struggle between an ethnic group and the Myanmar military.

⁶ The Irrawaddy, 'Myanmar Ceasefire Agreement Is Void: KNU Concerned Group', *The Irrawaddy* (blog), 3 September 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ceasefire-agreement-is-void-knu-concerned-group.html>.

⁷ Reuters, 'Fighting Erupts in Myanmar; Junta to "Consider" ASEAN Plan', *Reuters*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/fighting-erupts-myanmar-near-thai-border-thai-witnesses-2021-04-27/>.

⁸ Development Media Group, 'Driver Killed as Military, KNLA Clash along Myawaddy-Kawkaik Stretch of Asia Highway', *Development Media Group*, 2022, [true://www.dmediag.com/news/stretch-of-asia-highway.html](http://www.dmediag.com/news/stretch-of-asia-highway.html).

II. KEY THEME FROM LITERATURE

The inclusion of an empirical review conducted by Joan Esteban, Laura Mayoral, and Debraj Ray⁹ on the topic of Ethnicity and Conflict would be a valuable addition to this article. The frequency of internal conflicts within national boundaries increased during the latter half of the twentieth century. Civil war impacts approximately 33% of the total number of countries globally. A number of these conflicts, if not all, were characterized by incidents of ethnic violence. This study provides empirical evidence supporting the notion that pre-existing ethnic divisions significantly impact social conflict, as indicated by current theoretical and empirical research conducted by Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray.¹⁰ This study additionally examined particular avenues of influence. The findings of this study demonstrate that two distinct indicators of ethnic division, namely polarization, and fractionalization, impact conflict. Notably, polarization exhibits a more pronounced influence when the victors are endowed with a "public" reward, such as political authority or religious dominance. Conversely, fractionalization exerts a more substantial influence when the reward is "private," such as plundered resources, governmental subsidies, or infrastructure projects. According to Esteban¹¹, a line of reasoning suggests ethnic conflicts are more likely to be driven by instrumental factors rather than primal hatred.

The author fails to mention two significant facts regarding the social conflict that should be addressed. It is noteworthy that intra-state conflicts contribute substantially to the current prevalence of fatalities and affliction. Furthermore, instances of inter-ethnic conflicts often manifest themselves in an ethnic context. Since the conclusion of World War II, a significant proportion exceeding fifty percent of civil wars have been attributed to ethnic or religious conflicts.

In the edited Peace and Conflict Book by Charles P. Webel and Jorgen Johnsen¹², Galtung's work on Johan Galtung, a prominent figure in peace studies, often references the distinction between 'negative peace' and 'positive peace.'¹³ states, ' The absence of violence is commonly referred to as negative tranquility. When a ceasefire is declared, it can lead to the establishment of negative peace. The situation is disheartening as it involves the cessation of a negative occurrence, such as the discontinuation of violence or the termination of oppression. Positive peace encompasses various components that contribute to its constructive nature. These include the restoration and reconciliation of interpersonal connections, the establishment of societal frameworks that effectively address the collective requirements of the community, and the resolution of conflicts through nonviolent means. The author conducted an examination and determined that

⁹ Joan Esteban, Laura Mayoral, and Debraj Ray, 'Ethnicity and Conflict: An Empirical Study', *American Economic Review* 102, no. 4 (June 2012): 1310–42, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.102.4.1310>.

¹⁰ Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray.

¹¹ Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray.

¹² Charles P. Webel and Jorgen Johnsen, eds., *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹³ Johan Galtung, *Peace and Conflict Studies: A Reader* (Sage Publications Inc, 2012), 75–79.

the presence of peace does not necessarily indicate the absence of conflict. It encompasses the absence of violence and the implementation of constructive methods to resolve conflicts. Peace is achieved through the active participation of individuals in nonviolent means of conflict resolution, wherein they effectively address their differences while considering the valid demands and interests of all parties concerned.

In her work, Shields¹⁴ put forth the notion of positive and negative peace, asserting that negative peace is a concept that is relatively straightforward but subject to various limitations. In addition to the predominant negative perspective, a contrasting sense of optimistic tranquility is characterized by organicity, diversity, and dynamism. The positive ideals of peace encompass various principles, such as justice, democracy, federalism, sympathy, cooperation, effectiveness, freedom, engagement, order, harmony, and collaboration. "Blessed are the peacemakers" can have religious connotations and implications. In contrast to the well-defined concept of negative peace, positive peace is characterized by various interpretations. The distinctions mentioned above present challenges in promptly comprehending and valuing the concept of peace, yet they also offer valuable resources for understanding security in the postmodern era.¹⁵

The KNU aspires for Myanmar to establish a democratic, federal union that ensures the equitable treatment of all individuals within its borders and affords the Karen community the right to self-determination. Since the 1990s, the Karen National Union (KNU) has consistently demonstrated its endorsement of the National League for Democracy Party and the associated pro-democracy movement. Prior to 2012, the political objectives of the National League for Democracy (NLD) primarily centered around the alteration of the existing regime and the formation of an entirely new democratic administration. Concurrently, the NLD expressed its willingness to endorse tripartite negotiations involving the NLD, the Myanmar Military, and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The primary concern articulated by the Karen National Union (KNU) pertains to the perceived hegemony of the Bamar ethnic majority within the state, specifically about Bamar military personnel. According to Jolliffe and the Asia Foundation¹⁶, the KNU perceives a federal system as its ultimate political goal. This system would entail the establishment of ethnically defined states with internal autonomy, as well as power-sharing arrangements at the union level.

After the 2021 Military coup, a political agreement had yet to be achieved in the peace process involving these parties. The peace process strengthened the KNU's and Karen civilians' beliefs that the military remained resolute in its resistance towards a prospective federal government and the civilian oversight of the military. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the KNU opposes engaging in political discourse with Myanmar's military. In essence, the peace process revealed that engaging in dialogue with the military did not prove to be an effective means for the Karen National Union (KNU) to

¹⁴ Patricia Shields, 'Limits of Negative Peace, Faces of Positive Peace', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 47, no. 3 (1 September 2017): 6–12, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2868>.

¹⁵ Shields.

¹⁶ K. Jolliffe and Asia Foundation, 'Ceasefires, Governance, and Development : The Karen National Union in Times of Change' (Bahan, Yangon, Myanmar: Asia Foundation, 2016).

achieve its fundamental goals of establishing a system of governance, asserting self-determination, and securing autonomy within a federal union. The KNU has shifted its focus from interacting with the military to engaging with the NUG, which advocates for a "federal union aimed at addressing long-standing systemic violence against the entire population of Myanmar".¹⁷

III. BRIEF CONFLICT ANALYSIS

The Karen Conflict commenced following the attainment of independence in 1948. However, this protracted conflict has persisted across successive generations until now. Following a military coup in 1962, the Quasi-Military Government under the Ne Win regime implemented a policy referred to as Burmanization, which aimed to assimilate various ethnic groups, including the Karen. Despite the establishment of a civilian elected government, the resolution of long-standing conflicts has been hindered by the enduring impact of Ne Win's "Burmanization" policy implemented during the 1960s.¹⁸ This is the reason why ethnic groups persist in resorting to armed resistance as a means to safeguard their cultural identities and deter the Myanmar military from perpetrating human rights abuses. The Four Cut Strategy, encompassing funding, food, intelligence, and recruits, was formulated and documented in the Karen Women organization report from 1996 to 2004. The report highlights that 125 instances of rape were officially reported during this period, surpassing the actual occurrences of such incidents within the conflict.¹⁹

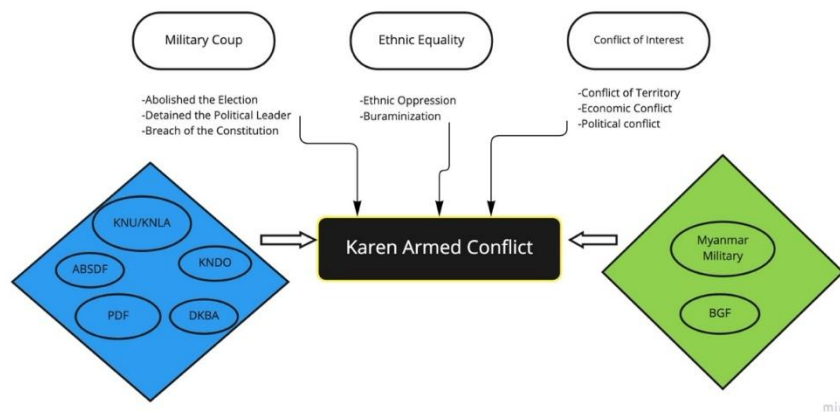


Figure (1) – Enabling factor of Karen armed Conflict and Conflicting Parties

¹⁷ Shona Loong, 'The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar' (Stimson Center, 2022), <https://www.stimson.org/2022/the-karen-national-union-in-post-coup-myanmar/>.

¹⁸ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 50–70.

¹⁹ The Karen Women's Organization (KWO), 'Shattering Silences: Karen Women Speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's Use of Rape as a Strategy of War in Karen State' (Karen Women's Organization, 2004), 68–93.

The occurrence of an armed conflict in the Karen Area can be attributed to the military coup and subsequent unlawful acquisition of power by the Myanmar military, as depicted in the figure mentioned above. The political leader was subjected to arbitrary detention by the military, who asserted their status as a legitimate representative for the 2020 general election. A significant number of young individuals and adolescents engage in protests against the Myanmar military and its anti-coup measures. Nonetheless, both rural and urban regions have observed instances of military-related fatalities, acts of torture, and acts of violence perpetrated by anti-coup demonstrators. Consequently, many young individuals from Burma endeavor to engage in armed resistance within the Karen state to combat the Myanmar military through an armed revolution.

The interconnection between ethnicity and violence in Myanmar has been evident since the country gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948. A significant number of ethnic leaders exhibited reluctance to align themselves with the nation-state. In contrast, a subset preferred a federal governance structure that would grant them full authority over their territories. The lack of inclusivity by the reformed central government, currently under military control, led to the emergence of Ethnic Armed Organizations such as KNU/KNLA. These groups initiated a rebellion against the government, intending to secure greater autonomy or complete independence.²⁰

Furthermore, many human rights transgressions were perpetrated against women and children, encompassing sexual assault, torture, theft, and coerced labor. This analysis examines the Karen conflict over some time, focusing on the territorial disputes between the KNU/KNLA and the Myanmar military and broader factors such as the absence of ethnic minority rights, political motivations, and efforts to foster trust. Key issues encompass democracy, Federalism, equitable distribution of natural resources, and conflicts of interest, all of which contribute to the underlying causes of the conflict. Before discussing the structure of conflicting parties and their objectives, exploring conflict transformation theories that connect Johan Galtung's conflict formation theory to the Karen conflict to the fullest extent possible is necessary.

According to Galtung²¹, conflict can be conceptualized as a triangular structure consisting of three key components: attitude (A), behavior (B), and contradiction (C). The parties involved and their interconnections characterize an asymmetric and fundamental conflict of interests underlying their relationship. Attitude comprises three fundamental components, namely emotional, cognitive, and conative elements. The emotional aspect pertains to an individual's feelings, while the cognitive aspect relates to their beliefs. Lastly, the conative aspect encompasses thoughts and willpower. Cooperation and coercion, as well as hostile and reconciliatory gestures, exemplify

²⁰ Karen Human Rights Group, 'Minorities under Threat, Diversity in Danger: Patterns of Systemic Discrimination in Southeast Myanmar' (Karen Human Rights Group, 17 November 2020), <https://www.khrg.org/2020/11/minorities-under-threat-diversity-danger-patterns-systemic-discrimination-southeast-myanmar>.

²¹ Johan Galtung and Undp/Undro Disaster Management Training Programme, 'Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means : The Transcend Method : Participants' Manual : Trainers' Manual' (Geneva: United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme, 2000).

various forms of behavior. Threats, coercion, and destructive attacks are characteristic manifestations of violent conflict behavior. According to Johan Galtung and the UNDP/Undro Disaster Management Training Programme²², all three elements must coexist concurrently in a conflict.



Figure (2)- Karen Armed Conflict approach to Galtung Conflict Triangle

The task of linking Galtung's theory would be facilitated by examining the positions and motivations of the parties involved in the subsequent conflicts that transpired after the prolonged hostilities of the Karen conflict and the post-coup events in 2021. The conflicting parties involved in the conflict are the KNU/KNLA, DKBA, PDF, Myanmar Military, and BGF, in that order.

A. *Karen National Union/ Karen National Liberation Army*

From the late 1940s to the early 1990s, the Karen National Union (KNU) emerged as a prominent ethnic and political armed group within Myanmar. Throughout this duration, the KNU operated as an effective governing body, exercising authority over extensive regions. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) serves as the military branch of the Karen National Union (KNU). It advocates for the self-determination of the Karen ethnic group within the context of Myanmar.

In 2015 the civilian government entered a ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union (KNU). Following the conclusion of the agreement mentioned above, hostilities ceased; however, in 2018, the Myanmar military initiated an incursion into the region under the control of the Karen National Union (KNU), resuming armed conflict.

²² Galtung and Undp/Undro Disaster Management Training Programme, 4–16.

The Karen National Union (KNU) plays a central role in pursuing federal democracy, aligning with the fundamental objective set forth by its founder and inaugural leader, Saw Ba U Gyi. The KNU's revolution is guided by four principles: a categorical rejection of surrender, the imperative of achieving full recognition for the Karen country, the determination to maintain possession of arms, and the resolve to independently determine their political future.²³ As per the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), a cessation of hostilities was instigated; however, in adherence to the principle of non-capitulation, armed confrontations persisted between the military council and allied factions sharing similar objectives during the 2021 coup defeat. The KNU/KNLA holds a stance characterized by opposition to Burman nationalism and the military dictatorship, advocating for the Karen people's right to determine their political objectives and maintain possession of their weaponry. At present, the organization possesses seven brigades and maintains the capacity to respond with countermeasures in the event of an incursion into territories under the control of the KNU.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the KNU (Karen National Union) and the Myanmar military junta hold divergent aspirations regarding the promotion of 'Burmanization' and exerting control over these regions. Following 2021, a ceasefire will be implemented, wherein the principles of self-determination and democracy will clash with authoritarianism and centralization. Galtung's triangle theory aligns with all three elements mentioned above.

B. The People's Defense Force

The People's Defense Force (PDF) is a paramilitary organization that originated after the coup in 2021. It serves as the military branch of the National Unity Government (NUG) and primarily consists of youthful individuals from various ethnic backgrounds within Burma.²⁴ The organization in question employs a similar methodology to establish a Federal Democracy, akin to the KNU/KNLA, while concurrently engaging in military activities within regions under KNU control. While there may be similarities between the Burmans, who constitute the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, and the Buddhist community in their alignment with the country's military, it is important to note that the objectives of authoritarianism and democracy are inherently incompatible.

²³ P. Keenan, 'Saw Ba U Gyi -Voices of the Revolution. (KHCPS), p.17.' (Karen History and Culture Preservation Society, 2008), 17.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence -NUG, 'People's Defence Force – ကာကွယ်ရေးတပ်ကြီးဌာန', 2010, <https://mod.nugmyanmar.org/en/peoples-defence-force/>.

C. All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF)

The All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) is a prominent organization that emerged after the 8888 uprisings in Yangon in 1988. The ABSDF possesses a militant division that has actively collaborated with other armed insurgent factions, notably the Kachin Independence Army and the KNLA, operating in both the southern and northern regions of Myanmar. The ABSDF was established as a military organization primarily composed of students to collaborate with other democratic and ethnic nationality factions. Its primary objectives encompass the restoration of democracy and human rights, establishing genuine federal unity, and dismantling Myanmar's authoritarian regime.²⁵ Despite being a constituent of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), the All-Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) opposed the military coup in 2021.

Consequently, it participated in the armed confrontation alongside the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA). The collective disposition and conduct of the group align with the ideological framework of the KNU. The opposition to the Myanmar military and the subsequent demand for a government that upholds human rights presents a significant paradox about the resistance against the coup and the restoration of a federal democratic system.

D. Democratic Karen Buddhist Association (DKBA)

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Association (DKBA) was a faction composed of Buddhist soldiers and officers in Myanmar that seceded from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), an organization primarily comprised of Christians.²⁶ Despite the religious disparities between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Karen National Union (KNU), the former has actively engaged in combat alongside the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) after the coup that occurred in 2021. The attitudes and behaviors exhibited by this group resemble those observed in the KNLA, except for a few ideas advocating for the inclusion of Karen Buddhists. There exists a divergence of political goals between the Myanmar Military Council and certain factions, save for the shared opposition towards the Buddhist majority. Hence, under Galtung's theoretical framework, conflicts are presently unfolding.

²⁵ Myanmar Peace Monitor, 'ABSDF» Myanmar Peace Monitor' (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2013), <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/1527/absdf/>.

²⁶ Ashley South, 'Karen Nationalist Communities: The "Problem" of Diversity', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 1 (April 2007): 55–76, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs29-1c>.

E. The Myanmar military and Border Guard Force

The Myanmar military can be characterized as an armed organization possessing a formidable military force and exercising control over public finances. However, rather than fulfilling their duty to safeguard the populace, they have encountered a situation of armed insurrection after the year 2021 as a consequence of the persistent mistreatment and lethal actions perpetrated against individuals. According to the Myanmar Peace Monitor²⁷, the Border Guard Force and the Myanmar Military are both under the authority of the Military Council. These entities can be categorized based on their comparable military operations and shared political objectives. A faction within the BGF comprises individuals of Karen ethnicity who operate under the authority of the Myanmar military. After 2021, this coalition has collaborated to launch offensive operations against the KNU and its affiliated groups.

Numerous factors contribute to conflicts, wherein the involved parties engage in frequent confrontations, ostensibly driven by divergent ideologies and attitudes, as posited by Galtung's framework of attitude, behavior, and contradiction. The conflict can be attributed to political ideologies and the pursuit of federal democracy, alongside factors such as socio-economic disparities and poverty. While the KNU and its allies consistently implement their ideological beliefs and revolutionary approach, it is important to note that policy changes are not contingent upon the individual leader. However, a potential change in the top military leadership could substantially influence the ongoing conflict.

IV. A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

Despite the revolutions over 70 years, the KNU and its allies continue to struggle against the prevailing attitudes, behaviors, and inconsistencies. This ongoing conflict aligns with the principles outlined by Saw Ba U Gyi, guiding the revolution. The Myanmar military and its supporters employ the pretext of pursuing autonomy and separating armed organizations from the Union to justify their opposition. In 1994, peace negotiations were conducted with the State Law and Order Restoration Council; however, the outcome of these discussions did not result in a mutually agreed upon resolution. In 2015, a comprehensive ceasefire agreement was signed at a national level, followed by the initiation of peace negotiations. Nevertheless, sporadic clashes have occurred since 2018 due to the absence of disarmament measures on both factions and political assurances.

²⁷ Myanmar Peace Monitor, 'Border Guard Force Scheme» Myanmar Peace Monitor. [Online] Myanmar Peace Monitor. Available at: [Accessed].' (Myanmar Peace Monitor), accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/border-guard-force-scheme/>.

After the 2021 coup, a discernible manifestation of three distinct attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions has emerged, leading to ongoing daily conflicts. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a significant shift has occurred between the past and present regarding the Karen people's fight for liberation. Specifically, the current landscape reveals a notable increase in the participation of Burmans in this struggle, indicating a growing collective effort. Furthermore, the objective of establishing a federal democracy has become more defined and discernible. The military is currently engaged in combat to suppress the rule of law, citing the coup as being orchestrated under the guise of electoral fraud during the 2020 election.

A meeting took place on March 10, 2022, involving the chairman of the Japanese Nippon Foundation and the KNU²⁸, the organization responsible for facilitating the 2012 NCA between the conflicting parties. The Peace Process Steering Team (PPST) conducted comprehensive deliberations concerning their collaborative endeavors with the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Center). As a result of these discussions, an agreement was reached to jointly focus on developing processes and methodologies to protect civilians from future calamities, as announced by the PPST on May 18th, 2023. China and Russia have sustained diplomatic relations with the military regime since the coup. Simultaneously, several nations have imposed sanctions on the junta or diminished diplomatic relations as a reaction to its subsequent suppression of dissent. The junta has declined the appeals made by ethnic leaders and the international community to grant participation rights to the National Unity Government (NUG) and the People's Defense Force (PDF) in the negotiations.

However, it is important to note that significant advancements have yet to be achieved thus far. In summary, the dynamics of peace and conflict exhibit a constant flux, necessitating a reconciliatory approach to navigate toward a cessation of hostilities and the establishment of lasting peace. The Myanmar military engaged in comparable discussions without assurances regarding the eventual outcome. The coup disrupted the ongoing peace process, significantly escalating armed conflict after the Military Coup.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PEACE PROCESS

The intensity of the conflict between the Myanmar military and the Karen National Union (KNU) and their respective alliances has heightened after the military coup, as both factions engage in vigorous combat. The NCA Agreement has previously facilitated ceasefire and peace negotiations. However, the Myanmar military's non-compliance with the provisions of the NCA Agreement, specifically through acts such as attacks on civilians, violence, village burnings, human rights violations, and encroachment on designated liberated areas, has resulted in substantial harm to the progress made in ceasefire and peacebuilding efforts. In order to bring an end to the armed conflict, it is

²⁸ Esther and Wah, 'Japanese Envoy Meets Ethnic Armed Organisations in Northern Thailand'.

imperative to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the interests and political ideologies held by the parties involved and subsequently facilitate a conducive environment that enables them to attain a state of peace genuinely. The genesis of the peace process encompasses the termination of hostilities, the absence of armed confrontation, and the implementation of a formal agreement to halt military operations. Initiating peace negotiations in the absence of a ceasefire constitutes a mere dialogue that lacks tangible substance and does not provide reliable assurance of the efficacy of the peacebuilding endeavor. While the international community advocates for a ceasefire primarily targeting ethnic armed organizations engaged in armed resistance against violence, human rights violations, and one-sided aggression by the Myanmar military, it is crucial to acknowledge that failure to halt the military's violence may result in severe consequences for innocent civilians. Hence, the parties involved in the conflict must demonstrate a genuine willingness to engage in negotiations to achieve a cessation of violence and initiate a comprehensive peacebuilding endeavor.

The Karen Conflict necessitates a comprehensive examination involving the pertinent parties involved in the peace process in order to establish an inclusive policy. Myanmar's military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, has proclaimed 2023 as a year dedicated to peace and has initiated discussions with the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). However, concurrently with this announcement, there has been aggression in the regions adjacent to the Thai-Myanmar border, explicitly targeting the KNU/KNLA, DKBA, and PDF groups. These acts of aggression encompass various forms of violence, such as artillery fire, airstrikes, bomb attacks, and the placement of landmines. During a commemorative address delivered on Myanmar Armed Force Day, precisely on March 27, 2023, Min Aung Hlaing, a military leader in Myanmar, expressed the intention of the Myanmar military to take decisive action against individuals or groups that contribute to the destabilization of the nation while they maintain authority.

Conversely, he invited them to engage in dialogue with ethnic armed organizations. Furthermore, Min Aung Hlaing delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of peace and extended an invitation for peace talks and negotiations to the KNU/KNLA and various other ethnic armed organizations. However, it is worth noting that this invitation did not extend to the NUG or PDF groups. Nevertheless, most Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), including the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA), have refuted the feasibility of negotiations. They assert that to achieve a ceasefire, and it is imperative to convene meetings involving all parties involved in the conflict.

The political resolution of the peace process between the parties mentioned above had yet to be achieved before the coup. The peace process strengthened the KNU's and Karen civilians' beliefs that the Myanmar military exhibited unwavering resistance toward establishing a federal system and civilian military control in the future. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the KNU opposes engaging in political discourse with the Myanmar military. Moreover, the peace process has illustrated that the Karen National Union's fundamental objectives of governance, self-determination, and

autonomy within a federal union were unattainable through dialogue with the military forces of Myanmar. Consequently, the KNU has redirected its attention from the militant group to the National Unity Government, which purports to pursue a federal union aimed at redressing long-standing patterns of systemic violence inflicted upon the entirety of the Myanmar populace.²⁹ Hence, the Karen Conflict should prioritize a more effective mediation and facilitation dialogue approach instead of a negotiation process.

VI. MEDIATION IN KAREN PEACE PROCESS

In protracted and adversarial conflicts where negotiation proves ineffective or fruitless, it is common for a neutral third party to be engaged to assist, either at the behest of the involved parties or through their own volition. Intermediaries can partake in diverse activities, encompassing a broad spectrum of roles they undertake within conflicts.³⁰ Over the past quarter-century, mediation has experienced a surge in popularity for resolving armed conflicts.³¹ Mediators from third parties have endeavored to facilitate peace accords in various nations, including but not limited to Guatemala, Georgia, Mozambique, and Macedonia. Mediators have, on certain occasions, successfully facilitated the peaceful resolution of armed conflicts. In various contexts, mediators have encountered challenges convincing belligerents to resolve their disputes through peaceful dialogue and cease their armed activities. Nevertheless, acquiring peacemakers within the realm of mediators is challenging.³²

The Bargaining Perspective is valued for elucidating the underlying factors contributing to political violence.³³ About this matter, two mechanisms hold significant importance. Firstly, conflicts arise due to the incentives of parties to misrepresent information in situations characterized by uncertainty, leading to information failure. Secondly, conflicts arise due to the challenges faced by adversaries in making credible commitments, as future incentives may drive them to exploit the other side, resulting in a commitment problem. The Karen mentioned above armed conflict is connected to the second one, wherein the absence of commitment can be examined in terms of how mediators can facilitate more effective communication between the warring parties

²⁹ Loong, 'The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar'.

³⁰ David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and R. Jervis, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Peter Wallensteen and Isak Svensson, 'Talking Peace: International Mediation in Armed Conflicts', *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (1 March 2014): 315–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313512223>.

³² Naomi Johnstone and Isak and Svensson, 'Belligerents and Believers: Exploring Faith-Based Mediation in Internal Armed Conflicts', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, no. 4 (1 December 2013): 557–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2013.829046>.

³³ James D Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization* 49, no. 03 (1995): 379–414, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033324>; Robert Powell, 'Bargaining Theory and International Conflict', *American Political Science Review* 5 (1 June 2002): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.5.092601.141138>; Dan Reiter, 'Exploring the Bargaining Model of War', *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 27–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000033>.

regarding their strength and resolve. These causal mechanisms serve as a foundation for further analysis.

A. The Role of Mediator in the Karen peace process

Since the 2021 coup, the peacemaking endeavor has grown increasingly intricate, characterized by the emergence of additional armed factions and a notable surge in the number of armed dissidents. When contemplating the engagement of a third-party mediator in the peace dialogue about the Karen armed conflict, it is imperative to evaluate various criteria. The initial step involves discerning selection among individuals, institutions, states, or international organizations. According to Simon³⁴, the mediator role involves the conflicting parties deciding the level of involvement they wish to pursue with the third party. This involvement can be in the form of a government and decision-making track, an influential but unofficial track, or a grassroots or civil society track.

1. International or regional-level organization

The United Nations, an established and influential international organization, played a significant role as a mediator in global affairs following the conclusion of the Cold War.³⁵ Nevertheless, the United Nations Security Council has faced criticism regarding its utilization of veto power and its perceived inability to effectively address the Russian invasion of Ukraine³⁶. The UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy position for Myanmar has recently experienced substantial transformations³⁷, leading to a notable decrease in the UN's attention towards Myanmar, including the Karen region. The UN Special Envoy has the potential to serve as a mediator in the Karen Conflict; however, due to the unwillingness of the conflicting parties to seek assistance from the mediator, the current scope of involvement is limited to the provision of humanitarian aid and the reporting of the conflict situation in Myanmar.

The mediation of the ASEAN special envoy for Myanmar is to be conducted within the institutional and decision-making framework at the regional level, following point 3 of the ASEAN 5-point consensus.³⁸ The mediator's role in the ASEAN chairman's

³⁴ Simon A Mason, 'Mediation and Facilitation in Peace Processes', International Relations and Security Network (ETH Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 2007), 5.

³⁵ Tetsuro Iji, 'The UN as an International Mediator: From the Post-Cold War Era to the Twenty-First Century', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 23, no. 1 (19 August 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02301008>.

³⁶ Julian Borger et al., 'Vetoed! What's Wrong with the UN Security Council – and How It Could Do Better', *The Guardian*, 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/sep/23/un-security-council-failing-70-years>.

³⁷ United Nations, 'Special Envoy Myanmar | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs', [dppa.un.org](https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/special-envoy-myanmar), 2018, <https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/special-envoy-myanmar>.

³⁸ S.M. Valdman, 'ASEAN Summit on Myanmar and the 5-Point Consensus', Asialink, 2021, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/asean-summit-on-myanmar-and-the-5-point-consensus>.

particular envoy position changes with the annual rotation of the chairmanship. Consequently, the peace process necessitates a fresh start, while the status and influence of mediators remain unpredictable.³⁹ In his capacity as a delegate of the Thai government at the ASEAN Summit, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai of Thailand proposed the implementation of the "D4D" approach as the most effective means for Myanmar to mitigate violence, provide humanitarian aid, release individuals in custody, and foster dialogue.⁴⁰ Furthermore, despite the efforts of the ASEAN Special Envoy from Indonesia to facilitate peace dialogue mediation, the Myanmar military has failed to comply with the five-point consensus calling for an immediate cessation of violence, resulting in a less successful outcome than anticipated.⁴¹

2. State or State Representative Actor

State-level mediators encompass countries and organizations consistently supporting Myanmar's peace process. Western nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, European countries, and neighboring countries such as China, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, have played significant roles. China and India, two nations with significant diplomatic relations with the Myanmar military and substantial geopolitical importance for Myanmar, are inclined to assume mediator roles due to their keen interest in the Myanmar peace process. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Japan Nippon Foundation has allocated substantial financial resources and offered technical support to develop Lay Kay Kaw Township in Karen Brigade 6, which falls under the Karen National Union's (KNU) jurisdiction. As a result of its diplomatic ties with the Myanmar military, the foundation has emerged as a prospective mediator in this context.

Prominent local political figures, religious leaders, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and civil society organizations, notably the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, the International Crisis Group, and the Asia Foundation, have successfully engaged in mediation efforts at the local level. Nevertheless, establishing trust and earning the respect of parties with conflicting interests can be challenging.

The mediators, external entities facilitating the Myanmar peace process, express their willingness to contribute. However, the conflicting parties involved in the process need help reaching a consensus regarding selecting an appropriate mediator. The peace process's crucial aspect lies in the conflicting parties' willingness to engage, as mediators

³⁹ ANI, 'Asean Should Retain Brunei's Erywan as Special Envoy to Myanmar under Cambodia's Chairmanship. [Online] The Star', 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2021/11/01/asean-should-retain-brunei039s-erywan-as-special-envoy-to-myanmar-under-cambodia039s-chairmanship>.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kingdom of Thailand, 'Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Proposed Way Forward For ASEAN in Addressing the Situation in Myanmar in the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Jakarta', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, 2021, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/dpmmfthaiaaseanleadersmeeting24apr2021?page=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9ac&menu=5d5bd3cb15e39c306002a9ad>.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, 'Myanmar: ASEAN's Failed "5-Point Consensus" a Year On', 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>.

must maintain neutrality and refrain from assuming the role of decision-makers.⁴² The absence of a mutually agreed ceasefire has significant implications for the reconciliation process and attaining a sustainable peace agreement. According to Strangio⁴³, the military government has classified the PDF and NUG as terrorist entities following counter-terrorism legislation. Consequently, negotiations have been conducted exclusively with these designated organizations, excluding other parties from participating in comprehensive and authoritative decision-making processes.

The "Harvard Approach" focuses on the Karen armed conflict by discerning discrete interests, examining the underlying motivations driving the conflicting parties' desires, and subsequently engaging in negotiations to achieve a mutually agreeable resolution that accommodates the diverse interests at play. Furthermore, the negotiation process involves exploring mutually agreed-upon criteria for evaluating potential solutions. The approach discussed in this context is grounded in an individualistic perspective and prioritizes content and output.⁴⁴ The method for resolving the fundamental underlying causes of a conflict, commonly known as the "Human Needs Approach," is based on addressing human needs in a lasting manner. It is posited that specific conflicts are impervious to resolution through negotiation and that the long-term resolution of any dispute necessitates fulfilling the fundamental needs of the conflicting parties, including but not limited to recognition and identity. The concept of universal needs can also serve as a means of establishing a connection between parties involved in a conflict. The study investigates the matter and may concentrate on output, processes, or relationships.⁴⁵ The successful implementation of the Harvard Approach, or the Human Needs Approach, is contingent upon consistently applying a policy that ensures all parties are addressed.

VII. POLITICAL ROAD MAP RELATED TO THE PEACE PROCESS

Including the political roadmap is a crucial aspect to be considered during the mediation of the peace process in Myanmar. The Myanmar Armed Forces have formulated a strategy to conduct elections following their political framework after the coup. Various methods can be employed to conduct a proportional representation election and establish a federal democracy that aligns with the context of Myanmar. Furthermore, akin to a clandestine governing body, the National Unity Government has devised a political strategy that entails revoking the 2008 constitution and implementing a federal

⁴² J. Kichaven, 'Articles | Expert Commentary', *IRMI.Com* (blog), 2004, www.irmi.com. Available at: <https://www.irmi.com/articles/expert-commentary/the-mediators>.

⁴³ Sebastian Strangio, 'Myanmar Junta Labels Shadow Government "Terrorists"', *The Diplomat*, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/myanmar-junta-labels-shadow-government-terrorists/>.

⁴⁴ Roger Fisher, William Ury, and B. Patton, *Getting to YES : Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/shop/getting-to-yes-negotiating-agreement-without-giving-in/>.

⁴⁵ Zulfiya Tursunova, '■ Rosenberg, Marshall B., 2005. Speak Peace in a World of Conflict: What You Say Next Will Change Your World. Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer. 240 Pp. ISBN 1892005174', *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 5 (1 September 2007): 640–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433070440050715>.

democracy charter. This roadmap also encompasses the formulation of a fresh constitution that ensures the entitlement of all ethnic factions to self-determination, alongside the complete eradication of Myanmar's military autocracy.

According to Shona Loong⁴⁶, analyzing the Karen ceasefires and subsequent peace process identified four key factors essential for comprehending the KNU's strategic approach and reactions to the Myanmar coup in 2021. The initiation of the ceasefire brought to light an evident conflict of interests between factions within the Karen National Union (KNU), namely those in favor of the ceasefire and those opposing it. The decision to sign both ceasefires was primarily driven by officials from the central districts of the KNU, which had experienced significant territorial losses during the Four Cuts counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it can be observed that the Karen National Union (KNU), various community-based organizations associated with the Karen community, and the Karen populace at large have experienced a decline in their confidence towards engaging in dialogue, primarily due to their experiences with the peace process. Disarmament will only be embraced by the Karen National Union (KNU) and the majority of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) once a political settlement has been achieved. According to Selth and Griffith Asia Institute⁴⁸, Karen actors perceived the administration of the National League for Democracy (NLD) as lacking effectiveness and displaying potential insincerity in their role as dialogue partners.

Furthermore, although the Karen National Union (KNU) perceived itself as the rightful governing authority in Karen regions, certain entities regarded it merely as a military organization. The role played by the social service units of the National Unity Government (NUG), National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) posed a significant obstacle during the peace negotiations. According to South⁴⁹, the NCA encompasses "interim arrangements" that provide services in areas affected by conflict during the period between ceasefires and establishing a comprehensive political resolution. Furthermore, the advent of the peace process has raised concerns among Karen community-based organizations regarding the potential adverse effects of infrastructure development and resource extraction in Karen regions, which have persisted since the implementation of ceasefires.⁵⁰ The mediation process about the Karen conflict necessitates a comprehensive examination of the abovementioned information, elucidation of pertinent concerns, and establishing of a shared perspective.

⁴⁶ Loong, 'The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar'.

⁴⁷ S. David Thaw, 'Choosing to Engage: Strategic Considerations for the Karen National Union | Conciliation Resources', *C-r.Org* (blog), 2022, <https://www.c-r.org/accord/engaging-armed-groups/choosing-engage-strategic-considerations-karen-national-union>.

⁴⁸ Andrew Selth, *Be Careful What You Wish for: The National League for Democracy and Government in Myanmar* (Brisbane, Qld: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2017).

⁴⁹ Selth.

⁵⁰ Burma Partnership, 'Karen Civil Society Has Lost Trust in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) Negotiations as a Gateway to Political Dialogue' (Karen Civil Society Organizations, 2015).

VIII. THE TIMEFRAME FOR THE KAREN PEACE PROCESS

Given that the Karen Conflict is the lengthiest in recorded history, it is a formidable task to promptly eradicate the accumulated layers of sedimentation over numerous years. The resolution of the protracted conflict in the Karen State, spanning over 70 years, hinges upon crucial factors, including democracy, federalism, and ethnic equality. The prospects of achieving consensus among the conflicting parties and the timeline for implementing these measures are pivotal in determining the potential resolution of the conflict. Following the coup, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) was dissolved, resulting in a significant shift in the trajectory of the peacebuilding process. This change is a decisive departure from the previous course, potentially offering an alternative, expedited route toward achieving peace. The hostilities may escalate and become more intense, particularly as the National Unity Government (NUG) and its affiliated factions consolidate their authority over a more extensive territory within Karen State. Additionally, there is a possibility that the Myanmar military may relinquish its involvement in this particular conflict. The duration of these conditions may vary between three and nine years, contingent upon the prevailing political climate and military activities.

The initiation of a ceasefire and the commencement of peace negotiations should be undertaken within a timeframe ranging from two to three years. Multiple formal and informal meetings ought to be convened on several occasions in order to bring an end to the protracted 70-year-old armed conflict, ensuring a lasting peace. Substantial progress must be achieved within a timeframe of one to three years. During this particular time frame, there is a likelihood for an increase in the involvement of conflicting parties, third-party mediators, observers, and various international governmental, non-governmental, and civil society organizations. This heightened engagement has the potential to expedite the processes of peace-making and peacebuilding. It is imperative for the Royal Thai government and neighboring countries to promptly enhance their provision of healthcare and humanitarian aid to displaced individuals residing across the border.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Karen armed conflict is among the numerous armed conflicts occurring in Myanmar, holding significant geographical and political importance within the conflict region. The neighboring nations prioritize stability, peace, and socioeconomic progress over pursuing ethnic rights and individual freedoms. Consequently, the fundamental underlying factors contributing to the conflict, namely democracy, ethnic equality, and self-determination, have yet to be effectively resolved, resulting in an ongoing state of unrest within the region, characterized by persistent gunfire and artillery activity. The lack of attainment in transitional justice, specifically in human rights violations, access to justice, and rehabilitation of violence, has hindered the ability of conflicting parties to achieve a peace agreement. The peace process is influenced by the conflicting parties and the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and the international community.

In the context of the Karen Conflict, the involved parties exhibit a notable reluctance to engage in negotiations, thereby perpetuating a state of hostility characterized by a mutual pursuit of complete eradication. The collapse of the NCA ensued from the coup, primarily attributable to the absence of participating entities, including the government, Hluttaw (parliament), conflicting parties, and subsequent erosion of public trust in the NCA. The mediation process necessitates the involvement of a neutral third party, and the selection of a mediator must be thoughtfully deliberated upon and aligned with the pertinent criteria for the Karen conflict scenario and peacebuilding endeavor. The international community and neighboring countries support the ASEAN 5-point consensus. However, the peace process is currently hindered due to the Myanmar military's lack of compliance and cooperation concerning the aforementioned 5-point consensus.

Analyzing the parties' ideological convictions and political strategies is imperative to comprehensively examine the Karen Conflict. Historically, the complexity of peace negotiations has been influenced by various factors, such as the pursuit of democratic governance, the promotion of ethnic equality, and the establishment of federal systems. Additionally, conflicts have often arisen due to competing interests in gaining de facto control over the territory, managing Christian and Buddhist religious affairs, and addressing the issue of self-determination. However, given the current clarity surrounding the political objective of constructing a comprehensive framework for democracy and the Federal Union, the peace process must transition from its previous trajectory to a novel approach to initiate peace-focused dialogue.

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