

# *International Parliamentary Inquiry into the global response to the crisis in Myanmar*

## **Dr Ashley South**

Ashley South has 20 years' experience as an independent author, researcher and consultant. He has a PhD from the Australian National University, and an MSc from SOAS (University of London), and is a Research Fellow at Chiang Mai University.

This submission is based on numerous research projects and strategic interventions, in partnership with a wide range of international and national stakeholders in Myanmar - especially the southeast (Karen, Karenni, Mon) and Kachin areas. Dr South has visited every state and region in Myanmar, often multiple times - including frequent visits to conflict-affected areas (most recently in January and April 2022).

Most of Dr South's publications can be found on the website: [www.AshleySouth.co.uk](http://www.AshleySouth.co.uk)  
Relevant recent publications include, *Thailand Could Revise its Myanmar Policy* ('The Irrawaddy', 11-7-2022) -  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/comment/thailand-could-revisit-its-myanmar-policy.html>

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Ashley South, *A New Look at Federalism in Myanmar* (PeaceRep - Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, Interim Transitions series; School of Law, Edinburgh University July 2022)

- *Following the military coup of 1 February 2021, Myanmar is in turmoil.*
- *I agree with the Inquiry's premise that the international community's responses to the coup have been inadequate.*

### Scale and quality of resistance

- Following the junta's bloody crackdown, opposition to the coup has proliferated. In almost every one of the Myanmar's 320 townships, People's Defence Forces have emerged.
- These are diverse in character, with some aligned to the National Unity Government (NUG), some working with already long-established Ethnic Armed Organisations (sometimes also known as Ethnic Resistance Organisations), and others operating more or less independently.
- Despite some predictions that PDFs would quickly be defeated by the Myanmar Army, the opposite seems to be true.
- In many parts of the country (including Sagaing and Magwe Regions, which had seen no armed conflict for decades), the PDFs have inflicted significant battlefield casualties on the Myanmar Army.
- In several ethnic states, PDFs have made common cause with EAOs.
- Particularly in Chin, Kachin, Karenni and Karen areas, EAOs and PDFs have resisted violent incursions by the Myanmar Army, in some cases pushing back the invading forces.
- This is happening in a context where EAOs such as the Karen National Union and Kachin Independence Organisation have been providing essential services to conflict-affected, ethnic nationality communities for decades.
- For example - 300,000-plus children in some 2000-plus schools administered by EAOs
- The international diplomatic and aid community should support these locally owned and delivered governance administrations and service delivery systems - particularly given the illegitimacy of the SAC regime.
- The education and other services provided by EAOs, often in partnership with CSOs, can be considered the building blocks of a new type of federalism in Myanmar.

- While constitutional change is necessary for just and sustainable conflict resolution, federalism can also be seen as an asymmetrical ‘emergent phenomenon’ - developing from the ‘bottom-up’, out of the existing, autonomous practices and arrangement of communities and EAOs.
- Myanmar’s EAOs enjoy significant legitimacy among the communities they seek to represent - and protect.

*The mother of all ‘critical junctures’ - opportunities for intersectional peacebuilding*

- It seems unlikely that the majority of Myanmar’s citizens will anytime soon be reconciled with the vicious military regime tenuously clinging on to power.
- Instead, the challenge and opportunity is for reconciliation between the Burman majority and ethnic nationality citizens, who for decades have suffered such violence.
- Before the coup, political reform and the peace process were stalled under an NLD government which had failed to deliver on its promises to ethnic nationality communities.
- Since the military takeover however, the country’s politics have been re-energised. ‘Gen Z’ and other young people from the cities are making common cause with Myanmar’s ethnic nationality actors - who themselves have suffered from decades of state-led violence and forced assimilation.
- Myanmar is at a critical juncture, in which narratives, identities and interests are being displaced and reworked.
- This is an extraordinary opportunity for building common ground between opponents of the illegal and illegitimate military regime - between ethnic Burman people from the cities, and activists and communities from ethnic areas.
- It is essential that the international community does not jeopardise the struggle for freedom, and movements towards national reconciliation, in Myanmar by recognising sham elections, which the military junta currently plans to hold next year.  
... especially since the 2010 elections brought a military-backed, *Apparently* reform-minded government to power ...
- Without full, free and fair participation on the part of *all* political stakeholders, any elections or moves towards a negotiated settlement to decades of state-society and armed conflict will lack credibility and exacerbate conflict.

## Thailand

- Thailand has unique national security concerns in relation to Myanmar.
- BUT - The State Administrative Council is not a credible or reliable security partner.
- In fact, association with the SAC is an embarrassment for Thailand.
  
- The Royal Thai Government should consider a return to historical buffer zones with ethnic minority groups along the border.
  
- For decades, Thailand has received refugees for decades from regional wars and civilian victims from Myanmar.
- During the Cold War, the Thai security authorities turned a blind eye towards, and sometimes quietly supported, insurgent groups in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.
  
- Since the late 1990s though, Thailand has pursued a regional policy of turning “battlefields into marketplaces.”
- Before the coup, it was reasonable for Thailand to pursue regular bilateral relations with Myanmar.
- With both countries in ASEAN, the relationship was arguably less problematic than at any time since the Second World War and there was less armed conflict along the border.
  
- All of this changed after the 2021 coup.
- The SAC junta has failed to suppress dissent and consolidate power.
- It controls key towns and cities and – but the SAC regime has lost its grip on large areas and is using battlefield weapons and airstrikes against civilians, and their villages and property.
- Thailand can no longer engage exclusively with the regime in Naypyidaw. It might be better to resume its buffer-zone policy.
  
- Under this system of patronage, Thailand would informally support para-state entities, under the authority of the EAOs, as border partners.

- The EAOs could cooperate in mitigating cross-border health & DRUGs threats, and reduce/regulate informal border crossing/ refugees - and cooperate in maintaining security.
- Such a rethink would not require Thailand to formally change existing policies.
- Engagement with the junta would no doubt continue, perhaps at a more cautious diplomatic level than now, reflecting the regime's shameful abuse of ASEAN.
- Relations with the EAOs and other groups could remain informal.
- For centuries it has been in the interests of Thailand to cultivate constructive relations with the communities which have guarded its western border.
- Many of these people are now suffering terribly. The United Nations calculates that at least 750,000 people have been displaced since the coup.
- Many face acute physical and food insecurity, and a crisis in health and education provision with a large proportion of these people near the Thai border.
- These humanitarian needs can be met by local aid organisations if they have access to the international donor community.
- Thailand has merely to open the door.
- Thailand has a long-standing Buddhist humanitarian tradition, which has included protecting vulnerable people from Myanmar.
- Thailand has an opportunity to rebuild its image among the young people who are Myanmar's future leaders.
- In supporting them now, Thailand will be investing in relationships that could last for decades.
- Such a strategy need not be costly.
- By allowing organizations to help people in the border areas, Thailand can help ensure their good health and security.
- This will significantly mitigate the impact on Thailand of armed conflict in Myanmar.
- The international community is ready to stand by.

- The USA and other partners are willing to support Thailand in such a new and shift of policy and posture.
- This should include military support to the opposition.
- CDM ... & EAOs
- I spoke recently to KNLA Vice Chief-of-Staff Lt-Gen Baw Kyaw Hae, who said:

*“Increased humanitarian aid to the war zones is very welcome.*

*This should be supplied by local organisations.*

*However, humanitarian aid will not solve the problem.*

*Only direct political and military support to the KNU and its allies will help us to protect civilians from the SAC junta - and defeat the military regime.”*

### **International initiatives**

GNU & KNPP & CNF - & NUG Humanitarian Ministry call for establishing:

- ***Inclusive Forum for Humanitarian Engagement*** – including ASEAN & AHA [the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance], the USA and other powers (including China, if possible), the UN and EU - not including the SAC
- *Joint humanitarian assessment* – KIO & KNU elements are underway, incorporating AHA design
- The international community com should support the findings, and act upon identified needs

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- an international ***Friends of Myanmar*** grouping for political engagement