



Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process

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Principal Findings

What's new? After close to two years of a stagnating peace process, the Myanmar government, its military and ethnic armed groups signatory to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement resumed negotiations aimed at holding a Panglong-21 peace conference later this year. The peace process will then enter hibernation while national elections take place.

Why does it matter? Recent negotiations have focused mainly on ensuring that the peace process continues after the election. But genuine progress toward ending Myanmar's long-running ethnic conflicts is unlikely to be made without a decisive change in approach, particularly from the government.

What should be done? With the National League for Democracy likely to win another term, the government, military and ethnic armed groups should use the hibernation period constructively to review causes of the current impasse, rebuild trust through sustained informal dialogue, and take steps to reinvigorate the peace process from 2021.

Executive Summary

A flurry of negotiations among Myanmar's government, its military and ethnic armed groups belies deeper problems in the country's moribund peace process. The government and armed groups that have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) are eager to hold a Panglong-21 peace conference before electoral dynamics take precedence later this year. As a result, two prominent armed groups that had suspended their participation have formally re-entered the peace process. Although these are positive developments, even if it takes place the conference would be largely symbolic and do little to address the fundamental obstacles on Myanmar's road toward sustainable peace. By putting formal negotiations on hold for at least six months, the election and subsequent transition period constitute a unique opportunity for a rethink. All parties involved should use this window to examine blockages that have hindered genuine progress so far, multiply informal meetings to rebuild trust and examine ways of reinvigorating the peace process from 2021.

When Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) took office in March 2016, hopes were high that it would consolidate the peace process launched under her predecessor, Thein Sein, in 2011. The results, however, have been disappointing. Although negotiators have made some modest progress, such as agreeing on 51 points for a future Union Peace Accord, conflict has intensified in Shan and Rakhine States, and the government has been unable to convince the country's most powerful armed groups to sign the NCA. Formal political negotiations with the ten armed groups that have signed the agreement have stalled, culminating in the temporary withdrawal of the two most important of them – the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State – from the peace process in late 2018. Although the NLD administration initially said peace negotiations were its top priority, it has shown neither the determination nor the capacity to take the process forward. Since 2017, its focus has shifted increasingly to other issues better suited to the project of shoring up political support among its ethnic Burman base.

The approaching election, slated for November 2020 but now subject to possible coronavirus-related delays, has given new impetus to the peace process. Informal talks over the past six months have encouraged the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State to return to the peace process, and formal meetings with all signatories have been convened since January with the aim of holding a Panglong-21 conference before election dynamics come to dominate the political landscape in the second half of the year. The COVID-19 outbreak is likely to make this original timeline impossible, but negotiators on both sides are intent on holding the conference before the vote. Despite this renewed commitment, the primary objectives for both sides are modest. The NLD sees the Panglong-21 meeting mostly as a way to boost its political campaign, while ethnic armed groups want to ensure that the peace process continues after the vote, regardless of who comes to power.

The election will bring further risks for ethnic conflict and the peace process. Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity with the Burman majority is likely to ensure that the NLD wins enough seats to select the president and form the next government, but ethnic minorities are increasingly aggrieved at her government's Burman nationalist tone

and the overwhelming Burman dominance in political institutions. The discontent is most evident in Rakhine State, where the political marginalisation of the Rakhine ethnic minority under the NLD has boosted support for the Arakan Army insurgency. Armed conflict and insecurity are likely to result in the cancellation of voting in some constituencies in minority areas, particularly in Rakhine State, which will only deepen local minorities' alienation.

The election period, however, will also be an opportunity to reflect on how to take the peace process forward. The formal negotiations will likely be put on hold for six to twelve months, until after the next cabinet is sworn in (scheduled for late March 2021). The current government, the military and ethnic armed groups should use this period to review their own strategy and goals, ramp up informal dialogue and examine crucial issues that have so far been put aside, such as the growth of the illicit economy and the mounting might of military-aligned militias. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic delays the Panglong-21 conference, there will still be a significant period during which formal peace negotiations will not take place. This downtime constitutes a unique opportunity for all parties to reflect on how to restart the process with a more constructive approach in 2021.

If the NLD forms the next government, as appears likely, it should use its second term in office to reinvigorate its leadership of the peace process. Overcoming the deadlock in negotiations toward a political settlement requires a fundamental shift in approach. As a first step, Naypyitaw should overhaul institutions like the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, to rely less on former government bureaucrats and instead draw in new negotiators and advisers from a range of backgrounds, such as business, academia and civil society. The key to substantive progress, however, lies in renewed political commitment from Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to the peace process, a stronger sense of empathy with the grievances of ethnic minorities, and a clear vision for where the peace process is going.

Yangon/Brussels, 19 June 2020

Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process

I. Introduction

In 2011, President Thein Sein's new government launched a peace process aimed at ending decades of conflict by reaching a political settlement with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. His administration quickly signed bilateral ceasefires with most groups, eight of which also signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015. Negotiators then drafted a framework for a political dialogue process, and convened the first Union Peace Conference in January 2016, shortly before Thein Sein left office.¹

Thein Sein's administration was unable, however, to convince the most powerful armed groups to join the process. The government's exclusion of three other groups from signing the NCA had raised concerns among potential signatories about the agreement's inclusivity. Some also had reservations about giving Thein Sein a political boost shortly before the 2015 elections. Ten groups did not sign the NCA, and as a result could not participate in the launch of the political dialogue.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) government that came to office in March 2016 thus inherited a complex, two-track process: political dialogue with NCA signatories, and ceasefire negotiations with non-signatories aimed at getting them into the political dialogue process. It also inherited a valuable, albeit fragile, trust with ethnic armed groups, some of which had been fighting the Myanmar military for many decades. There were clear opportunities for progress, but as Crisis Group warned in a June 2017 report, "the path toward a negotiated end to Myanmar's conflicts remain[ed] fraught with difficulties".²

Since then, these difficulties have come to the fore, to the extent that the peace process has now stalled for the past two years. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD government has been unable to steer the political dialogue process forward or convince non-signatories to sign the NCA, and the ceasefire monitoring mechanism designed to resolve disputes between the military and ethnic armed group signatories has proven largely ineffective. The trust that once existed has long since dissipated and the peace process now faces an uncertain future. The next twelve months, during which Myanmar is scheduled to hold elections and swear in its next government, offer an opportunity to reset and recalibrate.

This report examines some of the reasons why the peace process has stumbled and proposes concrete initiatives that all parties can undertake to kickstart negotiations in 2021, when the new government will come to power. A reboot will require

¹ For Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar's peace process since the 2015 elections, see Asia Reports N°s 307, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020; and 287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017; and Asia Briefings N°s 161, *Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, 19 May 2020; 158, *Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Ceasefire Negotiations*, 24 September 2019; 157, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, 6 August 2019; 154, *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 24 January 2019; 151, *Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, 28 August 2018; and 149, *Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, 19 October 2016.

² Crisis Group Report, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, op. cit.

not only technical fixes to the peace process architecture but more importantly reestablishment of trust through a fresh approach and shift in attitude, particularly from the government and the military. The report focuses primarily on the political dialogue process and implementation of the NCA with current signatories, rather than negotiations with non-signatories, as unless progress is made on both these aspects first, there will be little incentive for most of these groups to sign the national ceasefire.

This report is based on Crisis Group research since January 2020, including interviews with members of the government's peacemaking team, officials from peace process bodies, ethnic armed group representatives, diplomats, donors, civil society organisation staff, and local researchers and analysts. Due to the emergence of COVID-19, planned travel for the report was not possible. Interviews took place in Yangon, some in person and others by phone or videoconference.

II. The Peace Process in Disarray

When Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD came to power in March 2016, hopes were high that it could lead the peace process forward. Aung San Suu Kyi's political authority, her stated commitment to the peace process and the prospect of more friendly relations with China, which has leverage over some of the armed groups near its border, provided a strong base to build on her predecessor's work.³ The NLD moved quickly to install a new peace team, convene a Union Peace Conference – rebranded as Panglong-21 – in July 2016 and encourage the remaining armed groups to sign the NCA so that they could join the political negotiations.⁴

After the initial optimism that followed the election, however, progress was much slower and more difficult than the NLD had anticipated. Aside from underestimating the scale of the challenge, the NLD made some significant miscalculations, including its choice of negotiators and its prioritisation of formal talks over informal discussions. It also viewed itself as a neutral actor in the process, seeing its role as mediating between the military and ethnic armed groups – a fundamental misreading of how many ethnic minorities perceive the party and government more broadly, dominated as they are by ethnic Burmans.⁵

Efforts to convince non-signatory groups to sign the NCA quickly stalled, and most of them soon joined forces under the leadership of the country's largest armed group, the United Wa State Army, to reject the ceasefire outright and call for fresh negotiations. They still have not signed the NCA and as a result have yet to formally join the political dialogue, except occasionally as observers.⁶ Two other armed groups that were not part of the United Wa State Army-led bloc, the New Mon State Party and Lahu Democratic Union, signed the NCA in April 2018, but they have few combatants and little political heft.

Signatories, who were already concerned at pursuing political dialogue in the absence of the country's most powerful armed groups, also grew increasingly frustrated at the NLD's bureaucratic approach to negotiations, its inflexibility and its unwillingness to challenge the military's positions.⁷ The majority of them have come to see the NLD's position on power sharing as being broadly aligned with that of Myanmar's military, in that they both represent the interests of the Burman Buddhist majority and are unwilling to make significant concessions to ethnic minorities (see Section IV for details).

The NLD's initial eagerness to pursue peace negotiations was based largely on its belief that such talks would be the easiest way to achieve its desired changes to My-

³ See Crisis Group Asia Report N°305, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, 30 March 2020, for a full discussion of the Myanmar-China relationship under Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as its impact on the peace process.

⁴ The name "Panglong-21" (also referred to as 21st Century Panglong) is a reference to the pre-independence Panglong Conference, convened in 1947 by Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, Myanmar's independence hero.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, peace process analysts, February and May 2020, Yangon.

⁶ For full discussion of this new grouping, see Crisis Group Report, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, op. cit.

⁷ See, for example, "We are deadlocked: KNU general-secretary talks war and peace-making", *Frontier Myanmar*, 12 March 2020.

anmar's military-drafted constitution.⁸ The military – which holds an effective veto over changes to the charter through its presence in parliament – has said resolving Myanmar's conflicts is a precondition for any substantial constitutional reform.⁹ Since the peace process was supposed to lead to a political settlement with armed groups and the introduction of some form of federalism, requiring significant changes to the constitution, the NLD hoped to use the opportunity to simultaneously introduce additional amendments that reflected its other ambitions, in particular the dilution of the military's political role.¹⁰ But as the scale of the peace challenge became increasingly clear, the government shifted focus, pursuing constitutional change through parliamentary channels and prioritising grassroots economic development, another of its core electoral promises. In the process, it ended up neglecting the peace negotiations.¹¹

This perceived lack of commitment from the NLD has created resentment and mistrust among ethnic armed groups, while other factors further undermine progress. Deteriorating personal relations and political competition between Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing have weakened coordination between the government and military. Sensing that disarmament of ethnic armed groups is increasingly unlikely, Myanmar's generals have also become less enthusiastic about the peace process and hardened their position that signing the NCA is a prerequisite for participating in political dialogue. Some of the military's actions, particularly the building of strategic roads through Karen National Union territory in Kayin State, have significantly undermined trust and confidence in the NCA. Expanding conflict in Rakhine and northern Shan States, discussed in more detail below, has also created new challenges for political dialogue with NCA signatories and ceasefire negotiations with non-signatories.¹²

The inability of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) to resolve such disagreements between the military and NCA signatory groups has further eroded

⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, op. cit.

⁹ The constitution can be amended only through a vote in parliament. To be approved, each proposed change requires the support of more than 75 per cent of lawmakers (and sometimes approval at a national referendum). The constitution also gives the military 25 per cent of seats in parliament, ensuring that it can block any proposed changes. "Senior General Min Aung Hlaing receives Asahi Shimbun of Japan, answers the questions", official website of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, 17 February 2019.

¹⁰ The NLD's goals include removing the clause that bars Aung San Suu Kyi from the presidency, transferring ultimate command of the armed forces from the commander-in-chief to the president, drawing down the military's quota of seats in parliament and increasing civilian participation in the National Defence and Security Council.

¹¹ The NLD announced in January 2019 that it planned to submit constitutional amendments to parliament. In March 2020, the military used its veto to block virtually all the 114 proposals that the NLD put forward. None of the NLD's proposed changes would have significantly advanced the process of decentralisation or establishing a federal structure. For a summary of the process, see "Looking Back at the Myanmar Constitution Amendment Process", International IDEA, 8 April 2020.

¹² For more on increased conflict, see Crisis Group Report, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit., and Crisis Group Briefings, *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit., and *Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Cease-fire Negotiations*, op. cit.

trust.¹³ Although the JMC showed some initial promise, its structural shortcomings gradually came to the fore. Particularly problematic is the fact that all JMC bodies, from the national to local levels, are chaired by military officers, with ethnic armed groups only able to appoint vice chairs. Further, the civilian appointees, who are supposed to be neutral, have struggled to mediate between the different sides. The military has rejected proposals from ethnic armed groups to revise the JMC's structure or include international representatives in the ceasefire monitoring process as observers or advisers – a prospect that was envisaged in the NCA text.¹⁴

Another factor that has undermined the peace process is the failure to implement the “interim arrangements” section of the NCA, which had been anticipated as one of the agreement's major peace dividends. The ceasefire proposes “coordination” on “programs and projects” in ethnic armed group-held territory in a range of areas, including health, education, socio-economic development, environmental conservation and drug eradication. This section of the NCA could have facilitated on-the-ground cooperation and trust building between the government and ethnic armed groups, but disputes over interpretation have stymied progress: the government's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre has demanded ethnic armed groups seek permission for all such activities, while ethnic armed groups argue that it should be a partnership where projects and initiatives are agreed jointly. At the same time, the government has been accused of introducing laws, policies and programs – such as new laws on land acquisition – that affect people in ethnic armed group areas, without any consultation.¹⁵

As a result, the peace process has been at a standstill since 2018. The government has been able to hold only three Panglong-21 peace conferences since taking office – despite the political dialogue framework specifying that one take place every six months – and the most recent, in July 2018, was largely symbolic. To make matters worse, two key NCA signatories, the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State, suspended their participation following a disastrous “high-level” meeting with the government and military in October 2018.¹⁶

Shortly afterward, in January 2019, clashes between the Arakan Army and the military in Rakhine State escalated dramatically.¹⁷ The fighting has since spread and intensified into the bloodiest conflict that Myanmar has experienced in recent dec-

¹³ The JMC's role, according to the NCA, is “implementing provisions of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement; monitoring adherence to the Code of Conduct; investigating alleged violations; and undertaking problem solving functions”.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and ethnic armed group leaders, Yangon, February and May 2020. Section 12(c) of the NCA says: “We shall jointly decide, on the basis of mutual agreement, the role of representatives from foreign governments and international organizations that are involved in the ongoing peace process, either as observers, advisers or to provide necessary technical assistance at different levels of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee”.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leader and peace process analyst, May 2020. See, for example, “Implementation of Burma's Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law: At Odds with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and Peace Negotiations”, Transnational Institute, 10 December 2018. For the full text of the NCA, see the UN Peacemaker website.

¹⁶ “Analysis: Why did the KNU temporarily leave peace talks”, *The Irrawaddy*, 29 October 2018.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Briefing, *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

ades. It shows no sign of abating.¹⁸ With political dialogue negotiations on hold, the government and military have tried to reach bilateral ceasefires with the Arakan Army and three related groups – the Kachin Independence Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – as a precursor to signing the NCA. But the proposal required these groups to accept major restrictions on their areas of operations, including an Arakan Army withdrawal from Rakhine State. This unrealistic demand ensured that the talks failed and even helped stoke conflict in northern Shan State: in an effort to shake up negotiations, the newly formed Brotherhood Alliance – comprising the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – launched deadly attacks along the region's main highway in August 2019.¹⁹

When the NLD came to office, there was optimism that support from China could be an important asset for driving the peace process forward. Although China has gradually become more involved, it has limited its role mainly to facilitating talks with non-signatory groups operating along its border. Its only significant intervention in the political dialogue process has been to enable the attendance of non-signatories at Panglong-21 conferences.²⁰ China's interest seems to be primarily in ensuring stability in border areas, in part to support its economic ambitions, not in facilitating the peace process as a whole. Increasingly, it appears sceptical of the prospects for a political settlement to Myanmar's conflicts. Instead, it is promoting economic development and integration as a way to end the fighting.²¹

¹⁸ Crisis Group Report, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Ceasefire Negotiations*, op. cit.

²⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, op. cit.

²¹ Crisis Group Report, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, op. cit.

III. Preserving the Peace Process in an Election Year

As Myanmar entered an election year in 2020, prospects for substantive progress appeared dim. The two most important signatories to the NCA, the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State, had suspended their participation in the peace process more than a year earlier. Negotiations with non-signatories to the NCA had stalled amid heavy fighting in Rakhine and northern Shan States. Negotiators from the government and ethnic armed groups agreed that formal discussions would be unlikely after June 2020, as the government would be consumed by preparations for the vote and armed groups would be unwilling to do anything that could give the NLD an electoral advantage.²²

Despite these hurdles, the election has also created some renewed impetus for the peace process with NCA signatories. In 2015, the NLD told voters that ending the country's long-running conflict would be one of its three priorities while in office. Embarking five years later on a re-election campaign with the peace process in disarray could make it easy prey for critics and political rivals, particularly in ethnic minority areas. For all the complaints about the status of negotiations, there is also genuine concern among ethnic armed groups that the process could collapse due to either armed conflict, a change in government or a lack of momentum, threatening nearly a decade of effort. "Nobody wants the peace process to die. But this is a treacherous stretch because of the election", said one peace process observer.²³

In an effort to salvage the process and show results before the electoral campaign, in late 2019 the government took the initiative of arranging a semi-informal dialogue with NCA signatories. Its apparent willingness to negotiate and address some of the perceived roadblocks, for example by clarifying some key terms in the NCA, encouraged the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State to return to the process. Since January, a series of formal meetings have taken place with all ten signatories, with the objective of holding another Panglong-21 peace conference before the election. Negotiators on both sides worked hard to stick to the tight deadlines so that the conference could take place in late April or May, although the COVID-19 pandemic has now forced negotiators to postpone it to July or August at the earliest.²⁴

In preparation for these discussions, the NCA signatories resolved some of their own internal differences. Within the signatories' coordinating body, the Peace Process Steering Team, the more powerful members had long chafed at being treated on par with groups that have few armed forces and little political influence. In early December, the group agreed to new terms of reference for the steering team that gave the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State more authority. The leader of the Restoration Council of Shan State, Lieutenant General Yawd Serk, is now heading negotiations with the government, but it is the Karen National Union that is essentially driving policy for the NCA signatories.²⁵

²² Crisis Group interviews, Yangon, February 2020.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Yangon, February 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analyst and government peace negotiator, Yangon, February and April 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, analyst and ethnic armed group leader, Yangon, February 2020.

Sensing their renewed political leverage with the government, the NCA signatories have pushed for an ambitious suite of agreements in exchange for participating in a Panglong-21 conference. These include an addendum to the NCA that defines some of its key terms and a broader framework for the establishment of a “federal democratic union”, with timelines for implementation.²⁶ The signatories argue that these agreements, which would be approved at the Panglong-21 conference and then by the national legislature, are necessary guarantees for them to feel confident about how the process will move forward post-election.²⁷

The outcome of negotiations is likely to be more modest than the armed groups initially hoped. The government has pushed back against some of their proposals, including the idea of timelines, and the short window available before the conference takes place, the lack of capacity on all sides and the impact of COVID-19 are likely to constrain what can be achieved.²⁸ Still, the talks probably will result in at least some progress toward agreements to address some of the issues that have been stumbling blocks over the past four years. At a minimum, a Panglong-21 conference will take place – COVID-19 permitting – and the peace process will be preserved for resumption at some point after the election. As an analyst close to ethnic armed groups said:

There's a will and intention to hold a Panglong-21 conference. The question is less whether it will happen than what the purpose and outcome will be, as there's a huge range of potential outcomes ... but it's also positive if at a minimum the parties recommit themselves to continue the process. That's significantly different from what some of them were saying a year ago.²⁹

Although positive, the return of the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State to the peace process and the prospect of a Panglong-21 conference should not be interpreted as any kind of major breakthrough. The recent negotiations that facilitated these developments aim to address mostly technical problems within the peace process. Others, such as the government's lack of vision and commitment, or its highly centralised decision-making process, and the unwillingness of the government or military to cede any control, will continue to undermine progress toward a peace settlement until they are addressed.³⁰ These are discussed in more detail in Section IV.

There are also a number of issues that could stymie even the modest goals of the government and NCA signatories. The first is the lack of clarity over the position of the Myanmar military, and in particular its commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, on the recent talks. The NCA signatories' key demand – clarification of some terms in the ceasefire accord – could encounter pushback from the military, particularly if its leadership wants to deprive the NLD of political mileage ahead

²⁶ Two key terms that remain undefined in the NCA are “ceasefire areas” and “interim period”. The ambiguity has, for example, complicated the demarcation of territory between signatories and the military.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, analyst and ethnic armed group leader, Yangon, February 2020.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, government peace negotiator and diplomat briefed on peace process, Yangon, February 2020.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former peace negotiator, Yangon, February 2020.

of the election.³¹ Even while talks were taking place, the Myanmar army has clashed with both the Karen National Union and Restoration Council of Shan State, both NCA signatories. Military obstruction was also partly to blame for the Restoration Council of Shan State's leader, Lieutenant General Yawd Serk, being unable to travel to a meeting in Naypyitaw in late October, which delayed the resumption of formal talks with NCA signatories.³²

The election is also likely to amplify the ethnic grievances that underpin Myanmar's armed conflicts.³³ Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD is expected to win enough seats to choose the president and form the next government, thanks to her popularity with the Burman majority, but ethnic minorities are increasingly aggrieved by her government's Burman nationalist tone and Burman dominance in political institutions. Rather than curb its ambitions in ethnic minority areas to defuse tension, the NLD has redoubled its efforts to win seats there, forming an Ethnic Affairs Committee to spearhead its campaign.³⁴ The government has also relaxed residency requirements for voting, which has angered ethnic parties because it means that more Burman migrants living in ethnic minority areas – who are likely to support the NLD – will be able to cast ballots. Although an important step for ensuring universal suffrage in practice, it is perceived as an attempt to shore up NLD support in minority regions.³⁵ The Union Election Commission is also expected to cancel voting in parts or whole constituencies in minority areas due to armed conflict.

This dynamic is most evident in Rakhine State, where marginalisation under the NLD has caused many ethnic Rakhine to lose faith in the political process. Although the main local political formation, the Arakan National Party, performed strongly in the 2015 election, winning the majority of elected seats in Rakhine State at both the local and national level, the NLD refused to let it form the state government, instead appointing one of its own members of parliament as chief minister.³⁶ In January 2018, police opened fire on a crowd that had gathered in the ancient city of Mrauk-U to mark the anniversary of an independent Rakhine kingdom's fall to the Burmans. They killed at least seven people. Days later, the government arrested the state's leading political figure, Dr Aye Maung, and sentenced him to twenty years' imprisonment for high treason.³⁷ These events badly dented Rakhine faith in electoral democracy and fuelled support for the Arakan Army insurgency that has raged across

³¹ Crisis Group interview, analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February 2020.

³² Crisis Group interview, government peace negotiator, Yangon, February 2020.

³³ For a more detailed assessment of the election and conflict risks, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, op. cit.

³⁴ "No deal: NLD prepares to go it alone in 2020", *Frontier Myanmar*, 28 October 2019.

³⁵ "Myanmar's ethnic parties fear loss of vote share as lower house approves eased residency rules", *The Irrawaddy*, 26 February 2020.

³⁶ Under Myanmar's military-drafted constitution, the president nominates the chief ministers of the state and regional governments regardless of the composition of the local legislature. In March 2020, the NLD voted against a proposal from ethnic parties to amend the constitution to give state and regional legislatures the right to choose their chief minister. See "Myanmar's ruling NLD votes down bill on ethnic chief ministers", Radio Free Asia, 17 March 2020.

³⁷ "Rakhine political leader Dr Aye Maung arrested in Sittwe after Mrauk U violence", *Frontier Myanmar*, 18 January 2018.

the state since January 2019, leaving hundreds dead and at least 78,000 displaced in Rakhine and southern Chin States.³⁸

The other factor creating uncertainty is the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Myanmar has had only a limited number of confirmed cases at the time of writing, the government has introduced a range of social distancing measures, such as bans on large gatherings, in order to mitigate the contagion's potential spread. The Restoration Council of Shan State has already been forced to cancel a planned "national-level political dialogue" between the group and other Shan stakeholders to gather input for the Panglong-21 conference. Negotiators in the peace process have also since agreed to push back the national peace conference to July or August.³⁹ Given how little is known about the pandemic's possible evolution in Myanmar, these dates should be treated with caution. But those involved in the peace process say all sides are committed to convening the highly symbolic conference at some point this year.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, op. cit. The government's official figures put the number of displaced at 78,000 but only count those in recognised camps. Rakhine civil society groups estimate the true number of displaced to be far higher. See "164,211 people displaced due to conflict in Rakhine, according to REC", Narinjara, 5 May 2020.

³⁹ See "RCSS dialogue with Shan residents postponed over Myanmar's coronavirus concerns", *The Irrawaddy*, 17 March 2020; and "Govt negotiators, armed groups agree to postpone Panglong to July", *The Myanmar Times*, 6 April 2019.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, government peace negotiator, Yangon, April 2019.

IV. The Need for a Decisive Shake-up

The Panglong-21 peace conference would mark the conclusion of the formal peace negotiations under the current government's term, after which attention will turn to the elections. The hiatus could last anywhere from six to twelve months, and there would likely be a similar break even if COVID-19 concerns delay Panglong-21. The elections themselves could also be postponed on account of the pandemic, but whenever they take place the NLD is likely to win enough seats to again select the president and form the new government. The NLD could thus resume talks almost immediately after the polls, though it is more likely to wait until it swears in a new cabinet, expected (under the current schedule) in late March 2021. All sides should use this period of downtime constructively, both to re-examine their positions and to address weaknesses in their strategy and approach.

The government has a particular responsibility to set the tone and direction of future peace talks, and to use its political authority to drive the process forward. If the peace process is to make progress from 2021, the NLD will need to show newfound levels of leadership, commitment, empathy and flexibility. The party has a major asset in the person of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, who still enjoys immense political capital, but this advantage alone will not be sufficient: the NLD government will need a decisive change in approach to rebuild damaged trust with ethnic armed groups, particularly the NCA signatories involved in formal negotiations toward a political settlement.

Key steps the government could take to relaunch the process include:

Articulate a new vision for the peace process. The NLD approached the peace process in 2016 as a means to an end – achieving its desired constitutional reforms – and the hollowness of its commitment soon became apparent. Both in public and in private, government officials and peace negotiators also show a lack of empathy for the legitimate grievances of ethnic communities, and a misunderstanding of how Burmans – particularly Burman elites – are perceived by many minority groups.⁴¹ In order to gain the trust of ethnic armed group negotiators, the NLD should articulate a vision that goes beyond the platitudes that presently dominate its statements and more clearly distinguishes its own position from that of the military.⁴² Key to this vision is what a future federal democratic union might look like in practice, in particular how it would address the grievances of minorities and reduce the longstanding Burman Buddhist dominance over levers of power.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, analysts and ethnic armed groups leaders, Yangon, February and May 2020.

⁴² The government refers regularly to political dialogue leading to a democratic federal union with equality. But it gives little detail. It also regularly repeats junta-era slogans, talking of the importance of “unity”, “Union spirit” and all ethnic groups living in “harmony and solidarity”. See, for example, “Message sent by President U Win Myint on the occasion of the 73rd Union Day 2020”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 12 February 2020; and “State Counsellor opens Ethnic Cultural Festival-2020”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2 February 2020.

Back up this vision with short-term actions. The 2008 constitution is a barrier to decentralisation of power in the short term, because it establishes a centralised governance structure and can only be amended with the military's backing.⁴³ Nevertheless, the NLD could do much more under the current framework to signal its commitment to granting more autonomy to ethnic minorities. It could start immediately after the next elections: rather than repeat its actions in 2016, when it selected its own parliamentarians as chief ministers of Rakhine and Shan States despite not holding pluralities in those state legislatures, it should appoint chief ministers based on these assemblies' composition following the polls scheduled for November 2020. The NLD could also use its control of government and the national parliament to undertake decentralisation measures that do not require constitutional change, such as providing more autonomy to the current state and region administrations and boosting their capacity. Such short-term actions will build confidence in its long-term vision for a political solution to Myanmar's conflicts.

Overhaul and expand the peacemaking team. Many of the government's current negotiators lack the commitment and desire to lead the peace process, and appear to have little understanding of the conflicts or the ethnic grievances that underpin them.⁴⁴ Below the leadership, most of the staff at the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre are former bureaucrats or government staff on secondment. Many of them see working on the peace process as a career detour, and their instinct is to place a high priority on protocol and formalities rather than the actual negotiations. Although some civil servants are capable and committed, the most effective members are often those who come from outside the government and party. The NLD should look both within its own ranks and its broader network to overhaul and expand its current team by bringing in full-time members and advisers from diverse backgrounds, including business leaders, political representatives, civil society leaders and academics, who have the commitment and vision to help the government drive the process forward.

Empower peace representatives. The government's decision-making process is highly centralised in the office of Aung San Suu Kyi. The representatives it sends to negotiate are not empowered to make decisions and instead have to relay proposals back to headquarters. "We are like messengers", said one negotiator. "We note down what the ethnic armed groups say and give it to [the State Counsellor's Office]".⁴⁵ Although this issue is primarily one of delegating responsibility, it may help to remove the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre from the state counsellor's office and create a new, more independent, ministerial-level peace body. This step would not only improve coordination between the government's top peace negotiator and other ministries, but also send a strong signal that the government is committed to the peace process. It is essential, however, that this body be genuinely empowered to streamline decision-making and implementation, not created simply as a public relations stunt.

⁴³ The constitution created sub-national governments and legislatures in the seven ethnic minority-dominated states. These institutions have little decision-making power or autonomy.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Yangon, February 2020.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, government peace negotiator, Yangon, February 2020.

Prioritise genuinely informal dialogue. The Thein Sein administration's peace team developed trust with ethnic armed group leaders in part through regular informal meetings at which issues could be discussed openly. When the NLD took over, it dispensed with this approach, focusing on formal talks and performative set-piece ceremonies. More recently, the government has recognised the importance of more open dialogue, but it has yet to pursue genuinely informal talks. "The government's definition of informal isn't really that different from previous formal meetings. It's still structured, rigid, with all the trappings of a formal meeting", said one source close to ethnic armed groups.⁴⁶ The looming downtime around the elections offers a good opportunity to resume such gatherings away from the pressure of deadlines and formal negotiating positions. When it becomes possible, donors could help arrange retreats or study trips with less strict schedules to allow for mingling and discussions.

In parallel, the military should:

Halt infrastructure projects in ethnic armed group territory. The military's construction of a strategic road through Karen National Union-held territory in Kayin State – and the inability of the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee to resolve the dispute – was one of the key reasons that the Karen National Union withdrew from the peace process in 2018. More recently, the Karen National Union has accused the military of using drones to undertake reconnaissance of its bases. Both are contrary to the spirit (if not the letter) of the NCA and have severely undermined confidence in the agreement.⁴⁷ Fighting sparked by the road construction has resulted in civilian casualties, which also represents a likely violation of the NCA. The military should immediately stop building infrastructure in areas under the control of ethnic armed groups.

Demarcate territory with NCA signatories. The military has argued that building the road in Kayin State is not a violation of the NCA in part because territory has not yet been demarcated. But the absence of demarcation is largely the result of military obstruction: when ethnic armed groups have raised the issue during negotiations, the military has refused to discuss it.⁴⁸ Immediately demarcating territory would rebuild some trust and create more confidence among ethnic armed groups that the military is genuinely interested in a negotiated solution, rather than using the NCA to weaken the ethnic armed groups' hold over their territory, as has often been the case in the past.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, peace process analyst, May 2020. See "Karen ceasefire frays under Tatmadaw road-building push", *Frontier Myanmar*, 28 February 2020; and "KNU accuses military of using drones to spy on its bases", *Myanmar Now*, 24 January 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, peace process analyst and analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February and May 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts, Yangon, February and May 2020.

Together, the government and military should:

Strengthen the joint nature of the peace process. The peace process is supposed to be co-managed by all parties, but the government and military have been reluctant to genuinely share control with ethnic armed groups. In key peace process institutions such as the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee and the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee, which oversees the political dialogue process, the government and military have appointed the chair and ethnic armed groups are left to appoint the deputies.⁵⁰ Introducing a rotating leadership, particularly for the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, would send an important message that these bodies are “joint” in practice and not merely in name, and could help to make them more effective.

Strengthen the ceasefire and adhere to its terms. The failure to implement some ceasefire terms – for example, the stipulation that the military and ethnic armed groups meet within fourteen days of signing to set timelines for implementation – or to jointly define terms in the text such as “ceasefire areas” and “interim period”, have sapped confidence among signatories and discouraged other ethnic armed groups from signing.⁵¹ The government’s perceived failure to stick to the “interim arrangements” section – for example, in not consulting signatories on changes to Myanmar’s land laws – has also undermined the agreement. The government and military should work with NCA signatories to clarify key sections of the ceasefire accord and begin implementation of the interim arrangements, such as those that specify coordination on health, education and social development. Most pressingly, they ought to coordinate on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁵²

Adopt a more flexible policy toward NCA non-signatories. Presently, ethnic armed groups that have not signed the NCA are unable to formally participate in political dialogue negotiations toward a Union Peace Accord. Given that some of these groups are among the country’s largest and most active, this requirement is a major barrier to progress in achieving peace. Without their participation, the process lacks legitimacy and inclusivity. The government and military should adopt a more flexible policy – for example, allowing them to participate in political dialogue once they have reached a bilateral ceasefire, but prior to signing the nationwide ceasefire, which will inevitably require time since most groups will not sign until some of the terms are amended.

For their part, ethnic armed groups should:

Clarify policy positions on key issues. Ethnic armed groups have yet to clearly articulate what they want from the peace process beyond statements covering broad ideals. The lack of clarity is understandable: the signatories are diverse and struggle to develop consensus positions. But it hinders both progress in negotiations and

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, peace process analyst and analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February 2020.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group official and analyst close to ethnic armed groups, Yangon, February 2020.

⁵² Crisis Group Briefing, *Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, op. cit.

leaders' efforts to delegate authority to negotiating teams. Most urgently, ethnic groups should detail the powers they would want ethnic minority-dominated areas to have under a federal system.

Sequence demands to build trust. Ethnic armed groups that have signed the NCA should give careful consideration to how they approach negotiations after the election. Immediately pushing for significant political concessions, such as the withdrawal of the Myanmar military from politics, even in the expectation that they will ultimately scale back their demands, could further harm relations with senior government and military leaders. A better approach may be to focus on less controversial topics – for example, land law reform or cooperation between government and ethnic-run systems in the health and education sectors – in order to build trust and avoid a backlash, and then make progress over time on the bigger issues of federalism, power sharing and integration of armed forces.

Meanwhile, all parties to the peace process should:

Simplify the peace process structure. The present architecture is overly complex, particularly the aspects dealing with the political dialogue process (see Appendix B). In their attempt to generate a genuinely “bottom-up” dialogue, the drafters of the framework for political dialogue created an extensive consultation process that included a wide range of stakeholders. Although the objective was laudable, the end result has proven largely ineffective and an unmanageable staffing burden for all sides. All parties should review the political dialogue structure, particularly the usefulness and practicality of the numerous thematic working committees, supervisory committees and national-level dialogues. The aim should be to streamline the process while maintaining a reasonable level of consultation and participation. Donors should assist this review, if requested, without being wedded to the current architecture just because they supported its development.

Enhance women's role. Despite commitments in the NCA and framework for political dialogue that women would be given a significant role, the peace process remains dominated by older men. Although the proportion of women representatives at Union Peace Conferences has increased steadily, from just 7 per cent of attendees at the first meeting in January 2016 to 22 per cent at the July 2018 talks, they remain underrepresented and their capacity to influence decisions extremely limited.⁵³ Away from these large conferences, women hold even fewer positions on key peace process institutions, such as the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee or Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee. This lack of participation belies the fact that women play an influential but often informal role in politics and civil society, including peacebuilding initiatives and dispute resolution at the community level.

Many women in Myanmar have valuable political experience as mediators, facilitators, negotiators and peacebuilders but are excluded from formal processes. Drawing on this practical experience would not only ensure that women's perspectives are heard – and women's rights reflected in potential peace agreements – but also bring

⁵³ “Women's Participation in Myanmar's Peace Process”, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 8 August 2019.

fresh thinking to help reinvigorate the stalled negotiations. All parties should create opportunities for women to meaningfully participate in every aspect of the peace process and future governance, not just peace conferences.

Finally, donors and non-governmental organisations should help all parties to:

Begin examining the economics of conflict. To date, the peace process has focused on reaching political solutions to Myanmar's conflicts. On their own, however, these are unlikely to suffice. Armed groups, including Myanmar military-aligned Border Guard Forces and militias, rely on various sources of mostly illicit income and almost certainly will not give up their arms without a viable plan for replacing at least some of what they are earning now with revenues from licit businesses. The explosion of crystal methamphetamine (or "ice") production in northern Shan State over the past few years highlights the risks of ignoring the issue.⁵⁴ Armed groups may not be as resistant to giving up these revenue streams as they might initially appear. Illicit income entails a range of significant risks, among them the possibility of upsetting the political balance among different non-state armed groups.⁵⁵

Finding sustainable alternatives to this illicit economy will inevitably be a long process. Given the limited available capacity within the government, military and ethnic armed groups, they are likely to focus instead on more pressing issues that are being discussed at the negotiating table. In parallel, however, donors could begin supporting non-governmental organisations, think-tanks and independent researchers to undertake detailed studies on the economic dynamics underlying the conflict. These studies could then be used by decision-makers in consultation with armed groups to come up with income substitution solutions. One example is informal trade, from which many armed groups profit by running their own unofficial border crossings. Most of the goods that pass through these gates – everything from cattle to liquor and detergent – are not outright illegal, but regulations encourage traders to use non-official crossings. A roadmap to revise these regulations and give ethnic armed groups time to make the transition to licit businesses could substantially reduce illicit trade.

Similarly, the next six to twelve months offer an opportunity for the same groups to devote time and resources to studying other important but overlooked political economy issues that are affecting or will affect the peace process. One example is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (part of China's Belt and Road Initiative), which could entrench the role of armed groups in the political economy, particularly in

⁵⁴ The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimated in 2018 that the regional methamphetamine economy was worth \$60 billion, with production centred in Myanmar. If even a small slice of the value chain is within the country, it makes meth the most lucrative economic activity in Shan State and entrenches a political economy in which armed groups hold significant power. For full details, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°299, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, 8 January 2019. For drug revenue figures, see "Transnational Organised Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, July 2019.

⁵⁵ See, for example, "Myanmar army seizes drugs, detains leaders in raid on KIA offshoot group", Radio Free Asia, 26 March 2020.

Shan State, and aggravate underlying ethnic grievances toward the government.⁵⁶ Another is the rarely discussed role of the thousands of pro-military militias across Myanmar that are not included in the peace process. Although some of these are small village defence units with little clout, others have developed into fighting forces with more political and military influence than many of the ethnic armed groups involved in the peace process. They have built themselves up primarily by engaging in illicit economic activities, including running casinos, as well as smuggling narcotics and other goods.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, op. cit., for further discussion on the impact of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor on conflict in Myanmar.

⁵⁷ On militias, see "Militias in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, July 2016.

V. Conclusion

Discussions over the past six months among the NLD government, the military and signatories of the National Ceasefire Agreement have confirmed that all stakeholders want the peace process to continue after the general election tentatively slated for November this year. Given the alternatives, even a mostly symbolic Panglong-21 conference would be welcome, and all sides should work toward this short-term goal. But the peace conference should not be seen for more than what it is: an attempt to keep the peace process alive into 2021. Over the last two years, progress has largely stalled, and tensions have increased among the three key stakeholders. It was only the government's electoral imperatives and the prospect of the ceasefire collapsing that brought key ethnic armed groups back to the negotiating table.

Nevertheless, the elections offer an important chance for a reset after the missed opportunities and disappointments of the NLD's first term. The peace process will be put on hold for at least six months after the Panglong-21 conference due to the elections, and the parties should use this time to lay the groundwork for greater progress in negotiations when they start again in 2021. Even if the spread of COVID-19 necessitates further delays for convening the next Panglong-21 (and potentially also the elections), there will still be an equivalent period of downtime during which formal negotiations will not take place. All sides should use this period to review their positions, address their internal weaknesses, and build trust and confidence with each other away from the pressure of meetings and deadlines. All should make the most of this opportunity, but the primary responsibility rests with the NLD, which is likely to remain in power for another five-year term. The onus will then be on the NLD government to articulate a new, more inclusive vision for the peace process and to exhibit the political will to make it a reality.

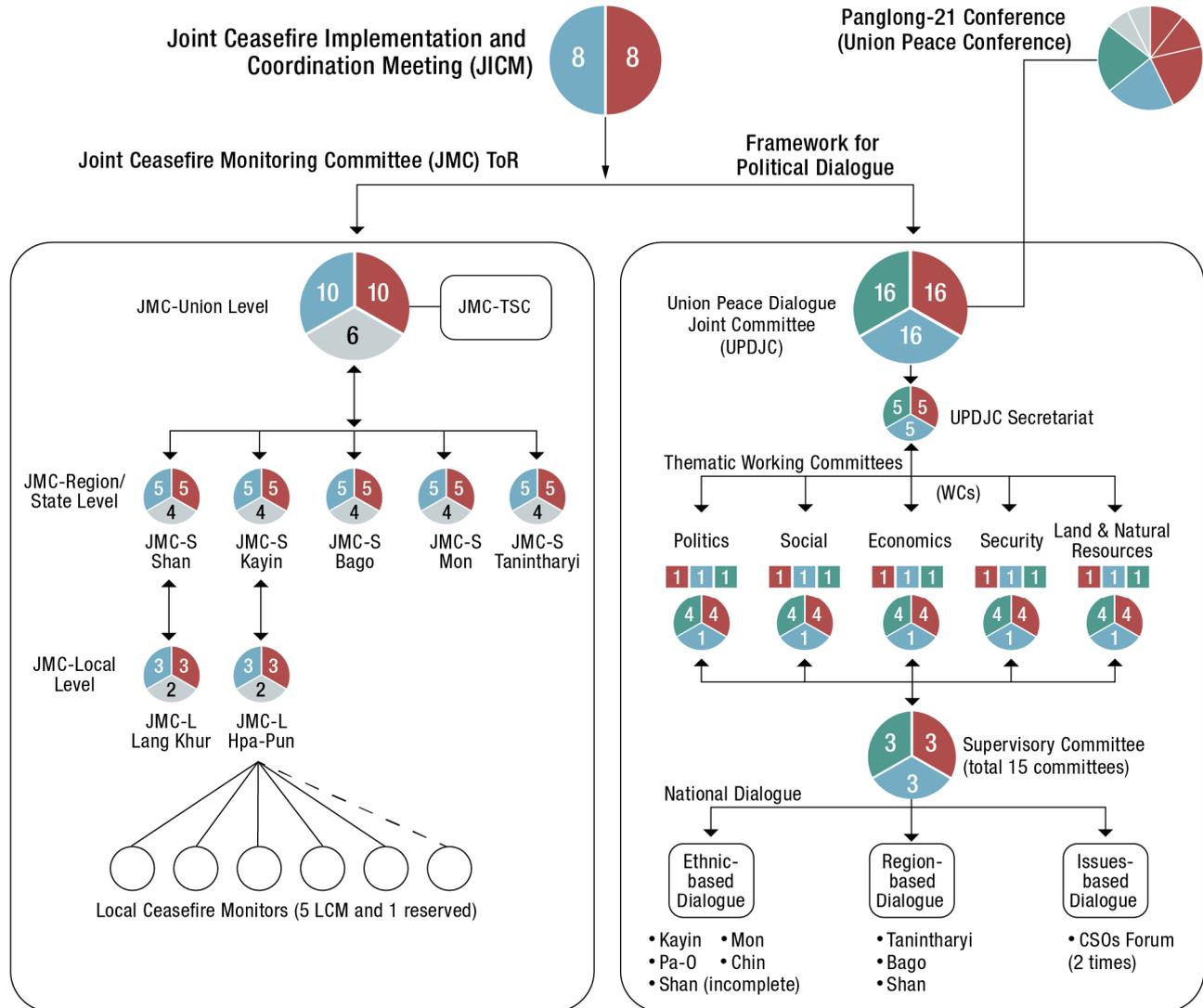
Yangon/Brussels, 19 June 2020

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



International Crisis Group/KO/Dec 2015. Based on UN map no. 4168 Rev. 3 (June 2012).

Appendix B: Organogram: Peace Process



● Government, Parliament, Myanmar Military
 ● Ethnic Armed Groups
 ● Political Parties
 ● Civilian Representatives

Participants in the Panglong-21 Conference (Union Peace Conference)

- 75 representatives of the government
- 75 representatives of parliament
- 150 representatives of the Myanmar military
- 150 representatives of the ethnic armed organisations
- 150 representatives of registered political parties
- 50 ethnic representatives
- 50 relevant stakeholders

700 Total

Appendix C: List of Main Ethnic Armed Groups and Their Ceasefire Status

	Armed Group	Bilateral Ceasefire	NCA Signatory?
1	United Wa State Party	6 Sep 2011	No
2	National Democratic Alliance Army ("Mongla group")	7 Sep 2011	No
3	Democratic Kayin Benevolent Army	3 Nov 2011	Yes
4	Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South	2 Dec 2011	Yes
5	Chin National Front	6 Jan 2012	Yes
6	Karen National Union	12 Jan 2012	Yes
7	Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North	28 Jan 2012	No
8	New Mon State Party	1 Feb 2012	Yes
9	Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council	7 Feb 2012	Yes
10	Karenni National Progressive Party	7 Mar 2012	No
11	Arakan Liberation Party	5 Apr 2012	Yes
12	National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang	9 Apr 2012	No
13	Pao National Liberation Organisation	25 Aug 2012	Yes
14	All Burma Students Democratic Front	5 Aug 2013	Yes
15	Kachin Independence Organisation	No *	No
16	Ta'ang National Liberation Army	No	No
17	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army ("Kokang group")	No †	No
18	Arakan Army	No	No
19	Arakan National Council ‡	No	No
20	Lahu Democratic Union ‡	No	Yes
21	Wa National Organisation ‡	No	No

* An agreement was signed 30 May 2012, containing, *inter alia*, a commitment to "efforts to achieve de-escalation and cessation of hostilities". Clashes have continued, however.

† This group's 1989 ceasefire ended after an attack by the Myanmar army in 2009, with one faction being routed (and its leaders fleeing to China) and the other agreeing to become a Border Guard Force unit under the partial control of the Myanmar army. The routed faction subsequently reactivated, with support from other groups.

‡ Small groups with no real military forces. Previously, they were told they could join the political dialogue but were not eligible to sign the NCA. In early 2017, however, they were invited to sign the NCA. Unlike other ethnic armed groups, the Lahu Democratic Union was able to sign the NCA without a bilateral ceasefire because it has no troops.

Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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