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A Civil War? Political Violence and Non-Violence in a Democracy Movement

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Abstract

Global civil society has often been seen as a peaceful realm of cooperation apart from the violence of state warfare and the competition of the international economy. The involvement of domestic civil society organisations, as well as Global Civil Society networks, has also been identified as a factor in democratisation. However, analysis of the actual roles of civil society organisations in non-democratic societies reveals a range of positions on the use of political violence and non-violence in the transition to democracy. Using a case study of the Burmese opposition movement, this paper examines how attitudes to political violence are affected by and affect networks of local and global civil society. This paper uses a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with twenty five participants from Burmese opposition groups based in Thailand. Participants were at both leadership and membership levels of the organisations, including youth/student, women's, ethnic/indigenous and trade union organisations. It is argued that the relationship between civil society and political violence is more complex than sometimes assumed. Even organisations with a stated commitment to non-violence and peace-building may have an ambiguous relationship to the issue of political violence in the transition to democracy.

Research in the areas of global civil society and political violence has tended to reinforce a dichotomy between the two in normative and descriptive terms. While civil society groups are assumed to be non-violent and opposed to war, armed groups are sometimes treated as if they had no connection to the networks and concerns of civil society. This paper uses a qualitative analysis of interviews with participants in both armed and non-armed groups in the Burmese opposition movement to understand how armed struggle and non-violent action operate in this context. In discussing the needs, lacks, problems, motivations, actions and relationships of their groups and communities, participants demonstrated that armed and non-armed groups often had more in common than is sometimes assumed. A range of viewpoints on political violence existed across the groups, with many armed group members supporting peaceful solutions and many members of non-violent organisations defending aspects of the armed struggle. There have been difficulties however, especially for members of the armed groups, in attempting to reconcile their own viewpoints with dominant international perspectives on violence and non-violence. It is concluded that assumptions about the absolute non-violence of global civil society can have a distorting effect in particular local contexts.

Theorists of global civil society have tended to associate the concept with a commitment to non-violence. John Keane's view of global civil society is that "violence is anathema to its spirit and substance. This follows, by definition, because global civil society is marked by a tendency to non-violence" (2003, 145). While Keane's assertion is broadly representative of the Liberal consensus on the subject, not all theorists share the definition of civil society as a sphere of non-violent voluntary association. Chandhoke has problematised the assumptions that civil society is non-violent and characterised by horizontal relationships of trust. Taken together, these two assumptions render invisible the political nature of resistance by oppressed groups and fail to recognise the inequalities of power that constitute the oppression in the first place (2003, 61). For marginalised or oppressed groups to take advantage of the rights of civil society, such as the right to organise a social movement or trade union, is in itself often a struggle occasioning violent repression. In such situations, civil society is not experienced as a neutral and peaceful realm of association, but rather as a set of unequal power relations linked to economic class and enforced by state violence (2003, 207-220). In a similar historical argument which generalises the experiences of developing states from a comparative analysis of the development of civil societies in India and in Europe, Mitra (2003) argues that emerging civil societies have always been characterised by political violence. From this perspective, outbreaks of violent resistance are less a result of state failure and more a result of social conflicts focussed around a developing state. The existence of violence in a developing civil society should not be seen as exceptional but rather as a sign of underlying conflicts over political values and status.

Theorists of global civil society have often promoted it as a field of practice which can reinforce the governance roles of international organisations and powerful states in the pursuit of international law and peace. Violence in all its forms has been seen as a threat to global civil society, or as part of its 'dark side' (Albrow and Anheir, 2007, 1). Global civil society in turn is seen as mobilising against war, with large scale anti-war protest showing 'both the robust reality of global civil society, and its current weakness as a challenge to geopolitical prerogatives' (Falk, 2005, 76). Others have gone further, claiming that due to the expansion of global civil society and of international law, 'war, meaning violence between socially organised groups, normally states, has become morally unjustifiable' (Ezzat and Kaldor 2007, 19). Kaldor has argued elsewhere that Liberals since Kant have 'envisaged the construction of a liberal international order linked to the rise of domestic civil society, in which force was increasingly limited to policing actions' (2003a, 36). Kaldor identifies with this Kantian tradition (2003b, 583) and emphasises that the conditions of liberal global governance in politico-legal terms are co-constitutive with those of global civil society: 'civil society needs governance, a framework of rules and institutions for civil society to function' (2003a,

109), in particular the 'extension and application of international humanitarian law (the 'laws of war') and human rights law'. Noting that laws need enforcement, Kaldor advocates 'humanitarian intervention' in the form of military force which aims 'not to defeat an enemy but to protect civilians and stabilise war situations so that non-extremist tolerant politics has space to develop.' (2003a, 128)

This pragmatic willingness to consider state violence as potentially legitimate is not generally extended to non-state actors by theorists of global civil society. In what Keane calls 'uncivil war' the traditional rules of state warfare do not apply as the anarchy of non-state violence is unleashed. While traditional civil wars involve rival claimants to state power, uncivil war involves the breakdown of state power, or in currently fashionable terms, state failure. The removal of the state as the stable centre of conflict disturbs the familiar moral order, leading Keane to warn that uncivil war operates 'according to no rules except that of destructiveness' as 'sober restrictions covering the ground rules of war are swept aside' (2004, 155-7). Keane does not feel the need to provide evidence of state warfare being conducted according to sober rules or a care to avoid destruction. While uncivil wars are discussed in terms of periods of communal violence such as in Rwanda and Bosnia, the term is broad enough to cover almost any non-state violence. The only form of resistance that is explicitly exempted from this definition of 'uncivil society' is the non-violent civil disobedience of Thoreau and Gandhi (2004, 109, n1). Keane's concept of uncivil war correlates to what Kaldor calls 'network war', a supposedly new form of conflict involving 'armed networks of non-state and state actors' (2003, 119). The analysis of network war depicts non-state armed groups in pejorative terms as terrorists, fanatics, criminals, mercenaries and followers of charismatic leaders and warlords. Like Keane, Kaldor makes use of the idea of 'failed states' to explain how these groups exploit conditions in which 'the monopoly of legitimate organised violence is being eroded' (2003, 120). In contrast to the potential for state violence to reinforce international norms, non-state violence is seen as destabilising and necessarily contrary to the aims of global civil society.

This view has not been directly challenged by theorists of political violence, who have tended to be engaged in debates about conflict and insurgency rather than the character of global civil society. However, this paper argues that there is more empirical overlap between the subfields of political violence and global civil society than has generally been assumed. Various methods have been used for empirical research into motivating factors in political violence, each with their own benefits and drawbacks. Some researchers have developed econometric models to explain armed activity in terms of 'greed' rather than 'grievance' (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004) or, more recently, simply in terms of the practical opportunity for insurrection (Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2006). The method used in studies of this type has been criticised for the somewhat arbitrary way in which available statistical data has been used to proxy the variables in question (Cramer 2002). The researchers may be overdrawing their conclusions in claiming to have eliminated political grievance as a causal factor in civil war, but such studies introduce some useful scepticism towards generalised claims about structural causes of conflict. Where some writers have claimed that civil wars are generally caused by economic inequality and a deficit of democracy (Mason 2003) others have used statistical analysis over a large number of cases to show that neither factor has any significance in predicting the outbreak of civil war (Fearen and Laitin, 2003). A strength of Fearen and Laitin's study is that they are circumspect in their conclusions, not claiming to have settled the question of what causes conflict, but rather using statistical analysis to rule out some generalisations that cannot be sustained. What such studies can tell us about is precisely the motivating factors that can be generalised across a large number of conflicts. What they can't tell us is what combination of unique circumstances will be relevant in each specific case in initiating and fueling conflict. To answer this question, of critical importance in finding sustainable solutions to civil conflict, there is no substitute for in-depth empirical study of particular cases.

To this end, Humphreys and Weinstein (2006) used a quantitative survey method to study factors in individual participation in the Sierra Leone civil war. As the researchers point out, this method allows for greater consideration of the dynamics of recruitment and mobilisation than cross-country quantitative methods. The survey method also allowed competing hypotheses to be tested against a large sample. However, the standardisation of questions meant these hypotheses were drawn from the existing literature rather than generated from the experiences of respondents. The results consequently present a fairly reliable but not very deep explanation of the phenomena. Other studies have used qualitative analysis of interviews with smaller number of participants to seek understanding of their participation in armed conflict. This approach was used by Florez-Morris (2007) to study members of Colombian guerrilla organisations and by Brett and Specht (2004) to study adolescent child soldiers across several countries. While both studies produced thematic analyses which are rich in personal experiences and insight, the loosely qualitative nature of the methodology makes the process of getting from data to results somewhat opaque.

Theorists of political violence by non-state actors have often perpetuated this dichotomy between the groups and practices they study and those which are accepted as part of global civil society. While some studies have included non-combatants as a control group for comparison with combatants (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006) and others have explored the political experiences of militants prior to recruitment (Florez-Morris, 2007), studies have not generally taken account of relationships between armed and non-armed political groups. Seidman (2001) makes a cogent argument, based on the case of the ANC in South Africa, for paying more attention to the links between groups and individuals engaged in armed struggle and legal forms of political mobilisation. Based on personal experiences as a researcher and a review of existing literature, Seidman argues that such links are likely to be relevant in explaining dynamics of armed group recruitment as well as the direct and indirect influences of armed struggle on non-violent contentious politics.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews with members of both armed and non-armed groups in order to understand the motivations of each group and the interactions between them. The analysis utilised Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), a method of qualitative analysis which allows a measure of transparency and repeatability in the process of coding interview data and assessing emergent themes. The preliminary results discussed in this paper are based on interviews conducted in October and November 2006 during doctoral fieldwork on the Thai-Burma border. A total of forty five participants were interviewed, covering leaders and members of a range of women's, student/youth, ethnic and trade union organisations.¹ For this paper a preliminary analysis has been based on a sample of twenty five interviews, covering thirty two participants.

Participants

Participants were selected from social movement organisations with a presence on the Thai-Burma border. Interviews were conducted at various locations including Bangkok and Chiang Mai in Thailand, Thai border towns such as Mae Sot, Mae Sariang and Sangkla Buri; Mae La Oo refugee camp; and one site on the border of Karen state controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU). Interviews were sought with a range of high profile organisations and others recommended by contacts. These included women's groups, student and youth organisations, ethnic based political groups and trade unions. Where possible, interviews were conducted with activists and grassroots

1 This fieldwork forms part of my doctoral research and was carried out with the support of a grant from Education New Zealand, which is gratefully acknowledged.

members of the groups as well as with leaders and spokespeople. The sample used for this paper includes members and leaders of student and youth, women's, trade union and ethnic groups (see Table 1).

(01) Former member All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), currently Foreign Affairs Committee Member, National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB)
(02) Spokesperson, Karen National Union (KNU)
(03) Spokesperson, Burmese Women's Union (BWU)
(04) Spokesperson, Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT)
(05) Members (three participants), KWAT
(06) Spokesperson, Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF)
(07) Spokespeople (two participants), All Kachin Student and Youth Union (AKSYU)
(08) Spokesperson, Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)
(09) Spokesperson, All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF)
(10) Member, soldier (ABSDF)
(11) Member, soldier, ABSDF
(12) Member, soldier, ABSDF
(13) Member, medic, ABSDF
(14) Leader, school teacher, ABSDF
(15) Member, soldier, Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)
(16) Member, medic, KNLA
(17) Member, Karen Youth Organisation
(18) Member, Karen Youth Organisation
(19) Leader, All Arakan Student and Youth Congress (AASYC)
(20) members, BWU, six participants
(21) Spokesperson, Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB)
(22) Spokesperson, Mon Women's Organisation (MWO)
(23) Spokesperson, New Mon State Party (NMSP)
(24) Spokesperson, Mon Youth Progressive Organisation (MYPO)

Table 1: Participants in the sample used for this study

Of the organisations covered by the sample, five are armed groups or have an armed wing (the ABSDF, NMSP and PSLF are armed and the KNU has an armed wing, the KNLA), while eight have a policy commitment to non-violence (BWU, KWO, KWAT, AKSYU, AASYC, BWU, MWO, MYPO).

Procedure

Interviews were semi-structured and based on a set of questions covering the goals and actions of the groups, as relating to their community, other organisations and the state regime. Participants were asked to describe the most important goals of their organisation, their personal reasons for involvement and the issues for their community. They were also asked about the activities of the group, what support they had received and what further actions they thought were needed to achieve the change they wanted to see. In addition, participants were asked whether they felt their goals and activities were understood and supported by other groups including international NGOs.

Where translation was used, this was usually done by peers from the groups concerned. This kind of

amateur translation involved some loss of precision, but allowed participants to talk more freely than would have been the case if using local translators who were unknown to the participants. Issues of confidentiality, consent and use of information were covered in a written and spoken briefing. Interviews were recorded, then transcribed and manually coded using Nvivo computer software.

Analysis

Coding followed the process of grounded theory as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In the initial phase of open coding, transcripts were coded at the level of meaning expressed by the participant. The ideas or points expressed in the interview were paraphrased as closely as possible into 'meaning units'. The second phase of open coding involved abstracting each statement and grouping together like statements into 'second-order categories'. As with the first phase of coding, an attempt was made to base the coding on the original meaning expressed, even as it was abstracted out of its original specific context and related to other statements. In this way, as concepts and categories emerged through the interpretation of the researcher they also remained grounded in the expressed experiences of the participants. Depending on length, an interview transcript typically generated around 60 coded statements at the initial phase of open coding. During the second phase these statements were grouped together and added to existing 'second-order categories', or a new category was added. As each interview was analysed, fewer new categories were required, until a more-or-less saturated coding model was developed, consisting of 95 distinct categories. The next phase of 'axial coding' involved sorting these second order categories into broad groups, based on patterns emerging from the categorisation and interpretation of statements.

Results

Statements coded from interviews in the sample were grouped into categories of: needs; lacks; problems; motivations; actions; and relationships. Aspects of these categories relating to the themes of political violence and non-violence are summarised below.

Needs

Some participants expressed an explicit need for their group to hold arms in the current situation. The reasons given were to continue to fight for the aims and objectives of the group, to be able to continue political work and access to information from inside the country, and to protect or defend people in border areas. Participants also expressed a need for international understanding of their need to hold arms for self-defence and in pursuit of their goals. A common sentiment was expressed by a member of the ABSDF: 'when they come after us with guns, we need the guns to defend ourselves. I think if people come and talk to us and see the situation, they will understand that'. Others expressed frustration at the lack of international support or funds for groups that hold arms. Members of armed groups in the study felt that they deserved the support of global civil society because they were fighting for democratic change and for the benefit of the people. As one ABSDF member put it, 'the international groups like NGOs, civil society, if they really want to change Burma they need to support armed struggle effectively'. These needs for weapons and support for armed struggle were, unsurprisingly, expressed by members of the armed groups rather than those from non-armed groups.

However, when discussing what forms of action were needed, participants from both armed and non-armed groups expressed support for a combination of tactics, including political mobilisation inside Burma, armed struggle and international pressure on the regime. Statements coded under this

category emphasised that different groups could work together towards the same ends by different means and that this could include both non-violent and armed actions. One women's group member stated that armed and non-armed groups worked together on various campaigns and joint action committees, including seminars for youth dialogue and on issues of democracy, national reconciliation and federal union. 'Our beliefs are the same, we have a common goal, although we are using different strategies. So we are working together all the time.' Asked whether she thought that outside organisations would understand the need to work with armed groups, she said that this should not be confusing to observers who understood the complexity of the situation as well as the common goals of the groups. Another women's group member thought that working towards a people's movement inside Burma was the most effective strategy for change, but because the SPDC regime had broken ceasefire agreements, people should be able to fight back when attacked.

Members of armed groups in the sample also expressed their support and preference for a range of non-violent forms of action. These included expression of the need for more international awareness and pressure on the regime, the need for a grassroots people's movement inside Burma and the need for a political solution to the conflict, leading to reforms. Spokespeople for armed groups wanted more international awareness of the situation and suffering of people in Burma and to counter the 'propaganda' of the SPDC regime. A spokesperson for the New Mon State Party, which includes an armed wing, expressed appreciation for academic researchers who had worked in the area and brought the existence and struggles of the Mon people to the world's attention. Participants from armed groups also emphasised their need for international support. One spokesperson stated that raising international awareness and support for political change in Burma was the most important goal of his organisation and the primary purpose of their presence in Thailand. Another emphasised the need for humanitarian assistance to people in conflict areas, arguing that with more food, medical care and education, people would have more energy and ability to engage in non-violent forms of political action. Members of both armed and non-armed groups discussed international awareness-raising and networking as potential sources of financial and human resources for their groups. For instance, a soldier from the Karen National Liberation Army said that he hoped that people who heard about the situation in Karen state through this study would be able to come to the area and help in some way. One women's group member said: 'when other people know about what is happening inside...we got donations or people want to come and help'. Members of women's, youth and student organizations also discussed the strength of international networks that allowed them to participate in international campaigns and learn from other organizations. Participants from both armed and non-armed groups expressed a need for peace in their country. One participant from an armed group, when asked what he would like to see change in Burma, said that he did not want there to be a lot of armed organisations and wanted the people to be able to live in peace.

All members of armed groups in the sample said that more international pressure on the regime in Burma was needed. Pressure was seen as needed to persuade the regime to enter into dialogue, to respect human rights and to give up power. Support was consistently expressed for 'tripartite dialogue' between armed ethnic groups, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the SPDC regime. Participants supported international pressure towards these goals in the form of action by the United Nations Security Council, diplomatic pressure by states and sanctions on Burmese military and business interests. No support was expressed for outside military intervention, with one participant saying supporting this would be 'quite crazy'. Participants from both armed and non-armed groups supported a political solution to current armed conflicts through dialogue and political reforms leading to civilian rule, multi-party democracy and equal rights for all ethnic groups.

Lacks

Statements from participants relating to things that their groups and communities lack can be seen as both causes and consequences of armed conflicts. Participants across the different groups identified a lack of education and economic opportunities in their communities, as well as ethnic and gender discrimination in these areas. Participants from non-Burman ethnic communities felt that they lacked political power and rights. Women also faced a lack of power over their lives, in the form of abuses such as rape by members of the military and forced prostitution. Women also lacked control over marriage and were expected to support their men during armed conflict while also looking after children and family members.

A lack of international awareness, understanding or support was expressed by several participants from both armed and non-armed groups. However, members of armed groups reported a more widespread lack of support than members of non-armed groups. Participants who felt their groups lacked international support attributed this to various factors including isolation, lack of information sharing, lack of contacts and international interest in national politics rather than minority interests. These concerns were expressed by members of the armed groups as well as members of the smaller, less well known non-armed groups (KWAT, AKSYU). In addition, members of armed groups felt that they lacked international support and understanding due to a widespread opposition to armed struggle and political violence. Armed groups in the sample have long struggled to access any international assistance, including humanitarian assistance or support for their education and health departments. When the ABSDF was in the early stages of organising students fleeing state repression in the late 1980s, emergency food supplied by international NGOs was restricted to rice and fish paste and only supplied to non-combatants. The group survived by trading rice for other food supplies and sharing half-rations between armed and non-armed members. Later, the group managed to access some aid funding to assist in setting up education and health programs for refugees on the border. But in 2001, this funding too was cut, with USAID withdrawing support. Group members interviewed felt that this indicated a changing international attitude against armed groups, which was confirmed by the declaration of the “war on terrorism”. A spokesperson for the KNU also linked a lack of recognition from international groups and governments to a perception that armed groups were linked to terrorism. This was due, in his opinion, to a lack of understanding of the causes of conflict:

‘when you talk about arms, some of the westerners think that you’re from the other side, like you’re from the terrorist group. But we have to explain to them why we hold arms. From the very beginning, people don’t want to hold arms. All the ethnic groups from the early days, they would like to solve the problem by democratic ways. But when you are forced to come to this solution, I think all the ethnic groups started with this struggle. To get the support, we have to explain to them the atrocity that our people facing in our homeland, the discrimination that our people facing.’ (interview 2).

Interestingly, this participant reported that similar attitudes had initially been encountered from students and other political refugees fleeing repression in the cities. He felt that some people were wary of working with armed groups because of government propaganda that ethnic armed groups were terrorists. Only once they had stayed for a while at the border and seen that the armed groups were there ‘only to defend their community, defend themselves’ did they understand and support the need to hold arms. This explanation links the lack of international support for armed groups to a lack of awareness and understanding of the situation for their communities, the causes of the conflicts and the motivations for armed resistance.

Problems

Problems which were explicitly identified by participants as causes of armed conflict included government denial of ethnic rights and refusal to listen to minority voices, government attacks on community leaders, government reneging on agreements, ineffectiveness of peaceful protest and desperation caused by poverty and a lack of alternative forms of resistance. Many of these problems, like the conflicts they are linked to, go back 50 years or more to the political struggles of post-independence Burma. Specific grievances which sparked conflict included the 1948 disbanding of ethnic-based military units such as the Karen Rifles, the lack of promised Karen and Mon States in the independent Union of Burma, and the 1961 government suppression of the traditional Palaung royalty. The 1988 student conflict with the regime which preceded the formation of the ABSDF had been sparked by a heavy police response to a fight in a Rangoon tea shop. When students protested, demanding an official investigation, the state responded with further violence and protests escalated. When the military intervened and crushed the protests many students fled to the jungle and took up arms. Participants described an ongoing political crisis in the 1980s as the BSPP regime maintained a one-party system and a socialist ideology that was in conflict with government practice, while enforcing order with 'draconian censorship laws' and arrest of people who criticised the government. Members of each armed group cited a lack of consultation or unwillingness to listen on the part of successive regimes as causes of the ongoing and unresolved armed conflicts.

The impossibility of working with the regime was also identified as a problem by participants from non-armed groups. Members of women's groups felt that they were hated by the regime for exposing the abuses of women by members of the military and for their criticisms of the regime. Members of the groups had been blacklisted and forced to flee the country. It was felt that any contact with the regime was dangerous. Participants from groups that had produced reports on social problems in Burma did not believe that this would be heeded by the regime or have an effect on policy.

Participants reported widespread anger with the regime. In the cities this 'anger' and 'bad feelings' toward the government was caused by decisions such as the cancellation of certain banknotes in 1987 which instantly impoverished many people, as well as by political repression and violence toward protesters. In rural areas, resentment of local BSPP authorities was exacerbated by poverty, economic restrictions and widespread corruption. One participant from Karen state said that this situation made the people 'desperate to fight for their freedom in terms of political freedom, economic freedom.' Another participant, from Kachin state, said that most people learnt to both fear and oppose government and local authority officers from the first time they encountered them: 'Because always the SPDC threaten with the gun to the civilian or local people, so they are afraid of that weapon, but in their mind they know what they should do.'

A range of abuses by the military regime was catalogued by participants across all groups in the sample. Recent army offensives and expansion of military bases in the border area, especially in Karen state, had caused villagers to be confined to their homes or forcibly relocated and cut off from their fields and food supplies. Others had been forced to flee their homes, hiding in the jungle or crossing the border into Thailand. Various participants from Karen and Kachin states reported an increase in forced labour, conscription and extortion by military authorities to fund the expanded military presence in those areas. Groups from Mon state reported that despite a ceasefire with the military regime, people continued to suffer forced labour and relocation and other human rights violations including rape and killings. Participants from all women's groups reported widespread rape by soldiers, which they felt was sanctioned by military authorities and used as a weapon of war against their communities. The regime was also blamed for involvement in drug trafficking and

creating the conditions for widespread drug addiction, especially among young people in Kachin state. These abuses and the resentment and resistance they engender can be seen as both cause and consequence of armed conflict.

Communities experiencing this kind of military onslaught faced seemingly impossible choices between resistance and surrender. Participants discussed problems with both armed resistance and the ceasefire agreements that many armed ethnic groups have signed with the central government. Armed resistance was seen as leading to further loss of life, abuse of human rights and damage to property. Fighting was seen to hurt innocent people and cause suffering. Resistance was also seen as unlikely to succeed, given the superior firepower of the military regime. The difficulties of armed struggle were furthered by a lack of weapons and international support. Global trends such as the end of the cold war and the declaration of a “war on terrorism” were cited as reasons for this. The difficulties of continued resistance have led many armed groups to sign ceasefire agreements with the regime. As one participant from Kachin state put it:

‘Most of the armed groups, why they start to get a ceasefire with the SPDC is that any armed organisation faces a lot of problems. Most of your local people shot dead by SPDC. For example, here is maybe one brigade settled in the region, but in the region most are local people living. So the SPDC came to fight them several times, but the local people could not resist them anymore. They have lack of food, lack of health... So finally the ethnic armed groups know their local people face a problem and they start to get ceasefire with the SPDC.’

Several participants criticised existing ceasefire agreements as ‘not genuine’ or a ‘false peace’. Reasons given were that ethnic groups had been forced to accept the ceasefire, that the ceasefire did not address the underlying causes of conflict or political reforms and that expansion of military bases and abuses of the people had continued. These concerns were expressed by both armed and non-armed groups. In this context, even groups with a principled commitment to non-violence were not in favour of disarming the non-state armed groups. As one women’s group member said:

‘I think to disarm them is not, I mean it is very difficult. Because they are standing where they are to protect their people, not that they love fighting or for themselves. They think that this is the way to protect the people. So I think that would be difficult.’

Differences of opinion over the question of ceasefire agreements had caused division amongst the opposition groups. One participant reported arguments between supporters and opponents of the ceasefires as a divisive issue at youth networking meetings. Another expressed the criticisms that ceasefire groups were more interested in ‘getting rich’ and maintaining their own local authority than in working toward democracy or cooperating with other opposition groups. Disagreement with the decision of the Palaung State Liberation Organisation to sign a ceasefire was the founding moment for the PSLF to break away from their ‘mother organisation’ and to ‘continue to fight for our aim and objectives as we have laid down’ (interview 6). However, the ceasefire in Palaung state has made it difficult for the PSLF to continue the armed struggle, as they were cut off from communications, arms and recruits. Similarly, the ABSDF has found their operations in Kachin and Karen states restricted following the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) ceasefire and the 2004 ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ between the regime and the KNU. Mon organisations have had difficulties with a ceasefire agreement that forbids political activity or contact with outside organisations. Members of the organisations active inside Mon state said the ceasefire had made it harder for them to express their opinions freely or organise protests. It was difficult to deal with other organisations and they had to be very careful when arranging meetings or contact.

Several participants from both armed and non-armed groups expressed a belief that armed struggle could not solve their problems. For some participants from non-armed groups this was expressed as a commitment to ‘peaceful ways to get change’ and a hope that negotiation to end the conflicts would be possible. Others, from armed groups, saw the armed struggle as a legitimate last resort, but never as a full solution. This attitude was expressed in similar terms as statements expressing a need for a combination of tactics and for a political solution to the conflicts. But for some, the unpopularity of the armed struggle was something they had to reluctantly accept. These participants felt that a commitment to the armed struggle was the best contribution they could make to political change in Burma and felt frustrated that they were unable to take effective action. Participants from groups engaged in armed struggle expressed difficulty in finding other ways of pursuing their political objectives, given the lack of international support for the non-violent activities of their organisations, such as education and training.

Motivations

Motivations for participants’ involvement in armed struggle included defence of themselves and their communities, to allow them to continue other activities, to fight for liberation or political change, to resist abuses by the military, to be taken seriously by the regime, because there was no alternative and because the prospect of surrender was worse. Members of armed groups felt they had a duty to protect people from their communities which were under attack from the military regime. Armed organisations were also able to access areas which would be unsafe without armed protection. This has allowed them to continue other non-violent activities, including collecting information, political organising and training. As one armed group member explained: ‘Sometimes in the jungle, we did the training, some of the human rights training, community organising training, but we need to hold the arms for their security.’ Another motivation for participation in armed activities was to fight for political change. Two participants described this in terms of fighting for liberation from oppression and for self-determination. Another described his motivation for joining the armed struggle as having leverage to change the political system. One participant from a non-armed group felt that the armed groups were motivated by a desire for equality and freedom and that a transition to democracy would end the conflict. It was felt by several participants that it was necessary to hold arms to be taken seriously by the current regime, in order to bring them to dialogue on political issues. A similar analysis was expressed by armed group participants who felt they had no alternative but to take up arms to fight for political change. These participants saw the armed resistance as a sign of desperation, but also as a way that they could be involved in the struggle. This view was expressed by one armed group member who had participated in the protests of 1988, which had shown that ‘peaceful expression was not effective to change the government’. The state crackdown on peaceful protest was a key moment for each of the members of the ABSDF, who described having discussed the possibility of a military coup and making secret plans in that event to join the armed struggle of ethnic groups on the border. Others had been motivated to join armed groups to fight against ethnic discrimination or a lack of ‘ethnic rights’, because the regime had attacked their communities and leaders and because of desperate poverty. In the current situation, participants felt that to give up the armed struggle would be to surrender to the military regime and that it was necessary to keep their arms to defend themselves and their communities, ‘to have space to live’.

Participants from non-armed groups were motivated in similar ways to oppose discrimination and abuses by the regime against their communities, as well as by support from their community, family involvement and to further their own education and experience. Some participants expressed motivations that were specific to non-violent actions, including being inspired by the example set by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a personal commitment to peace, a belief that non-violent pressure and dialogue were the best ways to achieve change and a recognition of greater global support for non-

violent activity.

The role of armed struggle in the opposition movement was obviously a controversial issue and a matter of active debate for groups in the study. In small focus group interviews with members of the Burmese Women's Union and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand, the question of violent versus non-violent action was the issue that generated the most contentious discussion and disagreement in both interviews. The BWU, which has a policy commitment to non-violence, was originally formed to push for gender equality inside the student guerrilla movement and includes members with a range of views and experiences of armed struggle, including current members of the ABSDF. As one of the group's leaders explained, 'we can't say that everyone accepts non-violence or armed group support. For example, we all based on the ABSDF members, then we believed that gender equality we needed to do, there was a bad situation that we needed to change. That is why our policy is on gender equality and mostly by peaceful non-violent action, but politically we have different views.'

Actions

Both armed and non-armed groups were involved in a wide range of actions in response to their needs, lacks, problems and motivations. Whether or not they were also involved in armed activities, each group engaged in community organising, collecting information and documentation, forming alliances and relationships with other groups, international lobbying, training and education programmes and providing other social services including health services.

Relationships

Participants discussed the relationships their groups had formed with both their own communities and other organisations. Participants from both armed and non-armed groups expressed opinions that armed groups were supported by their communities. One women's group member said that 'for the people who are inside [Burma], they feel like they still have people to protect them and it would be worse if they are not present there. For example if the military comes to attack them and if there is a guerrilla group try to intervene, try to stop, even though they cannot protect them completely, they still feel like they try to defend them, so they have time to run away.' Kachin participants, all from non-armed groups, said that the KIO had enjoyed broad community support since its formation, with one saying 'the KIO is the heart of our Kachin people'. Although the KIO had signed a ceasefire with the regime, it was still seen as providing a buffer against SPDC troops. The spokesperson for the PSLF said that from the time of its formation, until signing a ceasefire with the regime, the PSLO had received '100 percent support from the Palaung people to make activity for the Palaung revolution movement and even to join with Shan, join with Kachin, join with Communists sometimes, we fight our common enemy, what we now call SPDC.'. This support was seen as arising from community organising, creating a recognition that the community and the organisation were mutually reliant on each other. The KNU was seen as the legitimate representatives of the Karen people by both armed and non-armed groups. Their spokesperson said that the organisation relied almost entirely on community support: 'through the whole struggle we didn't get any support from outside, we only got support from our own Karen people from inside.' Ethnic armed groups typically took on state functions in areas under their control, providing for the health, education and welfare of their people. A spokesperson for the New Mon State Party said that the armed group 'is acting as a political party in Mon state. But while they are doing that, they also have a responsibility for the people in Mon state, for their education, for their health, for their development.'

Participants from armed groups in the sample reported that their organisations had formed alliances

and worked cooperatively with each other, as well as with non-armed groups. The ethnic armed groups had initially formed the National Democratic Front in 1976 to coordinate their armed struggles for self-determination. In 1988 an expanded alliance was formed to incorporate the newly formed ABSDF, as well as other groups including the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma, under the name Democratic Alliance of Burma. In 1992 these organisations came together with the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area) to form the National Council of the Union of Burma (interviews and <http://www.ncub.org/>, accessed 30/9/07). Ethnic armed groups tended to have close working relationships with the non-armed women's and youth groups from the same communities. Similarly, the Burmese Women's Union was formed by female members of the ABSDF and, although the women's group was committed to non-violence, the two organisations maintained some overlapping membership.

Participants from the ABSDF considered the group to be part of civil society in Burma, considered to be 'based on civilians, the people and the public' and the self-organisation of the community. Examples given of civil society activity in Burma were village committees to organise social events, or volunteering time at Buddhist temples. ABSDF members considered their group to be part of civil society by virtue of their social service activities for health and education, as well as by the support they received from the community.

Conclusion

Existing literature on the relationship between global civil society and political violence has tended to assume a clear division between the two. On the one hand, global civil society actors are assumed to be committed to non-violence and are seen as a legitimate force for global political change. On the other hand, non-state armed groups are identified with the unrestrained violence of 'uncivil' or 'network' wars and are not seen as legitimate political actors. The effect of this is to isolate any group that for any reason holds arms from acceptance as a legitimate part of global civil society.

However, it is evident from the results of the empirical research discussed in this paper that participants were not making such stark divisions between groups that have a commitment to non-violence and those that hold arms. The question of whether violence by non-state groups is acceptable was found to be not one but several questions, relating to both principled belief and to strategic choices in complex situations. Answers to these questions of the legitimacy of violence were not always dependent on whether the participant was a member of an armed or non-armed group.

Participants discussed their situation and activities in terms of specific problems faced by their communities, what they needed and lacked. Motivations for group actions and relationships were similarly based on understandings grounded in the situation of the community. In discussing their needs, lacks, problems, motivations, actions and relationships there was more that united than divided the participants from armed and non-armed groups. To the participants, the tactics or means that a group used to resist were not usually the most important signifiers of inclusion within the bonds of trust and association sometimes identified as civil society. Rather, a demonstrated commitment to responding to the needs and problems of the community, motivated by a concern for the collective interest, was generally a more important criterion for inclusion in relationships of cooperation among opposition groups.

Participants were also acting with a great deal of awareness of global political trends and the importance of international support for their cause. Considerable frustration was caused where international awareness or understanding was felt to be out of step with the experiences of participants and their communities. A heavy reliance on financial support from international donors

has meant that the possibility and priority of action by Burmese opposition groups have often been determined from outside. In this context, questions of the legitimacy of political violence by non-state actors in relation to global civil society have more than a semantic effect. Based on the preliminary analysis of results presented in this paper, it seems that a disjunction exists between influential assumptions of the non-violence of global civil society and the experience of participants from Burmese opposition groups on the Thai-Burma border.

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