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### Enduring Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Origins of Conflict in Myanmar

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**ENDURING ETHNIC CONFLICT: THE INSTITUTIONAL ORIGINS OF  
CONFLICT IN MYANMAR**

A thesis presented

by

Olivia Zeiner-Morrish

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## Chapter One: Institutional Legacies and the Evolution of Ethnic Conflict

### **Introduction**

As ethnic conflict wreaks havoc on the Burmese state, Myanmar has captured international attention. The state has unraveled since the military coup of last spring; rebel and security forces have racked the streets with violence, with thousands of civilians killed in the crossfire. This ethnic violence is painfully familiar in Myanmar. Since the colonial era, ethnic-based armed groups have been a distinctly enduring feature of Myanmar's conflict landscape. The Burmese state is controlled and defined by its ethnically exclusive nationalist military regime. Ethnicity is inextricably linked to conflict; all of Myanmar's seven major ethnic minority groups have been linked to some form of insurgency—none have remained entirely passive or have entirely assimilated to the Burmese majority. Many scholars suggest that the colonial experience can explain the politicization and militarization of ethnicity, pointing to ethnic favoritism, grievances, and weak postcolonial states unable to bring order to society. Myanmar has an overwhelming history of divisive institutions, largely built during the British colonial period and the Japanese occupation. These institutional legacies suggest that Myanmar's ethnic conflict is path-dependent, sustained by a self-reproductive system of violence. Yet, the nuanced fragmentation and evolution of Burmese ethnic groups complicates a linear imagining of conflict.

The complex interactions between ethnic minority groups and the Burmese government have varied across time and space. Not all of Myanmar's ethnic groups have played the same role in challenging the government. Some have birthed particularly powerful insurgencies, while others have been more amenable to negotiations with the central government, and experienced significant ceasefire periods. Insurgent groups have also experienced ethnic defection, with

splinter groups repurposed by the government as pro-state militia. What has driven the arc of Myanmar's ethnic conflict: British colonial institutions, Japanese wartime institutions, or some other combination of political and social factors?

Predicated by both British colonialism and Japanese occupation during wartime, Myanmar's understudied and evolving conflict is a rich case study for examining the relationship between institutional legacies and ethnic conflict. Still, Myanmar has largely been excluded from contemporary conflict literature. I aim to bridge this "Burma Gap", as Mathieson calls it.<sup>1</sup> By bringing theoretical perspectives into Burmese context, this thesis will not only contribute to a greater conversation on colonialism, institutional legacies, and ethnic conflict; it will also stand as a significant contribution to a limited body of contemporary scholarship on Myanmar.

Before continuing on to discuss the theoretical framework of my analysis, it is important to establish a brief history of the British and Japanese in Myanmar. The British colonial period in Myanmar lasted from 1824 to 1948. John Furnivall's influential account of ethnic pluralism in Myanmar—the striking “medley of peoples ... living side by side, but separately”—suggests the vastness of the ethnographic agenda attempted by the British.<sup>2</sup> With waves of precolonial immigration, mostly from India and China, the Burmese population was incredibly diverse. The British attempt to organize society for production compelled the pacification of the Burmese population. However, local interests were paid little attention, and internal security protected British commerce above all else. The British constructed a shallow and extractive state in

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<sup>1</sup> David Mathieson. “Bridging the 'Burma Gap' in Conflict Studies.” Tea Circle, May 22, 2018. <https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/05/07/bridging-the-burma-gap-in-conflict-studies/>.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Furnivall. *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. New York: New York University Press, 1956, 304.

Myanmar, building institutions and bringing order without meaning.<sup>3</sup> This “skinny state” was “filled out with the coercive muscles of British and Indian army units.”<sup>4</sup> The British colonial administration in Myanmar was constructed out of convenience—components of administration in India were arbitrarily recreated in Myanmar, and the diverse society was haphazardly reorganized. By selectively recruiting ethnic minorities into the colonial military, the British established political alliances between certain groups, alliances that would ultimately bleed into the Japanese occupation and World War II.

Many scholars trace ethnic conflict to colonial grievances and institutions that reified ethnic boundaries. However, this is difficult in the case of Myanmar; tracing ethnic conflict directly to British colonialism is impeded by the massive disruption that occurred during World War II and the Japanese occupation. After the British departed, civil war simultaneously erupted. As Callahan says:

The British colonial state disintegrated overnight, [and] there emerged a dizzying array of nonstate organizations of violence, wherein coercion was the currency of politics and the weakened state became only one of numerous entities with claims on violence, territory, resources, and people.<sup>5</sup>

The Japanese invasion of Myanmar began in 1942. As the British colonial administration rapidly collapsed, the Japanese scrambled to create wartime institutions. During this time period, the Burmese state was overwhelmed by conflict with both international and civil dimensions. As

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Dhaka: The University Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Callahan. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Callahan, 3.

interstate war pulled apart the British colonial administration, the Japanese cultivated new domestic alliances along ethnic lines and constructed a new national military.

From the beginning of the colonial period to independence in 1948, complex institutional legacies of ethnic division and militarization became rooted in the Burmese state. As conflict in Myanmar continues to evolve, contemporary insurgency provides a new environment in which to test theories of institutional legacy. While some insurgencies, like the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) have remained a formidable challenge to the Burmese state, others have weakened over time. In the past three decades, there have been tenuous but significant shifts toward cease-fire politics and cooperation with armed groups, suggesting that conflict dynamics might be changing.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps institutional legacies can explain the willingness of certain ethnic groups to cooperate with the Burmese state. Or perhaps this slight shift in armed politics suggests that situation at hand is a new dynamic, emerging from decades of strategic and situational behavior taken by ethnic groups and the Burmese state. As the situation in Myanmar worsens, it is important to identify the particular antecedents of this overwhelming ethnic violence. In this thesis, I will examine whether Myanmar's historical institutions created a path-dependent, self-perpetuating ethnic conflict. Broadly, this thesis aims to answer the question: *how much do institutional legacies matter when explaining ethnic conflict?* In order to study the question at hand, I will first examine the pre-existing literature on colonial legacies, wartime institution building, and ethnic conflict.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Staniland. *Ordering Violence: Explaining Armed Group-State Relations from Conflict to Cooperation*. Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 2021.

## Literature Review

Before engaging with different theories of institutional legacy and ethnic conflict, it is important to establish a general definition of institutions. As articulated by Helmke and Levitsky, I will define institutions as the “rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that structure social interaction by constraining and enabling actors’ behavior.”<sup>7</sup> Most of my analysis will examine formal institutions, such as systems of political representation, policing, and the military.

To test the relationship between institutions and ethnic conflict, I will examine three areas of literature. First, I will draw on literature that emphasizes colonial legacies, in order to frame my analysis of the British colonial period. Colonial legacies have been widely studied and linked to ethnic conflict and state weakness. Next, I will examine what I call “competing legacies” arguments. These arguments describe wartime institution building, which, in the case of Myanmar, might have “competed” with the legacy of British colonial institutions. Finally, I will examine what I call “situational and strategic arguments,” which deemphasize institutional legacies by highlighting the fluid and complex dynamics of civil conflict and the strategic ways in which insurgents and governmental actors respond to political and social context.

### *Colonial Legacies*

I will begin by considering literature that emphasizes the long-term effects of colonialism, including the political legacies of state capacity, colonial institutions, and ethnic conflict. Jeffrey Herbst famously argued that colonial rule exacerbated underlying structural

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<sup>7</sup> Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky. “Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda.” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 04 (2004): 725-40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592704040472>.

constraints in Africa, making it even harder for postcolonial rulers to exert power.<sup>8</sup> In Africa, colonial rule established artificial state boundaries and failed to establish meaningful institutions. With difficulty governing over vast colonial territories, colonial rulers did not implement an effective system of governance. This led to postcolonial states that were unable to extend their power outside of colonial hubs: capitals and coastal cities. The incapacity of many modern African states reflects the failure of colonial rulers to establish effective governance and develop state institutions. Herbst's explanation of state failure in Africa builds on a tradition of work that evaluates the development of states as modern institutions. The modern state is characterized by its bureaucracies, fiscal systems, and representative institutions.<sup>9</sup> Institutional development that was manipulated and perverted by colonial powers can explain the weakness of many modern states.

In *Lineages of Despotism and Development*, Lange challenges the widespread belief that past imperialism necessarily hinders the development of nations.<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of all British colonies, Lange distinguishes between direct and indirect rule as two fundamentally different systems of control, with very different legacies. While direct rule was transformative and intensive, indirect rule was a form of colonial domination, in which colonial administrators collaborated with indigenous intermediaries. Lange determines that more intensive, direct rule supports the development of a strong state with high levels of bureaucratization. Contrastingly,

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Herbst. *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> James Robinson. "States and Power in Africa by Jeffrey I. Herbst: A Review Essay." *Journal of Economic Literature* 40, no. 2 (2002): 510–19. <https://doi.org/10.1257/002205102320161357>, 512.

<sup>10</sup> Lange, Matthew. *Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

indirect rule created weak, patrimonial states. Interestingly, Myanmar is an outlier among Lange's case studies. In Myanmar, the British used a combination of direct and indirect rule, but the former predominated.<sup>11</sup> Given the degree of direct rule, Lange's theory predicts a much higher developmental record than actually observed in Myanmar, which is one of Asia's poorest countries, with an incredibly ineffective and weak state. The failure of Lange's theory in this case demonstrates the importance of attention to the Japanese occupation in Myanmar.

Kohli similarly argues that intensive colonialism can have a beneficial long-term legacy. Japanese colonial policies ultimately supported the development of a strong and prosperous postcolonial Korean state.<sup>12</sup> Prior to colonialism, Korea was a weak state, which would have been unable to successfully modernize on its own. Even though Japanese colonial policies were highly repressive and violent, they strengthened Korea's postcolonial state in three ways: 1) they contributed to the development of a powerful colonial bureaucracy, 2) they supported the construction of an alliance between state and capital, and 3) they strengthened the development of institutions of mass repression. Ultimately, this legacy supported Korean industrialization and the growth of a capable state. Kohli is one of few scholars that emphasizes a positive colonial impact, but his argument fundamentally supports the same idea as Herbst and others: the colonial experience is defining for a state. Furthermore, his attention to institutions of mass repression reveals the importance of coercive colonial power.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Lange. *Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Atul Kohli. "Chapter Four. Where Do High-Growth Political Economies Come From? The Japanese Lineage of Korea's 'Developmental State.'" *The Developmental State*, 2019, 93-136.

In addition to determining state capacity and strength, colonial rule leaves behind a profound legacy of ethnic conflict. In *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani traces the politicization of ethnicity to the colonial state. Mamdani argues that the British regime in Africa constructed despotic and hierarchical state, through which ethnicity was made political. The British designed a bifurcated state that ordered society through divisive institutions, separating the rural from the urban, and one ethnicity from another.<sup>13</sup> Under the British, indirect rule came to be the mode of domination over the native people. This indirect rule reinforced ethnically bound institutions of control—every local apparatus was organized around an ethnic or religious basis. Thus, ethnic and tribal identity became much more rigid, and a preeminent concern. “Ethnicity (tribalism) thus came to be simultaneously the form of colonial control over natives and the form of revolt against it.”<sup>14</sup> Mamdani shows that contemporary ethnic conflict in Africa is a product of this indirect rule and its institutional legacies. When colonial powers use ethnic identity as the basis of their resource allocation, political organization, and institutional control, ethnicity becomes deeply politicized.

In *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence in India*, Ajay Verghese emphasizes the roles that institutions play in maintaining colonial legacies of ethnic division. In India, different policies of ethnic stratification, both from British and princely India, created “disparate fault lines of conflict.” These fault lines persist because of institutions—both formal institutions such as parties and schooling, and institutions as informal as the memories of an ethnic community. Throughout my thesis, I draw on this concept of “fault lines of conflict” to describe the ways in

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<sup>13</sup> Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: University Press, 1996, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Mamdani, 24.

which institutions make patterns of ethnic violence highly durable.<sup>15</sup> Verghese shows that patterns of ethnic violence tend to harden over time, especially when reinforced by institutions. Thus, ethnic violence is one realm in which identities are unlikely to change. Similarly, Lieberman and Singh study the British census in India, systematically testing the relationship between state institutions and ethnic salience. Lieberman and Singh argue that by solidifying boundaries between social identities and enumerating ethnic cleavages, the institution of the census creates ethnic categories and conflict.<sup>16</sup> By elevating ideas of “otherness” and ethnic competition, institutions can place ethnic identity at the forefront of politics.

Colonial legacies drive state weakness and the continued politicization of ethnic identity, factors instrumental in understanding contemporary ethnic violence. By defining “fault lines of conflict,” the colonial period can leave behind an institutional legacy that continuously reproduces conflict along the same ethnic lines. The literature on colonialism frames my first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *British colonialism established “fault lines” of conflict, determining the course of ethnic conflict in Myanmar.*

### *Competing Legacies*

The phenomenon of colonialism has been so widely studied because of the mass disruption it brings to both state and society, birthing new institutions. Yet, British colonization was not the only (and perhaps not even the greatest) disruption of the Burmese state. Myanmar’s

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<sup>15</sup> Ajay Verghese. *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence in India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Evan S. Lieberman and Perna Singh. “Census Enumeration and Group Conflict: A Global Analysis of the Consequences of Counting.” *World Politics* 69, no 1 (2017): 1-53. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137364333>.

dramatic decolonization—in which the state was launched from colonial rule into World War II and Japanese occupation—has been widely understudied. Many scholars have discussed colonialism and its legacies, but few have traced the exact legacies of decolonization and wartime institutions, leaving a substantial gap in current literature. I will frame this gap by drawing on scholarship that describes the window of opportunity for institution building that is created during decolonization and wartime. As the British colonial administration collapsed, this window of opportunity supported the development of new institutions in Myanmar. Thus, I will examine the possibility of “competing legacies,” which might have overwhelmed the influence of the British colonial period.

Decolonization is a quite technical term for what is an incredibly dramatic process. As the imperial state dissolves and its rule is delegitimized, a nation-state emerges. Though dramatic, decolonization is not a short process, the colonizers hardly “vanish into the night.” Decolonization is a complicated, a drawn-out process of disentanglement and reentanglement, enmeshed in other political and social changes—in the case of Myanmar, this was World War II.<sup>17</sup>

Myanmar emerged from its colonial statehood into a complex wartime with both international and civil dynamics, as different military alliance fractionalized society. Literature has generally identified key differences between the influences of interstate and civil war, and so I will consider arguments that address institution building during both kinds of war. Scholars have long studied the relationship between interstate war making and state making. Classical bellicist theory frames an understanding of wartime, best summarized in Tilly’s famous

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<sup>17</sup> Jan C. Jansen and Jurgen Osterhammel. *Decolonization: A Short History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

aphorism “war made the state, and the state made war.”<sup>18</sup> Tilly argues that wartime competition over territory and resources facilitated the development of the state. He identifies three primary ways in which war supports the growth of a strong state. First, war making helped rulers concentrate coercive power and eliminate domestic rivals. Second, war making led to the development of state institutions to extract resources and support the war, such as through taxation. Finally, the state developed its capacity for protection, through institutions like courts of law, in order to promote the accumulation of capital and resources that might be accessed by the state. By achieving these different functions integral to war, the state emerges. If war is, as bellicist theory argues, a defining period for the state, it is imperative to study Myanmar during World War II and the institutions built by the Japanese.

Bellicist theory emerged in the context of European states, and thus has been criticized in its general application. It must be carefully considered in the case of Myanmar. In *Blood and Debt*, Miguel Centeno challenges the universal application of bellicist theory and rejects the application of Tilly’s logic to Latin American states.<sup>19</sup> Though Centeno does not entirely reject Tilly’s argument, he significantly complicates it. Centeno argues that the historical context of war determines its state making capacity, rather than this being some benefit inherent in all wars. The European states that Tilly considered already had a basic organizational capacity that Latin American states lacked. Access to external financing further undermined the statebuilding process in Latin America, creating bankrupt beggar states.<sup>20</sup> Centeno finds that Latin American

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Tilly. “Reflections on the History of European State-Making”. *Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Miguel Centeno. *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Centeno, *Blood and Debt*.

wars occurred two soon after independence and thus the state could not respond in the pattern described by Tilly. Centeno's challenge to bellicism might explain elements of Myanmar's state failure. Emerging directly from colonial rule into wartime, the state hardly had the opportunity to develop organizational capacity, or to even exist without external support and control.

Research into the effects of intrastate war further complicates the possibilities of wartime institutional legacies. Generally, findings on the subject of civil war are quite mixed. While some scholars find that civil war harms a state's capacity for extractive processes like taxation, others find that internal conflict can bolster state extraction. In "Civil War, Institutional Change, and Criminalization of the State," Rachel Schwartz takes a novel approach to studying civil war, institutional change, and revenue extraction.<sup>21</sup> Rather than focusing on sweeping processes such as statebuilding or destruction, Schwartz emphasizes the smaller, more specific rules and changes that develop during civil war. She shows that civil war can induce extractive weakness because of the specific institutions, rules, and procedures created during civil conflict, which are different from those created during interstate conflict. During civil conflict, escalating insurgent threats generate institutional ambiguity, producing "soft spots" in the state's fiscal order and prompting change.<sup>22</sup> During civil conflict, new rules are formed, which might either strengthen or undermine the state.

Schwartz identifies two institutional logics that guide the new rules made during civil conflict; the rules "may be *undermining* and thus deviate from the state's extractive functions or

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<sup>21</sup> Rachel Schwartz. "Civil War, Institutional Change, and the Criminalization of the State: Evidence from Guatemala's Conflict Archives." *Journal of Peace Research* 55(2): 222-235.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, "Civil War, Institutional Change, and the Criminalization of the State," 386.

*reinforcing* and thus coincide with them.”<sup>23</sup> Undermining rules are formed when escalating insurgent threats empower political military actors. In order to avoid insurgent penetration, this counterinsurgent elite becomes insulated from broader political and military structures. The expansion of military control, outside of non-military institutional arenas, obstructs internal regime opposition and civilian oversight, concentrating authority in a small body of counterinsurgent elites. Thus, rules are narrowly conceived and feed benefits directly to a small, military elite, explaining why wartime institutions can undermine the state. Schwartz argues that reinforcing rules are created when a “broader, multisectoral rule-making coalition takes place.”<sup>24</sup> In this situation, the escalation of an insurgent threat similarly produces institutional ambiguity, but it causes state leaders to collaborate in a diverse coalition. This leads to a deliberative rulemaking process that incorporates different interests, leading to rules that reinforce the state. Thus, Schwartz contends that divergent paths of wartime institutional development can be explained through the elite groups that shape institutional change, and the exact rules that emerge. Schwartz’s analysis suggests that postcolonial war might birth an entirely new institutional system. Furthermore, she demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the Burmese military elite that emerged during World War II.

Classical bellicist theory and literature on civil war both show that wartime produces institutional ambiguity, creating an opportunity for overwhelming institutional growth and change. Even if British colonialism temporarily redefined the Burmese state, literature frames the possibility of “competing legacies,” which might have overwhelmed any changes made by the British. Did the process of decolonization during wartime and Japanese occupation overwrite the

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<sup>23</sup> Schwartz, “Civil War, Institutional Change, and the Criminalization of the State,” 386.

<sup>24</sup> Schwartz, 388.

British colonial legacy, defining new fault lines of conflict? Theories of institution building during interstate and civil war provide a foundation for my second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: Massive wartime disruption cast new institutional legacies that overwhelmed the British colonial legacy, determining Myanmar's ethnic conflict.*

### *Situation and Strategy*

A separate area of scholarship draws attention to the behavioral and group centric elements of conflict, emphasizing situational and strategic reasons for rebellion, fragmentation, and cooperation. These theories would deemphasize the institutional legacies of British colonialism, Japanese occupation, and wartime, and draw attention instead to the specific environment in which Burmese ethnic conflict occurs, and the evolving dynamics between the insurgents and the state.

Paul Staniland posits that many scholars make a fundamentally flawed assumption that both sides of a civil conflict are “locked in a straightforward struggle for a monopoly of violence.”<sup>25</sup> This assumption overlooks the variance of political orders during civil war, such as the temporary emergence of cooperation between the state and its ostensible rivals. During war, political orders are likely to develop, evolve, and collapse in complex oscillations.

In *Ordering Violence*, Staniland focuses on the role of that the government plays in defining and responding to insurgency, and how this shapes conflict dynamics. His fundamental claim is that the government's response to insurgency is driven by its perception of ideological threat. Rather than directly worrying about the size or power of an armed group, the regime

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Staniland. “States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders.” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 243-64, 243.

assesses how a group's politics align with the government's own goals.<sup>26</sup> Staniland uses Myanmar as a case study and identifies Burmese nationalism as being definitive of the wartime political order. By establishing Burman ethnicity and Buddhist religion as the top of the hierarchy, the Burmese nationalist project laid a foundation for ongoing political conflict. Staniland contends that ethnic, religious, and linguistic political cleavages had elements of fluidity in the 1940s and 50s but dramatically hardened under General Ne Win's military dictatorship, beginning in 1962.<sup>27</sup> By emphasizing the fluidity of ethnicity prior to General Ne Win's dictatorship, Staniland suggests that neither the British colonial period, nor the Japanese occupation, established fault lines of conflict. Instead, the nationalist ideology of the Burmese government supports ethnic conflict, by driving heavily repressive security responses and preventing cooperation with minority groups.<sup>28</sup> Staniland's argument emphasizes the goals of the postcolonial regime and the role they play in defining and fueling insurgency. Therefore, we should not assume that wartime and colonial era legacies of conflict will persist, as postcolonial states have the capacity to reshape conflict through their own ideologies and interests.

While Staniland focuses on the goals of the regime, Kalyvas focuses on the conflict dynamic itself, and how this dynamic generates changing patterns of compliance and resistance. Kalyvas emphasizes fluidity in civil conflict, describing civil wars as dynamic social and political contexts.<sup>29</sup> He says that civil conflict can shape the behavioral expression of ethnic identity in many ways, rather than just hardening and solidifying ethnic identity, as Verghese

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<sup>26</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Staniland, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Staniland, 228.

<sup>29</sup> Stathis Kalyvas. "Ethnic Defection in Civil War." *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(8), 1043-1068, 2008.

suggests. Kalyvas draws on constructivist theory, which explains ethnicity as a socially constructed identity that evolves through interactions with other actors. He argues that the behavioral potential of ethnicity is empirically variable. Kalyvas specifically examines two processes: identity shift, the acquisition of a new ethnic or national identity that replaces the old, and ethnic defection, in which individuals join organizations “explicitly opposed to the national aspirations of the ethnic group with which they identify and end up fighting against their coethnics.”<sup>30</sup> Kalyvas’ evaluation of ethnic defection might lend insight into the ethnic armed groups that have willingly been transformed into pro state militia. According to Kalyvas, features such as resources and territorial control influence ethnic defection, shaping the arc of ethnic conflict. Kalyvas presents both theoretical and empirical findings that demonstrate the fluidity of ethnic identity and the importance of postcolonial dynamics, demonstrating the importance of investigating later variance in Myanmar’s ethnic conflict.

Arguments that emphasize the responsiveness of conflict actors to a changing political context frame my third hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Ethnic conflict in Myanmar has not been determined by institutional legacies; political and social factors have shaped the behaviors of conflict actors, driving the evolution of ethnic conflict.*

## **Methodology**

Using Myanmar as a single case study, this thesis seeks to understand the role of institutional legacies in ethnic conflict and examines the inherent tensions between the concept of path dependency and the concept of a fluid and evolving ethnic conflict. An exclusive focus

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<sup>30</sup> Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil War,” 1045.

on Myanmar supports country specific analysis and comparison, and I analyze both scholarly and primary sources for my research. I compare institution building between two distinct periods, British colonialism, and Japanese occupation, in order to disentangle Myanmar's institutional legacies. I also compare Burmese ethnic groups, and the ways in which their ethnic identities have been made political and violent. My outcome of interest is the politicization and potential militarization of ethnic identity, that is, the extent to which groups have engaged in ethnic competition. I draw on Lieberman and Singh's definition of ethnic competition, as a "pattern of behavior in which ordinary citizens and elites consistently engage in contests over foods, services, prestige, and leadership, such that the winners and losers are generally described by participants and close observers in terms of ethnic groups."<sup>31</sup> Ethnic conflict is an extreme manifestation of ethnic competition, and ethnic violence an extreme form of ethnic conflict. In this thesis, I will examine ethnic competition as it takes shape during the colonial period, escalates in the nationalist movement, and erupts in ethnically defined insurgencies.

As previously described, my paper will test three different hypotheses. 1) British colonialism established "fault lines" of conflict, determining the course of ethnic conflict in Myanmar. 2) Massive wartime disruption replaced colonial institutions, casting new legacies which better explain Myanmar's ethnic conflict. 3) Ethnic conflict in Myanmar has not been determined by institutional legacies; political and social factors have shaped the behaviors of conflict actors, driving the evolution of ethnic conflict.

Myanmar is incredibly diverse, with seven major ethnic minority groups and many smaller immigrant groups. For the purpose of this thesis, I have narrowed my focus to studying the politicization or militarization of identity in four different ethnic groups. By referencing each

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<sup>31</sup> Evan S. Lieberman, and Perna Singh. "Census Enumeration and Group Conflict: A Global Analysis of the Consequences of Counting." *World Politics* 69, no. 1 (2017): 1–53. doi:10.1017/S0043887116000198. 8.

of these four groups throughout my thesis, I will show how they have been differently incorporated into institutions and involved in ethnic conflict. First, I will consider the ethnic Burmans, the majority group in Myanmar. I have also selected three ethnic minority groups for comparison: the Karen, Kachin, and the Mon.

By selecting these three groups, I capture some of the variation that can be observed in Myanmar's enduring civil conflict. The violent conflict between the Karens and ethnic Burmans is the longest running and most consistent conflict in Myanmar, beginning even before the colonial period. Under British rule, the Karens received political privileges, but under the Japanese occupation this power dynamic was subverted, and the Karens were subjugated. The Karens represent the most extreme case of an ethnic identity being politicized and militarized. The Karens rebelled against the Burmese government immediately after Myanmar gained political independence in 1948 and did not partake in a successful ceasefire agreement until 2012.<sup>32</sup> The Kachins, the second group selected for study, are notably distinct in their geographic stronghold in Myanmar's southern hills.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the colonial period and the Japanese occupation, the Kachins enjoyed significant political autonomy, as it was difficult to exert control over these southern borderlands. Unlike with the Karen, Kachin insurgency did not begin until a decade after Myanmar's political independence, and the Kachin were amenable to ceasefire negotiations in 1995 (though this ceasefire ultimately failed). Lastly, the Mons are distinct from both the Karens and Kachins, in that they have a significant history of assimilation to the Burman majority. Throughout the colonial period and the Japanese occupation, Mon identity appeared relatively unpolitical. Thus, it seems surprising that the Mons rebelled even

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<sup>32</sup> Dukalskis, "Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?" 21.

<sup>33</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 48.

before the Kachin, only a year after the Karens first rebelled. The Mons also engaged in early ceasefire negotiations, and today, Mon insurgents are the least active.<sup>34</sup> By selecting these three ethnic groups for study, I can contrast their distinct experiences under the British and Japanese and compare inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic variance in behavior throughout Myanmar's political history.

This thesis will not only investigate the variation across groups, that is, why some ethnicities are more politicized or militarized, but also variation within groups: why they have acted in different ways at different times, sometimes assimilating, then rebelling, then cooperating with the central state. To interpret these behaviors, I draw on the two approaches to theorizing ethnic conflict described above: arguments that emphasize institutional legacies, and arguments that emphasize situation and strategy in explaining group behaviors throughout wartime. The historical scope of this thesis is large, spanning from the colonial period to present day ethnic conflict. As each chapter moves forward in history, I will continuously evaluate the duration, strength, and influence of the institutions I have selected for study, in order to see how they have politicized and militarized different ethnicities, and in order to test the concept of path-dependency.

### **Analysis to Come**

In tracing the origins of Myanmar's persistent ethnic conflict, I will pull apart the institutional legacies of the British colonial period and the Japanese occupation during wartime. In further analysis I will test the duration of any institutional legacies and examine their potential

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander Dukalskis. "Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not? A Within-Case Analysis of Burma/Myanmar, 1948-2011." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10. (2015): 21.

for explaining the variance in the behavioral expression of ethnic identity, compared to theories of conflict that emphasize situational and strategic behaviors.

The thesis will continue as follows. The second chapter will examine the institutions built during the British colonial period and conclude with an initial evaluation of the British colonial legacy and its impact on ethnic conflict. The third chapter will focus on the institutions built during Japanese occupation and World War II, in order to determine whether this period “overwrote” the legacies of the colonial period. The cumulative argument of chapters two and three is that the British established fault lines of conflict, which were reinforced, not rewritten, by the Japanese. Ultimately, the British and Japanese periods were crystallized in one key institutional legacy: Myanmar’s ethnically exclusive military. The fourth chapter will examine the evolution of ethnic conflict post-independence, including changes in the past two decades. I will challenge the possibility of path-dependency by considering explanations that emphasize the situational and strategic elements of conflict. In my fifth and final chapter, I will evaluate my findings and present a historical theory of Myanmar’s ethnic conflict, which is grounded conceptually in the institutional fault lines of conflict.

## Chapter Two: British Burma

### Introduction

Ethnic conflict has often been traced to colonial grievances institutions that solidified ethnic boundaries. In precolonial Myanmar, ethnicity was fundamentally fluid and regionally based—it was not fundamentally political, nor was it militarized. Under British colonial rule, ethnic boundaries were solidified and made political salient. Through institutions of indirect rule, the military apparatus, and the tolerance of ethnically based local armies, the colonial period created lasting ethnic divisions. This chapter establishes an overview of precolonial Myanmar and then examines the ways in which the British rulers created lasting fault lines of conflict. I show that the colonial period was institutionally transformative and a fundamental cause of ethnic conflict in Myanmar.

### Precolonial Myanmar

Before examining the British colonial period, it is important to establish a brief overview of precolonial society in Myanmar. The precolonial period spans from 1587 to 1885, when the monarchical order and Buddhist state fell to the British empire. This expansive period was not one long unchanging pattern, but for the sake of reference and comparison, I will establish a general description of the precolonial state and society. Fundamentally, the precolonial state was patrimonial.<sup>35</sup> Yet, while the state was organized hierarchically, there was a constant tension

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<sup>35</sup> Patrimonialism is a form of traditional political domination, in which a royal household exerts authority on the basis of kin-ties, patron-client relations, and personal allegiances. Max Weber wrote that in a patrimonial state, “the object of obedience is the personal authority of the ruling individual which he enjoys by virtue of his traditional status” (341). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. ed. Talcott Parsons. New York, NY: Free Press 1997.

between the center and its extremities.<sup>36</sup> In theory, the king was a universal monarch, carefully regulating the kingdom and bestowing order on the populace. In reality, the monarch was entangled in a web of threats and internal rivalries, as he sought tenuous control over an incredibly diverse and rural state.<sup>37</sup> The authority of the monarch and central institutions came largely from patron-client ties and religious legitimacy, rather than from institutional strength. The military exemplifies these precolonial patterns of political organization. Without any clear command structure or rational organization, military order was often sustained through patronage; gift-giving and other incentives swayed both commanders and their units.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, patron-client ties sustained a precolonial state that could not exert complete control over its diverse and rural extremities.

The legitimacy of the precolonial state was firmly grounded in religious doctrine and customary beliefs.<sup>39</sup> While the ideology of Myanmar's classical kingship had many elements, it was deeply intertwined with Buddhism, and engrained in its population the belief that political order was inevitable and cosmological. While Buddhism was a legitimizing force, which bolstered the state and also supported cultural unity in central Myanmar, powerful religious institutions sometimes threatened state control.<sup>40</sup> The Buddhist *Sangha*, or monkhood, grew stronger where the state was weak, and the growth of autonomous religious power regularly raised alarm. Throughout the precolonial period, the power of both the *Sangha* and the central

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<sup>36</sup> Robert H. Taylor. *The State in Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, 50.

state waxed and waned.<sup>41</sup> The tension between the two, along with monarchical attempts to reform the *Sangha*, continued until British colonization, which would severely undermine the power of the *Sangha*. In the precolonial period, Buddhism played a fundamental role in ordering the state and organizing society. In Myanmar, precolonial political culture was fluid and religiously based. There was no strong sense of national unity.<sup>42</sup>

Burmese society lacked “the social and cultural bonding of a settled, integrated political unit or nation.”<sup>43</sup> With waves of precolonial immigration, mostly from India and China, the Burmese population was composed of at least eight major ethnic groups with many smaller groups. Society was divided along ethnic lines; people identified with their ethnic groups, rather than sharing some national identity under the rule of the Burman kings.<sup>44</sup> Daily life was organized on a cellular level. While ethnic identity in the precolonial period was messy and complex, each of the four ethnic groups studied in this paper had a distinct precolonial experience.

The map below (Figure 1) depicts Myanmar’s immense ethnic diversity, including the Chins, Kayas, Shans, and Rakhines, which are not studied in this thesis. Importantly, this map visualizes the distribution of major ethnic groups, including the Burmans, Kachin, and Karen.

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Lieberman, Victor. Review of *Excising the “Mon Paradigm” from Burmese Historiography*, by Michael A. Aung-Thwin. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 377–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20071838>, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Josef Silverstein. *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, 6.

Figure 1. Map of Myanmar and Ethnic Distribution <sup>45</sup>



<sup>45</sup> Mikael Gravers. Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma. Copenhagen: NIAS, 2010, xx.

First, it is important to note on this map, the term “Burmese” is used to describe the ethnic Burman majority. Throughout history, the terms Burman and Burmese have sometimes been used interchangeably to refer to the ethnic majority. However, the term “Burmese” is also used to describe the Burmese state, society, and all other native peoples in Myanmar. In my own analysis, I exclusively use the term Burman when referring to the ethnic majority, for the sake of clarity. It is also important to recognize that Mons are not represented at all in this map. This is not because the Mon population is so insignificant, but because the Mons have not any meaningful geographic stronghold since the 1600s. For centuries, the Mons have lived as a small minority group, almost entirely interspersed among the ethnic Burmans in central Myanmar.<sup>46</sup> The Burmans dominated central Myanmar. In some areas, the Karens were interspersed with the Burmans, but the Karens also dwelled in territory extending far north along the Thailand border. The Kachins were distinctly concentrated in the southern hills of Myanmar.

In the early pre-colonial period, the most significant ethnic cleavage was between the Mons, a small ethnic minority group, and the Burmans, the ethnic majority. The Mons were a relatively small ethnic group—in 1931, the Mon population was estimated to be 337,728, compared to over 9,000,000 Burmans.<sup>47</sup> The territory that would eventually compose modern-day Myanmar contained two kingdoms: the northern Avan kingdom, dominated by Burmans, and the southern Peguan kingdom, dominated by Mons. The Burmese and Mon languages were mutually unintelligible, belonging to different linguistic families, and the two groups had distinct

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<sup>46</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Albert D. Moscotti, 114 *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1931-1937*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1974.

cultural practices and ways of dressing.<sup>48</sup> However, these identities were not entirely static or mutually exclusive. To an extent “‘Mon’ was a role filled by people loyal to Pegu, while ‘Burman’ was the role accepted by people loyal to Ava. Some Pegu dwelling Burmans assimilated, as did some Mons in Ava. For example, an ethnic Burman living in Ava might cut his hair in a Mon fashion and identify as ‘Mon,’ while still maintaining some Burman cultural traits.<sup>49</sup> While much literature on pre-colonial Myanmar treats the principal ethnic groups as discrete historical categories, these ethnic groups were not entirely exclusive and stable.<sup>50</sup>

The precolonial history of the Mons has long been shrouded in myth. Virtually all interpretations of Mon history have been dominated by the belief that a powerful Mon Kingdom flourished until it was conquered by the Burmans. In many accounts, the Mons have been regarded as acting as massive cultural donors to the ethnic Burmans.<sup>51</sup> In a compelling dissection of this “Mon paradigm,” Michael Aung-Thwin identifies much of this “history” as mythology that originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Mon King Dhammazedi, eager to establish prestige for the Mon polity, claimed the kingdom to be the earliest site of Buddhist orthodoxy.<sup>52</sup> This myth would later be amplified by the British, as a tool of ethnic division. Ultimately, the Mon precolonial experience is defined by 1) the pervasive mythologization of early Mon influence and 2) the fact that the Mons, in the later precolonial period, were clearly under Burman rule.

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<sup>48</sup> Lieberman, “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma.” *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 455-822,” 456.

<sup>49</sup> Lieberman, 458.

<sup>50</sup> Lieberman, 456.

<sup>51</sup> Lieberman, “Excising the Mon Paradigm,” 378.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Aung-Thwin. *Colonial Officials and Scholars: The Institutionalization of the Mon Paradigm. In The Mists of Ramanna: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (pp. 281–298). 2005. University of Hawai’i Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wn0qs1.15>

Even before British annexation, the Mons were a subject people.<sup>53</sup> By the end of the precolonial period, the ethnic Burmans were clearly established as the ruling class. The Mons were, in some ways, subjugated due to their distinct language and culture. However, throughout the later precolonial period, geographic proximity resulted in notable assimilation and intermarriage between the Mons and the Burmans.

As the dominant, and largest, indigenous group, the Burmans forced proximate ethnic groups into subordinacy over time. Many Burmans resided in Upper and Lower Myanmar, working as farmers in river valleys and plains. The Karen, the largest indigenous minority group, similarly dwelled in areas of Lower Myanmar and parts of Upper Myanmar. The Karens suffered greatly at the hands of the Burmans—they were considered inferior, widely mistreated, subjected to raids, and forced into labor by the ethnic majority.<sup>54</sup> The Karens made up a large part of the indigenous population—in 1930, the Karen population was approximately 1,367,673.<sup>55</sup> However, they were not incorporated into the precolonial government. Many Karens, hoping to escape subjugation, made homes in rural and mountainous land.<sup>56</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, American missionaries found their way to these rural Karen settlements. Though most Karens are now Buddhist, missionary schooling and Christian conversion would support British collaboration with the Karen.<sup>57</sup> Christian influence came to distinguish the Karen from the other ethnic groups, including the Mon, that supported the British

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<sup>53</sup> South, Ashley. *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake*. London: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Bertil Lintner. *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 8*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, 43.

<sup>55</sup> Albert D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma*, 114.

<sup>56</sup> Lintner, 45.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 44.

during early annexation.<sup>58</sup> Moscotti notes that to a large extent, missionaries slowed the ‘Burmanization’ or assimilation of the Karens to the ethnic majority.<sup>59</sup> Christian missionaries encouraged a Karen identity that was separate from the precolonial state and “connected ideologically and personally with the growing power of the Western world.”<sup>60</sup> The colonial state would continue to nurture this identity.

The final ethnic minority group studied in this paper, the Kachins, arrived to the territory that would eventually compose modern-day Myanmar late in the precolonial period. Thus, compared to the Karen and Mon minorities, there is little written about Kachin precolonial history. Kachin migration from southern China and eastern Tibet to Myanmar was still ongoing when the British arrived in the early twentieth century, and thus, the Kachins had not been firmly situated within the precolonial political landscape.<sup>61</sup>

Despite immense ethnic diversity, ethnicity was not the dominant mode of precolonial political organization.<sup>62</sup> There were ethnic divisions in precolonial society, as well as ethnically based conflicts—notably between Karens and Burmans. However, these ethnic divisions did not define the Burmese state. Ethnic identity was not entirely cohesive, so while it might have been politicized in some cases, it was not in others. In the eighteenth century, rebellion sometimes arose among discontent minority groups, but universalist traditions mitigated ethnic

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<sup>58</sup> South, *Mon Nationalism*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma*, 115.

<sup>60</sup> Robert H. Taylor, “The Relationship Between Burmese Social Classes and British-Indian Policy on the Behavior of the Burmese Political Elite, 1937-1942,” *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 35, no. 6, 156.

<sup>61</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Victor B. Lieberman. “Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma.” *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 455-82.

exclusiveness. During the Peguan (Mon) revolt against the Burman monarchy, many self-identified Burmans supported the Mon.<sup>63</sup> Ethnic identity was just one of several factors that determined political loyalty in the precolonial period.

These ethnic identities would only begin to take on a more precise, exclusive meaning, under colonial imposition. During the precolonial period, the correlation between ethnic identity and political loyalty was imperfect and complicated. It is important to note that the categories 'Burman,' 'Mon,' 'Karen,' and 'Kachin' were malleable throughout this expansive period, and, at times, encapsulated or intersected with other identities that go unmentioned here. Myanmar's population was divided by geography and regionalism, and thus groups that enjoyed the same language and culture were fragmented. Precolonial conflicts and allegiances were sometimes produced along ethnic lines, as in the case of Karen subjugation. However, the patrimonial state organized society through personal, almost quasi-feudal allegiances, which were not based in ethnic or cultural distinctions.<sup>64</sup> It is not until after the fall of the monarchical state that was ethnic conflict was linked inextricably to Burmese politics.

## **The Colonial State**

### *Invasion and Early Ethnic Politics*

The British gradually took over Burmese territory in three Anglo-Burmese wars, beginning in 1824 and concluding in 1886. These wars were not waged with any coherent, expansionist vision of "British Burma," rather they were prompted by competition between France and Britain over the natural resources in Southeast Asia. Even early in the precolonial

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<sup>63</sup> Lieberman, "Ethnic Politics," 480.

<sup>64</sup> Lieberman, 480.

period, British interference in ethnic relations was apparent, as invaders took advantage of the Christian converted Karens. One officer in the British army commented that the Karen, owing to the missionaries' activities "are often better educated than the Burmans ... and they have been taught how to cooperate."<sup>65</sup> The British found willing Karen guides, who were praised for their service after the war.<sup>66</sup> The Mons were also largely cooperative with the British during the war. The British explained both Mon and Karen cooperation in terms of ethnic antagonism by the Burmans. It is claimed that these groups viewed the British as liberators from Burman rule.<sup>67</sup> Seeking a pool of reliable recruits for state service, the British began to subvert the internal balance of power, establishing their preference for ethnic minority groups, over the ethnic majority.

Racism and anti-Burman sentiment was powerful within the colonial administration. Writing in 1882, Sir James George Scott reiterates fundamental stereotypes about the Burmans: they were lazy, they were violent and prone to criminal behavior, and they were indifferent to British rule.<sup>68</sup> Scott describes them as "lamentably wanting in self-control, sometimes passing into wild outbursts of brutality."<sup>69</sup> The British considered the Burmans distant and untrustworthy, and imagined them the "sad bully" of the Burmese population. The Karen, who were increasingly well regarded by the British, reinforced this image of the Burman people as the

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<sup>65</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 156.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen L. Keck. *British Burma in the New Century, 1895-1918*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015, 157.

<sup>69</sup> James George Scott. "Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States." Rangoon: Government Printing, 1990.

great antagonist. As the British constructed the colonial state, their sharp preferences for certain ethnic minority groups were institutionalized.

### *Colonial Administrative Order*

The British state in Myanmar was never an imperial priority; it was established as an appendage to India and a buffer zone between French Indochina and India.<sup>70</sup> The colonial government constructed a shallow and extractive state, repurposing many components of the British administration in India. The British were singularly focused on ordering society so that it might best access resources.<sup>71</sup> The goal of the administration was to meet a basic standard of order at a minimum inconvenience, with annexed territories that were able to raise sufficient revenue to fund themselves. Well-practiced in strategies of colonial subjugation and administration in India, the British-Indian state hit the ground running in Myanmar, ready to establish law and order, in order to expand business and take advantage of a wealth of resources.<sup>72</sup> Over time, the immediate concerns of the British administration, efficiency and social order, became increasingly difficult to achieve, as the indigenous social structure disintegrated. As economic activity simultaneously intensified, the British policy in Myanmar became less laissez faire. Therefore, while British Burma was for its duration a weak and shallow state, the colonial administration did significantly expand over time.

When comparing the precolonial state to the colonial state, the most obvious contrast is the degree of formal centralization. Following the Indian prototype, the British instituted a

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<sup>70</sup> Mary P. Callahan. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. New York: Zed Books, 1991.

<sup>72</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 23.

system of “gradationary control,” in which authority was exercised through a clearly defined chain of officials, down to the village level. The colonial state aimed to comprehensively intervene in society.<sup>73</sup> Subordinate officials of the central government involved themselves directly in the lives of peasantry.<sup>74</sup>

A combination of direct and indirect rule—in which some areas were directly ruled by the British, but other regions were left under the control of precolonial rulers—was a system imported from India and implemented in Myanmar.<sup>75</sup> Mamdani famously traces ethnic conflict to indirect colonial rule in Africa. He describes the bifurcated colonial state, in which society was fragmented and reorganized hierarchically along ethnic lines. Just as in Africa, Burmese society was ordered through institutions that divided the population along rural, urban, and ethnic lines. In an effort to standardize and regulate administration, the British largely overhauled the system of local government. In Myanmar, roughly two-thirds of the state and the vast majority of the population lived under the rule of British administrators, while the rest were governed by native rulers.<sup>76</sup> This division of rule separated the population along ethnic lines.

Out of all indigenous groups, the Karen enjoyed the most political privilege. In hill areas, which were primarily occupied by the Karen and Kachin peoples, traditional rulers and chiefs exercised significant authority.<sup>77</sup> The Karenni states, occupied by a subgroup of the Karen

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, “The State in Myanmar,” 70.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, 70, 87.

<sup>75</sup> Verghese, *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence*, 208.

<sup>76</sup> Verghese, 187.

<sup>77</sup> Verghese, 189.

people, were particularly autonomous, even retaining nominal sovereignty.<sup>78</sup> It is likely that this autonomy stemmed both from practical concerns, since it was more difficult to control the remote and mountainous areas where the Karen resided. One British commander said, in reference to the Karens, that he knew “too little about the people in the hills to reduce them to any system’ of rule.”<sup>79</sup> Ethnic favoritism also bolstered their political position, since the Karen were well-regarded and trusted by the British. Colonial and military patronage forged particularly strong associations between Christianized Karen elites and the state.<sup>80</sup> In addition to granting the Karens a high degree of autonomy, the British also gave the Karens reserved seats in the legislature to protect their interests and the Karens were heavily recruited into the colonial military. Traditional rulers and chiefs of the Kachin peoples enjoyed significant autonomy, similarly, stemming from practical concerns and ethnic favoritism, as the Kachins were well-regarded and trusted by the British. Due to the Kachin’s geographic stronghold in the mountains, the colonial state was much less developed in their area.<sup>81</sup>

In contrast, while the Mons had assisted the British, they did not receive such favorable political incorporation or separate representation. Though the British thought highly of the Mon—they were respected, for example, for being highly literate—and allowed the rurally settled Kachin political autonomy, they were much more favorable to the Karen, who they considered to be most amenable to the colonial civilizing mission.<sup>82</sup> Compared to the Karens,

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<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 88.

<sup>80</sup> South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, 88.

<sup>82</sup> South, 91.

Mon identity was not as strongly politicized or militarized during the colonial period.

Intermarriage and assimilation over time meant that many Burmans viewed the Mons as being part of their majority group, particularly since the Mons were geographically interspersed throughout the Burman population in the central state.<sup>83</sup>

The British were somewhat inconsistent in their treatment of the Mons, sometimes grouping them with the ethnic majority, but at other times as a distinct group. The British encouraged attention to distinct Mon literature and culture, and also employed the Mon Paradigm to rhetorically distinguish the Mons from the Burmans. “By contrasting the Mons’ past greatness with their current subjugation, the Mon Paradigm called attention to the oppressive nature of Burmese rule towards the Mons.”<sup>84</sup> Such rhetoric was not entirely supported by colonial institutions, as the British institutions did not target the Mons, either positively or negatively, as they did other ethnic groups. Contradictory to the British attempt to distinguish between the Mons and Burmans, the colonial census seemed to increasingly group the two together. In one district, an 1856 census calculated that nearly half of the population was Mon. In a 1911 census, only 1,224 people described themselves as Mons out of 532,357 inhabitants.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, Mon identity was not made as political as Karen identity, but this British did make a convoluted attempt to separate the Mons from the ethnic Burmans.

Colonial institutions of governance directly elevated the political status of the Karen, and, to a slightly lesser degree, the Kachin. The Mon might be considered to receive somewhat

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<sup>83</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 48-49.

<sup>84</sup> Lieberman, “Excising the ‘Mon Paradigm’,” 380.

<sup>85</sup> Martin Smith and Ashley South, Nai Kasuah Mon, Nai Banya Hogsar. “Reflections on the 1995 New Mon State Party Ceasefire.” *Covenant Institute via Myanmar Information Management Unit*. (2020), 10.

neutral treatment under the British; they were not highly sought after or politically favored, but they were not directly discriminated on the grounds of ethnic identity. Conversely, the Burmans, who lived in British controlled areas were largely excluded from governance and unrepresented. By organizing the colonial apparatus along ethnic lines, the British politicized ethnicity. The British separated the Karens and Kachins from the Burmans by recruiting them into the colonial army and elevating their political status, solidifying the precolonial ethnic divisions that had been imperfect and mostly unpolitical. In the Karens, the British continued to explicitly encourage an ethnic identity that was formed in opposition to the Burman majority.<sup>86</sup> The colonial state made ethnicity a prominent form of control, and a preeminent concern within the Burmese population.<sup>87</sup>

Outside of the ethnically controlled territories that were allowed to maintain traditional authority, the British largely destroyed indigenous institutions of control. The widespread destruction of precolonial institutions resulted in a second unintended consequence: an uncontrolled and increasingly violent society. Callahan contends that the intrusion of a modern capitalist economy in a precapitalist, agrarian society, was simply incompatible with many local systems of authority.<sup>88</sup> The destruction of the *Sangha*, the Buddhist monastic order, demonstrates how the colonial state undermined precolonial social order. Before colonization, the *Sangha* served as a culturally unifying force and often collaborated with the state to order society through religion and schooling.<sup>89</sup> Colonial policies de-emphasized religion, in the hopes of

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<sup>86</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma*, 91.

<sup>87</sup> Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.

<sup>88</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 43.

<sup>89</sup> Nick Cheesman. "School, State and Sangha in Burma." *Comparative Education* 39, no 1 (2003): 45-63.

creating a secular state, and eroded the power of the *Sangha*, wreaking havoc on Burmese society.

The loss of precolonial authority, along with unemployment and impoverishment, were all features that led to widespread social disintegration. This disorder, along with an expansive colonial definition of crime that treated murderers, thieves, and scavenging peasants as comparable threats to the state, led to wildly escalating crime rates. “From 1911 to 1921, the population increased by about 9 percent, but the increase of major crimes ranged from 31 percent in the case of murder to 109 percent in the case of robbery and dacoity.”<sup>90</sup> Dacoity—a catch-all term for banditry that extended broadly to any form of resistance—was particularly widespread. The criminalization of opium consumption also led to the increased “discovery” of crime in the colony.<sup>91</sup> Myanmar came to be regarded as the most criminal province in the British empire.<sup>92</sup>

### *British Coercion: Military and Policing*

The British attempt to organize society for production compelled the pacification of the Burmese population. As crime and violence escalated, the colonial state found a need for internal security and responded by expanding the colonial military apparatus and police force. Notably, the British did not build a new military in Myanmar. A cursory glance at Burmese history might suggest that Myanmar’s military state is not rooted in the colonial period, since a national military was not institutionalized until the Japanese occupation. However, the colonial period

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<sup>90</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 30.

<sup>91</sup> Diana Kim. *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia*. Princeton University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvp7d4p6>, 187.

<sup>92</sup> Callahan, 29.

elevated the role of coercive institutions in Burmese governance and primed the state for future militarism.

In the pursuit of unfettered commerce, the British established, in the words of Callahan, a “coercion-intensive political relationship between state and society that hardened into durable institutions and practice.”<sup>93</sup> Most colonial military units were focused on maintaining internal security and suppressing threats to commerce. In fact, there were no real threats to Myanmar’s borders until the Japanese invasion—the military functioned to order the Burmese population and played a major role in governing colonial Burma.<sup>94</sup> Through the frequent deployment of armed forces, Burmese society gained extensive experience with the military arm of the colonial state. Having eliminated the Sangha—an important intermediary institution that brought order to society—the colonial state was forced to use the military. This necessitated rule by force, perhaps more so than in other British colonies, where intermediary institutions were not destroyed.

Colonial policing further amplified the use of coercive force in regulating individual and social behavior. However, local police forces, underdeveloped and poorly trained, often failed to successfully bring order to society. The failures of local police units ultimately reinforced the colonial reliance on the military, setting a pattern of law enforcement that, Callahan argues, still exists today. The slightest challenge to colonial order provoked military deployment. Within the colonial apparatus, the role of the military was elevated above all else. This was a weak, shallow state, barely capable of collecting enough revenue. The colonial state barely existed. Where it

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<sup>93</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Callahan, 31.

took form—in military and police units—the state overcompensated with extravagant force.<sup>95</sup> In Myanmar, the British institutionalized an unequal relationship between military and civil authorities, a relationship that persists today.

Colonial rulers established the military as the most prominent institution of social control in Myanmar. Furthermore, because of the selective incorporation of certain ethnic groups, the colonial military institutionalized ethnic divisions. British colonialism established an ethnically exclusive military institution in Myanmar, a legacy that persists today. The British heavily recruited their favored ethnic minority groups, the Karen and the Kachin, under the pretext that they made better soldiers.<sup>96</sup> The Karen, Kachin and Chins, were the only indigenous groups recruited to serve in the British army in Myanmar. While the Mons were not directly recruited throughout the colonial period, they were not explicitly excluded, as the ethnic Burmans were.<sup>97</sup> Burmans were effectively banned from joining the military until 1929. This exclusion was partly rooted in racist anti-Burman stereotyping, and, particularly in later years of British colonialism, stemmed from fears of arming and training Burmans who might get swept up in the growing anticolonial nationalist movement. The colonial military in Myanmar is a classic illustration of divide and rule, which further institutionalized and militarized ethnic divisions. Below, Figure 2 illustrates the incorporation of ethnic groups into the British Army in Myanmar. Importantly, this shows that while the British had conceded to the limited incorporation of Burmans a decade earlier, Burmans were still vastly underrepresented in 1939.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 31.

<sup>96</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, 16.

<sup>97</sup> Callahan, 35.

<sup>98</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937*, 133-134.

**Figure 2. The Ethnic Composition of the British Army in Myanmar, in 1939.**<sup>99</sup>

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Percent of the Population</b>	<b>Number in Army</b>
Burman	75.11	472
Karen	9.34	1,448
Chin	2.38	868
Kachin	1.05	881
Others (Native and Foreign)	12.12	168

The Burmans composed the vast majority of the population (75 percent), yet there were only 472 Burman soldiers in the British Army. Though the Kachin made up just 1 percent of the population, they supplied 881 soldiers—nearly twice as many soldiers as the Burmans. The Karens were also drastically overrepresented: they constituted 9.34 percent of the population, but 1,448 Karens served in the colonial army.<sup>100</sup> Based off of the numbers reported above, the Kachins made up an enormous 37% of the colonial army in 1939. While the Mons are not represented in this chart, we can assume they contributed a very limited number of soldiers to the “other” category. It is also likely that some Mons were classified as ethnic Burmans, since the British were inconsistent in their categorization of the Mons.<sup>101</sup>

The notion that the Karens and Kachins gained valuable military experience, from which they could reproduce armed organizations, has been frequently repeated. The extent to which the colonial military truly served as a “training ground” for minority groups, birthing skilled ethnic

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<sup>99</sup> Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma*, 133-134.

<sup>100</sup> Moscotti, 133-134.

<sup>101</sup> Lieberman, “Excising the ‘Mon Paradigm’,” 380.

armies, is unclear, because this notion ultimately became so intertwined with nationalist beliefs and anti-minority propaganda.<sup>102</sup> Whether or not experience in the colonial military directly equipped minority groups to form ethnic armed organizations in the postcolonial period, their selective incorporation into the military deeply undermined political cohesion in the Burmese state. The exclusion of the ethnic Burmans from the military is at least as important as the inclusion of the Karens and Kachins, as Burman nationalists came to view membership in the government's armed forces as collaboration with the enemy.<sup>103</sup>

Kachin and Karen colonial recruits in particular came to represent not the socially complex demographic categories that they were, but rather the politically and ideologically immature embodiments of their respective 'ethnic groups' ... loyal to colonialism and having a primitive tendency towards violence combined with a large dose of political naivety, the colonial military experience provided them with the knowledge base from which they could endlessly reproduce militarized organizations to oppose the Burmese state in the longer term.<sup>104</sup>

Ethnic based recruitment amplified the fears of Burman nationalists and encouraged their imagining of ethnic soldiers that were deeply loyal to colonialism and subsequently disloyal to Burman nationalists.<sup>105</sup> Along with other policies that elevated the political status of the Karens

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<sup>102</sup> Mandy Sadan. "Ethnic Armies and Ethnic Conflict in Burma: Reconsidering the History of Colonial Militarization in the Kachin Region of Burma during the Second World War." *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 4 (2013): 601-26.

<sup>103</sup> Sadan, 605-606.

<sup>104</sup> Sadan, 605-606.

<sup>105</sup> Sadan, 624.

and Kachins (their relative political autonomy and government representation), the colonial military apparatus institutionalized their ethnic favoritism and solidified ethnic divisions.

### *Burgeoning Nationalism*

Under colonial rule, ethnic Burmans lacked power in their own country, and they became increasingly frustrated with their disempowered status.<sup>106</sup> After nearly five decades of British rule, nationalism began to develop aggressively in the 1930s. The earliest and most significant nationalist movements was the *Dobama Asiayone* or “We Burman Society,” which was organized chiefly by university students. The members called themselves *Thakins*, or Masters, and the party came to be known as the Thakin Party.<sup>107</sup> The ultimate goal of the group was Myanmar’s independence, but their initial objectives included the revival of indigenous language and culture. In the 1930s, their stated slogan read:

Burma is our country; Burmese literature is our literature; Burmese language is our language. Love our country, raise the standards of our literature, respect our language.<sup>108</sup>

While this slogan clearly captures nationalist aspirations of independence, it also reflects the ethnocentric ideals held by the emerging nationalist groups. The phrase “Burma is *our* country,” does not simply reject British governance, it also situates the ethnic Burman nationalists as the rightful rulers of the country. Along with the Thakin Party, other groups with similar nationalist aspirations, also emerged during the 1930s, including the the *Myochit* (Love of Country) Party and the *Sinyetha* (Poor Man’s) Party. For all of these emerging nationalists, self-rule meant

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<sup>106</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, 38.

<sup>107</sup> Silverstein, 38.

<sup>108</sup> Silverstein, 39.

*Burman* rule. “Minorities were expected to either assimilate or to accept a reduced social and political status.”<sup>109</sup> The emerging nationalist movement was framed as the empowerment of the Burman majority, who had been excluded and humiliated by the British. Burman nationalists were staunchly opposed to British policies of minority representation in government, and the colonial protection of the Kachin and Karen.<sup>110</sup> Thus, an ethnically exclusive nationalist movement began to emerge, fusing its political ideology with a focus on Burmese language and Buddhist religion. The development of the Burmese nationalist movement also coincided with—and fueled—the proliferation of local non-state armies.

*Political Pocket Armies: The Colonial Volunteer Corps*

Ethnically exclusive military policies resulted in another major consequence, which would further institutionalize ethnic divisions: the emergence of local, non-state military organizations, which Callahan calls “political pocket armies.”<sup>111</sup> Unable to obtain military training in the colonial armed forces, the Burman-majority nationalist political organizations established political pocket armies. This militarization spread rapidly—by the mid-1930s every major nationalist or religious organization had established its own *tat*.<sup>112</sup> Local *tats*, also referred to as the volunteer corps, or, in grander terms, “private armies,” were the most politically organized groups in pre-war Myanmar.<sup>113</sup> The volunteer corps were regularly used to terrorize

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<sup>109</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, 39-40.

<sup>110</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 202.

<sup>111</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*.

<sup>112</sup> Callahan, 36.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor, “The Relationship Between Burmese Social Classes,” 185.

political opponents and extort money from wealthy individuals through the threat of beating or the destruction of property. While there were occasional clashes between different “armies,” they never posed a serious threat to domestic peace.<sup>114</sup>

Callahan accurately observes that the most bizarre feature of *tats* was that the British tolerated their existence at all. While British law did not permit *tats* to carry firearms, these were overtly military organizations, wearing uniforms and carrying out drills and war exercises with bamboo staffs.<sup>115</sup> It is not entirely clear why the British allowed *tats* to exist; Callahan suggests that, perhaps the British underestimated anti colonial sentiment, or thought that they could later integrate *tats* into the colonial army. Robert Taylor similarly reasons that the British perceived the *tats* as ultimately useful. Since the British believed the Burmans to be unfit for military service, *tats* were seen as a means of developing Myanmar’s capacity for self-defense, and instilling discipline in the young men.<sup>116</sup> This logic was not entirely wrong: on occasion, some *tats* were contracted by the British. Other *tats*, however, made appearances in anti-government protests.<sup>117</sup>

Whatever the rationale, the British tolerance of this widespread militarization further “institutionalized the ethnically demarcated boundaries between ‘collaborators’ and ‘nationalists.’”<sup>118</sup> The existence of *tats* resulted directly from ethnic exclusion in the colonial state, and *tats* were fundamentally ethnically based, local militia. In the colonial military

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<sup>114</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 186.

<sup>115</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 37.

<sup>116</sup> Taylor, 188.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, 348.

<sup>118</sup> Callahan, 39.

apparatus, British colonizers institutionalized ethnic boundaries and militarized the Burmese population along ethnic lines.

### **The Colonial Legacy**

The colonial state hardened ethnic divisions, keeping communities apart and building a history of animosity.<sup>119</sup> Before colonization, ethnic identity and culture was highly textured and elastic. As the state enforced ethnic divisions, two related changes occurred, both of which are described by Mamdani. First, ethnic identity was homogenized and flattened, in favor of an official version. Second, the imposition of law along ethnic boundaries turned the simple fact of ethnic diversity into a source of tension.<sup>120</sup> Through indirect rule, the military apparatus, and the tolerance of ethnic nationalist *tats*, the colonial state established ethnic identity as the foundation of political and military mobilization. Colonial policies of ethnic stratification created fault lines of ethnic conflict, along which conflict would be reproduced. As the British subverted the precolonial power balance, elevating the Karen and Kachin, and subjugating the Burmans, it made these three ethnic identities highly politically salient. While the British made ethnicity a prominent form of control in Myanmar, Mon identity was not as strongly politicized or militarized during the colonial period. Caught between the British, their favored ethnic minority groups, and the Burmese majority, the Mons emerged from the colonial period in a slightly uncertain position. As a whole, the British created a society in which ethnicity was a yardstick for political power.

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<sup>119</sup> Verghese, *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence*, 35.

<sup>120</sup> Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 293.

The colonial military apparatus and nationalist *tats* further divided Burmese society, militarizing the population along ethnic lines. Throughout the colonial period, an undercurrent of nationalism was rising, with a clear focus on overcoming colonial humiliation and restoring the power of the Burman majority.<sup>121</sup> Colonial interference shaped a nationalist movement that came to be defined in ethnic terms, as a line was drawn between “colonial collaborators” and Burman nationalists. Today, these groups are still deeply divided—the Karens, Kachins and Mons have birthed violent insurgent groups that target the Burman controlled state, making violent, separatist claims. The ethnic divisions politicized by the British remain highly salient, decades later.

The political and ethnic divisions institutionalized during the colonial period can be easily mapped onto contemporary civil conflict. Myanmar’s ethnically exclusive military controls the state, overshadowing its weak civil institutions. The central government is gripped by an ethno-nationalist ideology that refuses to accommodate minority groups. Small, ethnically defined insurgent armies, easily likened to colonial *tats*, fight back against the state. Thus far, my findings support my first hypothesis: British colonialism established fault lines of conflict in Myanmar, determining the course of ethnic conflict. Verghese similarly concludes that in Myanmar, the colonial period created “patterns of violence [that] became self-reinforcing; every riot hardened ethnic divisions.”<sup>122</sup> However, this finding leads to the seemingly counterintuitive claim that the Japanese occupation did not significantly disrupt colonial legacies or cast new patterns of violence. Institutional continuity requires active attempts to maintain existing institutions. If the British colonial institutions continue to define ethnic conflict in Myanmar,

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<sup>121</sup> Staniland, 228.

<sup>122</sup> Verghese, *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence*, 207.

how did this colonial legacy survive the Japanese period? In the following chapter, I will address this question.

## Chapter Three: The Japanese Occupation and Wartime Institutions

### Introduction

As the colonial state dissolved, Myanmar began a new, complex chapter of statehood, amidst the theater of World War II. The Burmese state was launched from colonial rule into wartime politics, as Japanese invaders rapidly stripped the Burmese state of colonial administrators and began to construct a new, wartime state. Classical bellicist theory and Tilly's famous logic suggest that Japan's wartime occupation of Myanmar would be institutionally transformative. Theories of wartime institution building demand the scrutiny of my first finding, that colonial legacies determine Myanmar's violent pattern of ethnic conflict. If the institutional legacies of colonialism define modern ethnic conflict, how did these institutions survive the massive disruption that occurred during the Japanese invasion? Thus, I return to my second hypothesis and consider the possibility that the Japanese occupation disrupted British institutional legacies, redefining patterns of conflict.

The Japanese invasion brought about the swift and irreversible collapse of the British colonial state.<sup>123</sup> However, the Japanese never undertook an extensive statebuilding project to build a new administrative machinery. Tilly's causal logic anticipates the concentration of coercive power, and the development of state institutions to extract resources and protect the state accumulation of capital. The Japanese *did* concentrate coercive power, building the first national military in Myanmar. There was no direct antecedent to the national military constructed by the Japanese, since the British had merely integrated indigenous forces into the colonial military. The Japanese built a Burmese military from scratch, and in doing so, established what has been, ever since, Myanmar's preeminent political institution. However, this national military

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<sup>123</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 46.

was almost the extent of Japanese wartime institution building. There was no concerted effort to build institutions that would extract resources or protect capital.

Centeno's analysis of wartime states in Latin America frames one explanation for the Japanese failure to build meaningful institutions in Myanmar. Latin American states entered into war too soon after independence, and thus they lacked the basic organizational capacity that was needed to respond in the pattern described by Tilly. While the exact circumstances in Myanmar were different—notably, the state was not yet independent, only occupied by a different imperial power—the Burmese state certainly lacked any organizational capacity that the Japanese might have harnessed to build institutions. The Japanese, like the British, built a skinny, underdeveloped state that privileged the military. Wartime developments under the Japanese did alter Burmese state institutions and ethnic politics, but ultimately, did not overwrite the British legacy. In fact, the opposite occurred. Institutional path dependence is the notion that an institution, once established, is difficult to change, and furthermore, that existing institutions constrain and shape the development of future institutions.<sup>124</sup> From the beginning, the impacts of Japanese imperialism mirrored those of British colonialism, because it was constrained by a state and society shaped by the colonial period. There was no clear institutional break between the two periods. In this chapter, I argue that the Japanese occupation reinforced the British legacy of ethnic divisions and militarization by building an ethnically exclusive nationalist military that came to define the state.

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<sup>124</sup> On the concept of path dependence, see Brian Arthur, *Increasing Returns and path Dependence in the Economy* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

## Japanese Invasion and Occupation

Japanese policy towards Myanmar—invasion, occupation, and ultimately, independence—was dictated by military expedience.<sup>125</sup> The Japanese invasion of Myanmar was seen as necessary for two reasons, as reported in a 1941 War Ministry policy review. First, occupying Myanmar would establish a key position for the Japanese defense line and second, it would cut off supplies to China by disrupting the Burma Road to Yunnan.<sup>126</sup> Another imperative was later added as the Japanese strategized their invasion: the occupation of Myanmar would accelerate its alienation from Great Britain.<sup>127</sup>

From the beginning, the Japanese sought to collaborate with the Burmese nationalist movement, in order to achieve their military goals. In 1940, the Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo dispatched Colonel Suzuki to Myanmar, where he made contacts with nationalist leaders and identified the Thakin Party as the most important arm of the independence movement.<sup>128</sup> Suzuki pledged that Japan would help Myanmar achieve independence, which was well received by Burman nationalists—after failing to make headway with the British, nationalist leaders were desperately seeking foreign military aid.<sup>129</sup> Appealing to nationalist organizations with imagery of “sweeping away British power,” the Japanese began to source recruits for their military effort in Myanmar.<sup>130</sup> The Japanese tapped into groups of young, anticolonial

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<sup>125</sup> Won Z. Yoon. “Military Expediency: A Determining Factor in the Japanese Policy Regarding Burmese Independence.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1978): 248–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062727>.

<sup>126</sup> Joyce Lebra. *Japanese-Trained Armies in Southeast Asia: Independence and Volunteer Forces in World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, 43.

<sup>127</sup> Lebra, 42.

<sup>128</sup> Lebra, 50.

<sup>129</sup> Yoon, 249.

<sup>130</sup> Lebra, 45.

nationalists who hoped to oust the British and gain independence, and smuggled many of them out of the country for military training.<sup>131</sup> Famously, in 1941, thirty young nationalists, known as the “Thirty Comrades,” were secretly taken to Hainan Island, to prepare them to fight in an uprising against the British. One of the men recruited was Thakin Aung San, one of the most influential nationalist leaders in Myanmar.<sup>132</sup> Japanese-style military discipline was new to these Burmans recruits, who had been excluded from the colonial army. At first, the Burmans were exhausted and demoralized by their rigorous training, but their political ambitions propelled them, as they were eager to prepare for themselves for the liberation of Myanmar. In addition to learning military skills and tactics, the recruits carried out war games and were encouraged to strengthen their spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>133</sup> These soldiers would make up the nucleus of the Burmese Independence Army. Even before Japanese invasion, Myanmar’s national military had begun to take form.

### *Building a Military*

The Burmese Independence Army (BIA) was the first iteration of Myanmar’s national military. While the obvious function of the BIA was to provide military support to Japan’s invading troops, the creation of this “independence army” was also a necessary evil. The Japanese provided invaluable military training and aid to anticolonial Burman nationalists, in exchange for their collaboration. Incorporating the Thirty Comrades and other Japanese trained nationalists, the BIA came into being formally in December 1941. The BIA expanded rapidly,

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<sup>131</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 48.

<sup>132</sup> Yoon, “Military Expediency,” 250.

<sup>133</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 57-58.

with overwhelmingly successful recruitment—within a few weeks of the BIA’s arrival in Myanmar, it was estimated to be as large as 200,000 men.<sup>134</sup> Nearly all BIA members were ethnically Burman, though the Burmans constituted roughly 65-70 percent of the population. Expanding and strengthening the BIA was never a Japanese priority, and “in the chaotic early months of the Japanese conquest and occupation, the BIA emerged as an entity that far outpaced Japanese plans.”<sup>135</sup> This early and unanticipated growth foreshadows Japan’s ultimate loss of control over the Burmese military.

Colonial society was primed for Japanese militarization—along with the widespread banditry and anti-British sentiment in Burmese society, the British had established the military as the preeminent political institution and militarized its population along ethnic lines. The rapid growth of the BIA can be attributed to two factors that emerged out of the colonial period: local traditions of dacoity and rampant anti-British sentiment.<sup>136</sup> While the establishment of a national military is a distinct product of the Japanese, the institution emerged within a state and society that had just abruptly emerged from British rule. The establishment of a national military institution is the defining legacy of the Japanese occupation, but this legacy was distinctly supported by the colonial experience.

### *The Japanese Military Administration*

As the war expanded further into Myanmar in early 1942, the Japanese were faced with a critical issue—the question of independence. When exactly should the Japanese grant the

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<sup>134</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 45.

<sup>135</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 53.

<sup>136</sup> Lebra, 65.

independence that they continued to promise? The Japanese lacked an entirely coherent policy in Myanmar, which led to widespread confusion and contradiction regarding the promotion of Burmese independence. This confusion is reflected in two nearly simultaneous pronouncements made in Tokyo.<sup>137</sup> On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1941, it was announced that the independence of Burma would be promoted and used to stimulate the independence of India. Only five days later, the exact same policymaking body announced that it had decided to “encourage the native peoples to have a deep appreciation and trust for the Imperial Army” and “to avoid any action that may stimulate unduly or induce an early independence movement.”<sup>138</sup> Ultimately, the Japanese decided to delay Burmese independence, reasoning that friction between the Burmese and Japanese governments might impede Japanese military operations.<sup>139</sup>

A military administration was established in March 1942—a turning point in Burman Japanese relations.<sup>140</sup> The Japanese established the Military Administrative Department (M.A.D) with the goal of procuring resources essential to their operations in Myanmar and elsewhere. M.A.D (later, Military Administration Headquarters) was staffed by army officers and Japanese civilians who were sent to Myanmar. All iterations of the Japanese administration in Myanmar were headed by a military commander.<sup>141</sup> In the “General Plan for Enforcing Military Administration in Burma,” Colonel Ishii outlined the guiding principles for the Japanese administration.

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<sup>137</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 44.

<sup>138</sup> Lebra, 44.

<sup>139</sup> Yoon, “Military Expediency,” 252.

<sup>140</sup> Yoon, 259.

<sup>141</sup> Yoon, 255.

“The major objective of enforcing the military administration in Burma is the rapid procurement of the resources essential for national defense and self-support of the Japanese forces in Burma. To achieve this objective, the military administration will retain complete control over Burmese affairs—political, economic, diplomatic, and military. The military administration will be responsible to the Commander of the Fifteenth Army.”<sup>142</sup>

While some Japanese civilians and pro-Japanese Burmans were employed in the Japanese administration, it was a fundamentally military enterprise—political, economic, and diplomatic issues were all under the oversight of the Fifteenth Army. This military supremacy is definitive of the Japanese occupation in Myanmar.

The Japanese also established the Burma Baho Government, or Burma Central Government, in Rangoon, which was essentially a figurehead government. The Baho Government was placed under the oversight of Thakins, with Burman nationalist Tun Oke as the nominal head. The purpose of the Baho government was to “create some semblance of order in the administrative units of the BIA,” which were scattered through Lower Myanmar.<sup>143</sup> In actuality, the administrative authority of the government did not extend much beyond the capital of Rangoon. The BIA was placed under the command of Japan’s Fifteenth Army, and while it was a “Burman” army, it was Japanese led. The Japanese used the Governor-General’s residence (the seat of the colonial government) as the headquarters of the Military Administration, which further symbolized the preeminence of the Japanese Military Administration over the BIA and the Baho Government. The BIA had anticipated use of the Governor-General’s residence as its

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<sup>142</sup> Yoon, “Military Expediency,” 253-254.

<sup>143</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 63.

own headquarters in Rangoon, and its seizure by the Japanese Army caused bitterness among the BIA officer corps. The use of the Governor-General's residence was taken as symbolic of the real relationship between the Japanese Army and Myanmar.<sup>144</sup>

Anticipating an independent government, Burmese nationalists felt deeply betrayed by the establishment of military administration in Myanmar: it became evident that Japan was now intending to rule Myanmar. Nationalist leaders began to regard the Japanese as conquerors, rather than liberators. While the Baho Government was essentially a figurehead government, tasked with restoring law and order in occupied villages and districts, BIA leaders still expected that it would become the legitimate government of Myanmar.<sup>145</sup> Thus, anti-Japanese sentiment further escalated when, after just two months of its existence, the Baho Government was abruptly dissolved. As demands for independence escalated, the Japanese had found it too difficult to work with the Baho Government and replaced it with a "pro-Japanese government" that could be more easily handled. Similarly, the Japanese Army assumed tighter control over the Burman army.<sup>146</sup> The Japanese disbanded the BIA and attempted to reorganize the army as the BDA (the Burma Defense Army), and again, later, as the BNA (the Burma National Army).<sup>147</sup> Ultimately, it was too late—the Japanese were unable to control and pacify the Burmans. The relationship between the Burmans and the Japanese had been irreparably damaged, and anti-Japanese sentiment burgeoned.

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<sup>144</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 159.

<sup>145</sup> Yoon, "Military Expediency," 259.

<sup>146</sup> Lebra, 63.

<sup>147</sup> Yoon, 259-260.

The Japanese administration brought no stability to Myanmar's volatile political landscape. In fact, it did the opposite. The mere existence of the administration provoked outrage among Burman nationalists, and the state itself was barely capable of carrying out the minimal functions of maintaining order and regulating institutions.<sup>148</sup> The Japanese certainly made no concerted effort to prepare the Burmese state and people for independence and self-governance. In a time of immense uncertainty and instability, the Japanese built only one powerful institution: the military. When the Burmese later gained independence, the military was the only institution with a strong foundation. Japan's administration in Myanmar amplified the British legacy and established the military as the preeminent institution of governance.

### **Militarized Ethnicity**

Under colonial rule, Burmese nationalism had been sharply defined along ethnic lines. By framing their military project in nationalist terms, the Japanese built a national institution that transmitted the colonial legacy of militarization into post-independence politics and reinforced the ethnic divisions created by the British. By recruiting ethnic Burman nationalists, the Japanese military institutionalized the same ethnic divisions as the British but subverted the balance of power. While the British had selectively recruited Karens and Kachins and excluded Burmans, the Japanese recruited mostly Burmans and shunned the ethnic groups who had served in the colonial forces.<sup>149</sup> The Japanese were untrusting of the ethnic groups that they viewed as being allied with the British. In Myanmar, as they did elsewhere, they adhered to a policy of avoiding

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<sup>148</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 252.

<sup>149</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 167.

the segments of the population which served in the colonial regime.<sup>150</sup> The Japanese selected for special education and training the very segments of the population that had been excluded by the colonial regime, and built an ethnically exclusive military that elevated the political and military status of the previously disenfranchised Burmans.<sup>151</sup> Verghese finds patterns of violence that were established during the colonial period persisted into postcolonial India because they were embedded in institutions. When the Japanese built a Burmese national military, they crystallized ethnic divisions in a military institution that was far more durable and permanent than the colonial armed forces.

During World War II, the ethnic tensions underlying Burmese politics became increasingly volatile. While Burmese nationalists were gaining power, influence, and opportunity, other individuals and interests that had had been protected in the colonial system were suddenly left vulnerable.<sup>152</sup> Calls for independence found few sympathizers among the minority groups, who stood to be overpowered by the Burman majority.<sup>153</sup> By promoting a narrative in which the Burmans were the rightful leaders of their country, the Japanese exacerbated the fears of minority groups.<sup>154</sup> During the invasion of Myanmar, Japanese propaganda broadcasts repeated the slogans “Asia for the Asians” and “Burma for the Burmans”

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<sup>150</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 64.

<sup>151</sup> Lebra, 167.

<sup>152</sup> Selth, Andrew. “Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945”. *Modern Asian Studies*, 20(3), 483–507. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312534>.

<sup>153</sup> Selth, 487.

<sup>154</sup> Selth, 494.

and stressed the ‘glorious past’ of the Burmese people.<sup>155</sup> This propaganda emphasized that the Japanese saw the Buddhist Burmans as allies and the rightful ruling class.<sup>156</sup> Japanese strategy reinforced the ethnically demarcated boundaries of the nationalist movement and elevated the political status of ethnic Burman majority. As Myanmar’s political future loomed uncertain, ethnic tensions escalated.

### *Karens*

The Japanese subverted the power balance in a manner that most directly benefited the Burmans and harmed the Karens: it was along this ethnic divide that violent conflict escalated most severely. The Karens lost the protected position they had enjoyed under the colonial administration and were fearful of their minority political status in an independent state controlled by Burman nationalists. For these reasons, Karen leaders sought to bring about the return of the British.<sup>157</sup> Karen leaders also began to articulate their goal of an autonomous ethnic state post World War II. The British took advantage of the Karens’ insecure position and rallied them to fight alongside the Allied powers. Decolonization is a long and complicated process—while the colonial power had been removed from Myanmar, the British still exerted wartime influence over segments of the Burmese population—particularly the Karens and Kachins. British officers encouraged the Karens that “their dream of a Karen state might be realized after

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<sup>155</sup> John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978, 441.

<sup>156</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 494.

<sup>157</sup> Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, 224.

the war.”<sup>158</sup> Many Karens believed that the British would reward them for their loyalty by helping them construct an autonomous ethnic state. British and American operatives also distributed extensive anti-Burman propaganda, which identified Burman nationalists as a key enemy, along with the Japanese. Such propaganda emphasized historical grievances between the Burmans and Karens and reinforced the idea that the Allied forces would support the Karens in pursuing an independent state and resisting the Burman nationalists.<sup>159</sup> In pursuit of two different futures for their country, the Karen fought alongside the Japanese, and the Burman BIA fought alongside the British. Many Karens (and Kachins) were recruited by the British and provided with military training, often in India. After receiving intensive training in conventional and guerilla warfare, they returned to Myanmar in regular Allied divisions, or even in undercover units behind Japanese lines.<sup>160</sup> As the divide deepened between the BIA and the Karens, ethnically motivated violence grew more extreme.

The Karens’ loyalty to the British led to their oppression by the Japanese through the BIA. When Karens in Lower Burma refused to accept the authority of the BIA and relinquish their guns, hostilities quickly escalated between them. In 1942, entire Karen communities were put under arrest and public executions were held, either “for disloyalty to the new Burmese regime or to make an example of those unwilling to cooperate with the BIA.”<sup>161</sup> In one Myaungmya district, over 1,800 Karens were killed, and 400 villages were destroyed. Communal

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<sup>158</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 502.

<sup>159</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 82.

<sup>160</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and The Politics of Ethnicity*, 92.

<sup>161</sup> Selth, 491.

violence between the Burman BIA soldiers and Karens ended only due to Japanese intervention.<sup>162</sup> In 1946, Saw Tha Din, a future leader of Karen insurrection remarked:

How could anyone expect the Karen people to trust the Burmans after what happened ... the murder and slaughter of so many Karen people and the robbing of so many Karen villages? After all this, how could anyone seriously expect us to trust any Burman government in Rangoon? <sup>163</sup>

While the Japanese later attempted to mitigate the conflict between Burmans and Karens by forming a Karen battalion in the military, it was too little too late. The events of 1942 were never forgotten.<sup>164</sup> Not only did the BIA commit atrocities against the Karen, but the puppet Burmese government came to be identified with the brutalities endured under the Japanese, fueling the ethnic and antagonism and conflict that continues today.<sup>165</sup> While the Karens and Burmans were divided under the British, they were not directly engaged in violent conflict. The Japanese stoked these divisions, and ethnic violence between the Karens and Burmans began to ensue in full. Together, the British and Japanese established corrosive institutions that divided the population and politicized and militarized ethnic identity, creating a deep divide between the Burmans and the Karens.

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<sup>162</sup> Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and The Politics of Ethnicity*, 63.

<sup>163</sup> Martin Smith, 62; 'Report on the Rebellion in Burma', Presented by Sec. of State for India to Parliament, June 1931 (HMSO): 13-14.

<sup>164</sup> Selth, "Race and Resistance," 491.

<sup>165</sup> Selth, 495.

### *Kachins*

The Kachins, like the Karens, were pro-British and engaged in Japanese resistance. US and British operatives targeted the Kachins with the same propaganda that was distributed amongst the Karens—emphasizing grievances with the Burman population and depicting them as the ultimate enemy. Again, as with the Karens, the British made promises of independence and autonomy following the war and encouraged Kachin aspirations of statehood. Throughout World War II, the Karens and Kachins fought alongside the British, but they were fighting for their own distinct visions of political independence as separate ethnic states.

The Japanese never established complete control of the Kachin and Chin territories (this would be the first area recaptured by the Allies in 1944-1945). The British reported that “[the Kachins] refusal to cooperate with the Japanese ... finally forced the Japanese to abandon their position in the hills.<sup>166</sup> Thus, while the Kachins mobilized to fight against the Japanese, the Japanese occupation and the collapse of the colonial state did not appear to impact them as drastically as it impacted the Karens. The Kachins’ geographic stronghold near the Chinese and Indian borders provided them with a degree of separation from the politics and conflict in central Myanmar.<sup>167</sup> The BIA/BNA did not ever operate in the Kachin held areas.<sup>168</sup> While the Kachins were involved in violent conflict, they fought directly against Japanese troops, rather than against pro-Japanese Burman nationalists. Unlike the Karens and Burmans, the Kachins and Burmans had no meaningful history of ethnic conflict, until they fought on opposite sides during World War II.

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<sup>166</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 55.

<sup>167</sup> Silverstein, 55.

<sup>168</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 492.

Both under the British and the Japanese, we see that the Kachins' geographic stronghold is definitive of their ethnic experience. Compared to the other ethnic groups studied in this paper, the Kachins were uniquely autonomous during the Japanese occupation. Silverstein even contends that "Japan's authority had little or no effect on the people living in the area of the present Kachin and Chin states."<sup>169</sup> While the Kachin people were not subjugated under the Japanese, the Japanese occupation and WWII had lasting impacts on Kachin identity and politics. In the Kachin region, the greatest impact was not made by the Japanese Military Administration or BIA, but rather by the international conflict dynamics that solidified the ethnic divisions between the Kachin and the Burmans. In fact, during World War II it seems that the British were more influential in shaping the conflict between the Kachins and Burmans than the Japanese were. While the Japanese were distrustful of the Kachins and Karens, they had no reason to intentionally create ethnic conflict between the Burman nationalists and ethnic minorities. However, the British strategically stoked this conflict, in order to rouse anti-Burman and anti-Japanese sentiment, and to increase support for the Allied forces.

### *Mons*

Like the Kachins, the Mons were less drastically impacted by the Japanese occupation. This is in part due to their relative position under the colonial administration—Karens were at the top of the colonial food chain, and thus had the most to lose. In the case of the Mons, their identity was less politicized than Karen and Kachin identities, both during the colonial period and the Japanese occupation. Intermarriage and assimilation over time meant that many Burmans viewed the Mons as being part of their majority group, and therefore, the elevation of Burman

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<sup>169</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 48.

status was not inherently harmful to the Mon people. Additionally, as a group that was geographically dispersed throughout the Burmans, Mons faced difficulties organizing and forming a collective identity. During the Japanese occupation, the Mons were generally accepting of Burman leadership and nationalism. In fact, there were even influential Mon nationalists.<sup>170</sup> Throughout the Japanese occupation and early independence, the Mon were faced with a fundamental question, the answer to which determined their political behavior. Would they do better to stand independently or work with the Burman majority? The Mons appear to have favored the latter option for decades. The Japanese loosely grouped the Mon with the ethnic Burmans, and thus the Japanese occupation did not appear to have an immediate impact on Mon identity and ethnic politics. However, in the chaos left behind by the Japanese in the post-independence period, the Mons joined the Karens and Kachins in their efforts to assert separatist claims. This, perhaps unanticipated, organizing of Mon political groups will be further investigated in the following chapter.<sup>171</sup>

### **Nationalist Revolt**

Desperately seeking to pacify the Burmese people and gain support, the Japanese granted nominal independence to Myanmar in 1943. As the British counter-offensive in Myanmar grew stronger, Japanese policymakers concluded that the current policy of delayed independence must be immediately abandoned. Still, many Japanese leaders had serious reservations, and consequently, the “independent” Burmese government was controlled by the Japanese.<sup>172</sup> In fact,

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<sup>170</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 48-49.

<sup>171</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 483.

<sup>172</sup> Yoon, “Military Expediency,” 261.

the new Burmese government was almost powerless; the Japanese Army Commander made virtually all political, economic, military, and diplomatic decisions for it. The Burmese had been granted independence without even sovereignty. The state remained under control of the Japanese military, and, again, no concerted effort was made to build institutions or establish a true government.<sup>173</sup>

Japan's insincere gesture of nominal independence failed to appease the Burmese and secure their cooperation. Instead, it provoked greater anti-Japanese sentiment. On the first anniversary of "independence," Aung San spoke at the ceremony, saying "our independence exists only on paper and the peoples have yet to enjoy the benefits. ... A long hard road still lies between us and our goals."<sup>174</sup> The Burmese revolt against the Japanese did not happen all at once. Dissatisfaction with the Japanese Military Administration had emerged early on. As discussed earlier, the weakness of the Baho Government and the Japanese occupation of the Governor-General's residence frustrated the BIA officer corps and nationalists. The reorganization of the BIA as the BDA also provoked anti-Japanese sentiment. Many officers interpreted this reorganization as the Japanese attempt to reassert more direct control over the BIA—which it was.<sup>175</sup> After creating the BIA, the Japanese made no clear plans for its future. Sitting idle, militarized Burman nationalists turned towards resistance.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Yoon, "Military Expediency," 262.

<sup>174</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 157-158

<sup>175</sup> Lebra, 159.

<sup>176</sup> Yoon, 265.

As early as October 1942, young BIA officers met secretly to distribute anti-Japanese leaflets and discuss issues of ideology, strategy, and tactics.<sup>177</sup> By 1944, nominal independence had failed to slow the resistance movement, and BDA officers grew increasingly insistent. The Japanese contemplated expanding the army (which had been reformulated, yet again, as the Burmese National Army—BNA), in order to offset the dissatisfaction within the ranks. However, facing a weapons shortage, the expansion of the BNA was an impossible feat, and the Japanese were unable to alleviate the BNA tensions.<sup>178</sup>

The earliest outbreak of revolt against the Japanese occurred in March 1945, when Bo Ba Htut, a BNA commander, declared war against the Japanese. Bo Ba Htut led his battalion to cross sides and join the invading Allied forces. Japanese advisors considered disarming the BNA, in order to prevent further rebellion, but ultimately determined that Bo Ba Htut's resistance was an isolated incident. This proved to be a fateful miscalculation. All across Myanmar, violent quarrels began to erupt between the Japanese and the Burmans.<sup>179</sup> After the outbreak of revolt, several Japanese officers were killed by BNA troops. This rising domestic conflict coincided with British military advances, and the successful recapture of the cities Meiktila and Mandalay by the Allied forces.

Ultimately, the Japanese trained military revolted against the Japanese and joined forces with the Allies.<sup>180</sup> By rebelling against their Japanese tutors, the BIA demonstrated that they had become a real independence army. The difficulty of harnessing Burmese nationalism proved

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<sup>177</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 159.

<sup>178</sup> Lebra, 162.

<sup>179</sup> Lebra, 163

<sup>180</sup> Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule*, 17.

fatal for the Japanese. After securing control of Myanmar, the Japanese made no clear plans for the future of the BIA. In fact, they did not intend to use it in combat until 1945. By then, it was far too late.<sup>181</sup> The Japanese created a Burmese military, fed and fattened it on nationalism, and then kept it idle. The Japanese attempts to reformulate and reincarnate the BIA, as the Burmese Defense Army (BDA), and then the Burmese National Army (BNA), did little to check its power. The Burmese military gained a viability of its own, becoming a greater force than the Japanese could control.

As a whole, the Japanese resistance movement was tenuous and decentralized. Throughout the Japanese occupation, the British had been lurking in the shadows, arming pro-British minority groups, and attempting to exert influence over the hills that the Japanese were unable to control. The resistance was necessarily centrifugal—the secret nature of raising resistance loosely tied together different armed groups and networks to fight against the Japanese. By the end of the war, the Allied forces, Karens, Kachins, Burmans, and other minority groups were fighting against the Japanese, joined by other armed guerillas. The decentralized nature of the resistance plan makes it difficult to understand how exactly these different forces worked together to reoccupy Myanmar, and there is evidence that the relations between the different actors were quite contentious from the start. The resistance campaign was composed of a network of groups that were “fighting *against* the same enemy but fighting *for* very different visions of the future.”<sup>182</sup> Ethnic groups which had long been in conflict were suddenly fighting for the same side—but they were hardly fighting in unison. Karen and Kachin leaders still believed that the Allied powers would support their postwar autonomy and

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<sup>181</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 75.

<sup>182</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 85.

independence, will Burman nationalists expected to take control of an independent and united Myanmar.

As it became increasingly clear that the campaign against the Japanese would be relatively brief and successful, the anti-Japanese forces began to turn toward state rebuilding.<sup>183</sup> At the end of the war, Myanmar was yet again under the control of the British military, which had the chief concern of re-establishing law and order and normal living conditions. Under the British, the Burmese people began to contend with their irreconcilable visions of the postwar state. Without any clear heir to the Japanese state, a patchwork of competing claims emerged: allies-turned-enemies were everywhere.<sup>184</sup> Burmese nationalists' desire for independence had reached a boiling point, and with the British they began to plan for an independent united Myanmar.<sup>185</sup> The Karens quickly began to campaign against this plan, in which they would be minority partners in national leadership, and proposed the creation of a new state "Karenistan," which would be separate from Burmese territory.<sup>186</sup> The British demanded that Myanmar's ethnic groups reach an agreement before independence was granted.<sup>187</sup> This led to the Panglong Agreement in February 1947, which articulated steps to achieve a political solution to Burma's diversity, including political autonomy for minority groups.<sup>188</sup> The Panglong agreement granted ethnic states the right to secede after 10 years and even endorsed a future Kachin State. The

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<sup>183</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 85.

<sup>184</sup> Callahan, 88.

<sup>185</sup> Enze Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors: Borderland State Building between China and Southeast Asia*. Oxford University Press, 2019, 121.

<sup>186</sup> Callahan, 105.

<sup>187</sup> Han, 121.

<sup>188</sup> Dukalskis, "Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?" 21.

agreement was signed by Kachin, Chin, and Shan leaders—notably, the dissenting Karens were excluded from the agreement, reflecting the deep distrust between the Karens and the Burman government.<sup>189</sup> The Mons were also excluded, which is reflective of the Burman insistence that Mons had no separate identity. While the Panglong agreement was a landmark agreement and a powerful step forward, the tension between Burman nationalists and ethnic minority groups was entirely unresolved, especially in the case of the Karen.

Furthermore, the assassination of Aung San in July 1947 deprived the country of a respected and skillful politician, who was regarded as the postwar architect of national unity and independence. Without Aung San, the country faced an even greater struggle to bridge the differences between the Burman majority and ethnic minorities.<sup>190</sup> Ultimately, the promises contained in the Panglong Agreement were never honored. When Myanmar gained political independence in 1948, a unitary state was forced on ethnic areas under control of the Burmese government. Thus, Myanmar entered into independence in the midst of a power struggle between competing ethnic groups.<sup>191</sup>

### **The Japanese Legacy**

While the Japanese created a military to serve their own political and military goals during wartime, it ultimately provided a generation of Burman nationalists with rigorous military training. Louis Allen, who fought in Myanmar during World War II and conducted exhaustive research on the Japanese, suggested that, while not entirely tangible, the establishment of the

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<sup>189</sup> Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, 141.

<sup>190</sup> Han, 141.

<sup>191</sup> Han, 271.

BIA and Baho Government had “the effect of imparting self-confidence to the Burmese: they learned what it was like, even on a small scale, to control the means of physical compulsion through their own forces.”<sup>192</sup> The Japanese trained and politicized an ethnically Burman military cadre, which then fed directly into the post-war political elite.<sup>193</sup> Joyce Lebra, writing in 1977, notes that that nearly all of Burma’s army officers, members of the Revolutionary Council and diplomatic corps were descended directly from these Japanese-trained units. Since independence, Japanese trained officers, and their descendants, have controlled the Burmese state. Ultimately, Japan’s wartime occupation had an effect which cannot be overemphasized: the militarization and politicization of an ethnically Burman post-war elite.<sup>194</sup> The Japanese occupation did not overwrite the colonial legacy. Instead, colonial fault lines of conflict were preserved and even intensified.

There was no clear institutional break between the British colonial period and the Japanese occupation of Myanmar. Constrained by the residual colonial state and focused singularly on wartime imperatives, the Japanese did not redefine Burmese political institutions, but rather solidified crucial features of the colonial state. Throughout the colonial period, the primacy of coercive force, mounting ethnic tensions, and anti-British nationalist sentiment produced a society that was ripe for Japanese militarism. These forces would later outpace the national military that was trained and politicized, then left dormant. The Japanese occupation directly elevated the status of Burmans, and then left them with an ethnically exclusive military institution—for the Burmans, the ultimate imperial gift. Generations of these military cadres

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<sup>192</sup> Louis Allen, “Review of Japanese Military Rule in Burma, by Tsunezo Ota.” *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1969): 177-81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311859>, 30.

<sup>193</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 179.

<sup>194</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 74.

have grasped tightly to the state in Myanmar since, and self-serving, conservative elites have maintained the supremacy of the military.

When studying colonial legacies, a difficulty often arises in definitively tracing these legacies through their different institutional forms.<sup>195</sup> In Myanmar, British and Japanese institutional legacies map quite clearly onto contemporary conflict. The modern military state is controlled by the Burmans, and civil conflict continuously erupts along ethnic lines, with the Karen, Kachin, and Mon insurgencies posing significant threats to the central state. At least twelve major insurgent groups have been explicitly defined as being Karen or Kachin, and at least two as Mon.<sup>196</sup> The following chapter will examine the emergence and activity of these groups in the post-independence period. The Japanese wartime campaign ultimately reproduced colonial era ethnic identities, which still persist today. Further research on this subject might investigate whether this finding is typical or atypical—when does war scramble ethnic identities, and when does it reproduce them?

In the case of Myanmar, the Japanese harnessed an ethnically defined nationalist movement to serve their own wartime imperatives. In doing so, the Japanese further institutionalized the ethnic demarcation between nationalists and “colonial collaborators,” fueling ethnic violence and amplifying the mistrust and resentment that has come to define Myanmar’s divided population. As Andrew Selth writes, “the Japanese sought to use the nationalist aspirations of one racial group while the British sought to take advantage of the hopes

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<sup>195</sup> See Mahmood Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: University Press, 1996; Leander Schneider. “Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Authoritarianism in Tanzania: Connects and Disconnects.” *African Studies Review* 49, no 1 (2006): 93-118

<sup>196</sup> John Buchanan. *Militias in Myanmar*. Yangon: The Asia Foundation, 2016.

and fears of the other. In this struggle both Burmese groups seem to have been betrayed.”<sup>197</sup> It is impossible to entirely disentangle the legacies of the British and the Japanese, which coincided, almost perfectly, to politicize and militarize ethnic divisions.

The Japanese left behind a militant and divided population, with ethnic groups that were deeply distrusting of those who had fought on the opposite side of the war. While the Burmans were left in a position of power, they were ill positioned for governance. The military was the only residual institution, and thus, the military became the nucleus of the post-independence government, just as it had been under the British and the Japanese. As uncertainty loomed, the Burmese population underwent mass mobilization. Within six months of independence, Karens, Kachins and Mons all attempted to assert separatist claims against the Burman dominated government in Rangoon, motivated by racial antagonisms. The insurgencies that erupted in the early post-independence period continue, to different degrees, today.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 507.

<sup>198</sup> Selth, 483.

## Chapter Four: Independence and Insurgency

### Introduction

The institutions built by the British and Japanese politicized and militarized ethnicity in Myanmar, creating deep fault lines in Burmese society along which conflict has continuously erupted. However, there is variance in this conflict—the behaviors of Burmese ethnic groups have changed across space and time. While all of Myanmar’s seven major ethnic minority groups have been linked to insurgency, these insurgent experiences are distinct, with different durations, levels of violence, and engagement in ceasefire politics. By selecting the Karens, Kachins, and Mons for study, I capture some of the variation that can be observed in Myanmar’s enduring civil conflict and examine the nuances of Burmese ethnic politics.

The violent conflict between the Karens and ethnic Burmans is the longest running and most consistent conflict in Myanmar, beginning before the colonial period and continuing today, as the Karen National Union (KNU) still fights against the state. After engaging in ceasefire negotiations in 2012, the Karen resumed their fight against the central state following the military coup in 2021. The Mons entered into direct conflict with the ethnic Burmans much later than the Karens did. After decades of assimilation to the ethnic majority group, the Mons suddenly rebelled against the state after Myanmar gained political independence. Mon political behavior underwent another major shift when the New Mon State Party (NMSP) signed a ceasefire agreement in 1995.<sup>199</sup> After decades of insurgency, Mon insurgents are now relatively inactive compared to their Karen and Kachin counterparts. What can explain the variance in Mon behavior over time? Lastly, the Kachin insurgency began in the early 1960’s, a decade after the Karens and Mons rebelled. Why do we observe this delayed engagement in ethnic insurgency?

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<sup>199</sup> Dukalskis, “Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?” 21.

Like the Mons, the Kachins suspended insurgency and signed a ceasefire in the 1990s. Then, like the Karens, they took up arms against the government in 2021.<sup>200</sup> The varying behaviors of Burmese ethnic groups complicates my findings thus far and challenges the notion of path dependency.

As a whole, this thesis aims to answer the question: *how much do institutional legacies matter when explaining ethnic conflict?* Thus far, my findings suggest that institutional legacies are instrumental in explaining Myanmar's ethnic conflict. The institutions built by the British and Japanese politicized and militarized ethnicity in Myanmar, creating deep fault lines in Burmese society along which conflict has continuously erupted. However, institutional continuity requires active attempts to maintain those existing institutions. I have traced the origin of contentious ethnic divisions to British rule, but for these identities to remain politically salient, they would have to be reinforced in later decades. Conflict actors have not acted uniformly across time and space, suggesting that other influences—outside of British and Japanese institutions—have shaped their behaviors.

Karen Leonard cautions against a historical “obsession” with British colonialism, which “[overlooks] ways of interpreting the past and present that do not make colonial rule responsible for all that has happened.”<sup>201</sup> After focusing closely on the colonial period and the Japanese occupation, this chapter takes a broader view of post-independence Myanmar and contemporary history, in order to trace the dynamics of ethnic competition and determine how ethnic identities might have been shifted or reinforced. I examine the potential for conflict dynamics to evolve under the postcolonial regime. In doing so, I test my findings thus far and consider my third

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<sup>200</sup> Dukalskis, “Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?” 21.

<sup>201</sup> Karen Leonard. “Reassessing Indirect Rule in Hyderabad: Rule, Ruler, or Sons-in-Law of the State?” 2003, 364.

hypothesis: *Ethnic conflict in Myanmar has not been determined by institutional legacies; political and social factors have shaped the behaviors of conflict actors, driving the evolution of ethnic conflict.* I will first describe the period immediately following independence, during which insurgencies began to take form and the state began to take shape. I will then take a broader historical view and consider ethnic minorities' varied responses to a political landscape shifting towards ceasefire politics. Ultimately, I conclude that ethnic identities have mostly hardened over time, along the same colonial and imperial divisions I have examined thus far. However, the British and Japanese institutional legacies cannot entirely explain the variance in ethnic behaviors over time, and thus it is important to consider other social and political dynamics.

### **Early Independence**

The transfer of power from the British to the Burmese occurred on January 4, 1948. It did little to slow the turmoil ripping through the already thin fabric of the national state.<sup>202</sup>

Throughout World War II and the Japanese resistance, the Burmese population underwent widespread mobilization, taking up arms to fight on both sides of the war. After the war's end, the members of this militarized population did not placidly lay down their arms. Armed personnel directly fed into either the Tatmadaw or private armies and ethnic armed organizations.<sup>203</sup> While the British had encouraged ethnic minority groups to dream of political independence after the war, these minority groups had suddenly fallen under the rule of the Burman majority, without any protected political status.<sup>204</sup> Separatist movements quickly gained

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<sup>202</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 114.

<sup>203</sup> Callahan, 116.

<sup>204</sup> Selth, "Race and Resistance," 502.

traction throughout the early months of political independence. Local rebellion appeared to be erupting everywhere, with insurgents skilled in guerilla tactics and thriving on illegal economic and political activities. By 1949, 75 percent of the towns in Myanmar had fallen to one insurgent group or another.<sup>205</sup> While insurgency blossomed, the weak central government in Rangoon struggled to collect revenue and to organize the Tatmadaw.<sup>206</sup> The disorganized national military was barely distinguishable from the dizzying array of quasi-state and private armies, and the Tatmadaw struggled to wage coherent campaigns against the growing separatist movements.<sup>207</sup> As Callahan writes, “just as the state became independent from colonial rule, it utterly collapsed.”<sup>208</sup>

### *Military-Led State-Building*

The state in Myanmar was slowly established, with the national military at its forefront. This statebuilding project was partly driven by the cross-border impacts of China’s civil war. Following the Communist victory in Mainland China, the Chinese Nationalist Party, (Kuomintang, KMT) was forced to flee. After the KMT was driven out of Yunnan, one of its last strongholds, a section of the KMT crossed the border into Myanmar and occupied parts of the Shan State.<sup>209</sup> The presence of the KMT destabilized Myanmar’s borderland area for several decades, posing a threat that demanded a reorganized national military, capable of defending

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<sup>205</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 115.

<sup>206</sup> Callahan, 116.

<sup>207</sup> Callahan, 115.

<sup>208</sup> Callahan, 115.

<sup>209</sup> Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, 42.

national sovereignty.<sup>210</sup> In order to protect Myanmar’s national sovereignty, the Tatmadaw underwent a restructuring and reorganization process that strengthened the general staff and limited the civilian oversight of elected politicians. Throughout this reorganization, military authority was rapidly elevated—the military was delegated all power over anything remotely defined as a security concern. In 1953, the “[T]atmadaw alone claimed responsibility for defining who was an enemy of the state and deciding how enemies and threats would be handled.”<sup>211</sup> It was the army, rather than the civilian bureaucracy, that experimented with counterinsurgent strategies. Ultimately, the presence of the KMT coincided with other factors to support the overdevelopment of the Burmese military, relative to the weak civilian government.<sup>212</sup> As Myanmar’s military grew stronger, other branches of the government did not follow suit.

Burmese statebuilding initially reflects Tilly’s classic logic—wartime competition over territory facilitated state development by prompting the state to concentrate coercive power.<sup>213</sup> However, no strong state ever emerged from the conflict with the KMT. As Centeno argues, state making is not a benefit inherent to all wars.<sup>214</sup> The European states that Tilly considered already had a basic organizational capacity that allowed them to respond to war in a certain way and construct a strong state. Myanmar—like the Latin American states studied by Centeno—severely lacked this organizational capacity. Thus, Myanmar was unable to develop universally strong

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<sup>210</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 147.

<sup>211</sup> Callahan, 147.

<sup>212</sup> Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, 43.

<sup>213</sup> Tilly, “Reflections on the History of European State-Making”.

<sup>214</sup> Centeno. *Blood and Debt*.

institutions and its statebuilding project was led by the military. As noted in the previous chapter, the Japanese trained a military elite that fed directly into the post-war government.<sup>215</sup>

These elite had undergone rigorous military training but gained little experience with other aspects of governance.

By singularly pursuing a military solution to its domestic problems, the Burmese government crowded out other potential state reformers. Officers became state builders and the military expanded from military-as-institution into military-as-state itself.<sup>216</sup> Burmese citizens and the civilian government became mere barriers to the Tatmadaw's consolidation of political power.<sup>217</sup> As Schwartz explains, the expansion of military control outside of non-military institutional arenas obstructs internal regime opposition and civilian oversight. Instead, authority becomes concentrated in a small body of military elites.<sup>218</sup> While the central military grew increasingly strong, the development of civil services and political parties was deeply stunted. In post-independence Myanmar, "one limp structure lay in the civilian realm; the other, more robust structure in the military bureaucracy."<sup>219</sup> In early independence, Myanmar never strayed from its purely military approach to governance.<sup>220</sup>

In order to protect the military institution from destructive ethnic divisions, the Tatmadaw was defined along ethnic lines. Initially, the Tatmadaw attempted to organize separate

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<sup>215</sup> Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, 179.

<sup>216</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 206.

<sup>217</sup> Callahan, 206.

<sup>218</sup> Schwartz, "Civil War, Institutional Change, and the Criminalization of the State".

<sup>219</sup> Callahan, 205.

<sup>220</sup> Callahan, 205.

ethnic units, but this was short lived. In 1949, several ethnic Karen units defected from the Tatmadaw and joined the KNDO.<sup>221</sup> The Tatmadaw's "First Kachin Rifles" unit also revolted.<sup>222</sup> These Karen and Kachin revolts prompted the army to quietly reorganize and place Burman officers in charge of the reorganized Burman units.<sup>223</sup> While the Tatmadaw was not as explicit in its ethnic exclusion as the colonial military, it was fundamentally controlled and staffed by ethnic Burmans. Furthermore, the Tatmadaw implemented policies that were intended to ensure the Burmanization of its new officers. By 1951, the military adapted Burmese to code for use in signaling.<sup>224</sup> Two years later, the Defense Services Academy Bill was passed, which created an officer's training college for the purpose of "eliminat[ing] any tendency toward minority disunity in ideological concept among the Armed Forces and thus to ensure the enduring security of the Constitution."<sup>225</sup> The training college was also linked to the University of Rangoon where the curriculum was focused on the culture and history of ethnic Burmans. By largely excluding ethnic minorities and attempting to "Burmanize" all new officers, independent Myanmar established a national military that—like the military institutions under the British and Japanese—was defined along ethnic lines.

Myanmar's early independence period is deeply reflective of the colonial and imperial states. Conflict erupted along the same divisions politicized and militarized by the British and Japanese. With a weak central state, Myanmar governed through its national military, which came quickly to be an ethnically exclusive institution controlled by the Burman majority. This

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<sup>221</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 221.

<sup>222</sup> Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar," 7.

<sup>223</sup> Silverstein, 221.

<sup>224</sup> Silverstein, 221.

<sup>225</sup> Silverstein, 222.

ethnically exclusive military institution would continue to reinforce the “otherness” of ethnic minority groups, thus undermining ethnic unity in Myanmar. As the Burmese state took form, institutionalizing exclusive nationalism, ethnic insurgency simultaneously erupted.

### *Emerging Insurgency*

Within the first 15 years of independence, the Karens, Mons, and Kachins had all taken up arms against the central state. These three groups did not rebel at precisely the same moment, however. The behavior of each group was influenced by its distinct experience under the British and the Japanese.

The Karen people were the first to establish an ethnic armed organization. It is not surprising that the Karens would rebel immediately against the independent Burman government, given Karen history. As early as the pre-colonial period, Karens suffered greatly at the hands of the Burmans and were subjected to raids and forced into labor.<sup>226</sup> Under the British, the ethnic violence between the Karens and Burmans subsided, as the two groups were sharply divided within the colonial apparatus, and the Karens were given privileged treatment. After the Japanese occupied Myanmar and allied with the Burmans, violence between the Karens and Burmans resumed immediately, and the Burman BIA committed many atrocities against the pro-British Karens.

Shortly before independence, in 1947, the Karen National Union (KNU) was established by several hundred Karen representatives with the goal of achieving a separate Karen state that remained within the British Commonwealth. Later that year, the KNU formed its own militia, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO). The KNU was the most prominent ethno-

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<sup>226</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 43.

separatist movement during this period.<sup>227</sup> The KNU and KNDO were both headquartered in Sanchaung, a Rangoon suburb, and publicly carried out drills, in uniform, in front of their office.<sup>228</sup> These activities are notably similar to those conducted by the tats (or political pocket armies) that existed in the colonial state, as described in Chapter Two. The emergence of colonial *tats*—which were fundamentally ethnically based, local militia—resulted directly from ethnically exclusive policies of the colonial government. Post-independence, the emergence of ethnically defined insurgent armies under Burman dominated government clearly parallels the dynamics under the colonial state.

The mutual mistrust and conflict between the Burmans and the Karens, so vastly amplified by the colonial and imperial experiences, exploded in the early independence period. During World War II, many Karens were armed by the British in order to fight against the Japanese. Following the war, thousands of Karens still held these weapons, with no intentions of giving them up. In June 1947, Karen leader Saw Marshall Shwin wrote: “with the painful memories of Myaungma and Papun atrocities and other Burmese persecutions first in mind [the Karens] are not going to give up any arms for any pretext whatsoever.”<sup>229</sup> The Karens directly cited past Burman attacks as reason for remaining armed. The explosive violence between the Karens and the Tatmadaw only continued to escalate after independence. In December of 1948, members of the Burman military police went on a murderous rampage the Palaw area, near a Karen stronghold. On Christmas Eve, more than eighty Karens—men, women, and children—

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<sup>227</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 206.

<sup>228</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 9.

<sup>229</sup> Lintner, 9.

were killed while attending church services.<sup>230</sup> With powerful grievances held against the Burman population, and aspirations of a separate state, the immediate Karen rebellion is highly consistent with their behavior and experiences. The Karens have been locked into conflict with the ethnically exclusive national army since its inception under the Japanese. The BIA was reformulated into the Tatmadaw, and the institutional continuity of the Burmese military sustained the conflict between the Burmans and the Karens, driving ethnic insurgency.

While the Karen rebellion might be logically anticipated, the sudden Mon rebellion appears quite unexpected and inconsistent with their past behavior. During the colonial period and the Japanese occupation, the Mons held a seemingly unpoliticized identity. Under British and Japanese institutions, which sharply distinguished between ethnic minorities and the majority group, the Mons were caught in the middle. As a small group dispersed among the Burman population, the Mon were in political limbo. In the colonial state, the British sometimes treated Mons as Burmans, but at other times distinguished the Mons from the Burmans. Under the British, the Mons received no political benefits from their minority status, unlike the Karens and Kachins. Thus, it is important to recognize that the Burman nationalist movement and the Japanese occupation appeared initially advantageous to the Mons. Since the Burmans considered the Mons to be part of the ethnic majority group, the elevation of Burman political status directly benefited the Mons. There were even Mons who took on major roles in the nationalist movement. However, once the independent state began to take form, this association with the ethnic majority was no longer advantageous. After decades of assimilation, the Mons still retained a separate culture and identity, but the Burmans refused to acknowledge this cultural distinctness. While the Mons wished to assert their ethnic identity, they were excluded from the

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<sup>230</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 10.

Panglong Agreement. After decades caught in political limbo, the Mons were fed up; they entered into the early independence period entirely disillusioned with the emerging Burman government.

After decades of assimilation to the majority, scattered groups of Mon began to arm themselves almost immediately following independence, asserting a separatist claim to a Mon state. By 1953, scattered armed groups were gradually assimilated into one group, the Mon People's Front (MPF).<sup>231</sup> The MPF took up arms against the government and Tatmadaw and established 'liberated zones' in the eastern hills of the state, from where they hoped to achieve independence, or at least substantial autonomy.<sup>232</sup> The Mon rebelled against the very nationalist leaders that they had collaborated with. A statement issued by the New Mon State Party (a successful outgrowth of the MPF) in the 1980s lends clarity to the Mon rebellion.

Through several facts and figures and bitter experiences for years, Mons have learnt better lessons. [The realized] that they can not rely on any alien people and must have their own struggle programme. Therefore, to guide of their national movement, they ... [must] have an association of their own.<sup>233</sup>

As the Burmese state took shape, it was being strong articulated in ethnic terms unfavorable to the Mon. The Burman government insinuated that the Mons and Burmans were "indistinguishable in racial identity and characteristics, and so separate minority rights should

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<sup>231</sup> Jake, Border. "The Movements of Mon National Liberation Army", in *Soldier of Fortune*. (1987). Bertil Lintner Collection of Burmese documents, University of Washington.

<sup>232</sup> Sourabh Jyoti Sharma. "Ethnicity And Insurgency in Myanmar: Profiling of Non-State Insurgent Groups," *Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 18, no. 3 (2014): 150–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505114>, 159.

<sup>233</sup> "New Mon State Party 3<sup>rd</sup> ed." Bertil Lintner Collection of Burmese documents, University of Washington.

not be contemplated”<sup>234</sup> The Mons had learned that they could not trust the Burmans and refused to continue collaborating with the government. This distrust precipitated decades of destructive ethnic violence and insurgency.

Unlike the Karen and Mon, the Kachin did not immediately rebel after Myanmar gained political independence. Two key factors delayed Kachin rebellion. Firstly, the borderland Kachin territories did not immediately feel the pressures of the central state, because the government was focused elsewhere. In the early years of independence, the Burmese government was struggling to establish a functioning state in Rangoon. Simultaneously, the security threat posed by the KMT diverted the government’s attention. Rather than emphasizing the political incorporation of the Kachin territories, the state was focused on fighting the KMT in the neighboring Shan territories. By March 1953, it was estimated that 80% of the Burmese military was engaged in fighting the KMT.<sup>235</sup> Put simply, the government was preoccupied. Thus, it seems likely that the Kachins did not immediately feel the impacts of Burman rule.

The second factor that delayed rebellion was the relative trust that the Kachins appeared to have in the central state.<sup>236</sup> The Kachin were allotted significant political autonomy under British rule, and the Japanese were unable to conquer their borderland territory. Prior to independence, the Kachin, unlike the Karen, had never come directly into conflict with the Burman majority. While they fought on opposite sides of World War II, the Kachins fought against Japanese troops and not against the BIA. The institutional continuity of the Burmese military—the obvious transformation of the BIA into the Tatmadaw—severely undermined the

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<sup>234</sup> Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 43.

<sup>235</sup> Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, 117.

<sup>236</sup> Dukalskis, “Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?”

possibility of Karen negotiations with the government. However, the Kachins did not share the same experience with Myanmar's military institution. This lack of direct conflict with the BIA (and thus, lack of ethnic violence between the Burmans and Kachins) seems to have made the Kachin more willing negotiators with the emerging state. Or perhaps, conversely, this made the state more willing to negotiate with the Kachin. Of the three groups studied in this paper, the Kachin were the only group to sign the Panglong Agreement, which promised them eventual freedom as an ethnic state.<sup>237</sup> The Panglong Agreement played a major role in delaying Kachin rebellion, for the Kachin leaders adhered to the agreement for over a decade, anticipating an autonomous ethnic state.

As the Burmese state continued to centralize and enact policy that was favorable to the majority, it became clear there were no intentions of honoring the Panglong Agreement. In 1960, U Nu made a public promise to make Buddhism the state religion, which angered the Kachin people, who were still majority Christian.<sup>238</sup> Around the same time, China and Myanmar also finalized border demarcation negotiations, which saw three Kachin villages given to China. This stoked rumors that the central government of Myanmar had given vast tracts of Kachin land to China.<sup>239</sup> Abandoning the Panglong Agreement at last, the Kachin took up arms and began the fight for freedom. In 1961, the Kachin founded the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which would ultimately become one of the largest and best organized armed groups in Myanmar.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Dukalskis, "Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?" 21.

<sup>238</sup> Dukalskis, 21.

<sup>239</sup> Dukalskis 21

<sup>240</sup> Sharma, "Ethnicity and Insurgency in Myanmar," 155.

The Karen, Mon, and Kachin insurgencies did not begin at the same moment. However, this variance at the outset of insurgency does not undermine my argument in chapters two and three; this variance is best explained by the distinct experiences of minority groups under the British and the Japanese. The conflict between the Karens and Burmans was amplified by the divisive institutions built by the British and Japanese, and reached a head in the early independence period. After decades caught in political limbo, the Mons refused to continue collaborating with an ethnic majority that denied their ethnic identity. Both the Karens and Mons entered into the independence period entirely disillusioned and distrusting of the Burman majority government. The Kachins, however, had always enjoyed a degree of separation from the central state. While British and Japanese era institutions made Kachin identity deeply political, the Kachins had no real history of ethnic conflict with the Burman majority. Thus, Kachins were able to negotiate with the Burman government in relatively good faith. Kachin insurgency did not erupt until a decade after independence, after the central state had clearly failed them. Ultimately, the emergence of Karen, Mon, and Kachin insurgencies reflect their experiences with British and Japanese era institutions.

### **Ethnic Politics and Insurgency Over Time**

British and Japanese legacies precipitated ethnic insurgency and shaped the distinct behaviors of the Karen, Kachin, and Mon. Yet over 70 years have passed since Myanmar gained political independence; we should not assume that wartime and colonial era legacies of conflict will persist. Staniland argues that the goals of the postcolonial regime play a key role in defining and fueling insurgency and shaping the arc of conflict. In order to accurately analyze contemporary conflict dynamics, it is important to understand the ideology of the modern

Burmese state. What quickly becomes apparent, however, is that Myanmar's national ideology is deeply rooted in its colonial past. The institutional roots of the military—in the 1930s nationalist movement and 1940s BIA—instilled in the Burman government a deep distrust of ethnic minorities and a fear of losing power to these groups.<sup>241</sup> Since independence, the Burmese nationalist project, which first emerged under the British and was strengthened by the Japanese, has laid a foundation for ongoing political conflict.

After independence, ethnically exclusive nationalist ideology manifested in an expansive project of forced assimilation, or Burmanization. After Ne Win staged a coup d'état in 1962, regaining power, he quickly began implementing new reforms. Ne Win was first asked to serve as Prime Minister of Myanmar in 1968, after the former prime minister failed to suppress the ethnic insurgencies that were wreaking havoc on the state. Though Ne Win stepped down in 1960, he seized power just two years later. Ne Win quickly dissolved the legislature and established the Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma, drawing members almost entirely from the military.<sup>242</sup> Ne Win rapidly began implementing new reforms to “safeguard” the united nation-state. This meant suppressing the ethno-cultural “other” and imposing one language: Burmese, one religion: Buddhism, one ethnicity: Burman.<sup>243</sup>

In 1962, Burmese was established as the national language, and the usage of other ethnic languages was banned in newspapers, books, and other mediums. Schools were also nationalized, and while the teaching of most minority languages was still allowed, Burmese was

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<sup>241</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 221.

<sup>242</sup> Bigagli, Francesco. “School, Ethnicity and Nation-Building in Post-Colonial Myanmar.” *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 1, no. 1 (December 16, 2019): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.01.01.1>, 5.

<sup>243</sup> Bigagli, 5.

promoted as the sole medium of instruction.<sup>244</sup> The growing influence of the central state and its Burmanizing agenda is particularly apparent in the case of the Kachin. The Kachin had long enjoyed a state of autonomy, or at the very least, a degree of removal from the politics in the central state. Yet they were increasingly subject to the power of the central government. The teaching of Kachin language was even banned in public schools.

General Ne Win also denied the need for a separate Mon culture and ethnicity, shortly after seizing power. According to Ne Win, “the Mon tradition had been fully incorporated into Burmese national culture, and thus required no distinct expression.”<sup>245</sup> Just as Burmanization ultimately amplified ethnic divisions, the state’s rejection of Mon identity only drew greater attention to the distinctness of Mon identity. The manner in which “ordinary” Mon people have responded to the nationalist agenda is often unclear, as the majority are poor rice farmers focused on their day-to-day survival (the same could be said of most ethnic minority groups in Myanmar). The government has insisted that a separate Mon identity is redundant, but its policies have continued to cultivate the notion of a distinct Mon identity. The harsh treatment of the Mon has led to an increased dependency on Mon militias for basic security, which has amplified support for ethnic armed organizations and reinforced public identification with Mon ethnicity.<sup>246</sup> Notably, Burmanization efforts have explicitly targeted the Kachins and Mons more frequently than the Karens—perhaps by the 1960s, the Karens were considered a lost cause, too deeply entrenched in centuries of conflict with the Burmans.

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<sup>244</sup> Bigagli, “School, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building in Post-Colonial Myanmar” 6.

<sup>245</sup> South, *Mon Nationalism*, 160

<sup>246</sup> South, 161.

The government in Rangoon continually strives to Burmanize its diverse population through the revival and propagation of a Burman national culture.<sup>247</sup> Since the early 1990s, museums have been built throughout Myanmar, intended to institutionalize and reproduce the “national culture.”<sup>248</sup> While these policies were intended to promote national unity, they have continuously heightened ethno-cultural awareness among minority groups.<sup>249</sup> Burmanization policies have amplified ideas of an “us versus them,” deepening and reinforcing the divisions between the Burmans and the ethnic minority groups. The attempt to eradicate diversity in Myanmar has had the unintentional effect of ensuring that minority identity has been largely defined in opposition to the ethnic majority.

The Burmese government has continued to sustain the ethnic conflict in Myanmar and reinforce divisions among its population. The ideological foundation of the postcolonial regime is deeply grounded in ethno-nationalism, making the state deeply suspicious of ethnic minority groups. After colonial and imperial ethnic divisions were transmitted into the early independence period, today, ethnically exclusive nationalist ideology continues to lay a foundation for conflict. In his study of Myanmar, Staniland does not explicitly focus on colonial legacies; instead, his argument emphasizes the goals and ideology of the postcolonial regime and the role these features play in shaping insurgency. Yet, this appears to be a superficial distinction. The goals of the modern Burmese state are fundamentally rooted in ethno-nationalism that was distinctly shaped by British and Japanese institutions. On a surface level, Staniland shifts attention away from the colonial period, yet his argument returns to colonial legacies, nonetheless. He writes

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<sup>247</sup> Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 224.

<sup>248</sup> South, *Mon Nationalism*, 160.

<sup>249</sup> Bigagli, “School, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building,” 9.

that Burmese nationalism has had an “overriding focus on overcoming colonial humiliation and restoring the majority population to its rightful place.”<sup>250</sup> While postcolonial regimes might reshape conflict dynamics in the pursuit of their own interests and ideological goals, the state in Myanmar has continued to sustain wartime and colonial era legacies of conflict. Guided by a fundamentally exclusive nationalist ideology, the modern state in Myanmar has been deeply unwilling to accommodate ethnic minorities, and the ideological project of Burmanization continues to generate revolt.<sup>251</sup>

### *Continued Insurgency, Ceasefire Politics, and Ethnic Defection*

If deeply rooted ethno-nationalism is the fundamental driver of Myanmar’s ethnic conflict, how then should we interpret the recent shift to ceasefire politics, and the varying participation of ethnic minority groups in ceasefire agreements? In the following section, I analyze the conflict and negotiation patterns of the Karen, Kachin, and Mon, and show that this shift towards ceasefire politics is tactical, not fundamental. In each case, ethnic armed groups have signed ceasefire agreements when they faced significant resource constraints or tactical incentives. Overwhelmingly, war weariness and increased military pressures have forced ethnic insurgents to sign ceasefire agreements. There has been no fundamental rethinking of Burmese nationalism or willingness to recognize Myanmar’s multicultural and multiracial identity. Ceasefire agreements do not represent any change to Myanmar’s ethno-nationalism, or any shift in minority identity. Instead, ceasefire politics has been a superficial and short lived “solution” to ethnic conflict.

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<sup>250</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 228.

<sup>251</sup> Staniland, 220.

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) effectively controlled the Kachin State from the 1960s until a 1994 ceasefire—it seems quite strange that such a robust insurgency would suddenly suspend its fight and stay largely dormant until 2011.<sup>252</sup> However, tactical incentives compelled the KIO to sign a ceasefire. After three decades of exhausting conflict, the KIO was increasingly outgunned by the central government. While the Kachin did have a powerful geographic stronghold, the distribution of their territory rendered it difficult to build a secure infrastructure without crossing government territory. The Kachin insurgency seemed to grow increasingly hopeless, and it was this war weariness that precipitated their ceasefire.<sup>253</sup>

Despite a nearly two-decade ceasefire, the KIA renewed its activities in 2011 and quickly regained momentum. It is clear that the previous ceasefire agreement was not representative of any fundamental shift in Kachin identity or politics; in fact, more and more Kachin youth are supporting the KIA and its means of seeking Kachin independence. This likely reflects the fact that many Kachin people felt increasingly marginalized throughout the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as economic changes in the name of development led to the exploitation of the natural resources found in Kachin territory.<sup>254</sup> While not the focus of this thesis, KIO violence also escalated following the 2021 military coup.

Similar to the Kachin, tactical incentives drove Mon insurgents to sign a ceasefire agreement in 1995. Unlike the Karen and Kachin insurgencies, the Mon have no borderland

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<sup>252</sup> Sharma, “Ethnicity and Insurgency in Myanmar,” 155.

<sup>253</sup> Dukalskis, “Why Do Some Insurgent Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?” 23.

<sup>254</sup> Han, *Asymmetrical Neighbors*, 221.

territories to which they can retreat.<sup>255</sup> This geographic constraint, as well as the relatively small size of the Mon population, gradually weakened the New Mon State Party's military position over decades of fighting. Offensives by the Burmese army forced the NMSP to slowly retreat and ultimately sign a ceasefire agreement. From the perspective of the central state, the ceasefire agreement has been somewhat successful, in the sense that the NMSP's levels of violence have been low. However, this low level of insurgent activity is reflective of the very constraints that have long inhibited the collective action of the Mon people. Throughout Burmese history, the political experience of Mons has been defined by their unfortunate position as a small ethnic minority group distributed geographically across the majority population. It is logical that Mon insurgents have struggled the most in their fight against the central state. The lastingness of the Mon ceasefire is, once again, not representative of meaningful identity shift. The Mons continue pursue autonomy through the legal fold, though the state still refuses to acknowledge their ethnic identity.<sup>256</sup>

In Myanmar's civil conflict, the violence between the Karen and ethnic Burmans is the longest running. Unlike the Kachin and Mon insurgents, the Karen National Union (KNU) did not sign a ceasefire agreement until 2012. The KNU and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), continues insurgent activities as the oldest armed insurgent group in Myanmar.<sup>257</sup> While it is difficult to calculate an official estimate—and the KNU has likely

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<sup>255</sup> Smith et al. "Reflections on the 1995 New Mon State Party Ceasefire," 14.

<sup>256</sup> Smith et al., 36.

<sup>257</sup> Buchanan, "Militia's in Myanmar," 29.

shrunk in the past decade—it once boasted an army of 14,000 men. The KNU has also controlled a large amount of territory along Myanmar’s eastern border.<sup>258</sup>

Two main factors deterred the KNU from signing a ceasefire agreement at an earlier date. Firstly, the KNU was well established after fighting for over 60 years. They provided basic administration in controlled areas, with established hospitals, clinics, high schools, and hundreds of village schools. This power made the KNU less inclined to sign a ceasefire, as they were not facing the same constraints as the Kachin and Mon.<sup>259</sup> Second, the Karen had a very well-developed political ideology that was founded in a deep mistrust of the central state.<sup>260</sup> The four guiding principles of the KNU had built-in barriers to a ceasefire:

Surrender is out of the question; the recognition of the Karen State must be completed; the KNU shall retain its arms; the Karen shall decide their own political destiny.<sup>261</sup>

The legacy of distrust between the KNU and the central government rendered a ceasefire very difficult. The BIA massacres in Karen villages were associated with the central government and the Tatmadaw. The institutional continuity of the military, and its powerful role in the government, sustained insurgency, keeping the Karens and Burmans locked in ethnic conflict.<sup>262</sup> However, even the powerful KNU was ultimately worn down, signing a ceasefire in 2012. Almost a decade later, this ceasefire was rendered meaningless by the February 2021 military coup.

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<sup>258</sup> Sharma, “Ethnicity and Insurgency in Myanmar,” 156.

<sup>259</sup> Dukalskis, “Why Do Some Groups Agree to Cease-Fires While Others Do Not?” 27.

<sup>260</sup> Dukalskis, 27.

<sup>261</sup> Dukalskis, 28.

<sup>262</sup> Dukalskis, 28.

In the past three decades, there have been notable shifts to ceasefire politics. However, this shift is ultimately reflective of war weariness and the different constraints limiting insurgent groups, rather than a fundamental change to the dynamics of ethnic conflict, or a fluid and evolving expression of ethnic identity. It is important to note, however, that there has been minimal ethnic defection in Myanmar. Kalyvas defines ethnic defection as “a process whereby individuals join organizations explicitly opposed to the national aspirations with which they identify and end up fighting against their coethnics.”<sup>263</sup> In Myanmar, as in any civil conflict, there have been divisions within organizations: rifts over different ideological goals and competing strategies. Some of these divisions have resulted in the fragmentation of insurgent groups, and some of these splinter groups have been repurposed by the Tatmadaw as pro-state militias, supplying local information and manpower.

In 2009, Myanmar implemented the Border Guard Force (BGF) scheme to incorporate former ethnic insurgents into the Tatmadaw structure.<sup>264</sup> The BGF has faced significant difficulty: not all ceasefire signatories accepted the program, and many perceived it as an effort to dismantle their forces.<sup>265</sup> However, some small splinter groups have been successfully incorporated through the BGF. Kalyvas finds that territorial control is a major predictor of ethnic defection—the higher the level of territorial control exercised by the “enemy” in a given locality, the more ethnic defection is observed.<sup>266</sup> In Myanmar, this theory wrongly predicts that the Mons would be most likely to experience ethnic defection, as they have no geographic stronghold and

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<sup>263</sup> Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil War,” 1045.

<sup>264</sup> Adhi Priamariziki, “Ka Kwe Ke to Border Guard Force: Proxy of Violence in Myanmar.” Ritsumeikan University: Institute of International Relations and Area Studies, 2020, 43.

<sup>265</sup> Priamariziki, 55.

<sup>266</sup> Kalyvas, 1061.

live within territory controlled by Burmans. Yet when the NMSP signed a ceasefire, it refused to relinquish control over its forces and integrate into the BGF. Instead, Karen and Kachin splinter groups have been incorporated into the BGF, despite having more territorial control than the Mons. Kalyvas' findings fail to explain ethnic defection in Myanmar, revealing that territorial control is not entirely predictive of ethnic defection. More importantly, however, I argue that limited ethnic defection is not representative of any meaningful change in Myanmar's ethnic conflict. Kalyvas remarks that the recruitment of ethnic defectors is "a testament to the fluidity of ethnic boundaries."<sup>267</sup> Yet Myanmar's ethnic boundaries have not really shifted or changed.

Despite limited ethnic defection, Kachin and Karen groups remain firmly locked in conflict with the central state. Kalyvas stresses that the process of ethnic defection is "extremely consequential even when the numbers of defectors remain relatively small" because ethnic identity ceases to be a reliable indicator of rebel behavior.<sup>268</sup> In Myanmar, ethnic identity has been a powerful indicator of political and violent behavior since independence in 1948—this is far from changing. The BGF program was implemented in 2009. Aside from the incorporation of small splinter groups, this program has not driven any meaningful shift in ethnic politics, and ethnic identity remains a reliable indicator of rebel behavior. Kachin, Karen, and Mon organizations continually assert their desires for ethnic autonomy, with widespread support from their respective groups. Burmese ethno-nationalism sustains this insurgency: Burmanization policies amplify "otherness," the military pushes for a unitary, nonfederal state, and commits extremely high levels of violence in ongoing conflicts.<sup>269</sup> Ultimately, we observe little of the

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<sup>267</sup> Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," 1061.

<sup>268</sup> Kalyvas, 1055.

<sup>269</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 227.

fluidity anticipated by constructivist insights. As Staniland writes, “there has not been a transformational change in the core political cleavages.”<sup>270</sup> Violent conflict still erupts along the ethnic cleavages politicized by British and Japanese era institutions.

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<sup>270</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 223.

## Chapter Five: Striking Continuity and Enduring Ethnic Conflict

### **Introduction**

British and Japanese era institutions created lasting fault lines of conflict, dividing Myanmar's diverse society, and reproducing patterns of ethnic violence between the military and minority groups. Prior to colonization, ethnicity was highly textured and elastic, defined in regional and linguistic terms. Ethnic identity was not made highly political until the British colonial state stratified the Burmese population along ethnic lines. By selectively incorporating Karens and Kachins into the colonial military, and bestowing political privileges upon them, the British elevated the status of ethnic minority groups. The Burman majority was simultaneously excluded from the military and underrepresented politically, spurring an ethno-nationalist movement that drew a sharp line between "collaborators" and Burman nationalists. Under the colonial state, the primacy of coercive force, rising ethnic tensions, and anti-British nationalist sentiment primed society for Japanese militarism. The Japanese captured the momentum of the Burman nationalists to overthrow the British and establish Myanmar's first national army. In founding the Burman Independence Army, the Japanese unknowingly created an institution that would quickly emerge as the nucleus of the post-independence government. The BIA evolved almost directly into the Tatmadaw: this institutional continuity preserved ethno-nationalist ideology and ethnic fault lines of conflict between the Burmans and ethnic minority groups. While British institutions made ethnicity fundamentally political, Japanese military institutions ensured that colonial era ethnic cleavages were transmitted into the postcolonial independent state.

Since independence, the Karens, Kachins and Mons have continued to assert violent separatist claims against the central state. Though we observe a distinct shift to ceasefire politics

in the 1990s, this was not precipitated by changing dynamics of ethnic conflict. Closer analysis reveals that tactical difficulties and war weariness were the primary factors contributing to the signature of ceasefire agreements. Weakened insurgent groups cooperated with the central state out of desperation and this cooperation did not last, as both the Karen and Kachin resumed hostilities despite their ceasefire agreements. The political and ethnic cleavages that drive modern ethnic conflict trace clearly to British and Japanese era institutions. The Burmese state is gripped by ethno-nationalism that sustains a self-reproductive cycle of violence.

This thesis tested three different hypotheses. First, I considered hypothesis 1: *British colonialism established “fault lines” of conflict, determining the course of ethnic conflict in Myanmar*. My findings support this hypothesis—the colonial period was institutionally transformative, establishing ethnic identity as the foundation of political and military mobilization. However, these fault lines of conflict would not have been so durable without the reinforcement of Japanese institutions. My analysis shows that the Japanese occupation during World War II did not overwrite the British colonial legacy. Thus, I reject my second hypothesis: *massive wartime disruption replaced colonial institutions, casting new legacies which better explain Myanmar’s ethnic conflict*. The British and Japanese legacies coincided almost perfectly; the Japanese harnessed an ethno-nationalist movement to serve their own wartime imperatives, while the British took advantage of insecure and hopeful minority groups. Wartime institution building reinforced the ethnic demarcation between nationalists and colonial collaborators, amplifying mistrust and resentment in Myanmar’s divided population.<sup>271</sup> It is impossible to entirely disentangle the legacies of the British and the Japanese, as the Japanese occupation preserved colonial era dynamics and deepened ethnic cleavages. As noted in Chapter Two, this

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<sup>271</sup> Selth, “Race and Resistance,” 507.

finding should be investigated in further research. Under what conditions does war scramble ethnic identities, and when does it reproduce them? Is Myanmar unique in this regard, or does this reflect a general trend?

My findings also contradict hypothesis 3: *ethnic conflict in Myanmar has not been determined by institutional legacies; political and social factors have shaped the behaviors of conflict actors, driving the evolution of ethnic conflict*. While non-institutional factors have certainly influenced the behaviors of conflict actors, the modern Burmese state is still defined by British and Japanese era institutions—most importantly, the military. The ethnically exclusive Tatmadaw is a shockingly powerful institution that controls the state, dictates an ethno-nationalist agenda, and fuels conflict. The militarization of Myanmar can clearly be traced to the legacies of the British and Japanese, which coincided to elevate the role of the military above all other institutions of governance.

Each of these three hypotheses failed to entirely predict the institutional determinants of Myanmar's ethnic conflict, and its remarkable continuity. Though my first hypothesis most closely resembles my findings in this project, it still fails to capture and incorporate the significance of the Japanese occupation during World War II. Together, the British and Japanese periods established an institutional trajectory that has produced disastrous long-term consequences.

### **Continuity in Conflict**

The central finding of this project is that Myanmar's ethnic conflict has major elements of continuity. From the colonial era to World War II, to modern day, conflict has been reproduced along the same ethnic divides. Each iteration of the Burmese military—the colonial

military, the BIA, and the Tatmadaw—has been an ethnically exclusive institution with elevated oversight and striking supremacy. Ethnic identity has continued to serve as a yardstick for political power, and the basis for competition over influence, leadership, and autonomy.<sup>272</sup> As a result, Burman, Kachin, Karen and Mon identities remain extremely politically salient.

“Change is synonymous with war,” Kalyvas writes.<sup>273</sup> Yet this pithy observation does not ring true in the case of Myanmar. My findings raise a significant question: why has Myanmar had so much continuity in its ethnic conflict? Why do I observe so little fluidity, despite Kalyvas’ theoretical and empirical predictions? First, it is important to recognize the limits of Kalyvas’ findings: the bulk of his analysis is focused on one province in a single country—Argolid, in southern Greece—and therefore his theory of ethnic defection must be treated as suggestive.<sup>274</sup> While territorial control was highly predictive of ethnic defection in Argolid, it does not accurately predict ethnic defection in Myanmar. Further research could examine why territorial control is not a significant determinant of ethnic defection in Myanmar. Based on my overall findings, I anticipate that ideology and institutional legacies play a key role in determining ethnic conflict, in addition to resource constraints. While many ethnic groups, including the New Mon State Party, signed ceasefire agreements, only certain splinter groups are willing to cooperate with such a deeply exclusionary ethnocratic state. Should this prove true, Kalyvas’ theory of ethnic defection might be adapted.

My analysis of Myanmar also suggests that varying expressions of ethnic identity, as in ethnic defection, do not necessarily represent a fundamental change in an ongoing ethnic

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<sup>272</sup> Lieberman and Singh, “Census Enumeration and Group Conflict,” 8.

<sup>273</sup> Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil War,” 1063.

<sup>274</sup> Kalyvas, 1060.

conflict. Despite the ethnic defection of splinter groups, Myanmar's ethnic minorities remain locked in conflict with the central state. As seen in Myanmar, when institutions reinforce conflict over many decades, patterns of violence become highly durable.<sup>275</sup> Limited instances of ethnic defection are less meaningful, and less predictive of ethnic behaviors. Essentially, the significance of ethnic defection is entirely overwhelmed by more powerful institutions that reinforce ethnic identity and preserve fault lines of conflict. My findings suggest that when ethnic defection occurs late in an already durable ethnic conflict, this variance in the behavioral expression of ethnic identity does not necessarily undermine the significance of institutional legacies or fundamentally alter conflict dynamics. This is an expansive area for further research, with major implications for the prediction of ethnic conflict. When does ethnic defection precipitate greater fluidity in the behavioral expression of ethnic identity? Is there something distinct about Myanmar's ethnic conflict, or might this finding be generalizable in similar cases? Myanmar represents a case of extremely durable ethnic conflict that traces directly back to colonial legacies—a valuable case study for comparison with other postcolonial regimes.

### **Looking to the Future**

The weight of history constricts Myanmar's political future; recent developments only reaffirm this finding. The brutal ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, beginning in August 2017, serves as a grim example of the state's unwillingness to recognize the political status of minority groups. The central state refuses to accept the multi-ethnic and multi-racial identities of its populace and perpetuates "otherness" through policies of forced assimilation and horrific, discriminate violence. The ethno-nationalist government and Tatmadaw continue to reinforce

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<sup>275</sup> Verghese, *The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Violence*, 211.

ethnic divisions in Myanmar, reinforcing patterns of conflict along colonial and imperial fault lines. The ideological goals of the postcolonial regime help us to understand why the breakthrough into cease-fire politics has not been followed by the widespread incorporation of insurgent groups, and why the Karen National Union and Kachin Independence Army have continued to fight against the state despite previous ceasefire agreements.<sup>276</sup>

The striking continuity of Myanmar's ethnic conflict is further illustrated in the 2021 military coup and its aftermath. Last February, the Burman majority Tatmadaw demonstrated its ultimate supremacy, seizing power in the dead of night and putting a firm end to Myanmar's recent period of quasi-democracy. Following the coup, violent crackdowns increased armed resistance, particularly among the Karens and Kachins. In response, the military has brutally targeted civilian populations through airstrikes, mass killings, and arrests.<sup>277</sup> This state violence only escalates insurgent violence, and every revolt deepens colonial fault lines of conflict. British and Japanese era legacies created an insidious and enduring military institution that locks the state in ethnic violence. The potential for ongoing conflict will remain ever present unless there is a fundamental rethinking of Myanmar's national identity.<sup>278</sup>

Myanmar's historical institutions created a path-dependent, self-perpetuating ethnic conflict. The parallels between the colonial period, the Japanese occupation, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unmistakable—the state is ruled by coercive force, the population is divided along ethnic lines, and political power is defined in ethnic terms. Conflict in Myanmar is far from fluid: the

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<sup>276</sup> Staniland, *Ordering Violence*, 229.

<sup>277</sup> "Myanmar's Coup: A Year under Military Rule in Numbers." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, February 1, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/01/myanmar-coup-a-year-under-military-rule-in-numbers>.

<sup>278</sup> Staniland, 229.

state continues along a disastrous institutional trajectory that reinforces ethnic conflict, without an end in sight.

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