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CHAPTER 8

Ethnic Education Systems in Burma: Possibilities for Harmonization and Integration[1]

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In a context of great ethnolinguistic diversity and armed conflict with the army of the central government, a number of "ethnic education systems" have arisen in various places in Burma.[2] In many of the areas which have been outside of the control of the central government, ethnic-minority actors have set up administration systems, including schools. Many of these schools provide "mother tongue education," using an ethnic-minority language as the medium of instruction while also teaching content related to their history and culture. In the past, the ethnic education systems provided education in areas which were geographically and politically beyond the reach of the central government, in for example border regions where the state was unable or unwilling to reach. Burma has entered a time of transition, one in which the current government has the burden to deal with decades of mismanagement, poor decisions, poor governance, and chronic under- and de-funding across all sectors.

In education, the ethnic education systems continue to function in their previous roles, but now within an emergent environment. Recent national governments have increased their funding for education dramatically and have embarked on a number of ambitious reforms, including working towards decentralization and allowing languages other than Burmese to be used in school.[3] In 2016, the Ministry of Education released a "National Language Policy" which affirms the central role of Burmese as the medium of instruction, but which supports ethnic and indigenous communities to transmit their languages.[4] There is little funding for these efforts and minority languages are usually taught outside school hours.[5]

At the same time, however, the ethnic education systems are deeply imbricated in on-going political processes of negotiating and renegotiating ceasefires and peace agreements between the various non-state armed actors and the central government. This chapter is a snapshot of three major ethnic education systems in Burma—the Mon, Karen, and Kachin—and provides an analysis of the overall situation in which these systems operate, including aspects of ideology.

Current Context

In Burma, education, politics, conflict, language, and ethnicity are tightly interwoven. Philosophies towards education and visions for the future of the country also differ significantly among the various actors. Some ethnic armed groups see integration of their territory with the central government—in other words, with Burma—as a long-term possibility and desirable. In the short term, some groups recognize their own limitations and may be willing to harmonize or accommodate the provision of education. In other cases, ethnic armed actors, in reaction to violence and armed conflict with the Tatmadaw or Burmese army, have not seen harmonization, much less integration, as desirable, and may seek independence. All groups want to retain some autonomy in education, and some actively seek official recognition. In a context of decades of endemic warfare, many ethnic armed actors are slow to trust the central government. The recent political environment and changes have raised expectations for growth and change, but such hopes are tempered by the breakdown and renegotiation of existing ceasefires.

Since the first change of government away from a wholly military-run system in 2010, the central government has begun to change some of its long-term stances in relation to minority affairs and towards education more specifically. The state of ceasefire agreements and relations with both the Burmese army and the central government inform the ethnic education systems, how they operate, their reach, and their vision of association with Burma and Burmese institutions. With the formal accession to power of the new government led by the National League for Democracy in February 2016, hopes have been running high for change and reform. The previous government, for example, stated its intention to promote greater decentralization in governance.[6] If understood as allowing greater autonomy and local decision-making power, decentralization could accommodate established ethnic education systems, but also more widely allow

the possibility for greater local autonomy in educational matters. Widespread interest in providing "mother tongue education," or using languages other than Burmese as a medium of instruction, is a major point of intersection with some of the interest in ethnic education systems.

Historical Context of Education in Burma

Burma is a country of great ethno-linguistic diversity. Government figures put the number of "national races" at 135, while linguistic classifications state there are around 117 languages spoken in the country.[7] Government classification schemes tend to put the 135 races under eight large umbrella ethnic labels: Burman (Bamar), Mon, Kachin, Chin, Rakhaing, Kayah, Karen, and Shan. These labels reflect history and politics as much as they reflect linguistic and cultural difference. Under some categories, such as the Kachin, exist great differences in language, not just dialect. Other groups, such as the Mon, form a fairly cohesive unit. The Burman (Bamar) majority makes up some 60 per cent of the population of 52 million people, whereas the various ethnic groups form the remaining 40 per cent. Although widely spoken as a second language, the degree of exposure to Burmese and opportunities for education in the government schools vary widely. Large sections of the population do not speak Burmese at all, or at least not well. Nevertheless, most groups recognize the role of Burmese as a lingua franca and the benefits of being able to speak the language.[8]

Ethnic diversity is a feature of society throughout the country, but it is often associated with the border areas. This idea of "the border," however, is a hazy concept and can potentially include areas deep inside the internationally recognized boundaries. A useful way to understand "the border" can be in terms of those areas outside of government control. Not all members of an ethnic category live on "the border" nor do they live in the state bearing an ethnic name. The population of Kayin (Karen) State, for example, contains only a minority of the Karen-speaking population, which is spread between Bago Region, Ayeyarwady Region, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Region. This disjuncture reveals a potential pitfall in federalist models of government which depend on an association of ethnicity with territory. While some ethnic groups do tend to live in clearly demarcated areas, in many cases settlement patterns tend to be far more mixed. Burma's major cities host sizeable populations of various ethnic groups, especially Yangon and Mandalay.

The country's shape, borders, and the mix of ethnic groups living there are the result of Burma's pre-colonial past and the contingencies of

colonialism. Under the British, peoples and political entities which had been only loosely associated with the Burmese court were brought much more directly under central state authority. This process is an important underlying reason for the armed conflict against the central Burmese government and army. Said another way, the central government has never been wholly sovereign throughout the internationally demarcated borders of the country and has always been concerned with preventing the country from breaking up, especially as valuable resources are located in various "ethnic" areas. Central governmental and military control in many areas has only ever been weak, contested, or non-existent. Government services, including education, have been sporadic or non-existent. An aim of many ceasefire agreements at least from the perspective of the central government, is to bring more people and resources under central government control.

Successive regimes since independence in 1948 have viewed ethnicity with suspicion. Many have tried to carefully control expressions of cultural identity or history, and have been chary of promoting indigenous languages through the government education system. Many Burmans, who form the majority of the government and military, genuinely do not understand the situation in ethnic and border areas, and so do not understand the extent to which the Burmese language is not spoken, or the resentment that many members of minority groups feel towards the central government.[9]

Immediately after independence, the new government allowed teaching in some minority languages and translated government textbooks into ethnic languages. Because of the weakness of the central government and a fear of chaos and disintegration, General Ne Win took control of the county in 1962. The new government soon made Burmese the sole official language and medium of instruction in government schools.[10] This change created great resentment, while also putting ethnic minority children at a disadvantage in the school system.

Against these long-term trends, the educational context in Burma has begun to change rapidly in the past few years. The changes in government have also meant changes in educational policy, including increases in spending. Until the change in government, Burma had had some of the lowest expenditures on education of any country in the region.[11] Another year has been added to schooling, expanding it from the "ten standard" system in place for decades. Myanmar has signed onto the Millennium Development Goals, which include improving educational outcomes. Common is rhetoric to promote greater accommodation, as in the ethnic

rights for the transmission of language and culture in the 2016 National Language Policy. In the background, for many years, foreign donors and ethnic minority groups have been using mother tongue education, and more recently, have brought the issue to the greater attention of the government, which has garnered a limited response, as noted above. The government has been slow and reluctant to make concessions on this point, but there have been a few important signs that a shift may be underway.

There is a deep connection between the operation of the various ethnic education systems on the one hand, and the long-term maintenance of peace between armed groups, ceasefire groups, and the central government on the other. In 2011, the newly-elected USDP government nullified all ceasefires negotiated under previous regimes and said they would have to be renegotiated bilaterally. In 2015, eight major groups had signed the nation-wide ceasefire, although several, such as the Kachin Independence Organization, have not and have been at war with the Tatmadaw.[12]

The Government Education System

A brief discussion of government schools will throw into relief aspects of education in general. The government and ethnic systems face many of the same difficulties. The chief education provider are the government schools, from primary through the tertiary level, which are under the Ministry of Education. A parallel system is the monastic schools, which often operate in areas where families cannot afford to send their children to the government schools. The monastic schools, a system in place since before colonization, largely follow the government curriculum, although there is greater room for autonomy or for running local programs. These monastic schools fall under various ministries, including the Ministry for Religious Affairs. Because of this greater freedom and because restrictions which had been in place until quite recently on working in government schools, foreign non-governmental organizations and donors have been more active in the monastic school system than in the government system. There are also private schools, such as the international schools primarily in Yangon, which are legally businesses and so do not follow the government curriculum. The term "government schools" is useful for describing the situation of institutions run by various government ministries following the same basic curriculum.

Overall, outcomes are generally poor and fail to meet the needs of society. Schools emphasize rote learning, are under-funded, and use

corporal punishment. Dropout rates are high, especially in the transition between middle and high school.[13] Matriculation rates in the final year of high school are less than half of the students. Reflecting societal preferences and economic calculations, families often pull girls out of school in order to work or take care of younger siblings, especially when the girls are teenagers. Yet girls tend to perform better than boys when they have the opportunity. Official statistics often do not reveal the extent to which children do not actually attend school—there are various incentives for registering children who may not actually attend school. Access to school is uneven and unequal, with rural and ethnic areas generally more poorly served, while affluent, urban areas getting higher quality teachers and infrastructure. One recent study revealed that less than one half of school age children in Shan State received any schooling at all.[14]

Government schools are often overcrowded and noisy because of the preference for children learning by recitation together in a loud voice.[15] Class sizes tend to be quite large. Teachers may have inadequate training or education themselves. In many places, government schools are either far away or non-existent. High schools, for example, may be too far away to serve local populations. Although technically education is provided free of charge, there are numerous, often burdensome informal fees associated with schooling. Most notoriously is the common practice of "tuition," in which teachers do not teach the answers to tests during school hours, but only in paid "tutoring" classes. Students who do complete a government education are often ill-equipped to find work or carry on further education. The emphasis on rote learning and memorization in order to pass tests means that students do not develop critical and analytical skills.

Adequate salaries for teachers is a perennial problem throughout all systems, although the government system has recently increased spending on education, including pay raises for teachers. Problems with training and pay equity have become more acute in recent years as the government has embarked on an ambitious plan of expanding the reach of government education. In addition to adding another year of education and constructing numerous new schools, the government has started hiring "daily wage teachers" as a way to provide five teachers in each primary school. These teachers are not civil servants and have not undergone the same training at teachers' colleges as the regular teachers. A disproportionate number have been sent to remote schools, including in ethnic minority areas, and have been associated with an increase in dropouts there.[16] School teachers are posted following a centralized process, meaning that the teachers in many peripheral areas are not from local communities, but

rather Burman Buddhists. Many teachers posted to remote ethnic areas are underpaid, find the work or lifestyle unsatisfying, and are often called away to distant towns to receive pay and fill out paperwork, leading to high levels of absenteeism and turnover.[17] These teachers do not know local languages, so that teaching becomes ineffective or worse, leaving many children effectively uneducated.

Whatever the shortcomings of the school system, Burmese society places a high value on education. Parents tend to do whatever they can to have their children educated, and teachers and administrators do their best, according to their understanding, to provide an education. Burmese society has not clearly articulated the purpose of education, nor what it means to be educated. For many, being educated means to speak English. Around the world, many other societies view education as a way to create citizens able to participate in civic life, or to prepare citizens for the workforce. In Burma, however, the educational rhetoric takes the form of vague aspirations, such as the large signboards around schools which declare, "towards a modern and developed nation through discipline." What it means to be "developed" is also left unspecified. It is easy to think about what the education system lacks, but it does in fact suit a particular vision of society, in which young people do what their elders and superiors tell them. The problem is that the skills and attitudes which serve an agrarian, monarchical, hierarchical society are not the same as those of capitalist markets, which demand higher overall educational abilities, if indeed becoming a capitalist society is a societal goal.

Ethnic Education Systems

The ethnic education systems are key to providing education to more of the citizens of the country, especially in hard-to-reach places. As one recent report observes, the government system will not be able to expand their provision of education across the country, even under their ambitious new plan. Recent years have seen increasing interactions between the government and ethnic systems, sometimes welcome, sometimes contested. Ethnic systems tend to be funded by local communities, although foreign donors often provide substantial amounts of money, as has been the case with the Mon system in which foreign donors were subsidizing a significant amount of teachers' salaries.[18] A difficulty, however, is that foreign donors typically provide only short-term funding and are not interested in providing money for a public good which they see as the responsibility of the central government.[19] Teachers in some ethnic systems tend to be

young, often working as much as volunteers as regularly paid teachers.[20] Common to all of the ethnic systems are outmoded pedagogy, curriculum, and textbooks, even as each group has made efforts to update them.

Strictly speaking, the three ethnic education systems are not comparable. There is no one "ethnic education" model representative of the experience as a whole. These systems are still "in process," still emerging, in that their fates depend on interactions between changes of thinking and legislation in the central government, and on the resolution of complex political and military events. The Mon system stands on one end of the spectrum, in that it is fairly coherent and represents a single entity. The "Karen System" actually encompasses a variety of arrangements and accommodations. Differences among the systems represent the particularities of history and relationships with the central government and the military and their experience with armed conflict. Ideological, religious, and cultural diversity also factor into the variation. When discussing these systems, questions emerge about who operates them, how these people represent their ethnic group, and how they are accountable to students, teachers, and communities. Many international donors and governments are keen to work with ceasefire groups and support ethnic minorities. All education systems in Burma have their origins in hierarchical social structures and do not involve elected officials. The ethnic minority systems have developed under their respective militaries, so that it is not clear to what extent ethnic education systems represent the views and interests of the people, or to what extent they reflect elite ideologies. Starting in 2012, foreign donors encouraged the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to hold a series of on-going consultations with the Mon public to address precisely the ambiguity of the NMSP's position and their ability to represent the people they claim to govern.

Today the three ethnic education systems considered here operate not only in territory which ethnic armed actors—the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Karen National (KNU), and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)—control, but also in areas under overlapping control with the central government. In these areas, the ethnic schools may complement the government system, or work together with the government system in various local accommodations, often called "mixed schools." Increasingly, as the central government has sought to expand its reach into new areas, they have opened new schools in areas which previously did not have them. At times local ethnic communities have accepted or even asked for these schools because they can provide education beyond what has been available locally, or because the costs of supporting teachers

are lower. Where these schools are built, there is usually already a community school, whose administration the government then takes over, thus creating a mixed school.[21] Where there are two competing schools, parents often face difficult choices of which school to send their children to. Mixed schools, however, can present opportunities for fruitful accommodation: teachers may "teach" in Burmese but "explain" the lessons in a local language. This practice can potentially benefit children whose first language is not Burmese. A difficulty is that although the National Language Policy of 2016 supports the transmission of ethnic languages and an amendment to the National Education Law in 2015 allows "local languages" to be used along with Burmese as necessary at the basic level as noted above, the practice is highly contingent upon local head teachers and administrators, in addition to the presence of teachers who know the local language. In areas where teachers cannot speak the local language, however, morale among both students and teachers is often low, with many students leaving school.

Mon National Schools

The Mon-speaking population of Burma is around 800,000. The largest Mon armed ethnic group, the New Mon State Party, started the "Mon National Schools" with the founding of the Mon National Education Committee in 1972.[22] The New Mon State Party had been in armed conflict with the central government since independence until 1995, when the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement. In the mid-1990s, there were 76 Mon national schools in the Mon-majority areas of Mon and Karen States.[23] The original site of the schools was areas the New Mon State Party held, but since the ceasefires, various strategies and accommodation have allowed Mon-medium and Mon-content education to spread through Mon-majority areas of Mon and Karen States, although there are also populations of Mon speakers in adjacent Bago and Tanintharyi Regions, and significant clusters of Mon speakers in and around Yangon.

Typically, Mon schools use Mon as the sole medium of instruction through primary school. Burmese and English are taught as subjects, as is Mon history. In middle school, they switch to Burmese as the medium of instruction, with Mon history and language taught as subjects. Through local, unofficial agreements, students from the Mon schools have been able to take the examinations to enter government high schools. None of these agreements are the result of official legislation (even if, as noted above, some new legislation raises the possibility), but rather depend on

the attitudes and inclinations of local government officials. The possibility of students transferring into government schools from the ethnic schools is critical to many students and parents. For many parents, teachers and students, it is of critical importance that students who go through ethnic systems can take the entrance examinations to be admitted to government high schools, which are also the gateway to universities.

There are also a number of government schools where varying degrees of accommodation are made to the local Mon community, called here and elsewhere as "mixed schools." Accommodations typically include allowing Mon teachers to use government school buildings after school hours, or providing actual Mon-speaking teachers to either "teach" or "explain" in Mon following the practice outlined above, or actually using Mon-language textbooks and teaching Mon-relevant content such as history and language.[24] The Burmese government allowed the teaching of minority languages beginning in 2014, although it appears that how local officials interpret this permission and how it plays out in schools varies.[25] Monastic schools have been a site of expansion of Mon-medium and Mon-content instruction throughout Mon-speaking areas.

The ease (in theory) of transferring from the Mon system into the government system is one of the most distinctive features of this system. Many international donors and experts have seen the Mon system as ideal because it allows for the preservation and transmission of the ethnic language and ethnic history, while also fostering integration into national life. The length of the ceasefire between the New Mon State Party and the Burmese military, recent good relations with the central government, together with close historical, cultural, and religious links between the Mons and Burmans, have worked in favor of the system. At the same time, however, as will become clear in the discussion of the Kachin systems, the lack of significant natural resources in Mon-speaking areas has precluded the possibility of the New Mon State Party from holding out and funding a parallel administration through other means.

Karen Systems

Similar to the Mon situation, a network of schools providing education to members of Karen ethnic groups has arisen out of political and military organizations. The Karen National Association (KNA) was founded in 1881 before developing into the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1947. Fighting broke out between the central government and the KNU in 1949 and persisted until the signing of a ceasefire in 2012. The KNU set

up administrative structures, including the Karen Education Department (KED), formerly the Karen Education and Culture Department. The KED is largely active in areas which the KNU hold, particularly areas closer to the Thai-Burma border, meaning that many areas where Karens live are not served by the KED. Additionally, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (the former a splinter group of the latter) also run about 100 schools. Another place providing education to Karen children are the several Karen and Karenni (Kayah) refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Some 30,000 children were attending school in these camps in 2015.[26] As is the case of the Mons, large numbers of Karens live in government-controlled areas. In the past 15 years, the Karen Teachers' Working Group (KTWG) has been active in improving the quality of teachers, curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy in Karen schools.[27]

Unlike the situation of the Mons, who encompass one group speaking one language, Karens speak a variety of languages and dialects which are not mutually intelligible. The Karen population is scattered through parts of Karen and Mon States, eastern Bago Region, Tanintharyi Region, and Ayeyarwady Region. Not all of these areas are Karen majority, nor are they geographically contiguous. About 20 per cent of the 5–7 million Karens living in Burma are Christian, especially Baptist, and represent the majority of actors involved in Karen education. The remainder of the non-Christian population is at least nominal Buddhist.

After the suppression of Karen-language education in the 1960s, many local churches and monasteries continued to provide informal instruction in the two major Karen languages, Sgaw and Pwo (Phloun).[28] Most Karen schooling is organized and controlled by local communities and must seek funding from the community, meaning that securing adequate funding for the teachers and schools is a perennial problem. Truly reliable data are hard to come by, but government statistics suggest that in at least one Karen area, Kayin (Karen) State, literacy rates (presumably in Burmese) are low, at 75 per cent, and out of a population of around 580,000 children, around 70,000 may not be registered. Only 24 per cent of 5-year-old children are in school, and as in other systems, promotion rates between primary and middle, and between middle and high school, are low, as are high school matriculation rates.[29]

As described above, under the government expansion of the education system, new government schools have opened in areas held by the KNU, and in the process, the new government officials often try to bring the local Karen community schools under their control. Karen students

appear to have been particularly affected by this development, in that over 1,000 of the daily-wage teachers in Karen areas have been reported as absent from the schools for more than a month. The fact that these teachers cannot speak a Karen language has also had a severe impact on the education of the children in these areas.[30]

The KTWG has been making great efforts in strained circumstances to improve the quality of teaching in Karen schools, and has been instrumental in providing education in hard-to-reach places. For teachers, their efforts have focused on training teachers before they start work and also while they are working, often through "mobile training." The KTWG also supports mother tongue-based teaching and local curriculum. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. The KED curriculum diverges significantly from that of the government, mostly in the promotion of Karen language instruction and content, and with its limited study of the Burmese language. Unlike in the Mon systems, where some local officials have made accommodations so that students from the Mon national schools can transfer into government schools, no such accommodation is possible for KED schools.[31] There is an acute shortage of Karen teachers, and the curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy are all outdated.

Many teachers, students, parents, and donors would like to see the possibility of greater harmonization with the government system. This harmonization might look like the Mon system, with instruction in a Karen language with Karen content, but with the gradual introduction of Burmese so that students would have the option of switching into government schools if they chose. In addition to legal barriers—Burmese law does not recognize any ethnic education system—in light of decades of civil war and violence, many Karens are wary of closer integration into the government system. Particular education situations at particular times, for example among refugees on the Thai border, may be less interested in teaching Burmese and focus instead on English in anticipation of resettlement in an English-speaking third country.

Kachin Systems

"Kachin" is actually an umbrella term encompassing linguistically-diverse people who have come to participate, in varying degrees, in a cultural, religious, and political system centered historically on clans and a system of exchanging wives between them.[32] While all the languages falling under the rubric of Kachin are from the same Tibeto-Burman language family, they are from rather different branches and are not mutually intelligible.

Jinghpaw is the majority language with around 630,000 speakers and often serves as the lingua franca. Other languages include Maru (Lhaovo), Zaiwa (Atsi), Lachik, Rawang, and some Lisu, although their participation in the Kachin complex is more recent and contested. As with the Karen, Kachins live throughout a wide region of Upper Burma, not only in Kachin State, but also in many parts of Shan State and, as is the case with most large ethnic groups, in the major cities of Mandalay and Yangon.

The Kachin education system shows most clearly the influence of political developments on education. Key to the current situation is the breakdown of the ceasefire between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Organization in June 2011. The Kachin Independence Organization took up arms against the central government in 1961. In 1994, the Kachin Independence Organization signed a ceasefire. Over the decades since its founding, the Kachin Independence Organization and other Kachin organizations have been able to build up a variety of administrative functions and bureaucracy, such as for education, health, and agriculture. KIO-controlled areas have built their own state apparatus.

There are some crucial structural differences between the situation among the Kachin in opposition to the Karen and Mon systems. Thailand, and therefore the Thai-Burma border, served as a haven for refugees and also an access point for international aid and support. This was much less the case along the Burma-China border, and far fewer NGOs have been able to work with the Kachins. On the other hand, the Kachins have been able to rely on revenue from natural resources such as the jade trade with China, which has allowed not only the building up of infrastructure but also acts as a disincentive to signing a ceasefire. Indeed, some Kachin want outright independence, although given the geopolitical context, such an aspiration is likely to prove difficult.

The Education Department of the Kachin Independence Organization, established in 1978, operated 180 schools in 2016 with about 30,000 students. Notably, this system teaches the government curriculum with additions for Jinghpaw language and culture—similar to the Mon model. Unlike the Mon system, however, the Kachin system had used Burmese as the medium of instruction more than Jinghpaw (or other Kachin languages). Textbooks are all in Burmese, even in places where teachers and students have little Burmese ability, a situation resulting in much hardship.

The resumption of fighting since 2011 has had deep impacts on the Kachin society, including on the education system, not least of which is the large number of internally-displaced persons. First, graduates of the

Kachin system are no longer allowed to transfer into government schools, effectively curtailing their education and career choices. Second, there is much greater antagonism—at least among elites—towards the idea of being part of Burma, and therefore many schools are using less Burmese and more Jinghpaw and English. The switch to English is part of creating a curriculum aimed at sending students abroad to study, and thus represents a wider trend of creating a separate system altogether.

The Future of the Ethnic Education Systems: Opportunities and Constraints

This brief overview of the three systems highlights their great diversity in their development and their relations with the government system. In considering the future, the most important question is, what do the various parties concerned want? There are two parts to this question: relations of each of the armed ethnic groups to the central government and military; and more widely, respective ideas about being part of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. The answers to these questions are key to understanding the futures of ethnic education systems. Groups like the Mon, which see themselves as part of Burma and which have stable ceasefires, would likely move towards integration and accommodation. Even with a ceasefire between the Burmese military and Kachin groups, it is still likely that anti-Burmese sentiment will linger for some time, and in any case, most ethnic minorities are wary of the central government. It will take time to build trust, especially when there are recent memories of conflict, or in places where interactions with the Tatmadaw remain frequent and tense. In certain situations, as seems to be the case with the Kachin and in refugee communities, some groups will prefer not to teach Burmese and use English or another local language instead, and focus on maintaining a separate education system that would not prepare graduates for life in Burma. It is likely that even if association with, or eventual integration into, the central government system is the goal, it will be a long time coming.

Second, there is crossover between discussions of ethnic education systems and mother tongue education. It is important to note briefly that not every ethnic group that speaks a language other than Burmese, or would like to transmit a language other than Burmese, has their own ethnic education system, or is connected with an armed group. Continuing debates about the desirability and possibilities for mother tongue instruction may lead to ethnic education systems changing in the coming years.

At the same time that the Kachin system disfavors Burmese, it may increase the use of English and the various Kachin languages, while the Karen, Mon, and even government systems may reconsider their heavy emphasis on English. Such rethinking of the role of English reflects global shifts away from introducing English as a subject early into formal education, because children are unable to absorb it and tend to create negative associations with it. These questions of language use and attitudes are central to larger questions of federalism, local autonomy, and the integration into the country of areas held by ceasefire groups. Perhaps a federalist model based on territory, as usually understood in Burma, has to be rethought: the ethnic states do not encompass all the members of the ethnicity after which they are named, and large numbers of other ethnic groups live within these territories. For example, some groups in Shan State feel oppressed by Shan elites, language, and culture, and do not want to have to learn Shan.

A third consideration is the legal and constitutional framework. It is not clear to what extent minority issues will garner the attention of the new government. Before the 2015 election, there was a widespread expectation that ethnic minority parties would be elected, but this was largely not the case with a few exceptions. Perhaps as ethnic minority education systems are tied into larger developments in the education system, such as the recent Comprehensive Education Sector Review, some changes may start to take place.

A central constraint is the possibility for the devolution of power, at least within the government system. One way to approach the accommodation of the ethnic education systems is through decentralization. Some might see association with ethnic education systems as a way to devolve power to local levels and to recognize areas of local autonomy. From a strictly legal perspective, however, according to the constitution, matters related to education in terms of policy and curriculum are decided at the national level. Devolution of control would necessitate a constitutional amendment.

Relatedly, decentralization may seem like a logical way to approach addressing change throughout the education system, especially if understood as giving people lower down in the bureaucracy decision-making power. There are few signs that this is happening, or indeed, that many people lower down in the bureaucracy see this as desirable. Even assuming that some kind of legal change could be enacted to allow a devolution in policy making, the Ministry of Education as a whole would have to

foster new practices encouraging local initiatives. The evidence of governance suggests a continued preference for decision and responsibility to stay at the highest levels.

Fourth, technical challenges having to do with training, recognition, and equity remain. As discussed above, all education systems throughout the country are under-funded, teachers are not necessarily properly trained, and there is a widespread recognition that curriculum, teaching methods, and textbooks are all in need of an overhaul. Assuming that closer association or harmonization with the central government system is desirable, how exactly the teachers of the ethnic schools will be recognized remains to be negotiated. The solution revolves around training: teachers in the ethnic education systems cannot be recognized by the central government if they have not had formal government training as teachers and civil servants. As described above, sending Burman teachers into ethnic areas, where they will be unable to communicate with local students, serves no one's interests. Yet to not address these questions means undermining equity in terms of all students, whatever their linguistic background, being able to go to school with the same relative advantages.

The possibilities for integrating—or better, harmonizing—the ethnic education systems with the government system, will depend on politics, both in the sense of formal legislation, and in the sense of negotiations. Recognizing the ethnic systems in the short term, allowing transfer between the ethnic and government system, and making provisions for long-term harmonization of qualifications, may all be feasible short-term solutions. If integration or accommodation are not the goals, then education will form a central part of whatever agreements are made between ethnic armed groups and the central government. In the long term, it is likely that ethnic education systems narrowly, and mother tongue education more widely, will be accommodated. The changes in legislation and attitudes in the past several years are reasons to feel optimistic in the long run. In the short term, the future of the ethnic education systems will likely be decided by high-level political negotiation rather than legislation.

A final point is that the ethnic education systems are crucial partners for spreading education throughout the country. Ethnic education systems cannot and do not serve all the students of any given ethnic group because of geographical and political constraints. The government system, even under its current expansion, cannot provide education to everyone, nor will it be able to in the near future. The ethnic education systems are well poised to provide an education in hard-to-reach areas, such as along

the Thai-Burma or Thai-China borders. Ethnic education systems, such as the KED, have been in a position to pioneer new practices to improve the quality of education.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Catherine Johnston for her generous time and assistance with revising this chapter and to an anonymous reviewer. All the opinions herein are my own.
2. The term "Myanmar" is unwieldy because it refers to language, people, country, citizenship, and often ethnic majority. Instead of resorting to non-native sounding locutions such as "Myanmar people" or "Myanmar language," I use "Burma" for the country, "Burmese" for the language and citizenship, and "Burman" for the ethnic majority.
3. For an in-depth discussion of decentralization, see Brooke Zobrist and Patrick McCormick, "A Preliminary Assessment of Decentralization in Education: Experiences in Mon State and Yangon Region" (Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2013), pp. 15–24.
4. Kim Jolliffe and Emily Speers Mears, "Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar's Ethnic Areas" (Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2016), pp. 37, 109 for the National Language Policy.
5. A 2015 amendment to the National Education Law does permit teachers to use an ethnic language in addition to Burmese at the basic level. The government has paid for classroom assistants who speak local languages to be present in the primary classrooms.
6. See Zobrist and McCormick 2013: 5–6.
7. Figures related to languages and speakers are taken from <www.ethnologue.org> [accessed June 2018].
8. Some Christian minority groups have called for using English as the national language. Unlike former British colonies like India or Malaysia, which have no clear ethnic majority but do have significant numbers of English-speaking elites, Burma has a clear numerical majority, but high levels of English-language proficiency have only been achieved among very small elites.
9. This is an observation based on my 14 years' experience living, working, and conducting research in Burma. A senior Burmese academic researcher I worked with expressed their surprise that members of ethnic minority whose village we were in would want to keep their language since they already have their "ethnic dress" and culture.
10. Jolliffe and Speers Mears (p. 8) note that many think that the Ne Win government immediately outlawed the use of other languages, but it appears that by 1964–65, the nationalization of religious and private schools and the instituting of a national curriculum effectively ended the earlier practice of teaching minority languages.

11. Zobrist and McCormick, pp. 14–15. Spending as a proportion of GDP fell from 0.4 per cent in 2002 to 0.1 per cent in 2007, before rising to 0.7 per cent by 2010. In 2006, Burma's proportion was five times lower than the regional average of 3.6 per cent of GDP. In 2013, spending was raised to 5.8 per cent of the national budget, but inaccuracy dogs government data in Burma.
12. It is not always clear what a "ceasefire" means because skirmishes sometimes break out between the Tatmadaw and signatories. The Tatmadaw is not, after all, under the control of the central government.
13. Brooke Zobrist, "Mapping Teaching-Learning and Operational Experiences in Fifty Monastery Schools Across Myanmar" (Yangon: Pyoe Pin Programme, 2010).
14. Cited in Jolliffe and Speers Mears, p. 22. This is based on Ministry of Immigration data, and like all government data, must be treated with caution.
15. This picture of the government schools is based on Zobrist and McCormick 2013; Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016; and Zobrist 2010.
16. See Jolliffe and Speers Mears, p. 30 and Catherine Johnston, "A Model of Education in Hard-to-Reach Areas: The KTWF Model" (Yangon: Save the Children, 2016), pp. 43–5.
17. Discussed in Zobrist and McCormick, Jolliffe and Speers Mears, and Johnston, pp. 43–5.
18. The Mon National Education Committee receives most of its funding from foreign donors. See Patrick McCormick, "NPA and the MNEC: Considerations for the Future, an Internal Review" (Yangon: Norwegian People's Aid, 2017).
19. Funding cycles for the MNEC, for example, were typically limited to a year. See McCormick 2017.
20. This is the observation of Zobrist and McCormick after visiting several MNEC-run Mon National Schools in 2013, and McCormick in 2012.
21. Jolliffe and Speers Mears describe this process, pp. 14–16.
22. My discussion of the Mon sector is based on Zobrist and McCormick 2013; Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-Based Teaching in Myanmar" (Yangon: Asia Foundation, 2016), and McCormick 2017. My thanks to Ashley South for sharing his report.
23. There is also a sizeable Mon-speaking community in Yangon and some around Bago (Pegu).
24. Jolliffe and Speers Mears note that in some ethnic systems, students, at least at higher levels, often do not take these classes seriously because they are not part of the official government exams. To what extent this applies to the Mon system merits further investigation.
25. See Lawi Weng, "Lawmakers Highlight Shortcomings in Ethnic Language Teaching," in *The Irrawaddy*, 10 June 2016.
26. South and Lall 2017.

27. Johnston, p. 13.
28. In the past, Pwo parents often sent their children to nearby Mon monasteries to be educated, hence the old term "Mon Karen" for Pwo speakers.
29. Johnston, pp. 16–17, who is quoting Department of Population figures, and KTWG information for promotion and matriculation rates.
30. Johnston, p. 7.
31. South and Lall 2016.
32. See for example Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (London: The British Academy, 2013).

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