

# The “Wages of Burman-ness:” Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar

MATTHEW J. WALTON

*Department of Political Science, George Washington University, Washington DC, USA*

**ABSTRACT** *Ethnicity is one of the primary lenses through which scholars view conflict in Burma/Myanmar. In this paper I examine the dominance of the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, the Burmans, and the ways in which Burman-ness functions as a privileged identity. I draw from the theoretical framework of Whiteness and White privilege in critical race theory to argue that, although there are important analytical differences between race and ethnicity, we can conceptualise Burman-ness as a form of institutionalised dominance similar to Whiteness. I support this argument by documenting the ways in which Burmans are privileged in relation to non-Burmans, while still, in many cases, seeing themselves as equally subject to government repression. This analysis of Burman privilege (and blindness to that privilege) is particularly relevant given the fact that the political reforms implemented by Myanmar’s new, partly civilian government since 2011 have opened new opportunities for (mostly Burman) activists while coinciding with increased military violence in some non-Burman border regions of the country.*

**KEY WORDS:** Burma, Myanmar, ethnic conflict, Burman, privilege, Whiteness

Ethnic conflict has persistently plagued Burma since before its independence in 1948.<sup>1</sup> The military governments that ruled the country from 1962 until 2011 regularly battled ethnic insurgencies in the border areas and, despite a series of ceasefires over the last 15 years, ethnic conflict continues today. As a result, ethnicity remains one of the primary lenses through which scholars view conflict in present-day Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the dominance of the majority ethnic group in Myanmar, the Burmans, through a conceptual lens drawn from critical race theory.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical framework of Whiteness and White privilege is used to determine if a similar privileged identity of Burman-ness operates in Myanmar. I argue that we can conceptualise Burman-ness as a form of institutionalised dominance similar to Whiteness, despite the analytical differences between race and ethnicity. At the same time some of the ways in which the boundaries of a dominant ethnic group appear to be more porous than racial boundaries, particularly when they overlap with national identity, as is the case in Myanmar. This argument is supported by documenting the

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*Correspondence Address:* Matthew J. Walton, Department of Political Science, George Washington University, 2115 G St. NW, Monroe Hall 440, Washington, DC 20052, USA.  
Email: matthewjwalton@gmail.com

ways in which Burmans are privileged in relation to non-Burmans, while still, in many cases, being subject to government repression themselves or, at least, perceiving themselves as equally subject to repression.<sup>4</sup> In the same way that critical race theorists note that racism cannot be overcome without white recognition of their privilege, the inability of Burmans to recognise this privilege and to actively work against it inhibits efforts to forge ethnic unity in Myanmar.

As a result of elections in 2010 and some political reforms since 2011, many formerly hostile governments and international organisations have adopted a more open stance toward Myanmar. Within this evolving political context, it is particularly important for both international and domestic actors to continue to focus on ethnic issues in Myanmar. As Western governments slowly begin to ease sanctions, many influential individuals are urging continued Western engagement with the Myanmar government in the hope that it will lead to more extensive political reform. Members of the democratic opposition, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, have also offered to play a role in the reconciliation process between the government and the non-Burman ethnic groups. While the recent changes (including release of many political prisoners, expanded freedoms of speech and press, and more opportunities for democratic opposition groups to participate in the political process) are encouraging, there are reasons to continue to push for further reform.

Of great concern, given the topic of this paper, is the increased fighting in some ethnic areas. Government negotiations with ethnic armed groups have resulted in ceasefires in some areas that had experienced long-running conflict, such as the January 2012 ceasefire with the Karen National Union (KNU) in Karen State. However, while the new civilian government appears to be opening up political space in central, Burman areas, some non-Burman areas have seen renewed violence, including Kachin State since June 2011. Additionally, the ceasefires that do exist are fragile and the Burmese government has yet to consider a lasting political resolution to the conflicts.<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates that many non-Burmans are not in a position to enjoy the benefits of recent political reforms; indeed, at times it seems as if the government is implementing two separate, but related policies: one of increased openness, of which Burmans are the primary beneficiaries, and one of violent repression, of which non-Burmans remain the primary victims. As I argue below, part of Burman privilege is not only avoiding the worst elements of violent repression, but also being able to ignore it when it occurs elsewhere, since it is not part of their everyday political reality.

For the past 50 years, the Burmese military has been accused of committing much of the violence against non-Burman populations. However, this analysis does not fit into a simple narrative that posits the military on one side as the oppressor and the opposition on the other side fighting for good. The history of ethnic conflict in Myanmar has been far more complex than this. First, hostilities between Burmans and non-Burmans go back well before the military took power in 1962. Some of the most prominent figures in the Burmese independence movement used chauvinistic rhetoric and even committed atrocities against non-Burman populations. However, decades of military campaigns combating (mostly ethnic) insurgencies have resulted in policies that institutionalise differential treatment of Burmans and non-Burmans. Thus, while they may not be explicitly based on ethnic discrimination, these practices have generated a set of privileges that Burmans enjoy because of their ethnic identity.

challenge in locating themselves within the state's narrative of the Myanmar nation. Burman students, on the other hand, enjoy the privilege of unproblematically relating to their own history, since they can immediately and consistently find those who are similar to themselves.

*The Democratic Opposition and the Perpetuation of Burman-ness*

Unfortunately, many of the Burman leaders of the democratic opposition remain blind to the privileged position of Burmans in Myanmar. This is most likely because they view themselves as having equally experienced repression at the hands of the military government. Despite frequently expressing support for the participation of "ethnic minority" groups in political negotiations with the government, in the past Aung San Suu Kyi has spoken about ethnic differences in (unintentional yet) subtly dismissive ways. In a speech in 1989 she stated:

At this time there is a very great need for all our ethnic groups to be joined together. We cannot have the attitude of "I'm Kachin," "I'm Burman," "I'm Shan." We must have the attitude that we are all comrades in the struggle for democratic rights. We must all work closely together like brothers and sisters. Only then will we succeed. If we divide ourselves ethnically, we shall not achieve democracy for a long time. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 231)

Statements like this reveal what Roediger (1999, 11) refers to as the "suppressed question of whiteness" (or, in this case, Burman-ness). Aung San Suu Kyi can call for a move away from ethnic identity precisely because her own ethnic identity is unproblematic. Not only does she effectively ignore the historically real and continuing effects of ethnic conflict, she does not acknowledge the disparities in sacrifice and suffering experienced by non-Burman ethnic groups. She asks them to put aside their own experiences of injustice and oppression to follow her plan: "Only after building this Union can we really work towards peace and prosperity for all. We must all sacrifice our own needs for the needs of others" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 226). The message is clear: the priority is forming a (Burman-led) democratic government; only after this has been achieved will the "ethnic question" be addressed (see Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2010).

While the criticism of government and military policies made by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) is important, it too ignores the historical tensions both between Burmans and non-Burmans, and among the non-Burman groups themselves. Although she has repeatedly denounced the oppression of non-Burman ethnic groups, in her past statements Aung San Suu Kyi (1991, 231) has disregarded the exclusion and deception that characterised the period leading up to independence and essentially glossed over, if not completely rewritten Myanmar's recent ethnic history with statements such as: "We won our independence [in 1948] through the unity of the various nationalities." This type of claim excludes and dismisses conflicting accounts of the independence struggle from non-Burmans and, more importantly, oversimplifies a complex political history that will need to be honestly acknowledged as part of a process of national reconciliation in Myanmar.

The point here is not to vilify Aung San Suu Kyi or any of the Burman democratic opposition leaders. Indeed, the NLD has also expressed strong support for non-Burman political aspirations. NLD leaders signed on to the Kalay Declaration in 2011, a document calling for a second Panglong gathering that would aim to establish Myanmar as a federal rather than unitary system and Aung San Suu Kyi frequently discusses the need for a political solution to ethnic conflict. However, many non-Burmans remain sceptical that the Burman leaders of the democratic opposition fully recognise the differential experiences of suffering between the two groups, understand the nature of non-Burman grievances, and acknowledge the need for non-Burman voices to assume the central role in political talks. In a positive development, members of the 88 Generation Students political group began a tour of war-torn ethnic areas in April 2012. Their stated goal was to listen to the voices of the people in order to better understand the situation in those areas (Hpyo Wai Tha 2012). This could indicate a positive (and from the perspective of many non-Burmans, necessary) shift in attitudes among some Burman leaders of the democratic opposition towards a more self-reflective and less domineering position *vis-à-vis* the non-Burman ethnic groups.

Burman stereotypes about non-Burmans have hindered inter-ethnic understanding even within inter-ethnic coalitions. After the government's bloody repression of protests in 1988, many Burman students fled to the jungles to join non-Burman groups that had already been waging a war against the military for decades. Despite the friendships and alliances that were established during this period, the language of Burmans writing about their experiences often betrays their views of the foreignness of non-Burman opposition groups. In an article reflecting on those first encounters, Naw May Oo (2010), a Karen scholar, explains how Burmans coming to the jungle judged Karens as savages based on cultural differences and misunderstood Karen fear of them (perfectly justified based on their previous experiences with Burman soldiers) as evidence of their backwardness. She laments the use of labels, such as "Karen-style justice," which a Burman writer used to describe the harsh ways he saw rebel militias treating people who had violated laws. Rather than explain these actions as conditioned by a context of violence and conflict, he attributes these practices to Karen in general and Naw May Oo's concern is that this type of language not only implies a divide between cultures, but contrasts Karen practices to the presumably universal and civilised justice of the Burmans.<sup>16</sup>

Burmans continue to assume a central place in Burmese politics, whether as power holders or as members of the democratic opposition. The NLD and other opposition groups are dominated by Burmans, and those groups that do have majority populations of non-Burmans are always labelled as such, for example, the Shan National League for Democracy. Burmans also maintain a privileged position in the international perception of Burmese politics. Many observers have called for a three-part dialogue, between the military government, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic "minority" groups. Left unquestioned is the assumption that the NLD, as the pre-eminent opposition party, implicitly represents Burman interests. In assessing white working class alignment with Whiteness, Roediger (1999) notes that the refusal to acknowledge (let alone critically question) white privilege meant that cross-colour alliances were always fragile and in danger of being undermined (usually to the eventual detriment of white workers). In the same way, the refusal to

acknowledge Burman privilege has been an impediment to cross-ethnic co-operation and solidarity against the greater threat posed by the military government and now by a government that continues to pursue some of the same policies.

### *Experiences of Oppression*

One of the most obvious differences between the position of Burmans and non-Burmans is the difference in the ways that the military regime has treated each group. Many scholars and activists have noted the effects of the militarisation of the ethnic states on Myanmar's periphery (for example, Fink 2008; Karen Human Rights Group 2011b). Local and international organisations have exhaustively documented abuses by the Myanmar military (as well as abuses committed by various ethnic insurgent armies). These include the indiscriminate use of landmines and the use of non-Burman civilians as "human minesweepers" (Moser-Paungsuwan 2001; Landmine Monitor 2010; Karen Human Rights Group 2011a); forced appropriation by the Myanmar army of local food and resources (South 2011); extrajudicial detention and torture (Amnesty International 1988); military attacks on civilians and denial of humanitarian aid (Karen Human Rights Group 2010); sexual violence (Shan Women's Action Network 2002); forced portering (Human Rights Watch 2011); forced migration (South 2008) and many more offences.

Additionally, a recent report by Amnesty International catalogued targeted government repression of non-Burman political activists, especially in the period leading up to the 2010 elections. These actions included "arbitrary arrests and detention; torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; unfair trials; rape; extrajudicial killings; forced labour; violations of freedom of expression, assembly, association, and religion; intimidation and harassment; and discrimination" (Amnesty International 2010, 55). While Burman political activists also faced some of these threats, the degree of violence was and is unequal. When dealing with the Burman opposition, the government has tended to reserve the kind of repression it visits on non-Burmans to only the most threatening Burman activists. Although the violent suppression of (mostly Burman) rebellions in 1988 and in 2007 was well publicised and contained no shortage of atrocities, these events still take place infrequently among the majority Burman community, whereas within non-Burman communities they can be regular occurrences. While they may still experience oppression in a variety of ways, Burmans in Myanmar are privileged in that they are not subjected to the same treatment as the members of other ethnic groups.

Of course, the unequal experience of violence is itself the product of a self-reinforcing feedback loop. It is perfectly logical for the Burmese military to focus its campaigns (and thus, its violence) in non-Burman areas because these are the regions that contain active rebellions, insurgent groups or other types of security threats. While the mostly urban uprisings of 1988 and 2007 were temporary threats to the government, the groups leading them were, for the most part, not armed, and did not pose a threat to the sovereignty of the government. Among other Burman-dominated resistance groups, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) collapsed in 1989 and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF, a military group formed of former students who participated in the 1988 protests) has not been an

Non-Burman scholars and activists have written for years about the dominant position of the majority ethnic group, yet they have usually been told (as we saw in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD) that their concerns could only be addressed once democracy had been achieved. Slowly, expatriate Burman writers are starting to realise that the question of ethnic relations must be central in Burmese politics, possibly even prior to issues of democratic governance and political reform (see, for example, the New Panglong Initiative 2001).

Political activist Aung Myo Min, who lives in Thailand working on human rights, is one of the few Burmans to publicly and explicitly acknowledge not just the violence that non-Burman communities face, but the vastly different *degrees* of oppression faced by Burman and non-Burman communities.

Human rights violations still continue in every area of Burma especially in the ethnic areas of Burma. Burmans are not being treated like ethnic people, but because of the civil war and the four cuts system in the ethnic areas the [non-Burman] people suffer a lot. More than the Burman people. (*The Irrawaddy*, July 1, 1999)<sup>17</sup>

Statements like this, and occasional articles criticising Burman ethnocentrism written by Dr Zarni, a Burman scholar and activist (for example, *The Irrawaddy*, October 17, 2009), are almost shocking in their rarity. The simple, yet challenging, fact remains that, just as with Whiteness, Burman dominance and privilege can be overcome only through active struggle and repudiation *by Burmans*. This is a difficult truth to face, not least because many Burmans also perceive themselves as having suffered at the hands of the regime.

## **Conclusion**

What we have seen in the case of Myanmar is an effective merging of ethnic and national identity; to be Burman (the ethnic group) is to be (truly) Burmese or Myanmar (a citizen of the nation). The unquestioned assumptions that underlie this association are similar to those that anchor Whiteness. In both cases, one group enjoys not only unproblematic inclusion in a particular national community, but also access to a specific set of privileges, while simultaneously denying all of that to varying degrees to those in other groups. Even though many Burman people see themselves as having been oppressed by the military government, this paper argues that they retain a privileged status within Myanmar, simply because of their ethnicity and the way in which Myanmar culture has been constituted by Burman culture.

Despite this gloomy assessment, I will suggest in closing that it is the very permeability of ethnicity that points, at least initially, to a way forward. I have already noted the ways in which non-Burman disadvantages are enhanced by geographical location; that is, military repression is focused on non-Burman areas, while many non-Burmans living in central Burma (and particularly in urban areas) experience little to no discrimination based on ethnicity. This suggests that, removed from the areas of volatile ethnic resistance and military response, there are fewer barriers to ethnic reconciliation (although dividing non-Burmans into “loyal” and “disloyal” groups is still problematic and could encourage assimilation). It also

reinforces the critical importance of lasting *political* settlements to ethnic conflicts in border areas through inclusive and accommodating dialogue.

However, even these political settlements are only an initial step towards dismantling Burman privilege. In addition to greater inclusion of non-Burman voices in the political decision-making process, the government of Myanmar will need to open to public discussion the question of what it means to be “Myanmar” and members of all ethnic groups will need to grapple with the challenges posed by essentialised ethnic identities (see Sadan 2007, 35). Admittedly, this would be an enormous step, given the pathological insistence on “unity” among political groups across the spectrum. While a government obviously cannot countenance armed rebellion, can there be space for “loyal opposition” expressed through ethnicity? Without attention to continued differential treatment of non-Burmans in many parts of the country as well as the privileged position of Burmans with regard to the national “Myanmar” identity, ethnic reconciliation in Myanmar will remain elusive.

The purpose of this analysis has not been to suggest that all Burmans are chauvinists, looking down on or actively discriminating against non-Burmans. However, drawing a lesson from viewing Whiteness as a set of power relations, the more insidious impediments to ethnic unity in Myanmar are the ways in which Burman dominance has been institutionalised over time and the ways in which Burmans either cannot see it or actively ignore or deny it. One of the compelling aspects of a theory of Whiteness and White privilege is that instead of blaming whites or accusing all whites of being racist, it focuses on the historical construction of racial identities and their institutionalisation in contemporary power structures. This does not, however, absolve whites (or Burmans, in my appropriation of the concept) of acting to contest these institutions and practices. In fact, adopting a perspective that is sensitive to Burman privilege puts the focus squarely on Burmans as the only group in a position to challenge structures of Burman privilege. This perspective does not place the responsibility for ethnic unity and harmony solely on Burman shoulders, but does insist that dismantling the supremacy of Burman-ness can occur only from within the sphere of Burman privilege.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> The government officially changed the name of the country to “Myanmar” in 1989; in referring to either an institution of the state or the people as a whole contained within its borders, I use “Myanmar” when speaking about the country after the change and “Burma” when speaking about the country before the change. I use “Burmese” to refer to the citizens of the state.
- <sup>2</sup> As a result of elections in November 2010, Myanmar is now led by a civilian government. The military still retains the strongest voice in political matters, however, as most of the leaders of this civilian government are former military officers and the vast majority of Parliamentary seats are controlled by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which has close connections to the former