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This is the published version of a chapter published in *Relational peace practices*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Olivius, E., Hedström, J. (2023)

"They treat us like visitors in our own house": relational peace and local experiences of the state in Myanmar

In: Anna Jarstad; Johanna Söderström; Malin Åkebo (ed.), *Relational peace practices* (pp. 127-149). Manchester University Press

New approaches to conflict analysis

<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526168979.00012>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

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Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-213528>

“They treat us like visitors in our own house”: relational peace and local experiences of the state in Myanmar

Elisabeth Olivius and Jenny Hedström

In 2011, the inauguration of a semi-civilian government led by General Thein Sein marked the start of an ambitious reform agenda that gave rise to widespread hopes that Myanmar’s long civil war was finally coming to an end.¹ Subsequently, economic and political liberalization and a renewed peace process fundamentally reshaped both the political landscape in Myanmar and its international relations. Further fueling optimism, the 2015 general election was won by the National League for Democracy, the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and the new government took office without interference from the previous government or the Myanmar Armed Forces, the Tatmadaw (Thawngmung 2017). Yet, in 2021, the military took back power in a coup d’état, ending the decade of reforms (Jordt et al. 2021; Thawngmung and Noah 2021; Pedersen 2022; Ye Myo Hein 2022).

While Myanmar’s transition from a full-fledged military junta to a quasi-democratic government faced numerous challenges (Aung-Thwin 2014), many conflict-affected areas nevertheless saw a drastic reduction in violence during this reform period. This was the case in the two regions that we focus on in this chapter: Kayah State and Mon State. In both of these areas, ceasefires between the main armed insurgent groups and the government held from 2012 until the 2021 military coup, and the number of battle-related deaths was close to zero (UCDP 2018). According to conventional definitions, these regions, during this decade of reforms, were no longer scenes of war.

However, this narrative of successful peacebuilding is troubled when read alongside local narratives that capture how the post-war order was experienced by people living in conflict-affected areas. For local ethnic-minority communities, the end of war and the beginning of reforms in 2011 did not necessarily mean there was peace. In many of our interviews, the ceasefire period was described as a continuation of the war’s many injustices, marked by discrimination, marginalization, and fear. Thus, while the armed conflict ended and a bird’s eye view rendered an image of an improving security situation, people in the two areas emphasized how wartime dynamics

continued to shape their lives, and did not agree that they, or the areas in which they lived, were at peace. Based on a study of local experiences and understandings of peace conducted in 2019, this chapter explores how these discrepancies between seemingly contradictory narratives of war and peace can be understood.

In our analysis, we argue that a relational analysis of peace helps us make sense of this gap. By applying a relational perspective in our analysis of peace in Kayah State and Mon State, we illustrate how the fundamental logics of key conflict relationships between the Myanmar state and ethnic-minority groups and communities were not transformed by the peace process but merely manifested themselves in new ways: armed violence was replaced by other forms of domination, underpinned by inequality, non-recognition, and distrust. However, these relational dynamics are rendered invisible by an assessment of peace focusing on indicators such as levels of violence and the status of peace agreements. Instead, uncovering them requires a grounded analysis that places people's everyday experiences and perceptions of peace and war at its center. The relational peace framework (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction), with its focus on relationships and the attitudes and ideas that underpin them, is a useful analytical tool for capturing how peace, or the absence of it, is experienced in a particular empirical context.

In the analysis of our cases, we focus on the relationships that have been at the heart of decades of war in these areas, namely those between the Myanmar state, often embodied by its military, the Tatmadaw, and local actors such as ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), civil society organizations, and civilian communities. Although these local actors are by no means homogeneous, our data show that their experiences of interactions with the state, and their ideas of what peace is and should be, have significant commonalities. Thus, in this chapter, we explore how local actors (broadly defined) experience their relationship with the state; and how this has changed over time, in particular during the transitional period which began in 2011 and ended with the coup d'état in 2021. Our analysis draws on focus group discussions, interviews, and participant observation with local civilians, civil society activists, and members of EAOs. This means that the chapter primarily builds on data capturing the behavior, subjective attitudes, and ideas of the relationship of various local actors in ethnic-minority areas. However, secondary sources are used to verify local accounts of state behavior in relation to actors in the regions at hand. Our focus on the perspectives of civilians, local activists, and members and representatives of non-state groups allows us to place local experiences, aspirations, and perspectives at the center of efforts to theorize and analyze relational peace.

The predominant picture that emerges from our interview data is that local actors in Mon and Kayah States perceived their relationship to the Myanmar state as being characterized by top-down domination, the imposition of ethnic Bamar superiority, and suppression and non-recognition of ethnic-minority identities, histories, and political aspirations. Relationships during the period of political transition were marked by significant continuities of war, even though armed violence decreased significantly. State domination of minorities was during this period often carried out through other – and legal – means, such as arbitrary land confiscation facilitated by new land reforms, and repression of political protesters justified under different parliamentary acts. At the same time, and as compared with periods of active armed conflict before 2011, we find more examples of deliberation between state agents and local actors, suggesting that the state gave at least a thin form of recognition of ethnic-minority groups as counterparts in negotiations. Local actors were also increasingly making use of state channels such as government departments and commissions to make claims on the state and protest against state policies and actions they disagreed with, signaling a degree of recognition vis-à-vis the central state and its authority.

Our application of the relational peace framework to cases which are somewhat removed from an ideal definition of relational peace demonstrates the framework's value as an analytical tool for capturing specific features of a particular conflict context. It helps us to pinpoint areas and issues that prevent the emergence of a sustainable and legitimate peace, and to detect possible pathways of transformation. The analysis provides insights of wider relevance into why post-war orders frequently remain unequal, insecure, and fragile for years, or even decades, after the end of war, and helps explain the gap that exists between a bird's eye view of progress and relative security and on-the-ground experiences of insecurity and coercion. A relational analysis of peace also contributes to recent scholarship in critical and feminist peace studies that challenges the notion of a neat dichotomy between war and peace, and explores how war and peace coexist and overlap (Klem 2018; Gusic 2020; Porter 2016). Moreover, our analysis adds to the growing literature on everyday peace, locating and exploring how peace is manifested and experienced in people's everyday practices and interactions (Mac Ginty 2014; Blomqvist et al. 2021; Lee 2021; Ware and Ware 2021). More specifically, our findings add to previous work on everyday peace indicators (see for example Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017). Our analysis shows that in addition to peace indicators relating to security and basic needs, which are often highlighted in this literature, relational dimensions of peace such as recognition, trust, and political equality are also highly significant for local people in conflict-affected contexts. As our cases exemplify, these aspects

of peace are not necessarily perceived as less important or less immediate in contexts where human insecurity is persistent and widespread. A relational analysis of local experiences and perceptions of peace thereby contributes to a fuller, more nuanced understanding of peace.

Contexts, material, and methods

Most of independent Myanmar's history has been marked by military dictatorship, war and oppression (Callahan 2003; Agatha Ma and Kusakabe 2015; Nhkum Bu Lu 2016), with ethnic-minority areas often experiencing the brunt of violence. In 2011, an ambitious reform agenda was initiated by General Thein Sein, resulting in widespread political and economic reforms, including the commencement of elections, a nationwide peace process, and the opening up of the country to investments and foreign aid (Thawngmung 2017). While these were promising developments, violence and discrimination in ethnic-minority areas did not necessarily cease, and in some cases even intensified (Kachin Women's Association Thailand 2016; Sadan 2016; UNHCR 2019; International Court of Justice 2019). In February 2021, the military took power in a coup d'état, effectively ending the decade of reforms, and the country once again descended into chaos, war, and violence.

However, even before the 2021 coup d'état, in many areas of the country populated by ethnic-minority communities, changes resulting from the reforms initiated from 2011 onward were experienced alongside continuities and legacies of war (Olivius and Hedström 2021). This was clear in the two areas addressed in this chapter, Kayah State and Mon State. These areas are both located along Myanmar's southeastern border with Thailand, and have been scenes of armed conflict for decades.

In Kayah State, the smallest of Myanmar's ethnic-minority states, the main ethnic insurgent group is the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), formed in 1957. Over time, splits and breakaway factions led to the establishment of numerous smaller armed groups, creating a complex conflict landscape. Although the KNPP did agree to a ceasefire with the government in 1995, the deal broke down after a mere three months. The breakdown of the ceasefire agreement was followed by an intense period of violence, in which civilians across the state suffered large-scale human rights abuses and forced displacement (Kramer et al. 2018). This included the forced relocation of around 30,000 civilians to army-led displacement camps (Amnesty International 1999). After the start of the transitional period, armed violence decreased, with the KNPP agreeing to a bilateral ceasefire in 2012. Although it was a participant in the national peace talks, it never signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. During the transitional decade,

the area remained mired in widespread poverty, and tensions around state-led reforms and development initiatives in the area were prominent (Hedström and Olivius 2020). Since the coup in 2021, Kayah State has been the focus for brutal counterinsurgency campaigns waged by the state against both resistance fighters and civilians (Irrawaddy 2022; Quinley 2022; Strangio 2022).

Further south, in Mon State, the main insurgent group, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), was established a year after the KNPP, although the armed struggle began already in 1948 (NMSP 1985). Fighting for an independent Monland, the NMSP soon found itself having a complicated relationship with the neighbouring ethnic Karen rebels of the Karen National Union, with whom they sometimes allied and at other times fought for control over land and resources.² As in Kayah State, the regime's infamous counterinsurgency campaigns led to widespread human rights abuses across the state, including sexual violence, arbitrary executions, forced labor, land confiscation, and the destruction of villages (South 2003; Human Rights Watch 2005; Lwin Lwin Mon 2018). In June 1995, the NMSP agreed to a ceasefire with the military regime, and in 2012 the party signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the new semi-democratic regime. In 2018 it signed the National Ceasefire Agreement, yet the situation on the ground continued to be tense, with flareups in fighting as recently as November 2019.

The analysis in this chapter draws on qualitative data collected in Kayah State and in Mon State in 2019 by one of the authors (Hedström) and a research assistant (Zin Mar Phyo).³ Employing an interactive methodology aimed at gauging experiences and perceptions of peace and conflict, we undertook focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews with a total of forty-six women and men living in, or from, Kayah State and southern Shan State, and with a total of fifty-five women and men in Mon State. Our interviews focused on three categories of respondent: civilians, including people from a variety of rural and urban locations across Kayah and Mon States; civil society activists, including representatives of peace monitoring groups, women's organizations, youth organizations, farmer's unions, trade unions, refugee organizations, environmental organizations, and more; and representatives from political organizations including non-state armed groups and political parties. While we successfully interviewed the KNPP as well as smaller non-state armed groups in Kayah State, including several pro-government militias, the research in Mon State was impacted by the fighting in November 2019, when a Karen splinter group, together with local Tatmadaw commanders, attacked a NMSP outpost. Following this, planned interviews with splinter and military groups were canceled, leaving us with interviews with the NMSP only. Taken together, our interviews capture the perspectives of a diversity of local actors in the studied regions,

allowing us to trace patterns in how peace is experienced and envisioned, and how relationships and interactions with the Myanmar state relate to these conceptions of peace. As noted above, we do not assume these diverse local actors to be a homogeneous group, but argue that tracing patterns in how relationships to the state are experienced provides important insights into how key conflict dynamics in Myanmar have evolved since the end of armed violence.

Access to the interviewees was arranged through contacts gained through previous research visits to Myanmar, and with the invaluable help of our research assistant, Zin Mar Phyto, who has worked with one of the authors (Hedström) in Myanmar for close to sixteen years. Together, we developed a research protocol informed by feminist ethics, designed to ensure that the ethical standards we strived for were applicable locally and would minimize possible negative consequences for the research participants (Ackerly and True 2010; Brooten and Metro 2014; Hedström 2019). We asked for informed consent ahead of, during, and after each interview, emphasizing to our respondents that they were ultimately in control of the interview, meaning that they could choose to terminate the interview altogether at any moment in time, and should answer questions only if they felt comfortable doing so. We purposefully did not ask for information about traumatic events but kept the questions broad. If and when respondents showed signs of trauma (such as crying) we explained that while we are here to listen to anything they want to tell us, we can take a break at any moment of their choosing, or come back to the interview at another time. Zin Mar Phyto helped facilitate these interviews and, when necessary, provided translation from local languages into English.

Our interviews aimed to identify different local understandings and experiences of peace over time, in relation to ceasefire agreements and other shifts in the dynamics of armed conflict. Using life history diagrams (Söderström 2020; see also Skidmore 2004 for the use of life histories in Myanmar in particular) as a visual methodological tool to identify significant events or circumstances helped to stimulate discussion about the interviewees' own experience and perception of peace and conflict in Myanmar. Life history diagrams were structured by a horizontal timeline (from 1988 to 2019). In interviews, participants were asked to draw a line depicting the level of peace in their lives over time. In focus groups, we also used an exercise where participants were asked to discuss and rank a number of terms (such as "security," "trust," "democracy") in the order of their importance for peace. In some of the interviews we also asked participants to draw maps depicting the most important actors or groups and their relationships to each other. These interactive exercises, which can broadly be described as visual methodologies (Prosser 2012; Söderström 2020), helped to facilitate

discussion about the meaning of peace; the level, presence, or absence of peace; and the nature of key relationships. When ranking peace-related terms, participants in focus groups were asked to discuss the words and arrive at a joint ranking, thus seeking consensus. However, the discussions provided them with space to articulate divergent views and express different perspectives on what peace means to them. When they drew life history diagrams and relationship maps there was no need to agree, but individual drawings provided a good basis for detailed discussions.

Our data primarily capture the perspectives of local actors on their relationship to the central Myanmar state. While our data do include some local government representatives, we prioritized one side of the relational dyads we explore, for reasons that are practical as well as normative: reaching out to state military officials was deemed potentially unsafe and would also not give us the insights into local perspectives this project was seeking. Official state narratives are furthermore easily available in online and print media. While this gives rise to some limitations, for example in our ability to trace asymmetries in subjective conditions or ideas of the relationship within dyads, our data provide detailed, nuanced insights into how peace – or a lack thereof – is experienced and perceived by local populations whose voices are rarely heard. Thus our analysis can provide a fine-grained understanding of the effects, achievements, and shortcomings of recent ceasefires and political transitions in Myanmar as they are experienced by people living in conflict-affected, and therefore hard-to-reach, regions. We argue that the relational peace framework provides useful analytical tools for pinpointing specific characteristics of the post-war order in these areas, and specific issues and gaps where change is needed in order for a sustainable and legitimate peace to emerge.

Our interview data are complemented with secondary sources, including reports and news material. This material is used to verify events described in interviews, and to explore behavioral interactions in particular. Drawing on these sources allows us to examine the behavior of state actors as well as local actors, and to an extent provides insights into the subjective perspectives and motivations of state actors.

Relational peace and local experiences of the state

In the following analysis, we draw on our interview data combined with secondary sources to analyze how behavioral interactions with the state were experienced by local actors in Kayah State and Mon State; how local actors perceived the level of recognition and trust between themselves and the state; and how they articulated ideas about what type of relationship

they had to the state. We draw on the framework developed by Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction) and use the components of this framework as tools to guide the analysis of our cases. Thus, in the first section of the analysis, we examine the degrees of non-domination, deliberation, and cooperation between local actors and the state. In the second section, we explore whether and how subjective conditions of relational peace, mutual recognition, and mutual trust are expressed by our respondents in relation to the state. In the third section, we focus on how local actors perceive and describe their relationship to the state; is it a relationship of legitimate coexistence, a relationship of friendship, or something else?

Behavioral interactions: state domination in new forms

As noted, the wars in both Mon and Kayah States were characterized by grave human rights violations, forced displacement, food insecurity, widespread poverty, and political oppression. Local minority populations therefore associate the state with the oppressive and coercive power of the Tatmadaw. Though the reforms initiated in 2011 resulted in a significant reduction in violence as well as changes in political arrangements and relationships, the military was widely perceived as the embodiment of the state, and, despite the democratic election of the National League for Democracy government in 2015, the government and the military were often perceived to be indivisible. When asked to describe the difference between the government and the military, one focus group participant in Mon State succinctly captured this view: “if you cut a lime, one side is the government and the other is the Tatmadaw.”⁴ As a result, while we do not assume the Myanmar state to be a unitary actor, our analytical point of departure is local experiences of the state, which very often meant experiences of interactions with the Tatmadaw as the most visible and present face of the state.

While ceasefire agreements signed between the regime and different types of non-state armed organizations reduced violent interactions, they did not address the underlying cause of the war, including political and economic inequality and discrimination. This came across clearly in our interview material. For example, in a focus group discussion in Kayah State, a now middle-aged man recounts decades of traumatic experiences of repeatedly fleeing from the war, missing education, being separated from family members, and being subjected to the campaigns of government counterinsurgency policies. Telling his story, this man explains that “after 2012, after the peace process [was initiated], we could eat a little bit better, our livelihoods are a little bit improved ... but the rest of the issues have not improved yet, so we are still in a bad situation.”⁵ The unresolved issues he mentions refer

to the longstanding discrimination and oppression of ethnic-minority populations. A representative of a Mon armed group expresses similar sentiments, arguing that “after 1995, the fighting reduced, and our freedom of movement and people’s livelihood improved. But the things that we are calling for, equality for ethnic people, we have not gotten that.”⁶ In the lives of local people we learned from, remaining patterns of domination by the state after 2011 were manifested through top-down state practices of ceasefire negotiations, land governance, and political surveillance and repression, rather than armed violence.

One area in which the state was seen as deploying forms of domination and coercion in new forms was negotiations with EAOs. When signing ceasefires, the state sought to pacify armed opponents through granting business concessions. This enriched some leaders of armed insurgent groups, but also led to popular dissatisfaction and predatory economic orders captured by (predominately male) elites (Woods 2011; Brenner 2017; Hedström and Olivius 2020). In our interviews, these strategies were widely rejected as means for peace precisely because they did not change unequal relationships where ethnic-minority actors were subordinate to the state and its army. As noted by a civil society activist in Kayah State, these strategies were premised on the assumption that resources and business opportunities belong to the state and are theirs to give away: this is precisely what ethnic-minority insurgents and broader movements for self-determination have struggled against, and continue to oppose:

So, when we talk about peace, the Tatmadaw is the key player ... it all depends on the Tatmadaw. What the Tatmadaw is doing, it is like they own everything. For example, when they negotiate with the armed groups they say okay we will give this permit, we will give this permit to work a business or to extract these natural resources or something like that. Like they own everything. They are acting like they are the owner, the boss or something like that. So, as long as their mindset is that “only if we allow it, then they can do it” ... As long as they have those kinds of concepts, we cannot be at peace among us. Because ideally, the natural resources and everything is owned by the people, not the Tatmadaw. Or any other groups. So, it is not up to them to provide, offering opportunities ... it should not be done like that. There should be equality in talking, political dialogue ... there should be equality.⁷

Here, peace is conceived of as being possible only in a relationship between equals who deliberate and cooperate, and not in a relationship where one actor dominates the other. While the granting of business concessions to EAOs and associated companies as part of ceasefire deals represents a significant change in behavioral interactions as compared with periods of fighting, these interactions were still characterized by forms of dominance and coercion rather than deliberation and cooperation. Moreover, for civilians

in these areas, “ceasefire capitalism” (Woods 2011), as well as the intensification of state efforts to develop ceasefire areas through investments in energy and infrastructure (Hedström and Olivius 2020), created new forms of insecurity. As expressed by a woman working for an educational civil society organization in Mon State, “we do not have peace because we have to worry about business and development projects, including coal, cement and rock mining which destroy our mountains and causes landslides and deaths.”⁸

Issues of land use and ownership, central to ceasefire politics and state strategies for post-war development, stand out in our interview data as an area where local populations experienced state domination and new forms of insecurity. In both Mon and Kayah States, post-war land confiscation for military purposes and to make space for development projects such as dams and industries led to forced displacement, destroyed livelihoods, and continued, and widespread, human insecurity (Hedström and Olivius 2020; MACDO and Barbesgaard 2019). This process was facilitated by new land laws which, in effect, legitimized the move to bring agrarian areas under customary use under the control of the government (Ferguson 2014; Woods 2014; Scurrah, Hirsch, and Woods 2015; Faxon 2017). The majority of the population in rural areas makes a living from subsistence farming, practicing shifting cultivation (*taungya*). However, as land is used customarily, many people do not have any legal documents identifying them as the owners of their land. This positions rural populations, especially in conflict-affected, minority-dominated areas such as Mon and Kayah, as highly vulnerable to land grabbing. Local groups in Kayah State report that more than 50,000 acres of land have been confiscated by state military forces, government agencies, and individual businessmen since the beginning of the country’s transition in 2011 (Htoe Myar 2016; Karenni Social Development Center 2016).

In one case, the military confiscated a large area of farmland in Kayah State. When farmers challenged the taking of their land by continuing to plant seeds, seeking to protect their livelihoods, the army brought charges against forty farmers for trespassing, and imprisoned a number of them without trial (Burma News Online 2019). Thus, while army repression used the law rather than violence as its vehicle, signifying a change in behavior post-war, the arbitrary exercise of power and coercion still characterized the army’s treatment of minority populations. However, illustrating the complexity of post-war relationships, when state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi visited Kayah State in January 2020, representatives of the affected farmers were granted a meeting with her; she vowed to review the military’s land confiscation and lawsuit. While these farmers had their land and livelihoods arbitrarily taken from them without compensation, and their protests met with arrests, there were also at least a veneer of recognition of their grievances by state

representatives, and the occasional example of deliberation. This shows how post-war behavioral interactions between the state and minority actors are characterized by both change and continuity.

Another example, this time from Mon State, demonstrates a similar mix of deliberation and dominance in state–minority relationships. In 2015, large public protests erupted against plans to construct a coal power plant, Inn Din power station, in Mon State. Residents of the area protested against the destructive effects the project would have on local livelihoods, its environmental impact, and the fact that the electricity would not benefit local communities but be exported to Thailand. As such, this project is typical of large-scale energy projects implemented in a top-down manner in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar since 2011 (HURFOM 2015; Bello 2018; Woods 2019). Conflict around this issue played out through deliberation as well as repression. Like the protesting farmers in Kayah State, people who protested against the Inn Din power station were jailed on several occasions. However, both state authorities and the Thai company that was granted permission to build the plant also made efforts to consult with local communities. Further, protesters not only took to the streets, but made appeals through channels such as local government bodies and the Myanmar human rights commission. This shows that the ways in which conflictual relationships between the state and minority population were expressed indeed changed significantly over the past decade, with more instances of deliberation and a higher degree of local recognition and use of state channels to make political claims. In this case, protests eventually led to the suspension of the project in 2017, indicating that public protest was not simply struck down but did affect the decision-making of the state (Environmental Justice Atlas 2018; Global Energy Monitor 2019).

The recent land confiscation case in Kayah State and the Inn Din power station case in Mon State exemplify how post-war expansion of state power into ethnic-minority areas has been accompanied by new forms of coercion, dominance, and arbitrary exercise of power, leading to the loss of livelihoods, displacement, and insecurity. At the same time, they also show how these continuities of wartime relationships are combined with new patterns of deliberation, and a shift toward the use of administrative mechanisms and the law as venues for communication and conflict on the part of the Myanmar state as well as local actors in Mon and Kayah States.

*Subjective conditions: non-recognition at the heart of
local grievances*

As the examples above indicate, local actors in conflict-affected ethnic-minority-populated areas of Myanmar experience their relationships to the

state as being marked by significant continuities of wartime patterns of domination and coercion. In contrast, our data show that notions of respect, equality, and recognition are central to local conceptions of what peace means. For example, in one focus group, a participant forcefully stated that in Myanmar generally and Kayah State specifically, there is “no recognition for the indigenous people ... that’s why there is no peace.”⁹ Discussing the meaning of peace, another focus group participant argued that “the most important thing is respect. Respect each other, respect each other’s rights.”¹⁰ This conception of peace is fundamentally relational; indeed, the emphasis placed on relational aspects of peace in our data speaks to the analytical usefulness of a relational approach.

Against this backdrop, the actions of the central state, often embodied by the Tatmadaw, are often interpreted as communicating the opposite of respect and recognition. For example, during the transitional period (2011–2021), insurgent structures of governance and service provision that had functioned and enjoyed significant popular legitimacy for decades were weakened by efforts to strengthen government capacity and control in minority areas (South 2018). These state incursions into previously rebel-held territories were often perceived as threatening by local populations, who previously encountered the state only through the violence and coercion of the Tatmadaw. In addition, these developments were also interpreted as signaling disdain and non-recognition of local governance structures where non-state actors played key roles:

So KNPP they have different causes ... like for education, for other things, so many things. But the military they don’t want to listen to that, which is one of the challenges to peace in the area. They don’t have respect. The ethnic people, we ... we are calling for equality, equal civil rights, right, but the military, the government, they are not listening to us and they don’t give respect. However, they [EAOs] will fight for equality, as long as there is no respect. Ignoring and not giving respect is one of the challenges to have equal rights and peace.¹¹

In this quotation, the Tatmadaw is described as refusing to recognize KNPP structures for education and other services that are already in place, and this refusal is read as a lack of respect and a denial of equal rights, and thereby as a hindrance to peace.

A recent example where non-recognition of ethnic-minority histories, perspectives, and voices has generated an upsurge of public protests is the state’s efforts to name landmarks after General Aung San. General Aung San is commonly known as the country’s independence hero, and as a key driver of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which outlined a roadmap

toward federalism and gave ethnic minorities the option to secede from the union. That these promises remain unfulfilled is understood among many ethnic-minority communities as symptomatic of subsequent regime attempts to suppress diversity in the country.

In 2017, the lower house of the union parliament voted to name a new bridge across the Salween river in Mon State after General Aung San, despite previous local protests that had already caused the opening ceremony to be canceled once (Irrawaddy 2017a). Prior to the opening, a petition with over 90,000 names was submitted to the president's office (Irrawaddy 2017b). At the inauguration of the bridge, the speaker of parliament defended the choice of name in his speech, claiming that it would contribute to national unity:

To strengthen union spirit more than ever, and to honour and remind us of Bogyoke Aung San, architect of Independence and national leader, the bridge was named after him. It is reasonable to do so. As known by all, in other countries of the world as well, national heroes and leaders who sacrificed themselves for their countries and people are honoured by recording in such a way. [...] Just by hearing or seeing Bogyoke Aung San's name, it will arouse union spirit, beget unity, cause patriotism, encourage people to imitate his honesty and straightforwardness and to emulate his sacrifices. (Global New Light of Myanmar 2017)

However, to ethnic-minority populations, this vision of unity under one national identity closely resembles the policies and processes of “Bamanization,” the forced imposition of ethnic majority Bamar culture and identity, of past decades (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019). As expressed by one focus group participant in Mon State, “the Bamar recognizes a national hero that has killed so many ethnic people. This gives us no respect. We have many heroes in our ethnic community. But none of them are recognized.”¹² The trope of national unity has a long history of legitimating violence in Myanmar. From the perspective of the military, counterinsurgency operations have been seen as necessary measures against chaos and state disintegration. Thus, a vision of peace as stability and order within a unitary Myanmar state has historically been central for the legitimation of armed violence against ethnic armed groups as well as civilian communities (Callahan 2003; Fink 2008). In this context, naming the bridge in Mon State after General Aung San is widely seen as a symbol of central state expansion, Bamar domination, and non-recognition of ethnic histories and identities. As a result, as expressed by a Buddhist abbot in Mon State, “the bridge saves us [Mon people] physical discomfort, but not mental disturbance. Whenever we cross the bridge, we feel upset in our hearts and minds” (Irrawaddy 2017b).

In Kayah State, the 2019 erection of a statue of General Aung San in a park in the state capital Loikaw similarly led to large-scale public protests (Olivius and Hedström 2021). When news spread about the plans to erect a statue of General Aung San in 2018, protests erupted, first in the form of a letter campaign demanding Aung San's promise of autonomy and federalism instead of the statue, and later in the form of public demonstrations. The government response has consisted of attempts to file lawsuits for defamation and arrest protesters, as well as violent crackdowns and arrests during demonstrations. While the statue was erected on January 28, 2019, it has continued to be a focal point for protests (Transnational Institute 2019). In our interviews, especially those with civil society activists living in Loikaw but also those with representatives from armed groups, resentment over the statue case was noticeable. The issue was represented as symptomatic of the state's failure to recognize and listen to local people. Thus, the state's actions were seen as detrimental to peace, demonstrating that a relationship of respect and mutual recognition does not exist between the state and local communities in Kayah. In a co-authored commentary for the Transnational Institute (2019), local activists locate the statue case as the continuation of a policy of Bamanization, or forced assimilation of minority cultures under a national, Bamar-majority identity: "the local peoples consider this a misuse of public funds and an attempt to erase their own history, continuing a practice of downplaying ethnic minority cultures by a policy known as Bamanisation" (Transnational Institute 2019). From the perspective of our respondents, Bamanization must be replaced by mutual recognition, equality, and respect for difference if peace is to be achieved:

When we try to build trust and peace in our region, in our country, then Bamanization is one of the most important things that we have to get rid of. In the Tatmadaw and in the government, most of the people have the idea of Bamanization, only they don't show on the paper but they have Bamanization as a hidden agenda. So, to have a genuine peace and a democratic country then they must respect the equality, justice, and equality for ethnic rights, they must give equality to the ethnic people. As long as they have Bamanization as a hidden agenda, it is really far away to get peace.¹³

In the cases of the Aung San Bridge in Mon State and statue in Kayah State, public outrage was met by a combination of repression and attempts at deliberation. However, in the end local protests and claims did not achieve success; instead the state unilaterally imposed its decisions.

In addition to the lack of recognition by the state, our respondents in Mon and Kayah distrusted the state. This attitude was most frequently seen in stories about military expansion and arbitrary use of power, despite the existence of ceasefire agreements that should at the time have regulated the

behavior of the Tatmadaw. While official statements and interviews with state representatives situate the post-1995 period as a period of increasing stability in both Kayah and Mon States, the majority of our respondents did not agree with this interpretation. In Kayah State, the level of peace decreased sharply after 1995, with most communities arguing that the local conflict landscape, and their everyday lives, did not see improvements until the early to mid-2000s. In Mon State, most communities we interviewed suggested that widespread militarization after the ceasefire of 1995 resulted in, if not an increase in war, then at least a continuation of it by other means until around early 2000. The discrepancy between the state narrative and local perceptions of the ceasefire is starkly illustrated in an interview with two women in Mon State, who recounted experiencing torture, forced labor, and military-imposed curfews after 1995.¹⁴ Similarly, a middle-aged farmer living in a Karen village in Mon State recalled periods, sometimes lasting up to a month, of forced labor and portering for military troops, and of arbitrary arrest and torture, between 1995 and 2002.¹⁵

In Kayah State, a young man we interviewed described how a military camp suddenly appeared near his village, with Tatmadaw troops test-shooting weapons across farmland belonging to the villagers.¹⁶ In this respondent's view, the troops' behavior related to a lack of respect for the current ceasefire agreement in place between the KNPP and the Tatmadaw. The lack of respect was a common theme in many of our interviews, and meant that many of the civilians we spoke to felt they had no trust in the government, and therefore worried about the future:

So, when there is an agreement, ceasefire agreement or peace agreement, then there is no security for the local people. For example, there are military ... it comes to them, even though there is agreement, right ... so in the current situation, the local people feel that there is no security for freedom of movement and other things. Even though in the agreement, it is included about security, not to extend the military camps and also to provide or care for refugees coming back, but even though they include it in the agreement, they are not practicing.¹⁷

The perceived failure of the government and Tatmadaw to abide by prior agreements, and the ongoing militarization of Kayah and Mon States, made people feel that the current situation could not be trusted. Fear about a looming return to war was expressed repeatedly in our interviews. Although armed conflict was not ongoing, the ever-present possibility of violence cast a long shadow over people's lives:

The peace process is something like in between ... it is difficult to say whether it is ... how to call ... between like hot and cold. So, people are really afraid of whether the fighting will start or not, or something like that. And also, for

the military, they didn't step forward or backward, they are in a "ready" position. [...]. For example, in December, last December, the military announced that they would suspend the fighting for four months. However, during that time they extended building military camps.¹⁸

Because the Tatmadaw was not seen as treating its counterparts in ethnic-minority states as equals or with respect, continuing to breach existing agreements, the civilians we met felt unable to plan for the future or trust that their lives and livelihoods were safe. As expressed by one respondent, because of the lack of trust "we are not sure if there is genuine peace or not, that's why I am afraid that the past time will happen again and I have to worry again."¹⁹ The lack of recognition and trust in the relationship with the state led directly to material insecurities and suffering. Previous experiences and traumas of war further compounded the fear and insecurity that this gave rise to, negatively affecting local actors' understanding of the relationship.

Ideas of the relationship: "owners" and "visitors"

Alongside behavioral interactions and subjective attitudes, a third component of a relationship is how the constituent actors understand and define their relationship (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction). For a relationship to be assessed as peaceful, a minimum requirement is that the actors in the dyad no longer think of each other as enemies to be eliminated, but as legitimate adversaries with whom they can coexist and associate.

The empirical examples and interview data presented above suggest that the ceasefire agreements between EAOs and the government in Mon and Kayah States, alongside the initiation of a semi-democratic political transition, did change the way the state interacted with ethnic-minority populations. Ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations brought not only ethnic-minority armed groups, but also political parties and civil society organizations into relationships with the state and its representatives where they were not framed solely as enemies, but as counterparts with whom to negotiate or consult. Further, as exemplified above, ordinary people such as farmers, as well as civil society activists, considered state institutions to be possible channels through which they could protest and make claims on the state. This in itself shows that significant changes took place after 2011, and that a perception of the other as a legitimate party who at least has the right to exist was a facet of the relationship between the state and various local actors in ethnic-minority areas.

Nevertheless, from our interviews it is clear that the most prominent perception of the relationship of various local ethnic-minority actors to

the Myanmar state was one of fundamental and persistent inequality. This is succinctly expressed by a civilian in a focus group in Mon State: “the government and the Tatmadaw behave as if they are the owners of the house. They treat us as visitors.”²⁰ A representative of the Mon armed group similarly described the state as “act[ing] like they have ownership over [political and ethnic] rights, and can pick and choose what they will give us.”²¹ In a context where struggles over ethnic self-determination and equality have been ongoing for decades, when the state acts as “the owner of the house” in ethnic-minority areas, this was taken as proof that while violence had been reduced, the power dynamics between the state and ethnic-minority populations had not really changed.

While the state was at the time of our interviews not attacking ethnic minorities in Mon and Kayah States, it nevertheless refused to recognize and respect the specificity of ethnic-minority identities, cultures, and histories. Thus, this is a “thin” form of recognition, not a “thick” form where the other is “respected for the features that make a subject unique” (Strömbom 2010: 61). This was illustrated by state actions that locals perceive as the continuation of historic Bamanization policies, aiming to create unity through the suppression and forced assimilation of diversity. Further, while elite representatives of ethnic-minority communities, and occasionally other groups, were recognized as counterparts in negotiation or dialogue, in their everyday lives people often felt that their voices were not heard or recognized as relevant. This was expressed in widespread experiences of land confiscation which lacked any opportunities for compensation or redress, and in experiences of arbitrary arrest when people spoke out against government policies or military actions.

For our respondents, political equality lies at the heart of peaceful relationships, and the persistent expressions of inequality that characterize their relationship with the state were perceived as a key obstacle to peace. In almost all of our interviews, people expressed demands for a federal political system in Myanmar. This was difficult to reconcile with the 2008 constitution, which also reserves significant political power for the military. Constitutional moves toward a political order and political institutions that build on, and which can safeguard, ethnic equality, including recognition of minority languages and practices, were seen as the key to addressing the core grievances of the conflict, and thus as the necessary foundation for peace: “This is one of the main reasons why the ethnic people have to stand for their rights. There is no equality among the ethnic groups and no federal democracy. That is the only ... without that there will be no peace.”²² As noted by Jarstad, Söderström, and Åkebo in the Introduction to this volume, federal systems can offer one institutional or legal solution to ensure non-domination in societies emerging from war. For our respondents, a federal political

order that would guarantee a degree of ethnic self-determination was seen as the institutional framework that could transform current unequal relationships to the state into peaceful ones, by recognizing people in Kayah and Mon States as owners of their own houses, not visitors in them.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored how local actors, including civilians, civil society activists, and EAO representatives, experienced their relationships to the Myanmar state, and how these relationships have changed over time, in particular during the decade of political reforms (2011–2021). Our findings demonstrate that local actors in Mon and Kayah States perceive their relationship to the Myanmar state as a relationship of fundamental and persistent inequality, characterized by top-down domination, the imposition of ethnic Bamar superiority, and suppression and non-recognition of ethnic-minority identities, histories, and political aspirations. Post-war relationships were marked by significant continuities of war, even though the level of armed violence decreased significantly. State domination was instead carried out through other means such as arbitrary land confiscation and repression of political protesters. At the same time, and as compared with periods of active armed conflict, examples of deliberation between state agents and local actors increased between 2011 and 2021, suggesting that the state was giving at least a thin form of recognition of ethnic-minority groups as counterparts in negotiations. Local actors were also increasingly making use of state channels such as government departments and commissions to make claims on the state and protest against state policies and actions they disagreed with, signaling a degree of recognition vis-à-vis the central state and its authority.

Our application of the relational peace framework to cases that are rather far from an ideal definition of relational peace demonstrates its value as an analytical tool for capturing specific features of a particular conflict context, and for pinpointing areas and issues that are preventing the emergence of a sustainable and legitimate peace. Further, our analysis demonstrates the complexity of post-war relationships and their incremental evolution over time, and points to the importance of drawing on local, grounded experiences and perspectives in analyses of peace and conflict. Our analysis adds to the growing interest in locating and exploring peace in everyday experiences and interactions. However, while previous work seeking to capture how local conflict-affected people define and understand peace has primarily emphasized everyday security and material needs, our analysis demonstrates that people

living in conditions of human insecurity nevertheless highly value relational features such as equality, recognition, and trust as key dimensions of peace. These findings show that a relational analysis of peace can generate new insights into how peace is understood, envisioned, and experienced, and thus contribute to a more nuanced analysis of everyday peace.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, Myanmar, which in 1989 replaced Burma as the official name of the state, is used to refer to the country, although both names are frequently employed.
- 2 Since the outbreak of conflict in the late 1940s, tensions between the Karen National Union (KNU), other small Karen breakaway factions, and the NMSP have to a large extent centered on contested areas, lying between an envisioned Monland and Kawthoolei, an independent Karen state. Planned interviews with several armed groups' representatives were canceled because of this in November 2019.
- 3 Zin Mar Phyo, who also works as a journalist for the women's run website Honest Information (<https://hiburma.net>), has productively used these trips to gather information and inspiration for news stories and photo essays, which she has later returned to work on. For instance, she has published four photo essays and a longer investigative report on, respectively, the social and gendered impact of the Maw Chi Mines; the effect of water shortages on women's health in villages in Demoso; women's experiences of hydropower projects in Kayah; and Kayah female farmers' access to educational opportunities.
- 4 Focus group interview, Mon State, civilians, November 28, 2019.
- 5 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, and civil society organizations, March 26, 2019.
- 6 Interview, Mon State, representative for NMSP, December 6, 2019.
- 7 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civil society activists, March 28, 2019.
- 8 Life history interview, Mon State, civil society organization, December 4, 2019.
- 9 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, March 26, 2019.
- 10 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civil society activists, March 28, 2019.
- 11 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, March 26, 2019.
- 12 Focus group interview, Mon State, civilians and civil society organizations, November 28, 2019.
- 13 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civil society activists, March 28, 2019.
- 14 Interview with two women, civilians, Mon State, November 28, 2019.
- 15 Life history interview Mon State, civilian, December 6, 2019.
- 16 Life history interview Kayah State, civilian, March 26, 2019.
- 17 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, March 26, 2019.
- 18 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, March 26, 2019.
- 19 Focus group interview, Kayah State, civilians, March 26, 2019.

- 20 Focus group interview, civilians, Mon State, November 28, 2019.
- 21 Interview with New Mon State Party representative, Mon State, December 6, 2019.
- 22 Focus group interview, civilians, Kayah State, March 26, 2019.

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