
THE KAREN PEOPLES OF MYANMAR: AN EXAMINATION OF ISSUES SURROUNDING KAREN COMMUNITIES IN MYANMAR AND THE APPLICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES AND LAWS

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Abstract: *This paper explores the current and past practices of the government of Myanmar in its attempts to disenfranchise and disempower the sizeable minority of Karen peoples. The Karen, constituting a large community that stretches predominately over the two countries of Thailand and Myanmar is often overlooked because of the lack of readily available information regarding Myanmar in general and the Karen in particular. This paper views the issues that surround the Karen and the human rights violations they have suffered in the past 70 years at the hands of the dominant Burman government. Further, in attempts to tie this to the current Rohingya crisis in Myanmar's southwest, this paper also intends to use predictive forecasting assessing the future endgame of Naypyidaw, the government of Myanmar.*

Keywords: *Karen, Myanmar, Indigenous, Human Rights, United Nations, Identity Politics, ASEAN*

1. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar has had a chequered history over the past 70 years; an extension of the British Empire ruled by the British Raj, then occupied by the Japanese in World War II, and then decades of civil war and counter insurgency. In fact, so much has happened in Myanmar's modern history that one group that is often forgotten is the Karen and their continuing struggle. The Karen are an ethnic and linguistic group of Myanmar and Thailand whose population numbers near six million with four million in Myanmar, one million in Thailand (in addition, there are roughly 100,000 Karen refugees in Thailand), and then various diasporas predominately in Sweden, The United States of America, Australia, and Canada (Kanska, 2008). The Karen, as a significant minority within Myanmar are part of the four main ethnic groups of Myanmar and inhabit a country that according to Kwanchewan Budadaeng is especially linguistically diverse having over 100 languages, of which the Karenic language family is perhaps the most unique (Budadaeng, 2007). Consequently, being a sizeable minority in a highly diverse country in which identity politics played a significant role in its early formation in opposition to British colonialism and Japanese invasion, the Karen people have faced opposition for many years. This article aims to provide a brief overview for existing human rights issues faced by the Karen people as well as looking what human rights principles and laws apply to their situation, concluding with an assessment regarding the efficacy of the human rights process and projecting a forecast for what the future likely holds for the Karen.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When beginning to write this article, two things became immediately apparent. The first is that human rights and international relations are deeply entangled, and despite the fact that the Karen Problem is predominately an intrastate issue, it has been dealt with in a classical Hobbesian - perhaps even Machiavellian in its ruthlessness - tradition.¹ Resultantly, though the author may be inclined to pursue traditional human rights schools of thought on this matter, borrowing heavily from the field of peace studies, the subject matter lends itself to being consistent with a realist perspective of international relations. As such, the dominant lens in which the Karen Problem will be viewed is through classical realism and security theory, utilizing the works of Morgenthau and his moral realism as well as Barry Buzan and his modernist, holistic view of insecurity (both real and perceived) as the foundation for conflict.

When using classical realist theory to discuss about human rights it becomes important to state that the use of classical IR theory is to define the root causes of conflict and potentially; what can be done to resolve the problem? Looking at the history of the conflict between the Karen and the Burman peoples, it becomes apparent that the conflict is deeply rooted in security fears. These fears, as will be explored later, had their genesis during the British Empire during the occupation of then Burma. During this period many Karen converted from local religions to Christianity, aligning themselves with the British and becoming favoured over the Burman peoples (Silverstein, 1977). This manifested itself in Karen peoples being allowed disproportionate representation in the state legislature as well as holding positions of significance in the armed forces. This uneven balance of power saw conflict when Britain's hold over Myanmar was lost to the Japanese during World War II with the Karen and Burman groups backing separate sides. The Karen sided with the British, whom were expelled from Myanmar by the Japanese, and Burman peoples supported the Japanese. The Burmans, then under the Burmese National Army (also known in some sources as the Burmese Independence Army) used their favourable position and power to militarily engage with the Karens (Rudolf Jr., 2015). The result was that many civilians were killed as Karen forces and Burman forces fought along the Irrawaddy. After World War II and the expulsion of the Japanese, the Karen peoples took advantage of the opportunity to, unsuccessfully, push for independence from Myanmar. Further, the events of pre and post-World War II set the foundation of armed animosity between these two peoples setting a course that would continue to this very day. Therefore, it can be seen that an uneven balance of power, helped by the British, exploited during the Japanese invasion, and then wrapped in the guise of national sovereignty issues created the conditions required for an ethnic conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and lasted over 70 years. The Burman government has often used the insecurity caused by minority groups to legitimise its actions. Therefore, it becomes important to treat the issue in the same view as Naypyidaw has to avoid theoretical dissonance. The Karen issue is most certainly a human rights issue, and that what this article intends to explore, but it must be framed as the security problem that it is being attacked as.

¹ The term Machiavellian in this case is used to denote the work of Machiavelli's *The Prince* rather than his more liberal texts which achieved comparably little fame.

2.1 The Karen People

'New' and developing countries have significant risk factors and political immaturity that lend themselves to conflict between major or dominant ethnic group/s and minority groups (Mucha, 2007). Turkey and its Kurds, Russia and its Chechens, China and its Uighur problem, and Thailand and its Southern Problem. Each of these examples highlight how, in many cases, emerging or developing countries and their central governments have often had difficulties when promoting homogeneity or a dominant vision, a result of the perceived need to 'pacify' potentially destabilising groups and individuals. Naypyidaw in this case is no different, however, has rightly come under fire for how it has pursued its policies favouring ethnically Burman peoples over other minorities. Such policies, as will be explored in detail later, have left sizeable numbers of Karen peoples among other groups displaced and dispossessed of their property. The number of refugees recorded by the UNHCR office in Thailand states that there are currently 100,238 refugees residing in 9 different camps inside Thailand's border with Myanmar (UNHCR Thailand, 2017). This has been continuing for the past 30 years and as long as Myanmar remains a hostile country to its minorities, is likely to continue.

Similarly, to Myanmar as a whole, Karen identity has been subject to internal rivalry of its own. The Karen ethnic group is far from religiously and economical homogenous with 25-30% of its population being Christian, 5-10% Animist, and the rest being Buddhist co-existing in a collection of twelve different languages of which none are mutually intelligible with the others (South, 2007a). Keyes (1979) points out that when ethnic groups come under stress, as is the case in Myanmar, the peoples will often adopt several ethnic labels, not necessarily out of security concerns, but out of an inability to self-identify stemming from dissociation with traditional social structures. This has been exacerbated by outsiders whom often in cases such as this one, use generic terms and labels for entire groups and ethnicities, often ignoring the complexities and nuances within the group itself (Hayami, 1996). Moreover, identity simplification has occasionally come from groups who perceive themselves as helpers, in particular: Christian missionaries. As Platz (2003) explores, Christian missionaries since 1858 in Thailand, and perhaps an earlier time in Myanmar, have spread Christian beliefs to minority groups in each region. This has led to a competing identities within Karen communities as the Christian religion conflicted with traditional religions of animism and Buddhism of which the latter was, and continues to be, the predominate religion of most people, including the Ethnic majority Burman peoples.

It was this Karen identity, as internally fractured as it was, that led to development of a Karen ethnic movement culminating in a guerrilla war under the Karen National Liberation Army formed in 1947. The civil war, which had aims of achieving independence from the Myanmar State, failed despite early success in razing cities in Myanmar's north, including the then capital, Rangoon (sometimes spelt Yangon) (South, 2011). The result of this civil war that arguably is still on-going is the principle focus of this article: How Myanmar and its ethnic Burman government have used their position to neutralise its 'Karen Problem' through forced removals, destruction of farms, collapse of society, and preventing Karen persons from engaging in the political process.²

2.2 Issues of Human Rights Abuses: Relocations and Enfranchisement

Relocations: The Karen are a substantive minority in Myanmar and due to historical animosities with the majority Burman ethnic group, have been on the receiving end of governmental policies that have prevented the Karen from actualising their human rights, particularly those basic rights to property, security of person, and arguably slavery.² Cases of human rights abuses against Karen people in Myanmar are extensive and well documented even as armed conflict between the Government of Myanmar (hereinafter referred to as Naypyidaw, the country’s capital) and the Karen National Union has largely dissipated since its heights during the 1980s. South (2007a) shows that in years following the cease-fire, Karen communities have been routinely forcibly relocated in order to make way for what the author refers to as *Type II Forced Migration*: state driven relocations caused by post-conflict military occupation by government forces under the pretext of development. In her chapter, South illustrates that some 36 Karen communities had experienced over 1,000 forcible relocations dating back to the 1940s with some communities being particularly targeted with over 100 relocations. With such pressure, Karen communities have struggled to maintain their family units, culture, and language. Smith (1999) refers to this as the ‘*Burmanisation*’ of the state with the end goal of either physically or culturally eliminating Myanmar’s substantial minority groups. Consequently, it is evident to all concerned that such actions by Naypyidaw amounts of grievous violations of human rights, with some authors such as Pedersen (2011) making the argument, perhaps accurately, that this constitutes genocide.

Table 1. Typology of Forced Migration (South, 2007a).

Typology of Forced Migration		
Internally Displaced Persons	Other Forced Migrants	
Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Directly displaced due to armed conflict.	Post-armed conflict based on policies that are not explicitly violent. Displacement stems from the state.	Migrations based on distress, either directly or indirectly related to government practices. Effect predominately on rural areas within Burma.

Enfranchisement: In addition to the earlier mentioned egregious violations of fundamental principles regarding human rights, Naypyidaw also exercises its vast powers to prevent minority groups, particularly Karen, from being able to mount an effective civil political opposition to the ethnic Burman controlled government (Bowman, 2007). This took the form of the government using its monopoly of most media in the country to prevent political opposition groups from

² For simplicity, the term ‘Karen’ will be used to refer to the entire ethno-linguistic group as the limitations of this essay prevent detailed analysis of the issues facing individual tribes and communities.

garnering support. Doing so has prevented rural villagers from being educated on the political discourse that surrounds them ensuring that, though no outright violation of their political rights has been made, the ability of rural villagers in being politically empowered is severely limited. In all these instances, Naypyidaw has actively violated the principles of political freedom and natural justice (Davis, 2000).

Table 2. Ethnic Demographics of Myanmar (CIA World Factbook)

Ethnic Group	Percent of Total Population
Burman	68%
Shan	9%
Karen	7%
Rakhine	4%
Chinese	3%
Indian	2%
Mon	2%
Other	5%

List of Human Rights grievances against the Karen communities by the Myanmar government as mentioned in Smith (1999), Bowman (2007), South (2007b), and Pedersen (2011).

- Forced Relocations (Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (Part 1, paragraph 30))
- Right to adequate housing (The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 16.1 and Art. 27.))
- Genocide (UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Art. 1), Bosnia and Herzegovina V Serbia and Montenegro (2007), The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (The Prosecutor V Jean-Paul Akayesu).
- Racial discrimination (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Art. 14.1))

Currently there are moves being made by various NGO's and United Nations programmes in order to resolve the tensions that exist between political leaders in Myanmar and the Karen persons, and whilst such moves have been glacial, progress has been achieved in several fronts. Thailand, as a significant economic power in the region, shouldered the burden of accepting significant numbers of refugees from Myanmar with the number in 2015 reaching 72,900 registered refugees and another 51,500 persons in refugee-like status (UNHCR, 2016). Obviously such a situation is not ideal, and as the Burma Link – a NGO monitoring Myanmar human right violations – point out, it does provide some physical and food security to people and communities that have struggled in both regards for many years. In addition, the UNHCR provides education up to the 10th grade level, giving students at these camps (particularly the largest in Mae La, Thailand) the basic skill sets needed to allow them some self-empowerment. In addition, the camps have become a significant source of shame for Naypyidaw which has

increasingly had an international image problem in association with Karen refugees and Aung San Suu Kyi, now State Counsellor of Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Of course, shaming whilst effective in the long run does little to benefit the lives of many that suffer at the time. Progress has been made in Myanmar in regards to its general human rights policies, however it has been shown that plenty of more work needs to be achieved.

3. CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PROJECTIONS

As mentioned earlier, the current Karen refugee population in Thailand is 100,238. This number however only illustrates part of the story. The total population of Karen across Myanmar and Thailand varies widely depending on the source, with the CIA stating that 6 million live across both countries and the Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation (2010) is closer to 7 million, of which 300,000 live in Thailand compared to the CIA's estimate of 1 million. Exact population demographics are considerably difficult to ascertain as there are political reasons by all groups involved to inflate or deflate the actual real number. Despite these varied numbers, demographics of the home state for Karen peoples, Kayin (Myanmar) has a total population of 1.3 million persons, of which it is hard to find reliable information detailing ethnic composition. The inferred conclusion from this is that although the Karen may have a significantly sizeable population they are, through the effects of forcible relocations as detailed earlier, disassociated from their ethnic homelands. Additionally, looking at similar situations in Canada and Australia, there is a significant correlation between dispossession and mental health issues, including depression and suicide (Miller, 1996; O'Shane, 1995; Walters et al, 2011). In 2015, karennews.org reported, based on information from social workers at the Mae La Refugee Camp, the frequency of suicides had been increasing within the camp (karennews.org, 2015). Suicides at the camp were often linked to drug consumption. However, the spike in suicides was found not to be related to drug consumptions, but rather the effects of refugee life on mental health. Suicides have increased, with one particular sad case being a pregnant woman who committed suicide through ingestion of pesticides. The issue of suicides is an issue of grave concern, as clearly the effects of forcible relocation are manifesting themselves in significant mental health concerns. From a human rights perspective, the lack of autonomy and self-determination as a result of potential persecution faced if allowed to return to Myanmar is of major concern.

However, despite the negative situation at the moment, can we say that the situation is improving or has the likeliness to improve in the near future?

4. MOVING FORWARD

Conflicts generally tend to escalate when the two opposing groups differ in identity as explored in Huntington's Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1996). As such, though the Karen are linguistically different than the much larger Burman group, they are mostly similar in terms of religion, culture, family dynamics, and shared history. Though such similarities do nothing to prevent Naypyidaw from enacting genocidal policies, it does temper the policies and the manner in which they are pursued. One need only look at how Naypyidaw has responded to its Rohingya problem to see that, whilst the policies and actions of Myanmar against the Karen over the past 60+ years is horrendous, the scale at which it was pursued was significantly less aggressive than

what is currently occurring with the Rohingya. The UNHCR has reported that 2,000 Rohingya persons have been killed in the past year, with nearly 536,000 (over one third the total population) fleeing to Bangladesh. The speed at which this conflict has occurred is comparatively faster than those historically against the Karen, though no less significant in any way. The actions by Naypyidaw relating to each ethnic group are useful indicators for analysts to make predictions on what actions and policies the government will make in the near future.

Moving forward for the Karen from the contemporary situation, options look bleak.

Naypyidaw has aggressively pursued policies of ethnic cleansing time and again; manipulating a siege mentality that has promoted a societal security issue perspective with the Burman's being surrounded by ethnic groups that seek to undermine it. This has been seen in the disproportionate response to extremist Rohingya insurgency attacks such as that of October 9 where 9 police officers were killed in which the government responded in late October by burning hundreds of homes and then capturing the land (Griffiths, 2016). Such actions echo those that have been explored earlier regarding the Karen National Liberation Army. The actions that Naypyidaw takes in the coming months and years in relation to the Rohingya will likely be an accurate picture for the worst case scenario that could happen to the Karen. The more likely scenario now that the Karen are fragmented and unable to put up any significant resistance is 'quiet' absorption of the group into the main Burman ethnic group. As Buzan, Wilde, and Waever (1998) put it in their seminal text *Security*, governments generally pursue one of three (arguably four, but the fourth has already been accomplished) tactics when trying mitigate societal security threats.

Table 3: Strategies of ethnic conflict, as adapted from *Security* by Buzan, Waever, & Wild (1998)

Type	Competition	Description
1	Migration	Migration by the dominant/aggressor group into the territory of the minority
2	Horizontal Competition	Utilising overriding culture and linguistic influence to change the targeted group
3	Vertical Competition	Adoption of regionalist project which will attempt to distort the traditional view of identity in the region.
4	Elimination	Forcible depopulation through war, plague, famine, policies of extermination

The fourth strategy has already been applied and has resulted in a significantly weakened Karen population that is unable to resist the main state either militarily or culturally. Consequently, we are likely to see a combination of Type 1 and 2 strategies be employed in the near future if not already as the government attempts to 'Burmanise' the Karen group. Templates for such strategies exist around the world, particularly in Turkey where a highly targeted approach was developed in attempt to exterminate the Kurdish peoples through prohibition of the Kurdish language in the education system, banning the distribution of Kurdish publications, coupled with more militant displacement, ethnic cleansing, and torture (McDowall, 2002). Consequently, though military actions against the Karen are likely to continue through confiscation of land and mandated crop production, it is likely that this will be coupled with

other forms of ethnic cleansing in the hopes of reducing the ethnicity to something that is a lower perceived threat to the government. Conversely though, because of the preponderance of the Burman ethnic group in the region as a result of years of ethnic conflict, there may be less political will to continue an ethnic conflict through military and security means. Thus, the new normal in the region may be a process of Burman linguistic and cultural dominance that prevents and prohibits the expression of other minority languages and cultural practices. This may be done through force, though as Myanmar faces increased international scrutiny regarding its actions in the Rakhine State it is more likely to be done progressively over the years. Unfortunately, time is the side of Naypyidaw.

Despite the powerful movement that the Burmese government has made in trying to arrest the development of the Karen peoples, there are solutions at the international level that have the possibility of success. These solutions primarily revolve around The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights and NGOs and their efforts at alleviating the crises affecting Myanmar's minority populations. As discussed earlier, politically the situation does look bleak. Without significant international support, that is unlikely to come, the Karen Problem is one that is not going to be solved as a security issue. In such a sense, this issue differs dramatically from that of the Rohingya who have successfully pressed for international support. Consequently, the Karen Problem must be solved through humanitarian instruments. Relocating the affected people in one option, and to some extent this has proven successful. Australia for example hosts 11,000 Karen persons, not all of whom are refugees (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). Other countries host various amounts with the total amounting to approximately 185,000 Karen peoples being hosted in countries outside of Myanmar and Thailand. Whilst this number is large, and the lives of those that have escaped Myanmar perhaps considerably better than previously, the numbers are not significant enough to make a dramatic change. To make a larger impact, neighbouring developed countries which are seeing labour costs increase due to the lack of available labour, need to view the acceptance of refugees, not just Karen but from all countries, as an economic commodity. Shifting the focus from humanitarian to economic can benefit the refugees in question but can also 'sell' the concept of increasing immigration to a conservative public. According to the OECD, immigrants are likely to provide a net benefit to the host country as they can fill important niches in existing labour markets (OECD, 2014). Therefore, it becomes an economic and humanitarian decision to increase refugee acceptance into developed countries, Australia due to its proximity being a good example.

Another important factor to consider is that Thailand cannot continue to host such a large number of refugees indeterminately. The process for repatriation of some refugees began in 2016 with the idea that because of no present military threat, Thailand and Myanmar could work cooperatively in resettling refugees. However, at the time of writing, only 71 refugees have been resettled under this project due to an apparent lack of response by Naypyidaw (Tan, personal communication, Dec 22, 2017). Therefore, unsurprisingly, though the potential for humanitarian resettlements appears to be both appealing and have potential, political will has left it stranded.

Looking at the issue on a regional scale though the issue remains bleak. ASEAN as the most significant regional organization in Southeast Asia has been rather quiet on Myanmar and the issues that the country brings to the stability of the organization. Famously ASEAN has practiced

the concept of non-intervention in the affairs of its member states, including Myanmar, but this has been tested as 'constructive engagement' by ASEAN has yielded little results in terms of development, curbing narcotic development, and human rights abuses (Roberts, 2010). However, some authors such as Oishi & Ghani (2016) have argued that recent responses and actions by ASEAN have performed well. The authors posit that ASEAN has quietly developed the instruments of influence allowing the organization to turn into a mediating power. This was done over four phases starting in 1988 to the present day using people-to-people dialogue and pressure at the heads of state level whilst at the same time providing international support for the member. ASEAN through encouragement, rather than confrontation, has sought to quell the intrastate problems that Myanmar faces. Though some progress has been made in this regard as argued by Oishi and Ghani, when looking at the numbers and the lack of progress in recent years, it is hard to say that ASEAN has proved itself a useful organisation relating to the Karen Problem. The likely scenario is that there is truth to both parts in that ASEAN has been useful in some aspects providing diplomacy within a 'high-context culture', yet the limits of that progress is apparent and needs to be reconciled (Hall, 1976).

5. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this essay has looked at the Karen peoples of Myanmar and the system of actions that the government has taken to prevent their achievement of human rights. These abuses by Naypyidaw have resulted in years of systematic degradation of the Karen peoples (among others) which has had dramatic consequences as explored earlier. Furthermore, the details of these abuses and how they would be classified under human rights law has been shown that these abuses are of the most severe kind. Unfortunately, the Karen people are likely to continue facing these challenges as there is little power behind UN criticisms of Myanmar and the regional architecture, ASEAN, has an entrenched history of non-political intervention. Consequently, any projection of the quality of life the Karen peoples will experience in the near future appears bleak. As such, this case study shows just how far and how little human rights has come since the atrocities of World War II.

In order for the fulfilment of the human rights that the Karen peoples have been denied to be achieved, a concentrated effort needs to be made by all parties, stakeholders, and key actors. Though this essay is limited in its scope and decided to mostly ignore the effect of regional architecture and political initiative has on such a humanitarian issue, state leaders and their governments play a critical role in this humanitarian crisis that has existed in one form or another since the early 1950s. Naypyidaw needs to be pressured or encouraged to see the Karen as an integral part of Myanmar society and that their culture is of intrinsic value that should be protected. However, as seen in the current resettlement process with only 71 refugees having been returned home, this is an on-going process that is likely to take many slow decades if it ever occurs.

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