



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

PARTY MERGERS IN MYANMAR

A New Development

Su Mon Thant

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Party Mergers in Myanmar: A New Development

By Su Mon Thant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Party mergers are a new development in Myanmar politics. Given that such mergers often assist the consolidation of new democratic regimes, some broader system-wide effects may also occur. Myanmar's ethnic parties consistently choose merger strategies over other forms of pre-electoral coalition. This highlights a transition from a focus on questions of authoritarianism and democracy to one on the creation of a federal system of government with a stronger cleavage between competing Bamar and ethnic nationalisms.
- Despite cooperation among political parties outside the electoral process, pre-electoral coalitions such as constituency-sharing or campaigning for allies have generally not been successful. Five of the six mergers among ethnic parties attempted prior to the 2015 general election failed. However, between 2017 and 2019, five mergers involving parties representing the Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin or Karen, and Mon ethnicities, achieved success.
- The successful mergers were motivated not only by desires for electoral success in 2020 but also by shared federal aims, which involve ethnic parties in Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin or Karen, and Mon states forming a strong local party in their respective regions to strive for ethnic equality and self-determination.
- The mergers are between parties with markedly different platforms and their success is conditioned by their preferences for particular kinds of federalism. Mergers cannot guarantee electoral success. And other pre-electoral coalitions, such as avoiding competition for the same constituencies, also proved successful in the 2018 by-elections. But what mergers can uniquely do is respond to public

demand for parties to unite and make the resulting party stronger in terms of resources and public support.

- In general, mergers can reduce system fragmentation, avoid vote wastage and lead to the formation of stable parties. Ethnic party mergers also simplify party labels for voters and make it easier for them to vote on the basis of ethnic preferences. In addition, mergers can increase public interest and political participation among members of ethnic communities.
- Three common factors behind the five successful mergers are previous electoral losses, public pressure and shared federal aims. The durability of these mergers depends on continuous party building, negotiations and equality among party members. Meanwhile, a greater number of new parties will form and continue to exist under the multi-party democracy principle granted in Myanmar's 2008 Constitution.
- The upcoming 2020 general election will witness a combination of mergers and other pre-electoral coalition forms between ethnic parties as they compete with Bamar national parties. Election results will influence the durability of merged parties, their political allegiance and potential parliamentary coalitions.

Party Mergers in Myanmar: A New Development

By Su Mon Thant¹

INTRODUCTION

After a lengthy hiatus, Myanmar's electoral politics resumed with the adoption of the country's 2008 Constitution, the re-emergence of political parties and the first election in two decades in 2010.² A second round of national elections was held in 2015, with the next round intended to be held in the last quarter of 2020.³ Since 2010, many political parties have registered and engaged in the political process.⁴ There are currently ninety-four officially registered political parties—of which an estimated fifty-five are ethnic parties.⁵ Both Bamar-dominated national parties

¹ Su Mon Thant holds a master's degree from Keele University. She lives in Yangon, where she conducts research on democracy in Myanmar. This paper is a product of the research and capacity-building project organized by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) for Burmese scholars and experts, in partnership with Urbanize: Policy Institute for Urban and Regional Planning and its Head of Research, Mael Raynaud.

² This election, the first to be held under the 2008 Constitution, was widely perceived as not being free or fair.

³ The electoral commission has not announced when the next elections will be held. Under the current legal framework, Myanmar holds elections every five years; effective from the day the first parliamentary session commences.

⁴ A total of 122 political parties have engaged in the political process as of October 2019. Some of these parties, however, no longer exist.

⁵ This is the number of registered parties approved by the Union Election Commission as of October 2019. There is no legal definition of an ethnic political party in Myanmar. An ethnic party in this paper refers to an identity-based political organization registered to compete in elections with a leadership and membership that identifies as belonging to a non-dominant ethnic group that aims to enhance its ethnic or cultural goals.

and non-Bamar ethnic parties cannot be easily positioned on a left/right continuum.⁶ In Myanmar, political dividing lines relate instead to either pro- or anti-democracy stances, pro- or anti-military stances or to historical attitudes towards reform/revolution. Furthermore, in addition to ethnic parties, there are proxy parties, splintered parties and rebranded parties, which condition party interactions and complicate Myanmar's democratic landscape.

These party categorizations relate to the fact that electoral and party politics occur in a wider political context. In Myanmar there is an ongoing peace process, initiated soon after democratic reforms in 2011, which attempts to resolve long-standing conflicts between the (majority Bamar) army known as the Tatmadaw and the actors who identify as ethnic political entities or ethnic armed organizations.⁷ A grievance underlying this conflict relates to the dominance of the central government in designated ethnic minority territories and the insubstantial say that ethnic groups have in their own affairs. The previous military government used multi-party elections to induce ethnic armed organizations to engage in politics rather than armed conflict. Despite differences among individual ethnic populations—small or large, with or without states named after their ethnic group—the overall ethnic population shares certain common

⁶ One differentiation between political parties under Myanmar's Political Parties Registration Law is Nationwide/National or Regional. This is based on their electoral coverage and number of party members. When registered, national parties are required to organize a minimum of 1,000 party members nationwide, whereas regional parties are required to organize a minimum of 500 party members in a state or region. Political parties often identify themselves as ethnic parties, state-based parties, or national parties. The ruling National League for Democracy party and the current opposition party the Union Solidarity and Development Party are the two major national parties which contested in almost all constituencies in the 2015 elections. Dominated by Bamar-majority in most national parties headquartered in Bamar-majority regions, ethnic parties consider them Bamar parties.

⁷ However, for the last seventy years, conflict has ebbed and flowed not only between the majority (Bamar) army and the minority ethnic armies but also between the ethnic armies themselves.

goals: ethnic equality, self-determination and a federal system of governance. To achieve these ends, most ethnic groups have engaged in a two-track process: through ethnic armed organizations, which operate outside the formal political system and the 2008 Constitution, and ethnic political parties, which pursue change within the system.⁸ Myanmar's party system reflects these twin processes of democratization and the peace process. It has two major cleavages—Burman nationalism versus ethnic nationalism and authoritarian rule versus democratic rule.

There are three political forces in Myanmar. The first are the pro-military forces that originated from the ruling parties of the authoritarian period—the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and its associated proxy parties. The second are the democratic forces that grew out of the pro-democratic movement during military rule—the National League for Democracy (NLD) and smaller Bamar-dominated parties. The third force is comprised of the non-Bamar ethnic parties. In some cases, the ethnic forces are further divided into two groups: those that have an allegiance to the NLD and those that have an allegiance to the USDP. There are also other forms of functionally restricted cooperation among parties: in the form of the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF), the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), the Federal Democracy Alliance (FDA)⁹ and the USDP with its ad hoc allies.¹⁰ Cooperation among the parties in these groupings is functionally restricted to specific areas (e.g., drafting a political dialogue framework, drafting state constitutions, drafting federal union principles, parliamentary cooperation), while in other areas (electoral competition, candidate recruitment) the parties still

⁸ Burma Partnership, “Elections for Ethnic Equality? A Snapshot of Ethnic Perspectives on the 2015 Elections”, *Progressive Voice Policy Research Project*, October 2015, <https://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Elections-for-Ethnic-Equality-Layout-11-points.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2019).

⁹ Less active after the 2015 elections but reportedly still functional.

¹⁰ The USDP and its twenty or so political party allies (both ethnic and Bamar-dominated) have released at least five joint statements.

compete. Most ethnic parties are members of either the UNA or the NBF and compete for support within the same communities.¹¹

Despite the presence of various political groupings and of other forms of interparty cooperation, pre-electoral coalitions among ethnic parties, including constituency-sharing and campaigning for allies, were absent in 2015. The closest attempt at forming a coalition was the surprise formation of a new party by representatives of political parties that were members of existing alliances. For instance, the Federal Union Party was founded with representatives from the fifteen constituent organizations of the NBF to compete against two major Bamar-dominated parties in the Bamar-majority areas of Myanmar's seven states and seven regions.¹² Party mergers were also an unattractive strategy for ethnic parties in 2015 because they required the dissolution of old parties as part of the process of forming new parties. This situation presented a dilemma for established parties that wished to retain separate identities, especially given the context of social cleavages in Myanmar. Only in recent years have parties that represent major ethnic groups held discussions that resulted in successful mergers. Five such mergers, each involving three or more constituent parties, occurred in Myanmar between 2017 and 2019.

Parties in democracies worldwide often merge to avoid vote wastage, to form new and more stable parties and to reduce excessive party system fragmentation—all with the goal of winning elections.

¹¹ The UNA has fifteen members and the NBF has twenty-two members as of June 2019.

¹² Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, “နိုင်းငံရေးပါတီမဟာမိတ်အဖွဲ့များအပေါ် လေ့လာသုံးသပ် မှတ်တမ်း” [Analysis of Political Parties Alliances], 7 November 2015, <https://emref.org/mm/publication/142> (accessed 4 May 2020), p. 16; Zin Mar Win, “Fifteen Myanmar Ethnic Groups to Form Unified Party”, *Radio Free Asia*, 11 June 2013, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/party-06112013190735.html> (accessed 15 January 2020). The number of member parties of the NBF has increased to over twenty ethnic parties since then.

The Myanmar media and analyses of Myanmar politics have regularly been reporting that parties are merging in order to win seats in the 2020 national elections.¹³ This study adds nuance to this perception, arguing that mergers may also have certain broader system-wide effects, such as in the consolidation of new democratic regimes.

Why are ethnic parties merging, and what is the impact of party mergers on interparty cooperation? In order to answer these questions, this study analyses five mergers, involving five of the country's major ethnic-minority groups: Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin or Karen, and Mon. It studies press statements and reports from news media and official party organs, which are often distributed via Facebook. More importantly, however, the central findings are based on primary data gleaned from 40 interviews with party representatives involved in the mergers, conducted from June to October 2019. Another 15 representatives from ethnic-minority civil society organizations and the media were also interviewed.

Findings from these interviews suggest that ethnic party mergers do more than merely assist parties with their electoral success. In fact, they strengthen the prospects for a federal union in Myanmar characterized by ethnic equality and self-determination. This paper has three sections. The first discusses how and why ethnic parties merge, with an emphasis on the primary objectives and motivations behind the mergers. The second

¹³ For example: Hein Ko Soe, "The ethnic parties' dilemma: Merger or strategic alliance?", *Frontier Myanmar*, 18 April 2018, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-ethnic-parties-dilemma-merger-or-strategic-alliance> (accessed 13 March 2019); Nan Lwin, "Ethnic Political Parties Merge to Seek Stronger Representation in 2020 Election", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/ethnic-political-parties-merge-to-seek-stronger-representation-in-2020-election.html> (accessed 18 March 2019); and John Zaw, "Myanmar Ethnic Parties Merge for 2020 Power Push", *UCANEWS*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-ethnic-parties-merge-for-2020-power-push/81992> (accessed 3 June 2019).

discusses two premises: (i) that ethnic parties consistently choose merger strategies rather than other forms of collaboration; and (ii) that visions for federalism guide these parties' merger attempts. The third and final section provides information on the structure, the merger process and the compromises and strategies behind the five mergers, as of October 2019, in order to anticipate how the newly merged parties may evolve beyond 2020.

AN UNATTRACTIVE STRATEGY BECOMES A TREND

Party mergers are defined by the creation of a fully merged new organization integrated across all areas. Belanger and Godbout define them as “the fusion of two (or more) political parties into a single new party organization... As a result, the former parties must cease to exist, to be replaced by a new political formation”.¹⁴ Currently, there are five official merged parties approved by Myanmar's Union Election Commission: the Kayah State Democracy Party (KySDP), representing the Kayah ethnic group; the Karen National Development Party (KNDP), representing the Kayin or Karen ethnic group; the Kachin State People's Party (KSPP), representing the Kachin ethnic group; the Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD), representing the Chin ethnic group; and the Mon Union Party (MUP), representing the Mon ethnic group.

According to Coffé and Torenvlied, the most common explanation for party mergers is that they are a response to poor election results, with parties expecting that merging would improve their future performance.¹⁵

¹⁴ Éric Bélanger and Jean-François Godbout, “Why Do Parties Merge? The Case of the Conservative Party of Canada”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 63, no. 1 (January 2010): 41–65.

¹⁵ Hilde Coffé and René Torenvlied, “Explanatory Factors for the Merger of Political Parties”, Center for the Study of Democracy Working Paper, University of California Irvine, September 2008.

Parties also merge in order to meet mandated electoral thresholds or to create a new mega party and thus win an important role in the formation of government coalitions.¹⁶ Internationally, the three most common factors that condition party mergers are electoral systems, electoral results and parties' ideological proximity, all of which apply to ethnic party mergers in Myanmar.

Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin/Karen and Mon ethnic political parties did not achieve strong results in the 2015 election, when the NLD won most of the votes for which those parties competed. The sheer number of ethnic parties competing in a first-past-the-post electoral system resulted in significant electoral defeats. The NLD won 79 per cent of the elected seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw¹⁷ and majorities in all states and regions, except in the subnational-level elections in Shan and Rakhine States.¹⁸ The NLD won enough to form the national government on its own. The president that it then installed could then appoint the chief ministers of all state and regional governments.¹⁹ The NLD reduced ethnic political party representation to only 11 per cent in the Hluttaw. In the 2010 general elections, which the NLD did not contest, the USDP enjoyed the support of a majority of voters, and ethnic parties secured 22 per cent of elected seats in the Hluttaw.

¹⁶ Raimondas Ibenskas, "Marriages of Convenience: Explaining Party Mergers in Europe", *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 343–356, p. 345.

¹⁷ The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is the national-level bicameral legislature, made up of two houses: the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), a 224-seat upper house, and the Pyithu Hluttaw, a 440-seat lower house (House of Representatives).

¹⁸ In Myanmar there are two layers of governments: national and state/regional. There is a bicameral legislature at the national level and 14 state or regional parliaments at the subnational level.

¹⁹ According to the 2008 Constitution, the president appoints the chief ministers to lead the subnational governments with the approval of the subnational parliaments.

In addition to these factors conditioning mergers, ethnic parties in Myanmar must also confront public pressure to merge and the consequences of the peace process.²⁰ Civil society and religious groups have pressured ethnic parties to merge even before the 2015 elections, because of concerns over vote splitting. After the NLD came to power and continued the peace process initiated by the previous government, it limited the participation in that process of political parties without seats in the Hluttaw and thus undermined the role of parties in the peace process.²¹ This created a “Catch 22” situation for affected parties because, without representation in the Hluttaw—and, therefore, in the peace process—they had less chance to receive votes. They are perceived to lack the legitimacy to represent constituents in the search for peace in Myanmar.²²

In addition to electoral defeat and public pressure being factors behind party mergers, party members interviewed mentioned two further objectives. One was to increase political representation in both

²⁰ The peace process is held under the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference, in which the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee is the main peace dialogue mechanism.

²¹ This is in contravention of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement’s paragraph 22(a) that guarantees registered political parties to participate in political dialogue. See the text of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement at National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, “The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Ethnic Armed Organisations”, 15 October 2015, <http://www.nrpc.gov.mm/en/node/229> (accessed 4 May 2020), and also Carter Center, “Ethnic Political Parties Need Assessment Report”, *Democracy Program Report*, March 2019, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/democracy/broadening-women-participation_en-march-2019.pdf (accessed 30 August 2019).

²² Interviews, Hpa-an, 26 July 2019, and Yangon, 28 August 2019. Also see Burma News International, “Chin Political Parties Need to Win in Elections for Their Specific Role in the Peace Process”, *BNI*, 2 November 2018, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/chin-political-parties-need-win-elections-their-specific-role-peace-process> (accessed 13 March 2019).

the political and peace processes. Another was to form the largest local parties in a federal system that guaranteed self-determination at the state level and ethnic equality. The constituents interviewed believed that mergers would attract all supporters, including businessmen and technocrats, gain the public's trust and receive recognition from regional actors (ethnic civil society organizations and ethnic armed organizations) that the merged parties legitimately represented ethnic people in the pursuit of federalism.²³ One party representative noted, "A strong political party requires supporters just as a strong army needs troops".²⁴ Most interviewees from civil society also confirmed that they shared the idea of creating only one party to lead the ethnic cause.

CROSS-ALLIANCE COLLABORATIONS

The pattern suggests that the parties that successfully merged shared the same ethnicity and/or operated in the same states. Their priorities for party mergers were either ethnic-based or state-based. For instance, the merged Kachin party, the KSPP, is open to new mergers with Lisu or Lhaovo ethnic parties operating in Kachin State, suggesting a state-based party merger strategy, whereas Mon-based parties prefer merging only with other Mon-based parties regardless of where they operate, suggesting an ethnic-based party merger strategy. The constituent parties of mergers did not markedly differ from one another in terms of policy platforms. For example, when the three Chin parties merged, they simply adopted the Chin League for Democracy's party platform for their new

²³ The majority of the interviewees mentioned that regional actors, such as powerful ethnic armed organizations, religious organizations and civil society organizations, either formally or informally endorsed the NLD in order for their followers to vote for the party in 2015.

²⁴ Interview, Myitkyina, 14 July 2019.

merged party.²⁵ The KSPP is only now improving its party platform, section by section, after the merger. The KySDP, the KNDP and the MUP stated that neither platforms nor sectoral policies were an issue in the mergers that created them.

Where the merging parties significantly differed was in the alliances to which they belong—the NBF or the UNA. A majority of ethnic parties joined one of these two influential ethnic alliances. Collectively, these alliances can serve as a venue for ethnic parties, especially for smaller ethnic parties, to stay involved in politics and the peace process, to be connected with domestic and international communities and receive technical assistances on matters such as party building and policy drafting. Both alliances facilitate, even if not fully, their members' electoral competition, misunderstandings, and confrontations, if any.²⁶ However, both alliances and their member ethnic parties share the common objectives of ethnic equality, self-determination and a federal system of governance. The difference lies only in the approach.

The key divide between the two powerful ethnic alliances is in the origins of member parties and their preferences for particular kinds of federalism. Political legacies or the origins of political parties matter in Myanmar's party politics, especially when the parties are not organized around ideology. Political parties established to compete in the 2010 general elections had several aims. These aims included as creating an electoral platform for a system change or engaging in the political process rather than armed conflicts, and some of the parties received assistance from the USDP, the pro-military ruling party of the previous

²⁵ A new party is required to submit a party platform for registration along with the list of the party's leaders and their positions. The Chin National Development Party (CNDP) and the Chin Progressive Party (CPP) agreed to use the CLD's platform for registration until new policies were reviewed and drafted for each area such as peace, youth, or gender, which would take time.

²⁶ Although disputes between Bamar-majority and large ethnic-minority groups are prevalent, there are also disputes over identity and power between the major and the smaller ethnic-minority groups.

authoritarian period. Despite different aims, parties originating in the 2010 elections period were generally perceived as proxy parties used to legitimate the electoral process under the inherent flaws and undemocratic nature of the 2008 Constitution. Parties reincarnated from those that contested the 1990 general elections, along with the National League for Democracy, boycotted the 2010 elections since participation could have meant accepting the annulment of the 1990 election results. Ethnic political parties originating from the period of the 1990 elections were thus inclined to give allegiance to the NLD despite its lacklustre record on supporting ethnic issues.²⁷

A word about the two alliances is in order. The UNA is thus known as a “1990 alliance”, and it is reportedly closer to the NLD. It takes a much stronger stance on constitutional amendment and advocates the “eight-unit” division.²⁸ The parties in the UNA envision a federal union built on the Panglong Agreement and in which political representation is based on equal representation of nationalities. Instead of a fourteen-unit administration, in which half of all units have Bamar (or, in one case Rakhine) majorities, the UNA demands a union of eight units that represent the eight major ethnic groups involved in forming the union since independence. While it does not intend to redraw the physical borders of Myanmar’s subnational units,²⁹ it does mean to change the composition of the Hluttaw.³⁰ From this perspective, ethnic parties winning a majority in their states does not imply having ethnic equality or self-determination.

²⁷ Paul Keenan, “Finding Common Ground: Ethnic Political Parties and the 2020 Elections”, *EBO Background Paper*, September 2019, p. 3.

²⁸ This regards the division of administrative units in the country: seven ethnic states and one state for Bamar.

²⁹ Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, 7 November 2015, p. 35.

³⁰ Currently, the Upper House of the National Parliament or Amyotha Hluttaw has 168 seats, with each of the 14 states and regions electing 12 members. The Lower House or Pyithu Hluttaw has 330 seats, each elected from individual townships from these states and regions. While two houses hold the same power, the Lower House has more seats for the seven Bamar majority regions, reflective of their larger share of the national population.

United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), 2012

Leaders who contested the 1990 elections revived the UNA in 2012 out of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD). Leaders from the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the Zomi Congress for Democracy, the Arakan League for Democracy and the Mon Democracy Party founded the UNA. The UNA started with eight members, increased to fifteen and then in 2019 the merged parties halted engagement with alliances. The vision of the UNA is federalism, ethnic rights and forming a political dialogue. The UNA uses political engagements both within and outside parliament, including constitutional amendment in order to achieve these three objectives. The UNA set out nine basic federal principles as a roadmap for federalism.

In contrast, the NBF is known as the “2010 alliance”, with perceived allegiance to the military-backed USDP party.³¹ It views constitutional amendment as a gradual process and does not support an “eight-unit” territorial division. In its political statements released in 2012 and 2013, the NBF stated that it would strive for a genuine federal union through democratic means and amend the constitution only as when necessary to build a federal union.³² The NBF claims that the composition of

³¹ The member parties of the NBF alliance stressed in every interview with the researcher that they are independent of any other major national parties. However, both alliances have opinions about each other regarding political allegiances. Also see the Enlighten Myanmar Research Foundation’s report on political parties alliances at pp. 16 and 34.

³² “Multi-Ethnic Political Party Wants Constitution Changed”, *Mon News*, 30 October 2013, <http://monnews.org/2013/10/30/multi-ethnic-political-party-wants-constitution-changed/> (accessed 4 May 2020), and “The 9th Position Statement of Nationalities Brotherhood Forum”, 7 April 2012, https://euroburmaoffice.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/84/15/8415f909-0411-46cb-ae4fd-caf6e4abffba/nbf9.pdf (accessed 4 May 2020).

the country, in fourteen units or otherwise, should be a matter of widely accepted political agreement.³³ To the NBF, being represented in the three pillars of the government—executive, legislative and judiciary—and working towards power sharing, resource sharing and tax sharing are steps towards federalism.³⁴ In this view, ethnic parties winning the majority vote or gaining control in the cabinet or at the subnational-level parliament is a first step towards ethnic equality and self-determination.

Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF), 2011

Parties that won seats in the 2010 elections—such as the Chin National Party (later renamed the Chin National Development Party), the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, the All Mon Regions Democracy Party and the Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party—came together to demand long-lost ethnic rights. The Nationalities Brotherhood Forum was founded in 2011 after meetings and discussions on ethnic equality and self-determination. In 2013, it was replaced by the Federation to reflect their determination to achieve a genuine federal system. The Federation has six basic principles and eighteen members as of 2019. The NBF holds three main objectives: (i) federal union building; (ii) equal developments of all ethnic nationalities; and (iii) democracy.

All the merged parties interviewed identified that negotiations on ethnic alliances were a major impediment. This factor affected the merged parties' ultimate political alignments, allegiances, interactions and policy coalitions. Cross-alliance collaborations can mean that the merged parties, depending on the dominant constituent party's position, might

³³ Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, 7 November 2015, p. 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

be closer to the UNA, with its commitment to amending the constitution to reflect the Panglong Agreement and to equal representation of major ethnic nationalities in the legislature—a goal shared by the ethnic armed organizations.³⁵ Or they might be closer to the NBF, with its stress on amending the constitution to give more power to subnational states, a goal shared by the Tatmadaw among others. See Table 1.

A MOVE TOWARDS A SHARED FEDERAL VISION

The research on which this paper draws confirms that party mergers have had aims beyond electoral success for two reasons. First, ethnic parties have consistently chosen mergers rather than other forms of pre-electoral coalition. Second, these mergers have brought together parties with markedly different platforms, and their success is conditioned by their preference for particular kinds of federalism.

Party Mergers over Other Forms of Pre-electoral Coalition

Party mergers do not always result in electoral success. Mair argues that fission and fusion have very limited electoral consequences.³⁶ His study of a selection of merged parties leads Mair to claim that they tend to lose rather than to receive an electoral payoff.³⁷ The results from the 2015

³⁵ The references to the Panglong promises or agreement made by the respondents refer to the commitments made by General Aung San in February 1947, which guaranteed equality, ethnic rights and the right to secession. It is one of the UNA's principles, shared by its allied ethnic armed organizations and its member parties.

³⁶ Peter Mair, "The Electoral Payoffs of Fission and Fusion", *British Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (1990): 31–142, p. 138.

³⁷ Mair assessed a total of fifty-five clear examples of fissions and fusions over a forty-three-year period from the beginning of 1945 to the end of 1987 in fourteen countries in Western Europe, covering 170 elections.

Table 1: The Five Mergers with Their Constituent Parties and the Ethnic Alliances That These Parties Formerly Belonged to

Kayah/Karenni State	Alliance	Mergers
All Nationals Democracy Party (ANDP)		Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP)
Kayah Democracy Unity Party (KDUP)	NBF	
Karen State		
Karen State Democracy and Development Party		Karen National Development Party (KNNDP)
Karen Democratic Party		
United Karen Nationalities Democratic Party (UKNDP)		
Kachin State		
Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UPDKS)		
Kachin State Democratic Party (KSDP)	UNA	Kachin State People's Party (KSPP)
Kachin Democratic Party (KDP)	NBF	
Chin State		
Chin National Party (CNP)	NBF	Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)
Chin Progressive Party (CPP)	UNA	
Chin League for Democracy (CLD)	UNA	
Mon State		
All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP)	NBF	Mon Unity Party (MUP)
Mon National Party (MNP)	UNA	

Myanmar election do not suggest that party mergers have a huge impact on the parties' chances for electoral success in the country. A split vote between the ethnic parties that represent the same community was not the only factor that contributed to the defeat of ethnic parties that year.³⁸ The ethnic parties would have gained only seventeen more seats in both the Pyidaungsu and subnational Hluttaws in 2015 had the vote not been split.³⁹

On the other hand, pre-electoral coalitions—or strategic alliances, in ethnic parties' terms—that involve constituency sharing and campaigning for allies may increase the ethnic parties' chances in elections. The three Chin parties entered into an informal alliance during the campaign for the 2018 by-elections before they had officially merged, and they succeeded in winning a seat in the State Parliament. In the 2017 by-elections, the merged KySDP did win a seat, though the NLD did not run a candidate for that seat. The race was a two-party competition between the merged KySDP and the USDP. Data suggest that the KySDP may have captured votes previously won by the NLD in the 2015 general election. The same can be said for the future members of the CNLD and their victory in the 2018 by-elections. The USDP did not contest the seat, and the Chin parties may have won some of the votes that it had won three years earlier.

The data thus fail to confirm that mergers enhance the electoral prospects of the constituent parties. They also leave open the possibility that pre-electoral coalitions with constituency-sharing arrangements

³⁸ Ardeth Thawngmung, "Myanmar Elections 2015: Why the National League for Democracy Won a Landslide Victory", *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016): 132–42, and Su Mon Thant, "The Fate of Ethnic Parties in the Presence of the National League for Democracy: A Case Study of the 2015 General Elections", Master's thesis, Keele University, 2016.

³⁹ Transnational Institute, "Ethnic Politics and the 2015 Elections in Myanmar", *Myanmar Policy Briefing* no. 16, September 2015, https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/bpb16_web_16092015.pdf (accessed 15 October 2019).

increase the likelihood of victory. The consequences of party interactions and pre-electoral coalitions are hard to determine because there are other contributing factors. For example, an increase in the number of Bamar voters in military camps in some ethnic areas often translates into votes for the USDP in those areas.⁴⁰ For the merged parties, however, the two primary ambitions of winning a majority in the legislature of the ethnic states and building a stronger local party in response to public desires have led to potential compromises in terms of ideology and to alliances with apparently unlikely partners. If it were not for the purpose of achieving these objectives, the parties would prefer other forms of functionally restricted coalitions or pre-electoral coalitions, which would allow them to maintain separate organizational identities.

Representatives from the Mon, Chin, Kachin and Rakhine parties shared the view that the presence of two or three parties representing the same community in a multi-party democracy is not an issue or a disunity.⁴¹ Referring to the UNA's Federal Principles, section 11(a), the UNA-allied parties asserted that they supported the free formation of parties in accordance with democratic principles and would seek to enact legal provisions on the emergence of an authoritarian one-party system impossible in a federal union. These parties were concerned that merging into a single entity might not give voters enough policy choices and would contradict this UNA's principle of free formation of political parties even at the subnational level.

Regardless of the support for free formation of political parties and maintaining their identities, these parties prioritized responding to public demands as both their party's main function and the way to

⁴⁰ Lawi Weng, "Ethnic Parties in Myanmar Worried Proposed Voter Registration Changes Will Hurt Their Election Chances", *The Irrawaddy*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ethnic-parties-myanmar-worried-proposed-voter-registration-changes-will-hurt-election-chances.html> (accessed 18 November 2019).

⁴¹ Interviews, Mawlamyine, 22 July 2019; Yangon, 28 August 2019; Yangon, 28 October 2019; and Yangon, 30 October 2019.

receive local support and build strong local parties through combining resources, including members and supporters. A representative of the KySDP claimed that “two old parties merged on policy agreements that concern all ethnic nationalities residing in the Kayah State”, referring to Principle 2(a) of its party’s platform guaranteeing minority rights.⁴² A representative of the MUP admitted that, despite differences between the two constituent parties, “both are responsible to build a united front and lead our people to achieve federal goals”.⁴³ A representative of the KSPP commented that ethnic parties, or identity-based parties, can stand alone and even win some seats in their strongholds but that “in order to lead the state to equality and self-determination they all must come together as one”.⁴⁴

Interviewees from merged parties also confirmed that the parties immediately received recognition and public support after merging and that they maintained the same levels of public participation as before. An interviewee from the KNDP said that a leader from the Karen National Union, a respected Kayin armed actor who previously held governmental and territorial control over what is now several parliamentary seats, attended the party’s central committee meeting and expressed support for the Kayin parties uniting into one.⁴⁵ An interviewee from the KySDP also said that the party organized state-level cooperation between regional actors on topics related to peace and ethnic affairs, and sought as a party to offer state-level representation.⁴⁶

An interviewee from the KSPP said that the local and international communities’ attitudes towards ethnic parties had changed and that the public had increasingly participated in political causes; this included members of the public that were difficult to organize in the past.⁴⁷ The

⁴² Interview, Loikaw, 2 August 2019.

⁴³ Interview, Mawlamyine, 22 July 2019.

⁴⁴ Interview, Myitkyina, 14 July 2019.

⁴⁵ Interview, Hpa-an, 26 July 2019.

⁴⁶ Interview, Loikaw, 2 August 2019.

⁴⁷ Interview, Myitkyina, 14 July 2019.

CNLD received recognition during its organizing trip in Kanpalet, Mindat and Matupi Townships of Chin State, whose residents turned out even in the pouring rain. In the past, potential candidates had only been interested in competing on the NLD ticket. After the merger, the merged CNLD saw expressions of interest and offers to compete under a common Chin flag.⁴⁸ The merged MUP has been quite happy with the fact that its constituents' attitudes have changed and that many are becoming interested in politics. The merged Mon party and the Mon civil society organizations are also coming closer together as the latter offer their assistance to the party's electoral campaigning in exchange for the party responding to public demands.⁴⁹

Mergers simplify the party labels for voters and make it easier for them to vote on the basis of ethnicity preferences. In addition, a fractured collective ethnic front may not demonstrate the strength that a party needs to lead the state towards a federal union. Table 2 shows the logic behind the merging of ethnic parties to reach various objectives.

Table 2: Pre-electoral Coalition Forms and Ethnic Political Parties' Objectives

Objectives	Mergers	Other Forms of Pre-electoral Coalition
Electoral success	Maybe	Maybe
Showing unity	Yes	Maybe
Stronger regional/local party	Yes	Maybe
Addressing calls from public	Yes	No
Support from regional actors	Yes	Maybe

⁴⁸ Interview, Yangon, 28 August 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview, Mawlamyine, 22 July 2019.

Federal Principles Conditioning the Success of Mergers

Additional evidence suggests that mergers have aims beyond electoral success, and that federal principles condition a merger's success. There were at least six merger attempts among ethnic parties representing the same communities before Myanmar's 2015 general elections: between the two Shan parties, two Rakhine parties, two Chin parties, two Mon parties, three parties with Kayah electoral bases, and five Kayin parties (Table 3). Except for the short-lived merger between the two Rakhine parties, all failed. Among other reasons, a major impediment to the mergers between the two Shan parties in 2013, among the three parties with Kayah electoral bases in 2014, among the five Kayin parties in 2015, and among the three Kachin parties in 2018, was disagreement over which multi-party alliance to join after the merger. In the case of the Kachin parties, one of the potential constituent parties, the Kachin National Congress (KNC), quit merger talks because of the decision of the other parties to merge first and to address matters of policy later. Similarly, the successful Rakhine party merger fell apart after only one year as a result of disagreements about whether the party should ally with the UNA or the NBF.⁵⁰

The mergers that have occurred since 2015—resulting in the formation of the KySDP, the KNDP, the KSPP, the CNLD and the MUP—also face the problem of which alliance to join and remain unsettled on the issue despite having the common objectives of ethnic equality, self-determination and a federal union.⁵¹ The KNDP has postponed the

⁵⁰ Interviews, Mawlamyine, 22 July 2019; Loikaw, 2 August 2019; Hpa-an, 26 July 2019; and Yangon, 28 October 2019. Deciding which multi-party alliance to join is more than merely choosing an ally for show. As discussed above, it affects the merged parties' ultimate political alignments, allegiances, interactions and policy coalitions. To some parties, it means choosing which one of two major national parties to ally with, to others it is choosing which federal approach to pursue and to a few, it simply means that the constituents of the merged parties broke a pre-conditional agreement.

⁵¹ Mergers require the dissolution of old parties; thus, technically, the constituent parties of these five mergers are no longer a part of any alliance.

Table 3: Unsuccessful Mergers Aborted Before Completion or Abandoned After Merger

	Merger attempts	Alliance	Result
1	Two Shan parties (2013)		
	Shan Nationalities Development Party (SNLD)	NBF	
	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNDP)	UNA	Unsuccessful
2	Three Kayah-based parties (2014)		
	All Nationals Democracy Party (ANDP)		
	Kayah Democracy Unity Party (KDUP)	NBF	
	Kayan National Party (KNP)	UNA	Unsuccessful
3	Five Karen parties (2014)		
	Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP)	NBF	
	Karen State Democracy and Development Party		
	Kayin People Party (KPP)	FDA	
	Karen National Party (KNP)	UNA	Unsuccessful
	United Karen Nationalities Democratic Party		
4	Two Chin parties (2014)		
	Chin National Party (CNP)	NBF	
	Chin Progressive Party (CPP)	UNA	Unsuccessful
5	Two Mon parties (2014)		
	All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP)	NBF	
	Mon National Party (MNP)	UNA	Unsuccessful
6	Two Rakhine parties (2014)		
	Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNNDP)	NBF	
	Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)	UNA	Merged into Arakan National Party, split after election
7	Three Kachin parties (2018)		
	Kachin State Democratic Party (KSDP)	UNA	
	Kachin Democratic Party (KDP)	NBF	
	The Kachin Nation Congress Party (KNC)	UNA	Unsuccessful

decision on which alliance to join.⁵² In the cases of the MUP, the KySDP and the CNLD, decisions were suspended until the merged parties were fully formed.⁵³ One representative of the CNLD said, “we decided to discuss it later as we don’t want any cracks before”.⁵⁴ Table 4 offers comparative data on merger negotiations held before and after the 2015 general elections, detailing ethnic parties’ attempts to enter into and subsequent exits from the merger process in each state and parties’ ethnic alliances.

Instead of joining one of the existing alliances, these five successfully merged parties—the KySDP, the KNDP, the KSPP, the CNLD, and the MUP—have established “five state” cooperation, with the merged parties aiming to engage with one another to share practices and strategies without forming a new third alliance. This cooperation also aims to assist both the UNA and NBF alliances by working informally with and advocating a merger of these two alliances under the common goals of ethnic equality, self-determination and a federal union.⁵⁵

Merged parties target winning 70 per cent of the seats in state parliaments, the majority required to control those bodies and state governments. They also aim for a minimum of 20 per cent in the national parliament, which is the threshold required for the ability to table a motion or proposal. More concretely, their top priorities at the national level are the amendment of Article 261 of the 2008 Constitution, which allows the president to appoint chief ministers to lead subnational governments,

⁵² Interview, Hpa-an, 26 July 2019.

⁵³ Naw Betty Han, “Three Political Parties Merge Under Mon Party Banner”, *Myanmar Times*, 26 September 2018, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/three-political-parties-merge-under-mon-party-banner.html> (accessed 15 September 2019).

⁵⁴ Interview, Yangon, 28 August 2019.

⁵⁵ This point is also mentioned in Burma News International, “Ethnic Political Parties Suggest Alliance Merger”, *BNI*, 10 January 2020 (<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/ethnic-political-parties-suggest-alliance-merger>, accessed 10 January 2020).

Table 4: Case Studies and the NBF/UNA Alliances

Kayah/Karenni State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
All Nationals' Democracy Party (ANDP)		x	x	Merged into KySDP
Kayah Democracy Unity Party (KDUP)	NBF	x	x	Merged into KySDP
Kayan National Party (KNP)	UNA	x		Separate entity
Kayin State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
United Karen Nationalities Democratic Party (UKNDP)		x	x	Merged into KNDP
Karen State Democracy and Development Party		x	x	Merged into KNDP
Karen Democratic Party			x	Merged into KNDP
Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party	NBF	x	x	Separate entity
Kayin People Party	FDA	x		Separate entity
Karen National Party (KNP)	UNA	x		Separate entity
Kachin State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UPDKS)			x	Merged into KSPP
Kachin State Democratic Party (KSDP)	UNA		x	Merged into KSPP
Kachin Democratic Party (KDP)	NBF		x	Merged into KSPP
The Kachin National Congress Party (KNC)	UNA		x	Separate entity

continued on next page

Table 4 — cont'd

Chin State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
Chin National Party (CNP)	NBF	x	x	Merged into CNLD
Chin Progressive Party (CPP)	UNA	x	x	Merged into CNLD
Chin League for Democracy (CLD)	UNA		x	Merged into CNLD
Mon State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP)	NBF	x	x	Merged into MUP
Mon National Party (MNP)	UNA	x	x	Merged into MUP
Shan State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
Shan Nationalities Development Party	NBF	x		Separate entity
Shan Nationalities League for Democracy	UNA	x		Separate entity
Rakhine State	Alliance	Before 2015	After 2015	Final Status
Rakhine Nationalities Development Party	NBF	x		Merged into ANP and split after election
Arakan League for Democracy	UNA	x		Merged into ANP and split after election

Note: x = parties engaged in merger negotiations.

and the inclusion of all ethnic political parties in peace negotiations. In terms of potential parliamentary coalitions, if one of the two major Bamar parties does not win a majority, the ethnic parties would emerge as kingmakers.⁵⁶ They would be able to bargain for ethnic priorities in exchange for their support in forming the government. The merged parties also believe that it would be possible, if the two alliances merged, for the resultant grand alliance to serve as a stronger representative of ethnic political parties.

Member parties of the two alliances other than those that have resulted from recent mergers are sceptical of the “grand alliance” idea because of perceived political allegiances, the presence of strong local parties such as those in Shan and Rakhine States which have not needed to merge in order to win the majority in their state parliaments, and the differing federal visions the various parties hold. One representative from an alliance member party interviewed noted, “Two Bamar national parties—the USDP and the NLD—might merge, but never the two ethnic alliances.”⁵⁷ However, while a merger between the UNA and the NBF is unlikely in the near future, the country will see both further party mergers and cross-alliance pre-electoral coalitions in the upcoming 2020 elections, as ethnic parties aim to compete with Bamar national parties.

CASE STUDIES: FIVE ETHNIC PARTY MERGERS

All party representatives interviewed for this study asserted that they tried to anticipate the potential risks to the durability of the mergers

⁵⁶ The USDP requires 26 per cent of seats and the NLD 51 per cent of seats to make up the majority because 25 per cent of the seats in the legislature are reserved for the military, whose representatives generally vote with the USDP.

⁵⁷ Interview, Yangon, 28 October 2019. One assessment from this interviewee is that there will never be a grand alliance between the NBF and the UNA because the dominant Shan parties in each alliance group have major disputes between them. This acrimony is replicated between the NBF’s dominant Rakhine party and its counterpart in the UNA. These deep rifts make an alliance between the NBF and the UNA seem impossible.

in which their parties were involved. They learned from the Rakhine experience, which saw two Rakhine parties merge in a “forced marriage” due to public pressure but without the time to build trust or to agree on leadership positions and policy.⁵⁸ Their members rushed into their party conference with lingering disputes over whether to join the UNA or the NBF alliance.

Despite differences in intensity, there has been pressure on parties representing all five ethnic groups—Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin or Karen, and Mon—to merge. The pressure has come in the media, on online platforms and, more quietly, through party members and their networks. Members have used threats to leave parties in order to force their leaderships to merge with other parties, as with the Chin Progressive Party prior to 2015 and the All Mon Regions Democracy Party after 2015. The most intense demands for merger can be seen in the Mon and Kachin cases. In the former, a third force—made up of civil society organizations, monks and pro-merger politicians—forced two Mon parties either to fuse or to face competition from a new party that it would form. In the latter, a third force—a seventeen-member committee of leaders of civil society organizations, religious organizations, literature and cultural organizations—also facilitated party merger talks. In short, the KySDP and the CNLD resulted directly from inter-party merger dialogues, while the cases of the KSPP, the KySDP and the MUP saw third-party involvement.

The merged parties’ leadership rosters were generally either chosen through internal voting or based on electoral strength. However, the MUP had negotiations to determine leadership positions and the CNLD rotated the positions. The MUP, the KSPP and the KNDP are not just a result of merged political parties; the constituents include a group of representatives from other political parties or civil society organizations. For instance, the KNDP is officially the merger of three parties, but it constitutes some members of Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party, thus

⁵⁸ There was a rise of nationalism after extensive intercommunal conflict in 2012 and 2013; the public demanded that the two Rakhine parties merge.

making four groups. The KNDP and the MUP received endorsement from the relevant signatory ethnic armed organizations and civil society organizations.⁵⁹ Influential religious and social leaders endorse the KSPP as a support for mergers. The KySDP and the CNLD have good relationships with remaining regional parties, making pre-electoral coalitions possible.

In the Kachin, Kayin and Chin mergers, one or more member parties set preconditions before merger was finalized. While the exact reason cannot be confirmed, the exit of the Kachin National Congress Party and the Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party from the Kachin and Kayin mergers seems to have been related to their perception that the other parties involved broke agreements on preconditions. With only one or two years to prepare policy drafts and fully integrate at all levels of their organizations before the 2020 elections, merged parties require continuous party building, negotiations and equality among constituents to ensure their durability. An interviewed party representative mentioned that “there are still groupings of members that are not fully integrated yet”.⁶⁰ Another representative stated that “two parties cannot merge seamlessly”.⁶¹ Policies on federalism also need to be sorted out among the constituents because the 2020 election and electoral results may determine the new form of interparty cooperation and alignment.

The following section describes the mergers that resulted in the KySDP, the KNDP, the KSPP, the CNLD, and the MUP. Each case study

⁵⁹ Also see in Sa Ai Su, “၂၀၂၀ ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် ကရင်ပါတီများကိုသာမဲထည့်ရန် KNU ဗဟိုကော်မတီဝင် ပဒိုမန်းငြိမ်းမောင် တိုက်တွန်း” [KNU Central Committee Member urges to vote only for Karen parties in 2020], *Karen Information Center News*, 11 February 2020, <http://kicnews.org/2020/02/၂၀၂၀-ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင်-ကရ/> (accessed 11 February 2020); and Saw Shar, “၂၀၂၀ ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် ကရင်ပါတီများကို ဝန်းရံသွားမည်ဟု ကရင်လူငယ်ကွန်ရက်ပြော” [Kayin Youth Network Says They Will Support Karen Parties in 2020], *Karen Information Center News*, 25 February 2020, <http://kicnews.org/2020/02/၂၀၂၀-ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင်-က-2/> (accessed 25 February 2020).

⁶⁰ Interview, Yangon, 29 October 2019.

⁶¹ Interview, Myitkyina, 15 July 2019.

investigates the merger process, the merged forces, the duration of the mergers talks, the composition of the leadership of merged parties and their strategies. The section also provides information on other ethnic parties active in each region, on pre-merger compromises and on the electoral strength of each participant in party mergers because all of these factors influence the durability of party mergers.

The Kayah State Democratic Party

The Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP) is the result of a merger between the All Nationals' Democracy Party (ANDP) of Kayah State and the Kayah Unity Democracy Party (KUDP), both founded in 2013. It gained registration on 8 September 2017.

The first merger talks among the ANDP, the KUDP and the Kayah National Party (KNP) began before Myanmar's 2015 general elections. However, the three parties did not merge at that time because the parties belonged to different alliances; had different interests, whether in a focus on ethnic identity or on state-level governance; and were experiencing leadership difficulties. The parties also faced resistance among members to their abolition and the loss of their positions. An effort to form an electoral agreement to not run in the same constituencies in the 2015 polls was also unsuccessful. The defeats that they suffered in those polls have forced the Kayah parties to revisit their weaknesses. The two Kayah parties whose visions for federalism were closest, the ANDP and the KUDP, finally secured an agreement. To consolidate the merger, the two parties agreed to dissolve, to stop engaging with both the NBF and the UNA alliances, to take time to build trust and negotiate for power sharing, and to structure the merged party through internal elections.

Merger meetings were held once a month. A negotiation committee was formed in 2016 with ten representatives from each of the two parties and two spots were reserved for the KNP to observe the process. Meeting locations rotated among party offices and different townships, with the aim of building trust and preventing excessive influence being held by either of the two parties. Meetings covered both state- and national-level issues and received input from ethnic armed organizations and civil society organizations in the region. The merger process took about one

year and received third-party support with discussion facilitation as well as technical and financial assistance.

The KySDP has yet to hold public consultations, but it is confident of local support because it is endorsed by regional actors. A party representative said, “We hold all-inclusive policies, and the party’s constitution is written to reflect federal characteristics”.⁶² The party leadership was chosen through internal voting. The party is funded through membership fees, donations and the contributions of private organizations. The party will compete only in the Kayah state and will ally with the KNP in the 2020 elections, after agreeing on constituency sharing. See Table 5.

The Karen National Development Party

The Karen National Development Party (KNDP) obtained its registration on 22 February 2018. The party is the result of the merger of three

Table 5: Ethnic Parties in Kayah State, Their 2015 Electoral Results, and the Alliances to Which They Belonged

Kayah Parties/ Parties in Kayah State	Base	Alliance Member of	2015 Election Results	Current Status
Kayan National Party (KNP)	Kayah State	UNA	—	Remains in existence
All Nationals’ Democracy Party (ANDP)	Kayah State	—	—	Merged into KySDP
Kayah Democracy Unity Party (KDUP)	Kayah State	NBF	—	Merged into KySDP

⁶² Interview, Loikaw, 2 August 2019.

registered Kayin or Karen parties—the Karen State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP), founded in 2010; the Karen Democratic Party (KDP), founded in 2012; and the United Karen Nationalities Democratic Party (UKNDP), founded in 2015.

Leaders from Karen State first discussed the formation of the party when the 2010 elections were announced. But their discussions resulted in the formation of two political parties in Karen State—the Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP) and the Kayin People’s Party (KPP); the latter operated outside Karen State, in the Bamar heartland.⁶³ Later, a segment of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army founded the KSDDP. Prior to the 2015 elections, three more Kayin parties were founded. The chair of the PSDP left that party to establish the KDP. Another Karen party—the Karen National Party (KNP)—emerged in the Bamar heartland and the Karen National Unity Party was established in Karen State. These events made for a total of six Kayin parties, four in Karen State and two in the Bamar heartland, in the run-up to the 2015 elections.

In Yangon and Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, a total of seven merger meetings took place in 2015 before drafting of the KNDP’s constitution began; see Table 3 for the concerned parties. As the leaderships of the KPP and the KNP had different views, differences between the two parties operating in the Bamar heartland which belong to different alliances were especially pronounced. As a result, each party contested the 2015 elections separately, and 203 candidates from six separate Kayin parties ran. Only one, from the KPP, won a seat. Frustrated by the result, the parties based in Karen State resumed merger talks without waiting the parties in the Bamar heartland, as the latter were not geographically close and as it seemed that a consensus with them was harder to achieve.

At least five further merger meetings between the four parties based in Karen State—the PSDP, the KSDDP, the KDP and the UKNDP—happened in 2016; see Table 4. During the process, eight representatives

⁶³ Ethnic parties refer to the Bamar-majority regions as the Bamar heartland or “Burma proper”.

from each of the four parties met and discussed terms.⁶⁴ The merged KNDP's principles included forming alliances only with other ethnic parties and not being influenced by any other political organization or group. The central executive committee was formed with fifteen members, elected from thirty-two representatives from the merging parties and five "patrons" selected to steer and advise the new party. While the PSDP dropped out of the merger process, a KNDP representative said, "The KNDP is the merger of three parties, but constitutes four groups from four parties." The reason for PSDP's exit was unclear. Either the other parties did not agree on its conditions, or the PSDP was exercising caution in case the merged party did not win enough public support.⁶⁵

The new party will run candidates in Karen State, especially in its five main townships of Hlaing Bwe, Hpa-an, Kyarinseik-gyi, Kawkayeik and Myawaddy. As for other townships, Thandaungyi is considered KPP territory because of its ethnic and religious composition, and Phapon is considered a USDP stronghold because of the military camps located there. The KNDP maintains relations with the two Kayin/Karen parties from the Bamar heartland, the KPP and KNP, with a possible future alliance in mind. The parties that merged into the KNDP did not receive public pressure to merge that was as strong as that which other parties that merged had experienced. Instead, they had to create that pressure, inviting civil society organizations and ethnic armed organizations in the region to the new party's conferences and hoping for their support in the upcoming election. See Table 6.

⁶⁴ There was disagreement over whether a new party with a new name should be formed or the three parties should be abolished and merged into the extant PSDP.

⁶⁵ The PSDP maintained its name and decided to compete in the 2020 general election; see Sa Fan Shong, "လာမည့်ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် ကရင်နှင့်ကရင်ပြည်နယ်ပြင်ပနေရာများတွင် ဝင်ရောက်ယှဉ်ပြိုင်မည်ဟု PSDP ပါတီပြော" [PSDP Says It Will Compete Within and Outside Karen State in Upcoming Elections], *Karen Information Center News*, 29 December 2019, <http://kicnews.org/2019/12/လာမည့်-ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင်/> (accessed 29 December 2019).

Table 6: Ethnic Parties in Karen State, Their 2015 Electoral Results and the Alliances to Which They Belonged

Karen Parties/ Parties in Karen State	Base	Alliance Member of	2015 Election Results	Current Status
Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party (PSDP)	Karen State	NBF	—	Remains in existence
Karen State Democracy and Development Party (KSDDP)	Karen State	—	—	Merged into KNDP
Kayin People Party (KPP)	Yangon Region	FDA	1	Remains in existence
Karen Democratic Party (KDP)	Karen State	—	—	Merged into KNDP
Karen National Party (KNP)	Yangon Region	UNA	—	Remains in existence
United Karen Nationalities Democratic Party (UKNDP)	Karen State	—	—	Merged into KNDP

The Kachin State People's Party

The Kachin State People Party (KSPP) is the result of the merger of three registered parties—the United and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UDPKS), founded in 2010; the Kachin State Democratic Party (KSDDP), founded in 2013; and the Kachin Democratic Party (KDP), founded in 2014.

The talks that led to the merger of these parties began in 2013. It was, however, five years before the merger agreement was signed, in April 2018. Four Kachin parties—the UDPKS, the KSDDP, the KDP and

the Kachin National Congress Party (KNC)—resumed merger meetings after the 2015 elections. Other ethnic parties, such as the Lisu and Lhaovo parties, observed the process.⁶⁶ Meetings were held twenty or thirty times, with ten representatives from each party present. The meetings enjoyed civil society organization facilitation and technical and financial support. The KNC proposed seven pre-conditions for the merger, including the new party joining the UNA, its registration as a nationwide party under the Kachin National Congress name and integration of the seventeen-member committee that facilitated the merger talks into the party’s structure.⁶⁷ The Kachin parties held a conference whose 710 attendees reportedly voted to use a new name for the party rather than that of the KNC. The other three parties wanted to discuss the merger first and to postpone discussion of which alliance to join, and the KNC left the merger talks as a result.⁶⁸

A representative of the KSPP said, “The KSPP is officially the merger of three parties, but it constitutes five groups—the UDPKS, the KSDP, the KDP and members of the Kachin State Progressive Party and some ex-members of the KNC.”⁶⁹ The KSPP initiated a committee with five members from each segment plus two standing committee members to take charge of the formation of the party. Leadership positions were allotted according the various parties’ electoral weight in the 2015 elections. This approach led to the former KSDP’s representative becoming the chairman of the new party, as it had won four seats in 2015, to the former UKPDS’s chairman taking the position of vice chairman, and to the

⁶⁶ Originally, the three Kachin parties—the KSDP, the KDP and the KNC—began the merger talks; the UPDKS joined them later.

⁶⁷ This is with the intention to compete in more than one state. This requires 1,000 party members, unlike the regional parties, which requires only 500 party members.

⁶⁸ Choosing which alliance to join also means choosing which vision of federalism to hold and with which national party to ally in pursuit of that vision.

⁶⁹ The Union Election Commission had not allowed this party, founded by the chairman of the KSDP, Dr Tu Ja, to contest the 2010 elections.

KDP's chairman taking the position of second vice chair position. This structure is expected to remain in place until the next election or party conference. The party depends on member contributions, donations and funds raised by a committee advised by the vice chairmen. The KSPP claims to have an all-inclusive policy and aims to unite all Kachins. It maintains relationships with other Kachin groups and with ethnic groups such as Lisu and Lhaovo.⁷⁰ The KSPP aims to compete in all eighteen townships in the Kachin State in the 2020 elections. See Table 7.

The Chin National League for Democracy

The Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD) is the result of the merger of three registered parties—the Chin National Development Party (CNDP), founded in 2010; the Chin Progressive Party (CPP), founded in 2010; and the Chin League for Democracy (CLD), founded in 2014. The CNLD obtained its registration on 11 July 2019.

Leaders from the Chin community discussed forming a party before 2010, when elections were first announced. Disagreement over issues including the prefix “Chin” in party names resulted instead in the formation of parties centred on narrower identities, such as Zo, Asho and Mara ethnic parties.⁷¹ After 2010, two Chin parties—the CNP and CPP—discussed a merger. As a part of the negotiations, the CNP changed its name from CNP to CNDP, but the merger attempt was not successful. In 2014, the Chin League for Democracy (CLD), a revival of the CNLD of a quarter-century earlier, was founded.

The CLD was able to come to terms with the Asho Chin Party and the Zo National Party, signing an agreement on a merger in 2014. In 2018, the CLD held a party conference and set preconditions for the merger including the stipulation that the new party name must be the Chin

⁷⁰ The Lisu National Development Party (LNDP) and the Lhaovo National Development Party.

⁷¹ The Zo National Development Party; the Asho Chin National Development Party; the Ethnic Nationalities Democracy Party.

Table 7: Ethnic Parties in Kachin State, Their 2015 Electoral Results and the Alliances to Which They Belonged

Kachin Parties/Parties in Kachin State	Base	Alliance Member of	2015 Election Results	Current Status
Unity and Democracy Party of Kachin State (UPDKS)	Kachin State	—	1	Merged into KSPP
Kachin State Democratic Party (KSDP)	Kachin State	—	4	Merged into KSPP
Kachin Democratic Party (KDP)	Kachin State	NBF	—	Merged into KSPP
The Kachin National Congress Party (KNC)	Kachin State	UNA	—	Remains in existence
United Nationalities Federal Democracy Party ^a	Kachin State	—	—	Merged into KSPP
New Democracy Party (Kachin) 2019	Kachin State	—	—	New ^b
Lhaovo National Unity and Development Party	Kachin State	—	—	Remains in existence
Lisu National Development Party	Kachin State	NBF	—	Remains in existence

Notes:

a. The United Nationalities Federal Democracy Party existed as a separate party at the time of data collection. It was dissolved in February 2020 to combine with the KSPP; see, Burma News International, “KSPP နှင့် ကချင်ပြည်ထောင်စုတပ်မတော်” [KSPP Merged with Another Party], *BNI*, 22 December 2019, <https://www.bnionline.net/mmm/news-69917> (accessed 25 December 2019).

b. The party was only founded in 2019 and has not entered any elections. Also, there is now another party—the Kachin National Party (KNP)—based in the Shan State, which was approved by the Union Election Commission in February 2020.

National League for Democracy. Other preconditions included the party's principles on federal union having to be based on the 1947 Panglong commitments and the merged party had to join the UNA. The CPP and the CNP accepted the first two conditions and the CLD compromised on the third, accepting postponement of the issue until after the merger.⁷² The parties signed the merger agreement in order to prevent any split after the 2020 election.

There were thirteen negotiation meetings among the three parties that ultimately signed the agreement on 29 September 2018. There were thirty-nine people involved in the negotiations, thirteen representatives from each party. The CNLD has been structured to ensure collective leadership. The chairmen of the merged parties will rotate as leader of the new party in six-month periods during the transitional period prior to the 2020 general elections. The CNLD will hold a party conference within ninety days of the conclusions of the 2020 elections in order to elect a new leadership. The party is funded by contributions from members of its leadership, with a scale reflecting positions in the party. The CNLD will compete in all nine townships of Chin State, in Kalay and Tamu in Sagaing Region, and other Chin-populated areas, such as Min Pya and Myay Pone in Rakhine State. A principle of the CNLD is to work with other parties that share the same objectives of equality and self-determination and a common vision for a federal union. The CNLD will continue to work with other parties, ethnic armed organizations and civil society organizations in the peace process. See Table 8.

The Mon Unity Party

The Mon Unity Party is the result of the merger of two registered parties—the All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP), founded in 2010, and the Mon National Party (MNP), founded in 2012. It was registered on 11 July 2019.

The public pressure in Mon State for parties to merge persisted from 2012, when the Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) re-

⁷² The party voted in October 2019 to suspend engagement with both alliances.

Table 8: Ethnic Parties in Chin State, Their 2015 Electoral Results and the Alliances to Which They Belonged

Chin Parties/Parties in the Chin State	Base	Alliance Member of	2015 Election Results	Current Status
Chin National Party (CNP)	Yangon	NBF	—	Merged into CNLD
Chin Progressive Party (CPP)	Yangon Region	UNA	—	Merged into CNLD
Chin League for Democracy (CLD)	Yangon Region	UNA	—	Merged into CNLD
Chin National Party (CNP) ^a	Magway Region	—	—	New
Ethnic Nationalities Development Party (ENDP)	Chin State	NBF	—	Remains in existence
Zo National Development Party (ZNDP)	Chin State	—	—	Remains in existence
Asho Chin National Party (ACNP)	Chin State	NBF	—	Remains in existence
Zomi Congress for Democracy Party (ZCD)	Chin State	—	6	Remains in existence

Note: a. The CNP is based in Magway Region and was only approved by the Union Election Commission in August 2019. The CNP has offered to merge with the CNLD; see “ချင်းနယ်တို့ ပူးပေါင်းဆုံရွေးကောက်ပွဲ” [Two chin parties will discuss merging], *The Voice*, 17 March 2020, <http://thevoicemyanmar.com/2020-election/40281-chin?fbclid=IwAR3VVVLoKc3tTNIhnRI1zEOQ-beUEO6mRCJITZ-MNuelrHnyGGPtVUcuwKwRI> (accessed 17 March 2020).

registered as the Mon Democracy Party; it changed its name to the Mon National Party. But the AMRDP refused to approve the four-point agreement on merging, signed on 22 April of that year before hundreds of representatives, civil society organizations and monks. These four points stipulated that the two parties had to agree to unite as one, to hold regular monthly meetings on party unity, to decide on a new name and to set the deadline for fusion.

However, after the parties suffered electoral defeat in 2015, merger talks were restarted. In 2016, public pressure also further intensified. Pro-merger groups left the AMRDP and later combined with other forces—such as civil society organizations; monks; representatives from the New Mon State Party, a Mon armed actor—to force the MNP and the AMRDP to merge into a single party or face competition from a new Mon party called the Mon National Representative Party (MNRP) that they would then form.⁷³ Despite differences, the two parties thus committed to negotiate on a merger.

The negotiations were staggered. First, the political parties decided to negotiate alone and to build trust between themselves without acknowledging external pressures or any third-party offer of facilitation. After reaching an agreement to unite, the two parties established the Mon Unity Committee and held discussions with the representatives from the third party/collective force that aimed to form the Mon National Representative Party. The merger negotiations took two years, with eight official meetings and countless informal meetings. Party representatives interviewed mentioned that they shortlisted ten names proposed by Mon people for a new merged party and finally went with the “Mon Unity Party” as approved by the Union Election Commission.

The leadership positions of the MUP are allotted through negotiations and based on seniority, and the party’s central executive committees

⁷³ The movement was later named the Yamanya movement, making third party members “Yamanya forces”. Also see Aung Aung, “Understanding Ethnic Political Parties in Myanmar: The Cases of Mon and Karen States”, *ISEAS Perspective* no. 2018/57, p. 3, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_57@50.pdf (accessed 25 September 2018).

comprise five members from each of the two major merged Mon parties and four from a third party. The party branches are organized in such a way that, if a member of one of the merged parties occupies the chair in a township, members of the other party are vice chairman and secretary while a member of the first party takes the joint secretary post. The party depends for contributions on the central committee, the central executive committee and a 10 per cent share of the salaries of its representatives in both national and subnational Hluttaws. Donors also contribute to support the steps needed for the completion of the merger process. The MUP will field candidates in Mon State and Tanintharyi Region.

The party will engage with other ethnic parties who share its policies on ethnic issues, and it works closely with regional actors—ethnic armed organizations who are signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and the civil society organizations working for the Mon national cause—as a collective front. See Tables 9 and 10.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the push factors of electoral defeat and public pressure, party mergers have two primary objectives. One is to increase prospects for participation and representation in both the political and the peace

Table 9: Ethnic Parties in Mon State, Their 2015 Electoral Results and the Alliances to Which They Belong

Mon Parties	Alliance Member of	2015 Election Results	Current Status
All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMRDP)	NBF	1	Merged into MUP
Mon National Party (MNP)	UNA	3	Merged into MUP
Women Party (Mon)	—	—	Remains in existence

Table 10: Five Case Studies of Merged Ethnic Parties

	Kayah	Kayin	Kachin	Chin	Mon
Party Name	Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP)	Karen National Democratic Party (KNDP)	Kachin State People's Party (KSPP)	Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)	Mon Unity Party
Registration Date	Registered 08/09/2017, No. 105	Registered 22/02/2018, No. 108	Registered 07/06/2019, No. 115	Registered 11/07/2019, No. 116	Registered 11/07/2019, No. 117
Merged Parties	Two parties ANDP KUDP	Three parties (+) ^a KSDP KDP UKNDP	Three parties (+) UDPKS KSDP KDP	Three parties CNP CPP CLD	Two parties (+) AMRDP AMP Third-party (Yamanya forces)
Merger Process	Two-party dialogue	Some PSDP ^b Four-party dialogue	Former KSPP & UNFD ^c Four-party dialogue, civil society organization facilitation (17-member committee)	Triparty dialogue	Two-party dialogue Party and Yamanya forces dialogue

Negotiators	Ten from each party	Eight from each party	Ten from each party	Thirteen from each party	
Duration	One year	One year	More than one year		Two years
Leadership	Internal elections	Internal elections	Electoral weight	Collective leadership, six-month rotation	Negotiation
Registered As	Regional Party	National Party	Regional Party	National Party	National Party
Target Area	The entire Kayah State	Five townships in Kayah State	All eighteen townships in Kayah State	All seven townships, Sagam and Magway Regions and Rakhine State	The entire Mon State and Tanintharyi Region
Party Merger Strategy	State-based merger	Ethnic-based merger	State-based merger	Ethnic-based merger	Ethnic-based merger

Notes:

- a. (+) Means constituents of a merged party are not limited to only registered political parties. Other groups or entities also involved.
- b. The Phalon Sawaw Democratic Party remains active. However, some of its members joined the KNDP as part of the initial merger negotiations.
- c. The UNFD party, which was officially abolished on 5 March 2020 by the Union Election Commission, has reportedly combined with the KSPP.

processes. The other is to build the large local parties that will lead a federal system of government that guarantees self-determination and ethnic equality. The research findings presented here confirm these objectives because the parties that merged chose strategies of fusion over other pre-electoral coalition forms. Also, it is because mergers occurred across different ethnic alliances with different federal visions and principles that conditioned the success of their mergers.

As a consequence of the party mergers discussed here, the ethnic blocs that appear after the 2020 election may be more closely aligned with the politics of either the UNA or the NBF, depending on the dominant constituent party in each merger. Ethnic party mergers simplify party labels for voters and make it easier for them to vote on the basis of ethnic preferences. Mergers also increase public interest in politics and the political participation of ethnic communities. The durability of mergers depends on continuous party building, and on negotiations and equality among party members. Marked by ethnic nationalism, the electoral landscape of the upcoming 2020 general elections in Myanmar will witness a combination of mergers and other pre-electoral coalition forms among ethnic parties in competition with Bamar national parties.

The 2020 electoral results will also influence the durability of the merged parties, their political allegiances and the parliamentary coalitions that they may join. It is possible that the parties will have different alternatives to pursue their federal objectives in the future, as shaped by the political context after the 2020 election. There may also be new parties founded in the future which could change party interactions. In summary, party mergers are a new development in Myanmar politics, highlighting a transition from a previous focus on questions of authoritarianism and democracy to one on the creation of a federal system of government with a stronger cleavage between competing Bamar and ethnic nationalisms.

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