

From Margin to Center: Experiences of Political and Social Marginalization of Ethnic Minorities in Karenni State

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Edited by Radka Antalíková, PhD



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current political marginalization of people living in Karenni State and, in this way, to contribute to the transformation of the structure of political institutions. The study used qualitative methodology and included 15 participants of different ethnicities living in Karenni State. The study found that the ethnic minorities in Karenni State are being discriminated against by the government with respect to their culture, religion, and ethnic origins. Specifically, the findings showed institutional discrimination against the ethnic minorities, minorities' lack of trust in institutions, lack of participation in decision-making processes, lack of access to information, social services, and civic engagement, and their experiences of and perceptions of conflict and

violence. It was found that all of these themes are related to the concept of Burmanization. Taken together, these results indicate that there is ongoing forced cultural assimilation of ethnic minorities by the dominant majority ethnic group, the Bamar. In general, these findings suggest that the political representation of ethnic minority people needs to be considered in order to ensure all-inclusiveness in relevant institutions and decision-making processes, which could help end the cycle of conflict in Karenni State. The study contributes to our understanding of political and social marginalization in Karenni State and the root causes of the current escalating conflicts between the ethnic minorities and the State Government as well as to some practical solutions to these problems.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express their sincere gratitude to their focal persons for helping them to get in contact with different organizations and for contacting the participants. The researchers are also immensely grateful to the participants for sharing their experiences. The researchers hope this research paper will

contribute to the understanding of political and social marginalization in Karenni State and the root causes of current uprising conflicts between ethnic minorities and the State Government as well as provide practical solutions to ending of the cycle of ongoing conflicts and civil war in Burma.



JOINT PEACE FUND



Introduction

“Burma is our country, Burmese literature is our literature; Burmese language is our language” was the slogan of Dobama Asiayone (Tarling, 1992, p. 289), one of the oldest political institutions structurally promoting Bamar supremacy, operating since precolonial times. This policy affected all Bamar-dominated political institutions and the discrimination against frontier populations continued under the military regime after gaining independence from the British (Smith, 1994). Until today, Burma¹ is a country with strong social structures from which people from minority groups have suffered social injustice and inequality due to the imbalance in power sharing. There are many kinds of discrimination and violations in this social system, such as poverty, discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and these have been repeatedly perpetrated.

Historically, Karenni people have hardly ever had any willful engagement with the Burmese government. In 1875, the British declared Karenni State independent, which meant it belonged neither to Burma nor to the British. After U Nu gained power over the country, Karenni State refused to join the union, so the Burmese Army invaded in 1948 (Smith, 1994). The invasion marked the beginning of over 70 years of civil war, making it one of the longest running conflicts in Burma. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Karenni people have faced a series of violence by General Ne Win and consecutive governments throughout the 1980s until the present day (Smith, 1994). Although Karenni armed groups have made several attempts to implement peace agreements with the military/government, these have always failed. As a consequence, in rural areas of Karenni State, there are people living in poverty, with poor infrastructure and low literacy rates, without educational opportunities, healthcare facilities, and with a general lack of development. Moreover, there are thousands of refugees and displaced persons from Karenni State across Thailand and Burma (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees South-East Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2014), and there is no reliable data for the amount of deaths from the many armed conflicts and abuses.

The Karenni people have always felt like they do not belong to Burma as they believe they have been marginalized

politically and structurally and treated like they do not exist (Smith, 1994). Political marginalization is the exclusion of individuals or groups from political participation and decision-making processes (Watts, 2002), while social marginalization typically refers to procedures through which members of a society are excluded from the labor market and social welfare (Democratic Dialogue, 1995). Political and social marginalization are closely connected; people who are socially marginalized cannot participate actively in politics either. Furthermore, if particular people cannot participate politically, they cannot be politically represented either and consequently, they do not have political power, since they cannot be law- and policy-makers. Therefore, the consequence of exclusion from political institutions is that public policy cannot reflect marginalized people and in turn, those people cannot access public services and legal protection. Finally, political and social marginalization can lead to conflict, since having formal, structural power can lead to control of and access to resources (Watts, 2002).

Inclusive political institutions with specific structures that consider ethnic perspectives and represent the whole Burma could be the key to reduce the tension between non-Bamar ethnic people and Bamar-dominated government and act as a strategy for conflict resolution. At the same time, there is a need for political participation of populations that have been historically marginalized. In line with this, a previous report on Karenni State published by Transnational Institute argued that “Kayah [Karenni] State should become a centerpiece for enlightened and inclusive change, ending the decades of ethnic conflict, political marginalization, and socio-economic neglect” (Kramer, Russell, & Smith, 2018, p. 133). Hence, the reason for conducting this research project is to acquire evidence for achieving an inclusive political institutional structure, which would genuinely represent the ethnic people in Karenni State and operated on principles of equality and justice, and, in this way, to help inform solutions to the country's long-running civil war in order to bring sustainable peace among its ethnic minorities. Specifically, the current research will investigate how people from Karenni State experience social and political marginalization as well as explore ways how to improve the participation of ethnic minorities in decision-making processes.

Methodology

This study used qualitative methodology, specifically, face-to-face in-depth interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, because this way, researchers could follow up by asking more detailed questions to get relevant information about specific topics. Moreover, by employing open-ended questions, participants were free to express their opinions in their own words. In addition, it was judged as very important for the researchers' and participants' relationship to have the opportunity to respond immediately and freely. In the interview guide, 11 questions were included. Firstly, the participants' sense of belonging in Burma was discussed, followed by asking about the benefits and challenges stemming from being a part of Burma. Secondly, the participants were asked whether they have felt included or marginalized when it comes to their access to social services and benefits from Karenni State's natural resources, followed by questions about their experiences with the state and national governments. Thirdly, questions were asked about the participants' representation and participation in government institutions and the current national peace process. Finally, questions about the participants' vision for the future of the country and their recommendations for a more inclusive political decision-making process were included. The questions were first formulated in English and then translated into Burmese. To make sure the chosen method was appropriate for the local context, a small pilot was conducted with a Karenni woman working in Yangon. Through this pilot study, valuable feedback was received, specifically with respect to the clarification of identity and ethnicity in the interview questions.

Sample, Sampling, and Procedure

A non-probability sampling method, specifically a snowball strategy, was used in this study; the participants were recruited by referral from their circle of acquaintances.

Moreover, the participants were chosen for their work experience in the community and knowledge of the political situation by using purposive sampling. In addition, the researchers tried to include multiple sub-ethnic groups of the Karenni people and to include both women and men. The final sample included 15 participants in total, eight female and seven male participants of different ethnicities: Kayan, Kayaw, Karenni, Bamar-Kayaw, and Karen. Before the data collection, the researchers contacted people from Karenni State who are working in civil society organizations (CSOs) and explained their research project to them. The researchers had previously already networked with people working in CSOs from Karenni State and thus, they were able to build trust through these networks.

The data was collected in Loikaw, Karenni State, in February 2019. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in the participants' offices or homes or at the researchers' accommodation, which were considered safe and secure places for the participants. First, the researchers introduced themselves and gave leaflets to the participants to introduce the research institute. Then, the purpose of the research was explained and the participants were asked to verbally give informed consent to participate in a recorded interview. The participants were told that their names and organizations would not be described in the report and that this descriptive information was only for the researchers' use. The participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to skip questions or completely withdraw from the interview if they wished. After that, the researchers started asking the interview questions. After the data collection was completed, the participants were debriefed by asking them if they would like to add more information, in case any additional information which was not included in the questions was relevant, or if they had any questions themselves.

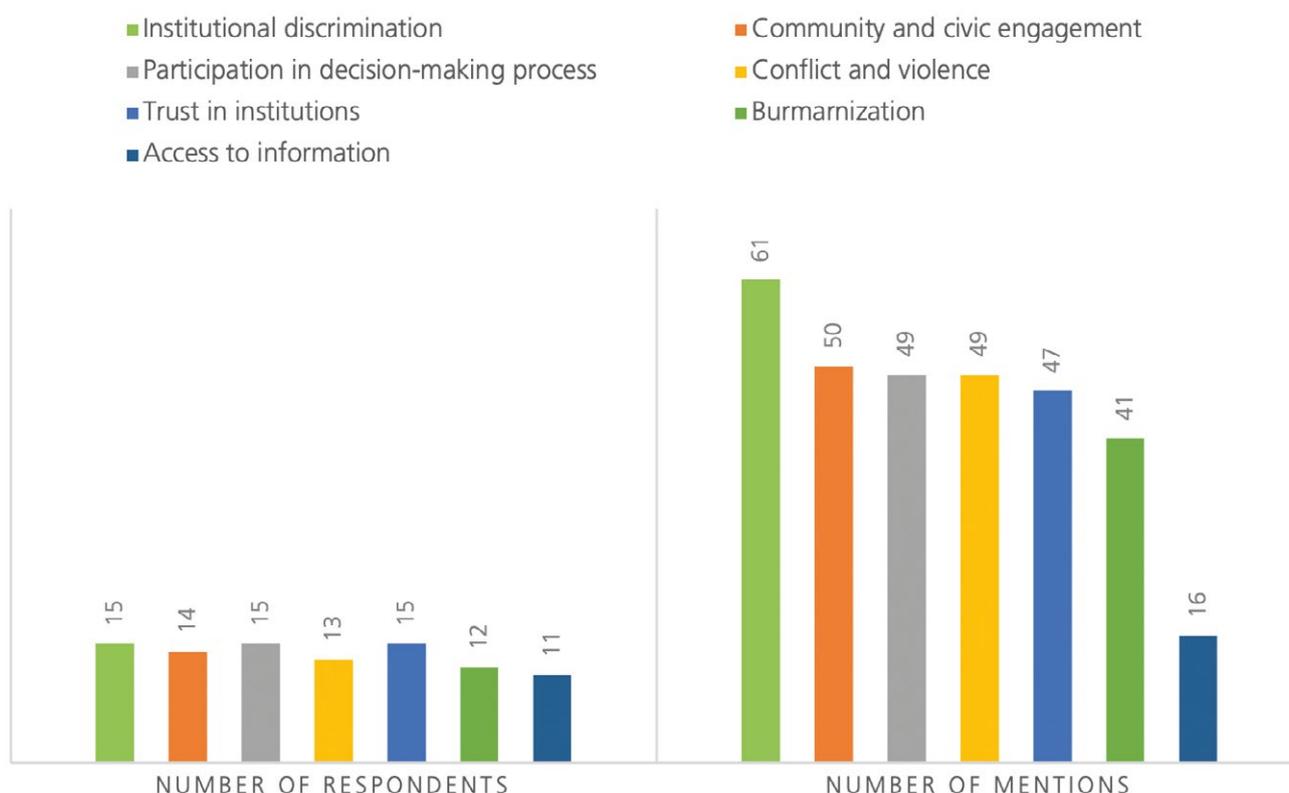
Findings and Discussion

This research used a multi-dimensional approach to measuring political and social marginalization in the experiences of people from Karenni State. The measurement was originally based on the following dimensions: (1) conflict and violence, (2) security, (3) community and civic engagement, (4) access to information, (5) trust in institutions, (6) participation in decision-making processes and (7) others, from the *Dimensions of Political Marginalization* framework (World Bank, 2014). However, during the data analysis, the researchers realized that some dimensions were overlapping and, at the same time, a lot of findings were classified in the “others” category. Therefore, conflict and violence and security were combined into one dimension, “conflict and violence”, and two new dimensions called “Institutional discrimination” and “Burmanization” were added, maintaining a total of 7 dimensions.

Participation in Decision-Making Processes

People’s participation in decision-making is one of the most important things for a democratic country, since it is their fundamental right (Tafjord, 2007). However, all participants mentioned that they do not have rights to participate in decision-making processes, such as those relating to political issues and natural resources (see Figure 1). Government institutions are very centralized and the posts of decision-makers are generally occupied by Bamar people from upper Burma, while local people are employed as lower-level staff. For example, participant KN9 said that “there are no ethnic people in the director positions or chief of administration positions at the district and township levels of administration”. Moreover, the participant explained that the current chief minister of Karenni State is from a local ethnic group,

Figure 1: The Participants’ Experiences of Marginalization.



but he does not have a mandate for decision-making; instead, all decisions come from the central government. Similarly, participant KN10 argued that “we already have the skills but positions are filled with their people in a form of Burmanization”.

In addition, all participants expressed that they did not feel they were getting benefits from their state’s resources and that all decisions with regard to these also came from the central government. For instance, the hydroelectric power plants in the state only distribute electricity to areas outside the state. Participant KN10 said, “Mineral extraction projects began in 1830 and hydroelectric power plants started from 1964 in the state. But we are still trying to get electricity until now. I don’t think it is fair for us”.

Institutional Discrimination

All participants mentioned that they have experienced discrimination; in fact, they mentioned this the most frequently out of all themes, precisely 61 times (see Figure 1). Discrimination exists when a specific group of people suffer from unequal treatment due to their ethnicity, religion, race, or social class and it can happen in many forms, individually and institutionally, with the intentions of favoring dominant groups (Krieger, 1999). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* by Turner (2006) describes *institutional discrimination* as an indirect form of discrimination that results in exclusion of minority groups from participation in institutions or from access to resources. Having unfair and unequal chances for employment in government institutions was an example given by the majority of participants. Participant KN7 from the government education department stated, “When it comes to an opportunity for promotion, the people at the highest positions in the department have a tendency to give such chances to those who are of the same ethnicity as them in the first place”. Concerning this, KN13 said,

“...if we look at General Administration Departments in the state, it is rare to see local ethnic people in higher positions and only people from the mainland govern us. Also, if we have a look at the rights of the government staff, the local staff from the State do not get the

permission to stay at housings provided by the government and almost all of staff living in these housings are from the mainland. Although these kinds of practices are not officially legalized, we can see obviously how the system of the State Government treats the local ethnic people differently”.

Subsequently, the participant described the centralized hiring structure in institutions and gave the specific example of the selection process for the head of departments in state universities. The order from the central government typically comes with a restricted degree as a requirement for the particular job position. As a result, chances are automatically blocked for local ethnic people with ordinary degrees, while candidates who possess specific qualifications set by the government, which are not available in Karenni State, are selected. In addition to this, KN10 talked about the impact of matriculation examination marks on the admission to Loikaw Technological University. Generally, the marks of local students are lower, because they have to learn from teachers who not only have less experience but also do not have enough knowledge of the local context, while students from big cities like Yangon or Mandalay can learn with well-experienced teachers, so in the end they gain higher marks.

Conflict and Violence

Conflict, violence, and civil war have created immense political instability in Burma. If people feel fear, situations of conflict and violence can be harmful for them both mentally and physically. Thirteen participants in total talked about conflict and violence (see Figure 1). Most of these participants mentioned that they are still concerned about fighting. Participant KN4 said, “I always feel fear of war. I am not safe; it can happen anytime”. This is because the Karenni National Progressive Party has not yet signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Participant KN14 said that “currently, there is only a state-level bilateral ceasefire agreement between the Karenni National Progressive Party and the military, which means that there can be war anytime. This situation can be further intensified by the military’s expanding troops. Such activities are one of the blocking factors in the peace

process". Moreover, participant KN10 criticized the peace process, saying that the current government only cares about ethnic armed organizations that are powerful. He said that "[the] dialogue is based on power. I think that is very wrong".

Lack of Access to Social Services and Community and Civic Engagement

Fourteen participants talked about their experience with community and civic engagement and the lack of social services in their area (see Figure 1). Mostly, they mentioned that they have limited educational opportunities: there are not enough schools, the teachers are from upper Burma and typically do not want to stay in the area for too long. In addition, some areas are not reachable by the government education system and the government's criterion of a minimum 45 students necessary to operate a basic education school often cannot be fulfilled. For instance, participant KN6 said that "even though the government criteria of the school are not met in our area, we need the school. In the end, local people who are interested in working as volunteer teachers go there". Due to difficulties in access, and because there is not enough trained medical staff available, healthcare facilities are also still lacking in Karenni State. Participant KN7 stated that most doctors who come to their area have been demoted in other parts of the country and are not really skillful. According to Hamilton and Svensson (2014),

"poor public service provision may not only increase the risk of falling into poverty and reduce the ability to transition out of it, but may create a vicious circle where poor public service provision results in the state's legitimacy being questioned and a general distrust in the political system, including reduced political participation" (p. 4).

Community and civic engagement are very important for community development and for promoting people's participation in decision-making processes. Yet, some participants mentioned that there are no consultations with local people to solve community problems and address community needs. Participant KN1 suggested

that the government needs to "carefully and respectfully listen to the voices of people from Karenni State... They need to welcome and open the way for people to participate". Similarly, participant KN5 said that the government does not have a proper policy and program for youth empowerment; he wants real community representatives in youth committees. If people are empowered and engage more with the government, they will become more willing to participate in decision-making, because they will trust government institutions more. At the same time, by the government providing better access to social services such as education, healthcare, and transportation, people could in turn participate more in political activities. All of these factors overlap and could together support active citizenship and democratic transition.

Lack of Access to Information

Eleven participants talked about the lack of information access, mentioning it 16 times in total (see Figure 1). The participants felt there is no transparency about the government's project implementation; for example, participant KN1 said that the local people do not know about fiscal sharing between the national and state levels. "We do not know how many investments there are in Karenni State. We didn't get information about how much the Union Government shares back to Karenni State and where they use that money". Moreover, there is no information about the peace process either. Participant KN9 mentioned that most ordinary people are interested in the peace process, but they "do not know about the peace process. They can get information only from Facebook and media. People do not have information, they cannot participate".

Lack of Trust in Government Institutions

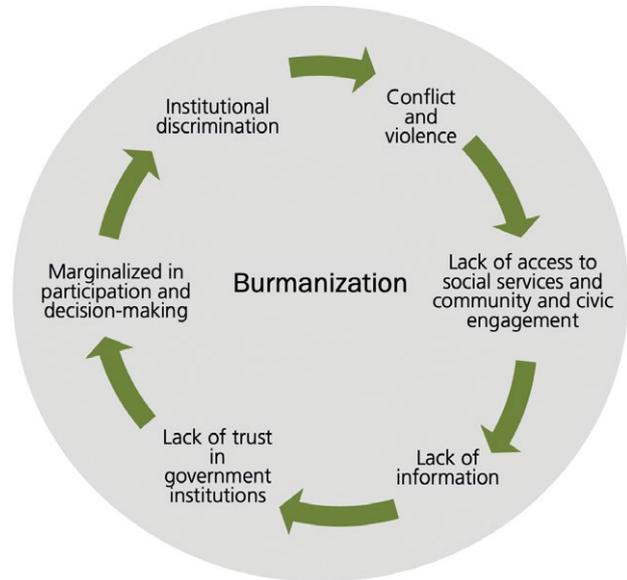
Most participants indicated that they do not have trust in the acts of the Karenni government (Kayah State Government), since there is little participation of local ethnic people in its decision-making processes that affect the local community. KN6 stated, "Although the current government was elected by the people in Karenni State, the control and power are still centralized and

the local authority here is only on the surface". Local ethnic mobilizers and those who have genuine interest in the democratic transition are only at the ground level and cannot get involved at the decision-making level. Moreover, local ethnic people living around economic development project areas suffer from environmental damages, but responsible people from the State Government who give permission for these projects do not take any responsibility for this or offer any compensation. Lack of transparency in resource allocation and revenue sharing from investments in the State creates low trust in the work of the State Government. Yet, previous research about Karenni State has shown that trust-building is essential to attaining sustainable peace (Kramer, Russell, & Smith, 2018). In addition, Levi (1998) argued that a real civilian government should base its activities and policies on the desires of its citizens, which in turn will enable the government to gain the citizens' trust and respect.

Experiences of Burmanization

Burmanization refers to the Bamar ethnic group dominating decision-making roles and forcing assimilation to their culture and religion through laws, policies, and activities. Many research studies have previously described Burmanization (Berlie, 2008; Gravers, 2010; Holmes, 1967; Karlsson, 2012; Kham, 2016; Lewis, 1924). In the current study, even though the interview guide had originally not included questions about Burmanization, all interviewed participants mentioned it and thought it was an important factor in Burma's political and peace process (see Figure 1). Specifically, most of the participants talked about the statue of General Aung San being erected in minority areas, including Loikaw in Karenni State, saying that local people were not happy about it. Even though Karenni youth had protested against the statue, the local government built it anyway. The protesters believed that the statue of Aung San was not appropriate for

Figure 2: The Cycle of Marginalization.



their ethnic identity and their state, a clear example of Burmanization occurring at the time of the current study.

All in all, according to the analysis, Burmanization appears to be the underlying mechanism of all the other dimensions of political and social marginalization found in this study, connected to each other in a cycle of marginalization (see Figure 2). Specifically, Burmanization is systematically marginalizing and discriminating against ethnic people, preventing them from being represented in institutions, leading them to distrust said institutions. Similarly, access to social services and information, community and civic engagement, and trust towards institutions are connected to political participation. If people cannot participate in political activities, they cannot be included in decision-making processes. These are the root causes of the ongoing conflict.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of the present research was to explore experiences of people living in Karenni State and, based on that, to determine what kind of political institutions would be able to support the peace-building process in Burma. The findings confirmed a lack of ethnic minorities' participation in decision-making processes, discrimination they face in state institutions, and impacts of the long history of conflict and violence in the country. The findings also showed that the lack of access to social services and information, community and civic engagement, and lack of trust in institutions are all related to Burmanization. Taken together, these results indicate that there is ongoing forced assimilation by the dominant majority ethnic group, the Bamar. The Bamar dominate both political and social institutions, their supremacy and hierarchy policies and activities marginalize ethnic minorities, limit their access to information, and prevent their participation in decision-making. Importantly, our results provide evidence for the cycle of ongoing conflict and civil war in Burma. On the whole, these findings should be considered when forming inclusive political institutions with true representation of ethnic minority people in order to welcome them in the critical decision-making processes, and in this way, to bring the cycle of conflict to an end.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of sampling, since the participants were selected based on their experience working with political institutions, and hence, the findings cannot reflect experiences of all people from Karenni State. Similarly, further studies should be carried out in order to explore ethnic minorities' representation in the government and military institutions across the country, not only in Karenni State. Finally, the timeframe of the data collection unexpectedly coincided with the protest against General Aung San's statue in Loikaw. This had some impact on the study, since participants responded with the current situation in mind and many of their answers were directly related to the causes of the protest.

There are a number of important changes that need to be made in order to achieve the vision of people from Karenni State:

1/ Firstly, and most importantly, the Union Government must recognize ethnic identities' historical background in order for them to have a sense of belonging to the union. Moreover, it needs to engage and consult with CSOs, ethnic armed groups, political parties, and respective ethnic civilians from Karenni State when

critical decisions that could have an impact both on the peace-building process and in nation-building are being made. Forced assimilation into the Burmese culture, symbols, and religion should be avoided.

- 2/ While forming a coalition government (including ethnic political parties) to reconcile more with ethnic minorities through the reformation of the 2008 Constitution, the Union Government should decentralize administrative functions and government institutions in order to improve the quality of service delivery for all.
- 3/ The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement framework needs to be reviewed and space for all stakeholders, including all ethnic leaders regardless of political and armed power, needs to be created.
- 4/ Restructuring the Tatmadaw in order for it to be inclusive with the representation of ethnic minorities in high positions is strongly recommended to reinforce the trust-building process.
- 5/ Ethnic armed organizations should have a systematic and strategic approach in the peace process focused on building unity. This could be done by cooperating among themselves in order to find alternative ways of enabling non-signatory groups' participation in the political dialogue.
- 6/ Providing evidence through research to be used for advocacy is also critical in peace-building. This way, local people's voices in the peace process could be amplified in order for it to become more inclusive when it comes to decision-making. Public awareness about social cohesion should be raised through civic education by CSOs and local members of parliament and ethnic armed organizations should create a channel for public consultation with local communities.

The true desire of people from Karenni State is to achieve equal rights by speaking up about their sufferings as well as by eliminating discrimination against them. Not only listening to the voices of ethnic minorities living in Karenni State, but also the actual implementation of agreements during public consultation from beginning to end is necessary. This kind of practices would help build public trust in political institutions, which in turn would help reduce tension and conflict between CSOs and the State Government and it would move reconciliation forward. This way, the government would become a truly civilian government, representing the voices of ethnic minorities calling for inclusive participation with mutual trust, and overcoming the ongoing conflict in Karenni State.

Endnotes

1. Since the names “Burma” and “Karenni State” were changed to “Myanmar” and “Kayah State”, respectively, by Bamar-dominated military government with long-lasting divisive consequences in the state (Kramer, Russel, & Smith, 2018), this report uses the original names.

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Izumi Idoia Zubia | Cover illustrations
Myriam Rueda | Layout Design

Imprint

© 2019 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Myanmar Office
No 739, Sabal Yone, 1st street,
Yankin Township,
Yangon, Myanmar

Responsible:

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