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The “Other” Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms

ARDETH MAUNG THAWNGHMUNG

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For decades, the face of the Karen people to the outside world has been rebels fighting the Government of the Union of Myanmar. The year after independence following an Arakanese rebellion and an insurrection by the Communist Party in 1948, different elements of Karen-led army units broke away from the government and eventually coalesced with yet other armed groups under the leadership of the Karen National Defense Organization.

In a country run by a military government and all but closed to international researchers from 1962 until recently, the Karen rebellion was viewed by many as a valiant (although increasingly futile) stand for minority autonomy against oppression. The largely Protestant leadership of the rebellion evoked sympathy from outside the country especially in North America so much so that the Karens were sometimes mistakenly seen as predominantly Christian.

What most observers did not realize, however, was that Karens involved in the rebellion constituted only a small minority of the Karen population in the country and that by far most Karens were not Christian.

These misunderstandings are not surprising. There is a lack of access to the country’s minority areas with travel restrictions impeding contacts even by the country’s citizens so that nobody, local or expatriate can do field research. With the main avenue of understanding ethnic relations coming from refugees on the Thai border, who often are sympathetic to the Karen National Union (KNU), it is clear how misunderstandings about Karens developed and grew.

Now a big step has been taken towards filling this gap with Ardeth Maung Thawngmung’s book, *The “Other” Karens*. Even before opening the book one gets positive feelings from favorable

comments on the back cover by Robert Taylor and Ashley South, two scholars who do not always agree on the area's ethnic peoples.

The author is eminently prepared to study this subject. She studied at some of the best institutions of secondary and higher learning in the country and also had access to indigenous Karen networks. She writes (p. xxi) that "As a Karen, I have had privileged access to the community and information that are not easily accessible to foreign researchers." Through family connections she got to know leading scholars such as U Tun Aung Chain, an ethnic Karen who understands perhaps better than anyone the position of Karens in the country. Besides serving on the Myanmar Historical Commission, Stanford (as he is often called) is scrupulously honest and impartial, something recognized by the KNU in consenting to his serving as translator for its ceasefire negotiations with the government. Fluent in Karen, Burmese, and English, the author also was able to visit refugee camps in Thailand as well as cities across the United States and elsewhere to meet Karens.

She also importantly had the determination and patience to see this study through. She comments that her research aroused suspicions among Karens about her motives as well as doubts among KNU supporters that she was not faithful to the cause of the rebellion. She writes (p. xxiv) that she could not "count the times I was tempted to abandon this project as a result of the emotional stress and moral dilemmas involved in pursuit of it."

Partly this is because the Karen population is diverse and politicized. It is also subject to so many variables that no precise definition is possible. Discussions over the issue have not settled what Karenness is since anthropologist Peter Hinton asked, "Do the Karen really exist" in 1983. The fact is, as Hinton wrote, that they (an indefinite term at best) have no common identity.

Even seemingly definitive factors, such as fluency in one of the Karen languages, cannot conclusively determine whether one is or should be considered Karen. There are now thousands of individuals claiming "Karenness" while not speaking a Karen tongue—a well educated Karen in Chiang Mai once told me, "The Karen of Prome are perfect Karens but they cannot speak one word of Karen." When asking a high-ranking Burman government official in Naypyitaw whether this could be true, he replied, "Of course . . . my wife [is such a person]."

There are millions who do identify themselves as Karen (or with such terms as *Pgakanyaw*, *Phlong*, *Kayin*, and *Kariang* that almost inevitably denote being some kind of Karen). Most are Buddhist with an admixture of Karen religious beliefs. About 90 percent live in Myanmar (and mostly refer to the country as that).

The actual number of the "other" is estimated in the book (p. 65) as not less than two million. Given the politics of the country as well as issues of definition, there can be no more accurate estimate. As for the KNU, the author's "generous" estimate of 10,000 members (p. 65) may actually be low if one considers the thousands of people in conflict zones who (often out of desperation) support the KNU. The author cites KNU authorities who mention the need for such help (p. 63), one of her sources even claiming that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) was committing “genocide” by relocating Karens to third countries by depleting its “mass base.” Reports of the Karen Human Rights Group and the Free Burma Rangers (as well as others) and publications, such as *Undaunted* (2010), by a Karen woman, Zoya Phan, detail the many contacts between the KNU and ordinary Karen in or near conflict zones, all of which makes it likely that a more generous estimate of the size of the KNU is appropriate. Still it constitutes a small minority.

The discussion of Karens is placed within a larger framework as seen from the subtitle: “Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms.” The introduction (p. xx) states that “This book examines the ‘other’ or ‘quiet’ minorities who are members of ethnic groups associated with well-known armed resistance organizations yet do not take up arms.” She adds (p. xxi) that her study “examines the circumstances that set them apart . . . the nature of the relationships between the quiet minorities and their rebel counterparts and assesses how these intra-ethnic differences and divisions affect the armed resistance movement . . . conflict resolution, and political reform.”

The author’s interest in this topic was influenced by her being an “other” Karen. Another factor important to her was that the quiet members of minorities with armed resistance groups have been understudied. Citing James Scott, she comments (p. 3) that remaining quiet is more common than taking up arms (as shown by the few members of the KNU). Chapter 1 discusses the political significance of other minorities. The author tells that she is contributing to bringing other minorities into the study of ethnic politics.

Chapter 2 builds on the author’s previous work, *The Karen Revolution*, in which she argued that recognizing that Karen peoples have voices beyond that of armed resistance and that recognizing this would contribute to harmonious communal relationships, peace, and stability. She discusses how disparate peoples developed a pan-Karen identity and the impacts this has had on Karen-Burman relationships.

In Chapter 3 the author reviews the “various elements of the constituency” that the KNU “claims to represent.” The chapter’s sections include government-controlled zones, rebel-controlled and contested zones, refugees, and Diaspora. In the section on government areas, the author focuses almost entirely on the Karen Baptist Convention which is an umbrella organization dominated by Sgaw Karens with 18 regional sections. The author tells (in parentheses p. 67) that she is focusing on Baptists rather than Anglicans, Catholics, or Buddhists.

While this focus is justifiable in a case study, in the grander work she has written, the author should have mentioned her target group earlier and openly. This is important because the KNU claims a large constituency. The November 1986 edition of the *Karen National Union (K.N.U.) Bulletin* (which called itself “a news organ of the Karen National Movement”), identified 12 groups: Sgaw, Pwo, Paku, Bwe, (and some related groups), Keko, Red Karen, Maw Nay Pwo, White Karen (in the “Sgaw family” but living apart), Black Karen, Striped Karen, and Pa-O, collectively covering

a large area of the Delta, Pegu Yoma, border areas, the Salween River watershed, and Kayah State. She could then have discussed how the KNU's political agenda disagreed with how most Red Karen and Pa-O envision themselves from where she could have explored KNU relationships with the different groups who do consider themselves Karen. This would have contributed to the larger arguments she is making.

Chapter 4 reviews the circumstances that led some Karen to join the KNU and others not to, even to the point of rejecting the KNU. Major factors included the place of residence, with Karen living in conflict zones as more prone to join the KNU than those living elsewhere. Competing identities was another factor with some Karen opting for being a Myanmar citizen, a Buddhist or joining some other group. Other lacked alternatives with either the KNU or the government forcibly conscripting them.

As a part of the author's aim to place the Karen into a comparative framework, Chapter 5 deals with "other ethno-nationalities in Myanmar/Burma." Following brief introductions to some armed ethnic movements, the author identifies three patterns of behavior, namely: 1) conducting activities that support the status quo (such as working for the government), 2) conducting activities undermining the status quo (such as joining ethnic-based parties), and 3) promoting ethnic identity and addressing humanitarian needs (such as through civil society groups or certain NGOs).

In the conclusion, the author compares the experience of "other" Karens with non-combatants elsewhere such as the Moros in the southern Philippines, the Palestinians, Kurds, and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. In identifying similar issues of competing loyalties as well as governmental divide-and-rule strategies, she clearly shows that the situation of minorities, such as the Karen is not unique, that non-participation is common and often constructive, and that there is room for productive comparisons.

As a pioneering effort, this work explores areas barely touched for decades in academic research. The author's linguistic skills, personal contacts, and intellectual ability (aided by a slowly changing political situation that tolerates some research) have significantly contributed to her work, especially to understanding Karens.

However, as with many pioneering efforts, there are shortcomings such as the inadequate discussion of the "KNU's constituents" and also a bibliography that curiously omits the several Burmese-language book on Karens including some sponsored by the government. Her discussion of Karen writing (p. 25) would also have profited from reading William Womack's dissertation (2005) on the development of Sgaw and Pwo written scripts which also would have enhanced her discussion of the totality of Karen peoples.

However, she surely has made significant overall advances in scholarship. This book examines the entire Karen population in English for the first time since Harry Marshall's ethnography of 1922. Ethnic relations in the country have been placed in a comparative framework that can serve as a basis for further work in the country as well as with groups elsewhere. Ardeeth Maung

Thawngmung has, with her many gifts, the potential to produce more insightful studies in the future that will be warmly welcomed by all interested academics.

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Religion, Politics and Gender in Indonesia: Disputing the Muslim Body

SONJA VAN WICHELEN

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Democratization and Islamization are the two most important developments that are shaping and influencing the socio-political landscape of Post-Suharto Indonesia. As the biggest Muslim majority country in the world, Indonesia is considered by many to have undergone a successful transition from authoritarian to democratic governance despite some limitations. A new democratic process has also witnessed the growth of Islam in Indonesia. It is generally understood that contemporary Indonesian Islam in the post-Suharto era has shown a decline in political Islam (as indicated by the weakening of Islamic political parties). However, to borrow a term, “social Islamization” is showing signs of progression (Ota *et al.* 2010, 5). This is clearly indicated by an increase in the publication of Islamic books, the popularity of veiling, a lively discussion of Muslim women’s rights, the emergence of a new generation of Islamic preachers, the growing attention accorded to the Islamic banking system, and the commodification of Islam.

This book was written in the context of the progressively changing democratization and Islamization, in which Islam has gradually moved to the center stage of Indonesian society and shaped its public sphere. Sonja van Wichelen notes how these two important developments, along with globalization (pp. xiii–xv), have enabled vibrant debates on social-cultural issues, Islam, gender, and politics to flourish and subsequently involve various actors with different ideologies. This book originated from a PhD thesis submitted to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR), the Netherlands, and builds on the author’s criticism of the current state of