

Department of International Relations and European Studies
FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES
Masaryk University

CAUSES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

MVZ489

Mgr. Zinaida Shevchuk, Ph.D.

Relative Deprivation within the Karen Conflict in Myanmar

Agata Martin 445175

In Brno, 22 June 2016

Summary

This paper explores the creation of the Karen conflict in Burma pertaining specifically to attitudes of disadvantage. The structure of this writing is first a historical background followed by a description of the current situation both of which provide context for the conflict's current and past realities then a theoretical framework based on relative deprivation, its application to the conflict, and its limitations.

Introduction

The expansion of colonial rule has posed some serious problems throughout history and has directly or indirectly led to many conflicts in the modern day world. The conflict between ethnic Karen and the Burmese government has clear origins but its explanations are not. Within the scope of ethnic conflict theory, the idea of 'ancient hatreds' has become somewhat of an outdated concept. Instead there is now a focus on more specific, concrete ideas such as weak institutions and opportunity. When observing the inception of the Karen conflict, the idea of relative deprivation could be used to provide an explanation of its cause.

History

The ongoing Karen conflict in Myanmar has been dubbed the world's longest running civil war with its origins being dated back to British colonial rule. Before Britain's invasion, the Burmese and Karen had some tensions due to the repression of the Karen people by Burma's monarchy, but after colonial rule ended ("KNU History"), the country's instability promoted the escalation of these problems to extreme proportions. Even though the minority's situation improved under British rule, hostility between the Burmese and Karen increased which would lead to future disputes after the end of colonial leadership (Tonnesson, 261). The two groups' differences deepened further out of loyalty to opposing sides: Burmese people were highly anti-imperialist and trying to free themselves of Britain's reach while the Karen people were pro-British rightists who actually helped them gain control over Burma (Fong, 36). The British simply exploited the inequality between the two groups to gain support from the Karen which were an important asset to them as soldiers with the added benefit of being highly knowledgeable of the terrain. Allying with the British created a way for the Karen to improve their lives by having an economic and political say for the first time in history (South). This created resentment amongst the Burmese that had most of

the power up until that moment. During the Japanese invasion the Burmese and Karen also found themselves on opposing sides with the former fighting with Japan and the latter fighting against it (Fong, 33). Eventually Burma also started fighting Japan but that unfortunately did not do much to improve their relationship with the Karen.

A couple of years before the end of colonial rule, the Karen National Union (KNU) was founded in 1947. It is defined by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program as an insurgent group who's goal was to create an independent Karen state. Over the years many different factions have been created that associate with the KNU including ones of a political and military nature (Uppsala). The KNU's military part is called the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). It was originally called the Karen National Defense Organization and had the purpose of defending Karen communities throughout Burma but their agenda soon widened and the armed forces were changed to the KNLA (Uppsala).

Burma gained its independence during the January of 1948 and shortly after many Karen civilian areas were heavily attacked by the radical nationalist government (Tonnesson, 262). About a year later, on 31 January 1949, the Karen National Union declared war on the Burmese government. Saw Ba U Gyi, the KNU president at the time, created the Four Principles shortly after the conflict began. They stated:

1. For us, surrender is out of the question;
2. We shall retain our arms;
3. The recognition of the Karen State must be complete;
4. We shall decide our own destiny. ("KNU History")

As the above Principles show, the Karen had strong determination from the very beginning. During colonial times the British saw an opportunity to instrumentalize the repression against the ethnic minority in order to establish and retain their rule. In turn, this upset the ethnic Burmese and also encouraged the creation of a strong Karen identity. Unfortunately, once Burma gained independence, the

animosity between the Burmese and Karen never ceased leading to almost seventy years of continuous conflict.

Current Situation

A little bit over two thirds of the population are ethnic Burmese with the rest consisting of many ethnic minorities including the Karen, Kachin, Shan, and others (Freedom House). The Karen supposedly make up anywhere between six and eight percent of Myanmar's entire population making it a significantly large number of people although accurate official statistics are not available. The 2008 constitution divided the country into seven regions which are predominantly Burmese and seven states with different ethnicities which has further divided the Burman majority from the rest of ethnic minorities. The government has continued to use one-sided violence "to repress demonstrations and against political opposition activists" as well as in their counterinsurgency campaigns (Uppsala).

For years after the beginning of the conflict, the KNU and KNLA were fighting for an independent state but since 1976 their goals for fighting have changed. The current struggle is for self-determination and a federal system with fair representation of the Karen people ("Objectives"). The government has largely ignored these demands and used tactics that could be considered as ethnic cleansing to further repression of the Karen population instead of coming to a compromise (South). A ceasefire agreement was signed late last year between the government and the KNU upsetting many Karen people. Their struggle has become more difficult as fragmentation within the group is growing and internal conflicts pose a threat to the whole cause (Falcone). Several Karen organizations even created alliances with Burma's government and promised to fight against other ethnic rebellions including their own (Falcone). Since the conflict has persisted for so long, the current activists, soldiers, and civilians have become bitter from the lifetime of struggle.

Theoretical Framework

Relative Deprivation Theory has to do with inequality that people experience within a society. In comparison to others, an individual or group feels deprived of some desirable things such as economic prosperity, political power, or personal rights. Either one or multiple people begin to desire tangible or intangible things that someone else in their environment has. To experience relative deprivation one must: 1.) first analyze and make comparisons within the setting 2.) come to the realization of being disadvantaged 3.) view this as unfair 4.) and begin to resent these prejudiced and unwarranted disadvantages (Smith et al.). The whole process creates a state of mind that “shapes emotions, cognitions, and behavior” (Smith and Pettigrew). For this theory to have relevance, it is important for not only inequality to be present but also the awareness and eventual resentment towards the situation as well as the “advantaged” people and groups within it. In terms of rebellions and insurgencies, the injustice is felt by a group of people that identify with one another whether that be because of religion, culture, or race (Peoples, 388). An ethnic group is composed of people that have a common identity and therefore serves as this type of group that can experience relative deprivation (Peoples, 389). This theory is used as one of the explanations of collective action by examining it through perceived injustice (Zomeren et al.). Depending on its extent and intensity, an in-group experiencing relative deprivation is enough to mobilize its people to work towards a common goal (Zomeren et al.). In theory, if the group feels disadvantaged, it will begin to resent others that are not in the same position (oftentimes viewed as the ones that are responsible for creating the disadvantage) and take steps to get rid of this feeling. This can happen through rebellions, riots, demonstrations, insurgencies, and acts of civil disobedience.

The idea of relative deprivation was first introduced by Samuel Stouffer in 1949 while studying U.S. soldiers after World War II. He developed the idea in

order to understand soldiers' psychology when it came to satisfaction during their service. Stouffer found that some men with slower promotions were more satisfied than others who had a faster rate of promotion (125). He realized that these individuals are comparing themselves within their environment as opposed to on a general scale so their satisfaction (or lack thereof) is a result of relative rather than overall comparisons (Stouffer, 126).

In 1970 Ted Gurr furthered the concept within the conflict field. In the book *Why Men Rebel* Gurr says that relative deprivation helps discover the reasons why political violence happens. According to Gurr, "men are quick to aspire beyond their social means and quick to anger when those means prove inadequate, but slow to accept their limitations" (58). He says people have a perception of "value expectations and value capabilities" (37). The former term pertains to the feeling of entitlement to certain things while the latter is the idea of a foreseen capability in obtaining and retaining the possession of something (Gurr, 37). If the value capability is lesser than value expectations, deprivation happens. This can occur through three ways; 1. "Decremental Deprivation" -when expectations remain the same but capabilities lessen (Gurr, 47)

2. "Aspirational Deprivation" -when capabilities remain the same but expectations rise (Gurr, 51)

3. "Progressive Deprivation" -expectation and capabilities are on a J-curve so they both grow but at a different rate; expectations increase faster and capabilities cannot keep up or even begin to fall (Gurr, 53)

James Davies also came out with a work around the same time about the relationship between expected and real satisfaction which is responsible for creating a sense of relative deprivation. Uprising is a result of "an intolerable gap between what people want and what they get," and is "most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by

a short period of sharp reversal” (Davies, 135-136). He utilized the J-curve to illustrate this occurrence and to show that rebellions were likely when a fall occurs after a time period of rising expectation and reality. When actual progress suddenly falls, expectation doesn't adjust to the new reality and promotes dissatisfaction.

Denton Morrison argued that within every society the social conditions needed for relative deprivation are existent and if a substantial enough number of people feel the same way, a movement is likely to form (677). He also used the concept of *decremental deprivation* and *aspirational deprivation* as a driving force powering social movements. Much evidence shows that social movements begin and grow when a group of people experiences relative deprivation (Morrison, 675).

Application

Starting from the independence of Burma, the Karen experienced relative deprivation. When colonial rule ended, the Karen were fully convinced they would receive their own independent state because the British had provided them with more freedom and essentially promised the formation of a Karen state (South). This scenario, however, did not happen which created the roots of feeling disadvantaged amongst the ethnic group. Not only did they not get their own state but also the British gave virtually all power to the Burmese. The Karen were strong allies to Britain for years and their decision to create a Burmese polity was essentially a betrayal of their trust (Fong, 74). A shutout from any political decisions fueled anger within the community.

The four steps of relative deprivation as described by Smith et al. could be applied to the Karen conflict the following way:

- 1.) The Karen were clearly already aware of their inequalities because otherwise they would not have been so apt to help the British. This shows the analysis and comparison within their setting (i.e. country).
- 2.) Once they experienced more

rights under colonial rule it was impossible to go back leading to the realization of being disadvantaged. 3.) The Karen felt largely betrayed by the British because of the unkept promise of an independent state. All political power was unfairly handed over exclusively to the Burmese. 4.) Resentment towards the Burmese majority was built throughout years of struggle, repression, and abuse. The only natural progression would be for the group to want independence from the “advantaged” and so the fight for autonomy ensued.

The struggle began out of desire for independence but now it has shifted focus and become more about human rights violations and the fight for a democratic federal system (Fong, 38). The KNU’s current mission statement is: “To establish a genuine Federal Union in cooperation with all the Karen and all the ethnic peoples in the country for harmony, peace, stability and prosperity for all” (“Objectives”).

The relative deprivation theory actually applies to the Karen conflict in an interesting way. The country’s overall situation is not favorable because, in fact, the entire general population faces repression of personal rights and liberties (Freedom House). However in comparison to the Burmese majority, the Karen, as well as other ethnic minority groups, are clearly disadvantaged. Usually the idea of relative deprivation is used in an opposite manner; even if a group has everything they need (food, shelter, rights) then if another group has more, hostility is created within the “deprived” group’s situation. It becomes more about meeting expectations rather than fulfilling basic needs. But, even in a situation with relatively few luxuries such as Myanmar relative deprivation can occur. The reference group, in this case the Burmese, receives more advantages within the society. Living in Myanmar is anything but desirable considering the amount of corruption, the strong military influence, restriction on internet access, little press freedom, and the many other problems that the country faces (Freedom House). But when using the theory a comparison becomes relative. Even though the general population gets severely repressed, “some of the country’s worst human

rights abuses, commonly committed by government troops, are against ethnic minorities, especially the Kachin, Shan, Chin, Karen, and Rohingyas” (Freedom House) meaning the Karen suffer relative deprivation.

When looking at the three different types of deprivation described by Gurr, Davies, and Morrison, *progressive deprivation* fits the Karen conflict the best. After colonial rule when the group experienced more “privileges” than ever before, the people’s mentality changed. This experience prompted the expectations to rise but the situation then fell back after Burma’s independence to the same, if not worse, reality as before British rule.

The deadly continuation of insurgency and inhumane counter-insurgency lead by the government just keeps prolonging the feeling of relative deprivation. The extreme human rights violations that the Burmese army uses against ethnic minorities such as the Karen keeps creating more resentment. The lower status of the Karen within Myanmar’s society is clear because of the government’s action against them as a people. Even in areas that are no longer considered active fighting sites, the Karen people are susceptible to “various forms of violence and deep-seated poverty” (South). Now, the conflict seems to be stuck in a viscous, never ending cycle. The persisting violations against Karen people have encouraged more hate and animosity towards the Burmese majority and less tolerance for the Karen minority.

Limitations

Several problems arise with using solely the Relative Deprivation Theory to explain why the Karen conflict began. The main issue is that it does not account for parts of the group that have *not* used it as a motivation to rebel. Theoretically, all of the Karen should rebel because they are all experiencing the same level of relative deprivation but that’s not the case. The KNU receives powerful support from parts of the Karen population, namely the Christian community but over time the organization has fallen out of touch with the non-Christian Karen people

(South). “Many commentators emphasize the Christian identity of the Karen. However, not more than 20% of the Karen population are Christians” (South). The second limitation of the theory is that it is also very subjective and difficult to understand without testing. The problem for this specific analysis is the lack of quantitative or qualitative research that could give insight on the Karen communities’ perception and opinion of their situation. When looking at the Karen’s actions, one can make assumptions of what type of feelings prompted them but it is impossible to know their definite ideas. Also, as with many basic theories that are applied to a realistic context, the relative deprivation theory cannot explain the irregular actors in a conflict environment.

Conclusion

The Karen conflict is unique in its long duration but still serves as a good case study for ethnic conflict. Myanmar’s population is very ethnically diverse which has proved to be challenging in keeping order within the country. For the Karen minority there has been a constant struggle against the Burmese government; first for an autonomous state and now for rights within the country itself. Relative deprivation theory can be applied to this conflict as an explanation of why the armed struggle actually began. Even though there are some limitations with using this theory, it serves as a good starting point for further discovery of why not only the Karen conflict started by other ethnic conflicts as well.

Works Cited

- Davies, James C., ed. 1971. *When Men Revolt and Why: A Reader in Political Violence and Revolution*. New York: Free Press.
- Falcone, Daniel. "Reiff Center Blog." *Reiff Center Blog*. N.p., 18 Jan. 2016. Web.
- Fong, Jack. *Revolution as Development: The Karen Self-determination Struggle against Ethnocracy 1949-2004*. Boca Raton, FL: Universal, 2008. Print.
- Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2016*. "Myanmar Country Report."
- Gurr, Ted Robert. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Published for the Center of International Studies, Princeton U Princeton UP, 1970. Print.
- "KNU History." Karen National Union. N.p., n.d. Web.
- Morrison, D. E. "Some Notes Toward Theory on Relative Deprivation, Social Movements, and Social Change." *American Behavioral Scientist* 14.5 (1971): 675-90. Web.
- "Myanmar (Burma)." UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program. Uppsala University, n.d. Web.
- "Objectives." Karen National Union. N.p., n.d. Web.
- Peoples, James; Bailey, Garrick (2010). *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (9th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage learning. p. 389.
- Smith, H. J., T. F. Pettigrew, G. M. Pippin, and S. Bialosiewicz. "Relative Deprivation: A Theoretical and Meta-Analytic Review." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16.3 (2011): 203-32. Web.
- Smith, Heather J., and Thomas F. Pettigrew. "Advances in Relative Deprivation Theory and Research." *Soc Just Res Social Justice Research* 28.1 (2015): 1-6. Web.
- South, Ashley. "Burma's Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict." *TNI*. Transnational Institute, 28 Mar. 2011. Web.
- Tonnesson, Stein, and Hans Antlöv. *Asian Forms of the Nation*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1996. Print.

Zomeren, Martijn Van, Tom Postmes, and Russell Spears. "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Three Socio-psychological Perspectives." *Psychological Bulletin* 134.4 (2008): 504-35. Web.