

LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Mon State



Starting from May 2016, the CNDH research team undertook a 27 day long trip through Mon State to conduct Political Process (PP) and Social Harmony (SH) Research across six townships – Bilin, Thaton, Mawlamyine, Kyaikmaraw, Thanbuzayat and Ye – collecting a total of approximately 2300 question sets for both PP and SH. 40 in-depth interviews were also completed to better understand the local context and bring the statistical data to life. The initiative is part of a nationwide CNDH research project that aims to provide data and analysis of the state of social harmony in the country, as well as to gauge the trust, understanding and attitudes of citizens towards the government and political processes.

The geography of Mon state blends elements found throughout the whole country – with mountainous terrain like that of Chin, Kachin and Shan States, a rugged coastline like Rakhine, Ayeyarwaddy and Tanintharyi, and the typically more humid weather of its closer neighbours, Yangon and Bago Region. Home to just under 2.1 million residents, Mon State is comprised of two districts, Thaton and Mawlamyine, with a total of 10 townships, making it one of the smaller administrative units of the country.

Historically, various Mon Kingdoms have governed over the area that now



comprises modern-day Mon State, as well as significant portions of Lower Burma, until they were defeated at the hands of the Konbaung Dynasty in 1757. While now an ethnic minority in the modern-day state of Myanmar, Mon people take pride in the heritage of their ancestors. Indeed, the greatest contribution to modern-day Myanmar is the Burmese alphabet – which is believed to be an adoption from the old Mon script. Mon State also played an important role in the British Colonial era, with the state capital city of Mawlamyine being a key British outpost.

Current demographics present a rich-

ly diverse state. In the upper district of Thaton, Mon people are a minority – being outweighed by Kayin, Bamar and Pa-O peoples. In Mawlamyine district, Mon are more predominant, particularly in the lower townships. Indian (both Hindu and Muslim) and Chinese diasporas are also found throughout the state but are particularly concentrated in Mawlamyine city itself – again a reflection of the city's colonial history. In the state's capital, monasteries, churches, mosques, Hindu temples and Chinese temples exist side-by-side in most wards.

Indeed, despite its religious diversity and the fact that the nationalist Bud-

dhist '969' movement and MaBaTha have their origins in Mon State, in general, relations between the different religious and ethnic groups are significantly more stable than is the case elsewhere in the country. As respondents themselves noted, while conflicts have broken out across the country, Mon State has remained peaceful.

After the peace process was initiated in 2011, regional security has significantly improved, particularly in areas once controlled by the KNU, since their accordance with peace treaties with the Union Government. While the NMSP conspicuously declined to sign the National Ceasefire Agreement of 2015, the group has

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More than 40 hours of interview

not been actively engaged with the state for quite some time, despite maintaining their right to bear arms. This issue drew mixed feelings from participants in the research – with some citizens being supportive of the actions of the EAG's, while others were long-weary of ethnic politics and almost regarded the groups as a nuisance. Nonetheless, the improved stability in the region has seen significant improvement to infrastructure and transportation facilities throughout the state, allowing a much faster flow of commodities.

Respondents expressed concern over the environmental impacts of the mining, logging and industrial activities occurring throughout the state. For example, residents in Thaton District suffer from the degradation of their rivers due to the gold-extraction taking place in the area by local and foreign companies. Meanwhile, residents in Kyaikmaraw Township have protested against the pollution caused by a recently opened cement factory powered by coal. Apart from the environmental impact, the local people expressed further concern about the rise in internal migrants from Ayeyawaddy, Magway, Bago and Mandalay region working in the project sites and rubber plantation fields, whom locals associate with an increase in crime rates.

A lack of livelihood opportunities is another major problem notable throughout the state. As a result, swathes of residents both men and women, young and old, migrate to neighbouring Thailand or Malaysia to seek work. Another issue raised, which is frequently associated with the cross-border travel to Thailand, is the burgeoning drugs problem affecting youth.

Reports analyzing the data collected and providing key elements of understanding on Mon State will be published by mid-August 2016 and shared with relevant stakeholders. For more information and to keep updated on our reports, please subscribe to CNDH Research Team Updates at research.cndh@gmail.com.